

The Handmaid’s Tale Knowledge Organiser	Plot (AO1)	Key Quotations (AO1)	Links with other texts (AO4)	
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>	“They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to”	<p><b>George Orwell – 1984 (published 1949)</b> 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.</p>	
		“Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last”		
		“There’s scriptural procedure”		
		“Freedom to and freedom from”		
		“the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture”		
		“I remember the smell of nail polish...the way it wrinkled if you out a second coat on too soon.”		
		“She is my spy, as I am hers”		
		“What I present is a made thing. No something born.”		
		“I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it.”		
		“ <i>Her</i> fault, <i>her</i> fault, <i>her</i> fault.”		
		“I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am”		
		“Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary”		
		“the long parenthesis of nothing. Time as white sound”		
		“she’s there with me suddenly, without warning”		
“We are two-legged wombs”				
“This is a re-construction. All of it is a reconstruction.”				
“fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how”				
“Nature demands variety for men. It’s part of the pro-creational strategy”				
“he was not a monster to her”				
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.”</p>	“more than a shadow. And I for him. I am no longer merely a usable body.”	<p><b>Aldous Huxley – Brave New World (published 1932)</b> 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.</p>	
		“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.”		
		“I am above him, looking down”		
		“So I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”		
		<b>Context (AO3)</b>		
		Published in 1985 – described by Atwood as ‘speculative fiction’.		
		Atwood wrote <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> in West Berlin and Alabama in the mid-1980s.		
		Dystopian novel – this is a feminist vision of a dystopia		
		American New Right – religious conservatism was on the rise in America as a result of the sexual liberties gained in the 60s and 70s		
		The launch of the Guardian Angels in 1979 in New York as a volunteer organisation of unarmed crime prevention		
		Written shortly after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain		
		The growing power of this “religious right” heightened feminist fears that the gains women had made in previous decades would be reversed.		
		Feminists consider the great triumphs of the 1970s—namely, widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing political influence of female voters		
		Historical notes refers to nuclear-plant accidents. Probably the most serious of these in America prior to Atwood's writing of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> was the Three Mile Island plant incident in 1979.		
<p>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>	<p>Historical notes mention the banning of birth control in Romania. Under the dictatorship of President Ceausescu, who wanted to increase his country's population, birth control and abortion were banned after 1966.</p> <p>The Berlin Wall was a guarded concrete barrier that physically and ideologically divided Berlin from 1961 to 1989 – its demolition brought sweeping reforms.</p> <p>Current topical context that affects the reading of the text: Election of Trump in 2016; Brexit; government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic; civil partnerships 2004; legalisation of same sex marriage 2014; civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples 2019</p>	<p><b>Ray Bradbury – Fahrenheit 451 (published 1953)</b> 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.</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.	Terminology (AO1/2)			Kashup Ishiguro – Never let me go (published 2005) Children attend a kind of boarding school 'Hailsham', where they live out semi-normal childhoods before dooming 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.
	Analogy	Metaphor	Parody	
	Allusion	Motif	Personification	
	Dystopia	Narrative	Postmodern	
	Epigraph	Neologism	Protagonist	
	Euphemism	Oxymoron	Satire	
	Flashback	Paradox	Symbol	
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.	Key Themes (AO1)			
	Bildunsroman	Children		
	Power	Love		
	Sexuality	Family		
	Oppression and rebellion	Freedom and confinement		
	Identity and memory	Gender roles		
	Marriage	Religion		
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	Central characters (AO1)			
	Offred	Aunt Lydia	Luke	Professor Piexixoto
	Moirá	Nick	Offred's Mother	Aunt Elizabeth
	The Commander	Ofglen	Janine	Angels
	Serena Joy	Cora and Rita	Offred's daughter	
Comparisons between THMT; ASCND; FG				
Entrapment in setting and liminal images	Power of sex		Clothing as signifier	
Setting reflecting reality	Women having no say in sex		Adultery/infidelity/sex	
Control between the sexes	Fertility and motherhood		Names of vehicles	
Mental health- being pushed to extremes	Ageing women		Homosexuality	
Nostalgia for mythical past	Names		Bathing	
'Sisterhood' challenged	Rules and codes		Gaps in time/ incomplete/unreliable stories	
Intertextuality	Music and the past		Cowardice and failure of central character	
Women's voices silenced or women using language to rebel/escape	Undecideability		Changing generations	
Rape	Roles being more important than the individuals filling them		People seen from outside perspectives	
Men's versions of things standing (women don't get their own voices)	Some are only linked to ASCND and not FG.			

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