

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale Overview of Text and Key Scenes

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Overview

Written in **1984**, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in Gilead, a **totalitarian state run by a theocratic regime** in what used to be the USA. **Environmental decline** has led to a decreasing fertility rate. Handmaids are women who are still fertile, and they are assigned to upper class couples in order to bear them children. The story centres on one of these women, Offred. The story is told using a **non-linear narrative** that includes **flashbacks and repetitions**, weaving together Offred's past and present. In the present, Offred has been assigned as a Handmaid to the Commander and the Commander's Wife. Throughout the novel, she remembers her time in the Red Center, where Aunts train Handmaids to adhere to the regime. She also reminisces about her life before Gilead, her childhood with her mother, her husband Luke and her friend Moira. Atwood uses the novel to explore themes of **patriarchy, class**, and **religious extremism**.

Genre

The novel combines multiple genres: **speculative fiction**, **dystopian fiction** and **tragedy**.

- It is seen primarily as **speculative fiction** because the world described in it is not too **dissimilar** from our own. Atwood is using the novel to **speculate** about what **could happen** in the future. In the novel, we see that many of the main **anxieties** and **contemporary issues** of the 1980s have led to the formation of Gilead, a **theocratic** (meaning ruled by religion) regime. Atwood is suggesting that the **rise** of the **religious far right** in the US, if left unchecked, could lead to the formation of a **totalitarian state**.
- **Dystopian fiction** is a genre which focuses on imagined societies where **injustice, human suffering** and **catastrophe** are rife. Often, it is used to make a point about the **political state** of the world. A well-known example of **dystopian fiction** is **1984** by **George Orwell**. Published in 1949, Orwell imagines the year 1984, in which the UK has been replaced by a **totalitarian state** and is run by a leader known as 'Big Brother'. Interestingly, 1984 is the year Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale*. Many **similarities** can be drawn between the two novels.
- **Tragedy** usually refers to **drama** concerned with **human suffering**, but the term is also applicable to other types of literature. Often, the characters undergo many **traumatic events** and there is not necessarily a happy ending. A famous example of a tragedy is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which both of the **titular** characters die at the **climax** after much **hardship**. *The Handmaid's Tale* can be seen as a tragedy because of the **continual suffering** Offred experiences, and the fact that she has no obvious **happy ending**.

Structure and Narration

The novel is split into parts, which are subdivided into chapters. The **final chapter** of the novel is called 'Historical Notes' and is a lecture given by an expert on Gilead in the year 2195, many years after the fall of the regime. Offred is the **internal first-person narrator** of the story, which we learn in the 'Historical Notes' section has been found recorded on cassette tapes, long after Gilead is no more. It follows a loosely **non-linear narrative**, meaning that it centres on the **events which drive the plot** rather than following a strictly **chronological timeline**. Much of the narrative involves **flashbacks** to the Red Center and to Offred's life before the regime.



Key Themes

• Survival

Survival, and issues of survival, are key to the plot. For Offred, there is a **distinction** between **mental** and **physical** survival. She cannot **control** her **physical survival**, since her body is no longer her own in the eyes of the state. It **belongs** to the Commander and to the regime. In the new regime, Offred has **no value outside her reproductive capacities**, and consequently feels herself fading: “**I feel as if there’s not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I’m made of smoke, as if I’m a mirage, fading before their eyes.**” (Chapter 14). While she mourns the loss of her sense of self, this loss can also be seen as a survival strategy - survival for Gileadean Handmaids is **predicated on obedience and submission**, and a strong sense of herself, and her value would likely lead to over resistance and would therefore endanger her. However, some sense of identity is important for her **psychological survival**. Through her memories she regains some sense of identity and her ability to narrate these memories also gives her a small sense of power: “**if it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending.**” (Chapter 7). In this way, Offred develops **mental strategies** for surviving Gilead.

• Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to **systems** of **government** and **society** that give men the **most power** and **actively exclude** everyone else. In patriarchies, men have **moral authority**, **leadership roles**, and **control** of **laws** and **property**. Gilead is an example of an **extremely patriarchal society**. Women cannot **own** property, and not even their **own bodies** belong to them any more. They cannot **possess money** and they cannot have **jobs**. Throughout the book, Offred compares the **patriarchy of Gilead** to society before the regime, and sees that there are both **similarities** and **differences**.

• Identity & Autonomy

Identity and **autonomy** are key themes to consider when looking at the novel. Offred’s struggle to **maintain her identity** and **humanity** in the face of **oppression** is central to the story. Women in Gilead are **reduced** to their **functions in society**; they are either Wives, Marthas, or Handmaids, and don’t even get to **keep their real names** - Offred’s name refers to the Commander to whom she belongs. Offred lacks **bodily autonomy** and often remembers the time before Gilead, when she could use her body for pleasure in any way she pleased. Even though she can eventually **manipulate The Commander** to some extent, he is always the one who is in **control**. Later in the novel, she **regains** a **feeling of autonomy** through her relationship with Nick.

• Reproduction

Gileadean society is entirely structured around **reproduction**. Handmaids exist to **maximise** the possibility of reproduction, but any offspring they produce **automatically belong** to the upper class couples they are assigned to. The novel argues that to **control women’s bodies** for **reproductive purposes** is **unethical**, given the suffering that it causes for Offred and other Handmaids.

“We are two-legged wombs, that’s all”
(Chapter 23)



- **Class & Oppression**

Gilead is structured along **pre-existing class lines**, as well as having **racist**, **anti-Semitic** and **homophobic** ideals (we see men hanged on the Wall for “homosexual activity”, and learn that Jewish and non-white people have been forced to emigrate or be killed). Offred must leave the house through the **back door**, harkening to how upper class Victorian households operated, with the servants (lower class) **segregated entirely** from the upper classes.

Context

The book was written in 1984 in the US by Atwood, when she was living in West Berlin. It was a time of **intense political unrest**, with people attempting to flee the GDR (German Democratic Republic) into the West. Many were killed in the process of crossing the Berlin Wall. The **Cold War (1979-1985)** was ongoing, and the **threat of nuclear war** between Soviet Russia and the West was always present, which informed the idea of the Colonies as a **radioactive wasteland**. This sense of **imminent threat** and **political unrest** informed many of the themes of the novel. In the early 1980s, the **AIDs pandemic** was beginning to take hold of the **public imagination**, and this may have had an impact on Atwood’s imagining of Gilead as a **society struggling against disease**. Other **anxieties** at the time included **environmental decline** and **over-industrialisation**, and arguments about **climate change** were just beginning to emerge. All of these concerns no doubt had an impact on Atwood’s **vision of the future** in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Characters

- **Offred:** Offred is the **first-person narrator** and **protagonist** of the novel. Offred is a name given to her signifying the Commander to whom she belongs; it means she is “Of Fred”. She is a Handmaid, a **fertile woman** forced to bear children for **infertile upper class couples**. The novel opens as she is placed on a **new assignment** in the home of the Commander and Serena Joy, his wife. Throughout the novel she has flashbacks to her **indoctrination** as a Handmaid at the Red Center, and to her life before the regime with her husband Luke and her daughter.
- **Serena Joy:** A former gospel singer and the Commander’s Wife. Before Gilead she was an **anti-feminist activist** campaigning for a return to “traditional values”. She is proud of her **status** as the Commander’s Wife, the highest position a woman can hold in Gilead, and she is cruel to Offred, who she sees as **inferior**. At the same time, Serena is **jealous of Offred’s ability to get pregnant**. In a society that values reproduction so much, Offred likely reminds Serena that she **cannot have children**, which makes her feel inadequate and resentful.
- **The Commander:** The **patriarchal head** of the household that Offred is assigned to at the beginning of the novel.
- **Aunt Lydia:** An Aunt at the Red Center, tasked with **re-educating** and **indoctrinating** women into accepting their fates as Handmaids. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia’s pro-Gilead **aphorisms** throughout the novel.

EXAM TIP

You can integrate context and the author’s intention into your initial point about a character or theme, e.g. “Serena Joy is used by Atwood to illustrate the ways women, as well as men, take an active part in the patriarchy”.



- **Moira:** Offred's best friend from college, before Gilead. A **lesbian** and a **feminist**, she is **independent** and **defiant** in the face of the regime. Eventually, she escapes from the Red Center. Offred sees her again later in the novel at a private club, as a sex worker.
- **Nick:** A **Guardian**, an officer of Gilead who works at the Commander's home as a chauffeur and a gardener. Offred and Nick begin a **secret affair** after Serena Joy, in an effort to get Offred pregnant, organises a union between them. It is unclear whether Nick is a member of the Eyes, Mayday, or both.
- **Ofglen:** A Handmaid assigned to be Offred's shopping partner. Ofglen is a member of the **underground group** "Mayday", working against the regime. Towards the end of the novel Ofglen hangs herself when she is discovered.
- **Cora:** A servant at the Commander's house. She is a Martha, an **infertile** woman who carries out **domestic work**. She is more accepting of the regime than Rita, the other Martha at work in the house.
- **Janine:** Offred meets Janine at the Red Center where they were training to be Handmaids together. As a Handmaid, her name is **Ofwarren**. She manages to have a baby, which causes a lot of **envy** in the other Handmaids, but the baby turns out to be an "**Unbaby**", born with deformities.
- **Luke:** Luke is Offred's husband from before Gilead. They met and had an affair while he was married to another woman, but he left his first wife for Offred. They have a daughter together, and try to **escape** to Canada when the regime first takes power. They are captured and separated, and never see each other again.
- **Aunt Elizabeth:** An Aunt at the Red Center who is **attacked** by Moira. She steals Aunt Elizabeth's uniform as a disguise to escape from the Center.
- **Offred's mother:** A **single parent** and **feminist activist**, Offred remembers her mother in flashbacks to her life before Gilead. At the Red Center, she sees archival footage of her mother as a younger woman on an **anti-rape** protest called Take Back the Night.
- **Rita:** Rita is one of two Marthas, along with Cora, working in the Commander's household. She treats Offred with **disdain** at the beginning of her stay, and seems more at odds with the regime.
- **Professor Piexoto:** The **epilogue** of the Handmaid's Tale takes place in **2195**. The Professor is a guest speaker at a symposium, and has transcribed Offred's tape-recorded narratives. In his lecture he examines the **historical context** and **significance** of Offred's story.

Quick Summary

Part I: Night (Chapter 1)

- The book opens on a woman, who we later learn is named Offred, remembering her time at the Red Center, a **re-education** centre for Handmaids. The Aunts, who teach at the Center, are **domineering** and **cruel**, patrolling with cattle prods on their belts.
- Guards ensure the women don't escape. Offred observes that the Handmaids long to interact with the Guards if only so that they can **barter an escape**.
- At night, Offred describes the Handmaids **secretly** exchanging their names from bed-to-bed when the Aunts aren't watching. She lists the names.



Analysis - Part I: Night

Atwood does not introduce us to our narrator or explain the intricacies of the world of Gilead straight away. Instead, she alludes to both the **familiar**, with her descriptions of the gymnasium and football field, and the **unfamiliar**, like the **implied violence** of the Aunts with their cattle prods and the Guards with guns. This **juxtaposition** serves to make the reader **uneasy** and sets the **tone** for the rest of the novel. It tells us that the world we are reading about is **related** to our own, though we don't learn how exactly until later in the book. Despite the ambiguity, we know from the first chapter that the book takes place in a time where women have been **completely disempowered**. The fact that they imagine using their bodies to **barter** escape with the Guards further confirms this; the women have **nothing to trade except themselves**. The women exchange names as a small act of **defiance**, **retaining their humanity** in the face of **oppression**.

Key Quotes

- **“If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.”**

The women at the Red Center have been completely stripped of their **power** and their **previous identities**. We learn later that in Gilead, women cannot own money or have jobs. The only tool they have to **bargain** with is their **bodies**. By using the word “we”, the narrator speaks for all of the Handmaids at once, compounding the idea that under Gilead, they have **lost their individuality**, and are now defined by their **biological purpose** alone.

- **“We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.”**

Readers have **speculated** that “June” is Offred’s real name (as it is in the TV adaptation) since the rest of the names listed here are mentioned again later in the book - Atwood mentions this directly in her 2019 **introduction** to the novel. The TV show also By trading names under the cover of darkness, the women are holding on to their **individuality** in the only way they can.

II: Shopping (Chapters 2 - 6)

Chapter 2

- Offred describes her new bedroom in the Commander’s house. It is **sparse** and **characterless**, unlike the surrounding house which is **large and expensive** looking, and anything that could be used to **self-harm** has been removed. Hearing the bell ring, Offred must go shopping, and describes her outfit. **Handmaids wear red**, down to their gloves and shoes. Her **winged white bonnet** protects her from being seen; and from seeing.
- Offred goes into the kitchen to get shopping tokens from Rita, a Martha, who treats her with hostility and disinterest.



- Offred leaves through the back door, and the scene changes to a **flashback** to five weeks ago, when Offred first arrived at her posting, and when she first met the Commander's Wife. The Commander's Wife tells Offred what she expects of her. She **asserts her position** as a Wife and therefore **superior** to Offred, and is **territorial** about her husband.
- Offred realises she recognises the Commander's Wife from before Gilead. She was a **gospel singer** on **religious** TV called Serena Joy.

Chapter 4

- On her way out, Offred passes Nick, a **low-status Guardian**, washing the Commander's car. He sees Offred looking at him and winks at her, a **forbidden act**. She wonders if he is testing her, and he is a **spy for the regime**, known as an "Eye".
- Offred meets Ofglen, another Handmaid. They are to **chaperone** each other on shopping outings. As they show their passes to the Guards at a checkpoint, Offred imagines returning there at night and using her body as a **bargaining tool**. Offred finds herself enjoying the **limited power** she has as an **object of desire** in the eyes of these men.

Chapter 5

- On the way to the shops, Offred **reminisces** walking the same streets with her husband Luke before the regime. Further into the town, Offred remembers how she sometimes felt **unsafe** as a woman in the times before Gilead, though she had much more control over her **body** and **freedom**.
- Once at the store, a **pregnant** Handmaid walks in. She has successfully carried out her **duty** as a Handmaid and is pregnant with a Commander's child. Offred **recognises** her as a woman from the Red Center called Janine, who she never liked.
- As Offred and Ofglen leave the shops, they come across a guided group of Japanese tourists. The women are dressed in the **Western style** of times before Gilead. They are **fascinated** by the two Handmaids and ask if they are happy, via their interpreter. Offred lies and says they are very happy, worried the interpreter could be an Eye.

Chapter 6

- En route home from shopping, Ofglen suggests they walk past the church. It is now a museum to **the history of white Puritan settlers**. Walking past old dormitories, a football stadium, and a boathouse, it is implied that they are walking through what was formerly a **University campus**.
- Opposite the church is the Wall, where **enemies** of Gilead are **executed** and hung on public display. There are six corpses, and all wear a sign on their necks with a fetus, signifying that they were put to death for **performing abortions** before Gilead. They are being **retroactively** punished for their crimes.

EXAM TIP

We know, from several references that Atwood makes throughout the novel, that the old university buildings referenced here are Harvard University.

Analysis - Part II: Shopping

As Offred's narrative develops, terms like "Angel", "Aunts" and "Handmaid" are introduced to us but never **directly explained**. Rather, as the novel **progresses** the structure of Gilead is **revealed** bit-by-bit. The **mundanity** of Offred's daily activities, **familiar** to all of us, is at odds with the **horrors** that she witnesses as she goes about them. In Part III, we are introduced to the



Commander's Wife, a former **anti-feminist activist** who **campaigned** for the life she now has but seems **unhappy** all the same. Themes of **class inequality** are also introduced, as Offred has to use the back door to leave the house, is treated with disdain by the other **domestic staff**, and meets Nick. In Part III we are also more firmly introduced to the idea that Gilead exists in the **not too distant future**, in what used to be the USA. At the Wall, criminals are executed for their **past crimes** before Gilead, which we are led to believe is around the late twentieth century - Atwood wrote the novel in **1984**.

EXAM TIP

Remember to relate back to the context of the time the novel was written. Atwood was living in West Berlin when she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*. She may well have taken her inspiration for the Wall in Gilead from the Berlin Wall, a symbol of suffering and division.

Key Quotes

- **“This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?” (Chapter 2)**

Referring **ambiguously** to what “they” like, we sense that Offred is **powerless** to the whims of those in charge, even down to making her own **aesthetic choices**. The **traditional values** to which she refers are the idea that women are best suited to **home-making, domestic work, and reproduction**. She uses the old proverb “Waste not want not”, which has **Victorian associations**, and further implies to us that the world she lives in has taken a lot of its **influences** from the past. She questions the **truth** of the proverb, a phrase mostly used to talk about **resources**, and applies it to her own body, thus **objectifying** herself.

- **“They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll.” (Chapter 3)**

Here, Offred again likens herself to an **inanimate object**, signifying her **loss of humanity** under the regime. Her relationship with Serena Joy only exists in order to carry out **biological function**. Offred's permitted conversation is **limited**, and scripted to specific **religious phrases**, just like a doll with pre-recorded speech. In this instance, Atwood is implying that Serena Joy is the little girl and Offred is her doll, which also can be seen as a comment on their **class differences**.

- **“To be seen - to be seen - is to be - her voice trembles - penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls.” (Chapter 5)**

Offred describes an instance of Aunt Lydia's teachings at the Red Center. Aunt Lydia's **allusion to sexual activity** is a reflection of the **religious doctrine** that governs Gilead. She is implying that the women must aim to be **pure**, and this has a **scriptural basis** - for example, the Bible says “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). In Gilead, **purity** brings you closer to God. Aunt Lydia also **patronises** the women by calling them girls, reinforcing her own place in the **hierarchy of power**.

Part III: Night (Chapter 7)

Chapter 7

- Offred remembers her **former life** at night; talking to her friend Moira in their dorm room at college, walking with her mother in the park and coming across women **burning books** and



pornographic magazines. Offred **cannot remember** large portions of her life and wonders whether she has been **injected** or **given a pill** in order to forget.

- She recalls waking up in an unfamiliar place, where authorities from the regime tell her she was an unfit mother to her daughter, who they have taken away. Offred imagines she is **recounting** these events as a story to someone, because then she has **control** over the ending.

Analysis - Part III: Night

Throughout the novel, we see Offred reliving her **memories** as a form of **escapism** and a way of **surviving** the mental anguish of her life in Gilead. In Part III we see her do this in the form of several **flashbacks**. In one such flashback, a young and unknowing Offred participates in the burning of **misogynistic material** as part of a public protest with her mother, introducing us to the political struggles between **feminism** and the **belief in male superiority** which led to Gilead.

Quotes

- “The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don’t move. As long as I lie still.” (Chapter 7)

Though we can interpret Offred as **passive** and **accepting** of the **oppressive conditions** she is living in, she **disrupts** her oppression in moments like these. Though she cannot legally own **material property** or **wealth** in Gilead, she can ‘own’ the time when she is alone.

Part IV: Waiting Room (Chapters 8 to 12)

Chapter 8

- On their next shopping trip, Offred and Ofglen see three new bodies on the Wall. Two are Guardians, executed for **homosexual activity**, and one is a Catholic priest. On the walk home, they come across a **funeral procession** of Econowives, the wives of poor Guardians, mourning the **miscarriage** of an early fetus. These women treat the Handmaids with **disdain**.
- When Ofglen leaves after shopping she says goodbye, but Offred thinks she wants to say more. At the driveway, she ignores Nick when he **breaks the rules** and asks her about her walk. Seeing Serena Joy, Offred remembers how she **campaigns** for women to stay in the home before Gilead. Offred wonders whether Serena Joy is **satisfied** with the results of her activism, now that she is **permanently** stuck at home under the regime.
- Upstairs, Offred sees the Commander **standing outside** her room, which is **not allowed**. He nods at her and **leaves**.

Chapter 9

- Back in her room, Offred **longs** for her husband Luke. She remembers waiting for him in hotel rooms when they first got together and he was **cheating** on his wife.
- She remembers finding the Latin words *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* scratched into her cupboard floor in the first few weeks of her stay. Offred doesn’t understand it, but she feels a **connection** with the Handmaid who had this room before her, and who she assumes wrote it. She associates this Handmaid with **memories** of her feisty best friend, Moira. Later, she asks Rita about the last Handmaid, but Rita **snubs** her questions.



Chapter 10

- Offred **sings songs** to herself in her head. Though **music is banned** in Gilead, she has heard Serena Joy humming, and listening to **old recordings** of herself when she was a gospel singer.
- With summer approaching and the house getting hot, Offred thinks about the things women used to be **allowed to wear**, before Gilead. She remembers Aunt Lydia at the Red Center blaming the **sexual violence** against women that occurred before Gilead on how they **used to dress**. Offred remembers the **relative freedom** before Gilead, when Moira threw a party at college to sell lingerie. She remembers reading about sexual violence against women in the news at the time, but felt it was **far away** from her own experience.

Chapter 11

- All Handmaids are **tested monthly** for disease and pregnancy by a Doctor. Offred went for her visit yesterday. At the Doctor's office, a sheet **prevents** her from seeing his face during her examination. Though it is forbidden, the Doctor talks to her in a **casual and cheerful** way, and offers to have sex with her to **improve her chances** of pregnancy, saying most Commanders are **sterile** or too old.
- This statement **shocks** Offred, since the state does not **acknowledge male sterility** anymore. In Gilead, the **blame** always lies with the woman if a couple cannot get pregnant. She **refuses** his offer, but tries to sound grateful. She is **frightened** because she recognises that the doctor has the power to list her as **infertile** -- an **Unwoman** -- and she will be sent to the Colonies.

Chapter 12

- Today is one of the days Offred is **required to bathe**. The door is kept **unlocked** and everything that could be used to **self-harm** has been removed. Cora **waits outside** until Offred is done. Offred feels **disconnected** from her own naked body, remembering her **ownership** of her body in the world before Gilead. It is hard to imagine now.
- She remembers a woman trying to **kidnap** her five year old daughter in the supermarket. It has been three years since. Offred often thinks of her daughter as a **ghost**, since it is easier to **imagine her dead**, where the authorities cannot hurt her.
- At dinner she **steals** a pat of butter from the table to take to her room.

Analysis - Part IV: Waiting Room

In Part IV, we learn at the Wall that the regime is not just **oppressive** of women, but is also against **homosexuality** and any **religious belief** that doesn't align with that of the state. We also see themes of **pro-life politics** in the funeral held for the fetus. Offred examines the **hypocrisy** of Serena Joy's lifestyle before Gilead and her **pro-regime values** now. Serena Joy was an **anti-feminist campaigner** who travelled and gave speeches, both activities which are **denied** her now under the regime. Offred's attitude towards Serena Joy is initially **sympathetic** and hopeful that the Wife will be lenient, but it quickly becomes apparent that Serena Joy takes an **enthusiastic role in enacting female oppression**, a theme which reappears throughout the book. In the Doctor's office, Offred is presented with an uncomfortable **Catch-22**: accept sex from the Doctor and risk both of their lives, or deny him and risk his **revenge**. This situation is one of many throughout the novel which serve to emphasise Offred's total **lack of power**.

EXAM TIP

It is useful to note the historical backdrop for *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood has noted that when she wrote it in 1984, it was in response to the socio-political climate in the US. Republican President Ronald Reagan was in power and far-right religious extremism was on the rise.



We learn that not only is Offred **heartbroken** from the loss of her husband, but that she is also **mourning** the loss of her daughter. For the rest of the book, Offred's **grief** for her daughter is one of her few **driving forces**.

Key Quotes

“We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between stories.” (Chapter Ten)

- Offred here is talking about the times before Gilead. She is hinting at her own **political apathy**, which is at odds with her mother's strong **feminist convictions**. By using the word “We” instead of “I” she is **acknowledging** that she was not alone in her apathy, and that most of society was ignoring the rise of **religious extremism** that led to Gilead. She describes her **position of privilege** in the time before Gilead, when she knew **oppression against women** was rife, but since it wasn't happening to her, she did nothing to fight it. In other words, she's **complacent**. Earlier in the Chapter she says of those times that **“We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.”** People were aware of the dangers of the religious far right, but **collective cognitive dissonance** meant that nobody did anything to stop its **rise in popularity**. Offred could easily be talking about the world as we know it now. Atwood uses descriptions of the world before Gilead to warn the reader that such **dystopia** is always possible. When Offred talks about being someone who “lived in the gaps between stories”, this is an example of **irony**, since the novel we are reading centres on her.

“Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.” (Chapter 11)

- **Semantics** are different in Gilead. The state no longer recognises male **sterility** as a possibility and only women can be blamed for **infertility**, to the extent that the word ‘sterile’ itself is banned. Atwood is emphasising the **relative fragility** of **universal civil rights**, which can be **taken away** or **disrupted** at the whim of those in charge. Further, Atwood is undermining the idea of the **law as sacred**; it is actually just a set of rules made up by the people with the **most power**.

Part V: Nap (Chapter 13)

- After dinner, Offred finds herself remembering when Moira first arrived at the Red Center, three weeks after she got there herself. They are too **scared to speak** to each other at first because friendships **arouse suspicion**, but arrange to meet in the bathroom and exchange a few words.
- At the Center everyone must “Testify” about their **previous lives**. Janine describes how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had to have an **abortion**. The Handmaids are made to **blame her** for the experience and **shame** her for being emotional.
- Offred thinks about how her relationship to her body has changed. Before Gilead, it was her own, used for **pleasure**. Now, her body is **walking uterus**. **Menstruation** represents **shame** each month because it means **pregnancy has failed**.
- She remembers **running** through the woods carrying her daughter, trying to **escape** Gilead. Hearing gunshots, she tries to **keep her daughter quiet** but the girl is too young to understand. Upon capture, her daughter is torn from her.



Analysis Part V: Nap

Offred is **heartbroken** at the loss of Luke and her daughter, but many of her fondest memories are of her **best friend**, Moira. Along with Offred's mother, Moira represents the **modern feminist**. At the Red Center, contrary to ideas espoused by the **feminist movement**, women are encouraged to **blame** each other for the way men have **abused** them in the past. Testifying is a technique practiced at the Red Center to teach women to **uphold the patriarchy** against each other.

Key Quotes

“She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her.” (Chapter 13)

- In a moment of enforced vulnerability, Janine (Ofwarren) ‘testifies’ about her gang-rape at the age of fourteen and her **resulting abortion**. Aunt Lydia encourages the women to blame Janine for this horrific **act of violence**, revealing Gilead’s essential **hatred of women**, which encourages them to blame themselves for men’s actions. A commonly **critiqued** expression of the last fifteen years is the phrase “What were you wearing?” which has been asked of women after **sexual assault**, implying that their clothing choices are the reason they were assaulted. This is **misogynistic** and places the blame on women when really, the perpetrator of the assault is **responsible**. Offred explains that even though the women are aware that what they are doing to Janine is unfair, they have already begun to see her as **repulsive** because of her past, proving that the **brainwashing** at the Red Center has already begun to take hold.

Part VI: Household (Chapters 14 to 17)

Chapter 14

- It is time for the Ceremony. The whole household **assembles** in the master bedroom and waits for the Commander. Nick touches Offred’s foot with his and she moves it away, but he does it again. Even though it’s **forbidden**, Serena Joy allows them to **watch the news** on TV while they wait for the Commander to arrive.
- Offred remembers purchasing **fake passports** with Luke in order to try and **escape** across the border. They give their daughter a sleeping pill so that she will not give them away, and pack nothing in the car to **avoid suspicion**.

Chapter 15

- The Commander arrives. From an ornate box he reads **Bible verses** that emphasise childbearing, and Serena Joy **cries**. Offred knows these verses from the Red Center, and remembers Moira **faking an illness** to try and escape by **offering sex** to the ambulance operators. She is reported and **tortured** by the Aunts as punishment.

Chapter 16

- Once the **Bible reading** and prayers are finished, Offred lies with her head in Serena Joy’s lap, holding her hands, and the Commander has **impersonal, profunctor** sex with her. When he is finished he leaves, wordlessly.
- Serena Joy **angrily** tells Offred to leave too, even though she is supposed to lie with her hips up for ten minutes to **improve her chances** of pregnancy.



Chapter 17

- Back in her room, Offred uses the butter she **stole** earlier as a lotion for her skin, a trick she learnt at the Red Center. Unable to sleep, she goes downstairs to **steal a daffodil** from the flower display. She wants to **press it** and leave it for the next Handmaid.
- In the sitting room, she runs into Nick. Neither of them are allowed to be there. They kiss and Offred feels very **sexually attracted** to him. Nick says the commander wants to **meet her** in his office tomorrow.

Analysis - Part VI: Household

In this chapter we finally see the chilling **practical reality** of being a Handmaid. Part of Gilead's efforts to **disempower** its citizens include stripping people of types of **privacy** previously believed to be **sacrosanct**. In the **religious theocracy** of Gilead, sex is no longer a **private action** for **personal pleasure**, but happens only for the **purposes of reproduction**. The Bible is a **literal part** of this process since it is read before the Ceremony, but it also **informs** the actions of Ceremony itself. At the beginning of the novel, Atwood quotes a passage from the Bible (Genesis 30:1-3) which is **continually referenced** as the story unfolds. Rachel, having been **unable to get pregnant**, tells her husband Jacob **"Give me children, or else I die"**. This angers him, and she tells him to have sex with her maid Bilhah instead in order to **produce a child** for her. Rachel's **logic** has been taken **literally** in Gilead and applied to the Handmaids.

Key Quotes

- **"To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange. To have them watching him all the time."** (Chapter 15)

Here, Atwood flips the idea of the **male gaze** on its head, focusing instead on how the Commander must feel with all of the women in the house **observing** him. Offred cannot help but **scrutinise** him. In Gilead, women are **not permitted** to be looked at, which is why they must wear their white bonnets.

- **"I do not say making love, because that is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. 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."** (Chapter 16)

Offred **struggles** to define what it is that happens to her during the Ceremony. The **absence** of love, and indeed, **any relationship** between her and the Commander, the **humiliation** of having everyone in the house **witness**, all cause Offred to **disconnect** from her body completely. Though she denies that it is an act of **sexual violence**, a **feminist interpretation** would contest this. Already, Offred is **blaming herself** for what is happening to her body, just as she was taught at the Red Center. Offred believes she had a choice, but her choice was between **certain death** in the Colonies or the **institutionalised, repeated rape** expected of Handmaids. Offred's logic is skewed, but it is a **survival mechanism**. By denying the idea that she is being raped, Offred can avoid dealing with the **emotional trauma** of the event.

Part VII - Night (Chapters 18)

Chapter 18

- Offred lies in bed and thinks about Luke. She remembers lying in bed with him while **pregnant** with their daughter. She imagines he's **dead** or in **prison**. Then, she imagines he



has **escaped across the border** and that one day soon, she will receive a **message** from him. She expects all three scenarios at once as a way of **managing her expectations**.

Analysis

Offred's **attitude** towards **survival** includes more than just **staying alive**. Throughout the book, Offred uses memories of her family and friends to help her **manage her emotional state** as best she can in order to avoid sinking into **depression** completely, as many Handmaids do. We understand that Offred believes if Gilead were to break her spirit, that would be them **winning**, and she will not let them win.

Key Quotes

- **“The things I believe can’t all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it.” (Chapter 18)**

Shaken after the Ceremony, Offred thinks about Luke. She cycles through all the potential **scenarios** she can imagine that might have happened to him. This is an example of one of Offred's **individual survival mechanisms**. In Chapter 2, she tells us **“I intend to last”**, and this means **mentally** as well as **physically**. Throughout the novel we see examples of Offred's **mental fortitude** in the face of the regime, and this is one such example.

Part VIII: Birth Day (Chapters 19 - 23)

Chapter 19

- Offred **dreams** of hugging her daughter, and of waking up as her mother comes in with a breakfast tray. Breakfast that day at the Commander's House is **interrupted** by the sirens of the Birthmobile. Ofwarren is **going into labour**, and the Handmaids must go and witness.
- On the way to the birth, Offred remembers Aunt Lydia at the Red Center explaining the **declining birth rate**. **Environmental decline** and **toxification** has poisoned one in four women, leading to **birth defects**. According to Aunt Lydia, women who do not want to breed are 'lazy sluts'. Women in labour are no longer allowed **pain relief** because God wants them to **suffer**.
- At the house of Ofwarren, the district's Wives arrive. They will also **witness**.

Chapter 20

- The Wife of Warren lies in the sitting room **mimicking** labour with the Wives watching. In the master bedroom, the Handmaids watch Ofwarren **give birth**. Offred remembers a film shown at the Red Center about “Unwomen”; **feminists** from the old days. Offred recognised her mother in some footage of an **anti-rape march**. Offred and her mother often fought because her mother thought Offred **ungrateful** for her own **feminist struggles**. Now, Offred wishes she could see her mother again **despite the tension** that existed between them.

Chapter 21

- Under the cover of a **chant** to help Ofwarren give birth, one of the Handmaids asks Offred if she is **looking for anyone**. Offred tells her about Moira. The Handmaid is looking for a



woman named Alma, and they both agree to look out for **women matching their description**. Their conversation is **interrupted** by the wary glance of an Aunt.

- Ofwarren and the Wife of Warren sit on a **birthing stool** together and the baby is born, a girl with **no visible deformities**. She is given to the Wife of Warren, who now **lies** in the master bed. Ofwarren will now be **transferred** to a new Commander, after **nursing** the baby for a few months. Because she has carried out her **duty** and given birth, she will never be sent to the Colonies and doesn't have to live under the **constant threat of violence or death**.

Chapter 22

- On the way back from the birth, Offred remembers Moira's **escape** from the Red Center. She tied Aunt Elizabeth up in the furnace room and **exchanged** their clothing, then left the Center in **disguise** using Aunt Elizabeth's pass. That was the **last time** Offred saw or heard from her.

Chapter 23

- Back at home, Cora expresses her **hope** that soon the Commander and his Wife will have a child.
- That night Offred leaves her room to meet the Commander in his quarters. She is **terrified** that if they get **caught** she will be sent to the Colonies, but also knows that to **refuse** him would also be **dangerous** because he holds all the **power** in the house.
- In his book-filled study, Offred is surprised when the Commander asks her to play Scrabble, an activity **forbidden** to her since women are **banned from reading**. The game feels **hedonistic** to Offred.
- When she leaves, the Commander asks her for a **kiss**. She imagines **murdering him** in his **vulnerable state**. She kisses him and he seems disappointed, saying he wanted her to kiss him like **she meant it**.

Analysis - Part VIII: Birth Day

In 'Birth Day' we see the ideal result expected of the Handmaids. During the labour, we see the separation of women **according to class**, with the Wives (**higher class**) in the sitting room and the Handmaids (**lower class**) in the bedroom. In Gilead, as in many **misogynistic** societies today, sex outside of marriage is seen to **defile** women. Even though the **purpose** of the Handmaids is to **reproduce** for Gilead, the fact that they must have sex with married men makes them **inferior** in the **eyes of society**. It is as if the **existence** of Handmaids is a **necessary evil** in order to counter the **declining birth rate**. We also see an **opportunity arise** for Offred: **manipulating** the Commander. In this way, Offred can wield the **little power** she has to benefit herself.

Key Quotes

- **"The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Center. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells."** (Chapter 19)

One of the recurring themes of the novel is **environmental decline** because of **human activity**. During the 1980s, when the novel was written, **environmental concerns** around **toxic waste**, **radioactive material** and **acid rain** were becoming more popular. **Anxiety** over these concerns was growing in society. In Gilead, **over-industrialisation** and **capitalistic greed** has **decimated**



the environment, and **radiation poisoning** is a constant threat. Atwood wrote the novel at the end of the Cold War, when the US was in **constant threat** of **nuclear attack** from Soviet Russia, and the idea of **nuclear apocalypse** had captured the **popular imagination**. At the time it was published, the horrors of the world depicted in the novel would have seemed an **entirely possible scenario**.

- **“Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.” (Chapter 21)**

Offred is calling for her mother, after witnessing Ofwarren’s **labour**. Giving birth, in contemporary times, is an incredibly **private occasion**, featuring only people close to the mother. In Gilead, as with the Ceremony, giving birth is a **public act** and everyone is involved. It is another example of the way the **individual rights** of women have been taken away in Gilead. It makes sense that Offred misses her mother while watching Ofwarren become one. Offred says that in Gilead there is a ‘women’s culture’, and though it’s not the **feminist utopia** that her mother **campaigned** for, the statement is partly true. The **segregation** of men and women in Gilead has provided a ‘women’s culture’ in kind.

Part IX: Night (Chapter 24)

Chapter 24

- Returning to her room, Offred decides to focus on how to **manipulate** her present situation, using the **limited power** she has with the Commander. She remembers Aunt Lydia’s teachings that all men are **sex machines**. Offred realises this provides the **opportunity to bargain**.
- Offred remembers watching a **historical documentary** about the mistress of a guard at a Nazi concentration camp. She **denied** knowing about the death camps and asserted that her lover was **not a bad person**, but **killed herself** days after conducting the interview.
- Abruptly, Offred finds the events of the evening **hysterically funny** and has to stifle her laughter from erupting. She **falls asleep** with her head in the cupboard, resting where the words *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* are written.

Analysis - Part IX: Night

After her encounter with the Commander, Offred is **full of adrenaline**. She realises she has an opportunity to bargain, and therefore the **possibility** to **escape** in future. Her laughter can be interpreted in multiple ways. Possibly the adrenaline has made her **delirious** and **hysterical**. Another possibility is that she relishes **undermining** the **absolute power** of the regime by laughing at it. Breaking from her **normal routine**, she falls asleep with her head near the graffiti in her cupboard. This is a touching moment, implying her **solidarity** with the previous Housemaid and her need to feel **emotionally connected** to another person.

Key Quotes

“Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is the metaphor. It’s nature’s way. It’s God’s device. It’s the way things are. Aunt Lydia did not actually say this, but it was implicit in everything she did say.”

- In Part IX, we see the first sliver of an opportunity for Offred. The Commander is interested in her and in **bending the rules**. He is attracted to her, and though she cannot **truthfully reciprocate**, she realises that she can **utilise** his attraction in order to barter for things in



return. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia's twisted teachings at the Red Center, which **characterised** men as animals unable to control their **sexual desires**. This attitude is not unheard of even today, in **patriarchal societies**, as a way of explaining away men's **inappropriate behaviour** without holding them **accountable** for it. Atwood includes many familiar **tropes** like this in the novel, highlighting how we are never far away from a **social dystopia** if we do not fight to protect our **civil liberties**.

Part X - Soul Scrolls (Chapter 25 - 29)

Chapter 25

- Offred is **woken by a scream** as Cora finds her with her head in the cupboard in the morning. Cora had assumed Offred had tried to **kill herself**. Offred says she fainted.
- It is summertime now, and Offred has continued to meet the Commander at night time, using Nick and a **system of signals** to ensure Serena Joy does not find out.
- Offred and the Commander continue to play Scrabble, and he does not try to kiss her again. He lets her read an old copy of *Vogue* magazine. She asks him for **hand lotion**. She tells him she has been using butter instead and he **laughs at her**, much to her irritation.

Chapter 26

- Offred feels **embarrassed** during the Ceremony now that she has a **friendship** with the Commander. She begins to feel **jealous** of Serena and also **guilty** that she is going behind her back with the Commander.
- The Commander almost **touches** Offred's face during a Ceremony and Offred tells him never to do it again, or Serena Joy will have her sent to the Colonies. He complains that he finds **sex impersonal**, and Offred scoffs. She is becoming more **trusting** in his presence.

Chapter 27

- Offred and Ofglen are **more comfortable** with each other, and continue to shop together. Offred wonders if Luke is **imprisoned** in the detention center behind the Wall. On one shopping trip, they stop at a store called Soul Scrolls, which prints **phone-order prayers** for the Wives to **signify their piety**.
- Ofglen asks Offred if she believes God **listens** to the printing machines. This kind of question is **treason** in Gilead, but Offred decides to **answer truthfully** and says no. The two women realise they can **trust** each other and feel **invigorated**. We learn that Ofglen is part of an **underground resistance group** called Mayday. On the way home a van for the Eyes **stops** near them and takes a man off the street. Offred is **relieved**, having thought it might be for her and Ofglen because of their **treasonous conversation**.

Chapter 28

- Offred remembers Moira **disapproving** of her **affair** with Luke. We learn that Moira was a **lesbian**. Offred has been given a fan in her room because of the summer heat, and she thinks about how if she were Moira she'd use the blades as a **weapon**.
- Offred thinks back to the **fall of the United States**. The President and Congress were **executed** and the Constitution **suspended**. Roadblocks appeared and widespread **ensorship** began. Moira warned Offred **something bad** was going to happen. Offred tries to use her bank card and realises it has been **suspended**. She goes to her job as a librarian only to find that **all female staff** have been fired, and soldiers appear to escort women out.



- Back at home, Offred learns from Moira that women can no longer **legally hold jobs** or own money, only men can. As Luke tries to comfort her, she wonders if he is already beginning to **patronise her**. She realises the soldiers she saw at the library were **not** US soldiers, but some other army.
- She sees Nick out of the window with his hat askew, a signal meaning that the Commander wants to see her that night. She wonders about Nick's **motivations** for being involved. She remembers the night she lost her job, when Luke wanted to have sex but she didn't, because she felt the **power had shifted**. She now **belonged to him**, legally, and she was worried that he **enjoyed it**.

Chapter 29

- One night, after their game of Scrabble, Offred says she wants to talk. He **concedes** to her questions but answers **evasively**. She asks him to translate the Latin in her room, and he reveals that it means "**Don't let the bastards grind you down**". Offred thinks the previous Handmaid must have learnt it from him, and asks what happened to her. We learn that Serena Joy **found out** about their night time meetings and the Handmaid **hung herself**. Offred realises the Commander feels **guilty** about her situation, and knows she can use his **guilt to manipulate him**. She asks him for information about what's going on in the world.

Analysis - Part X: Soul Scrolls (Chapter 25 - 29)

'Part X' reveals a lot of **information** we have been missing up until now. Offred details the **events** that led to **the fall of the US** and the beginning of Gilead. We also see some of Offred's **personality** begin to seep through the cracks of the **polished facade** she puts on in order to **survive**. She is beginning to feel **comfortable** in front of the Commander, even going so far as asking him for hand lotion and gently **mocking him**. She also makes an **important connection** with Ofglen, who she discovers is a member of an **underground resistance group**. 'Part X' represents the **rising action** of the overall **narrative arc**.

Key Quotes

"The Commander likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform. His approbation laps me like a warm bath. I sense in him none of the approbation I used to sense in men, even in Luke sometimes. He's not saying *bitch* in his head. He's positively daddyish." (Chapter 29)

- Offred, in the **relative safety** of the Commander's quarters, is able to **study** the man in charge of her life. In contrast to the **structural state violence** of Gilead, the Commander presents as quite a **gentle figure**, even while leading an **active role** in the governance of the regime. Despite **resenting** him and finding him **repulsive** at times because of what he **represents**, Offred finds she likes his attention. This is understandable, as she is otherwise starved of **human interaction**. Though she cannot completely relax in his company, by Chapter 29 she explains that much of the **formality** that **restricts** her daily life has **dissolved**. She likens herself to a **pet** in his company, reflecting the **power dynamic** of their **class differences**. She is **learning** what he likes and is **modifying her behaviour** to suit - she knows that her **ability to bargain** will **improve** the more he likes her. Though her behaviour with him is **tactical**, she is still **enjoying** it when he responds well.



Chapter 30

- Later that night, Offred steals a **sexually charged** glance from Nick from her bedroom window. She **recalls** trying to escape Gilead with Luke, and how they tried to leave **inconspicuously** so their neighbours would not notice. Somebody must have reported them, because their escape **failed**. Offred **prays** and thinks about **suicide**.

Analysis - Part XI: Night (Chapter 30)

In this chapter, Offred is **losing** her grip on her **mental strength**. Her **loneliness** is **exacerbated** by seeing Nick, and knowing they **cannot touch**. She tries to remember the faces of her family and her loved ones, and, finding it difficult, **spirals** into a **depression**. We see her **praying** to God for the first time in the novel, suggesting that this is a moment of **true despair**. It is not clear whether she actually **believes** in God or whether she is doing this to try and **counteract** her loneliness. She **contemplates suicide** and we learn that she has thought about it before, suggesting that her mental attempts to keep her spirits up have a **deeper history**.

Key Quotes

- “I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to remember what they look like. I try to hold them still behind my eyes, their faces, like pictures in an album.” (Chapter 30)

Using the word “conjure”, Atwood is making a comment about the **strength of the imagination**. So far, Offred’s **ability to imagine herself out** of Gilead has kept her sane, and alive. It has been years since Offred has seen Luke or her daughter, and here we find her **struggle** to **remember** what they look like. Offred calls them “spirits”, a result of **not knowing** whether they are **alive or dead**. Earlier in the novel, Offred mentions that it is almost **easier to imagine** that they are dead, because then she knows they aren’t **suffering**. Offred’s **lived experience** of Gilead is incredibly **bleak**, enough to make her **contemplate suicide** - it makes sense that she wouldn’t want her daughter to have to go through the same.

Part XII: Jezebel’s (Chapters 31 - 39)

Chapter 31

- Summer continues and **time drags** slowly for Offred. There are **two new bodies** on the Wall, one marked with a ‘J’. Offred and Ofglen do not know what this signifies. If the body was Jewish, it would be marked with a **yellow star**. We learn that Jews were given the option to **convert to Christianity** or **emigrate to Israel** in the beginnings of Gilead.
- Ofglen reveals that the **resistance** use the word ‘mayday’ to **communicate** with each other, but warns Offred to use it **sparingly**.
- Back at home, Serena Joy asks Offred to hold her wool while she knits. She asks if Offred has shown any **signs of pregnancy**. Offred says no and Serena Joy suggests that the Commander might be sterile, which shocks Offred, since this **distinction** is no longer accepted in Gilead. Serena suggests an **alternative method** to get Offred pregnant: having sex with Nick. She **offers** to show Offred **a photo of her daughter** if she agrees, and gives her a cigarette as a **reward** for doing so.

Chapter 32

- Offred thinks about saving the match for the cigarette to **burn down the house**. The Commander has started drinking during their meetings. Ofglen tells Offred he has a **high-powered position** in Gilead. One night, he tells Offred that before Gilead, men were



bored because there was **nothing left** to hold their interest when it came to women. He asks her what she thinks of Gilead. She cannot answer and he **senses her discomfort**, explaining they wanted to do better than what they ended up with.

Chapter 33

- Offred and Ofglen attend a **Prayvaganza** with other women from their district. Wives and their daughters are **segregated** from the Marthas and Econowives, and the Handmaids sit in their own section. Ofwarren is there with a new Wife, and we learn that her baby was **deformed** after all, and that she **slept with a doctor** to get pregnant. Offred remembers Ofwarren at the Red Center having a **mental health crisis** and speaking to an **invisible customer** at the restaurant she used to work at. Moira **slapped** her to snap her out of it.

Chapter 34

- Prayvaganzas are **mass wedding ceremonies** for the daughters of Wives, who are married as **young as fourteen**. Offred remembers the Commander saying that Gilead has provided **safety and security** for women, despite **taking away** their freedoms. Now, all women have spouses, and do not have to **work**. He says that **arranged marriages** work better than **love unions**.
- Prayvaganzas sometimes celebrate the **conversion of former Catholic nuns** to the religion of Gilead. Older nuns are **tortured** and sent to the Colonies, while younger ones are given the option to **convert** or be sent off. Many choose the Colonies.
- After the ceremony, Ofglen tells Offred that the **resistance group** know about her **seeing the Commander**, and asks her to **pass on** any information she can gather.

Chapter 35

- Offred can't help but remember when she and Luke tried to escape Gilead. At the border they showed their **fake passports**. Luke's passport said he'd **never been divorced** and the border Guard **picked up the phone** to check. They **fled** as fast as they could in the car, eventually **getting out** to flee into the woods. Offred tries to remember being **in love**. That night, Serena shows her a picture of her daughter. Offred imagines that her daughter is **forgetting her**.

Chapter 36

- The Commander is **drunk** at their meeting that night. He gives her a **revealing outfit** and **makeup** to wear and asks her to **accompany him out**. Nick drives them through the city and Offred **worries** what he thinks. They stop in an alley where the Commander **unlocks a door**, puts a **purple tag** on Offred's wrist, and says she must tell anyone who asks that she is an '**evening rental**'. She imagines Moira calling her an idiot for going along with him.

Chapter 37

- They are at an **old hotel** which Offred **recognises** as a place she used to meet Luke before Gilead. **Scantly clad women** are everywhere, as well as **high powered men**. Though the club is **officially forbidden**, the Commander explains that it is understood that men need a variety of women to **stay satisfied**. Offred decides to stay quiet. Some of the women here were **sex workers** before Gilead and some were **lawyers**, but all **prefer this** over life as a Handmaid. Suddenly, Offred spots Moira in the crowd. They pretend **not to recognise each other** but Moira uses their **old signal** from the Red Center to say that they should meet in the bathroom.



Chapter 38

- Offred meets Moira in the bathroom. She tells her about the Commander **smuggling her** in and Moira tells her own story. After she escaped the Red Center, she tried to leave Gilead on the **Underground Femaleroad**, but was **caught** as she left the final safe house to board a boat across the border.
- The Eyes **tortured** Moira and showed her **terrible videos** of the Colonies, where the life expectancy is **three years**, and Unwomen must clean up **radioactive spills** and **bodies from war**. She chose to do **sex work** in “Jezebel’s”, the nickname for the club they are in, rather than be sent there. Offred sees how Moira’s **once strong spirit** has been **crushed** and is **disappointed**. Moira suggests Offred work in the club too, where the life expectancy is a **little longer** than the Colonies and they get **face cream**. Offred misses the Moira she used to know. This is the last time Offred ever sees her friend.

Chapter 39

- The Commander takes Offred to a hotel room, where she **excuses herself** for a moment to go to the bathroom. She thinks about her mother and Moira, who told her that she’d **seen** Offred’s mother in one of the videos about the Colonies. Offred remembers going to her **mother’s house** when the regime first began and finding her **gone**. She had assumed she was **dead**. She imagines the Colonies must have **broken her mother’s spirit** like the regime has broken Moira’s. Back in the hotel room, the Commander is waiting for her and **seems disappointed** when she is **not excited** to have sex with him. Offred tells herself to **fake enthusiasm**.

Analysis - Part XII: Jezebel’s (Chapters 31 - 39)

In Part XII we learn more about the **extent of Gilead’s religious intolerance**. Jews are murdered if they do not **emigrate**, and the yellow star used to **identify them** is the same as was used by the Nazis. Catholic Nuns are given a **similar choice**, death by exile or conversion. In Chapter 6 we learn of a museum in Gilead dedicated to the **Puritan settlers** who **colonised America**. Many **comparisons** can be made between Puritan societies and the state of Gilead: music is banned, intoxicants are banned, and men are seen as **superior** to women; **morally, physically** and **spiritually**. Every law has a **scriptural precedent**.

- Part XII also shows us the **forbidden underground nightclub** that the Commanders attend to let off steam. Named “Jezebel’s”, after a Biblical figure, Queen Jezebel of Israel, the name is generally used to refer to people **masquerading as believers**, or **false prophets**. The nightclub’s existence reveals the **hypocrisy** of Gilead, that the men who **enforce the rules** do not have to follow them. At the nightclub we witness the **brief return of Moira** to the narrative, but she has **changed significantly**, and has been beaten down by life in Gilead.

Quotes

- “Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they’re protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me. You’re an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?” (Chapter 34)



The Commander **reveals** more to Offred about how he thinks. Before Gilead, money **dictated** people's lives - this explains why it has been **replaced** by tokens under the regime. Interestingly, however, **class differences** are still apparent in Gilead. The Commander's house is an **ostentatious display of wealth**. Getting rid of money has not solved the problems of class inequality or poverty. The **new system** of currency could be seen as a **rebranded version** of the old one.

- “...there's an enticement to this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative.” (Chapter 36)

Offred knows she is in a **dangerous situation** in accepting the Commander's offer to accompany him out, but she has no other choice. She understands that to dress in **forbidden clothing** could bring her **perverse enjoyment**, and would be a **small act of rebellion** against everything the Aunts stood for at the Red Center.

Part XIII: Night (Chapter 40)

Chapter 40

- Back at the house, Serena Joy takes Offred to Nick's room for their **pre-arranged sexual union**. Alone with him, Offred tells us **two versions** of what happened. One is **passionate** and **sensual**, the other is **awkward** and **sad**. Offred says it was actually more like a **combination** of both scenarios. Offred wonders whether Nick feels **used**. After they are done, Offred feels **full of shame**, and **guilty** of betraying Luke.

Analysis

In Chapter 40, Offred is finally able to act on her **feelings of attraction** towards Nick. Serena Joy has set up a **secret meeting** between them in order to improve Offred's **chances of giving birth**. **Ironically**, this happens on the same night the Commander breaks the rules to take Offred out - both husband and wife are **breaking the law** behind each other's backs. Offred describes **two versions** of her meeting with Nick, **repeating sentences** each time. This gives the chapter a **dreamlike quality**. In the first scenario, no words are exchanged, Nick turns out the light and they **embrace passionately**, like they might in a **romance novel**. In the second, they make **awkward conversation** until the ice is broken when they begin to **quote old movies** to each other. Offred says that in reality, what happened was a rough **approximation** of the two scenarios, leaving the reader guessing. Unlike sex with the Commander, which is **public, humiliating, and coercive**, Offred **cloaks** her interaction with Nick by telling us two versions, preserving the **privacy** of one of her only **truly intimate moments** in the book.

Key Quotes

- “No romance,” he says. “Okay?” That would have meant something else, one. Once it would have meant: *no strings*. Now it means: *no heroics*. It means: don't risk yourself for me, should it come to that.” (Chapter 40)

Though Nick is obviously **attracted** to Offred and feels **affection** towards her, he provides a **caveat** to their lovemaking: “No romance”. Offred explains that in pre-Gilead times this would have meant a **sexual relationship without emotions**. What Nick really is doing is warning her not to get too **emotionally invested** in him, because doing so could lead to **dangerous** and **risky** behaviour. Despite this, their relationship has undeniably **romantic qualities**. Up until this point,



Nick has been **courting** Offred in the **limited** ways that he can. He **touches her foot** during the Ceremony, **winks** at her and **steals glances**, not to mention the **kiss** they share in Chapter 17.

Part XIV: Salvaging (Chapter 41 - 45)

Chapter 41

- Offred tells us her story is too **painful** to bear but she feels **compelled** to keep telling it. She continues her **affair** with Nick, and finds herself telling him about Ofglen and Moira, and her **real name**. He never says much in return. She tells him she thinks she is **pregnant**, though she realises this is unlikely.
- During their walks to the shops, Ofglen tells Offred to **break into** the Commander's office to find out what his **position** is and the **power** he has. Offred chooses instead to **fixate** on her **feelings** for Nick. This parallels how, as Gilead was rising to power, she remained **complicit** and focused on her relationship with Luke.

Chapter 42

- A "Salvaging", or **public execution**, is organised for all of the **district women** to attend. It is held in what used to be **Harvard Yard**. On the stage is Aunt Lydia, who Offred has not seen since the Red Center, **overseeing the hangings**. She announces that the crimes of those executed will **no longer** be **revealed** because they result in **copycat crimes**. This gives the Handmaids hope that women still **resist** the **oppressive regime**. **Three women** are hanged, two Handmaids and one Wife. The Handmaids must lay their hands on a long rope during the execution to show their **consent**.

Chapter 43

- After the hanging, Aunt Lydia asks the Handmaids to **form a circle** and presents them with a **dishevelled looking Guardian** on whom they are to carry out a "**Participation**". She explains that he and another Guardian, who has already been **executed**, have committed **rape**. Apparently, one of the victims was a **pregnant Handmaid** who lost her baby.
- Offred feels an **intense bloodlust** along with the other women, but it is Ofglen who makes the **first move** and kicks the Guardian's head repeatedly. Afterwards, Ofglen explains to Offred that he was a **member of the resistance**, and she wanted to **put him out of his misery** quickly. Offred sees Ofwarren walking past in a state of **psychosis**, babbling **phrases** from before Gilead as she clutches a bloodied clump of hair. Offred admits that she feels a **deep hunger**, for **violence** or for **sex**.

Chapter 44

- When Offred goes to meet Ofglen for their shopping trip at the **usual spot**, she finds a new Handmaid in her place who **introduces** herself as Ofglen. Wondering if the new Ofglen is also part of the resistance, Offred works the password "Mayday" into their conversation by talking of May Day, the **celebration from old times**. New Ofglen **coldly** tells her to **forget** things from the old world. **Worried** that the new Ofglen will report her as part of the resistance, Offred imagines them **torturing her daughter**. As they part ways at the end of the shopping trip, new Ofglen **reveals** in a whisper that the old Ofglen was found out and **hung herself**. She says this was the best possible outcome.



Chapter 45

- Offred finds herself **relieved** that Ofglen **hanged herself** before she could give Offred's name to authorities. She feels she has **completely succumbed** to the regime and will do anything she can to **survive**. Back at home, Serena has found the **sequined outfit** and **winter robe** that Offred wore on her **outing** with the Commander. Serena calls her a **slut**, saying she will end up like the **previous Handmaid**. Nick **witnesses** this interaction, but Offred **avoids his gaze** and returns to her room.

Analysis Part XIV: Salvaging (Chapter 41 - 45)

The action is **rising** and the narrative is reaching its **climax** in Part XIV. We see several executions happen in Harvard Yard, which is symbolic of the ways **power has shifted hands** in Gilead. Atwood chooses this location on purpose. In Gilead, Harvard Yard - once a **symbol of academic freedom and possibility**; one of the world's best universities - is now the **site of public executions** for women who do not **adhere** to the regime.

Key Quotes

- **"I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilised. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape."** (Chapter 41)

Themes of **complacency** permeate the novel. Many times, Offred hints that the **complacency** of her and her peers led to the rise of Gilead. Offred wishes that her story was more **obviously heroic** - many times she imagines what Moira's actions would be in **comparison** to her own.

- **"I did not put it, to myself, in terms of love. I said, I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. That must have been what settlers' wives thought, and women who survived wars, if they still had a man. Humanity is so adaptable, my mother used to say. Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations."** (Chapter 41)

Here Offred is **justifying** her relationship with Nick. She has mentioned previously that she feels **guilty about sleeping with him** because it feels like she is **cheating** on Luke. Offred explains that she is making **the best of a bad situation** by having a relationship with Nick. Throughout the book Offred has been incredibly **lonely** and has **craved intimacy**, and in the **relative safety** of his room she begins to **feel a sense of freedom**, even going so far as to tell him her real name. Gilead can **control her body** and her environment but it cannot control her **feelings**. Earlier on in the novel, the Commander explains how he **disapproves of love**, making Offred's forbidden affection for Nick a way of **pushing back** against everything the regime stands for. Gilead is not a place where love can exist; marriages are **arranged** for the **benefit of the man**, and **extra-marital sex** is **forbidden**. Knowing this, we can interpret Offred's affair with Nick as an **act of rebellion**, even though Offred herself might not define it that way.

Part XV - Night (Chapter 46)

Chapter 46

- Offred waits in her room for her **punishment**. She considers ways to **kill herself** before the Eyes arrive, but hears their car and **regrets** not doing anything while she had time. Nick opens her door and says she **should go** with the Eyes as they are in Mayday. They have come to **save** her. Offred doesn't know whether he is **telling the truth**, since he could easily be an Eye himself, but she has **no choice**.
- Downstairs, Serena demands to know the **reason** for Offred's arrest, and Offred realises that Serena was **not the one** who **called them**. The Commander asks to see a **warrant**,



and the Eyes say Offred is being arrested for “violation of state secrets”. Offred **follows them** outside and **gets into the van**.

Analysis Part XV: Night (Chapter 46)

These are the **final moments** we have with Offred’s **narrative**, and the ending is left **intentionally ambiguous**. Offred is faced with the very real **possibility** that she will be taken away and executed, or sent to the Colonies. While **reckoning** with this, she tries to think of a way out by contemplating suicide, and thinks of the previous Handmaid. Offred’s **agency** has become so **limited** by Gilead that in the moment when it **matters most**, she is unable to take **action** or make a **decision**. The Eyes arrive before she can do anything. When it becomes apparent that Serena Joy did **not call them**, we can surmise that it was probably Nick, who watched Serena **admonish** Offred for the costume a few hours before.

Key Quotes

- **“Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double, turning in mid-air under the chandelier, in her costume stars and feathers, a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel, waiting to be found. By me this time. How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us.”**
(Chapter 46)

In her **darkest hour**, Offred feels the presence of the previous Handmaid hanging from the chandelier. It is an incredibly **chilling** moment, but we are led to believe that perhaps Offred is finding strange **comfort** in it. **Loneliness** has been a theme throughout the novel, and here, finally, Offred realises she has never been alone. The **presence** of the previous Handmaid has been with her.

Historical Notes

- The historical notes at the end of the novel are from a **symposium** held at a university in the Arctic in the year 2195. Gilead **no longer exists**, and Offred’s account of it has been found on **cassette tapes** in an army footlocker in Maine, recorded **between songs** on the tapes in order to **hide** it. Professor Piexoto is an **expert** on Gilead and he is presenting the account as a **published manuscript**.
- The Professor gives **historical context** for Gilead and explains that the regime resulted during a time of **immense pressure**, with a **falling birthrate** and **environmental decline**. He reveals the birth rate was falling because of an increase in **sexually transmitted diseases** as well as **pollution**.
- He explains the **influence of the Bible** on the state doctrine of Gilead, as well as how the **racial tensions** that existed in society before Gilead informed its **racist principles**.
- The Professor has tried to **discover the identity** of Offred, but this has been **impossible** because of the destruction of records since during civil wars. However, he has narrowed the identity of the Commander down to two possibilities, either Frederick Waterford or B. Frederick Judd. (Note that in the TV adaptation, The Commander is Fred Waterford). Judd invented the **Particution**, and espoused the idea that women should be involved in controlling other women, citing **colonial administrative tactics**.
- It is revealed that Offred’s fate **remains unknown** - she may have escaped to England or Canada, or been **recaptured**. The Professor reveals that Nick was a member of both the Eyes and Mayday, and the men he called at the end of the account were indeed sent to **rescue** her.



Analysis - Historical Notes

The 'Historical Notes' at the end of the novel **breaks completely** from the novel's **established narrative**. Over a **thousand years** since Offred's account takes place, an expert on Gilead, Professor Piexoto, is giving a lecture at a symposium. He **clarifies** some things for us that Offred was never able to, about the fall of the US and about the **reasons** Gilead came to be. The Professor explains clearly the **Biblical justifications** for Gilead's **governance**. By providing this justification, however, he attempts to **remain neutral**, instead of trusting Offred's narrative.

The world of Professor Piexoto seems to have developed **beyond dictatorship** and **white supremacy**. The Academics mentioned by the Professor have **Indigenous** American names, and the world's best universities are now in Northern Canada and India, suggesting a **new world order** in which **racial inequality** has possibly been **abolished**. Gilead's **executions of non-Christians** and **glorification of Puritan settler colonialism** imply that the regime was based on a **white supremacist ideology**. Professor Piexoto's critique seems to suggest that Gilead is seen as **regressive** and **barbaric** by 2195 standards. However, Piexoto, the "expert" on Gilead, is a man who makes **sexist jokes and comments**, suggesting that **Gilead's legacy** is not that distant after all.

Key Quotes

- **"Now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word 'enjoy' in two distinct sense, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (Laughter)." (Historical Notes)**

Even though he's an **expert** on the topic, and suggests that the patriarchal ways of Gilead are a thing of the distant past, the **first time** Professor Piexoto speaks, he makes a **sexist joke**. Here, he is using the word **"enjoy"** to euphemistically imply that he enjoys looking at Crescent Moon, the other (female) lecturer. This shows that **sexism and patriarchy** did not disappear with Gilead, but are still **perpetrated** long afterwards.

- **"Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time." (Historical Notes)**

The Professor here **confirms** to the reader that Gilead based many of its **governing principles** on **racism**, and preserving Caucasian (white) populations. Though never **explicitly** spoken about in Offred's account, the **state-sanctioned murder of Jews** and **non-conformists** in Gilead hints at the **white supremacist nature** of the regime. Later in his lecture, the Professor mentions that the **racist policies** of Gilead were directly drawn from the world before Gilead - in other words, from the 1980s. Given everything we have learned from her account, Offred's experience of life before Gilead was one of relative **comfort** and **privilege**. Her **complacency** surrounding **social issues** before Gilead, it could be argued, was a result of her **privilege**. She did not feel the need to protest **social issues** because she did not feel they **affected her directly**, and she regrets this in her account.



- **“We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees.” (Historical Notes)**

The Professor likens Offred to Eurydice, a figure from **Greek mythology**. She is the wife of Orpheus, who travels to the Underworld when she dies to **entreat** the Gods to let her live. **Moved** by his music, the Gods allow his wish to let her live. They promise Eurydice will follow behind him out of the Underworld, on the **condition** that he does not look back as they make the journey. Orpheus cannot help but **turn around** to see his wife. She has not yet **crossed** the threshold from the Underworld, and so **disappears** into the darkness forever. By making this reference, the Professor is making a comment about the **futility** of trying to find **answers** in Offred's account. In doing so, however, he also **erases her narrative**.

