

A Level Essay Questions on *The Handmaid's Tale*

1. What is the importance of Moira in the novel?
(AEB Eng Lit 95, Paper 2)
2. Remind yourself of the last few paragraphs of Chapter 30 where Offred says, 'Tonight I will say my prayers.'
How central is the theme of religion in the novel?
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3. 'There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of Anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from.' (p34). Examine the quality of life for women in the light of Aunt Lydia's statement, illustrating the methods used to 'protect' women.
4. 'We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander.' Do you think that women have gained under the Gileadean regime?

OR, similarly,
5. To what extent has Margaret Atwood made you think differently about the position of women in our own society? How has she done this?
6. 'I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there's nothing I can do to change it.' (p279) Discuss the way in which Atwood has chosen to present Offred's story to us saying how effective you find it.
7. Discuss Atwood's presentation of the character of Offred. As narrator she says she wishes for a more active role in her story. Would it have been possible for Atwood to portray her differently – as more of a 'traditional heroine' – without damaging the book's themes?
8. Examine how Offred changes as a result of her experience in Gilead. How is this development integral to Atwood's message to the reader?
9. How important is the portrayal of Moira to the novel's themes?
10. What methods does the regime use to condition women in Gilead? Do you think that this re-education is successful?
11. 'The Handmaid's Tale' has been referred to as 'a scathing satire and a dire warning'. What elements of our own society is Margaret Atwood satirising, and how does her satire work?

OR

What is Margaret Atwood warning us about and how does she oblige us to consider it?

12. What are the main methods of control in the Gileadean regime and how are these portrayed?
13. 'All around us we see evidence of the way in which belief is institutionalised and abused.' Consider Atwood's portrayal of religion in Gilead.

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14. Consider Atwood's treatment of time in the novel. How is it developed thematically and used as a narrative technique?
15. Examine Atwood's reasons for including the 'Historical Notes', explaining how they take up and develop the concerns shown in the rest of the novel.
16. Remind yourself of chapter 35 (p236-40) and use it to comment as fully as possible on Margaret Atwood's style of narration.
17. Discuss the variety of narrative techniques used in *The Handmaid's Tale*
18. Explore the issues concerning women and feminist raised in the novel.
19. Re-read Chapter 24 from 'I remember a television program I saw once;' to 'what I remember now, most of all, is the makeup.' Using this and other relevant references, respond to Atwood's presentation of the Commander in the novel.
20. To what extent are the Historical Notes necessary to the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*?
21. How appropriate to the narrative structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's description of her story as 'limping and mutilated'?
Use as your starting-point the opening chapter of the novel.
22. Despite Atwood's portrayal of Gilead as soulless and destructive, she has nevertheless succeeded in giving the reader a sense of optimism.' How far do you agree?
Refer in the course of your answer to Atwood's treatment of Moira's escape from the Red Centre in Chapter 22.