

The Handmaid's Tale

A Study Guide



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Introductory Materials — *Why teach The Handmaid's Tale?*

The Handmaid's Tale is one of the great dystopian novels of the 20th century, but some may think that it is — as a result — a novel of the 20th century, one that is now dated with limited applicability in contemporary classrooms.

Upon picking up the book, however, the reader is quickly struck and disturbed by the extent to which many of its themes are contemporary and perennial. Treated as a thought experiment created by Atwood, the novel can be used to press students to think harder about the issues facing both Canada and the world today.

The treatment of women in the religious state of Gilead is mirrored in many ways in oppressive regimes in the world today, such as the area controlled by ISIS in the Middle East, but also by Western history in many ways. Students are encouraged to examine thoughts and policies that exist in Canada in the early 21st century and ask just how much Margaret Atwood had to imagine things going wrong to get her dystopian vision.

Questions about social change, political awareness, and our moral obligation, and propensity, to help one another are also fertile ground for discussion through the course of this book.

Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

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Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through **discussion based inquiry**. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown.
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Chapters 1 – 7

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think “nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha” but there is so much concern about the clothes of handmaids?
- What do you believe is the purpose of having such visible uniforms for everyone?
- What do you think “The Colonies” or “the Unwomen” are?
- Why is it dangerous for Janine to be out if she’s pregnant?
- Why do you think so many people are being watched? (The Eyes, the pairs of handmaids, etc.)
- Why do you think there are no children, lawyers, or universities?
- What are the different kinds of freedom the Handmaid talks about? Which ones do you think are real freedom?
- What do you think of what Aunt Lydia says about modesty? Is there modesty for men in Gilead?
- Do you think that you could believe that what is happening in this book is “ordinary”?
- Do you think the burning books the Handmaid remembers are a sign of what led to Gilead, or are they something unrelated?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 4: “Last week they shot a woman, right about here... Well, someone’ll think twice before blowing up this house, anyways, said Cora.”

Chapter 4: “We produce our passes, from the zippered pockets in our wide sleeves... Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes.”

Chapter 5: “I think about laundromats... being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.”

Chapter 7: “I would come up though a roaring... a dress I’d never seen, white and down to the ground.”

Exercises

Reproductive health and women in Canada

The Handmaid notes that, “For me, like liquor and coffee, cigarettes are forbidden.” This is, like many of her clothing, dietary, and other regiments, to maximize her chances of conceiving and giving birth to a healthy baby. Share the two articles (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) **CDC: Young women should avoid alcohol unless using birth control** and **Telling women of reproductive age not to drink is fear mongering**.

- List one similarity and one difference between the Gilead ban on liquor, coffee, and cigarettes and the CDC recommendation from 2016.

Dress in Gilead

Share with your students the article: **Freedom Portrait: Women escape ISIS**, an article that includes a series of photos of women removing black burqas to reveal still modest, but colourful, clothes underneath.

- List two similarities and two differences between women being forced to cover up completely and without colour under ISIS and the clothing described in Gilead.
- In Gilead, the clothes are assigned based on role. Do you think this reveals something about the single acceptable outfit under ISIS? Justify your answer.
- Lots of people wear modest clothing or choose to take jobs in which they wear a uniform. Do you think these decisions are different than the clothing in Gilead? Why?

Share the website, **‘My Stealthy Freedom’** with your class for discussion.
(Link at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca)

- Consider the Japanese tourists in Gilead. Why does the handmaid note their hair? How is this related to the protest movement in Iran?

Group research and discussion

How many different times and places in which women were required to wear modest clothing can your class find examples of? Discuss the similarities and differences with your students.

Burning books.

If you would like to discuss book burning with your class, there are resources available in the Fahrenheit 451 page on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

Chapters 8 – 13

Discussion questions:

- Why don't the Econowives like the handmaids?
- What do you think Rita means when she says the Handmaid isn't common? What do you think the Handmaid means when she says Rita thinks she really is common?
- Why do you think someone tried to steal the Handmaid's daughter? What do you think must have been happening in Gilead?
- Why do you think the Handmaid's mementos of her daughter were confiscated?
- What do you think the Handmaid means when she says she is a national resource?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 8: "Serena Joy was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was Pam... How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word."

Chapter 8: "There's someone standing in the hall, near the door to the room where I stay... I called it mine."

Chapter 9: "Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time... We lived in the gaps between the stories."

Chapter 12: "My nakedness is strange to me already... something that determines me so completely."

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

Chapter 13: "Last week, Janine burst into tears... I used to think well of myself. I didn't then."

Chapter 13: "I used to think of my body as an instrument... continuing on and on, marking time."

Exercises

Dress codes:

Share the article with your students, **School Dress Codes: Discriminatory or Necessary?**

In Gilead, many things that we consider normal in moderation have been taken to extremes, and things that we think are acceptable for some people have been mandatory for everyone. Find one thing that you believe is reasonable about a dress code in the real world and explain how it has been taken too far in Gilead.

In groups, design a dress code for your school. Each group will present their dress code.

Women and bathrooms:

The Handmaid says, “In a bathroom, in a bathtub, you are vulnerable, said Aunt Lydia. She didn’t say to what.” Share the article **Texas eyes ‘women’s privacy act’ that critics say targets transgender people** with your students.

- The article is representative of a debate in 2016 over whether or not there should be laws governing bathrooms to protect women in bathrooms and locker rooms. Many politicians seem to believe that Aunt Lydia might be right.
- The Handmaid describes men’s washrooms in chapter 13 and compares them to women’s washrooms, where everything is private. Why do you think there is a difference? (Does she describe your school?)
- Separate bathrooms are something we take for granted, but do you think it’s something we should worry about, or is that an old fashioned way of thinking?
- What are the leaders of Gilead worried about in bathrooms?
- What do you think is the best way for bathrooms to work?

Public criticism under harsh regimes:

Share the article, **Photos: Fathers of Chinese Leaders at Revolutionary ‘Struggle Sessions’** and the **Photos of struggle sessions** with your students. See also page 31 of the **Cultural Revolution workbook** (all available on LiberalStudyGuides.ca).

- Compare the Chinese struggle sessions and criticism meetings with Testifying in the Handmaid’s training facility. What are some similarities? What are some differences?
- What do you think these meetings and sessions are supposed to accomplish with the people who attend them?
- Do you think they would work in Canada today? Why or why not?

Chapters 14 – 20

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the Handmaid wants to steal from the sitting room?
- What kind of war do you think is being fought in Gilead?
- Why do you think the Handmaid tells the story of the Ceremony at the same time that she tells the story of Moira's escape?
- It seems obvious that one of the things removed from sex by the Ceremony is love. It may be obvious why the laws of Gilead try to eliminate sex for pleasure, but why do you think Gilead would want to turn having children into a duty instead of an act of love?
- Do you think there is any love left in Gilead?
- Why do you think the handmaids are not allowed to have names, even though the Marthas are?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 14: "Several blank channels, then the news... They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor."

Chapter 15: "She watches him from within. We're all watching... It must be very silent."

Chapter 17: "I rub the butter over my face... We have ceremonies of our own, private ones."

Chapter 17: "I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name... I want to steal something."

Chapter 18: "Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly... I too am a missing person."

Chapter 18: "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be... Does Luke hope?"

Chapter 19: "The minimalist life... I slice the top off the egg with the spoon, and eat the contents."

Chapter 19: "Who is it?... I revise that: within limits."

Exercises

Quakers:

Share the article, **Quakers and the Underground Railroad: Myths and Realities** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students.

- Why do you think Quakers are being arrested in the war?
- What is a difference between Quakers during the Underground Railroad and Quakers in Gilead? (How were they protected in the past?)

Parallels with the Protestant Reformation:

Refer students to the section, *Scripture Alone* on the Khan Academy Introduction to the Protestant Reformation (a link is available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) to learn about the importance of having access to the Bible versus having to rely on the Church.

- What are the parallels between the way the Bible was controlled before the Reformation and how it is controlled in Gilead? Are there differences?
- Why do you think that only men are allowed to read the Bible in Gilead?

Medical research and equal rights:

Share the article on **Ventricular Septal Defect** ('hole in the heart'), one of the most common defects that a baby can be born with.

- Why do you think a baby with a hole in its heart in Gilead would be an 'Unbaby'?
- What do you think happens to Unbabies?
- Do you think that doctors in Gilead will learn to treat this disorder if the babies are branded as Unbabies?

Chapters 21 – 25

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the Aunts are allowed to read and write?
- What do you think of the reaction at the Centre to learning that Moira had escaped?
- Had it occurred to you before Cora's conversation with the handmaids that the Marthas depended on the Handmaid as well as the Commander? What do you think this reveals about the Handmaid's standing in the house? Has it changed your mind about it?
- Why do you think the handmaids are not allowed to have conversations or friendships with their Commander?
- Do you think Scrabble would be more fun if it were illegal, or less fun?
- Why do you think the Handmaid 'reconstructs' the telling of her story?
- Do you think that the Handmaid and Cora are building a sort of alliance like the one described at the Centre? How is it the same? How is it different?
- Do you think magazines are trivial now? What would change if they were banned?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 23: "But if you happen to be a man... Never tell me it amounts to the same thing."

Chapter 24: "What I need is perspective. The illusion... I can ask for something. Possibly not much, but something."

Chapter 24: "He was not a monster, she said... Nobody asked her whether or not she had loved him."

Exercises

Escaping from prison camps:

Share the article, **I walked 2,000km to trace my grandfather's escape from a Russian gulag** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students.

- How do you think Moira had to escape once she was free of the Centre?
- Write a one-page journal entry as Moira on the run.

Black markets, subversion, and freedom:

Share the video **Park Yeon-mi: North Korea's Black Market Generation** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- How does the description giving by Ms. Park compare to the situation in Gilead?
- What does access to the black market for the Commander and Serena Joy give them that the Handmaid doesn't have access to?
- Do you think the Handmaid would be better off or worse off with access to the black market? What do you think the dangers would be?
- Do you think that lower status people are able to access the black market in Gilead? Why or why not?

Chapters 26 – 30

Discussion questions:

- Do you think that the Handmaid has become friends with the Commander?
- Were you surprised that Ofglen is part of a resistance? Were there any clues?
- What do you think the difference is between the “jobs” women have and the “jobs” men have in Gilead?
- Do you think the Handmaid was happy about any of the changes that started to happen after the attack on Congress?
- How do you think it was possible for the changes in the law about women to be a surprise to the Handmaid?
- What do you think it takes for life to be bearable?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 26: “For the generations that come after... demand too much before it’s ready, can we?”

Chapter 26: “The Library is like a temple... They won’t have destroyed that.”

Chapter 27: “The window of Soul Scrolls is shatterproof... I think it was lingerie.”

Chapter 27: “Ofglen, under cover of her sleeve, grabs my elbow... What I feel is relief. It wasn’t me.”

Chapter 28: “I guess that’s how they were able to do it but she wasn’t intending to be funny.”

Chapter 28: “It’s high time somebody did something... Sorry, he said. This number’s not valid.”

Chapter 28: “We all looked up, turned off our machines... What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?”

Chapter 28: “Women can’t hold property any more, she said... They don’t want us going anywhere, you can bet on that.”

Chapter 28: “Luke knelt beside me and put his arms around me... I know, I said. I love you.”

Chapter 28: “We still have... he said... I was afraid to. I couldn’t afford to lose you.”

Exercises

Parallels with the Protestant Reformation:

Refer students to the section, *Indulgences* on the Khan Academy Introduction to the Protestant Reformation (a link is available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) to learn about the practice of indulgences in the run-up to the Protestant Reformation.

- What are some ways that Soul Scrolls are similar to indulgences?
- How do you think an official in Gilead would respond to your telling them that Soul Scrolls is like indulgences of the old Catholic church?

The preconditions for good samaritans:

The Handmaid says, “What I feel is relief. It wasn’t me.” after seeing a man grabbed off the street by the Eyes.

- What would your reaction be if you saw that happen in Canada today?
- What would your reaction be if you saw that happen and you were a visitor to Gilead?
- What would your reaction be if you saw that happen and you were a citizen of Gilead?
- What do you think is the difference between these three scenarios?
- Why do you think your reaction would be different than the Handmaid’s, if yours would be different? If it is not, why would you act the same way?
- What are some things about your life that the Handmaid does not have that allow you to do the following things?
 - To share
 - To help someone
 - To be polite

Chapters 31 – 36

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the Handmaid would fantasize about having a fight with Luke?
- How much do you think Serena Joy knows about the Handmaid, if she knows about her daughter?
- Who do you think can watch television in Gilead? Is it only Commanders and their Wives?
- Why do you think the Handmaid treats Janine’s attitude toward losing the baby as an attempt to give her life meaning? Do you think she’s right?
- Why do you think that nuns would be “more broken” than the rest of the handmaids?
- How do you think Ofglen is able to learn so many things about the Handmaid’s life?
- Based on how she feels about the way she’s dressed in the outfit from the Commander, and how Nick looks at her, how much do you think the Handmaid believes the things she’s been conditioned to believe about things like modesty and her role?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 32: “The problem wasn’t only with women... It always means worse, for some.”

Chapter 33: “A number of the Wives are already seated... in front of the television cameras.”

Chapter 34: “We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away... just as well, if not better.”

Chapter 34: “What we’re aiming for, says Aunt Lydia... such a thing was in itself heartening.”

Chapter 35: “If you don’t like it, change it... And he was, the love. One.”

Chapter 36: “I wonder where he found it. All such clothing... Freedom, like everything else, is relative.”

Exercises

The black market, subversion, and freedom:

Share the article by Park Yeon-mi, **The hopes of North Korea's 'Black Market Generation'** (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students, building on the video shown earlier. This article goes into greater detail about the subversive power of the black market, and students have now seen how extensive the black market in Gilead must be.

- Ms. Park describes the effect that the black market has had in North Korea. What are some similarities that you can see in Gilead?
- What are some differences between the sorts of goods that North Koreans are able to access via the market and those that people are able to get in Gilead?
- What are some similarities?
- Do you think that a black market like the one in North Korea could bring change to Gilead? Why or why not?

Negotiating an underground movement:

Divide the class into groups – each group will organize an underground network. There should be groups for the Commanders, the Wives, the Marthas, the Handmaids, and the drivers/Guardians.

- Each group should come up with the specific freedoms they have and restrictions they face.
- Each group should decide what sorts of things they want, and the things they have access to.
- Allow the groups to negotiate with one another to try to overcome the obstacles they face.
- As a class, map out the subversive underground network that your class has agreed on.
- Discuss the network – is there anything that surprises the students? (Is there anything that surprises you?)

Chapters 37 – 40

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of Jezebel's? Are the Commanders hypocrites? Why? Why not?
- Why do you think the Handmaid believes she needs to look stupid?
- Why do you think the women in Jezebel's are tagged, like the Handmaid?
- Why do you think the Aunts and the Centre were secrets?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 37: "It's like walking into the past," says the Commander... It shouldn't be that hard."

Chapter 38: "I pull her head over so I can whisper in her ear... she knows there is a point, so she does."

Exercises

Dress codes and extremes:

Share the video from Vox, **Transparen-She** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your class.

- Do you believe that women in Gilead are in a situation like the one in the parody?
- Think back to the way the Handmaid treated the young Guardian who checked her pass. Do you think Gilead has succeeded in eliminating the apparent ‘temptation’ that women pose to men?
- Think about Jezebel’s. Why do you think the only choices for women are extreme modesty or near-pornographic?
- What kind of clothing is not allowed under any circumstances in Gilead? Why do you think this is the case?

In addition, share the article, **I created the burkini to give women freedom, not to take it away** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your class.

- Do you think a garment like the burkini would be allowed in Gilead? Why or why not?
- Why do you think that only extremes exist in Gilead?
- Why do you think the burkini is such a controversial garment in the real world?

Applying the underground movement – assist the Underground Femaleroad:

Based on the underground network designed by student groups, who could help the Underground Femaleroad, and how?

- What sacrifices will each group have to make?
- Can everyone be saved?

Chapters 41 – “Historical Notes”

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the Handmaid has become, in her words, “lazy”?
- How widespread do you think the underground network must be?
- Do you think that the professor addressing the conference in 2195 is right that Gilead cannot be judged harshly? Why or why not?
- One of the architects of Gilead was quoted in the Historical Notes as saying, “Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won’t do that again.” Why do you think reading is seen as so dangerous?

Passages for Socratic Discussion:

Chapter 41: “I wish this story were different... I tell, therefore you are.”

Chapter 41: “Some days I was more rational... I feel relief.”

Chapter 43: “This man,” says Aunt Lydia... like a horse in terror.”

Chapter 45: “I breathe in, deeply, breathe out... I feel, for the first time, their true power.”

Chapter 46: “As I’m standing up I hear the black van... It’s all I’m left with.”

Historical Notes: “If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say... job is not to censure but to understand.”

Exercises

Real world assistance – helping those in a legal crisis:

Share the article, **Lawyers Mobilize at Nation's Airports After Trump's Order** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students.

The lawyers in the story are not putting their lives in danger, but they are coming together to help people that they don't know. We can imagine them helping the people in the Underground Femaleroad.

- What would have to be true of Canada for these lawyers to be helping those escaping Gilead?
- What do you believe motivates people to help those that they don't know?
- Does the number of people who came together to help the people flying in during the travel ban in the United States make you think that there would be a lot of people who would try to get women out of Gilead? Why or why not?

The power of reading:

Share the piece, **Excerpt from CHAPTER VII, Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass** (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, along with the full text of *Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass*), a piece in which former slave Frederick Douglass talks about the importance of having learned to read as a slave.

- What do you believe the parallels are between slavery in the American Antebellum South and the women of Gilead?
- Why are reading and writing considered such powerful intellectual tools?

Cumulative assignments / essay questions:

1. What do Moira and Janine represent through the book? Describe their different appearances and the roles they play in the life of the Handmaid each time. What do you think Margaret Atwood wants to accomplish by including them?
2. The Handmaid says of the Ceremony, "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose." This obviously falls far short of consent in Canada or in the United States (Gilead, in the book) today. Explain why you believe the Handmaid thinks of this as a choice, and what would have to change in the society of Gilead for her to be able to truly consent to her position?
3. Science fiction is often described as a story told in the world as it is, with one or two details changed. Name one or two details that you believe Margaret Atwood changed to imagine Gilead, and explain the ways in which they would affect the world in the book. Conclude by explaining how likely or unlikely you believe the emergence of a country like Gilead is today.

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Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

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