

Guided Reading: *The Handmaid's Tale*
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Name: _____

Instructions: These questions and reflections are designed to guide the reader through the novel by addressing the book's plot, style, and themes. Effective comprehension requires a thorough reading of the book, insightful annotating, and using our lecture notes as reference. Consider this your study guide for future assessments.

Parts I-II: Night and Shopping

1. From which point of view is the novel narrated?

2. Describe the environment? Past? Present? Future? Dystopian? Utopian? Be detailed.

3. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia explaining to her that where she is isn't a "prison" but a "privilege". Explain.

4. Who are Cora and Rita?

5. Why are the Commanders' Wives allowed to hit the Handmaids? In what ways does this address the theme of religion?

6. When walking out of the Commanders' compound and past the young Guardians, why does Offred say she moves her "hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway" around her...like "like teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach"?

7. Why does Janine cause such a stir among the Handmaids while shopping in Milk and Honey?

8. What is Offred's initial reaction to the clothing worn by the Japanese tourists? What does this reveal about Offred's own past?

9. What reason does Ofglen give for wanting to take the long way around when returning home from shopping with Offred? What is her real reason and why isn't she more straightforward with Offred? What does this suggest about the relationships among people, particularly women?

10. What is a "Salvaging"? Explain the way language is used to disguise its real purpose.

11. What might the primary color of the Handmaids' wardrobe symbolize?

Parts III-IV: Night and Waiting Room

12. Why does Offred like the night? How do these "Night" vignettes seem to function within the larger narrative?

13. Explain how the theme of memory, storytelling, and history is addressed in the following quote:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

14. What do we learn about Offred's former life (family, friends, personality, politics, etc.) before the fall of the U.S.?

15. What does Offred's childhood memory of the book burning she attended with her mother tell us about her family?

16. What happened to Offred's daughter?

17. As they leave the Wall, what does Ofglen say that might have been understood as a signal had Offred not missed it?

18. Knowing what we know about her in the present, and now learning about her past, explain the tragic irony of Serena Joy.

19. Explain how envy plays a role in the subjugation of women in the Republic of Gilead.

20. According to those in power, why aren't mirrors and makeup allowed in Gilead?

21. Upon returning from shopping, who does Offred discover peeking inside her room?

22. What two songs does Offred sometimes sing in her head to pass the time? Explain the symbolic relevance of each.

23. What “forbidden” word does Offred’s doctor use? Why is the word forbidden? How does this fit into the theme of patriarchy?

24. What is the most obvious allusion to Nazi Germany in this part of the novel?

25. Who is Luke?

Parts V-VI: Nap and Household

26. Thinking about how she has too much time, and wishing for a hobby, Offred remembers the nineteenth century paintings of women in harems, with whose boredom she now sympathizes, and says: *But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men.* Thematically, what is Atwood suggesting about gender roles then and now?

27. Where do Offred, Luke, and their daughter try to escape before the takeover by Gilead is complete?

28. What is the biblical symbolism of the name of the high school gym where the girls and first brought and trained in the ways of the new Republic?

29. What is the purpose of “Testifying,” and how does it relate to control?

30. Why does the government consider Baptists, Quakers, and Feminists all a threat to the Republic? What do these seemingly dissimilar sects have in common?

31. What happens to Moira after her failed escape from the Center?

32. How best might the "Ceremony" be described? What is its purpose? And how does each member feel about it?

33. Who is Nick?

34. Upon being discovered in Serena Joy's parlor in the middle of the night, why does Offred kiss Nick?

Parts VII-VIII: Night and Birth Day

35. Lying in bed, Offred imagines three possible fates for Luke. What are they? And what is the one fate she never considers?

36. While the Handmaids and the Aunts are in attendance during Ofwarren's labor, where are the Wives and what are they doing?

37. In one of Offred's flashbacks to the Center, she remembers Aunt Lydia showing films of sadistic pornography, as well as feminist rallies, where Offred actually catches a glimpse of someone she knows. Who? Does this change any of our initial conceptions?

38. How best might the notion of an “Unwoman” be explained?

39. How does the delivery of Ofwarren’s baby take place (explain the juxtaposition of those in the room)?

40. What does the following conversation between Offred and her mother say about the theme of gender roles?

You young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?

41. Upon returning home after the birth, Offred thinks of her mother and says, *You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one.* Explain the suggested irony in her statement.

42. The final chapter of “Birth Day” begins with Offred telling the reader, “This is a reconstruction,” continues with her relating the details of her new and secret affair with the Commander, and ends with her reiterating, “He was so sad. That is a reconstruction too.” With this in mind, the entire chapter can easily be seen as an exploration of the way in which memory and storytelling work together to shape our perceptions. Explain.

43. What does the Commander want from Offred in their first clandestine encounter?

44. How does Offred describe the Commander during this first encounter?

Parts IX-X: Night and Soul Scrolls

45. Offred remembers a documentary about WWII, in which the mistress of a Nazi concentration-camp supervisor claims not to have known about the mass exterminations taking place just next to her house. The now elderly woman says in an interview that her lover was not the “monster” others have made him out to be. Offred thinks to herself “how easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all.” How might this apply to Offred’s own depiction of and relationship to the Commander?

46. After Offred learns from Ofglen that a resistance movement exists and the two of them talk more intimately, a black van pulls up. “Two Eyes, in gray suits, leap from the opening double doors at the back. They grab a man [...] slam him back against the black side of the van” then “heave him into the back of the van” before pulling away. It’s over in a matter of seconds and Offred feels only relief. What does this suggest about the impact of authoritarianism on both the individual and society?

47. According to the backstory given in this part, when the President of the United States is shot and much of Congress is killed, on whom is this act of terrorism initially blamed? Why?

48. After the Constitution was suspended and newspapers censored, the Pornomarts were among the first businesses to be shut down—something even Offred’s mother and her feminist friends would have approved—but it wasn’t long before schools, courts, and other more necessary institutions fell by the wayside. How does the theme of freedom relate to the specific course of action taken here by the Gilead authorities?

49. What happened at the corner store that provided Offred her first clue that the rights and privileges of women in particular would soon be under attack?

50. Later that same day, Offred's boss, the director of the company, informed the women that he had to "let them go," and asked that they clear out their desks immediately. When asked why, what was his response?

51. When Offred explained to Luke all that had happened to her, he tells her not to worry, that it's only a job, and they he'll always take care of her. Why does Offred fail to find comfort in his response? What might she have preferred to hear?

52. According to the Commander, what does the phrase *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* mean?

53. Given the fate of the previous Handmaid, as well as Offred's current circumstances, what power does she now feel she has over the Commander? Is she right? How might she use this power? How should she use this power?

Parts XI-XII: Night and Jezebel's

54. What offer does Serena Joy make Offred and how does it address the themes of caste/class and rebellion?

55. When Offred and Ofglen attend the "Prayvaganza," Offred notices Janine, who looks thin, skinny, and pale. Why?

56. Throughout the novel, Atwood explores the many faces of religion—its purpose, its authenticity, its strength, its hypocrisy, etc. The fact that nuns were among the most difficult to "convert" in the new Republic, often opting for the Colonies rather than a life as a Handmaid, suggests what about religion in this particular instance?

57. At the Pravaganza, Offred witnesses the twenty young girls who are about to be arranged in marriage and thinks:

Start them soon is the policy, there's not a moment to be lost—still they'll remember. And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years; but after that they won't. They'll always have been in white; they'll always have been silent.

How does this relate to the theme of memory, storytelling, and history?

58. How does the following passage relate to the theme of freedom?

We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't [...] Think of the human misery [...] This way they're protected.

59. What does the following passage suggest about gender roles?

Women's Pravaganzas are for group weddings like this, usually. The men's are for military victories. These are the things we are supposed to rejoice in the most, respectively.

60. When asked by the Commander if they overlooked anything in designing this new society, what does Offred reply?

61. After informing Offred that they are aware she's been seeing the Commander alone, Ofglen asks what the Commander wants.

Why does Ofglen lie and tell her "kinky sex?"

62. After discovering Moira at the Jezebel club, Offred is given a detailed description of the Colonies, where men and women toil in urban ghettos, removing toxic waste, disposing of bodies, and wearing long gray dresses. What purpose might the dresses serve in regard to women? What purpose might the dresses serve in regard to men?

63. How did Moira initially succeed in her second escape from the Center?

64. According to Offred, what became of Moira?

Parts XIII-XIV: Night and Salvaging

65. As her relationship with Nick intensifies, how does Offred change?

66. In trying to help us understand how her relationship with both Nick and the Commander changed her mindset, Offred recalls something her mother once said: "Humanity is so adaptable [...] Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations." Explain.

67. When Ofglen arrives for their shopping trip later in the day, after the women's Salvaging earlier that morning, why does she seem different to Offred?

68. What does Offred discover upon returning home from both the Salvaging and her shopping?

Part XV: Night

69. While waiting calmly in her room, who arrives suddenly for Offred?

70. Throughout the novel, how best might Offred be described? Rebellious, passive, assertive, complacent, heroic, etc.? Is her disposition any different from her past disposition, before the Republic? What might this suggest?

71. What is Offred's fate at the end of the novel?

Historical Notes

72. How is the book's unusual narrative explained by the "Historical Notes"? What do we learn we have actually been reading?

73. What do the "Historical Notes" suggest about white people currently—both in population and influence?

74. What do the "Historical Notes" suggest about the Gileadean Period—its length, its scope, its influence?

75. What do the "Historical Notes" suggest about the way in which we understand the past?

76. What do the "Historical Notes" suggest about the rarity of cultures like Gilead and the originality of their practices?
