

English Department Key Stage 5 Knowledge Organiser – *The Handmaid's Tale* Paper 2

The Handmaid's Tale			
Key Concepts	AO3: Context	Key characters:	PSPW Terminology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dystopian fiction Speculative fiction Feminism Anti-feminism Religious oppression Conformity and rebellion Isolation Sex and gender Love Sacrifice Oppression Injustice Patriarchy/male dominance Puritanism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaganism and American New Right – right-wing Christian groups, sometimes fundamentalist, with concerns about abortion, homosexuality, contraception and pornography. Very popular in Southern states 'Bible Belt'. Puritans – descendants of the first English settlers in New England. A very conservative Christian faith based society eschewing modern society, and technology, and with very clear gender roles and expectations. Women were seen as inferior to men – pious, modest and confined to a domestic world. Environment – many concerns about global issues and their detrimental and destructive effects on humanity and the planet e.g. nuclear testing, climate change, pollution, pesticides etc. Anti-feminist backlash (and second-wave feminism) – in the 1980s an anti-feminist backlash challenged the second-wave feminist movement and ultimately sought to reject it, seeing it as a threat to traditional family values amongst other things. Atwood was deeply concerned by the anti-feminist backlash. CanLit – Although <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> was written whilst Atwood was living in the US, it can be interpreted as being Canadian Literature; presenting the more powerful US as suffering wars and disasters, and seeking to control its citizens. Canada, the US's nearest northern neighbour, can be viewed as more peaceful, calm and liberal in this context. Feminist Criticism – <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> can be viewed as a seminal feminist literary text as it challenges patriarchy and presents women as fully-rounded characters with complex lives, relationships (with each other and with men) and emotions. Marxist Criticism – Marxist critics would view this novel as being about inequality and oppression because of the capitalist society represented in it, where people are shaped by the circumstances they live in a result of political, economic, religious, educational and social ideologies forced upon them. Psychoanalytic criticism – critical analysis that focuses on the importance of the subconscious, dreams, unacknowledged desires and sexuality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offred – the protagonist and narrator; a Handmaid who dresses in red. She is named 'Offred' to indicate that she belongs to Fred, a Commander. We never learn her real name. Moira – Offred's friend. Rebellious and non-conformist. A feminist. Ofwarren/Janine – A Handmaid. An obedient adherent of the system. Commander (Fred) – The patriarch of the house. High ranking and important. Serena Joy – The Commander's Wife. Dressed in blue. Ofglen – A Handmaid. Offred and Ofglen are assigned with each other to go shopping. Rita and Cora – Marthas. Women of low status who are servants to the Gileadean elite. Dressed in green. Luke – Offred's husband before the regime change. Nick – The Commander's chauffeur. 	<p>Dystopia Theocracy Totalitarian Post-modernism Ecriture feminine Ideology Feminism Anti-feminism Dissidence Theology Religious oppression Parody Patriarchy Propaganda Satire Tyranny Institution</p>
AO2 Formal and Structural Features			Gileadean vocabulary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neologism Speculative fiction Self-conscious narrator Unreliable narrator Epistolary narrative Epigraph Allusion Metafiction Portmanteau Symbolism Allusion Flashback Pun Motif Paradox Irony 			<p>Salvagings Prayvaganzas Pnomarts Unbaby Compucheck Particution Soul scrolls The Colonies Econowives Jezebels Winged Eye Unwoman Compudoc</p>

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Plot summary

- Offred is a Handmaid in the totalitarian and theocratic Republic of Gilead, a state that has replaced the USA. Due to dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaid's are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving. Offred serves the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, a former gospel singer and advocate for 'traditional values'.
- Offred tells the story of her daily life, frequently slipping into flashbacks, from which the reader can reconstruct the events leading up to the beginning of the novel. In the world world, before Gilead, Offred had an affair with Luke, a married man. He divorced his wife and married Offred, and they had a child together. Offred's mother was a single mother and feminist activist. Offred's best friend, Moira, was fiercely independent. The architects of Gilead began their rise to power in an age of readily available pornography, prostitution and violence against women – when pollution and chemical spills led to declining fertility rates. Using the military, they assassinated the president and launched a coup, claiming they were taking power temporarily. They cracked down on women's rights, forbidding women to hold property or jobs. Offred and Luke took their daughter and attempted to flee the border into Canada, but they were caught and separated from one another, and Offred has not seen her daughter or Luke since.
- After her capture, Offred's marriage was voided and she was sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center., called the Red Centre by its inhabitants. At the center, women were indoctrinated into Gilead's ideology in preparation for becoming Handmaid's. Aunt Lydia supervised the women, giving speeches extolling Gilead's beliefs that women should be subservient to men and solely concerned with bearing children.
- Once assigned to the Commander's house, Offred's life settles into a restrictive routine. She must ensure the Ceremony in which the Commander reads to the household from the Bible and has sex with Offred. The first break from her routine occurs when she visits the doctor and he offers to have sex with her to get her pregnant, suggesting the Commander is infertile. After a ceremony, the Commander sends his gardener and chauffeur, Nick, to ask Offred to come to see him in his office. They play Scrabble(forbidden) and lets her look at old magazines. At the end of these secret meetings, he asks her to kiss him.
- During one of their shopping trips, Ofglen reveals to Offred that she is a member of 'Mayday', an underground organisation dedicated to overthrowing Gilead. Meanwhile, Offred begins to find the Ceremony feels different and less impersonal now that she knows the Commander. Their night time conversations start to touch on the new order that the Commander and his fellow leads have created in Gilead.
- Offred is still not pregnant, so Serena suggests that Offred have sex with Nick secretly and pass the child off as the Commander's. Serena promises to bring Offred a picture of her daughter if she sleeps with Nick and Offred realises Serena has always know her whereabouts. The same night, the Commander takes Offred to a secret club called Jezebels, where the Commanders mingle with prostitutes. Offred sees Moira working there. The Commander takes Offred upstairs and they have sex in an old hotel room.
- Soon after, Offred returns from Jezebel's late at night, Serena arrives and tells Offred to go to Nick's room. Offred and Nick have sex. Soon they begin to sleep together frequently. Offred becomes caught up in the affair and ignores Ofglen's requests to gather information from the Commander. One day, all the Handmaid's take part in a group execution of a supposed rapist, supervised by Aunt Lydia. Ofglen strikes the first blow. Later, she tells Offred that the so-called rapist was a member of a Mayday and she hit him to put him out of his misery.
- Shortly thereafter, Offred goes out shopping, and a new Ofglen meets her. This new woman is not part of Mayday, and she tells Offred that the old Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the secret police coming for her. At home, Serena has found out about Offred's trip to Jezebel's, and she sends her to her room, promising punishment. Offred waits there, and she sees a black van from the Eyes approach. Then Nick comes in and tells her that the Eyes are really Mayday members who have come to save her. Offred leaves with them, over the Commander's futile objections, on her way either to prison or to freedom—she does not know which.
- The novel closes with an epilogue from 2195, after Gilead has fallen, written in the form of a lecture given by Professor Pieixoto. He explains the formation and customs of Gilead in objective, analytical language. He discusses the significance of Offred's story, which has turned up on cassette tapes in Bangor, Maine. He suggests that Nick arranged Offred's escape but that her fate after that is unknown. She could have escaped to Canada or England, or she could have been recaptured.

Suggested further reading

Articles:

- **Aliens have taken the place of angels** – The Guardian
- **Is Margaret Atwood a feminist?** – Jezebel Magazine
- **No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood** – The New York Times
- **Rachael Carson's Silent Spring 50 Years On** – The Guardian
- **Reviews from the 1980s** – The Huffington Post
- **Science fiction is really about now** – The Guardian
- **Six reasons to read Margaret Atwood** – BBC Radio 4 Book Club

Revision guides:

York Notes for A-Level – The Handmaid's Tale
Hodder Study and Revise for A/AS Level – The Handmaid's Tale

If you love *The Handmaid's Tale*, you will probably enjoy:

- **Fahrenheit 451** – Ray Bradbury
- **Animal Farm and 1984** – George Orwell
- **Brave New World** – Aldous Huxley
- **The Power** – Naomi Alderman
- **The Age of Miracles** – Karen Thompson Walker
- **Station Eleven** – Emily St John Mandel
- **Vox** – Christine Dalcher
- **Never Let Me Go** – Kazuo Ishiguro
- **The Heart Goes Last** – Margaret Atwood
- **Oryx and Crake** – Margaret Atwood
- **The Testaments** – Margaret Atwood