

Puzzle Piece #1: *The Handmaid's Tale*
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Memory, Storytelling, and History

As we make our way through *The Handmaid's Tale*, you may notice its unconventional narrative structure. The book appears to be separated into parts, each signified by a Roman numeral (I-XV), with smaller chapters embedded within each part and marked by Arabic numerals (1-46). You may also notice that at times the dialogue is set inside quotation marks, as is typically the custom, while other times it is not. These are just a few of the book's narrative quirks, and they are not accidents. Authors make such choices deliberately, and Margaret Atwood is no different.

The observant reader should notice a clear (though unorthodox) narrative pattern developing, as well as several narrative cues that will not only help you put together the puzzle of this story, but also unlock one of Atwood's foundational themes: memory, storytelling, and history. Most novels explore their themes through plot. *The Handmaid's Tale* is no exception. However, unlike most novels, this book also uses the very structure of the novel itself as a way of reflecting, exploring, and commenting on its themes, particularly the ways in which memory can play tricks on us, our habit of and reasons for telling stories about ourselves, and how these stories can shape (or even misshape) our understanding of history and culture. Much of this will become more resonant as you read further into the novel, but a few things to consider right now:

Though seemingly small, the dialogue formatting is a cue that Atwood has provided to help us recognize time and space. It's also a clue to help us unlock the reason behind the book's unusual structure as well as one of its primary themes. If you're observant, you'll begin to notice that dialogue set inside quotation marks indicates conversations that are occurring in the present, while dialogue absent quotation marks indicates conversations that our protagonist is recalling from the past. Such a technique allows the reader to recognize narrative shifts from past to present, but it should also draw attention to how our past (and more specifically our memory) can shape our present—a primary theme of this novel.

Looking more broadly at the narrative structure, you should also notice that, with the exception of "Nap," every other Roman-numeral part of the novel is entitled "Night." Thus, "Night" becomes a narrative motif. If our protagonist's life can be divided into her "pre-Gilead" existence and her "post-Gilead" existence, then the "Night" portions of our story can be thought of as vignettes that allow our protagonist to reflect on what life was like before the fall of the United States, and thereby give us a clue as to how the transition happened. "Night" also functions as a symbol. These parts are small, they almost always precede her daytime existence in the current Republic of Gilead, and they represent the only time (at night) and the only way (in darkness) that our protagonist has the freedom to be herself (if only in her bedroom and only in her mind). It's these small sections that often afford us our greatest glimpse into our protagonist. Which brings us to our next unconventional narrative technique.

Puzzle Piece #1: *The Handmaid's Tale*
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

This is a first-person story. However, our narrator reveals very little about herself or even Gilead, and these revelations are fragmented, at times disordered, and almost always incomplete. In fact, we don't even know our protagonist's name. Who is she? What does she look like? How did she get here? What is a Handmaid? Are there others like her? How vast is Gilead? How do others live? What are the rules of this new society? What is its purpose? What is the role and purpose of each individual we come across: Commanders? Wives? Angels? Guardians? Aunts? Unwomen? What exactly are the mechanics of this society? Again, it's only through a close reading that we are able to piece together some answers—and we will never get everything... and the reason for this obscurity lies in the narrative structure as well.

So, as you work your way through the novel, ask as yourself three big questions: Who is telling the story? (Our narrator never reveals her name.) How is she telling her story? (We are informed from the outset that written materials, communication, even words themselves are outlawed.) To whom is she speaking? (Our narrator occasionally uses the word "you" and frequently references her own act of storytelling, even questioning her own memories.) Keeping these questions in mind will help you better interpret the novel and understand its importance in the end.