

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Themes, quotes and a bunch of useful things
you can use to revise ;) Have fun !!
by Ornella and Cyrielle



THEMES





LIST OF THEMES

- Freedom (to and from)
- Marriage
- Gender roles
- Language
- Fertility
- Religion
- Pain
- Love
- Sex
- Power
- Identity and human rights
- Body non-empowerment
- Rebellion
- Memory and trauma
- Death

SYMBOLS





WE FOUND FROSTY... HANGING ON A WALL.

Offred refers to people hanging on the wall as **scarecrows and snowmen**, but then she changes her mind. "But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. [...] These are not snowmen after all." Here Offred **compares dead bodies with childhood elements** to reassure herself by associating her fears with her own memories. But then when the blood stain brings her back to reality, she realizes that **Gilead's threats have nothing to do with her innocent childhood.**



RED, A COLOR THAT MEANS EVERYTHING

In Gilead, the color red symbolizes fertility : women have their period, which means they can have babies, and when they do, blood is also at the center of the process. But it also means violence, sin, and even sensuality. It has been scientifically proven that women who wear red clothes are more likely to catch all the attention. It is therefore not a coincidence that the Handmaids are wearing red : they must have babies, but they are also meant to be seen by everyone. It is implied that they are being shamed because they must have sex to have babies (and somehow, sex is considered a degrading sin in Gilead). When describing an exchange with Serena Joy, Offred says “Frowning, she tears out three tokens and hands them to me. Her face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck.” The color red is also present on Serena Joy’s flowers, which Offred likes to relate to, as flowers also symbolize fertility.



I'M WATCHING YOU

The Eye is clearly at the center of the society of Gilead as it symbolizes the fact that all citizens are watched by God, by the government, and by the Eyes themselves (the secret police of Gilead). It is present everywhere, for example the plastered-over light socket on Offred's ceiling has the shape of an eye. It is even marked on Offred's body : "I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse." One particular phrase, "Under His Eye", refers to the Handmaids being watched by God Himself; but in this patriarchal society, the masculine formulation could as well mean that women are being watched by literally every man, everytime and everywhere they go.

HIERARCHY IN GILEAD

IN ANOTHER LIFE MAYBE WE
COULD'VE BEEN COLLEAGUES.



IN THIS ONE, WE'RE HERETICS.



THE COMMANDERS

Outfit : Black tuxedo

Role : The Commanders have sex with the Handmaids in order to have babies. They rule a family made of a Wife and one or several Handmaids, and a few employees (Marthas and Guardians).

How did they end up in this situation : They either participated to the creation of Gilead or already had a high position in the pre-Gilead world (usually selected for their leading skills).



THE WIVES

Outfit : Blue dress

Role : The Wives are married to Commanders. They get to keep the Handmaid's babies, and are only expected to stay at home and do some gardening or another “feminine” activity (except reading, because women in Gilead are not allowed to read or write).

How did they end up in this situation : Usually (but not always), the Wives are infertile and were lucky to have a high position in the pre-Gilead world, just like the Commanders, which allowed them to avoid becoming Unwomen.



The Eyes

Outfit : Dark sunglasses and black suits, drive black vans with tinted windows in which they throw people they arrest. But really anyone could be an Eye, so there isn't a specific outfit to watch out for.

Role : Secret police meant to arrest anyone that seems to oppose just a tiny bit Gilead's authority.

How did they end up in this situation : Not specified. The Eyes are mysterious, probably because they must be feared (and people fear what they don't know, though sometimes "what you don't know won't hurt you"). We can assume that the Eyes are trusted members of Gilead who contributed to the rise of the society.



THE ANGELS

Outfit : Military uniform

Role : The Angels are soldiers who go to war and control people who cross Gilead's borders.

How did they end up in this situation : Not specified. We can assume, just like the Eyes, that they are trusted citizens. They are in good shape, usually muscular, and often young.



THE GUARDIANS

Outfit : Simple uniform

Role : The Guardians are soldiers who do not go to war. In the meantime, they are used as servants like Marthas but for “manly” jobs (like driving cars or being doctors).

How did they end up in this situation : Again, it is not specified. But in Gilead, men always have a better position than women and must always have power. So when a man cannot be a Commander, he becomes an Eye, if not he is an Angel, or a Guardian, and so on.



THE AUNTS

Outfit : Khaki dresses

Role : The Aunts watch over the Handmaids and preach a crazy and terribly wrong version of the Bible.

How did they end up in this situation : They have already had their menopause but are respected old women, and therefore have the right to a high social status in Gilead.



THE MARTHAS

Outfit : Dull green dresses

Role : The Marthas are servants who cook and clean for the Commanders and their Wives.

How did they end up in this situation : They are infertile but do not correspond to the criterias for being a Wife. They are named this way because in the Bible, Martha was supposed to clean and cook while Jesus taught her sister Mary of Bethany.



THE HANDMAIDS

Outfit : Red dresses and white wings around their heads to keep them from seeing and from being seen

Role : The Handmaids procreate, give birth, are taken away their own baby and sometimes go grocery shopping (in pairs, so that one Handmaid checks if the other one is clean).

How did they end up in this situation : In a world where most women are made infertile by the increasing amount of toxic waste, fertility must be exploited to replenish the Earth. The Handmaids were just random women without a high social status in the past, and are now used for their capacity of having babies. Fertile AND respected women usually become Wives.



THE ECONOWIVES

Outfit : Striped dress

Role : The Econowives are married to poor men (in Gilead, men are always superior to women, so when a man is too mediocre to be a Commander, at least he is sure to be assigned an Econowife). They are expected to be Handmaids, Marthas and Wives at the same time.

How did they end up in this situation : Not specified, but we can assume that they were not qualified enough to be Wives and not fertile enough to be Handmaids, but lucky enough not to become Unwomen.



THE UNWOMEN

Outfit : Unknown

Role : The Unwomen clean toxic waste in the Colonies and eventually die from radioactivity.

How did they end up in this situation : They are usually nuns or widows, or just random women that cannot have babies and are not respected members of the society. They cannot be properly integrated into society with a defined role, so they are simply sent away. Handmaids who fail to get pregnant from their third Commander also become Unwomen. But people who sin or have sinned (abortion, adultery) are arrested by the Eyes and executed during Salvaging or hung on the Wall.

ROSES ARE RED, VIOLETS
ARE BLUE...
DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOVE,
ALL OF THEM ARE TABOO





MEMORY OF LOVE

Offred is often reminiscing her relationship with her former husband, Luke, in her **stream of consciousness**. For example, she remembers when she lost her job just like most women when Gilead was starting and **confuses the past and the present tense** as she is so used to him living with her. “He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his. [...] ‘I guess you get all my money’, I said. ‘And I’m not even dead’. ‘Hush’, he said. ‘You know I’ll always take care of you.’ I thought, already he’s starting to patronize me. Then I thought, already you’re starting to get paranoid.” Though she did not dare to ask some questions like this in the past, she now takes advantage of her loneliness to ask them in her head and think of potential replies that can reassure her. But as the novel goes on, she realizes that **the memory of her love with Luke is probably incorrect and that their relationship was not that perfect**, though she still wishes he would hold her like in the old times.



MOTHERLY LOVE

Offred's mother was a **strong feminist** who believed that men are dangerous and terrible and must be treated as garbage (which, by the way, is not feminism but another extreme and toxic way of thinking that can lead to the oppression of one gender, just machism but reversed). She **voluntarily raised Offred alone without a father**. Ironically enough, her struggle to impose a matriarchy led to the complete opposite : like every other feminist of her kind, she **became an Unwoman** and Offred has no idea whether she is alive or not. Though their relationship used to be sometimes tense and awkward ("I **wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment**"), **Offred still misses her mother's love and respects her memory** : "I **admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy**."



FRIENDSHIP

Offred and Moira were best friends in the past and their friendship survived Gilead, as they both became Handmaids. They are very different though : while Offred is more submissive and stuck in her own thoughts, Moira is ambitious and likes to take action. She would rather die fighting for her rights than live as a prisoner : “Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you'd come apart, you'd vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together.” That causes both friends to be worried about each other, especially because as the novel goes on, they tend to exchange roles. Indeed, Moira ends up as a prostitute in Jezebel while Offred struggles for her freedom and starts doing illegal activities (having sex with Nick, meeting with the Commander, escaping to Jezebel and recording herself on tapes, which nobody knows how). But no matter these differences, Moira and Offred's friendship never fades away.



LOVE, A DIRE FEELING

“Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely. God is love, they once said, but we reversed that, and love, like heaven, was always just around the corner. The more difficult it was to love the particular man beside us, the more we believed in Love, abstract and total. We were waiting, always, for the incarnation. That word, made flesh.” In this quote Offred expresses how people used to take love for granted before Gilead, which led them to forget about its real meaning and considered it almost as a criteria to be accepted by society. Women and men were expected to fall truly, madly, deeply in love as if losing their brains and their own identity in the other person (wait, that sounds familiar), though lovers were interchangeable (yep, definitely like the Handmaids).

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX,
BABY (BUT NOT TOO MUCH,
WE'RE IN GILEAD)

Montgomery, James (1771-1854), Scottish poet and hymn-writer, was born in Ayrshire, and died in London. He was the son of a bookseller, and was educated at Glasgow. He was a member of the *Shepherd's Company*, a literary society, and was the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* (1795), when it was renamed the *Scottish Review*. He suffered the loss of his leg in the battle of Waterloo (1815), and he continued to write for the newspaper (1795) and the *Edinburgh Review* (1815). His poetical writings are mostly of a religious character, and his collected works contain a number of other poems. *The World before the Flood* (1812), *Greenland* (1819), and *The Palace of the Sirens* (1820). He also wrote many hymns, the best known of which are *For ever with the Lord* and *Songs of praise to the angels*.

Montgomery, Robert (1807-53), English poet and preacher, was born at Bath. The success of his first poem, *The Omnipotence of the Deity* (1808), was essentially to his fame. He was a Unitarian, and lived in St. Paul's Church, London. His chief poems are *The Omnipotence of the Deity*, *The Omnipotence of the Deity*, and *The Omnipotence of the Deity*. He is best known for his poem *The Omnipotence of the Deity*, which was published in the *Edinburgh Review* (1808).

Montgomeryshire, inland co. of Wales, 50 m. long, 40 m. broad, and nearly 800 sq. m. in area. The Vyrnwy, on Merionethshire border, forms the Liverpool corporation reservoir (5 m. long, holding 12,000,000 gallons). The mountains include the Plinlimmon group (2,400 ft.), the Berwyns (2,104 ft.). Two-fifths of the county is under permanent pasture. Lead and blende are mined, and slate and limestone are quarried. Flannels are manufactured, chiefly around Llandudno and Newtown. It returns one member to the House of Commons. Pop. (1901) 64,302. The county town is Montgomery. Earthworks abound in the Severn valley, and Offa's Dyke crosses the border.

Month, the interval of time between one new moon and the next. Its mean length of 29.5306 days varies, owing to the eccentricity of the lunar and terrestrial orbits, to the extent of thirteen hours. Specifically, this is called the *synodic month*, the "sidereal" month, the period of the moon's revolution marked by the stars, is a longer duration of 27.3216 days. A *lunar month* comprises 12.3682 synodic or 13.3682 sidereal months. The "anomalous" month, the time of the moon's revolution from perigee to perigee, is 27.5546 days. The "nodical" month, the time of the moon's revolution from node to node, is 27.2122 days. The interval between the moon's passage of and return to the same node.

Montolho, Charles (1782-1853), French general, born at Paris; served in the army of Napoleon. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Monti, Vincenzo (1754-1828), Italian poet was born at Fusignano. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Montmarre, Pierre (1807-53), French poet and preacher, was born at Paris. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Montmarre, Pierre (1807-53), French poet and preacher, was born at Paris. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

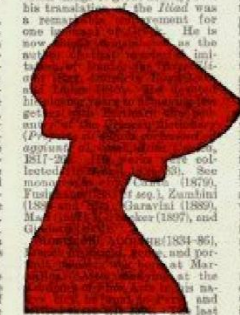
Montolho, Charles (1782-1853), French general, born at Paris; served in the army of Napoleon. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Montolho, Charles (1782-1853), French general, born at Paris; served in the army of Napoleon. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Montolho, Charles (1782-1853), French general, born at Paris; served in the army of Napoleon. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

Montolho, Charles (1782-1853), French general, born at Paris; served in the army of Napoleon. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome. He was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome, and was a member of the *Legation of the Holy See* in Rome.

FREEDOM
LIKE
EVERYTHING ELSE



IS
RELATIVE



FORCED SEX

In Gilead, the Bible is at the center of the society's philosophy. Thus, the Aunts often show the Handmaids **movies in which women are raped**, to show them how Gilead is feminist compared to what happened during "times of anarchy". However, the society is pretending to follow the Bible when forcing the Handmaids to have sex with Commanders in order to have babies. But **the notion of consent is very ambiguous and holds only to the people's confusion towards this new regime.** "What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it : nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for." This quote is ironic because Offred has the choice between having sex with the Commander or being killed. In real life it is often the same : a rapist often threatens his/her victim of killing them or hurting them if they do not accept to have sexual intercourse. Therefore **the relationship between the Commander and Offred can be considered as rape.**



UNFAITHFUL SEX

When Offred first met Luke, he was already married to another woman. They had to meet in a hotel room to **make love in secret**. Though it did not seem so wrong to them at the time, Gilead now considers this immoral and condemns it.

This type of sex is compared to the feeling of waiting : Offred used to feel empty until she met her lover and felt alive for an hour or so, waiting for this specific moment to be everlasting — as she expected Luke to leave his ex-wife.

"How I wasted them, those rooms, that freedom from being seen. [...] Before we were married and I solidified, I would always get there first, check in. It wasn't that many times, but it seems now like a decade, an era [...] I would pace, waiting for him, turn the television on and off, dab behind my ears with perfume, Opium it was."



SEX AS MEDICINE

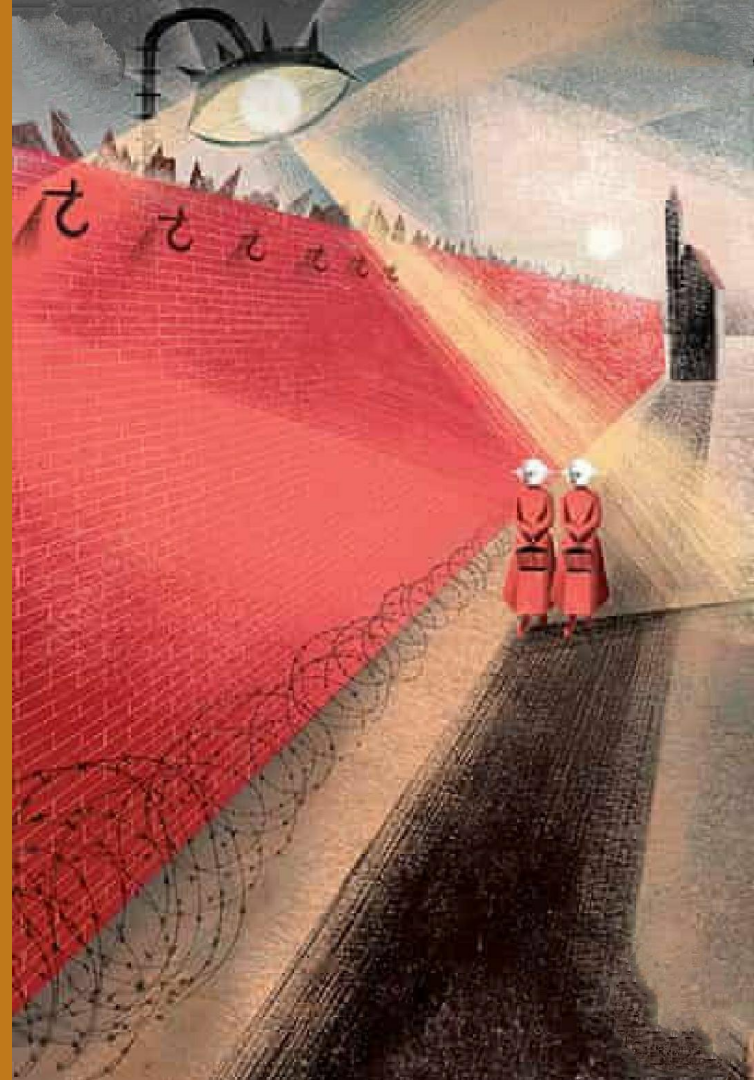
Offred knows very little about Nick, but still she has sexual intercourse with him, though he might be an Eye. This relationship is also dangerous as if they get caught, they might be killed or tortured (in Gilead, adultery is considered an unforgivable sin). But the effect it has on her mental health is completely worth the risk. Indeed, Offred is craving for touch and affection, and she uses Nick as a replacement for her husband Luke. She does try to convince herself that it is not the case though : "They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. Should not apply." Overall, Nick is a sort of medicine that makes her forget that she is a Handmaid and that her body is being used by other people for another purpose than her own pleasure. Their relationship is also very simple, which denounces how the over-consuming society they used to live in showed sex as a kind of entertaining show, while it's actually a simple natural action that only requires the present and attraction of two people. "We look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger."



LESBIAN SEXUALITY

The character of Moira identifies as a lesbian. Though she used to be open about her sexuality in the past, she is not longer free of assuming her own identity. Indeed, in the patriarchal society of Gilead, a woman belongs to a man, especially if she is able to have children. As a Handmaid, she is therefore forced to have sex with a man while she never felt desire for males : this is evidence that Commanders really rape women, no matter how Gilead chooses to present it. Moira's struggle might not be deeply explored by Atwood, but it is one example of pure alienation. This is why she always tries to escape, no matter the punishment. But when she finally manages to run away, it is only to turn into a prostitute at Jezebels, a place where she is also forced to have sex with men in order to survive. In fact, Moira's journey is one of the most touching in the novel because it has no way out. ““Moira,” I say. “You don’t mean that.” She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?”

FIFTY SHADES OF NICK





WHO'S NICK ?

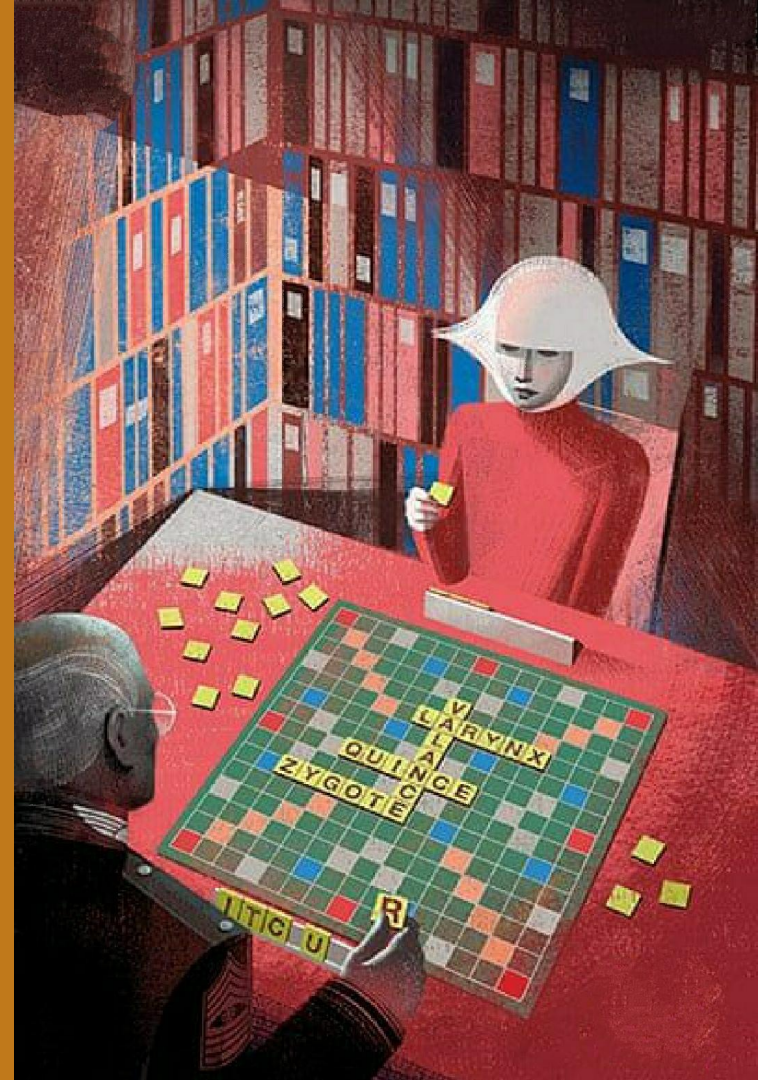
We don't know much about Nick, as he is an **ambiguous character**. Even when we are sure of what he does, we cannot really determine why he is doing it. He seems to be **rebellious and shows his contempt towards Gilead's rules through little gestures** such as "His cap is tilted at a jaunty angle and his sleeves are rolled to the elbow, showing his forearms [...] He has a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, which shows that he has something to trade on the black market.". He is a Guardian, which means his role is basically to help Serena Joy with her garden and to drive the Commander. At some point, when it becomes obvious that **the Commander is sterile**, Serena Joy asks Offred if she would like to have sex with Nick in order to have a baby.



EYE OR MAYDAY ?

In this society where everyone, especially women, is being watched by a dangerous and secret police, Nick's behavior confuses Offred : "Then he winks. Perhaps he was merely friendly. Perhaps he is an Eye." This quote is foreshadowing the fact that Nick will eventually save Offred at the end of the novel by pretending to be an Eye, while he is actually a member of Mayday. Offred learned about this organization from Ofglen, but its members are difficult to spot. Being a member of Mayday is a constant danger, and Ofglen herself gets caught. The fact that she was replaced so easily is frightening : "Has Ofglen been transferred, so soon ?' I ask. But I know she hasn't. I saw her only this morning. She would have said. 'I am Ofglen', the woman says. And of course she is [...] That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names." When Nick states that he is himself from Mayday, the only reason why we can believe him is because Offred's tapes became public and were not destroyed by the government.

THE COMMANDER HAS
POWER (AND HE LOVES
TO SHOW IT OFF)





ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The Commander has a private office in which he secretly keeps objects that are forbidden by Gilead. But having such power is not enough for him and he needs to show it off to Offred, for example by giving her newspapers and magazines while women must never read (because a woman who reads is DANGEROUS) : “It’s an oasis of the forbidden [...] It’s as if he’s offered me drugs”. In Gilead, power is all about who has access to information, and who does not. People who can learn can create themselves an opinion and are difficult to indoctrinate when a society is being unfair to them. But the Commander managed, somehow, to keep this link with the rest of the world, like staying aware of alternatives to the patriarchal society of Gilead. “Sometimes he turns on his short-wave radio, displaying me a minute or two of Radio Free America, to show me he can.”



TRANSGRESSING RULES

In this society where people are constantly watched and must always respect the rules, even a small transgression can mean the world. Meeting the Commander in his office at night is one (and a pretty big one, actually), but also playing board games and drinking alcohol : “Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too, and we take extra letters and make words with them that don’t exist.”. Though this can seem like a normal situation to the reader (because he/she is free, duh), it is made of two forbidden concepts in Gilead : breaking the rules (yes, even grammatical ones), and having fun.



OFFERED THE PRIZE PIG

Though Offred may have the sensation of acquiring power when she hangs out with the Commander, he is actually patronizing her and she is completely under his control. She must earn her privileges : “The Commander likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform.” And he wouldn’t give her this position if he did not find any personal advantage in it : in this case, it is the illusion of an intimate relationship, one that he chose for himself; and of course, recognition. “It occurs to me he is showing off. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that... But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He’s breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it.”

YOU KNOW WHAT'S
FUNNY ABOUT THE
AUNTS ? LITERALLY
NOTHING.

**PRAISED BE,
BITCH.**



ROLE OF THE AUNTS

The Aunts are women who have power (even if it is only over other women, it is still valuable, and they often take advantage of it). They are severe and are used as nuns who preach a hijacked Bible to the Handmaids and occasionally show them propaganda material made to dissuade them from raising an army against Gilead. They basically teach Handmaids how to become nobody for the sake of God : “Modesty is invisibility...Never forget it. To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be penetrated. What you must be girls, is impenetrable.” They lead submissive praying sessions, but as Offred says : “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.”



AUNT LYDIA

Aunt Lydia seems to be the most important Aunt, probably the one in charge. Her character is incredibly cynical and she is very fond of treating the Handmaids like ignorant children and lecturing them with sexist beliefs, wrongly interpreted Bible quotes and nonsense miscellaneous thoughts : "I've learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values." or "She said 'Think of yourselves as seeds', and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say 'Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees.'. I stand in the corner, pretending I am a tree." Her speciality is brainwashing and her personality is so brainwashed itself that we can't even assume where she comes from and why she does that. All we know is that she cannot be trusted.

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU
LEMONS, MAKE A
DAMN PATRIARCHY

Nolite
Bastardes
carborundonium



THE KEY IS TO BE INSIDIOUS

Obviously, such a terrible society that deprives women from their basic human rights **did not build itself in own day with the people's unanimity.** It started insidiously, with unusual events but that seemed unrelated to each other : "People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on." Gilead first suspended women's jobs and bank accounts, then the whole Constitution, step by step, alienating identities **without people really noticing it until it was too late** : "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it."



IDENTITY ? NAH, IT'S USELESS.

In Gilead, the entire people is organized so that each person can be interchangeable as long as the role fulfilled is the same. It is true especially for the Handmaids, who carry the name of their owners (Offred, Ofglen and Ofwarren, to name a few). "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter." Offred is alienated and her position depends on her behavior : if she fails at anything, another Offred will take her place. She has even had other Commanders before, with different names, always changing. One symbolic moment is the day of her salvation, when Nick calls her by her real name (that she told him thinking he would never care nor remember). During one of their meetings, the Commander also tells her : "One and one and one and one doesn't equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other." This is a clear opposition to Gilead's belief, and implies that Offred has an identity to his eyes as well.



LET'S ENSLAVE WOMEN AND PRETEND IT'S THEIR FAULT

"It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. [...] 'But whose fault was it ?' Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. 'Her fault, her fault, her fault', we chant in unison. 'Who let them on ?' Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. 'She did, she did, she did.'" In Gilead, women are considered unable to do anything except being servants; and still, they are seen as responsible for all of their actions. It is therefore very easy to make them believe that their situation can only be blamed on themselves (like, come on guys, it's clearly their fault if they were born women, now we have to disrespect them for the rest of their lives). They carry the world on their shoulders, are the hope of the nation but do not deserve to be looked at properly. Seriously, who would follow a religion that dictates this ?



DESIRE, AN UNDERESTIMATED WEAPON

In Gilead, **women do not get to choose anything**, even their own death or right to rebel : “I sit at the little table, eating creamed corn with a fork. I have a fork and a spoon, but never a knife. When there's meat they cut it up for me ahead of time, as if I'm lacking manual skills or teeth. I have both, however. That's why I'm not allowed **a knife.**” This complete lack of control is driving them crazy, and that is why they **need to find ways to escape the society**. Offred is a specialist, as she found out desire is a good way of acquiring control : “**They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach.**” Having sex with Nick is also a relief : “**His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending.**”



WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MEN CAN BE STERILE ?

“His hand is between my legs. ‘Most of those old guys can’t make it anymore’, he says. ‘Or they’re sterile’. I almost gasp : he’s said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law.” Here Offred’s doctor (who is also a Guardian), is trespassing the rules by saying men can be unable of having a baby (wait, does that mean it’s not 100% women’s fault ?) and offering her to impregnate her so that she can be free afterwards. But Offred knows the danger of this, and obviously her Commander (her last chance to not become an Unwoman) is sterile, but what could happen to her if she gets caught is even worse.

KNOCK KNOCK. WHO'S
THERE ?
HOLOCAUST,
SEGREGATION AND MANY
OTHER JOYFUL THINGS :)





HYPOCRISY OF KILLING

Gilead is based on the strong belief that sinning against God is the worst thing that could ever happen to you. So far, **killing is one of the Seven Deadly Sins**... so why does Gilead keep hanging citizens to the wall ? Is Gilead not capable of sinning ? Does that mean **the patriarchy thinks of itself as a Godly society** (spoiler alert : that's a sin as well) ? Though killing sinners is supposed to purify Gilead from bad seeds, it is only ruining people's lives, but as the Commander would say : **"Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some."** In order to avoid sympathy from the executioners, Gilead uses the let's-pretend-those-guys-aren't-humans technique, or as Offred explains it : **"I'll take care of it, Luke said. And because he said it instead of her, I knew it meant kill. That is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that's how they do it, I thought. I seemed never to have known that before."**



DID HITLER INSPIRE GILEAD ?

Atwood makes an **allusion to the Holocaust**, comparing the Jews' situation to the what is being done in Gilead, especially to the Unwomen and the Handmaids. "In ovens, my mother said; but there weren't any pictures of the ovens, so I got some confused notion that these deaths had taken place in kitchens. There is something especially terrifying to a child in that idea. Ovens means cooking, and cooking comes before eating. I thought these people had been eaten. Which in a way I suppose they have been." The last sentence of this quote shows that **the Jews had been taken their identities before being killed, which made them disappear as if eaten by the government.** "I thought someone had made it up. I suppose all children think that, about any history before their own. If it's only a story, it becomes less frightening." Here Offred has trouble realizing that she used to reassure herself about the Holocaust as a child, but is now living in a society that does the same atrocities.



FREEDOM TO AND FREEDOM FROM

"We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories."

Freedom to : Fundamental freedom, that every handmaid in the Gilead Regime was deprived of.

Freedom from: Freedom that is "given" by someone". Paradoxical isn't it ? If you need a concrete example : Offred and the Aunts (Gilead Regime by extension). The system gives so-called freedom to handmaids. When you "give" someone freedom, it's not freedom anymore.

The difference between these types of freedom is the lack or presence of boundaries. In conclusion, Freedom from is not freedom ; thus it's **slavery**.

STREAM OF
CONSCIOUSNESS (AKA :
HOW TO CONFUSE THE
READER BY MAKING
THINGS AMBIGUOUS)





WHO ARE YOU ?

When recording herself on tapes, Offred speaks to “you”, as if telling someone her own story. If there’s a you, it can mean two things : either she tries to feel like she is not lonely and that there is actually someone listening to her (“A story is like a letter. Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name. [...] You can mean more than one. You can mean thousands. I’m not in any immediate danger, I’ll say to you. I’ll pretend you can hear me. But it’s no good, because I know you can’t.”) , or she intends to make her tapes public as a warning for other humans to never create such a society again (“I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it. By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you... I tell, therefore you are.”).



THIS IS A RECONSTRUCTION

When Offred is remembering her past and telling the story of her everyday life in Gilead, she often transforms the stories, in order to preserve her mental health :

“Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes.” For example, when she is worrying too much about her best friend Moira : “Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira. [...] ‘I could kill you, you know, said Moira, when Aunt Elizabeth was safely stowed out of sight behind the furnace. I could injure you so badly so you would never feel good in your body again. I could zap you with this, or stick this thing into your eye. Just remember I didn’t, if it ever comes to that.’ Aunt Lydia didn’t repeat any of this part to Janine, but I expect Moira said something like it.” But Offred is also transforming her memory of love as if to make it more romantic or more adventurous : “All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate.”



HISTORICAL NOTES

At the end of the novel, Atwood writes a transcript of a conference held at the University of Denay, Nunavit, in 2195. It is led by Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, who is a woman. She can read, write and have a job, which means the patriarchal society of Gilead is completely over. It proves as well that such a society is definitely not sustainable, and humans cannot be taken away their identities for too long. Professor Pieixoto's speech helps understanding more Offred's testimony : "This item - I hesitate to use the word *document* - was unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor, in what, at the time prior to the inception of the Gileadean regime, would have been the state of Maine." and "[...] approximately thirty tape cassettes, of the time that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties". It is to be noted that Offred's disorganized stream of consciousness is also due to the fact that the tapes were not in the right order and the recordings were interrupted by old songs.

LINKS TO OTHER WORKS



<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>I'm "wife" - I've finished that</u> Emily Dickinson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inner conflict - Danger of asking questions - Gender roles - Criticism of society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stream of consciousness - Feminist undertone - Paradox (Wife is both a role of honour and still, a restrictive role, e.g : Serena Joy) - Sarcasm 	<p>"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. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off."</p>

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>Love in the Time of Cholera</u> Gabriel García Márquez	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Love - Patriarchal society/ women's rights - Past - Control - Nature - Aging and Time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flower imagery - Imagery of sight (colors have a symbol) 	<p>"Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat's ears in the sun, indigo shadow, and the bleeding hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out."</p>

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>Intimate Apparel</u> Lynn Nottage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sorority - Gender and expectations - Emancipation - Women's struggle - Nature (as a source of joy) - Touch (idea that it brings everyone to the same level, no matter your social class) - Sex and Attraction - Self-confidence - Control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to characters thoughts (Stream of consciousness in <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u> and light in stage directions for <u>Intimate Apparel</u>) - Ironic undertone - Extended metaphors - Similes - Anaphoras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists." - "It's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hand, we are no longer single."

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>Sweet Bird of Youth</u> Tennessee Williams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Love (and affection) - Past and Memories - Loss of Time perception - Struggle to survive (Idea of the "story" in which Offred is living, and drugs Chance is taking) - Control (patriarchal society) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lyricism (tone) - Anaphoras - Rhetorical questions - Dramatic tone (e.g. The Lament in <u>Sweet Bird of Youth</u> and the "Night sequences" in <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>) - Visual imagery (very detailed descriptions) - Imagery of touch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I suppose all children think that, about any history before their own. If it's only a story, it becomes less frightening."

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>When Mr. Pirzada came to dine</u> Jhumpa Lahiri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Love - Family and belonging - Passing of Time - Social classes - World in crisis - Religion - Hope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sensory imagery (smell, sight, touch auditory and shocking imagery) - Contrasts (e.g war and innocence of childhood) - Anaphoras - Rhetorical questions - Listing (often picturing the frenzy in the character's mind) - Superlatives and hyperboles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "In Hope. Why did they put that above a dead person? Was it the corpse hoping, or those still alive? Does Luke hope?" - "She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, like the wrong end of a telescope [...]"

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>The Picture of Dorian Gray</u> Oscar Wilde	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Love - Hidden truth - Passing of time - Influence and control (whether it is from relatives or from a whole government/society) - Women and Men (see also : Gender roles) - Nature - Religion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sensory imagery (mostly touch) - Hyperboles (mostly in description) - Metaphors - Epigraphs - Binary oppositions - Bittersweet tone (The dramatic situation is hidden behind all the elements Offred and Dorian Gray are losing themselves into => relationships) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." - "It must be just fine It must be hell It must be very silent" - "In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones" - Sufi proverb

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>The Tempest</u> Shakespeare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language as a tool of power - Betrayal - Love - Nature versus nurture - Alienation - Gender roles - Nature - Power - Freedom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foreshadowing - Ambiguity - Irony - Binary oppositions - Personifications - Names' signification (e.g Offred => Belonging to Fred. Caliban => beauty prohibited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Saint Serena, on her knees, doing penance" - "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it."

<u>Title of the work linked to</u> <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u>	<u>Thematic links</u>	<u>Stylistic links</u>	<u>Example of quote</u>
<u>Stopping by Woods on a</u> <u>Snowy Evening</u> Robert Frost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influence of Society - Stream of consciousness - Inner conflict - Melancholy - Danger of not following the rules - Regret - Choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ambiguity - Uncertain tone - Contrasts - Anaphoras - Metaphors - Similes 	<p> <i>“I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.”</i> </p>