

DISCUSSION GROUPS: HANDMAID'S TALE

12B Module 2

As you read, be sure to write down questions as they come to you. One of these questions will become your level 3 question for each discussion session.

Each session, one person will be assigned to the following roles. The roles will rotate each session.

- **LEADER:** this person is responsible for moving the conversation from question to question once the conversation has lulled.
- **PROCTOR:** this person is responsible for making sure everyone participates. If someone is not pulling their weight, the proctor will encourage that person to speak by asking direct questions
- **SCRIBE:** this person is responsible for taking notes digitally as others speak. They will both record responses (in short) as well as who made them. This will be turned in to your LF after every discussion session.
- **TIME KEEPER:** this person is responsible for making sure that no part of the discussion period goes to long. Most importantly, the time keeper will let the rest of the group know when 5 minutes are left, so the group can move to reflection.

Each discussion session will last 25 minutes. The last 5 minutes should be saved for self-reflection.

1. Every member of your book club will write down one level-3 (a harder analysis) question to ask the group. You do NOT need to have an answer (or even know the answer). It may be something you are confused or curious about. **You will turn in this question. So save it!**
2. As a group, you will share your questions and respond/discuss. One person will lead discussions, one will help make sure everyone participates, and one will record answers. Everyone talks.
 - a. This discussion of your level 3 questions should take approximately 10 minutes.
3. After you discuss your chosen questions, your leader will choose some pre-made discussion questions from those prepared for the session. Pick some that interest the group, or that you are struggling with.
 - a. This discussion of the pre-made discussion questions should take approximately 10 minutes. You do not have to answer all of the questions.
4. The time-keeper will let the group know when there is 5 minutes remaining. At this point, the group will silently and INDIVIDUALLY write a reflection on how conversation enhanced their comprehension of the text. The reflection should be a minimum of 5 sentences. At the bottom of your reflection, record what the level 3 question you contributed was.

WHEN ON THE WEBSITE:

Occasionally, your LF may ask you to have your discussion online instead. To do so, you will visit your book's page on lhsenglish.com → 12B module 2 → your book's blog page

Listed on the site will be discussion questions for the section that you are responding to.

- Each learner in the group will be required to respond to a specific discussion question
 - Minimum for initial response = 150 words
- Each learner in the group will be required to respond to another learner's response, in-depth, of their choice
 - Minimum for response to a response = 100 words
 - The point of the response to a response is to:
 - Elaborate and provide further evidence
 - Question / challenge / ask for clarification
 - Thoughtfully respond
 - Expand previous responses to new understandings

Your discussion sessions will occur after you finish reading each section, as outlined below:

SECTION	PAGES (CHAPTERS)	FIRST LINE	LAST LINE
Section 1	P. 3-45 (Sections 1 and 2; chpt 1-6)	Beginning	"It will become ordinary"
Section 2	p. 49-98 (Sections 3 – 5; chpt 7-13)	" <i>The night is mine</i> "	"Of all the dreams this is the worst."
Section 3	p. 101-135 (Sections 6 – 7; chpt 14-18)	"When the bell has finished"	"Does Luke hope?"
Section 4	p. 139-190 (Sections 8 – 9; chpt 19-24)	" <i>I'm dreaming that I'm awake</i> "	"opening and closing, opening..."
Section 5	p. 193-253 (Sections 10 – 11; chpt 25-30)	" <i>What I heard first</i> "	"How can I keep on living?"
Section 6	p.257-331 (Section 12; chpt 31-39)	" <i>Every night when I go to bed</i> "	"It's the least you can do."
Section 7	p. 335-378 (Sections 13 – 15; chpt 40-46)	" <i>The heat at night is worse</i> "	"or else the light."

SECTION ONE QUESTION OPTIONS

Chapter 1

1. Read the first sentence. What can you tell about the period just from this sentence?
2. What is suggested by the fact that the immediate supervisors of the girls are women but these women are not allowed guns?
3. What is suggested by the fact that the girls have to read lips to learn each others' names?

Chapter 2

1. The setting has shifted. It is now much later. What is suggested by the fact that the narrator observes "they've removed anything you could tie a rope to?"
2. What is implied by the sentence, "Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep; or no sleep"?
3. "Ladies in reduced circumstances" is a 19th-century expression usually applied to impoverished widows. How does the narrator pun on it?
4. What is suggested by the existence of "Colonies" where "Unwomen" live?
5. What are the crimes the Martha's gossip about in their "private conversations"?

Chapter 3

1. What evidence is there on the second page of this chapter that the revolution which inaugurated this bizarre society is relatively recent?
2. What evidence to reinforce that idea was presented in the opening chapter?

Chapter 4

1. The automobile names are all biblical. Can you guess from the context what an "Eye" is?
2. How do the names of Handmaids seem to be formed?
3. How are we informed that this society is under attack?
4. Baptists have a long-standing tradition of local control and individualism. Can you guess at the function of the black-painted vans?
5. What power does Offred have over men, powerless as she is?
6. How traditional is this kind of power?
7. Has the elimination of pornography stopped women from being regarded as sex objects?

Chapter 5

1. What is Gilead's attitude toward higher education?
2. Why is it ominous that the number of widows has diminished?
3. Examine the passage that begins "Women were not protected then." This is the heart of the ideology that underlies the founding of Gilead. What is its essential rationale?
4. Analyze the narrator's attitude toward the freedoms of which she speaks.
5. How are the Japanese women different from the women of Gilead? Is Atwood idealizing them?
6. What do you think the point of the contrast is?

Chapter 6

1. What is the function of the Wall?
2. Why have the doctors been executed?
3. The rule that the evidence of one single woman is not adequate is based on Islamic tradition. What is significant about the shift to the present tense in this passage, "Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't"?

SECTION TWO QUESTION OPTIONS

Chapter 7

1. To what time can Offred travel in her imagination that can be called "good"?
2. The narrator's pun on "date rape" depends on the fact that "rapé" means "grated" or "shredded" in French; a date is a fruit, of course. Be careful not to leap to the conclusion that Atwood is mocking the concept of date rape; her attitude is far more complex than that. But why is this reference especially appropriate to the present context?
3. What was the narrator's reaction as a little girl to her mother's participation in the burning of pornographic magazines? What relevance does this memory have to her present situation?
4. The next passage is too fragmented to make much sense now, though more context will be provided later. What can you guess about its meaning now?

Section IV: Waiting Room

Chapter 8

1. What is "Gender Treachery"?
2. The passage on the etymology of the term "Mayday" is correct. During World War II, the opening rhythmic pattern from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was interpreted as the Morse code for "v" (dot dot dot dash), and used to symbolize "victory". What do we learn about Offred's family in this passage? If a miscarried fetus may or may not be an "Unbaby" what would an "Unbaby" seem to be? "All flesh is grass" (Isaiah 40:6) is a quotation from the Bible meaning that all humans are mortal. Why does Aunt Lydia use instead the saying "all flesh is weak"? Does she really mean *all* humans? How about women?
3. How is Offred's silent correction a reply to her comment?
4. Why does Offred envy Rita her access to the knife?
5. Why is she startled at the end of the chapter when she realizes she has called the room "mine"?

Chapter 9

1. What feelings does she have as she looks back on the early days of her affair with Luke?
2. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* will be explained in Chapter 29. Note that a posting lasts two years. This will be important later.

Chapter 10

1. Why are the words to the hymn *Amazing Grace* now considered subversive?
2. Who did Aunt Lydia blame for the "things" that used to happen to women?
3. What sorts of memories does she keep returning to in this chapter?

Chapter 11

1. What do we learn about the Handmaid system during the scene at the doctor's office? "Give me children, or else I die." (Genesis 30:1). Deuteronomy 17:6 requires that for a couple to be stoned to death on account of adultery there has to be two witnesses to the act.

Chapter 12

2. To what were women vulnerable in bathrooms "before they got all the bugs ironed out"?
3. For Paul on hair, see 1 Corinthians 11:6-15. What does this mean: "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely"?
4. The old sexist society was said to reduce women to mere physical objects. Has this changed?
5. What does Offred suggest by saying of the attempted kidnapping of her daughter "I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time"? "Inheriting the Earth": see Matthew 5.5. If Offred was parted from her daughter when she was five and she is eight now, the separation must have happened three years ago. Since at eighteen months the pattern of change was not clear to Offred, the revolution which established Gilead must have been quite recent. It is difficult to believe that such a thorough transformation of society in such a short time, but it is important to remember that this is not a realistic novel, but a satirical dystopia. What associations are aroused by the tattoo on Offred's ankle?
6. She is remembering scenes from the end of World War II, in which women who dated the Nazi occupiers had their heads shaved in public. What two meanings of the word "compose" is she playing with in the last paragraph?

Section V: Nap

Chapter 13

1. What do you think about her comments on boredom as erotic?
2. Offred lets herself go back in time to when she was in training with Moira. Does anyone blame women for being raped today? How has Offred's attitude toward her body changed?
3. What do her dreams about her husband and daughter have in common?
4. What does she mean by saying at the end of the chapter "Of all the dreams this is the worst"?

SECTION THREE QUESTION OPTIONS

Section VI: Household

Chapter 14

1. The mention of a Montreal satellite station reminds us that Atwood is a Canadian, but Montreal is evidently outside of the territory controlled by Gilead. The endless war, always on the brink of victory, is very reminiscent of the war depicted in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. What other locales seem to be on the edge of Gilead?
2. You should be able to gradually construct a rough map of its territory. "The Children of Ham" is a designation for African-Americans. We are finally told that the narrator is called "Offred," though it isn't her real name. Why are we never told her real name? Why was the family warned not to look too happy when they are trying to escape Gilead?

Chapter 15

1. Why is the Bible kept locked up? In what era were Bibles routinely sequestered from the general population?
2. Note the series of unflattering phallic images Offred runs over. What is the point of the joke in saying "One false move and I'm dead."
3. The passages the Commander is reading from the Bible are Genesis 8:17 and 30:1-8. The section beginning "For lunch" uses Matthew 5:3-10 (emended) to switch scenes back in time. When we return to the scene in the sitting room, the Commander has just read Genesis 30:18. The scene ends with Second Chronicles 16:9. Why is this verse chosen as the ritual ending of all Bible readings?

Chapter 16

1. Although this chapter depicts what is clearly the most sensational aspect of Gilead society, it is important not to use it to condemn the novel as "unrealistic." Refer back to the note on the third epigraph of the novel. Even the perfume has a biblical name, "Lily of the Valley," from The Song of Songs 2:1. Why is women's pleasure in sex no longer valued?

Chapter 17

1. What is her reaction to Nick's coming to fetch her?

Section VII: Night

Chapter 18

1. What hope keeps Offred alive?

SECTION FOUR QUESTION OPTIONS

Section VIII: Birth Day

Chapter 19

1. In thinking about the missing cushions, Offred is referring to 1 Corinthians 13: 13. What are the odds that any baby will be seriously deformed? What has caused this situation?

Chapter 20

1. How valid is the use of sadistic porn films by the Aunts to argue against the old society?
2. "Take Back the Night" originated as the slogan of Women Against Pornography, but has developed in more recent years into an anti-rape slogan. What themes of the women's movement is Atwood blending together here?
3. What do you think her attitude toward them is? It may be difficult to imagine now, but in some feminist circles in the seventies a woman who chose to bear a child could come under considerable pressure from other feminists, like Offred's mother. What are the main tensions between Offred and her mother?
4. These distinctions are part of the crux of the novel, which is about a society which reacted to the older feminists by repression and which the younger women did not sufficiently combat. Why did she rebel against her mother as a young woman? How does she feel about her mother now?

Chapter 21

1. What do we learn in this chapter about how an "Unwoman" is defined?
2. The reference to a "women's culture" at the end of the chapter refers to certain kinds of feminists who have argued that women possess superior values and could build a superior society. What is Offred's attitude toward this idea?

Chapter 22

1. In what way is Moira a "loose woman"?

Chapter 23

1. How does Offred try to defend herself against her terror when she first enters the study?
2. Playing scrabble seems like an absurdly trivial form of transgression; why is it significant in this setting?
3. Why does she lie about her reaction when the Commander asks her to kiss him?

Section IX

Chapter 24

1. How does Offred interpret Aunt Lydia's teachings about men?
2. What do you think of this idea? What does the story about the death camp commander's mistress convey?
3. In ancient medicine, hysteria was a disease of women, caused by unnatural movements of the womb. How does Offred describe the sound of her beating heart?

SECTION FIVE QUESTION OPTIONS

Section X: Soul Scrolls

Chapter 25

1. Why does Offred covet Serena Joy's shears?
2. What do these occasional dark comments tell us about the state of her mind underneath her usual bitterly sarcastic narrative?
3. Women's fashion magazines such as the Commander shows Offred were once the target of fierce criticism from feminists. What does she say these magazines offered?
4. How do the pictures of the women impress her? "My wife doesn't understand me" is such an old cliché as uttered by men trying to start an affair that it has become a joke.

Chapter 26

1. A British expression says that a pregnant woman has a "bun in the oven." How have her feelings changed toward the Commander? How have his feelings changed toward her?

Chapter 27

1. Loaves and Fishes refers to a miracle story told in the Gospels (see the account in Mark 6:34-44). Note how the memory of the ice cream store leads Offred to thoughts of her daughter. The Soul Scroll machines are most obviously like Tibetan prayer wheels, which are turned to activate the prayers inside them; but they are also reminiscent to the old Catholic practice of paying priests to say prayers for the repose of the dead. What do Ofglen and Offred see immediately after they have revealed their true views to each other?

Chapter 28

1. Why did Moira criticize Offred for "stealing" Luke and how did Offred defend herself?
2. "Discothèques" nightclubs with recorded rather than live music originated in France. The name was soon abbreviated to "disco." The main feature of the book of Job is intense suffering. Why would a totalitarian dictatorship prefer computer banking to paper money?
3. Why did Offred find her mother embarrassing when she was an adolescent? How has her attitude changed now?
4. Why was Offred afraid to ask Luke how he really felt about her losing her job?

Chapter 29

1. "Pen Is Envy" is of course a pun on Freud's "penis envy," the notion that women who want to be like men are neurotic.
2. When the Commander says of the previous Handmaid who killed herself "Serena found out," what does this mean, and what is Offred's reaction?

Section XI: Night

Chapter 30

There is a traditional Jewish prayer for men which thanks God for not having made them women. This prayer is satirized and parodied in this chapter.

SECTION SIX QUESTION OPTIONS

Section XII: Jezebel's

Chapter 31

1. What has changed about the holidays the Fourth of July and Labor Day?
2. Why would Offred like to be able to have a fight with Luke?
3. Taliths are the prayer shawls worn by Jews. "Magen Davids" are Stars of David, symbols of Judaism. How do you imagine Serena Joy's offer of the picture affects Offred? Explain.

Chapter 32

"You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" is a paraphrase of Napoleon justifying the carnage he caused in attempting to build his empire. When a character in fiction uses it, it almost always indicates the speaker's ruthlessness.

Chapter 34

1. Arranged marriages seem hopelessly exotic to many Americans, but in Western civilization they were the rule rather than the exception until a couple of centuries ago. Evaluate and respond to the arguments that the Commander at the Prayvaganza makes against the old dating and marriage system. The "quoted" passages which begin "I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel" are from 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

Chapter 35

1. React to Offred's comments on love. In the next to the last paragraph, what does Offred mean when she says she has been "erased"?

Chapter 37

1. What is the Commander's rationale for the existence of places like Jezebel's?
2. How does he misunderstand when Offred asks him "Who are these people?"

Chapter 38

1. "The Underground Femaleroad" is of course a pun on the old "underground railroad" along which escaped slaves were smuggled to freedom. What kind of work do the women in the Colonies do?
2. What does Moira say the advantages are in working at Jezebel's over being a Handmaid?

SECTION SEVEN QUESTION OPTIONS

Section XIII: Night

Chapter 40

1. Why does Offred feel she has to make up stories about what happened between herself and Nick?

Section XIV: Salvaging

Chapter 41

1. Why does she say on the bottom of page. 268 "I told you it was bad"?

Chapter 42

1. Why are the crimes not described at "Salvagings"?

Chapter 43

1. Why does Ofglen attack the "rapist" so fiercely?

Chapter 44

1. Why does Offred tell her new companion that she met the former Ofglen in May?

Chapter 45

1. "She has died that I may live" is of course a parody of "He died that we may live," a central Christian doctrine referring to Christ's crucifixion as a source of salvation for believers.

Section XV: Night

Chapter 46

1. How does Nick reassure Offred when the black van comes? Note the offhanded, ambiguous, but emotionally loaded nature of the last line of Offred's narrative, typical of her.

OVERALL QUESTIONS

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
2. In Gilead, women are categorized as wives, handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts, but Moira refuses to fit into a niche. Offred says she was like an elevator with open sides who made them dizzy, she was their fantasy. Trace Moira's role throughout the tale to determine what she symbolizes.
3. Aunt Lydia, Janine, and Offred's mother also represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote? What do the style and color of their clothes symbolize?
4. At one level, *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the writing process. Atwood cleverly weaves this sub-plot into a major focus with remarks by Offred such as "Context is all," and "I've filled it out for her....," "I made that up," and "I wish this story were different." Does Offred's habit of talking about the process of storytelling make it easier or more difficult for you to suspend disbelief?
5. A palimpsest is a medieval parchment that scribes attempted to scrape clean and use again, though they were unable to obliterate all traces of the original. How does the new republic of Gilead's social order often resemble a palimpsest?
6. The commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instinct?
7. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?
8. Babies are referred to as "a keeper," "unbabies," "shredders." What other real or fictional worlds do these terms suggest?
9. Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?
10. What do you feel the historical notes at the book's end add to the reading of this novel? What does the book's last line mean to you?