# *The Handmaid’s Tale* Response Journal Suggestions

**Introduction to *The Handmaid’s Tale***

1. In what ways do you think *The Handmaid’s Tale* will connect to our other two major works, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Persepolis*?
2. What did you learn today (about George Orwell, Canada in the 1980s, or any other topics covered) that you did not know before?

**Chapters 1-3(pp. 3-20)**

1. What is your impression of the various categories of females in this society (e.g. – Aunts, Marthas, Wives, Econowives, Handmaids)? Why would a society do this? Also, what purpose could colour-coding them (e.g. – blue for Wives, red for Handmaids) serve?
2. What do you think is the source of the tension between the narrator and the new Wife to which she has been assigned, Serena Joy? What do you think a Handmaid’s job is?

**Chapters 4-6 (pp. 21-43)**

1. A careful reader will notice that none of the signage or media meant for women uses words (e.g. – food tokens with pictures, stop signs without the word *stop* on them). Why do you think that is?
2. What are your impressions of the narrator’s companion for when she does her errands, Ofglen?
3. Discuss your impressions of Aunt Lydia’s ideas about “[f]reedom to and freedom from” (p. 31).

**Chapters 7-10 (pp. 47-72)**

1. What is *worse* for women, in your opinion? Exploitation through pornography or censorship curtailing free speech?
2. Discuss the significance of *mayday*. What do you think is happening with this reference?

**Chapters 11-13 (pp. 73-93)**

1. What do you think of the doctor’s offer to the narrator? Do you think it might be a trap? Why or why not?
2. What are your impressions of the reaction to Janine’s story about being raped? What kind of an attitude is that to have about a rape victim?
3. How does the narrator view her body?

**Chapters 14-17 (pp. 97-123)**

1. Speculate, in as Atwoodian a fashion as possible, on the choice of section title “Household”.
2. We *finally* get the reference to the narrator’s Gileadean name in this section: Offred. Why do you think Atwood waited so long to reveal this?
3. What are your impressions of the Ceremony? Why do they do this, do you think?

**Chapters 18-20 (pp. 127-153)**

1. We get some speculation in this section as to what Offred thinks has happened to Luke. What do *you* think has happened to him?
2. There are also some hints in this section as to what might have been the cause of the infertility epidemic. What are some of the possibilities, and which of these do you think is the most likely?
3. What are your impressions of Offred’s mother, whom we meet in flashbacks? What kind of woman was she?

**Chapters 21-23 (pp. 154-176)**

1. What *ritual* elements are involved when a Handmaid gives birth? What purposes do you think the elements of the ritual serve?
2. What are your impressions of Moira? What are your thoughts on her attempted escape in this section? What do you think will happen to her?
3. What do you think the Commander wants from Offred?

**Chapters 24-25 (pp. 179-199)**

1. Why do you think Offred tells the reader the story of the Holocaust documentary on pp. 181-183? What connections is Atwood making with her own story?
2. Why does Offred *laugh* at the end of Chapter 24?
3. What is Offred’s reaction to the women’s magazines (e.g. – *Vogue*)? Why does the Commander have them?

# *The Handmaid’s Tale* Response Journal Suggestions, cont’d

**Chapters 26-28 (pp. 200-229)**

1. How, and more importantly why, have Offred’s experiences with the Ceremony changed since the private office meetings with the Commander started?
2. What are your thoughts on Ofglen’s revelations in this section?
3. We get a lot of details in Chapter 28 through Offred’s memories of the events, of the early days of the transition to Gileadean society. Which of these details strikes you as most disturbing and why?

**Chapters 29-30 (pp. 230-245)**

1. What is the significance of the translation of *Nolite te bastardes carborundum*? Why do you think the previous Handmaid carved it into the floor of Offred’s room?
2. There is a lot of discussion in Chapter 30 of the word *fall*. What are your thoughts on this word? How is it used?
3. What, if anything, did you find interesting of Offred’s deconstruction of the Lord’s Prayer at the end of Chapter 30?

**Chapters 31-33 (pp. 249-272)**

1. The novel tells us in this section of the segregation of Jews in Gileadean society. What historical parallels can you draw with what is happening in Gilead to Jews and what has happened to them in their long and tragic history?
2. Do you think Ofglen is sincere, or is she meant to trap Offred? Give evidence for either opinion.
3. What are your thoughts on what Serena is offering to Offred? If you were Offred, would you take the offer? Why or why not?

**Chapters 34-36 (pp. 273-293)**

1. What are your impressions of the Commander’s “service” on pp. 276-277? It is biblical in *style*, but it is not from any specific section of the Bible. Is this at all similar to the mislabelling of the Marx quotation on p. 146 as being from Acts? Why or why not?
2. Where do you think the Commander and Offred are going at the end of Chapter 36, based on the evidence given (the odd clothing for Offred, the level of secrecy, et cetera)?

**Chapters 37-39 (pp. 294-321)**

1. What are your impressions of Jezebel’s? Why do you think it exists in Gileadean society?
2. How has Moira changed since we saw her last? What are your thoughts on her new situation?
3. Discuss your impressions of Offred’s decision to sleep with the Commander.

**Chapters 40-42 (pp. 325-345)**

1. Why do you think Offred starts seeing Nick? What does she get out of this relationship?
2. At the beginning of Chapter 41, Offred makes a lot of comments about how she has told the story. Discuss Offred’s (and by extension Atwood’s) storytelling methods.

**Chapters 43-45 (pp. 346-359)**

1. What are your impressions of the Salvagings and the Particicutions? Pay particular attention to the way Atwood *names* them.
2. What are your impressions of the new Ofglen? Do you believe her story about what happened to the first Ofglen? Why or why not?
3. Now that Serena has found out about Offred and Fred, what do you think she will do?

**Chapter 46 + Historical Notes (pp. 363-388)**

1. The ending of the novel proper (i.e. – the end of Chapter 46) is maddeningly ambiguous. What do you think happened to Offred? Where is she going at the end of the novel?
2. What role do the “Historical Notes” play in the story? What surprising things did you learn about the story by reading them?