The Handmaid’s Tale

Sections I and II: Night and Shopping

Chapter 1-2

VOCABULARY

fraternize – to socialize or associate oneself with
insatiability – greed; the inability to be satisfied
palimpsest – a manuscript written over a partially erased document in such a way that the original shows through
parody – a humorous imitation of something

1. Read the brief prologue to the book. With these quotations in mind, what predictions can you make about the novel?

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2. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrol at night with “electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.” What does this detail, along with others, reveal about the situation thus far? More important, what does it reveal about the narrator?

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3. Who are the Angels? What is the narrator’s hope regarding them?

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4. What detail(s) reveal the strictness of the prison that the narrator finds herself in?

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5. The narrator remains unnamed for a large portion of the novel. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity in this teaching unit, her name will be revealed now as Offred. Why do you think, though, that the author would choose to keep the narrator unnamed for over half of the novel?
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6. Why has anything to which a rope could be tied been removed?
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7. The reader first begins to notice Offred's internal fascination with language in Chapter 2. Provide an example and explain why she might be so intent upon the way words work with and play upon each other.
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8. What is evidence of Offred's optimism?
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9. Describe Offred's clothing. What color is it, and how is the color symbolic? What is the significance of the elements of her clothing?
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Chapters 3 - 4

VOCABULARY

incognito – in disguise
orthodox – strict compliance to established political or religious beliefs
precedent – an event or action that can be used as an example or standard
reproach – a criticism of what someone does or says
servile – obedient or servant-like

1. What insightful observation does Offred make about the Commander's Wife sitting in her garden?

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2. For how long has Offred been at her new station? How does Offred know how Serena Joy feels about her?

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3. What information does Offred offer the reader about the place of Handmaids in general?

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4. Who is the Commander's wife? Where does Offred remember her from?

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5. Who is the Commander's Guardian? How does he, from the very beginning, demonstrate imperfect behavior with Offred?

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6. Offred's shopping companion's name is Ofglen. How do the names of the Handmaids seem to have been formed?

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7. What do you suppose is the function of the black painted vans?
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8. How does Offred demonstrate that she does still possess power, as powerless as she is?
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9. How does Atwood manage to continually layer the past upon the present?
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Chapters 5 - 6

VOCABULARY

anachronisms – chronological or historical mistakes
anarchy – the complete lack of governmental control
atrocities – extreme cruelties
blatant – obvious
covet – to desire what someone else has
martyr – someone who is willing to suffer for a cause or belief
piously – faithfully

1. What are the women’s reactions to the pregnant Handmaid?
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2. What is the purpose of the Wall?
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3. Who or what is currently on the Wall? What provides relief to Offred?
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Sections III and IV: Night and Waiting Room

Chapters 7 - 8

VOCABULARY

abstracted – preoccupied; lost in thought
disconsolate – unable to be cheered up
gloatings – bragging about one’s success to make someone else feel bad
ingratiate – to seek the favor of someone by flattering or pleasing
nostalgic – sentimental about the past
parley – talks or negotiations, particularly between opposing forces
sanctity – the quality of holiness
sulking – showing moodiness or bad-temper due to disappointment or anger
tremulous – trembling from fear or nervousness

1. Why is the night special and significant to Offred?

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2. As Moira becomes more fully fleshed out, who does she become in the reader’s perspective?

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3. What is the child Offred’s reaction to the porn cover? How is this different from the expected reaction?

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4. Why would Offred “like to believe this is a story [she’s] telling [?] [She] need[s] to believe it.”

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5. What is “Gender Treachery”?
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6. In her thoughts, Offred ponders the significance of the different possible meanings of “Mayday”. Where did it derive from?
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7. What is the circumstance of the chance meeting on the sidewalk between the Econowives and the Handmaid and how does each react to the other? If a miscarried fetus may or may not be an “Unbaby”, what exactly is an “Unbaby?”
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8. At their routine parting, at which they have each offered the “right” farewell, Offred thinks of Ofglen that “she’s like my own reflection in a mirror from which I am moving away.” What is significant about the fact that Ofglen is so similar to Offred? Is her loyalty a façade, as Offred’s is, or do you believe it is truly genuine?
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9. When Aunt Lydia says “All flesh is weak,” and Offred mentally corrects her, “All flesh is grass,” what do you think she means? Explain the allusion.
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10. Explain the situational irony in Serena Joy making a career of making speeches about women and the sanctity of the home.
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11. Analyze the encounter between the Commander and Offred at the end of Chapter 8. What is significant about Offred's emotions? How does she refer to her room?

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Chapters 9 - 10

VOCABULARY

communing – sharing ideas or sentiments
lugubrious – mournful and gloomy
petit point – a small stitch used in embroidery
sect – a group united by a specific doctrine
taboo – forbidden
unfathomable – impossible to understand

1. What does Offred reveal about the way her relationship with Luke began?
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2. How and why does Atwood juxtapose flashbacks of the hotel room where Offred and Luke carried out their affair and Offred’s current room in the Commander’s household?
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3. What does Offred discover in the cupboard on the third day?
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4. How long is a posting?
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5. Why are songs such as “Amazing Grace” considered outlawed?
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6. What are the “things” that used to happen to women? Who did Aunt Lydia blame for these “things?”
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7. What does Offred offer as an excuse for this way of life taking over? What makes it believable, acceptable?
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Chapters 11 - 12

VOCABULARY

barren – incapable of producing offspring (often referring to a female)
covertly – secretly; in a hidden manner
coyly – shyly, modestly
obligatory – required, mandatory
sterile – incapable of producing offspring (often referring to a male)

1. What attempt is made to keep the doctor's appointment completely impersonal?

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2. What offer does the doctor make, and what appears to motivate him? What is Offred's reaction and response? Why does she respond as she does?

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3. How were women vulnerable in the bathroom at one time?

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4. How is Offred's interpretation of her own nakedness unique?

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5. How does Offred know that her daughter is not a ghost?

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6. What does her daughter’s near-abduction at the supermarket foreshadow? What does Offred suggest about the isolated nature of this incident?
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7. In what period of time has the Gilead regime formed its stronghold and settled in?
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8. What event does Atwood foreshadow taking place that night?
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Sections V and VI: Nap and Household

Chapters 13 - 14

VOCABULARY

- **animation** – liveliness, energy
- **candid** – honest, sincere
- **espionage** – relating to spying
- **heretical** – against established religious beliefs
- **lethargic** – sluggish, tired
- **sedentary** – inactive; tending to laziness
- **translucent** – clear; able to see through

1. What was Offred unprepared to deal with in her situation? How does this make her feel?

2. How does Moira demonstrate that she is perhaps not entirely willing to adopt the Handmaid status?

3. When Janine tells her story of being gang-raped, how does the Aunts’ conditioning of Janine and the other Handmaids prove to be extremely effective?

4. How has Offred’s view of her body been altered from before?

5. What do Offred’s dreams reveal about her fears about Luke?
6. What is Offred's worst dream?
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7. How does the sitting room segment at the beginning of Chapter 14 clearly show Serena Joy and Offred's positions in relation to each other?
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8. Why does Offred wish to steal something from the sitting room?
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9. How does Nick exhibit a familiarity with Offred? Is it intentional? How does she know?
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10. What is the normal order of things as the “family” gathers for the ceremony?
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11. What is their understanding of the news?
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12. How does Offred convince herself that the loss of her name does not matter? What does she know to be true, however? What will she one day do with her name?
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Chapters 15 - 17

VOCABULARY

acquisitive – driven to obtain things
effigy – a carved or created image of someone
frivolity – silly or trivial behavior
genial – pleasant; friendly
incendiary – causing conflict or excitement
innocuous – harmless; inoffensive
prescribed – preplanned and approved
squandered – wasted
superfluous – in excess of what is necessary
titillate – to excite or arouse

1. How does the Commander abandon protocol?
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2. How might the Bible be an “incendiary device”?
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3. What effect does use of the word “tableau” have on Offred and the telling of this story in general? What does it reveal?
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4. Which Beatitude did the Aunts add to the list the Handmaids learned? How have you seen this Beatitude demonstrated throughout the novel thus far?
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5. What is Moira planning? What does this reveal about the primary difference between her and Offred?
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6. What does Serena always do after the Commander finishes his reading? What is Offred's usual reaction?
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7. What is Moira's punishment for attempting to escape? Why is this method particularly effective, according to the aunts?
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8. What is the one thing that Offred thinks makes the act of intercourse bearable for the Handmaids? Why?
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9. What does Offred do with the pat of butter she saved from earlier? How is the butter symbolic?
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10. Whose decree is it that the Handmaids not have hand lotion? Why?
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11. For what purpose does Offred go to the sitting room? Explain her compulsion.
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12. Who does Offred encounter in the sitting room, and what happens?
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Sections VII and VIII: Night and Birth Day

Chapters 18 - 19

VOCABULARY

- **bracken** – a type of large fern
- **delusion** – a mistaken or false belief
- **incubate** – to nurture, develop, and protect
- **litanies** – long, drawn-out lists
- **paranoid** – obsessively and unreasonably suspicious of other people
- **scorning** – holding in contempt

1. Explain the simile “I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor.”

2. What does Offred believe about Luke? Why are her memories so ambiguous? What purpose does this ambiguity serve?

3. What is significant about the pillow with the stitched word “Faith”?

4. What “proclamation” does Offred hear as she is eating her breakfast? What does it herald and call her to do?
5. How are behavioral expectations for the Handmaids modified somewhat on Birth Days?
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6. What are the chances that a baby will be born healthy? Why is this so? How is Atwood using this as a political and social commentary?
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7. How has labor and childbirth changed greatly from before? Why has it changed?
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Chapters 20 - 21

VOCABULARY

incarnation – a person or thing that represents a quality, idea, or person
matrix – an archaic term for the womb; a point of origin
pronatalist – a person or government policy that encourages childbearing
revile – to insult; verbally abused
transition – the last phase of labor during birth
vindicate – to clear someone of guilt or suspicion

1. Describe Commander Warren’s wife when Offred enters their home. How is her positioning farcical?

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2. Why is life hardest for Offred’s generation of Handmaids, the “transitional generation”?

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3. Who does Offred see in the Unwomen film the Aunts show the Handmaids? What is she doing?

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4. Describe the relationship between Offred and her mother. What conflict existed? How does Offred feel about it now, in retrospect?

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5. How does Atwood create a sense of community in the scene in which Janine gives birth? Give specific examples of the language Atwood uses to create this community.

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6. What is Janine’s reward for a successful pregnancy and delivery?

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7. At the end of Chapter 21, Offred thinks about her mother, “Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists.” How is this “women’s culture” not exactly what the feminists would have wanted? What flaws do you observe in the interaction between women on this Birth Day?

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Chapters 22 - 23

VOCABULARY

approbation – approval
audacity – boldness; confidence
beseeching – asking or begging
candor – complete honesty
collusion – the plotting between two or more people to commit an illegal act or wrongdoing
c oncubine – a lover; mistress
nuances – subtle differences
shanghaied – tricked or forced into doing something
sheepish – embarrassed; awkward
sniveling – whining or crying
totem – an object serving as a symbol of a clan or society, often used in rituals

1. What exception is made for the Aunts? Why would this exception be made, both from a practical and social standpoint?

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2. How does Offred characterize Janine?

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3. What does Aunt Lydia tell Janine about Moira? What does she want in return?

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4. How is Moira a “loose woman”?

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5. Paradoxically, how do the other Handmaids react to the idea of freedom?

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6. How is Offred's story a reconstruction?

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7. Offred says, “maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn’t really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death… Maybe it’s about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.” What do you think she is saying?

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8. Describe the risk Offred is taking in meeting the Commander secretly. Why is their private meeting forbidden? What could happen to her?

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9. How does the Commander greet Offred when she meets with him secretly? How does she react and why?

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10. What does the Commander want to do with Offred? Why?
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11. What does the Commander ask of Offred at the end of the evening? How does he react to her response? Why do you think he reacts in this manner?
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Sections IX and X: Night and Soul Scrolls

Chapters 24 - 25

VOCABULARY

clamor – to noisily demand
emaciated – very thin, especially due to starvation or illness
insinuating – implying or hinting
penance – an act of self-punishment or atonement for a sin or wrongdoing
subversive – likely to undermine or overthrow a government or other organization
suffuses – spreads throughout or over
swoon – to faint or lose consciousness
tactile – relating to the sense of touch
viable – capable of developing normally; workable or doable

1. How does Offred interpret Aunt Lydia’s teachings about men?

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2. What is the point of the story of the Nazi camp commander’s mistress?

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3. What awakens Offred the following morning? What does Cora believe when she sees Offred lying on the floor? How does Offred explain her position?

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4. What does Offred mean when she refers to Serena’s garden as “subversive”?

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5. Why does Serena knit scarves for the Angels?

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6. Why are the Marthas and the Handmaids careful to avoid any appearance of illness?

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7. Why does Offred feel hesitation in accepting the Vogue magazine to read?

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8. What is the Commander's response when Offred asks why he chose to reveal the magazine to her?

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9. What does the Commander's response confirm to Offred about her presence in his study?

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10. Offred comes to realize that the relationship between her and the Commander is now one of give and take. What does Offred request of the Commander at this time? How does his reaction to this request indicate that he really has no idea of the sacrifices the Handmaids have made?

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Chapters 26 - 27

VOCABULARY

breach – a violation of a law, trust, or promise
compunction – a feeling of guilt about doing something wrong
copulation – sexual intercourse
defunct – no longer working or valid
filching – stealing something, usually of little value
ignominious – deserving of disgrace or shame
perfunctory – dutifully, without thought or attention
propriety – accepted standards of correct behavior or morals

1. How has the Ceremony changed from the last time?

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2. How does Offred feel toward Serena? Why does she feel this way?

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3. What is Aunt Lydia’s dream for future generations? Do you think this dream is reasonable?

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4. What does “Loaves and Fishes” allude to? What irony exists in the titling of the store in this way and in the manner in which the store must operate?

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5. What is the Soul Scrolls franchise? Describe the irony inherent in such a franchise.

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6. What does Offred see as she stares into the glass of Soul Scrolls? What occurs at that moment?

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7. What does Offred learn about Ofglen?

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8. What happens to frighten Offred as she and Ofglen make their way home?

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1. How was the Gilead regime able to overthrow the United States government so easily? Describe the state of events as Offred relates them that led to the way things currently are.

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2. What detail about the army does Offred recall?

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3. Although the regime institutes changes that at first might make sense due to national security (for example, heightened security measures), it soon becomes obvious that the regime is bent on changing the entire American way of life. Naturally, there is some protest, although Offred recalls it being somewhat unenthusiastic. How is this protest dealt with? How does Offred deal with the changes to her way of life? Why do people react as they do?

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4. What does Offred’s thought, “I would like to think better of him” reveal about her feelings for Nick?
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5. What does the regime’s shift of power do to the relationship between Luke and Offred?
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6. What metaphors does Offred use to describe her reading habits when she is with the Commander?
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7. When Offred learns the meaning of the Latin phrase in her cupboard, what else does she learn?
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8. When Offred asks the Commander why it is so important that she continue to come to him, how does he respond? How is this different from her earlier supposition?
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9. What would Offred like, besides hand lotion?
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Sections XI and XII: Night and Jezebel’s

Chapters 30 - 32

VOCABULARY

- anecdotes – short, and often humorous, stories
- appeased – fulfilled a want or need to soothe or keep pace
- coquettish – flirtatious
- deign – to do something considered to be beneath one’s status
- dissipation – the overindulgence in physical pleasure (usually related to sex, drugs, or alcohol)
- implacable – relentless; without mercy
- importunate – demanding; unrelenting
- obliterated – completely destroyed
- ostentation – a showy display of wealth
- palpable – able to be perceived by the senses
- querulous – argumentative and difficult to get along with
- regimented – disciplined, well-ordered, and maintained
- stolidity – the state of being unemotional

1. What does Offred think is the reason her nightgown was made with long sleeves?
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2. What does Luke decide to do with the cat before he and Offred make their escape?
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3. How would you characterize the God that Offred prays to? Despite everything, does she seem to believe in God?
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4. When Offred makes the statement, “what would be the use, this isn’t a jail sentence,” is the implication that her time in the Commander’s home is better or worse than time spent in jail? Explain your response.

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5. How has Labor Day changed?

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6. What is the password to recognize others in the network?

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8. What is Serena’s surprising suggestion to their shared dilemma? Fully describe her manner as she “closes the deal” with Offred. What is going through Offred's mind at this time?

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9. Why is Rita’s gift of the ice cube important?

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10. What does the Commander reveal about the wants of men?

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Chapters 33 - 35

VOCABULARY

- **anomaly** – a variation from what is expected or considered standard
- **contingency** – a possibility or unforeseen event
- **flotilla** – a fleet of small boats
- **plebeian** – a blue-collar or working class rank
- **precarious** – an insecure or uncertain situation
- **prurience** – unwholesome sexual interest
- **revisionist** – one who re-examines long-standing, stated truths and practices
- **sobriety** – serious-minded
- **susurration** – a soft whisper or rustle

1. What has happened with Janine and her child?

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2. What is common knowledge throughout the network about Janine and the child's conception?

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3. What does Offred recall about Janine's mental status at the Red Center? What does this foreshadow?

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4. What is the purpose of the Prayvaganza?

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5. How does the Commander justify the new system?

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6. What, according to Offred, did the system fail to take into consideration? How does the Commander feel about this?
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7. How are men’s and women’s Prayvaganzas different?
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8. Why don’t the Handmaids like to draw a recanted nun for a shopping partner?
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9. What does Ofglen know, and what does she want from Offred?
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10. What invalidated the marriage between Luke and Offred and forced her into this position in the first place, even making it possible, for her daughter to be taken from her?
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11. What is the difference in the way Offred and the Commander view love?
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12. How has Time affected Offred and her daughter? Note the simile Offred uses to describe herself.
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Chapters 36 - 37

VOCABULARY

allure – an attraction or something that draws attention
apathetic – indifferent and uninterested
assimilated – merged into a larger group; adjusted to a new environment or situation
frivolous – silly; trivial
gawk – to stare openly and rudely
inscrutable – without expression; incapable of being read
jocularity – playfulness; merriment
lurid – garish and gaudy
monotony – without variation; tedium
procure – to acquire
snigger – a smothered (and sometimes disrespectful) laugh

1. How do the Commander's evening plans change for Offred?

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2. What sense does Offred get from Nick?

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3. How does Offred feel without her headdress?

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4. How does the Commander change as he spends more time in the hotel with Offred? What occurs to Offred?

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5. What excuse does the Commander offer for the club's existence?
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6. Who does Offred catch sight of, and how does she appear to be dressed?
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Chapters 38 – 39

VOCABULARY

aversion – loathing and extreme distaste for something
fatalisti – submitting to fate; believing that all things are inevitable
incorrigibles – people who are difficult or impossible to change or reform
lassitude – a state of weariness accompanied by listlessness
peremptory – authoritative and expecting obedience
plausible – conceivable; likely
sectarian – a member of a religious group

1. What does Offred learn about the women at the hotel? Who is the woman at the door of the Ladies’ room? Who are the majority of the other women? How did they come to be there?

2. Why does Moira think the Commander brought Offred to the hotel?

3. What did Moira use to help make her escape? What is this reminiscent of in U.S. history?

4. According to the films shown to Moira, what is life like in the Colonies?

5. What upsets Offred the most about the choice that Moira has made?
6. As Offred explores the hotel room, as she once did when she waited for Luke, how is everything the same and yet so different?

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7. Where has Moira seen Offred’s mother?

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Sections XIII and XIV: Night and Salvaging

Chapters 40 - 41

VOCABULARY

adroit – skillful, practiced
benevolence – kindness or goodwill
obverse – counterpart; complement
sordid – the worst, most immoral sides of human nature; disgusting
surliness – unfriendliness or hostility

1. How is Offred’s experience with Nick considerably different than with the Commander, even though she knows that “it’s an assignment”?

2. How does Offred wish her story could be different?

3. What does Offred do with Nick that she does with no one else? Why do you think she does this?

4. What, in particular, does Offred tell Nick? Why is this significant?

5. Why don’t Nick and Offred ever use the word “love”?
6. What does Ofglen want Offred to do? What is Offred’s feeling about this and why?
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7. What has Nick warned Offred about and why?
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8. What is Offred certain of by the end of Chapter 41?
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The Handmaid's Tale

STUDENT'S COPY

STUDY GUIDE

Chapters 42 - 43

VOCABULARY

bestow – to give
flaunting – showing off
munificent – characterized by extreme generosity
platitudes – pointless comments made to appear significant and helpful
prerogative – a right or privilege; usually restricted to people of a particular rank
revulsion – distaste; loathing

1. What is the purpose of a Salvaging? Who is being Salvaged?
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2. What will happen to those who are “salvaged”? What, more than likely, were the crimes they committed?
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3. What is a Particicution? Why, according to Aunt Lydia, is this Guardian to be subjected to one?
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4. Describe the scene. After the horror Aunt Lydia has described, what are the Handmaids feeling? What do they do immediately after she blows the whistle, giving them permission to rip the Guardian to shreds? What does the Guardian do?
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5. What does Ofglen do? Why?
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6. What does Offred notice about Janine?
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Chapters 44 – 45

VOCABULARY

abdicate – to step down from a position of authority
abject – wretchedly miserable
consolation – a source of comfort
engrossed – completely occupied by something
fervent – passionate; enthusiastic
incriminating – evidence that appears to prove someone's involvement in a crime
infinitesimal – minute and unimportant
melodrama – exaggerated or overly emotional behavior
placid – calm; not easily disturbed
talisman – a charm or object used to ward off evil

1. What draws Offred's attention to the fact that Ofglen is not Ofglen?

2. How is the new Ofglen different from her former self?

3. How does the new Ofglen respond when Offred asks, “Has Ofglen been transferred, so soon?”

4. What is Ofglen's response when Offred tests her with Mayday?

5. What information, finally, does Ofglen impart?
6. What mood is being established in this segment of the novel? How does Atwood accomplish this?

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7. What does Serena Joy discover?

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Section XV: Night and Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale

Chapter 46

VOCABULARY

brevity – shortness, compactness
censure – to reproach or condemn
echelons – levels of rank within a system or society
infallible – perfect, without fault
homage – a show of respect toward someone
progeny - offspring
symposium – a conference, seminar
synchronicity – a sequence of events that seem to be meaningfully related
transcript – a record

1. In Chapter 46, what conclusion does Offred come to concerning faith?

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2. Who comes for Offred in the end?

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3. Look carefully at the university, professor, and department names listed preceding the historical notes. What do they reveal?

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4. According to Professor Pieixoto, how did The Handmaid’s Tale come to be titled?

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5. What tone does Pieixoto take with the “item” and the women in general? Given this, why do you think Atwood included the Historical Notes as part of the novel?

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6. What were the justifications for the Participation ceremony?

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