Margaret Atwood The Handmaid’s Tale

**Brief summary:**

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel by Margaret Atwood, which depicts a dystopian world where a theocracy has taken the place of the United States government, and women have lost all of their rights.

**About the author:**

**Margaret Atwood** was born in 1939 in Ottawa, grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec and in Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master’s degree from Radcliffe College.

**About the Book:**

The Handmaid’s Tale was published in 1986. It is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a dystopian, futuristic version of the United States of America after the takeover of a totalitarian regime called the Sons of Jacob. Due to heavy pollution and radiation, fertility issues are common, and most women are unable to conceive. When they do, the infants often die or are malformed. As one of the few fertile women in Gilead, Offred is forced to copulate with a man of high standing in an attempt to propagate the human race.

The book contains two different types of narrative sections:

* Chapters focused in the present, where Offred details the events and daily lives of herself, the people she serves, and her acquaintances.
* “Night” chapters where Offred, left alone to her own thoughts and memories, recalls her capture and conditioning as she was trained to be a Handmaid at the Rachel and Leah Center and happier memories of her life before, when she was free.

**My feeling:**

I find the Handmaid’s Tale Very powerful; it give a good idea to what extent some dystopian regime can go. It is interesting to imagine what could have happened to the narrator at the end of the book when she is taken by the eye.

**Characters**

**Offred**

The narrator and protagonist of The Handmaid’s Tale. Offred belongs to the class of Handmaids (fertile women forced to bear children for elite -barren couples-). Handmaids show which Commander owns them by adopting their Commanders’ names, such as Fred and preceding them with “Of.” Offred remembers her real name but never reveals it. She no longer has family or friends (apart from Moira), though she has flashbacks to a time in which she had a daughter and a husband named Luke. The cruel physical and psychological burdens of her daily life in Gilead torment her and pervade her narrative.

**The Commander**

The Commander is the head of the household where Offred works as a Handmaid. He initiates an unorthodox relationship with Offred, secretly playing Scrabble with her in his study at night. He often seems a decent, well-meaning man, and Offred sometimes finds that she likes him in spite of herself. He almost seems a victim of Gilead, making the best of a society he opposes. However, we learn from various clues and from the epilogue that the Commander was actually involved in designing and establishing Gilead.

**Serena Joy**

The Commander’s Wife, Serena worked in pre-Gilead days as a gospel singer, then as an anti-feminist activist and crusader for “traditional values.” In Gilead, she sits at the top of the female social ladder, yet she is desperately unhappy. Serena’s unhappiness shows that her restrictive, male-dominated society cannot bring happiness even to its most pampered and powerful women. Serena jealously guards her claims to status and behaves cruelly toward the Handmaids in her household.

**Moira**

Offred’s best friend from college, Moira is a lesbian and a staunch feminist; she embodies female resourcefulness and independence. Her defiant nature contrasts starkly with the behaviour of the other women in the novel. Rather than passively accept her fate as a Handmaid, she makes several escape attempts and finally manages to get away from the Red Center. However, she is caught before she can get out of Gilead. Later, Offred encounters Moira working as a prostitute in a club for the Commanders. At the club, Moira seems resigned to her fate, which suggests that a totalitarian society can grind down and crush even the most resourceful and independent people.

**Aunt Lydia**

The Aunts are the class of women assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the beliefs of the new society and make them accept their fates. Aunt Lydia works at the “Red Center,” the re‑education center where Offred and other women go for instruction before becoming Handmaids. Although she appears only in Offred’s flashbacks, Aunt Lydia, and her instructions haunt Offred in her daily life. Aunt Lydia’s slogans and maxims drum the ideology of the new society into heads of the women, until even those like Offred, women who do not truly believe in the ideology, hear Gilead’s words echoing in their heads.

**Nick**

Nick is a Guardian, a low-level officer of Gilead assigned to the Commander’s home, where he works as a gardener and chauffeur. He and Offred have a sexual chemistry that they get to satisfy when Serena Joy orchestrates an encounter between them in an effort to get Offred pregnant. After sleeping together once, they begin a covert sexual affair. Nick is not just a Guardian; he may work either as a member of the Eyes, Gilead’s secret police, or as a member of the underground Mayday resistance, or both. At the end of the novel, Nick orchestrates Offred’s escape from the Commander’s home, but we do not know whether he puts her into the hands of the Eyes or the resistance.

**Ofglen**

Another Handmaid who is Offred’s shopping partner and a member of the subversive “Mayday” underground. At the end of the novel, Ofglen is found out, and she hangs herself rather than face torture and reveal the names of her co-conspirators.

**Cora**

Cora works as a servant in the Commander’s household. She belongs to the class of Marthas, infertile women who do not qualify for the high status of Wives and so work in domestic roles. Cora seems more content with her role than her fellow Martha, Rita. She hopes that Offred will be able to conceive, because then she will have a hand in raising a child.

**Janine**

Offred knows Janine from their time at the Red Center. After Janine becomes a Handmaid, she takes the name Ofwarren. She has a baby, which makes her the envy of all the other Handmaids in the area, but the baby later turns out to be deformed—an “Unbaby”—and there are rumors that her doctor fathered the child. Janine is a conformist, always ready to go along with what Gilead demands of her, and so she endears herself to the Aunts and to all authority figures. Offred holds Janine in contempt for taking the easy way out.

**Luke**

In the days before Gilead, Luke had an affair with Offred while he was married to another woman, then got a divorce and became Offred’s husband. When Gilead comes to power, he attempts to escape to Canada with Offred and their daughter, but they are captured. He is separated from Offred, and the couple never see one another again. The kind of love they shared is prohibited in Gilead, and Offred’s memories of Luke contrast with the regimented, passionless state of male-female relations in the new society.

**Offred’s mother**

Offred remembers her mother in flashbacks to her pre-Gilead world—she was a single parent and a feminist activist. One day during her education at the Red Center, Offred sees a video of her mother as a young woman, yelling and carrying a banner in an anti-rape march called Take Back the Night. She embodies everything the architects of Gilead want to stamp out.

**Aunt Elizabeth**

Aunt Elizabeth is one of the Aunts at the Red Center. Moira attacks her and steals her Aunt’s uniform during her escape from the Red Center.

**Rita**

A Martha, or domestic servant, in the Commander’s household. She seems less content with her lot than Cora, the other Martha working there.

**Professor Pieixoto**

The guest speaker at the symposium that takes place in the epilogue to The Handmaid’s Tale. He and another academic, working at a university in the year 2195, transcribed Offred’s recorded narrative; his lecture details the historical significance of the story that we have just read.

**About the author: \/**

**About the book: \/**

**Brief Summary: \/**

**Main Characters: \/**

**My feelings: \/**