

The Handmaid's Tale Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
2. In Gilead, women are categorized as wives, handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts. What do the style and color of their clothes symbolize? Aunt Lydia, Janine, Moira, and Offred's mother represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote?
3. "There is more than one kind of freedom Aunt Lydia says, freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." When we say that Christ has set us free, how does it differ or is it different from the freedoms described here?
4. 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?.
5. The commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instinct?
6. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead? How could it be incendiary if read by lay people? What historic time period is this characterizing?
7. Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?
8. How does *The Handmaid's Tale* depict the intersection between politics and sexual reproduction? How is Gilead's political order defined by this intersection, and how does it affect the lives of women?
9. How does Gilead create and use a new vocabulary to buttress its totalitarian order?
10. The protagonist in speaking to her mother says "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists." What do you think they envisioned in the era of the 1960s to the 1980s? Does Christianity allow for a women's culture and if so, what does it look like? Are we restricted or free?
11. Offred's pillow is cross stitched with FAITH. In what or whom do the characters place their faith? What do you think the author's opinion of formalized religion is?
12. Darkness and light are a strong theme throughout the book and both the narrative and historic notes end using these terms. What does the book's last lines mean to you?
13. What do you feel the historical notes at the book's end add to the reading of this novel?