

AP English/ENG 201 Dual Credit
The Handmaid's Tale Summer Reading Discussion Questions

NOTES

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood – ISBN: 978-0385490818

If you have any questions, please contact Mrs. Johnson via e-mail: joyjohnson@concordiaprepschool.org.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the near future and explores themes of women in subjugation and the various means by which they attempt to free themselves. Through the exploration of the role of women in a totalitarian and fundamental regime, the novel offers a haunting tale of the loss of freedoms. However, it is not just women and handmaids like Offred who have lost their freedoms. In this totalitarian regime, everyone's freedoms have been curtailed, and every character in their own way is finding a way to fight back. The bending and breaking of the rules, and the risks the characters take, demonstrate their determination to be unique and independent in spite of tight controls on almost all aspects of their life.

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 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 will examine thoughts and policies that exist in the early 21st century and ask just how much Margaret Atwood had to imagine things going wrong to get her dystopian vision.

Discussion Questions

Prepare responses, evidence, analysis, and other assertions for the following questions. Make sure to incorporate direct quotes from the text in your answers for those marked with an *, citing the lines you quote. Submit your TYPED summer reading responses to Turnitin.com on the first day of class.

Also prepare questions of your own to bring to the discussion. These questions can pertain to a specific quotation, character, plot point, theme, or insight.

You will be graded on your preparation, participation, and contributions to the discussion.

Quoting the Text

When quoting passages from a novel, stand-alone quotes are not allowed. Respond, use textual support to back up your statement by first introducing the quote, and then comment on the quote after the citation.

NOTE: Shorter phrases/passages work better—no need for block quotes—and remember to cite the page numbers.

Refer to next page for examples.

Examples:

As a means of control, the handmaids had to conform to the ways of Gilead: “‘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’” (49).

Or

The women knew that amongst themselves, “The crimes of others are a secret language...Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all” (73).

*****A word of warning!!*****

Please DO NOT include the question in your response. This creates a false positive when you upload in Turnitin.com (which means the instructor must investigate if you have in fact plagiarized). Failure to comply will cost you points on your summer reading.

Questions

1. *Any dystopian novel, which means a novel that describes a society that is a terrible place to live in—such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*—raises the question of free will. To what degree are the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* forced to participate in a government that violates their basic ethical beliefs? To what degree are they complicit in their own fate(s)? Does your response differ for male versus female characters? What does the fate of the character with the strongest will, Moira, suggest about the limits of free will?
2. *What is the predominant narrative tone of the novel and how is it established by Offred's diction, use of details, imagery, and other literary devices?
3. *The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
4. *Why did the Gileadean regime decide to call the women capable of procreating ‘Handmaids?’ What does this title reveal about their social status?
5. *Although Offred's struggle for survival is at the center of the novel's complex interplay of dominance, submission, and rebellion, throughout the novel, Atwood juxtaposes the actions of other female characters with those of Offred. How do other characters, such as Janine, Moira, Ofglen, Ofwarren, and Serena Joy add to the novel's exploration of gender roles in Gilead?
6. Is Atwood's vision of the future realistic? Why or why not?
7. Who is the worst off in this society? Explain. Is it better to know what is happening, even if you are powerless to change things, or to not even realize the sadness of your situation?
8. The narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with questions, not answers. Does this satisfy you? If not, why not?
9. How would this novel be different if it did not include the Historical Notes?
10. 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 viewed as so dangerous?