Many readers are surprised to hear Atwood's novel labeled science fiction, but it belongs squarely in the long tradition of near-future dystopias which has made up a large part of SF since the early50s. SF need not involve technological innovation: it has been a long-standing principle that social change can provide the basis for SF just as well as technical change. *The Handmaid's Tale* is partly an extrapolation of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* attempting to imagine what kind of values might evolve if environmental pollution rendered most of the human race sterile. It is also the product of debates within the feminist movement in the 70s and early 80s. Atwood has been very much a part of that movement, but she has never been a mere mouthpiece for any group, always insisting on her individual perspectives. The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of the religious right, the election of Ronald Reagan, and many sorts of backlash (mostly hugely misinformed) against the women's movement led writers like Atwood to fear that the antifeminist tide could not only prevent further gains for women, but turn back the clock. Dystopias are a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities. They are rarely intended as realistic predictions of a probable future, and it is pointless to criticize them on the grounds of implausibility. Atwood here examines some of the traditional attitudes that are embedded in the thinking of the religious right and which she finds particularly threatening.

But another social controversy also underlies this novel. During the early 80s a debate raged (and continues to rage, on a lower level) about feminist attitudes toward sexuality and pornography in particular. Outspoken feminists have taken all kinds of positions: that all erotica depicting women as sexual objects is demeaning, that pornography was bad though erotica can be good, that although most pornography is demeaning the protection of civil liberties is a greater good which requires the toleration of freedom for pornographers, however distasteful, even that such a thing as feminist pornography can and should be created.

The sub-theme of this tangled debate which seems to have particularly interested and alarmed Atwood is the tendency of some feminist anti-porn groups to ally themselves with religious anti-porn zealots who oppose the feminists on almost every other issue. The language of "protection of women" could slip from a demand for more freedom into a retreat from freedom, to a kind of neo-Victorianism. After all, it was the need to protect "good" women from sex that justified all manner of repression in the 19th century, including confining them to the home, barring them from participating in the arts, and voting. Contemporary Islamic women sometimes argue that assuming the veil and traditional all-enveloping clothing is aimed at dealing with sexual harassment and sexual objectification. The language is feminist, but the result can be deeply patriarchal, as in this novel.

Without some sense of the varying agendas of mid-20th-century feminists and the debates among those agendas this novel will not make much sense. Women who participated in the movement from the late sixties and early seventies responded to this novel strongly, often finding it extremely alarming. Younger women lacking the same background often found it baffling. Ask yourself as you read not whether events such as it depict s are likely to take place, but whether the attitudes and values it conveys are present in today's society.

Atwood's strong point is satire, often hilarious, often very pointed. Humor is in short supply in this novel, but it is a satire nonetheless. Atwood's love for language play (apparent in the anagram of her name she uses for her private business "O. W. Toad") is a major feature of the protagonist of this novel. Her jokes are dark and bitter, but they are pervasive.

There are numerous biblical references in the following notes. You should provide yourself with a Bible, preferably a King James Version, which is what Atwood uses most of the time. Or use a great searchable [Web Bible](http://tuna.uchicago.edu/homes/BIBLES.html).

**Epigraphs**

Genesis 30:1-3 is one of several passages that make clear that in patriarchal Hebrew times it was perfectly legitimate for a man to have sex and even beget children by his servants (slaves), particularly if his wife was infertile. It is unknown how widespread was the custom described here, of having the infertile wife embrace the fertile maidservant as she gave birth to symbolize that the baby is legally hers. Atwood extrapolates outrageously from this point, as is typical of dystopian writers: it is highly unlikely that the puritanical religious right would ever adopt the sexual practices depicted in this novel; but she is trying to argue that patriarchal traditions which value women only as fertility objects can be as demeaning as modern customs which value them as sex objects. She makes clear that this is a *reductio ad absurdum,* a theoretical exercise designed to stimulate thought about social issues rather than a realistic portrait of a probable future by comparing herself to Jonathan Swift, who in *A Modest Proposal* highlighted the hard-heartedness of the English in allowing the Irish masses to starve by satirically proposing that they should be encouraged to eat their own children. It is not so obvious what the application of the third epigraph is to this novel. It seems to say that no one needs to forbid what is undesirable. Can you interpret it any further?

**Section I: Night**

**Chapter 1**

Read the first sentence. What can you tell about the period just from this sentence? People generally sleep in gymnasiums only in emergencies, after disasters. But this "had once" been a gymnasium, which implies that it was converted to its present use a long time ago. Some major change has taken place, probably not for the good. A "palimpsest" was created when a medieval scribe tried to scrape clean a parchment in order to reuse it. Sometimes the scraping process was not complete enough to obliterate all traces of the original text, which could be read faintly underneath the new one. What is suggested by the fact that the immediate supervisors of the girls are women but these women are not allowed guns? What is suggested by the fact that the girls have to read lips to learn each others' names?

**Section II Shopping**

**Chapter 2**

The setting has shifted. It is now much later. What is suggested by the fact that the narrator observes "they've removed anything you could tie a rope to?" Note the play on the proverb "Waste not, want not." What is implied by the sentence, "Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep; or no sleep"? "Ladies in reduced circumstances" is a 19th-century expression usually applied to impoverished widows. How does the narrator pun on it? In the gospels, Martha was one of two sisters. She devoted herself to housework while her sister Mary sat and listened to Jesus. The irony here is that Jesus praised Mary, not Martha; but the new patriarchy has chosen Martha as the ideal. What is suggested by the existence of "Colonies" where "Unwomen" live? What are the crimes the Martha's gossip about in their "private conversations"?

**Chapter 3**

What evidence is there on the second page of this chapter that the revolution which inaugurated this bizarre society is relatively recent? What evidence to reinforce that idea was presented in the opening chapter? Note that Serena Joy bears more than a passing resemblance to Tammy Fay Bakker.

**Chapter 4**

The automobile names are all biblical. Can you guess from the context what an "Eye" is? "Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns:" see Mark 4:1-9. We will learn eventually that the narrator's name is "Offred." Her partner is named "Ofglen." How do the names of Handmaids seem to be formed? How are we informed that this society is under attack? The place name "Gilead" features as a sort of ideal land in the Bible, in Numbers 36. It is mentioned many other times in the Bible as one of the twelve traditional divisions of the land of the Hebrews. But Atwood was probably thinking of Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" This verse is famous because of its use in the old Black spiritual: "There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul." In this Christian context, Gilead becomes the source of healing: Jesus Christ. One can imagine a fundamentalist group calling itself Gilead because of these associations; but the original context in Jeremiah (the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians) causes considerable irony. It may even be that Atwood was thinking of that verse when the narrator is not allowed to have hand lotion ("balm"). Baptists have a long-standing tradition of local control and individualism. Can you guess at the function of the black-painted vans? What power does Offred have over men, powerless as she is? How traditional is this kind of power? Has the elimination of pornography stopped women from being regarded as sex objects?

**Chapter 5**

What is Gilead's attitude toward higher education? Why is it ominous that the number of widows has diminished? Examine the passage that begins "Women were not protected then." This is the heart of the ideology that underlies the founding of Gilead. What is its essential rationale? Analyze the narrator's attitude toward the freedoms of which she speaks. Analyze the play on words in "Habits are hard to break." The clothing store name "Lilies" is derived from Matthew 6:28. "A land flowing with milk and honey" is a common biblical phrase, often used to describe Canaan, the "Promised Land." What is the women's reaction to the pregnant woman? "All flesh" originally means "all of humanity" (see Isaiah 40:5) but here is given a more literal sense as the name for butcher shops. How are the Japanese women different from the women of Gilead? Is Atwood idealizing them? What do you think the point of the contrast is?

**Chapter 6**

What is the function of the Wall? Why have the doctors been executed? The rule that the evidence of one single woman is not adequate is based on Islamic tradition. What is significant about the shift to the present tense in this passage, "Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't"?

**Section III: Night**

**Chapter 7**

To what time can Offred travel in her imagination that can be called "good"? The narrator's pun on "date rape" depends on the fact that "rapé " means "grated" or "shredded" in French; a date is a fruit, of course. Be careful not to leap to the conclusion that Atwood is mocking the concept of date rape; her attitude is far more complex than that. But why is this reference especially appropriate to the present context? What was the narrator's reaction as a little girl to her mother's participation in the burning of pornographic magazines? What relevance does this memory have to her present situation? The next passage is too fragmented to make much sense now, though more context will be provided later. What can you guess about its meaning now? Stories are rarely told in the present tense, as this one is. If a narrator speaks in the past tense, we can be fairly confident that she knows the end of her own story, and that she has survived to tell it. Note how much more open-ended and suspenseful Offred's narrative is.

**Section IV: Waiting Room**

**Chapter 8**

What is "Gender Treachery?" The passage on the etymology of the term "Mayday" is correct. During World War II, the opening rhythmic pattern from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was interpreted as the Morse code for "v" (dot dot dot dash), and used to symbolize "victory". What do we learn about Offred's family in this passage? If a miscarried fetus may or may not be an "Unbaby" what would an "Unbaby" seem to be? "All flesh is grass" (Isaiah 40:6) is a quotation from the Bible meaning that all humans are mortal. Why does Aunt Lydia use instead the saying "all flesh is weak?" Does she really mean *all* humans? How about women? How is Offred's silent correction a reply to her comment? Serena Joy's speechmaking on behalf of housewifery is a clear satire on the career of Phyllis Shlafley, lawyer, right-wing activist, and cofounder of the Eagle Forum, who put most of her energy for many years into leading the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment while admonishing other women to stay home and raise their children. *The Shape of Things to Come* is the title of one of H. G. Well's novels, alluded to ironically at the end of the paragraph beginning "She's looking at the tulips." Why does Offred envy Rita her access to the knife? Why is she startled at the end of the chapter when she realizes she has called the room "mine"?

**Chapter 9**

What feelings does she have as she looks back on the early days of her affair with Luke? *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* will be explained in Chapter 29. Note that a posting lasts two years. This will be important later.

**Chapter 10**

Why are the words to the hymn *Amazing Grace* now considered subversive? Who did Aunt Lydia blame for the "things" that used to happen to women? What sorts of memories does she keep returning to in this chapter?

**Chapter 11**

What do we learn about the Handmaid system during the scene at the doctor's office? "Give me children, or else I die." (Genesis 30:1). Deuteronomy 17:6 requires that for a couple to be stoned to death on account of adultery there has to be two witnesses to the act.

**Chapter 12**

To what were women vulnerable in bathrooms "before they got all the bugs ironed out"? For Paul on hair, see 1 Corinthians 11:6-15. What does this mean: "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely"? The old sexist society was said to reduce women to mere physical objects. Has this changed? What does Offred suggest by saying of the attempted kidnapping of her daughter "I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time"? "Inheriting the Earth": see Matthew 5.5. If Offred was parted from her daughter when she was five and she is eight now, the separation must have happened three years ago. Since at eighteen months the pattern of change was not clear to Offred, the revolution which established Gilead must have been quite recent. It is difficult to believe that such a thorough transformation of society in such a short time, but it is important to remember that this is not a realistic novel, but a satirical dystopia. What associations are aroused by the tattoo on Offred's ankle? She is remembering scenes from the end of World War II, in which women who dated the Nazi occ upiers had their heads shaved in public. What two meanings of the word "compose" is she playing with in the last paragraph?

**Section V: Nap**

**Chapter 13**

What do you think about her comments on boredom as erotic? Offred lets herself go back in time to when she was in training with Moira. Does anyone blame women for being raped today? How has Offred's attitude toward her body changed? What do her dreams about her husband and daughter have in common? What does she mean by saying at the end of the chapter "Of all the dreams this is the worst"?

**Section VI: Household**

**Chapter 14**

The mention of a Montreal satellite station reminds us that Atwood is a Canadian, but Montreal is evidently outside of the territory controlled by Gilead. The endless war, always on the brink of victory, is very reminiscent of the war depicted in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four.* What other locales seem to be on the edge of Gilead? You should be able to gradually construct a rough map of its territory. "The Children of Ham" is a designation for African-Americans. We are finally told that the narrator is called "Offred," though it isn't her real name. Why are we never told her real name? Why was the family warned not to look too happy when they are trying to escape Gilead?

**Chapter 15**

Why is the Bible kept locked up? In what era were Bibles routinely sequestered from the general population? Note the series of unflattering phallic images Offred runs over. What is the point of the joke in saying "One false move and I'm dead." The passages the Commander is reading from the Bible are Genesis 8:17 and 30:1-8. The section beginning "For lunch" uses Matthew 5:3-10 (emended) to switch scenes back in time. When we return to the scene in the sitting room, the Commander has just read Genesis 30:18. The scene ends with Second Chronicles 16:9. Why is this verse chosen as the ritual ending of all Bible readings?

**Chapter 16**

Although this chapter depicts what is clearly the most sensational aspect of Gilead society, it is important not to use it to condemn the novel as "unrealistic." Refer back to the note on the third epigraph of the novel. Even the perfume has a biblical name, "Lily of the Valley," from The Song of Songs 2:1. Why is women's pleasure in sex no longer valued?

**Chapter 17**

What is her reaction to Nick's coming to fetch her?

**Section VII: Night**

**Chapter 18**

What hope keeps Offred alive?

**Section VIII: Birth Day**

**Chapter 19**

In thinking about the missing cushions, Offred is referring to 1 Corinthians 13: 13. What are the odds that any baby will be seriously deformed? What has caused this situation? The name of Jezebel, the wicked wife of King Ahab, is sometimes used as a label for any shamelessly wicked woman (see 1 Kings 21:1-29). The film shown the women about the former way of giving birth follows the same patt ern as other themes in this novel: ambivalence about feminist reforms. Some women have argued strongly for natural childbirth, but others see this as a step backward. And many positions in between are advocated. Atwood points out that it was modern medicin e that first made pain relief possible during childbirth, though it was at first denounced by preachers who cited the passage quoted at the end of this paragraph, from Genesis 3:16. Anesthetics used during childbirth can be harmful to the infant, but they can also be very beneficial for the mother. This example illustrates well Atwood's general approach in this novel: certain radical feminist positions and their opposite conservative positions are both depicted as too extreme. Reality is more complex, she seems to be saying. "Agent Orange" was the defoliant widely used on the forests of Vietnam and which was later blamed for numerous biological problems among soldiers.

**Chapter 20**

Birthing stools were once in widespread use and have been reintroduced by women who argue that giving birth in a sitting position is both more natural and more comfortable. Do you know the real source of the quotation, "From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs"? (It has been slightly but significantly altered.) How valid is the use of sadistic porn films by the Aunts to argue against the old society? "Take Back the Night" originated as the slogan of Women Against Pornography, but has developed in more recent years into an anti-rape slogan. What themes of the women's movement is Atwood blending together here? What do you think her attitude toward them is? It may be difficult to imagine now, but in some feminist circles in the seventies a woman who chose to bear a child could come under considerable pressure from other feminists, like Offred's mother. What are the main tensions between Offred and her mother? These distinctions are part of the crux of the novel, which is about a society which reacted to the older feminists by repression and which the younger women did not sufficiently combat. Why did she rebel against her mother as a young woman? How does she feel about her mother now?

**Chapter 21**

What do we learn in this chapter about how an "Unwoman" is defined? The reference to a "women's culture" at the end of the chapter refers to certain kinds of feminists who have argued that women possess superior values and could build a superior society. What is Offred's attitude toward this idea?

**Chapter 22**

In what way is Moira a "loose woman"?

**Chapter 23**

How does Offr ed try to defend herself against her terror when she first enters the study? Playing scrabble seems like an absurdly trivial form of transgression; why is it significant in this setting? Why does she lie about her reaction when the Commander asks her to ki ss him?

**Section IX**

**Chapter 24**

How does Offred interpret Aunt Lydia's teachings about men? What do you think of this idea? What does the story about the death camp commander's mistress convey? In ancient medicine, hysteria was a disease of women, caused by unnatural movements of the womb. How does Offred describe the sound of her beating heart?

**Section X: Soul Scrolls**

**Chapter 25**

Why does Offred covet Serena Joy's shears? What do these occasional dark comments tell us about the state of her mind underneath her usual bitterly sarcastic narrative? Women's fashion magazines such as the Commander shows Offred were once the target of fierce criticism from feminists. What does she say these magazines offered? How do the pictures of the women impress her? "My wife doesn't understand me" is such an old cliché as uttered by men trying to start an affair that it has become a joke.

**Chapter 26**

A British expression says that a pregnant woman has a "bun in the oven." How have her feelings changed toward the Commander? How have his feelings changed toward her?

**Chapter 27**

Loaves and Fishes refers to a miracle story told in the Gospels (see the account in Mark 6:34-44). Note how the memory of the ice cream store leads Offred to thoughts of her daughter. The Soul Scroll machines are most obviously like Tibetan prayer wheels, which are turned to activate the prayers inside them; but they are also reminiscent to the old Catholic practice of paying priests to say prayers for the repose of the dead. What do Ofglen and Offred see immediately after they have revealed their true views to each other?

**Chapter 28**

Why did Moira criticize Offred for "stealing" Luke and how did Offred defend herself? "Discothèques" nightclubs with recorded rather than live music originated in France. The name was soon abbreviated to "disco." The main feature of the book of Job is intense suffering. Why would a totalitarian dictatorship prefer computer banking to paper money? Note the statement by the newsstand clerk that sex-oriented enterprises can never be gotten rid of entirely. She turns out to be right later. The law prohibiting the ownership of property by women reinstates the law as it stood in the 19th century and earlier. Many of the extreme aspects of Giladean culture have actually existed in the past. In the passage which begins "Remembering this, I remember also my mother," note how anti-porn and abortion riots are blended together, though her mother must have been against porn and for abortion. Her opponents in the abortion demonstrations must have been her allies in the anti-porn demonstrations. Why did Offred find her mother embarrassing when she was an adolescent? How has her attitude changed now? Why was Offred afraid to ask Luke how he really felt about her losing her job?

**Chapter 29**

"Pen Is Envy" is of course a pun on Freud's "penis envy," the notion that women who want to be like men are neurotic. When the Commander says of the previous Handmaid who killed herself "Serena found out," what does this mean, and what is Offred's reaction?

**Section XI: Night**

**Chapter 30**

There is a traditional Jewish prayer for men which thanks God for not having made them women. This prayer is satirized and parodied in this chapter.

**Section XII: Jezebel's**

**Chapter 31**

What has changed about the holidays the Fourth of July and Labor Day? Why would Offred like to be able to have a fight with Luke? Taliths are the prayer shawls worn by Jews. "Magen Davids" are Stars of David, symbols of Judaism. How do you imagine Serena Joy's offer of the picture affects Offred? Explain.

**Chapter 32**

"You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" is a paraphrase of Napoleon justifying the carnage he caused in attempting to build his empire. When a character in fiction uses it, it almost always indicates the speaker's ruthlessness.

**Chapter 34**

Arranged marriages seem hopelessly exotic to many Americans, but in Western civilization they were the rule rather than the exception until a couple of centuries ago. Evaluate and respond to the arguments that the Commander at the Prayvaganza makes against the old dating and marriage system. The "quoted" passages which begin "I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel" are from 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

**Chapter 35**

React to Offred's comments on love. In the next to the last paragraph, what does Offred mean when she says she has been "erased"?

**Chapter 37**

What is the Commander's rationale for the existence of places like Jezebel's? How does he misunderstand when Offred asks him "Who are these people?"

**Chapter 38**

"The Underground Femaleroad" is of course a pun on the old "underground railroad" along which escaped slaves were smuggled to freedom. What kind of work do the women in the Colonies do? What does Moira say the advantages are in working at Jezebel's over being a Handmaid?

**Section XIII: Night**

**Chapter 40**

Why does Offred feel she has to make up stories about what happened between herself and Nick?

**Section XIV: Salvaging**

**Chapter 41**

Why does she say on the bottom of page. 268 "I told you it was bad"?

**Chapter 42**

Why are the crimes not described at "Salvagings"?

**Chapter 43**

Why does Ofglen attack the "rapist" so fiercely?

**Chapter 44**

Why does Offred tell her new companion that she met the former Ofglen in May?

**Chapter 45**

"She has died that I may live" is of course a parody of "He died that we may live," a central Christian doctrine referring to Christ's crucifixion as a source of salvation for believers.

**Section XV: Night**

**Chapter 46**

How does Nick reassure Offred when the black van comes? Note the offhanded, ambiguous, but emotionally loaded nature of the last line of Offred's narrative, typical of her.

**Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale**

This is the real end of the story, of course, told as a parody of a scholarly symposium. Note the date, two centuries from now. The title which Offred's narrative has been given resembles those of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales:* "The Knight's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Most SF dystopias end with a heroic conspiracy or uprising leading to the destruction of the evil government which has oppressed everyone. The jarring shift to pretentious scholarly jargon, while amusing to scholars, may be off-putting for most readers; but Atwood is trying to avoid fatalism and sensationalism at the same time. She is also parodying the ponderous, self-conscious attempts of scholars to be humorous. There is a long tradition of "nowhere" names in utopian fiction. "Utopia" means "nowhere" and Samuel Butler called his utopia "Erewhon." The Chair comes from the University of "deny" which is in the country of "none of it." But Gord Turner of Selkirk College comments further on these place names:

The Northwest Territories in Canada as an area has been associated with two large native groups--the Dene (read "Denay") in the Western Arctic and the Inuit in the Eastern Arctic. In fact, the Northwest Territories through referendum (already held) will be divided into two massive land areas known as Denendeh and Nunavut. "Nunavut" means "Our Land" to the Inuit.

So it's quite likely that Atwood meant the University of Denay to be coloured by the Dene and its massive land claims in the 1980s and the huge area to the East of the Mackenzie River Valley known as "Nunavut." That she changed the spelling of "Nunavut" to "Nunavit" is also interesting as "Nuna" still means "land" and "vit" may mean "our land."

Anthropology has traditionally been carried out by whites on minorities. Here an evidently Native American scholar has as her specialty studying whites, a deliberately ironic twist. Other names suggest that this conference is in fact dominated by Native Americans. It is difficult to see how Krishna (the erotic lover in Hindu mythology) and Kali (the also erotic avenging demon slaying goddess) have to do with Gileadean religion, though that may be Atwood's point. Scholars tend to read what they already know into w hat they are less familiar with. Certainly plenty of scholars have analyzed Krishna as a Christ figure. The reference to the "Warsaw Tactic" is more grim: the Nazis walled up the Warsaw Jews in the ghetto and proceeded to starve most of them to death. The reference to Iran is of course the most pointed, because of that nation's conservative Islamic revolution which involved strenuous demodernizing and drastic restrictions on the freedom of women. The Iranian example is one of the main inspirations of this novel. Given what Professor Pieixoto has to say about the discovery of "The Handmaid's Tale," how drastically would America seem to have changed between the end of the last chapter and now? Anthropologists are famous for their refusal to judge the societies they study. What do you think is Atwood's reaction to this striving for objectivity in the case of Gilead? How do you feel about it? William Wordsworth famously defined poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Note the allusion. Many details about the Gilead society's policies are revealed here. Atwood takes the opportunity to point to current tendencies which could lead in the direction depicted in the novel. The speaker's jibe at Offred's education is not a comment on women, but the smugly superior observation of a South American mocking the inadequacies of North America, clearly much fallen from its previous dominance. Note the Canadian references in this section. "Particicution" would seem to be a scholarly term formed out of "participant execution" to label what Gilead called "salvaging." [Gord Turner](mailto:gturner@Selkirk.bc.ca) points out a parallel term promoted by the Canadian government: "participaction" for "participant action." For the scapegoat, see Leviticus 16:10. Prof. Pieixoto's talk is of a type familiar to literary historians: the attempt to connect a the author of a text with some historical person known from other records, particularly in Medieval studies. But for us, the identification is irrelevant, it is the knowledge that Offred survived and the rebellion eventually triumphed that matters. The final call for questions is traditional, of course, but also serves here as an invitation to further discussion of the issues Atwood has raised.