

also stories about the Commander's Wife who used to be a television personality on a gospel show, as well as bits of gossip from the female servants and the other Wives. Offred creates a mosaic of alternative female worlds which deny patriarchal myths of women's submissiveness and silence. If women are marginal to the masculine world of public power struggles, men are shown to exist only on the periphery of this 'women's culture'. There are soldiers and guardians, there are the dead bodies of male dissidents hanging on the Wall, and there are occasional more intimate night-time encounters, but this is a story focused on women's bodies and their domestic lives.

At the end, Offred makes her exit from the Commander's house in the black van kept to cart dissidents away. Her escape seems to have been arranged by Nick and the underground resistance movement, but Offred does not know whether she will manage to escape over the border to Canada or whether she will be taken to prison. Her voice stops when she climbs up into the van, so we never hear the end of her story, just as she never hears the end of Moira's or her mother's or Luke's story. This novel is full of Missing Persons. There is an epilogue to Offred's story in the Historical Notes. This is presented as the transcription of an academic paper delivered at a Symposium on Gileadean Studies in the year 2195. Atwood adopts a 'fast forward' technique here, leaping two hundred years ahead into a future beyond Gilead. By that time, of course, Offred is dead and Gilead itself has fallen. The paper fills in a lot of background information about Gilead and how Offred's story came to be discovered, but it also challenges us as readers on questions of interpretation. After the audience have applauded the paper there comes the signal for opening up discussion: 'Are there any questions?' The novel ends not as academic speculation on the past but as a challenge to its readers in the present.

Detailed summaries

NOTE: *The Handmaid's Tale* is divided into fifteen named sections, which are subdivided into forty-eight chapters. These chapters in turn are divided into several scenic units marked by gaps in the text. There is also an unnumbered final section called 'Historical Notes'. This structure indicates that the text will be a rather fragmented narrative.

Prefatory material

This is a novel in which the prefatory material suggests some possible approaches to the tale. Who were the two dedicatees? And

what is the significance of the three quotations which form the Epigraph?

Mary Webster was one of Atwood's Puritan ancestors. She was hanging as a witch in Connecticut in 1683, but she survived the hanging and was allowed to go free. Like Offred, she was a woman who successfully flouted the law of the Puritan state.

Professor Perry Miller was Atwood's Director of American Studies at Harvard. His two books, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953), have made his reputation as an authority on Puritan history.

While these two names hint at the Puritan background used for Gilead, the three quotations give us other useful information.

The first quotation, from Genesis 30:1-3, is the Old Testament story of surrogate mothers on which the novel is based. It also provides the biblical rationale for the patriarchal state of Gilead.

The second quotation is from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), a desperate plea for improving conditions in Ireland in the 1720s in the form of a ferocious pamphlet recommending cannibalism and the treatment of women and children as cattle. In using it, Atwood signals, at the very opening of the book, her thematic and satiric intentions.

The third quotation, taken from a Sufi proverb suggests that, in the natural world, the human instinct for survival can be trusted. It is a comment on the polluted world of Gilead where the balance of nature has been destroyed, and is also an implied criticism of the state's over-regulation of human social and sexual activities.

Section 1. Chapter 1

'Night' is the title of the opening section, and 'Night' recurs as a section heading seven times, including the final section. It always signals 'time out', when Offred's life is not under glaring public scrutiny and when she can thus escape into her private world of memory and desire.

It is night-time, but we do not know who the narrator is, or where she is. All we know is that she is one of a group of young women who are being held in a makeshift prison camp in what was once a college gymnasium, controlled by two women gaolers ironically called Aunts, with heavy guard outside. The narrator nostalgically recalls the games and the dances that used to be held here between the 1960s and 1980s. It sounds very like an American campus, which indeed it turns out to be. This is, or was, Harvard University, which has undergone a striking transformation.

This short chapter manages to evoke both regimental discipline and the young women's ability to evade it when the Aunts are not looking. The chapter ends with a whispered list of first names, and, of course, we wonder which one is the narrator's. (During the story, all but one name is assigned to someone. Do you think the narrator's real name could be June?)

In this novel the narrator is not addressed by any name until Chapter 24. She is then called by her Gileadean name 'Offred', so for clarity this name will be used throughout the chapter summaries.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

electric cattle prods: electrified pointed instruments used to control

cattle, but also used by the police in US civil rights and race riots of the late 1960s. Here the term makes explicit the association between these women and breeding animals

Angels:

soldiers of Gilead's army, who fight in battalions with names like 'Angels of the Apocalypse' and 'Angels of Light'. They wear black uniforms. The name is possibly also linked with the New York 'guardian angels', a paramilitary force used to curb social violence

Section 2. Chapter 2

Under the section heading 'Shopping' which describes the daily domestic routines of the Handmaids, Offred begins to piece together her present situation, building up her account through short scenes and fragments of memory.

She is alone in a single bedroom in an old-fashioned house, where she is virtually kept a prisoner. Her actions seem to follow a prescribed pattern and her old-fashioned red dress and white headgear signal her membership of a group. But what does the red dress ('the colour of blood') stand for? The house belongs to a mysterious Commander and his Wife and there are female servants, but Offred is obviously isolated from them. She is assigned to do the shopping, and her role seems to be connected to having babies. There is also one reference to a man named Luke whom she remembers with affection.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

return to traditional values: a reference to Gilead's reactionary social ethos, which confines women to the home and to domestic roles

Martha:

female domestic servant in Gilead, from the biblical story of Martha and Mary; see Luke 10:38-42. In this society, it will be noted that almost all the characters are designated by their roles, for example, Commander, Wife, Aunt, Handmaid places on the borders of Gilead to which dissidents are sent to clear up toxic waste and to die

Colonies:

Chapter 3

This chapter reveals Offred's role in the household: her job is to be a surrogate mother, a Handmaid, bearing a child for the Commander and his ageing Wife. This is clearly not a voluntary arrangement but the result of a government order.

Beginning in the present, where she walks through the luxuriant garden hoping not to meet the Wife, the focus is on Offred's first meeting with this woman five weeks earlier when she had been delivered at her new 'posting'. There is a strong contrast drawn between the two women, one young and dressed in red, and the other old and dressed in pale blue. The older woman is powerful and antagonistic, and the younger one is constantly reminded of her inferiority and of the danger threatening her if she does not obey the rules. Yet there is a strange revelation at the end, for Offred remembers that the Wife was formerly a television personality on a gospel show and was called Serena Joy. She also realises that this woman too is now trapped like herself in a patriarchal system which rigidly controls all women.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

Guardian: member of the Gileadean police force. Guardians wear green uniforms and their official title is 'Guardians of the Faith'

Scriptural precedent: the first direct textual reference to Genesis 30:1-3 and to the Handmaid's role as slave and surrogate mother

Chapter 4

In this chapter, with its switch back to the present, Offred first meets Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, and Ofglen, her shopping companion. Nick clearly does not toe the Party line, and when he winks at Offred, she senses that here is somebody who is as dissident as herself. By contrast, Ofglen seems totally devoid of personality, but on reflection, Offred decides that this may be out of fear rather