**Study Guide/Questions for Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale:***

**Chapters 1-3**

1. Discuss how Atwood uses imagery to describe the setting of the gym in chapter one. How does she use irony to reveal how what has happened to old American cultural traditions? How does Atwood use selection of detail to draw readers into the story?
2. Can we infer who the “Angels” are? What do they suggest to you about the girls’ and country’s situation? Why is Offred’s reference to “fantasy” in the midst of restrictions significant?
3. Through the first few chapters, what does the significance or symbolism of the color red seem to be?
4. The house is “Late Victorian,” “a family house.” How does Atwood use this description to ironically foreshadow Offred’s position within the story as part of a family? Consider how this description compares and/or contrasts with Offred’s view of herself in the convex mirror.
5. By Chapter 3, Offred has been in the household for five weeks. Compare her encounters with Rita, Cora, and the Commander’s Wife, and describe Offred’s relationship with the Commander’s Wife.

**Chapters 4-6**

1. Who are the Guardians? Explain their place in society, and also explain what power Offred has over them.
2. Near the beginning of chapter 4, Aunt Lydia talks about the girls’ training being like seed scattered on different types of soil. What is this an allusion to? What does the twisted nature of this allusion tell us about Gilead’s religious beliefs?
3. **Shepard Only:** Aunt Lydia says, “In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.” What does this mean? Do we have too many freedoms in our society? Would you rather have less freedom and more protection?
4. What purposes are achieved through the account of the Japanese tourists?
5. What did we learn in chapter 6 about the doctors who have been killed recently? What was their crime? When did they commit this crime? What does their retroactive punishment say about the “justice” system of Gilead?
6. Offred says, “What I feel is that I must not feel…I need to be very clear in my own mind…” Why is this a necessity for survival in Gilead?

**Chapters 7-11**

1. What important information can we infer about Offred’s past from chapter 7? Why is writing “forbidden” in this society? And what is the significance of “you” at the end of the chapter?
2. In Chapter 8, find the paragraph beginning with “In the driveway, Nick is polishing the Whirlwind again.” Let’s read it together and talk about the fertility diction related to the tulips and chalices; note that this comes immediately after the funeral procession for the miscarried child.
3. At the beginning of Chapter 9, we learn that the Christian standard “Amazing Grace” has been outlawed. What does this tell us about the brand of Christianity that controls Gilead? And why don’t they want people to be able to read materials?
4. Offred spends much of this section giving us snapshots of her old life. She says, “We lived, as usual, by ignoring” (56). How does this relate to the changes that led to her current life in Gilead?
5. At the end of this chapter, what is the choice that terrifies Offred?

**Chapters 12-15**

1. What do we learn about Offred’s child? And how many years have elapsed since they were separated?
2. Explain the last two lines of chapter 12.
3. If applied to humanity, what does Offred’s story about the pigeons near the beginning of chapter 13 tell us about human nature?
4. Offred calls her body a kind of trap that “determines [her] so completely,” or “a swamp, a fenland…treacherous ground.” However, before Gilead her body was “single, solid, one with me,” and “an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will.” How is bodily integrity, the sense of possessing one’s own body, important to women?
5. Constantly throughout this narrative, and especially in chapter 13, the narrator moves seamlessly between memories, dreams, and the story of her life with the Commander. Why might this be the case? What effect does this choice have on readers?
6. In the two long paragraphs before the end of chapter 13, Atwood uses lots of commas. What effect does this syntactical choice have on readers?
7. **Shepard Only:** Why do you think the Government wants copies of the Bibles locked up, if it’s supposedly their guiding document? You can get a hint from a later passage in this chapter where Offred suspects the Aunts of adding to and taking away from the Beatitudes.
8. Why is Moira’s escape attempted juxtaposed with the Ceremony at the end of chapter 15?

**Chapters 16-19**

1. How does Offred feel about her past life with Luke (chapter 18)? What does she believe and hope for in the present?
2. Chapter 19 shows us some of the reasons childbearing has become more difficult. What are some of these reasons?
3. There are several divisions, or rankings, of women in Gilead – Marthas, Handmaids, Commanders’ Wives, Econowives, and Unwomen – each associated with its own style of dress or color. What are the different roles played by each type, and how do these rankings comment on the value of women in Gileadean culture?

**Chapters 20-23**

1. During the birthing scene, Offred remembers her own mother, who was a feminist activist in the time before, participating in “Take Back the Night” and pro-choice rallies. She once tells Offred, “You’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me.” Are politically disengaged young women like Offred at least partially responsible for their own oppression in Gilead?
2. Chapter 21, the birthing scene, depicts the women chanting and repeating words. What effect does the diction in this scene create?
3. Despite her absence, why is Moira still so important to Offred?
4. What is the significance of Offred’s meditation on the concept of forgiveness at the beginning of chapter 23?
5. What function does reconstruction serve in this chapter? Look carefully at the beginning and also at the final five paragraphs.
6. How have Offred’s circumstances changed after playing with the Commander?

**Chapters 24-27**

1. What sensations and memories does nature evoke in Offred several paragraphs after the three stars that separate the parts of this chapter? Start that “The willow...”
2. How do Offred’s Scrabble sessions with the Commander change the dynamic of their relationship? Look at their conversations, but also at the next Ceremony (chapter 26).
3. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids, “For the generations that come after…it will be so much better…But we can’t be greedy pigs and demand too much before it’s ready, now can we?” What is the significance of this commentary?
4. How does Offred’s situation change during her conversation with Ofglen at Soul Scrolls? What sort of development in her character do we see?

**Chapters 28-30**

1. What does Atwood’s characterization of Offred’s life as a friend and worker in the time before tell you about her?
2. **Shepard Only:** How does the government takeover happen? Any echoes with contemporary history, either from the 1980s when Atwood wrote the novel or from more recent political events?
3. **Shepard Only:** In the fallout of the government’s fall, what warning signs should’ve been clear to the citizens?
4. **Shepard Only:** What methods of control does the government exert on its citizens?
5. Why does Offred say that she and her friends felt as though they “deserved” to lose their jobs?
6. Offred notes, after losing her job and savings, “I felt love going forward without me.” How does this loss change her relationship with Luke? Especially consider the last line of chapter 28
7. What are the meanings of “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*”?
8. Why does Atwood include the story about the cat?
9. Describe the tone of Offred’s prayer at the end of chapter 30. How does Atwood use tone to illuminate the story’s themes?

**Chapters 31-35**

1. Comment on “The danger is grayout.” What does this mean?
2. What is the new agreement between Offred and Serena Joy? Does this agreement surprise you?
3. During a Scrabble session, the Commander attempts to justify Gilead, saying “The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore…there was nothing for them to do with women.” What does he mean by this? Does this resonate with your understanding of men in contemporary American culture – “inability to feel,” “turning off” on sex and marriage?
4. What does the “Janine episode” tell you about the women’s culture in Gilead?
5. Consider the Commander’s rationale for Gilead in chapter 34. Look at the paragraph beginning with, “We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away.” To what extent is his argument persuasive?
6. Aunt Lydia says, “Love is not the point,” siding with the Commander that falling in love “isn’t worth it.” Do you agree? Are false notions of romantic love, or the overvaluation of “love,” at least in part responsible for the creation of Gilead?
7. What do you think of Offred’s meditation on love and “working out,” the “revisionist” notion of relationships in chapter 35? What did she mean, and is it true?
8. What important thing do we learn at the end of chapter 35? What do you think this fact/”fact” means for Offred? Will it spur her to any action?

**Chapters 36-39**

1. What does the club Jezebel’s tell you about Gileadean culture? Which types of women from the time before wind up “permanently” at Jezebel’s, and what do their costumes recall?
2. What does Offred learn from Moira’s story? How has Moira changed because of her experiences?
3. Moira talks about the members of the Underground Femaleroad who help women out for “religious reasons.” How does this factor into your understanding of the book’s stance toward religion?
4. What do we learn about the Colonies from Moira’s account toward the end of chapter 38? What can we infer about the world as a whole, based on this information?
5. What has changed in Moira since the days before Gilead, and why is this change so devastating for Offred? If Moira is no longer what Offred wants her to be (see the last few lines of chapter 38), will this spur Offred to become what Moira always represented for her?

**Chapters 40-46**

1. Offred tells different versions of her meeting and having sex with Nick – why?
2. Chapter 41, near the beginning, develops our sense of Offred’s intended audience. Who could it be?
3. The beginning of chapter 41 also develops our understanding of Offred’s reliability as a narrator. How does Atwood pull this off?
4. Comment on the significance of Offred’s remarks after their tryst: “I would like to be without shame. I would like to be shameless. I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was.”
5. What is the nature of Offred’s relationship with Nick? Constructive or self-destructive? A repetition of her past mistakes, a glimpse into a different future, or just “treading water” and making life bearable? How does this change her relationship with Ofglen and the resistance?
6. Of the Salvaging, Offred says, “I don’t want to be telling this story.” What happens during the Salvaging, and why is this story so difficult for her to tell?
7. What is “Particicution,” and what is its function in Gileadean culture?
8. What do we learn about the nature of the male victim’s crime? And what can we infer from this event?
9. What happens to Ofglen, and what do you think of Offred’s response?
10. Comment on Offred’s remark after Serena Joy discovers her relationship with the Commander: “I should have paid attention.”
11. What happens to Offred when she gets into the van? What do you make of this ending to her story?
12. How did the new Ofglen foreshadow this ending?
13. How does this ending develop themes in the story?

**“Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*”**

1. What is the significance of Atwood’s ending *The Handmaid’s Tale* with Professor Pieixoto’s “Historical Notes”?
2. What sort of reader is the professor?
3. What do we learn about Gilead through this talk? What caused its downfall? How did people in other countries view Gilead?
4. What is the later time like?
5. Do the notes offer you any suggestions for how to read (or, conversely, how not to read) the novel?