

Study Guide for Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale Course Hero Study Guides

Margaret Atwood's dystopian masterpiece, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has captivated readers and scholars alike since its publication in 1985. Its haunting portrayal of a misogynistic, totalitarian society that subjugates women has made it a seminal work in feminist literature. This comprehensive study guide will provide you with the essential tools you need to navigate the complexities of Atwood's novel and excel in your Course Hero study.

The Handmaid's Tale draws upon a rich tapestry of historical and literary influences. Atwood's depiction of Gilead, a patriarchal society founded on theocratic principles, echoes the puritanical and patriarchal societies of the past. The novel also draws parallels to Nazi Germany and other totalitarian regimes, highlighting the dangers of unchecked power and the erosion of individual rights.

In terms of literary influences, Atwood's novel can be seen as a response to classic dystopian works such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. However, *The Handmaid's Tale* distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on the oppression of women and the consequences of gender inequality.

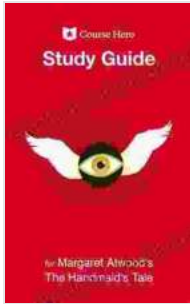
Study Guide for Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (Course Hero Study Guides) by Course Hero

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Screen Reader : Supported



Print length : 36 pages

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The novel is told from the first-person perspective of Offred, a Handmaid assigned to bear children for the infertile Commander and his wife. Offred's fractured and fragmented narrative style reflects the psychological trauma she endures in Gilead. The novel's language is rich in symbolism and irony, with Atwood employing biblical allusions and historical references to create a layered and evocative prose.

The Handmaid's Tale explores a multitude of complex and interconnected themes, including:

- **Feminism and Gender Roles:** The novel is a powerful indictment of patriarchal societies that oppress women and deny them fundamental rights. Atwood examines the ways in which women are objectified, silenced, and controlled in Gilead.
- **Totalitarianism and Dystopia:** Gilead represents a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked political power and the fragility of democratic societies. The novel explores the ways in which governments can use fear, propaganda, and violence to suppress dissent and control their citizens.

- **Identity and Resistance:** Offred's struggle to maintain her identity and resist the dehumanizing forces of Gilead is a central theme of the novel. Atwood highlights the importance of hope and resilience in the face of adversity.
- **Religious Extremism:** The puritanical and misogynistic beliefs that underlie Gilead's society serve as a critique of religious extremism and the dangers of intolerance and discrimination.

The Handmaid's Tale features a cast of unforgettable characters who embody the complexities of Atwood's dystopian vision:

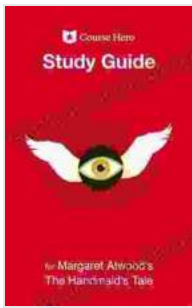
- **Offred:** The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Offred is a former librarian who has been subjected to the horrors of Gilead's regime. Her strength, resilience, and determination serve as a beacon of hope in the face of despair.
- **The Commander:** A powerful and enigmatic figure in Gilead's society, the Commander is the father of Offred's unborn child. His complex and contradictory character raises questions about morality and redemption.
- **Serena Joy:** The Commander's sterile wife, Serena Joy is a devout believer in Gilead's repressive ideology. Her jealousy and hatred of Offred drive her to undermine her Handmaid's well-being.
- **Moira:** A former resistance fighter, Moira is a symbol of defiance and hope. Her friendship with Offred provides solace and support in their shared struggle against Gilead.
- **Nick:** A Guardian assigned to monitor Offred, Nick becomes a source of ambivalent feelings for her. His ambiguous motives and potential for

both good and evil keep Offred and readers guessing.

The following discussion questions are designed to facilitate deeper analysis and understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale*:

- How does Atwood's novel explore the intersection of feminism and dystopia?
- What are the different ways in which the women of Gilead are oppressed and controlled?
- How does Offred's narrative voice and perspective shape our experience of the novel?
- What are the key symbols and motifs used in *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- How does the novel critique the dangers of religious extremism and intolerance?
- What lessons can be learned from Offred's struggle for identity and resistance?
- How does Atwood's novel resonate with contemporary social and political issues?

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful and disturbing masterpiece that continues to challenge and provoke readers today. This study guide has provided you with a comprehensive overview of the novel's historical and literary context, themes, characters, and discussion questions. Armed with this knowledge, you will be well-equipped to excel in your Course Hero study and engage critically with the complexities of Atwood's dystopian vision.



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