The Handmaid's Tale

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The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood

Summary

First published in 1986, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the near-future utopian society of Gilead. The novel's main characters have lived through society's transition from the social order of late twentieth-century America to a radically different one. Gilead, like the societies in most utopian novels (Orwell's 1984; Huxley's Brave New World), is actually a dystopia -- an ideal culture on the surface, but a disturbingly dysfunctional in practice. Its center is the geographic location formerly known as Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gilead is a theocratic Christian society of an unspecified denomination that wages war against Baptists and other denominations.

Women are the most prominent victims of Gilead's dystopian new order. Environmental pollution has poisoned the air, water, and humanity itself, causing an infertility epidemic. Based on their fertility and pre-Gilead social and religious status, women are assigned specific roles and wear clothing reflecting that identity. Fertile women not already married to prominent Gileadean men (Commanders and Wives) become Handmaids, serving a Commander strictly for the purpose of reproduction. Sex between a Commander and his Handmaid is a businesslike transaction: neither removes any more clothing -- or touches the other in any way -- than is strictly necessary, and the Handmaid lies between the Wife's legs the entire time. When a Handmaid gives birth, she sits in a special chair between the Wife's legs.

The use of "Handmaids" receives Biblical justification in "the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff" (p. 88), referring to the story of Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, who -- when they could not bear him children -- gave their handmaids to Jacob so that he might procreate, and they claimed the children as their own (see Genesis 30). The Christian doctrine of sex *only* for procreation further defines the clinical intercourse between Handmaids and Commanders.

Besides Handmaids and Wives, Gilead's functional identities for women include Aunts (educators/indoctrinators), Marthas (household staff), Econowives (lower class women who must serve their husbands in all capacities), and Unwomen (who refuse to participate in society and are

shipped off to clean toxic waste sites). Men also have their assigned roles: Guardians (menial laborers), Angels (soldiers), and Commanders. Only one group appears to be non-gender specific: the Eyes, the secret police who monitor others' activities and thereby keep order. No regular member of Gilead knows who the Eyes are -- anyone could be an Eye: a Handmaid, a Guardian, anyone. Not even the Eyes know the other Eyes, for they too must be monitored.

The novel's narrator is a Handmaid named Offred. As the novel progresses through her present life, she adds memories of her pre-Gilead life (of her husband, daughter, and mother), of the transitional time from 1980s U.S. society to Gilead society, and of her time at the indoctrination school for Handmaids prior to being assigned to a Commander.

The first third of the novel introduces Gilead and Offred to the reader. The conflict begins when Offred's Commander summons her to his office -- an illegal meeting for both of them -- and initiates an "affair" with her that consists of their playing *Scrabble*, him watching her read contraband 1970s magazines like *Vogue*, and their talking. Though he does want to kiss her, nothing sexual happens during these meetings. Meanwhile, the Commander's Wife, suspecting her husband to be infertile (not something to be spoken of) proposes that Offred secretly sleep with Nick, the household's chauffeur (a Guardian), and try to become pregnant by him. Offred agrees, partially because she has already failed to produce a child with two previous Commanders and her chances are running out, and partially because she is attracted to Nick and longs to feel tender physical touching; thus, she is involved in "affairs" with two men.

One evening the Commander dresses Offred in some of his Wife's clothes and sneaks her to Jezebel's, an old hotel now transformed into a secret club and brothel for Commanders and male dignitaries. Soon after, his Wife discovers that Offred has worn her clothes and confronts her. Offred's fate appears sealed; the Commander will not help her, nor will the Wife report her husband. But Nick arranges for some Eyes to arrive in a black van and whisk Offred away -- either Nick is an Eye, whisking her away to probable execution or the ranks of the Unwomen; or he is a member of the underground resistance movement, whisking her off to safety. "And so I step up" into the black van, her story concludes, "into the darkness within; or else the light" (p. 295).

The novel concludes with a section called "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," which we learn is the transcript of an academic conference panel some 200 years later. The main speaker, Professor Pieixoto, describes how he and a colleague found Offred's story recorded on tapes in a box in a Bangor, Maine; how they transcribed the tapes, and ordered them in the way that they felt made the most sense; and how they tried to identify Offred and her Commander's real names. The "Historical Notes" section makes clear the most terrifying dimension of Atwood's novel: its believability. Atwood cites real-life instances of oppression as her primary inspiration: "[T]here isn't anything in the book not based on something that has already happened in history or in another country, or for which actual supporting documentation is not already available" (http://www.randomhouse.com/resources/bookgroup/handmaidstale_bgc.html).

Questions

The following questions and answers are intended to spark discussion of this book, but are not "the final word" on it. Readers will bring differing

viewpoints to the story's characters, its events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups so rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas

Gilead's society is obviously quite sexist and repressive, yet do any aspects of it seem to be an improvement over our contemporary society?

Along with Gilead's poor treatment of women, its use of them as objects of utilitarian function only, comes a paradoxical immense respect for and veneration of them -- specifically of their capacity to bear children. When Offred's college friend Moira writes a paper for class on date rape, Atwood is reminding her readers of what Gilead has expunged: the misogynist and violent sexual treatment of women. In the interview quoted above, Atwood cites a number of positive aspects to Gilead society -- "Women aren't whistled at on the street, men don't come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are 'protected.' Sardonically speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets are much safer, for the most part" (http://www.randomhouse.com/resources/bookgroup/handmaidstale_bgc.html). Women are held in such esteem in this society that rape is a capital crime. As one of the Aunts tells the Handmaids, "There is more than one kind of freedom....Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (p. 24). No longer do citizens suffer from confusion in interpersonal relations, nor over one's role, position, and purpose -- these things are settled for them. No longer must women suffer the "indignity" of singles' bars, blind dates, and personal ads; no longer must they worry about being beaten by a husband, or being left with children to feed on a measly paycheck. Back then -- the 1980s -- money "was the only measure of worth, for everyone" and women "got no respect as mothers" (p. 219).

Indeed much of the mistreatment that Gilead has expunged is exactly the kind of mistreatment of women most attacked by contemporary feminists. Consequently, when Gilead was first forming itself and banned pornography and prostitution, Offred "wasn't sad to see them go. We all knew what a nuisance they had been" (p. 175). For feminists, *nuisance* is an understatement -- pornography and prostitution are the most demeaning of social acts toward women, as they reduce women to commercial objects for men's use. One point of particular brilliance about Atwood's novel is its conflation in Gilead of extreme right-wing attitudes with extreme left-wing attitudes. Both are a form of fascism, of dictating proper thought. Offred's mother, a 1960s feminist, participated in a few porn-burnings herself, and her vision of female independence from men leads to a vision of functional sex exactly like Gilead's: "I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women....Just do the job, then you can bugger off" (p. 121).

Gilead's procreative objectification of women has freed them from sexual objectification -- they no longer have to wear makeup, oil themselves for tanning "like roast meat on a spit" (p. 55), dress in certain ways, or starve themselves and/or have surgery to obtain the right figure (as all bodies are cloaked in uniform, figure-disguising robes). But how have things really changed? If contemporary society's rules about women's attractiveness obstruct their ability to be their natural selves, Gilead's behavioral strictures also force women (and men) into unnatural roles. "I wait," Offred says prior to attending a night of ceremonial intercourse with the Commander. "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as once

composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (p. 66) -- she might as well be describing her pre-Gilead self preparing for an old-fashioned date, putting on makeup, doing her hair, transforming herself into "a made thing, not something born."

Though Gilead is a blatantly patriarchal society, do the men really have it better than the women do?

Early in the novel, Atwood gives us a portrait of two Guardians at a barrier. Guardians "aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden, for instance" (p. 20). They are not permitted to have Wives; indeed not even all "real" soldiers are awarded a Wife. For the Guardians even to look at Offred is to risk a grave offense, and because they are not allowed a sexual partner, they suffer in that way as well.

> They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow [Ofglen], walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes (p. 22).

Nor is it much easier for more powerful men. At the ritual Bible reading prior to the Ceremony, Offred sympathizes with the Commander:

> To be a man, watched by women....To have them putting him on, trying him out, trying him out...We're all watching him. It's the one thing we can really do, and it is not for nothing: if he were to falter, fail, or die, what would become of us?...[It] must be hell, to be a man, like that...It must be very silent. (pp. 87-88)

Every move made by those in power, because they are in power, carries extraordinary significance. They are watched by the disempowered and by their peers in power -- the Eyes are everywhere, watching. The commanders cannot misstep. Their personal relations too are dictated; for them having sex isn't making love, it is performing a duty, and it must be done as mechanically and coldly as possible. Those in power are asked not to be human, just as those without power are. When Offred's Commander, straining for a personal connection, asks her to kiss him as if she meant it, she observes that his plight is "so sad" (p. 140). Ironically, though her name is derived from his and links her identity to him -- *Offred* meaning *of Fred*, or *Fred's* -- she has a name more personalized than his. He is the Commander only; he has no personal self; his identity is entirely one of public function (we only learn his real name, Frederick R. Waterford, from historians 200 years after the fact).

In contemporary North American society, we might make an analogy of the Eyes with the media. It's everywhere, watching everything everybody does -- most especially those in power. We seem to require that our leaders be perfect, that they never misstep, nor ever have in the past. Every act, even the most personal, reflects upon their leadership, their character, and our ability to trust them. This fact of modern life is a vicious twist on that feminist dictum that the political is personal.

Who is in power in Gilead? Where does power ultimately reside?

Language is power -- before the Bible was translated into English, for example, only the very few educated in Latin could read it; only they had access to God's word, and thus could control the message delivered to the masses. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, only those in power have access to the Bible, and can make it say what they want: "*From each*," says the slogan, "*according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that, three times, after desert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts" (p.117) -- but we readers know better; we know that this phrase comes from Karl Marx. Those without access to the Bible, however, cannot verify the phrase's source; they are in the hands of the authorities. Note also the subtle play with pronouns: from each according to *her* ability; to each according to *his* needs. It is no coincidence, then, that Atwood sets the novel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard, the symbol of higher learning -- of book learning -- in North America. The Eyes' headquarters in the university and its libraries further implies how much power resides in knowledge -- and in books as its vessels.

If reading gives access to knowledge, writing conveys the power to create knowledge. Those who can write can write (or rewrite) history, as well as their own stories; this gives them a measure of control over their own fate, as well as history's fate. In *Scrabble*, you score points by creating words out of letters. As a letter and word game, it symbolizes the very tools of power that Offred and so many others are denied in Gilead. By letting Offred play *Scrabble*, the Commander goes beyond a titillating violation of their prescribed roles; he is really playing with fire by encouraging her interest in language's power.

What do you think motivates the Commander to risk his life by having a taboo relationship with Offred?

Offred initially suspects that the Commander deeply needs genuine human connection, the kind of intimacy (sexual or otherwise) prevented by Gileadean rules. Even his relationship with his Wife appears perfunctory, emotionless. Offred sees him as sad, and she feels that she has a certain power over him because she has something he needs. Perhaps, however, her estimation of him is too kind. When he takes her to Jezebel's and she runs into Moira, her old college classmate turned Jezebel sex toy, Moira tells Offred that some of the Commanders "get a kick" out of taking their Handmaids to Jezebel's. "It's like screwing on the altar or something: your gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels. They like to see you all painted up. Just another crummy power trip" (p. 243). Moira's speech actually offers two motives: first, his need for the excitement and stimulation of breaking rules; and second, his need to exercise personal power.

Earlier, the Commander told Offred that men created Gilead partly out of boredom.

> There was nothing for them to do.... There was nothing for them to do with women.... [Sex] was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for....You know what [men] were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage." (p. 210)

In creating Gilead, a society with so many rules that every act, word, and glance carries significance, men created a space for excitement, conflict,

risk, and transgression. This also appears to be one of Offred's reasons for having the affair. Nineteenth century paintings of women in harems "were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use," she tells us. "They were paintings about boredom" (p. 69). Although dangerous, meeting secretly with the commander, is just plain "something to do....Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. It's something else to think about" (p. 163). Atwood may be suggesting that people need more than something to do; they need conflict, and will invent it when it isn't there, because it helps them feel alive, and it helps provide meaning to life. "People will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot" (p. 215). To have a plot, one must have action, and some sort of tension. There are no conflicts in an ideal society like Gilead.

In terms of the Commander's desire for personal power, we might read his "need" for intimacy with Offred as something he lets her believe, because this belief will help him get what he wants. He is, after all, the one with all the power. He has her file; he knows everything about her. He knows she is a book and word person -- by letting her read and play *Scrabble*, he feeds her the drug she will most relish. He engages in conversation with her the way a drug-supplier might with an addict: "[H]aving felt the relief of even that much speaking," Offred thinks, "I want more" (p. 185). His invitation for non-sexual intimacy eventually *is* about sex, as we learn when he leads her to a room at Jezebel's. He wants to be intimate with her on his terms, not as a result of his public position. But what he wants he does not get: sex with Offred at Jezebel's is just as mechanical and empty as sex with her on Ceremony nights. No amount of power or manipulation can foster true intimacy.

His need for power, control, and excitement make him sad and pathetic -- but also human. He and his wife "don't seem to have much in common" anymore, they rarely talk. "That's what I was there for, then," concludes Offred. "The same old thing. It was too banal too be true" (p158). As in pre-Gilead society, it turns out that men have affairs because they are bored.

What do you think of Offred's relationship with Nick?

Is it true love? Is it a romance that flowered only by circumstance? Is it only in such extreme circumstances that intensely passionate love occurs? These questions matter because Atwood intends us to wonder about the precise nature of Offred and Nick's relationship. On the one hand, we should perhaps celebrate it and cheer for them: in a world that privileges social utility over personal love, the latter cannot be fully denied. On the other hand, for a novel critical of patriarchal society and generally promoting feminist concerns, it perhaps has a hard time celebrating a conventional love-story ending in which girl meets boy, they fall in love, and boy rescues girl. Moreover, Offred's involvement with Nick gives her the strength to survive Gilead -- paradoxically reinforcing women's dependence on men. Moreover, this "strength" is passive at best, because it is merely her *resignation* from struggle:

> The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom," she says. "I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him....I have made a life for myself here, of a sort. That must have been what the settlers' wives thought, and women who survived wars, if they had a man....Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations. (p. 271)

The easy answer is that power resides with the Commanders, but even among the Commanders a hierarchy exists. From Ofglen we learn, for example, that Offred's Commander is "way up there...at the top...the very top" (p. 210). But we also know that a Commander who has a child is promoted -- thus Offred's childless Commander has some room to rise, *if* his Handmaid delivers. Nevertheless, ambiguity surrounds his power and position, as Offred realizes: "I know he's a Commander, I don't know what he's a Commander of. What does he control, what is his field, as they used to say? They don't have specific titles" (p. 185). And the Eyes scrutinize the Commanders, just as closely as they do everyone else. No one is above the law. Offred's Commander is killed "probably soon after the events" in the book, "in one of the earliest purges," for "liberal tendencies," for "being in possession of a substantial and unauthorized collection of heretical pictorial and literary materials," and for "harboring a subversive" (p. 309). He is still subject to a higher social authority, but we never know whom.

If power were located in a single place or person, one could organize against it, possibly overthrow it. Power in Gilead, however, does not work this way. Instead, individuals internalize the social values and rules, and perpetuate the system that controls them. We see this most clearly in the Aunts, the women who instruct the Handmaids. As women, they become Gilead's most effect instrument for controlling its women: "For this there were many historical precedents," notes the "Historical Notes" section; "No empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group"(p.308). We also see this in the Handmaids' interactions with one another. They are compelled to travel in pairs, so that each Handmaid feels the other watching her and will behave for fear of being reported. You never know who might be an Eye, or what non-Eye might report you to the authorities. You suspect everyone; you suspect you are being watched even when you are alone. This works because the central authority is *invisible* and *unverifiable*.

Atwood provides an amazing image of this power process when describing Offred's small room. "Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out" (p. 7). This image evokes both the presence and the absence of the watching eye. Atwood explicitly connects Gileadean power with divine omniscience: "The Eyes of God run over all the earth" (p.193) -- yet he does not inhabit it.

Why *Scrabble*?

For one thing, as Offred surmises, he wants to play *Scrabble* with her because "it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs" (139). In a strictly utilitarian society, games have value only insofar as they keep people from being mischievous -- but in this case, playing a game is one way of being mischievous. Therefore, playing games becomes desired *because* it is forbidden, and that desire can acquire erotic overtones. It is "indecent," it is something "he can't do with his Wife" -- Offred clearly plays the role of the other woman. She herself finds the game "voluptuous" (p. 139), and her "tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling" (p. 156). Later she tells Ofglen that what she does with the Commander in his office is more or less "kinky sex" (p. 223).

With a man, she no longer needs to fight society; with a man, she can survive, can in fact surrender. Is this the womanist perspective Atwood sanctions? Once Offred has decided to surrender to Gilead with Nick, it does not take long for her to decide to surrender altogether, with or without him:

> Dear God, I think I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce....I don't want pain....I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. (p. 286)

And it is exactly at this moment of resignation that Nick rescues her, or that he takes her away to be disposed -- we never know. Or maybe there is no difference between the two fates, not for a feminist author anyway. For a woman to be saved by a man, for her to repeat and reinforce that old story of frail female dependence on male strength, might that amount to very much the same thing as her being disposed of and silenced by patriarchal power? Because either way, Offred's story ends here.

Do you care for the open-ended ending? Why do you think Atwood chose to do it?

Offred's own tale leaves her fate ambiguous; the "Historical Notes" section clarifies things only a little. We learn that she made it to a safe house along the Underground Femaleroad, and we can assume that Nick was a member of the underground and did rescue her. Or can we know and assume these things? Nothing in the tapes indicates that Offred made it to the house. Two hundred years have passed, and Gilead has ceased to exist. Any number of events could have brought the tapes to a house that happened, at one time, to be part of the Underground Femaleroad. Professor Pieixoto and his colleague "reasoned" that the house was "possibly" a "safe house" where "our author [Offred] may have been kept hidden in, for instance, the attic or cellar"; however, like a good clinical researcher, they also concede that there's no way to know whether or not the tapes might have been moved to the house later (p. 303). If Offred did make it to a safe house -- she obviously made it somewhere for a period of time and with the resources to record her story -- we do not know of her fate after that. She perhaps made it to Canada, the way slaves and Vietnam-era draft dodgers did. Or perhaps she was caught. As readers, we simply not know.

The unresolved ending actually engages us more deeply with the novel, because Atwood leave us thinking instead of having the final word. Spelling out Offred's fate would have silenced readers' imaginations -- just as Gilead's powerful elite silenced others' use of language: only Commanders have access to the Bible; the Eyes control Harvard library; pictures replace words on commercial signs; reading and writing is proscribed for all but a few men. Conversation is also limited according to one's station. In sum, language use in Gilead is a one-way proposition because public dialogs are the first defense against tyranny. The open ending of the novel embodies its supportive message about the necessity of dialogue. Rather than closing the discussion, Atwood refuses to impose an ending on us, and give us the story's final ending; in doing so, she encourages us to think

about -- and discuss it -- instead. In a way, it is Atwood's way of playing *Scrabble* with her readers -- the next words or ideas are ours.

How does the "Historical Notes" section affect your understanding of the novel?

At different points in the novel, Offred talks directly to her audience. "Dear You, I'll say," and "I'll pretend you can hear me" (p. 40).Later, she talks to God in much the same way. "I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone" (p. 195). If God were to talk back, given his stature, what would transpire would hardly be a conversation -- God's silence is necessary for us to realize our full humanity. The novel's one-sided conversations further invite readers to reflect on what they might say or do in Offred's place. The manner in which Piexioto and his colleagues piece together Offred's story (or, at least, their version of it) enacts a similar conversational process: we question how closely their interpretations capture what *really* may have happened. In the end, we readers do not have access to the tapes; we only have what Pieixoto and friend have given us.

Pieixoto also represents a type of objective intellectualism that is "cautious about passing moral judgment" upon societies like Gilead, because a professor's job "is not to censure but to understand" (p. 302). As Atwood intends, these academic researchers become another set of readers who help to create the story we hear. At the same time, however, they are men who make sexist jokes -- Offred's tale is all about her *tale*, or "tail" (p. 301) -- and who demean her spoken account (despite its eloquence) as mere "crumbs" about Gilead, stating that they'd much have preferred data from the Commander's computer (p. 309-310). They focus on the identity of Offred's Commander, rather than hers. Male discourse and imposition seems to have won the day. We imagine what else these academic professionals may have overlooked, or misunderstood. Finally, Atwood also seems to *want* readers to judge Gilead, the way we ought to pass judgment on actual instances of inhumanity, like the Holocaust. The contrast between Offred's personal, emotional account and its vaguely dismissive handling by these male scholars invites our judgment.

About the Author

Born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939, Margaret Atwood is a prolific author of novels, poetry, children's books, literary criticism, plays, and television scripts. In college, Atwood gained awareness of Canada's unique literary tradition (separate from "American" or U.S. literature); her works -- fictional and scholarly -- reflect that strong literary tradition.

Also noted as an activist, Atwood helped to form the Canadian Writers' Union, and supported the creation of a writing school for Native Americans; she has been a public advocate for other social issues, from AIDS research to the environment and free trade. Her many award-winning novels include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Atwood often weaves serious social (often-feminist) concerns into highly readable fiction, leavened by wit and humor.

Further Reading

Fiction

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury
Set in a future where print and reading are ruthlessly suppressed, Bradbury's novel also raises questions about the extent to which humans can be forced to change, the potential of the human spirit to evade oppressive measures, and the power of words themselves to transcend human boundaries.

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley
Another classic dystopian novel, this one features a scientifically and socially engineered society that maintains social stability by rigorously imposing passivity on its citizens. A "savage" is introduced, a man who believes in moral choice and spirituality, who challenges their passivity with deadly consequences.

When She Awoke by Hillary Jordan
Unexpected crises introduce ordinary citizens to political dissidents who battle authoritarian regimes, forcing protagonists to question everything they believe. Infertility, reproductive rights, and the government's role in public health are major themes in these character-driven, intricately plotted dystopian novels.

1984 by George Orwell
Written after World War II and in light of the rise of Stalinist Russia, Orwell's famous novel depicts a fascist utopia set in London but with obvious references to the Soviet Union. It also features an underground revolutionary group and a love story that both attempt to defy the authorities.

Film

The Handmaid's Tale (1990)
Starring Natasha Richardson (Offred), Robert Duvall (the Commander), and Faye Dunaway (his wife), and written by the playwright Harold Pinter (with help from Atwood), the film version departs in a few significant ways from the novel. These differences are fruitful ground for discussion.

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Alex Vernon, Assistant Professor of English at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, with additional content by Kimberly S. Burton, Adult Readers Advisory Specialist at NoveList.

Read-alikes for The handmaid's tale

Find more read-alikes in NoveList.

The handmaid's tale

By: Atwood, Margaret

In a future world where the birth rate has declined, fertile women are rounded up, indoctrinated as "handmaids," and forced to bear children to prominent men.

Read-alikes

1. ***Agenda 21***

   Beck, Glenn

   Reason: These two dystopian novels envision futures where the population is completely controlled, forced to either produce energy or to selectively produce children. For the protagonists, though, fleeing this sort of life is the only option... -- Mike Nilsson

2. ***Turning on the girls***

   Benard, Cheryl, 1953-

   Reason: The women in these futuristic dystopias find themselves in roles at opposite ends of the spectrum (complete subservience vs. powerful), confronting different problems. Intensely thought-provoking, these books offer commentaries on the future, feminism, and gender roles. -- Rebecca Sigmon

3. ***A clockwork orange***

   Burgess, Anthony, 1917-1993

   Reason: Reflective individuals subjugated by totalitarian societies are the shared themes of these futuristic, issue-oriented novels. Both delve into ethics, morality, and social roles: Atwood's from an oppressed young woman's perspective, Burgess's from that of a violently rebellious young man. -- Matthew Ransom

4. ***Walk to the end of the world***

   Charnas, Suzy McKee

   Reason: These provocative and imaginative science fiction stories explore feminist themes through their artfully constructed dystopian futures featuring repressive and disturbingly violent patriarchies, strong female characters, and thoughtful and nuanced ruminations concerning complex social issues. -- Derek Keyser

5. ***Lighthouse Island***

   Jiles, Paulette, 1943-

   Reason: Lyrical and bleak, these dystopian novels feature women fighting for the right to live and love as they choose. Handmaid's Tale is centered around reproductive issues and Lighthouse Island around personal freedom, but both discuss the importance of freedom to happiness. -- Melissa Gray

6. ***Fahrenheit 451***

   Bradbury, Ray, 1920-2012

   Reason: Set in a future where print and reading are ruthlessly suppressed, Fahrenheit 451 likewise raises questions about the extent to which humans can be forced to change, the potential of the human spirit to evade oppression, and the power of words to transcend human boundaries. -- Shauna Griffin

7. ***Archetype*** & Prototype

   Waters, M. D., 1976-

Reason: In these compelling, suspenseful science fiction novels, women's fertility and reproduction are aggressively monitored and regulated by the authoritarian government of a near-future dystopian society -- a situation that prompts the heroines to resist indoctrination and rebel against the establishment. -- Gillian Speace

8. ***The summer before the dark***

   Lessing, Doris May, 1919-2013

   Reason: A bleak dystopia is illustrated from a woman's viewpoint in each of these menacing, descriptive, and issue-oriented novels. Both authors create disturbing, realistic futures to explore societal roles and morals. These are thought-provoking warnings for ethically challenged and materialist cultures. -- Matthew Ransom

9. ***When she woke***

   Jordan, Hillary, 1963-

   Reason: Desperate to escape oppressive theocratic regimes that strip women of all civil rights, the protagonists of these suspenseful Dystopian novels -- set in a near-future North America plagued by natural disasters, terrorism, and declining fertility -- join underground resistance movements. -- Gillian Speace

Read-alikes for Atwood, Margaret

Find more read-alikes in NoveList.

Atwood, Margaret
Margaret Atwood's Literary Fiction often incorporates mythical/fairy tale images into past, present, and future worlds that remain recognizably modern. Her protagonists are primarily women (often artists or writers) in difficult situations but who are never passive victims. Graceful, polished prose describes complex characters and storylines. There is always more beneath the surface, which allows readers to appreciate her novels on a variety of levels. Atwood weaves serious feminist concerns into highly readable stories, leavened by wit and humor. Start with: Blind Assassin.

Read-alikes

1. ***McEwan, Ian***

   Reason: Atwood and McEwan write thought-provoking literary fiction that probes into the psyches of their richly-layered and often troubled characters. Themes of the artist, sexual dysfunction, violence, and families in chaos are sprinkled throughout all of their complex works, which are characterized by a darker tone and a dry wit. -- Becky Spratford

2. ***Drabble, Margaret, 1939-***

   Reason: Margaret Drabble offers novels that - like Atwood's - feature engaging characters, polished prose, and exceptionally well-told stories in which the past intrudes on the present. -- Kim Burton

3. ***Tepper, Sheri S.***

   Reason: Sheri S. Tepper and Margaret Atwood focus on the intersections between the future, religion, and feminism. In addition, each author usually sets a bleak tone while building a highly detailed world. -- Krista Biggs

4. ***Orwell, George, 1903-1950***

   Reason: Margaret Atwood and George Orwell are favorites of Literary Fiction fans for their thought-provoking novels; both writers are notable for their sophisticated prose and compelling story delivery, as well as their attention to people and society. Both also have used science fiction as a device for presenting their political insights. -- Katherine Johnson

5. ***Oates, Joyce Carol, 1938-***

   Reason: Just as Margaret Atwood chronicles the character of Canada in a variety of genres, American novelist Joyce Carol Oates explores the soul of her own country. Both are prolific, versatile writers and excellent storytellers, who delve into similarly provocative issues - feminism, families, relationships, and politics. -- Victoria Caplinger

6. ***Lively, Penelope, 1933-***

   Reason: Penelope Lively and Margaret Atwood share a number of similar traits. Both writers place intriguing characters in well-told, layered, psychological tales; play skillfully with language and ideas; and often treat women's issues in their exceptionally well-told stories. -- Kim Burton

7. ***Butler, Octavia E.***

   Reason: Octavia E. Butler's books share the introspection common to Atwood's novels, and both authors have written what might be called "idea novels" and are powerful storytellers. Their stories lead readers to confront and examine the ways humans and societies treat one another. -- Katherine Johnson

8. ***McCarthy, Cormac, 1933-***

Reason: Cormac McCarthy writes bleak, thought-provoking Literary Fiction. Though his language is more ornate than Margaret Atwood's, it is every bit as stark and evocative. Although the violence in his stories is far more overt than in Atwood's novels, his complex characters also struggle to understand and define human morality. -- Victoria Caplinger

9. ***Shields, Carol***

Reason: Poet and novelist Carol Shields shares Margaret Atwood's command of language and detailed settings, as well as her narrative skill. Like Atwood, she often offers a chronology of her characters' lives and intersperses fairy tales with reality. Shields's emotionally compelling stories demonstrate many of the same feminist ideals that Atwood supports. -- Kim Burton

Is 'The Handmaid's Tale' Science Fiction -- Or a Preview of 2016?

Posted: 11/10/2014 7:49 am EST Updated: 11/10/2014 9:59 am EST

In Washington, D.C., a judge understood that a cesarean section might kill a seriously ill 27-year-old woman who was 26 weeks pregnant. Still, he ordered that she undergo the procedure. Both the woman and her baby died.

In Iowa, a pregnant woman fell down a flight of stairs and went to the hospital. The hospital reported her to the police, who arrested her for "attempted fetal homicide."

In Utah, a woman gave birth to twins. One died. Health care providers argued that she was delivered of a stillborn because she had delayed having a cesarean, and she too was arrested for fetal homicide.

In Louisiana, a woman went to the hospital because she was bleeding vaginally. She was convicted of second-degree murder and spent a year in jail before medical records proved she'd had a miscarriage.

A pregnant woman in South Carolina jumped out a window. Her suicide attempt failed. Because she lost the pregnancy, she was jailed for homicide by child abuse.

These are not incidents from the Dark Ages -- they're recent. And as Lynn Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin write in the *New York Times*, they're just the beginning of a campaign to strip American women of their rights:

With the success of Republicans in the midterm elections and the passage of Tennessee's anti-abortion amendment, we can expect ongoing efforts to ban abortion and advance the "personhood" rights of fertilized eggs, embryos and fetuses. But it is not just those who support

abortion rights who have reason to worry. Anti-abortion measures pose a risk to all pregnant women, including those who want to be pregnant. Such laws are increasingly being used as the basis for arresting women who have no intention of ending a pregnancy and for preventing women from making their own decisions about how they will give birth.

"Preventing women from making their own decisions about how they will give birth" is the engine of the plot of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, "The Handmaid's Tale." In the novel, at some point in the future, the "Sons of Jacob" stage an attack -- which they blame on Islamist terrorists (in 1985, how prescient was that?) -- on Washington. They kill the President and many in Congress, take over the government, and, in the interest of restoring order, re-engineer the United States into an Old Testament theocracy. Women's rights no longer exist. Women are now breeders. They have no other purpose.

One way or another, you've heard of "The Handmaid's Tale." For decades, the title has been feminist shorthand for the kind of future that's likely for women if Christian fundamentalists have their way. Because it's graphic about the sex that handmaids are permitted -- the man's actual wife is on her back, legs spread, and the handmaid lies over her, legs spread, as the man donates his seed -- school boards across the country have banned it. It has won awards. And it's sold millions of copies.

Thanks to "The Hunger Games," other dystopian novels and footage of terrorist bombings and beheadings, we're familiar with horrific cruelty. But even by contemporary standards, "The Handmaid's Tale" still has the power to shock.

Let's drop in on the Republic of Gilead, the former United States, specifically in the community around Cambridge, Mass., where once there was a Harvard. Our narrator is Offred, that is, "of Fred, " the head of her community. The handmaids, dressed all in red, their faces hidden by what are essential blinders, are allowed to go to town for errands, but they must travel in pairs and the entire area is walled because there is, of course, a continuing terrorist threat. Bodies hang along the Wall: men who have been "salvaged" for unspecified crimes. The meat store is called All Flesh.

And flesh is all. Fertile flesh. It is of crucial importance that a handmaid can bear children. Once she can't, she becomes an "unwoman" and may be sent elsewhere to clean areas spoiled by nuclear waste. Love? Doesn't exist. There is only sex, and then only with a sanctioned "commander."

But the difficulty of repopulating the community when men are often sterile and women are often infertile is not what the problem really is. Reducing women to incubators serves a larger goal: sustaining male patriarchy. And the easiest way to do that is by coercion, by controlling women.

Science fiction? That's how this novel is generally labeled. Atwood resists that:

I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist. I did not wish to

be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behavior. The group-activated hangings, the tearing apart of human beings, the clothing specific to castes and classes, the forced childbearing and the appropriation of the results, the children stolen by regimes and placed for upbringing with high-ranking officials, the forbidding of literacy, the denial of property rights -- all had precedents, and many were to be found not in other cultures and religions, but within western society and within the "Christian" tradition itself.

Could pregnant women lose their rights in our country now? Consider this: if the Supreme Court overturns gay marriage and Obamacare in 2015 and the Republicans win the White House and Congress in 2016, how safe is Roe v. Wade?

But that seems....crazy, yes?

It certainly seemed so to the distinguished novelist Mary McCarthy, who reviewed "The Handmaid's Tale" in the New York Times in 1986. She destroyed the book:

I just can't see the intolerance of the far right, presently directed not only at abortion clinics and homosexuals but also at high school libraries and small-town schoolteachers, as leading to a super-biblical puritanism by which procreation will be insisted on and reading of any kind banned.

McCarthy's conclusion: "'The Handmaid's Tale' doesn't scare one."

It does now.

Title: Margaret Atwood
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Full Text:

Full Text:

Margaret Atwood is one of the best-known Canadian writers of our day. She is certainly one of the most prolific authors in North America, having produced over twenty volumes of poetry and just as many books of fiction (including novels and short story collections), as well as important essays, dramas and children's books. Recognition for her work has included winning the Governor-General's Award twice, as well as the Coles Book of the Year Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Harvard University Centennial Medal.

She was born in Ottawa in 1939 and grew up in suburban Toronto. Her father was an entomologist, and during her childhood, Atwood, showing as much ability in science as she did in writing, believed that she would follow in his footsteps in the field of biology. Her talent as a writer became apparent early: in high school, she contributed poetry, short stories and cartoons to the school newspaper. Her first volume of poetry was published the same year that she graduated from Victoria College, University of Toronto, and five years later her second book of poetry was given one of Canada's most coveted prizes, the Governor-General's Award. Since the 1960's she has taught at several Canadian and American universities, usually through honorary guest fellowships, and she has produced a tremendous body of work.

Throughout her writing career, critics have often categorized Atwood's works as "feminist," a label that she has avoided because it often applied to any work written by a woman with leading female characters. She has been one of the foremost spokespersons for the previously under-examined tradition of Canadian literature and wrote one of the most important and widely-read books about the subject, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, indicating that gender identity is no more important in her work than national identity.

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[In the following excerpt, Malak examines how Atwood infuses the conventions of the dystopian genre with her own distinctive artistry in ***The Handmaid's Tale***.]

One of [***The Handmaid's Tale's***] successful aspects concerns the skillful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles, yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror—in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instance of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*.

What distinguishes Atwood's novel from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus. Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere "breeders." ... The handmaid's situation lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* [Knopf, 1971] about man defining woman not as an autonomous being but as simply what he decrees to be relative to him: "For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other." This view of man's marginalization of woman corroborates Foucault's earlier observation about the power-sex correlative; since man holds the sanctified reigns of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious, and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires.

However, not all the female characters in Atwood's novel are sympaphetic, nor all the male ones demonic. The Aunts, a vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the churchstate's staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be—her voice trembled—penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls." On the other hand, Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women, that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood's heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke, presently presumed dead. Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll of human suffering, she refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead. Indeed, we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty; the narrative reports most of the violent acts after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes. Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool.

Some may interpret Atwood's position here as a non-feminist stance, approving of women's status-quo. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, [March 21, 1986] Lorna Sage describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as Atwood's "revisionist look at her more visionary self," and as "a novel in praise of the present, for which, perhaps, you have to have the perspective of dystopia." It is really difficult to conceive Atwood's praising the present, because, like Orwell who in *1984* extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in twentieth-century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity. The novel's mimetic

impulse then aims at wresting an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: it appeals for vigilance, and an appreciation of the mature values of tolerance, compassion, and, above all, for women's unique identity.

The novel's thematics operate by positing polarized extremes: a decadent present, which Aunt Lydia cynically describes as "a society dying ... of too much choice," and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Naturally, while rejecting the indulgent decadence and chaos of an anarchic society, the reader condemns the Gilead regime for its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." As illustrated by the fears and agonies that Offred endures, when human beings are not free to aspire toward whatever they wish, when choices become so severely constrained that, to quote from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, "only the necessary is necessary," life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. Interestingly, the victimization process does not involve Offred and the handmaids alone, but extends to the oppressors as well. Everyone ruled by the Gilead regime suffers the deprivation of having no choice, except what the church-state decrees; even the Commander is compelled to perform his sexual assignment with Offred as a matter of obligation: "This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty."

Since the inhabitants of Gilead lead the precarious existence befitting victims, most try in varied ways to cope, endure, and survive. This situation of being a victim and trying to survive dramatizes Atwood's major thesis in her critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature.* [Anansi, 1973] in which she suggests that Canada, metaphorically still a colony or an oppressed minority, is "a collective victim," and that "the central symbol for Canada ... is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*." Atwood, furthermore, enumerates what she labels "basic victim positions," whereby a victim may choose any of four possible options, one of which is to acknowledge being a victim but refuse "to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable." This position fully explains Offred's role as the protagonist-narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale.* Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. Her double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor. This impulse to survive, together with the occasional flashes of wamth and concern among the handmaids, transmits reassuring signs of hope and humanity in an otherwise chilling and depressing tale.

What makes Atwood's book such a moving tale is its clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a voice, almost like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptively, yet convincingly, transfigured into a full-roundedness that parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead. Moreover, Atwood skilfully manipulates the time sequence between the heroine's past (pre-Gilead life) and the present: those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness, and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery, and suffering under totalitarianism. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively shown how the misogynous regime functions on the basis of power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear, not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities of a grim dystopian nightmare: initially, the narrative voice, distant and almost diffidently void of any emotions, emphasizes those aspects of frugality and solemnity imposed by the state, then progressively tyranny and corruption begin to unfold piecemeal. As the novel concludes, as the horror reaches a climax, the narrative voice assumes a fully engaged emotional tone that cleverly keeps us in suspense about the heroine's fate. This method of measured, well-punctuated revelations about Gilead connects symbolically with the novel's central meaning: misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy they may appear at their initial conception, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthlessly tyrannical nature.

Regardless of the novel's dystopian essence, it nevertheless avoids being solemn; on the contrary, it sustains an ironic texture throughout. We do not find too many frightening images that may compare with Oceana's torture chambers: the few graphic horror scenes are crisply and snappily presented, sparing us a blood-curdling impact. (Some may criticize this restraint as undermining the novel's integrity and emotional validity.)As in all dystopias, Atwood's aim is to encourage the reader to adopt a rational stance that avoids *total* "suspension of disbelief." This rational stance dislocates full emotional involvement in order to create a Brechtian type of alienation that, in turn, generates an ironic charge. This rational stance too should not be total, because Atwood does want us to care sympathetically about her heroine's fate; hence the emotional distance between reader and character must allow for closeness, but up to a point. Furthermore, Atwood is equally keen on preserving the ironic flair intact. No wonder then that she concludes *The Handmaid's Tale* with a climactic moment of irony: she exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues.... The entire "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognizing or experiencing the pathos

expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed in ritualistic, fashionable jargon, but no spirited illumination ever comes out of their endeavours. Atwood soberly demonstrates that when a critic or scholar (and by extension a reader) avoids, under the guise of scholarly objectivity, taking a moral or political stand about an issue of crucial magnitude such as totalitarianism, he or she will necessarily become an apologist for evil; more significantly, the applause the speaker receives gives us a further compelling glimpse into a distant future that still harbours strong misogynous tendencies.

While the major dystopian features can clearly be located in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony. Dramatizing the interrelationship between power and sex, the book's feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically. The novel's ironic tone, on the other hand, betokens a confident narrative strategy that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet firmly, openly, and conclusively, thus skilfully succeeding in securing the reader's sympathy and interest. The novel shows Atwood's strengths both as an engaging story-teller and a creator of a sympathetic heroine, and as an articulate crafts-woman of a theme that is both current and controversial. As the novel signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Atwood's creative career, her self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre....

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Other Names Used:	Atwood, Margaret Eleanor;
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Full Text:

Margaret Atwood's ***The Handmaid's Tale*** worries over the plight of women in a society governed by religious fundamentalists committed to bolstering a seriously low birthrate. In this ``Republic of Gilead'' fertile women serve as handmaids to infertile ones; each month, upon ovulation, the handmaid copulates with her mistress's husband. If conception occurs, the handmaid receives assistance in her labor from other handmaids, and then surrenders the child to her mistress. Having given birth successfully, the handmaid can rest assured that she won't be sent to the Colonies, where ``unwomen'' clean up toxic dumps and radiation spills.

Most readings of ***The Handmaid's Tale*** approach the text, quite rightly, as a dystopic novel; reactions focus on its horrific presentation of ``theocratic ambitions of the religious right,'' on its understanding of the sinister implications of an exaggerated cultural feminism, and on its critique of our own gender arrangements. Many of these reactions then posit love as a force subverting Gilead's power. While such reactions make sense, readers also must attend to the novel's statements about love's tendency to follow decidedly conservative narrative forms. Drawing parallels between the handmaid Offred's relationships with the three men in her life—Luke, the Commander, and Nick—the novel subverts love's subversive force.

Not surprisingly, Offred takes pains to differentiate among the three men: Luke as her ``real love,'' husband, and father to her child; the Commander as Gileadean ``sugar-daddy''—powerful, distant, in control of her future; Nick as her illicit love, companion in crime. But the text makes a very different argument. All three men merge, and this merging requires us to reassess supposed distinctions among husbands, lovers, and commanders. In looking at Luke and the Commander, we see first that the two share a familiarity with various languages; like so many men of privilege throughout history, Luke and the Commander know the language of the classical curriculum and use this knowledge in a subtle reaffirmation of classical gender roles and inequalities. In addition to an interest in old languages, both Luke and the Commander share a penchant for the ways of the past. Luke spouts ``old ideas'' about women being incapable of abstract thought and men needing more meat, while the Commander provides Offred with outdated women's magazines, and escorts her to a brothel from the Hefner era.

These characteristics of Luke and the Commander contribute to an overall pattern of relational dynamics between these two men and women in the text. Because of their power, the men may serve as ``passports'' for women in their lives. After women lose their jobs and bank accounts, Offred turns to Luke as a passport provider. But just as the Commander will fail her in this respect (when he calls her into his study, she hopes to trade on his desire: it ``could be a passport''), so too Luke: ``He said the passports were foolproof.... Maybe he had a plan, a map of some kind in his head.'' The passports aren't foolproof, and Offred's language suggests that Luke's ``plan'' may be self-serving. At least in part, the novel is a story of his betrayal of her, of ``love's'' betrayal of her.

The Handmaid's Tale provides us with two male characters who mirror one another in personal characteristics and relational dynamics. Offred doesn't draw attention to parallels between the two men, and might protest against such connections but the text insists upon them. Atwood's novel encourages us to read the future in light of the past, and the past in light of the future; doing so, we cannot exclude male figures from our consideration—no matter how disquieting the results of such consideration. Here, recognition of similarity between Luke and the Commander *is* disquieting; it casts doubt not only upon the narrator's story of Luke's love, but also upon love stories generally.

``But wait," the romantic reader may object, ``there's a third male in this story, and he does credit to the love plot." Various critics argue that Offred ``breaks through to her courageous self" in relationship with Nick, and certainly we may acknowledge that Nick's intervention allows Offred to escape, tape her account, and thereby provide us with the story of her past. But despite these positive features, despite certain differences between Nick and Luke/Fred, the novel continues to represent the love plot as something potentially dangerous to women who entangle themselves therein. ***The Handmaid's Tale*** conveys these dangers in its representations of the effect on Offred of ``being in love" and of the grammar according to which she articulates being in love. When in love with Luke, for example, Offred gives in to him, accepts his direction of her toward passivity; she does precisely the same with Nick, losing interest in Mayday and in the possibility of escape. She comments, ``The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him." She barely listens to Ofglen, and all political commitment she might be capable of making vanishes in light of her commitment to romance.

Equally worrisome is Offred's reliance upon traditional grammars with which to structure her relationship with this man. For example, Offred first employs the language of Harlequin romances to describe her visit to Luke's room; and when she revises this account, she falls into the language of old movies. Sadly, both ``reconstructions" limit the range of activities and options available to male and female characters. Operating within these traditional grammars, Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances.

Every representation of romance in ***The Handmaid's Tale***, including that most positive representation, Nick with Offred, is highly qualified, highly ambivalent. The novel wants to believe in ``love" at the same time it expresses powerful reservations about how we typically realize this emotion. Finally, ***The Handmaid's Tale*** is a story of love's limitations, rather than its latitudes.

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