

A large group of women, dressed in red dresses and white head coverings, are performing a synchronized dance in a courtyard. They are arranged in a circular formation, with some kneeling and others standing, all moving in a coordinated fashion. The background shows a stone building and a green car parked on the street.

The Handmaid's Tale

Course: ECS 188 - Professor Mohammad Sadoghi, PhD

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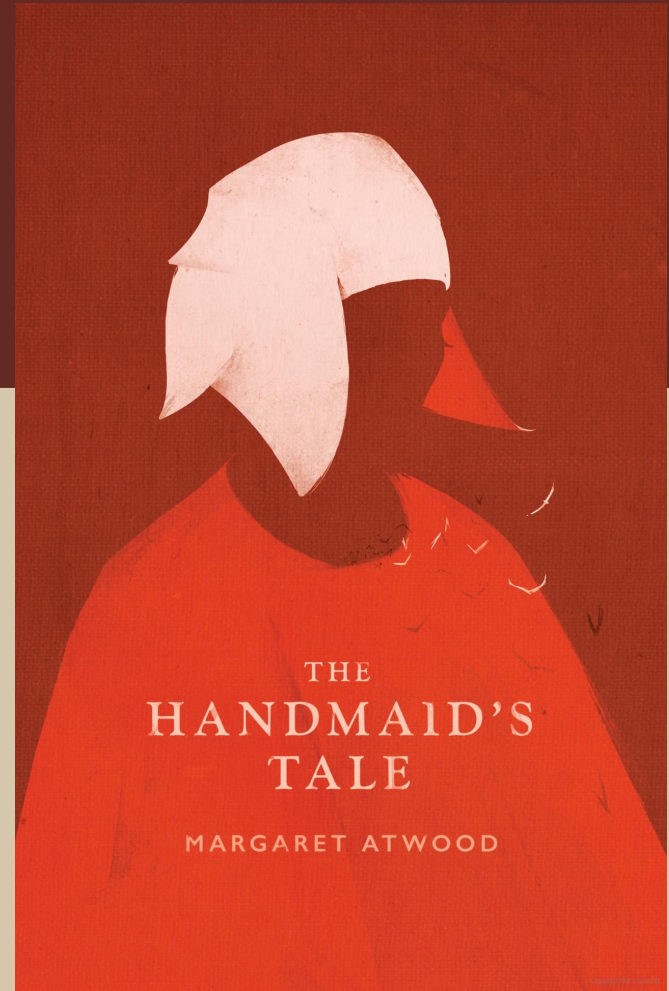
Summary to The Handmaid's Tale

Overview

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood in 1985 is a dystopian novel set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian society that has overthrown the U.S. government.

Facing a fertility crisis, Gilead enforces different roles for women, stripping them of rights and reducing many to “Handmaids” whose only function is to bear children for elite families.

The story follows Offred, a Handmaid struggling to survive under the constant threat of surveillance, punishment, and loss of identity, while quietly resisting the oppressive system.



Major Themes/Highlights

- Government control and loss of personal freedom
- Surveillance and mistrust
- Gender oppression and reproductive rights
- Resistance, hope, and the fight for identity

Raising some ethical questions:

- Is it ethical to control people through technology?
- Can the "greater good" justify oppression?
- Where is the line between protection and exploitation



Kantian Ethics (Deontology)

Maxim: It is acceptable to use mass surveillance and restrictive control over individuals to maintain control and regime stability.

- Mass surveillance and restrictions treat individuals as mere means to Gilead's goals (obedience, regime stability), not as ends in themselves.
- Direct violation of the principle of human dignity. Kant insists on respecting each person's freedom and moral agency.
- Citizens cannot freely express themselves or pursue moral choices under constant threat.

Universalizability test:

The maxim cannot be consistently used as a universal law since universal mass surveillance would destroy autonomy and freedom.

We must treat individuals as **ends in themselves**, respecting their dignity and rationality. Mass surveillance is unethical because it uses people merely as **means to political control**.

Technology and Surveillance in the US

Gilead's Surveillance State

- In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead uses advanced surveillance—spies (“Eyes”), informants, and constant monitoring—to control citizens and suppress dissent.

Modern Parallels

- Today's technology enables widespread surveillance in both obvious and subtle ways.

Palantir

Develops data analysis tools used by governments and police to track individuals, raising privacy and ethical concerns.

Siri and Smart Devices

Voice assistants and smartphones can collect and store personal conversations and behaviors, sometimes without explicit consent.

Edward Snowden

Whistleblower who revealed the NSA's mass surveillance programs, exposing how governments can monitor citizens on a global scale.

Utilitarianism in Gilead

- Gilead's Justification: Leaders claim actions are for the greater good, restoring birthrates and societal stability.
- Sacrifice of Individuals: Personal freedoms and rights are suppressed to achieve collective goals.
- Moral Dilemma: Does achieving societal "good" justify the means employed?
- Critique: Utilitarianism in Gilead overlooks individual rights and ethical boundaries.



Egoism in Gilead



- Gilead's Justification: Leaders pursue policies that reinforce their power, status to control under the guise of religious order.
- Sacrifice of Individuals: The women are forced into rigid roles that serve the interests of the ruling elite.
- Moral Dilemma: Can a society be ethical if it's structured primarily around the self-interest of those in power?
- Critique: Egoism in Gilead leads to systemic oppression, the morality is distorted to justify domination rather than justice or well-being.

Rejected

Hedonism

- Gilead forbids joy, freedom, or sensuality. Even reading is banned.
- Offred's only pleasures are her memories, language, or her relationship with Nick
- She can't pursue long-term happiness or fulfillment. Her life is about survival, not flourishing.
- The Commander does indulge in a selfish, egoistic version of hedonism.

Contractualism

- No one consents to Gilead's rules. The state is imposed, not agreed upon.
- Handmaids are especially vulnerable — forcibly separated from their families, renamed, and assigned to Commanders.

Feminist Ethics

Ethical Implications

Highlights the dangers of ignoring women's lived experiences.

Serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of systemic oppression.

Gilead's Structure

Systematically erases women's autonomy and voices.

Imposes rigid roles:
Wives, Marthas,
Handmaids, Aunts

Internalized Patriarchy

Female enforcers like Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy perpetuate oppression.

Demonstrates how women can be complicit in patriarchal systems.

The Handmaid's Tale Takeaways

- The Handmaid's Tale is a cautionary tale about power, tech, and ethics
- Suppressing autonomy and ignoring consent leads to harm and injustice
- Multiple ethical theories (Kantian, Utilitarian, Feminist, Virtue, etc.) all critique Gilead's practices
- Contemporary technology requires vigilance: Who benefits, who is harmed, who decides?
- Ethical tech must center on respect, dignity, consent, and justice for all

THANK YOU!
