

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO MARGARET ATWOOD'S



THE HANDMAID'S
TALE

“Completely brilliant. It’s like being in a room with marvellous tutors. You can’t really afford to be without them, and they are a joy to read.”

JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Isaacs

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Introduction

“The Handmaid’s Tale,” Margaret Atwood wrote in The Guardian in 2012, summing up its extraordinarily long life,

has not been out of print since it was first published, back in 1985. It has sold millions of copies worldwide and has appeared in a bewildering number of translations and editions. It has become a sort of tag for those writing about shifts towards policies aimed at controlling women, and especially women’s bodies and reproductive functions: “Like something out of *The Handmaid’s Tale*” and “Here comes *The Handmaid’s Tale*” have become familiar phrases.

It has been expelled from high school... People – not only women – have sent me photographs of their bodies with phrases from *The Handmaid’s Tale* tattooed on them... The book has had several dramatic incarnations, a film (with screenplay by Harold Pinter and direction by Volker Schlöndorff) and an opera (by Poul Ruders) among them. Revellers dress up as Handmaids on Halloween and also for protest marches – these two uses of its costumes mirroring its doubleness. Is it entertainment or dire political prophecy? Can it be both? I did not anticipate any of this when I was writing the book.

It seems that every few months an article appears

somewhere about the novel's continued relevance. In March 2015, for example, an article appeared in *Bustle*, which argued that it's "more important now than ever". In April 2016, the *Evening Standard* said that it was "just as vital today" and would "stay with you for the rest of your life". In August 2016, another article appeared in the *Guardian*, labelling it "a book to give you hope". Atwood herself, speaking in April 2016, when the cast was announced for its forthcoming HBO adaptation, claimed: "It's more relevant now than when it was written."

So what is it about *The Handmaid's Tale* that makes it so enduring? What makes it so vital? And what relevance does it have, more than 30 years after it was published?

A summary of the plot

I Night

An unnamed female narrator remembers being held prisoner in what was once a school gymnasium with a number of other girls, kept in check by women called "Aunts", armed with cattle prods.

II Shopping

She describes her present situation: an empty room in which she's held prisoner by a military dictatorship, Gilead, founded on theocratic

principles. The house she's in belongs to a man called "the Commander". She's let out only to go shopping, with a "double" called "Ofglen", a woman just like her. They wear floor-length red dresses, white headscarves with "wings" that mean they can't see anything except what's directly in front of them, nor can they be seen. As she leaves the house, she passes a "Guardian", a sort of caretaker, who winks at her: a forbidden gesture. They come across another woman dressed like them, heavily pregnant, and many others dressed the same way cooing over her. On their way home they pass the city wall, where they see the bodies of three men hanging from hooks; they've been executed for carrying out abortions.

III Night

In bed that night, the narrator, Offred, remembers happy times with her mother and her best friend, Moira, neither of whom she's seen for many years.

IV Waiting room

Offred is surprised to find the Commander standing outside her room one day. When he sees her, he nods hesitantly, and disappears. It's illegal for him to be there; what is he trying to say?

Lying on her bed, she remembers how, on first arrival, she had tried to find out more about the woman who was in the room before her, but is

refused any information.

She recalls a visit to the doctor the day before: a check-up, to see if she's pregnant. During the procedure, the doctor offered to impregnate her. Offred is a "Handmaid", we learn: a member of a slave class of women whose sole purpose is to bear children for her Commander and his wife, who can't. If she fails beyond a certain time, it's implied, she will be killed.

Offred is prepared by the household's maids ("Marthas") for a "Ceremony" that will take place later that night.

V Nap

Waiting for the Ceremony, Offred lies on her bed and remembers being with Moira at the "Rachel and Leah Centre" – the re-education centre she described at the start of the novel. They were not permitted to talk there, but managed snatched conversations when they sat in adjacent toilet cubicles. She then returns to a traumatic memory: she's running away with her husband, Luke, and her daughter; they are being chased. Luke is shot at, and her daughter taken away. She hasn't seen them since.

VI Household

The members of the household assemble in the living room: Offred, the Marthas, the Commander, the Commander's Wife and Nick, the Guardian.

The Commander unlocks a box, takes out a Bible, reads from it and they pray in silence. As they pray, Offred remembers Moira's attempted escape from the Rachel and Leah Centre, and the punishment that left her feet looking like lungs.

Then the Ceremony, in the Commander's bedroom: the Commander's Wife lies at the head of a four poster bed; Offred lies nested in her lap. On top of her, the Commander is all but raping Offred.

During the night, Offred creeps around the house. In the living room, she sees Nick. It's forbidden for both of them to be up at this time; it's forbidden for them to be alone together. But Nick has a message: the Commander wants to see her, alone, in his office the following day. Again, this is strictly forbidden.

VII Night

Offred lies in bed wondering what happened to Luke: is he alive or dead, imprisoned or free?

VIII Birth day

During breakfast one morning, Offred hears a siren. It is a Birthmobile: a van sent to drive all the local Handmaids to the house where one of them is in labour. They watch Janine, now Ofwarren, giving birth. It's another grotesque ceremony: the Handmaids sit on the floor, chanting, while this Commander's Wife sits on a stool above Janine, legs

wrapped around her, as if it's she who's giving birth.

Offred, "tired" of telling this story, retreats again to her memories and starts to tell another one: the story of Moira's successful escape from the Rachel and Leah Centre. (She kidnapped an Aunt, changed into her clothes, walked straight past the security guards, and hasn't been heard of since.)

That night, Offred meets the Commander in secret. She's terrified about what will happen, but all he wants is to play Scrabble. When she leaves he asks her to kiss him.

IX Night

In her room, Offred reflects on the strange episode and, climbing into her cupboard, erupts in a fit of hysterical laughter.

X Soul scrolls

Offred and the Commander's relationship intensifies. He starts giving her presents: contraband items, such as magazines from "the time before"; moisturiser for her dry skin.

Out shopping one day, Ofglen says something punishable by death: she questions the existence of God. Offred is thrilled. Ofglen reveals that she is a dissident, part of an underground resistance network called Mayday.

We learn how Gilead came into being. A group of ultra-conservative American activists stormed

Congress, killed everyone, blamed it on Islamic terrorists, and founded their own state. Women lost their jobs, their money. Fundamentalist Christian women became Commanders' Wives; fertile women became Handmaids; working class women became "Econowives"; all other women (and gay men) were sent to the "Colonies," to clear up nuclear waste.

Offred learns what happened to her predecessor: she also had an affair with the Commander, which was discovered. Knowing that she would be arrested, tortured, and killed as a result, she hanged herself in Offred's room.

XI Night

A Romeo and Juliet moment with Nick outside her window; they don't speak, but exchange meaningful glances. The sexual tension is building.

XII Jezebel's

The Commander's Wife is frustrated that Offred isn't pregnant and suggests, heretically, that it might be the Commander who's infertile, not her. She suggests Offred sleep with Nick in secret. In return, she will show Offred a photo of her daughter. She makes good on her word.

The local women attend a "Prayvagazna" – a mass devotional event, in this case to celebrate a number of arranged marriages. There, Offred sees

Janine looking thin and pale; Ofglen tells her that the baby she gave birth to was disabled – an “Unbaby” – and Janine has been reassigned. Ofglen knows that Offred has been seeing the Commander privately; she asks her to do some digging.

When they next meet, the Commander produces an old burlesque costume made of feathers and sequins. He makes her wear it and smuggles her into a debauched, elite club: a brothel. There, Offred finds Moira dressed as a Playboy Bunny. They retreat to the toilet to talk. Moira tells her about the aftermath of the escape – her attempt to get across the border to Canada on the “Underground Femaleroad” – and that Offred’s mother was sent to the Colonies as an Unwoman.

The Commander takes Offred to a room where he tries to sleep with her; she can’t do it.

XIII Night

At the Commander’s Wife’s behest, Offred and Nick sleep together.

XIV Salvaging

Offred and Nick begin a passionate affair; she loses all interest in trying to escape or aid Mayday.

The women are called to the steps of the old university (Harvard) for an event called a “salvaging”. Three women are hanged, their crimes never revealed. Then a man is brought out. They’re

told he’s a convicted rapist. What follows is a “Participation”: an execution in which all the Handmaids can participate. They’re allowed to do anything they like to him. Ofglen beats him violently until he loses consciousness. Furious, Offred turns on her. He’s not a rapist, Ofglen replies, he’s “one of ours”, a political dissident, a member of Mayday. She knocked him out so that he doesn’t have to experience what happens afterwards.

Later that day, Offred waits for Ofglen to go shopping. When Ofglen arrives, it’s someone else. Ofglen, she discovers, hanged herself after the Salvaging. She saw the secret police, the “Eyes”, coming for her, and escaped.

When she gets home, the Commander’s Wife greets her at the door. She has found out about her and the Commander. Offred goes to her room, her fate uncertain.

XV Night

Nick arrives at Offred’s door, with him two Eyes. They will take her, torture her, execute her. But Nick tells her that he works for Mayday; they’ve come to rescue her. They escort her off the premises.

Is *The Handmaid's Tale* a feminist novel?

It's possible to work out what *The Handmaid's Tale* is about before you even get to the first chapter (and without reading the blurb or seeing the cover): there are enough clues woven into what publishers call the “front matter”^{*} for a reader (a particularly clever reader, admittedly) to get a fairly clear picture of the book.

First, look at the copyright page.^{**} Ordinarily, you wouldn't think to, but you'd miss two significant dedications: “For Mary Webster and Perry Miller”, it says at the top. This might not seem unusual: writers are always dedicating books to loved ones. But if you happened to know a bit about early American history, then it might. Mary Webster was a Puritan settler who was hanged as a witch in the 1680s, and Perry Miller was an American intellectual historian who specialised in the early settlers, taught at Harvard and died in 1963.

When asked about the dedication, Atwood said Webster was an ancestor.

She was accused of witchcraft. She was hauled off to Boston – this was just before the Salem witch

* The title page, author's bio, list of other works by the same author, etc.

** The page on which all the legal information about the current edition is printed.

trials^{*} – put on trial and exonerated. She went back to her hometown. The townspeople were not pleased with the verdict, they lynched her anyway... they strung her up more or less just like a flag and let her dangle around and when they came to cut down the body in the morning, she was still alive... She lived another fourteen years, the man doing the accusation, however, died.

It's not the most revealing of answers. Twenty years after publishing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood published a poem about Webster called “Half-Hanged Mary” (1995), which might help us flesh out her significance.

Written from Webster's point of view, the poem describes the night of the hanging. “I was hanged,” Webster says,

*for living alone
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin
tattered skirts, few buttons,
a weedy farm in my own name,
and a surefire cure for warts;*

Oh yes, and breasts,

* A case of mass hysteria in Boston, 1692-1693: the people of Salem were so certain that the devil was in their midst that they hanged 20 innocent people as witches. The whole town turned brutally against anyone who showed the slightest sign of abnormality. It's often thought that their indiscriminating cruelty was the result of the extreme repressiveness of the Puritan way of life, which prohibited even dancing.

*and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
Whenever there's talk of demons
these come in handy.*

In this account the townspeople turned against Webster because of her independence (“living alone”), the appearance of her body (“blue eyes”, “sunburned skin”), the shabbiness of her clothes (“tattered skirts, few buttons”), her ownership of property (“a weedy farm in my own name”), her enterprise (“a surefire cure for warts”) and, most importantly, her sex (the “breasts” and “sweet pear hidden in my body”). She was demonised, attacked, tortured and nearly murdered by her community for the sin of being an independent woman who didn’t conform to the repressive expectations of appearance and behaviour that were placed on women in 17th century New England.

But what makes her remarkable, for Atwood, is her survival; the poem is, above all, a survival narrative. In her book, *Scarlet Letters*, the academic Lee Briscoe Thompson credits this “bizarre incident in her family history” with giving Atwood “a predisposition to see women as survivors, a consistent characteristic of her protagonists”.

From this first dedication, then, you might infer that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a novel about a victim of some kind of misogynistic municipal repression, whose significance is that she survives. And you’d be right: the narrator, Offred, is a prisoner in a military

* The uterus is pear-shaped.

dictatorship whose existence is ruled by her “sweet pear” – that is, her ability to bear children. And, as we’ll see, it’s her survival that interests Atwood more than her oppression.

You might also infer that the novel will fit into the tradition of feminism which sees women as victims, historically oppressed, seeks liberation and demands equality. And you would be largely right.

It’s certainly true that in Gilead women are a kind of slave class – worse, even: “I am a national resource,” says Offred (75). For Gilead, the Handmaids are “containers, it’s only the insides of [their] bodies that are important” (107); they are “two-legged wombs” (146). And they get the blame when things go wrong: “There’s no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially... that’s the law” (70-71).

Femininity means, for Gilead, to borrow terms from the 19th century feminist Marion Reid, “self-renunciation” and “self-extinction”. “Any symptom of independent thought,” Reid wrote in *A Plea for*



HISTORICAL NOTES ON *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

The perspective abruptly switches. It’s the year 2195 and we’re at an academic

conference devoted to Gilead studies. A man called Professor Pieixoto tells us that he pieced together the text we’ve just read from fragments. His society seems to be a happy one: his senior colleagues are women. They seem to be free. But he makes a few too many misogynistic jokes. ■