


The Handmaid's Tale Knowledge Organiser (Language and Literature)	Plot	Key Quotations	Links with other texts
Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids 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 is not the narrator’s real name—Handmaid names consist of the word “of” followed by the name of the Handmaid’s Commander. Every month, when Offred is at the right point in her menstrual cycle, she must have impersonal, wordless sex with the Commander while Serena sits behind her, holding her hands. Offred’s freedom, like the freedom of all women, is completely restricted. She can leave the house only on shopping trips, the door to her room cannot be completely shut, and the Eyes, Gilead’s secret police force, watch her every public move.		<b>“They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to”</b> <b>“Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last”</b> <b>“There’s scriptural procedure”</b> <b>“Freedom to and freedom from”</b> <b>“the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture”</b> <b>“I remember the smell of nail polish...the way it wrinkled if you out a second coat on too soon.”</b> <b>“She is my spy, as I am hers”</b> <b>“What I present is a made thing. No something born.”</b> <b>“I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it.”</b> <b>“Her fault, her fault, her fault.”</b> <b>“I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am”</b> <b>“Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary”</b> <b>“the long parenthesis of nothing. Time as white sound”</b> <b>“she’s there with me suddenly, without warning”</b> <b>“We are two-legged wombs”</b> <b>“This is a re-construction. All of it is a reconstruction.”</b> <b>“fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how”</b> <b>“Nature demands variety for men. It’s part of the pro-creational strategy”</b> <b>“he was not a monster to her”</b> <b>“more than a shadow. And I for him. I am no longer merely a usable body.”</b> <b>“There was nothing for them anymore...I’m not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy...you know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel.”</b> <b>“I am above him, looking down”</b> <b>“So I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”</b>	George Orwell – 1984 (published 1949) In Orwell’s 1984, Winston Smith wrestles with oppression in Oceania, a place where the Part scrutinises human actions with ever watchful Big Brother. Atwood’s Gilead similarly maintains an impression of constant surveillance. Defying a ban on individuality, Winston dares to express his thoughts in a diary and pursues a relationship with Julia. These criminal deeds bring Winston into the eye of the opposition, who then must reform the nonconformist. Orwell’s 1984 introduced the watchwords for life without freedom: BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.
After her capture, Offred’s marriage was voided (because Luke had been divorced), and she was sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, called the Red Center by its inhabitants. At the centre, women were indoctrinated into Gilead’s ideology in preparation for becoming Handmaids. Aunt Lydia supervised the women, giving speeches extolling Gilead’s beliefs that women should be subservient to men and solely concerned with bearing children. Aunt Lydia also argued that such a social order ultimately offers women more respect and safety than the old, pre-Gilead society offered them. Moira is brought to the Red Center, but she escapes, and Offred does not know what becomes of her.		<b>“I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am”</b> <b>“Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary”</b> <b>“the long parenthesis of nothing. Time as white sound”</b> <b>“she’s there with me suddenly, without warning”</b> <b>“We are two-legged wombs”</b> <b>“This is a re-construction. All of it is a reconstruction.”</b> <b>“fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how”</b> <b>“Nature demands variety for men. It’s part of the pro-creational strategy”</b> <b>“he was not a monster to her”</b> <b>“more than a shadow. And I for him. I am no longer merely a usable body.”</b> <b>“There was nothing for them anymore...I’m not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy...you know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel.”</b> <b>“I am above him, looking down”</b> <b>“So I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”</b>	Aldous Huxley – Brave New World (published 1932) Huxley’s ‘Brave new world’ is set 600 years in the future. Humans are grown in factories. Their class, appearance, beliefs and occupations are decided before birth and they are conditioned to accept their lot, much as members of society in Gilead are allotted a purpose. Negative emotions have been all but eradicated, and citizens are kept calm through a recreational drug readily available, Soma, which is reminiscent of the constantly tired, possibly drugged, handmaids at the red centre.
Once assigned to the Commander’s house, Offred’s life settles into a restrictive routine. She takes shopping trips with Ofglen, another Handmaid, and they visit the Wall outside what used to be Harvard University, where the bodies of rebels hang. She must visit the doctor frequently to be checked for disease and other complications, and she must endure the “Ceremony,” in which the Commander reads to the household from the Bible, then goes to the bedroom, where his Wife and Offred wait for him, 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 that her Commander is probably infertile. She refuses. The doctor makes her uneasy, but his proposition is too risky—she could be sent away if caught. After a Ceremony, the Commander sends his gardener and chauffeur, Nick, to ask Offred to come see him in his study the following night. She begins visiting him regularly. They play Scrabble (which is forbidden, since women are not allowed to read), and he lets her look at old magazines like <i>Vogue</i> . At the end of these secret meetings, he asks her to kiss him.		<b>“fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how”</b> <b>“Nature demands variety for men. It’s part of the pro-creational strategy”</b> <b>“he was not a monster to her”</b> <b>“more than a shadow. And I for him. I am no longer merely a usable body.”</b> <b>“There was nothing for them anymore...I’m not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy...you know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel.”</b> <b>“I am above him, looking down”</b> <b>“So I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”</b>	Ray Bradbury – Fahrenheit 451 (published 1953) Guy Montag is a fireman who burns books in a futuristic American city. In Montag’s world, firemen start fires rather than putting them out. The people in this society do not read books, enjoy nature, sped time by themselves, think independently, or have meaningful conversations, in much the same way as the citizens of Gilead. Instead they drive very fast, watch excessive amounts of television on wall-size sets, and listen to the radio on “Seashell Radio” sets attached to their ears.
During one of their shopping trips, Ofglen reveals to Offred that she is a member of “Mayday,” an underground organization dedicated to overthrowing Gilead. Meanwhile, Offred begins to find that the Ceremony feels different and less impersonal now that she knows the Commander. Their nighttime conversations begin to touch on the new order that the Commander and his fellow leaders have created in Gilead. When Offred admits how unhappy she is, the Commander remarks, “[Y]ou can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.”		<b>“So I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”</b> <b>Epigraph 1: And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis 30:1-3)</b> <b>Epigraph 2: But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal . . . (Jonathan Swift, A Modest Proposal)</b> <b>Epigraph 3: In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones. (Sufi proverb)</b>	Kashup Ishiguro – Never let me go (published 2005) Children attend a kind of boarding school ‘Hailsham’, where they live out semi-normal childhoods before becoming donors of organs in adulthood. Some are ‘carers’ before becoming ‘Donors’, but none live long. Donors can expect to survive one to three organ donations before passing away. They are effectively reared for slaughter, their bodies are their worth. This is reminiscent of the handmaids, whose values lie in their wombs.
After some time has gone by without Offred becoming pregnant, 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 realizes that Serena has always known the whereabouts of Offred’s daughter. The same night that Offred is to sleep with Nick, the Commander secretly takes her out to a club called Jezebel’s, where the Commanders mingle with prostitutes. Offred sees Moira working there. The two women meet in a bathroom, and Offred learns that Moira was captured just before she crossed the border. She chose life in Jezebel’s over being sent to the Colonies, where most political prisoners and dangerous people are sent. After that night at Jezebel’s, Offred says, she never sees Moira again. The Commander takes Offred upstairs after a few hours, and they have sex in what used to be a hotel room. She tries to feign passion.			

<p>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, without anyone’s knowledge. Offred becomes caught up in the affair and ignores Ofglen’s requests that she gather information from the Commander for Mayday. One day, all the Handmaids 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 Mayday and that she hit him to put him out of his misery.</p>				<div>Context</div> <p><b>1. Aids Epidemic</b> - Published in 1985 during the AIDS epidemic - it was clear that AIDS could be passed via sexual intercourse and also that infants could contract AIDS before, during or shortly after birth.</p> <p><b>2. Post-feminist revolution</b>, “post-feminism” term coined in the 1980s to describe a backlash to second wave feminism. Criticism of “equality feminism” in a favor of a form of feminism which recognises differences between the genders and rejects gender-neutrality because of its contribution to a society which favours men or compels women to imitate men.</p> <p><b>3. Abortion</b> - Split amongst American feminists in the 1980s on the topic of abortion, some arguing for an increase in agency and autonomy over women’s own bodies but others arguing sanctity of life on a Christian basis. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that individual state laws banning abortion are unconstitutional in 1973 but barriers to abortion still high.</p> <p><b>4. Anti-pornography movement</b> seeks to maintain or restore restrictions and to increase or create restrictions on the production, sale or dissemination of pornography. Jesuit priest Father Morton A. Hill (1917-1985) was a leader of the campaign against pornography in the United States in the 1960s, 1970 and 1980s. He was one of the founders of Morality in Media, which was created in 1962 to fight pornography. Morality in Media was launched by an interfaith group of clergy and Hill was president until his death in 1985. There is a tendency of some feminist anti-porn groups to ally themselves with religious anti-porn zealots who oppose feminists on almost every other issue.</p> <p><b>5. Civil Rights</b> - The Reagan administration was often criticized for inadequately enforcing, if not actively undermining, civil rights legislation. Reagan argued that strong enforcement of this type of legislation infringed on the rights of churches and business owners.</p> <p><b>6. Cold war - 1979–1985</b>, during this time, the threat of nuclear war had reached new heights not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis. With Margaret Thatcher elected in 1979 and Reagan in 1980 action was taken to dissolve Soviet influence. In March 1983, Reagan introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative, a defense project that would have used ground and space-based systems to protect the United States from attack by strategic nuclear ballistic missiles. Reagan believed that this defense shield could make nuclear war impossible.</p> <div>Reception:</div> <p><b>1. Zika Virus</b> - 2015 outbreak in Brazil of Zika Virus. Zika infection during pregnancy can cause serious birth defects. Zika virus disease is caused by a virus transmitted primarily by Aedes mosquitoes, which bite during the day. Many Olympians chose not to travel to compete in Rio because of the outbreak.</p> <p><b>2. Scientology</b> - Scientology teaches that people are immortal spiritual beings who have forgotten their true nature. Though it has attained some credibility as a religion in many countries, Scientology has also been described as both a cult and a commercial enterprise. Some of the Church's actions also brought scrutiny from the press and law enforcement particularly those that surround manipulation techniques and harassment and abuse of civil courts to silence its critics.</p> <p><b>3. Donald Trump</b> - A total of 19 women have accused Trump of sexual misconduct as of December 2017. The Trump campaign was remarkable for bringing fringe ideas, beliefs, and organizations into the mainstream. During his presidential campaign, Trump was accused of pandering to white supremacists. The leader of the KKK stated that he and like-minded people voted for Trump because of his promises to “take our country back”. The alt-right movement coalesced around Trump's candidacy, due in part to its opposition to multiculturalism and immigration.</p> <p><b>4. Fear of Extremism</b> - Extremism is defined as "the advocacy of extreme measures or views". For example, in contemporary discussions in Western countries of Islam or of Islamic political movements, the distinction between extremist (implying "bad") and moderate (implying "good") Muslims is typically stressed. Measures taken in fear of extremism e.g. Burqa Ban.</p>			
<p>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.</p>							
<p>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</p>							
Terminology							
Deixis		Puritanism		Paradox			
Allusion		Anti-realism		Portmanteau			
Dystopia		Narrative		Speculative fiction			
Epigraph		Schemata		Intentionality			
Euphemism		Homodiegetic		Storyworld			
Analepsis		Palimpsest		Theocracy			
Central Characters							
Offred		Moira	Aunt Lydia	The Commander			
Serena Joy		Nick	Luke	Aunt Elizabeth			
Offred’a mother		Offred’s daughter	Janine	Angels			
Ofglen		Cora and Rita	Professor Pieixoto				
							
Key Themes							
<p><b>Gender Roles:</b> The state of Gilead fires all women from their jobs and drain their bank accounts, leaving Offred desperate and dependent. Luke, however, doesn't seem so furious at this turn of events which embeds them further. Gilead institutionalizes sexual violence toward women, embedded misogynistic attitudes (common views, logical extreme). Commanders wife shows no solidarity (anti-individual).</p>				<p><b>Fertility:</b> Fertility is the reason for Offred’s captivity and the source of her power, Gilead’s major failing and its hope for the future. Body functions are valued, but personhood is not. (Birthing ceremony, no connection to their child). Inhabitants of Gilead give many reasons for the society’s issues with creating viable offspring: the sexual revolution and birth control, pollution, sexually transmitted diseases. And the book hints at other, more subtle problems: in a society that restricts women so much, treating the potential child-bearers alternately as precious objects, bothersome machines, and prostitute-like sources of shame, how could anyone conceive?</p>			
<p><b>Religion:</b> Story of Leah is used to justify and moralize the ritual. Many of the biblical quotes in the book are twisted. <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> is not a criticism of the Bible in itself, but a criticism of the way that people and theocracies use the Bible for their own oppressive purposes. This can be extended to any religious extremism and, to some extent, non-religious cases such as the American Constitution.</p>				<p><b>Love:</b> Despite Offred’s general passivity in the face of the oppressive society, she has a deep and secret source of strength: her love. Though love might keep Offred complacent, permitting her to daydream rather than to rebel outright, it’s also responsible for the book’s greatest triumph, as love drives Nick to help Offred escape, which she manages more effectively than Moira or Ofglen. Her love for her mother, her daughter, Luke, Moira, and ultimately Nick, allow her to stay sane, and to live within her memories and emotions instead of the terrible world around her.</p>			