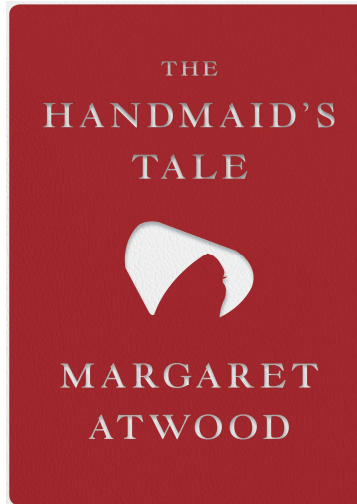


***Handmaid's Tale* Lesson Plan**

(for a fake college class in American Literature, Women Writers, or Speculative Fiction)



Time:

2 days a week, for **2 weeks**

(I'm imagining there won't be many books to read in the class, probably 3-4)

Each class session is around **2 hours** (120 minutes)

Materials Needed:

Whiteboard

Projector or SMART Board/interactive whiteboard (to share my presentations)

Class set of *The Handmaid's Tale* (or student copies/PDFs)

Assignments (these will be included in more detail later):

In-Class Group Assignment: Character Sketch (due at the end of class on the third day)

- **5 points**

Final Individual Assignment: Response Paper (due at the end of the unit)

- **10 points**
- 2-3 pages
- Graded based on rubric.

Everything else specified will be part of the general Participation grade.

Unit Objectives:

- Students will be introduced to Margaret Atwood, her bibliography, and the reason she created *The Handmaid's Tale* and the world of Gilead.
- Students will understand the meaning of specific symbols, cultural references, and biblical allusions in the novel through individual and collaborative analysis.
- Students will recognize how various symbols and literary devices are used to reinforce the power structure in Gilead and express it in verbal, visual, and written forms.
- Students will be able to understand and express the role of speculative fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale* as social, cultural, and political criticism.
- Ultimately, students will come to appreciate literature and its relationship to culture, and how it can be used as a lens to shape societies and develop empathy.

Day 1 (first Monday): “Introduction to Margaret Atwood: Her Work & Context”

Background: Students come to class knowing that they will be assigned to read The Handmaid's Tale.

Objective: Students will be introduced to Margaret Atwood, her bibliography, and the reason she created *The Handmaid's Tale* and the world of Gilead.

Order of Class:

Introduce students to Atwood:

- Born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1939 – question if she's really “American” or not. Ask students whether “American” identities refer to the U.S. or North American?
- Prolific bibliography – 71 total texts.

Discuss the various texts she produced:

- *Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*
 - o The title comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*
- Science fiction: *MaddAdam* trilogy
- Children's books, nonfiction, poetry, 2 graphic novels, and 1 RPG campaign
- Her work often addresses important social issues using worlds different than ours.

Introduce literary context for *The Handmaid's Tale*: **Speculative/Dystopian Fiction**

- Speculative Fiction: Very broad genre – includes sci-fi, fantasy, horror.
 - o Often combines everyday life (realism) with various supernatural elements – things that don't exist in the universe.
 - o Quote from Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses* (1974), calling it “the literature of cognitive estrangement”: there's always something new to be discovered in a speculative world, even if it seems “normal” at first.
- Dystopian Fiction: Comes from the Greek “bad place,” often consists of a fictional community or society that is undesirable, but not completely “bad.” Dystopias are characterized by fear or distress, tyrannical government, and social inequality. Often included in various speculative subgenres.
- Small Class Activity: Ask students to report out works they think qualify as speculative or dystopian fiction – write these down on the whiteboard. When there's enough examples, progress to the next bullet point.
- My Ultimate Argument: *Handmaid's Tale*, released in the 1980s, is very unique to the genres it belongs to because it combines elements from contemporary culture and society with a dystopian futuristic setting.
 - o Atwood made a rule to not include anything that humans have not developed (show the quote!)
 - o Discuss why that matters – **she was creating an “anti-feminist” dystopia in that women are considered the lowest and assigned to menial tasks to critique contemporary society's treatment of women, particularly by religious institutions.**

Class Activity: **Respond to the first chapter, "Night."**

A student will volunteer to read the two pages that make up the first chapter, while the rest of the class takes notes on these six following elements:

- Setting
- First-Person Narrative
- Emotions/Language
- Information About Gilead's Social Hierarchy
- Information About the "Past" (Atwood's present)
- Information About "Handmaids" and Their Position in Society

Students discuss their notes/findings in a group setting for around 10-15 minutes, using the chapter and the background information I provided to help them make sense of it.

Whole-class discussion on the activity:

Class reports out what they have found from their individual and collaborative work. This should go until the end of class.

Homework:

- By Wednesday, students will read up to chapter 15 of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Day 2 (first Wednesday): “Hiding in Plain Sight: Symbols & Language in the World of Gilead”

Background: Students come to class having read chapters 1-15 of The Handmaid's Tale.

Objective: Students will understand the meaning of specific symbols and uses of language in the novel through individual and collaborative analysis.

Order of Class:

Check-in (first 5-10 minutes): Ask students the following questions and allow them to report out.

- Did you like the first 15 chapters?
- What were some key events that happened?
 - o Write these down on a corner of the whiteboard.
- What are the events that led up to the creation of Gilead?
- What are some recurring themes and symbols you've noticed as you were reading?

Discuss instances of symbolism:

- In case some students don't come from a literature/humanities background, or need a refresher, introduce the concept of symbolism in a way that they can comprehend:
 - o Symbolism is the use of objects, colors, visuals, etc. to **represent ideas and/or qualities** as well as emotions or states of mind. It's like an indirect way of **an author telling you what they were writing about**.
- **The Color Red:** Appears often in the novel, associated with the Handmaids as they wear red all over them. The color is associated with both **shame** (like *The Scarlet Letter*) and **passion**, as well as fertility.
 - o Offred associates it with blood, either to represent her life force or violence and death. Some examples in the early chapters include the executed criminals and the Wall.
 - Tell students that Gilead is Boston – see if they can figure out what famous school they are living on. Give a hint: their color is red too.
 - o In Serena Joy's garden, the red flowers are associated with sex organs due to the flower as a symbol of fertility, but **they can never really flourish**, because she cuts them off.
 - o The **Red Center** was used by the Aunts to house and train Handmaids, but is also a “Re-Ed” center as it's used to “re-educate” women, indoctrinating them so they can become servants to Gilead.
- **Eyes:** The book is filled with them right off the start. They represent important topics that Atwood wants to communicate are prevalent in society nowadays – **paranoia, surveillance, and authority**.
 - o The Eyes are also Gilead's law enforcement – which in turn renders them as a source of paranoia. Like in *1984* or *The Great Gatsby*, there is always someone watching what the people of Gilead do.
 - o Seeing how Gilead is theocratic (religion = authority), eyes can also represent the “eyes of God” and how many religious fanatics believe that God is watching everything you do and also judging you for it.

Discuss language, or the lack thereof, in Gilead:

- A lot of things introduced at the start of the novel are Biblical allusions – “Milk & Honey,” for example – but they aren’t exactly faithful to what they mean.
 - o “Martha” comes from a character in the Bible, who was also a housekeeper.
- “Of___,” the name of a Handmaid with the Commander’s name filling in the blank, represents that **Handmaids have no power and are simply just “objects” to them**, reinforcing Gilead’s patriarchal beliefs.
- The usage of Biblical quotes is rather twisted – while this theocratic society is rigid about its religious influences, and so empathetic about the specific rules it upholds, it warps its essential virtues through surreal Bible-thumping.
 - o This is very similar to what slave owners did, stating that the Bible justified slavery when it did not.
 - o The prayers that the Aunts play are not real words in the Bible. Offred knows this but she has no way of checking because women are not allowed to read.
- Offred uses speech/language and storytelling as a pastime, as she has no access to entertainment. Her thoughts, represented in the book, and her narration are some of the few things that give her any power in this society.
 - o The thing is, she cannot say them out loud because she would be rebelling if she were to do so, and so she keeps them to herself.

Class Activity: Group Theme-Tracking: Close Reading/Analysis

Students pick one of the themes, language uses, and/or allusions mentioned in the lecture or on the whiteboard from the beginning of class, and spend 10-15 minutes finding 1-2 passages (depending on length) related to the theme and write down answers to the following two questions, which will be discussed immediately after:

- Why is this theme/allusion/reference important? Why would Atwood include it in her dystopia?
- What is the significance of the theme in the passage(s) you selected?

Whole-class discussion on the activity:

Class reports out what they have found from their collaborative work. This should go until the end of class.

- I will write everything down on the whiteboard as class goes on.

Homework:

- By Monday, students will read up to chapter 32 of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Day 3 (second Monday): "Eyes, Lies, & Econowives: The Politics of Gilead"

Background: Students come to class having read chapters 16-32 of The Handmaid's Tale.

Objectives:

Students will recognize how various characters, symbols, and literary devices are used to reinforce the power structure in Gilead, and express them in verbal, visual, and written forms.

Students will be able to understand and express the role of speculative fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale* as social, cultural, and political criticism.

Order of Class:

Check-in (first 10-15 minutes): Ask students the following questions and allow them to report out. For points 1-2, write them down on the whiteboard.

- What were some key events that happened in these next 16 chapters?
- Any new characters or locations introduced?
- Predictions for what will happen next?

Clear up various things about Gilead's hierarchy through diagrams and a presentation:

- The Republic of Gilead **does not hold equality above the law**, and the legal position of individuals is based on their affiliation to class.
 - o Ask the class what real-life cultures/societies they think this reminds them of. Some possible answers will include slavery or the caste system in India.
 - Unlike some of these, however, **it's not possible to change your position once you have one** (except for Unwomen).
 - o This is again something that makes *The Handmaid's Tale* unique compared to other speculative stories, as while this world is a fictional future, it's all based on things that happened in real life – **the class system even replaces parts of the federal law in America.**

The specific classes (in order from top-bottom) for women are:

- **Aunts** – highest-ranking women, responsible for the training and indoctrination of Handmaids as well as presiding over Salvagings (executions).
- **Commander's Wives** (also simply called Wives) – have a considerable amount of power and influence in the Republic but it's all a position of privilege. **Women considered "pure" and "moral" can marry and thus become Wives.** Serena Joy was a special case, however, because she was somewhat hypocritical.
 - o Many Wives "share their husbands" with Handmaids as they are sometimes incapable of bearing children, and most are older than the Handmaids.
 - o Despite their power, they are still oppressed and subjugated to their husbands, because this society is both theocratic and patriarchal – leading women to always be considered lower than men and "property."
 - o They always wear blue, which is a reference to the Virgin Mary.

- **Econowives** – poor women, the poorest you can be without being a servant. Married to men with a lower rank than a Commander, including Guardians. Subject to authority, yet jealous of Handmaids.
- **Handmaids** – female servants tasked with breeding and supplying Gilead with more children. **They are always fertile women who break the law**, and their “immorality” is why they are in their position.
- **Marthas** – considered lower than Handmaids because they don't have sex with Commanders. They are **domestic female servants**, and they wear green with aprons on top. Unmarried.

For men:

- **Commanders** – the social class of all powerful men. They serve as politicians, military leaders/officers, or policymakers/lawmakers.
 - o **They break the law**, in secret, often to do forbidden luxuries or activities like using the black market or having sexual affairs with their Handmaids. Fred, Offred's Commander, seems to want to do this with her.
- **Angels** – soldiers who serve on the frontlines in the Gilead war.
- **Guardians** – civilian men who act as bodyguards and servants to Commanders. They don't have many rights.

Two things outside of any real social class:

- o **Unwomen** – a title given to single women or women “**incapable of social integration**” within Gilead's gender divisions. They include feminists, failed Handmaids, nuns, and criminals. Offred's mother was considered one.
- o Eyes – discussed last week, potentially give a refresher.
- Why does this all matter to Atwood's world? (some interesting historical context)
 - o Because this entire premise **is based on true events** that happened in the Middle East in the late 1970s/early 1980s. A turnaround led by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan, among others, led to far worse consequences for women than before – **they were slowly deprived of all the rights they had in the past and treated like servants if they didn't follow the laws of radical Islamic politics.**
 - o As a work of speculative fiction, then, Atwood's novel is meant to be a **cautionary tale**, specifically theorizing on what happens when radical religious institutions take over, particularly based on their patriarchal nature.

Group Assignment: Character Sketch

- See the “Assignments” page (pg. 7) for an explanation.

Homework:

- By Monday, students will read up to chapter 46 of *The Handmaid's Tale*.
 - o The Historical Notes are optional.

Day 4 (second Wednesday): “Where Do We Go from Here? Real-World Influences & The Handmaid Fandom”

*Background: Students come to class having read
chapters 33-46 of The Handmaid's Tale.*

Objectives:

Students will be able to understand and express the role of speculative fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale* as social, cultural, and political criticism.

Ultimately, students will come to appreciate literature and its relationship to culture, and how it can be used as a lens to shape societies and develop empathy.

Order of Class:

Check-in (first 15-20 minutes): Ask students the following questions and allow them to report out. For points 1-2, write them down on the whiteboard.

- What were some key events that happened in these last chapters?
- Any new characters or locations introduced?
- Brief lecture on Jezebels – Biblical origin, what it's supposed to represent, etc. – and the ambiguous ending (it's Atwood's choice).

Class Activity: Discussion Questions

Students will pick one of the following three groups to be in and answer the following questions, sharing out to the class in a discussion – which students not in the groups can contribute to – immediately after.

- **Complicity:** What are the ethics of living in a state like Gilead? What does this book imagine that resistance, or “thinking” may look like?
- **Women's Lives:** What is the “women's” culture that Offred's mother wanted? What is the culture currently existing? How does this connect with Aunt Lydia's statement of “freedom from” and its importance over “freedom to”?
- **Relationships:** What does Moira's escape and the results of it – becoming a Jezebel – mean to Offred and her relationship with power? What about Luke – did their relationship change and is she still ambivalent?

Discuss the novel's real-world significance and the Handmaid Fandom as a projection of it:

- Speculative novels and narratives are often considered **tools for advocacy** as much as they are considered cautionary tales. These stories provide cultural insight by **allowing space for reflections on human values and what we can do better in the world** due to the complex and unstable social realities.
 - o Literature is used to **reflect** and **refract** culture.
 - o Ask class what they think reflects our current or past society.
- Literature also allows readers to see **common humanity and foster empathy** into people, and readers bring their kindness and curiosity to understand more about the world through reading. There are several characters to sympathize with throughout.
- The **Handmaid's Coalition** is a manifestation of the power of literature to connect with others. They are a fandom of the world Atwood created, who have

- met to both profess their love for Atwood's novels, LARP in public spaces, and protest for or against a variety of political causes:
- This fandom inspired a natural anti-abortion protest movement that began when a group of "Handmaids," dressed accurately to the cover, attended abortion legislation sessions in Texas in 2016 (this was before the show came out).
 - This is similar to the "Aunt Sam protests" by women's suffragists in 1913, when they wore costumes to promote their cause. Both turned cosplay and live-action role-playing into a political act.
 - Anne Crabtree, who later became a costume designer for the show alongside one *Marvel* movie, was a part of this fandom and attended the anti-abortion protests in her native California.
 - This ultimately proves that **literature has the power to unite people over a cause**. It's a two-way street – there's no simple consumption and voyeurism. The fandom's political involvement builds connections alongside empowering people to be involved in their communities, just because they read a book that spoke to them about influencing the world.
 - Fandoms are a united readership or viewership that often spawn from this mutual interest in not only a literary or visual text but the mutual interest in doing good for the world and attempting to solve important issues. ***The Handmaid's Tale's* significance is made stronger by its fandom because they are creating things and impacting the world based on that empathy.**

Assignment: Response Paper

Discuss the paper and what is required to complete it.

- Must be double-spaced and 2-3 pages.
- Must contain both evidence and analysis.
- Argument and/or idea is very open.
- See the "Assignments" page for an explanation.

Class Activity: Paper Brainstorming

Students pick 1-3 different ideas, arguments, or themes they want to write about for their Response Paper, and write them down somewhere (*laptop/notebook/phone, etc.*). They will later – between the time it's assigned and midnight on the following day – submit it on a Canvas Discussion Board for feedback. This goes until the end of class.

Homework:

- Response Paper due Monday

Assignments

Group Assignment: Character Sketch

Due: In class on Day 3 of the unit.

Points: 5 points possible. **Graded on completion.**

Materials Needed:

- Poster paper
- Markers/pens/Sharpies/colored pencils

Guidelines:

Students will form groups of 4-5 based on a character (who is *not* Offred) that they are interested in analyzing among the following:

- The Commander/Fred
- Serena Joy
- Moira
- Luke
- Aunt Lydia
- Another character – potentially, based on student interest.

They will then do the following things on the poster paper:

- **Draw the character**, with as much detail as possible based on artistic ability, based on specific quotes or descriptions related to their physical appearance. Place the quotes/passages you used (or where to find them) by the drawing.
- **Describe the character's attributes**, citing quotes when possible.
 - o Personality and interests.
 - o Social rank/place in society.
 - o Relationships with other characters.
- **Imagine the novel from your character's point of view, and address the following:**
 - o How would the character's perspective change how we understand and interpret the novel?
 - o Who would be the character's antagonist or anti-hero, and why?
 - o What would be some things we would learn about Gilead's society from this understanding of their perspective?
 - o What would you title the novel instead? Use this as the title for your poster, potentially.

After having some time (30-45 minutes) to create their poster, students will present their character analysis poster to the rest of the class.

Individual Assignment: Response Paper

(this would be a general writing assignment for the class, with a total of 3-4 that would be done at the end of each unit)

Due: The class meeting day after it is assigned.

Points: 10 points possible, based on a rubric.

Description:

Students will think and write critically about a text read in the class, engaging it in a manner that is not only interesting and relevant to the class, but that discerns the text's larger implications. This response paper should focus on *The Handmaid's Tale* and any aspect they find interesting.

Guidelines:

Response Papers are between 2 and 3 pages long, double-spaced papers meant for the student to "respond" to a text and show their understanding. They work on their close reading, literary analysis, and argumentative writing skills in a simple, miniature way.

The paper's prompts are open-ended, simply asking students to **respond to the novel and create their own argument based on something that interested them with the book**. This can take any form they want – either a formal academic essay or a response with textual evidence.

Aside from accomplishing course goals and assessing the stakes of the novels being read, they are also useful for **strengthening critical reading skills** and **practicing writing about literature** in a **low-stakes environment** which helps them succeed.

After the papers are finished, I will provide students with feedback on both their writing and their content in hopes that these may be helpful to them as both a starting point for the final paper/project and as a guide for their general critical reading skills and interest in literature.

Rubric: (general rubric)

Criterion	Possible Points
Introduction: Introduces the texts and main argument, alongside where the paper is going after.	3 points
Content: Body paragraphs combine close reading, summary, and paraphrasing to advance the argument.	3 points
Conclusion: Wraps up the paper by explaining the stakes. Makes the case for why the inquiry matters.	3 points
Conventions: No grammatical errors in the paper. Citations are done in an appropriate format (MLA or Chicago).	1 point