

Lesson Plan

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Grade Level: Year 3-4 (Advanced students; Involve teachers of Social Studies, or History)

Duration: 2-3 Weeks

Focus: Themes of power, gender roles, totalitarianism, socio-political commentary, dystopian literature.

Objective

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- ☞ Understand key themes and motifs in *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- ☞ Analyze the novel's portrayal of power, gender oppression, and resistance.
- ☞ Discuss the historical and socio-political context in which the book was written and how it relates to contemporary issues.
- ☞ Engage with Margaret Atwood's style, including her use of language, imagery, and symbolism.
- ☞ Examine dystopian elements and their relevance to society today.

Materials

- ☞ Copies of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood
- ☞ Supplementary articles on feminism, totalitarianism, and historical parallels (e.g., Puritan society, the Iranian Revolution, 1980s American politics)
- ☞ Documentaries or news clips about real-world women's rights movements (e.g., #MeToo, women's roles under authoritarian regimes)
- ☞ Projector or smartboard for visual aids (optional)

Author Background: Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian author, poet, and essayist, is known for her incisive commentary on societal issues, particularly around feminism, environmentalism, and power dynamics. Born in 1939, Atwood grew up during World War II and the early Cold War period, which heavily influenced her views on power and politics. Atwood's works frequently explore dystopian settings, often as cautionary tales about where society could be heading.

The Handmaid's Tale, written in 1985, was influenced by her observations of rising conservatism, particularly in the U.S., as well as historical precedents like the Puritanism of early America and the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. The book reflects concerns about the loss of women's rights, environmental degradation, and the manipulation of religion to justify oppressive power structures.

Historical and Socioeconomic Setting

The novel is set in a near-future dystopian society known as the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime that arose following a coup in what was once the United States. The society is built on rigid gender roles and class structures, where women are stripped of their rights and autonomy. Fertility is

a central issue due to widespread environmental degradation and pollution, which has rendered many people sterile. The resulting decline in birth rates has led to a religiously justified system where fertile women, the “Handmaids,” are forced into sexual servitude to bear children for elite couples.

Key influences include:

- ☞ **Historical Parallels:** Puritanism, theocratic societies, totalitarian regimes (e.g., Nazi Germany, the Iranian Revolution).
- ☞ **Socioeconomic Commentary:** The intersection of environmental decline and the rise of authoritarianism. The novel critiques patriarchal structures and religious extremism, often seen as reflective of the social and political climate of the 1980s.



Lesson Outline

Week 1: Introduction to the Novel

Day 1: Introduction to Dystopian Literature and Context

- ☞ Briefly introduce dystopian literature and discuss its role in social criticism.
- ☞ Provide a background on Margaret Atwood’s life and the 1980s political climate (including environmental concerns and the rise of conservative politics).

🌀 Assign reading: Chapters 1-5.

Day 2: Historical Parallels & Authoritarianism

- ☞ Discussion on the real-life influences behind Gilead, including Puritan society and modern authoritarian regimes.
- ☞ Introduce the concepts of feminism, patriarchal systems, and the role of religion in justifying oppression.
- ☞ Small group discussions: What are some historical examples of the control of women’s bodies?

🌀 Assign reading: Chapters 6-10.

Week 2: Power Structures & Gender Roles

Day 3: Power, Control, and Oppression

Discussion on how power is maintained in Gilead (through language, violence, ritual).


Analyze the roles of the Commanders, Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids. How does each class contribute to the overall structure of oppression?

🌀 Assign reading: Chapters 11-16.

Day 4: The Role of Women in Gilead

Discuss the different roles women are forced into: Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Econowives.

Explore the theme of complicity. How do women perpetuate the system?

 Assign reading: Chapters 17-23.

Day 5: Resistance and Rebellion

Introduce the concept of resistance (both passive and active).

Discuss Offred's internal rebellion versus external rebellion (e.g., Moira, the Mayday movement).

 Assign reading: Chapters 24-30.

Week 3: Themes, Symbols, and Modern Relevance

Day 6: The Power of Language

Examine Atwood's use of language: storytelling, names, and how language can both empower and oppress.

Discuss how Offred's narration changes as she gains more agency.

 Assign reading: Chapters 31-38.

Day 7: Symbolism & Imagery


Discuss key symbols in the novel: red (blood, fertility, sexuality), flowers, and the Eyes.


Analyze how Atwood uses biblical allusions to critique Gilead's hypocrisy.

 Assign reading: Chapters 39-46 (finish the novel).

Day 8: Modern Connections & Final Reflections

Discuss how the novel resonates with contemporary issues: women's rights, religious extremism, and political authoritarianism.

 **Debate:** Is *The Handmaid's Tale* still relevant today? Why or why not?

 **Assign reflective essay:** "What does *The Handmaid's Tale* warn us about, and how can we apply its lessons to today's society?"

 **Discussion Questions with Suggested Answers**

 **What role does the environment play in the creation of Gilead?**

Answer: The environmental crisis (pollution, infertility) is a central catalyst for Gilead's rise. The decline in fertility creates panic, leading to authoritarian measures and religious control. This reflects the interconnectedness of environmental and political issues.

👉 **How does Gilead justify the subjugation of women?**

Answer: Gilead uses religious texts, especially the Bible, to legitimize its treatment of women. Handmaids are modeled after the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, where women are valued solely for their ability to bear children. The regime's use of selective scripture manipulation is a critique of theocratic governments that justify oppression with religion.

👉 **What are the different forms of resistance we see in the novel?**

Answer: Resistance takes many forms, from Moira's escape attempts to Offred's internal rebellion through storytelling and her affair with Nick. The Mayday movement represents organized, external resistance. Atwood shows that even small acts of defiance can be powerful under oppressive regimes.

👉 **How does Atwood use symbolism to enhance the novel's themes?**

Answer: The color red, which the Handmaids are forced to wear, symbolizes fertility, sexuality, and violence. Eyes symbolize surveillance and control, while flowers often represent the potential for life and beauty but also the fragility of women's bodies under patriarchal control.

👉 **What is the significance of Offred's narrative style?**

Answer: Offred's fragmented, reflective narration mirrors her lack of control in Gilead. As the novel progresses, her storytelling becomes an act of rebellion, a way to reclaim her identity and resist Gilead's erasure of her personhood.



Teacher's Notes

Context is Key: Ensure students grasp the historical and political context of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Drawing parallels between Gilead and real-world theocracies or totalitarian regimes (e.g., Iran post-revolution, Nazi Germany) deepens understanding.

Encourage Diverse Opinions: Students may have varied interpretations of the book's messages. Foster an environment where different viewpoints on feminism, politics, and religion can be discussed respectfully.

Connect to Current Events: To keep the lesson relevant, connect themes from the novel to contemporary issues like reproductive rights, political authoritarianism, and women's movements