



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Sexual Oppression and Religious Extremism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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I teach twelfth grade English at Hill Regional Career High School in New Haven, a magnet school for students interested in business, medicine, and science. There are three sections of English for seniors, and I have the upper two tracks, Honors and Advanced Placement. The Advanced Placement course is designed to assist students in preparing for the A.P. English Literature and Composition exam in May. Students who do well on this exam may be given college credit for their participation, so its rigor requires them to develop into careful and critical readers and precise and thoughtful writers. The Honors course is designed for students who are prepared and ready for a challenging curriculum of reading and writing, but it is more flexible in regard to writing assignments than the Advanced Placement course, which is primarily expository essays and research papers; the Honors English course features more creative writing and artistic expression. Both courses consist primarily of the traditional canon of British and world literature, though there are some modern and American selections.

Our block schedule allows for in-depth coverage of works of literature and for good use of a writing workshop. Our classes meet every other day with periods of eighty-two minutes each, so little time is wasted on trivialities like attendance, announcements, etc. My class numbers are relatively small, with my largest class at twenty-four members and my smallest at nine. With two periods of Advanced Placement and three periods of Honors English, I have approximately eighty students. Students are motivated and bright, but some bring deficits with them in the areas of grammar and mechanics, and they do not always demonstrate an ability to read analytically and write with style and grace. These are skills I try to teach in whole-class mini-lessons and through individual conferences. Close readings of texts may occur as part of class activity or as homework, and writing assignments are generally done at home and in class, with time allotted for a writing workshop and writing conferences with me. An average class, then, would include a discussion of a reading assignment, a close examination of areas of ambiguity or difficulty in the text, a mini-lesson on a skill area such as grammar or punctuation, and a writing workshop in which students write and revise as I walk around, conferring with all students in turn and each again as needed.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a fabulous book for both Advanced Placement English and Honors English seniors. The plot concerns an overthrow of a contemporary U.S. government by religious fanatics who seize fertile women in an effort to control this valuable resource since pollution and nuclear disaster rendered many women -- and men--infertile. The narrator is an unremarkable woman before the religious Republic of Gilead

comes into control, and it is her pragmatic response to the turmoil that makes the book such an interesting read. As one of the few women with viable ovaries, Offred is required to serve as surrogate mother for a high-status military officer and his wife. If she is impregnated while lying between the knees of the commander's wife, her child will be theirs. Once breastfeeding is completed, her connection to the infant will be over, and she will travel to another house to become impregnated again. Offred's failure to become pregnant by her commander inspires her to have an affair with a member of the household staff (at first arranged by the commander's wife, then continued illicitly), become pregnant by him, and then escape as the fighting for supremacy in the Republic of Gilead continues. A post-script to the novel indicates that the power of the Republic was short-lived, and that it led to a decline in North American power and culture in general. Other countries, less susceptible to sexual oppression and religious intolerance, less spoiled by nuclear disaster and ecological foolishness, have claimed the role as world leaders while the United States foundered.

The challenge while teaching this novel is finding ways for the students to see its relevance. My goal, then, is to explore historical evidence that explains male dominance as a recurring political, social, biological, and religious phenomenon. My students have experienced discrimination, but their experience has generally been in a society where discrimination, while common, is also against the law in most meaningful ways. They have not had to surrender their possessions to a spouse or religion, nor do they risk great harm when they do not dress in accordance with guidelines. Earlier this year at Career, for example, Erik wore a shirt that said "Heineken: Been There, Drank That," risking being asked to turn it inside out or wear something over it. He did not risk being beaten to death, like a woman in Afghanistan who showed a bit of ankle as she crossed the street. The Republic of Gilead comes to power by swinging our cultural pendulum from "anything goes" back to an ultra-orthodox interpretation of the Bible, and the new order requires a number of strictly enforced dress codes, travel limitations, and curfews. My students are all interested and affected by these issues, and I think they would like to explore ways in which a social contract is forged successfully.

The book itself takes a passage from the Bible for its central idea: Genesis 30:1-3, which suggests that important men may have children with their servants if their wives cannot, that a handmaid's duty may be also to provide offspring for the powerful couple. It is imperative that my students read Genesis to understand the whole tale of Rachel and Jacob. Rather than a barren woman desperately in need to be mother, Rachel is more of a competitor with her sister Leah, also wife to the same husband, in a race to bear sons. The husband, Jacob, loves Rachel more than Leah, yet copulates and impregnates both sisters and their handmaids. We don't see Leah worrying that Jacob loves her less, or Rachel triumphant because Jacob loves her more: only the number of births matter in determining the worth -- and happiness -- of the wives. Progeny must not be a reflection of love between two people, then: it can be seen as a competition between mothers, with each birth adding to the value of the wife, even if the birth is from her handmaid, and not from the wife herself. It will be interesting for them to evaluate the Biblical passage in order to determine various ways it might be interpreted. Are we to believe that this passage promotes this behavior, discourages this behavior, or merely tells the tale? Where is the moral to be found?

Further readings will explore evidence of the same from other countries and eras: If the moral is about providing heirs to a powerful man, then to what extent are "illegitimate" children of the elite likely to be tolerated or even encouraged, and under what circumstances? Students may be interested in researching the Scottish prefix "Fitz" as an indicator of illegitimacy, and of the tendency of some Asian cultures to name boys upon birth but refer to females as "girl" until they become "wife of ___" or "mother of ___." Students may be surprised to learn that many of the practices of the Republic of Gilead in Atwood's novel have roots in ancient and modern cultures.

There are several ways to distinguish the status of a woman in the Republic of Gilead. Western cultures tend to name children after their fathers, but this patrilineal system is discarded by the Republic of Gilead, at least as far as the Handmaids are concerned. Handmaids are given the prefix Of- to the name of the Commander they serve. Since Offred's Commander's name is Fred, hers becomes Offred, at least while she is living with him and his wife. When and if she leaves to serve another couple, her name will change again. It is forbidden to tell others your name from "the time before," and in this way women are even more isolated and unlikely to be rescued from their roles as baby factories. As everyone is a potential spy, it is a real risk to discuss anything other than positive news about the Republic's Wars or the joy that being a Handmaid brings. There are other systems in place to separate women from forming friendships and supportive communities as well.

In Gilead status and function are clearly communicated by clothing and color. Women belong to a class system in Atwood's novel that links their status to that of their husbands and childbearing ability. The wives wear blue, have the highest status, and maintain their first names, though they undoubtedly adopt their husband's patronymic after marriage. The Aunts are brown-garbed Uncle Toms, oppressing their sisters to appease the men that don't hold them equal. Aunts are the manipulative mouthpieces of the commanders, always trying to believe that "freedom from" (sex? choice? independence?) is much better than "freedom to." The Marthas are servants who wear dull green, and the Unwomen of the Colonies, infertile or old women who clean up toxic waste and battlefields, wear gray. The Handmaids wear red, symbolic of blood and birth and sex and life; depending on the eye and leanings of the beholder. Econowives wear stripes of all colors, for they must perform all of the duties assigned to females, cleaning, giving birth, and being homemakers as well, though there is a promise that Econowives won't have to exist much longer, after the dust from the takeover settles. Daughters wear white until their marriages, which take place shortly after menstruation, since their work will be to repopulate the land with as many children as they can have before their childbearing years end. With a population crisis on hand the girls are not allowed to wait for emotional maturity: bearing children and caring for their husbands, who will be promoted if a wife or Handmaid bears a child.

Atwood herself has indicated that part of the book was inspired by a trip to Afghanistan in the late 1970s. She and her husband were impressed by the beauty of the country and by the silence of its women, who rarely spoke or looked directly at them. This predates the more current history of the Taliban, of course, but the ideas were taking root even as they visited historical sites. Human rights groups have kept a close watch on the gradual removal of freedoms for citizens, particularly female citizens, of Afghanistan, and have addressed the issues at length. Our students, who have been taught a great deal of fiction but have not read non-fiction nearly as much, should have the opportunity to read the stories of women in oppressed countries. I have included a reading list that they can draw from, though undoubtedly it is but a small sample of the wealth of material available.

Because I want them to respond aesthetically and intellectually to the book, I have designed a creative project as well as a "Supplemental Sources Project" that will require them to read another fiction or nonfiction book and articles in addition to *The Handmaid's Tale*. I think that if students were to read just one of the stories in Nayra Atiya's *Khul Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories*, for example, their eyes would be opened to the challenges women living right now face in their cultures. The stories about how dowry affects families are very interesting, and it isn't such a jump, after all, to connect these concepts with some of our more cherished American traditions related to weddings so elaborate that the parents of the bride are nearly crippled by debt. Certainly the impulse to shame females out of their sexuality by the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale* will seem mild compared to the routine clitoridectomies (removal of the clitoris and sometimes partial removal or suturing of the labia) done in some parts of Africa and the MiddleEast. This view into other cultures will allow them to glimpse life through unfamiliar eyes, and will allow them to see their own lives with greater clarity.

I will present the project questions to my students, and they will all read *The Handmaid's Tale* and excerpts from the other sources that are appropriate and interesting to them. I'll read through a few articles with them, perhaps a chapter from *Khul Khaal* or something like it, and then I'll do book talks about a few of the books on my list. The list itself isn't meant to be limiting; the point is to showcase the discussion and connection process more than provide details about a book or limit their choices. I think that there are books that complement one another, but that the most critical part of doing the comparison is being able to discover the comparisons that aren't so obvious. That part is difficult for my students, as they don't always make thematic connections as quickly as I'd like. The students will have an opportunity to find their own choices and to confer with me about how a book they find interesting might fit our supplemental sources project. I've tried to choose books that are fairly diverse and that would be appropriate for an A.P. Literature course. After giving an overview of the areas of investigation, I will ask them to choose one of the following areas to investigate further, relating each to sexual (or gender) oppression or elitism:

Politics: Offred seems to have a superficial understanding of politics. She seems to be a character that is more concerned with her life and the life of her family rather than larger political structures. An investigation of how women involve themselves in politics, and why, may prove a fertile research ground for papers.

Public assistance: Explore similarities and differences in public programs for men and women. This is a very controversial issue currently, with money designated to help encourage recipients of public assistance to marry. What guidelines are used to determine public assistance? Do women and men need to meet the same expectations to receive help? How do public assistance guidelines affect the ways family members live? Why are policies regarding the marital status of welfare recipients so controversial?

Public education: Scholarship funds are of great interest to my students, and many of the girls have felt that there are not enough opportunities for female athletes. Students may also be interested in passages from *THT* that describe Offred's memories of school and the ways that boys and girls were drawn -- or driven -- to differing academic and extracurricular programs.

Marriage and family: How spouses are chosen and the degree to which families participate would be an interesting area to research. I have already mentioned traditions for wedding expenses, of course, but there are other areas to consider, particularly inheritance issues and support (or the lack of support) following the dissolution of a marriage. What happens when a marriage ends in divorce and the parents remarry? Does the commitment to the children remain on the same level by both parents?

Biology: An examination of behavior through comparisons to animal groups and behaviors may provide another way to think about behaviors that we may take for granted. The power struggles and community life of chimpanzees and bonobos, for example, may suggest that nature provides a wide variety of gender roles for males and females, and that organizational structures may indeed be varied.

Religious organizations and influence: Offred is aware of major denominations, but provides little explanation about how a war between Christian sects may have been sparked. Additionally, she does not have the understanding of the Bible to challenge the interpretations of the Republic of Gilead, even though she recognizes that there are parts that have been changed or left out. It would be interesting for students to study the amount of female participation in religions, and then again what kind of participation. Do females have supportive or decision-making roles? Are males and females given the same moral instruction? Does this vary with race and socioeconomic

status, and why might it do so?

Historical precedents: Students who read carefully will realize that the Republic of Gilead “relocates” Jews (though one report states that they are dumped at sea) and rounds up the “Children of Ham” (African Americans) for removal to the Colonies. “Gender Treachery” (homosexuality) is a hanging offense. “Ethnic cleansing” may sound cleaner than genocide, but it’s the same thing, and there is plenty of it to research. Students may choose to examine any of the wars that have destroyed populations over ethnicity and religion. Nazi Germany may be an obvious place to start, but there are others: the 30 Year’s War, the Croats and the Serbs , Ireland’s ongoing struggles between the Catholics and Protestants, Bosnia’s disastrous religious warfare, the Turks and the Armenians, and any of a number of Reformations and Crusades. “Comfort Women” enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army in order to provide sexual outlets for soldiers have been telling their tales publicly to a world audience.

Environmental concerns: Offred recognizes the problem of having only 10% of females being fertile. How does over- or under-population affect a community? Students in our science magnet school may be interested in investigating how long environmental effects linger -- one generation, two generations, ten generations? The Republic of Gilead faced numerous environmental disasters, including nuclear contamination. We have become increasingly aware of the potential for nuclear disaster, bioterrorism, chemical warfare, environmental terrorism, etc. An investigation into the effects of atomic warfare on Hiroshima and Nagasaki may be of interest to my students, or perhaps the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on its local community and the entire planet.

Agricultural concerns: Offred hints that use of pesticides and farming methods may have played roles in poisoning the environment. Students may wish to investigate how farmers farm and what guidelines exist to protect consumers. We’ve also heard a lot about genetic engineering for agriculture, and they may wish to investigate the risks and benefits of it.

Other questions they would like to pursue.

The Story of Rachel: Genesis 29:1 - 31:17

(chart available in print form)

The Handmaid's Tale Project Ideas

As Offred, write a chapter that wasn't found by the scholars in the historical notes. You may explain any loose plot ends that you wish, but make sure that your ideas are firmly grounded in the writing of Atwood. Make sure that your developments are logical, yet creative and enlightening.

Develop a soundtrack for a movie version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This soundtrack should have at least 7 songs that are relevant to plot, characters, themes, etc. You must include a transcript of lyrics for each song, a paragraph connecting each song with the book, a CD cover design, and a CD or tape with at least one of the songs that you would be willing to present in class.

Write a journal that may have been kept by another character, such as Serena Joy, Ofglen, Ofwarren (Janine), the Commander, Nick, or Moira. Make certain that the development of the character you choose is firmly grounded in the writing of Atwood. The journal entries should enlighten the reader as to a different perspective of the same characters and circumstances, but may also include different (yet logical) plot elements and may also take place in a different time. The journal should not be an unedited ramble: try to find the "voice" of the character and to sound authentic as you develop ideas.

Write a series of newspaper articles, magazine articles, or letters that describe the time period around the takeover by the Republic of Gilead. What would the tone of those articles have been in the beginning? Would it have changed later? This is an opportunity for you to consider the roles of bias and coercion of the media. If you choose to write a series of letters, let your readers see how the writers would have responded to events as they unfolded. Let your ideas be reflected in your writing, and write an introduction to the articles or letters that explains your strategy for writing them.

The Handmaid's Tale Project Rubric

(chart available in print form)

The Handmaid's Tale Supplemental Sources Project

Your task is to allow your curiosity to be piqued by Atwood's tale of ethnic violence and gender oppression. You will be writing a paper comparing *The Handmaid's Tale* with fiction or nonfiction book of similar literary merit, and you will use supplemental academic sources to connect literary themes with historical facts or sociological trends. You will want to begin by selecting an idea or question:

What effects have political structures had on women?

How "equal" are women to men in our country, in other countries, eras, etc.?

How are power and resources shared among ethnic and religious groups?

What are the consequences of motherhood? Of fatherhood?

What are our norms regarding marriage, and why do these change?

Within religions, are expectations the same for members of both genders? If there are different expectations, what are the reasons for them?

What else?

Required Materials

- 1) You must select another book to read with *The Handmaid's Tale* . This novel or nonfiction book should connect with one of the themes in *THT* , such as sexism, religious intolerance, racism, etc.
- 2) You must select supplemental sources for your projects. Consider using a variety of sources, including academic books, articles from journals and magazines, speeches, essays, and position papers from particular groups.

Organization

Introduction -- includes thesis statement, mentions both novels and suggests the use of supplemental sources. One paragraph.

Discussion of thesis as it applies to *The Handmaid's Tale* . Four to six paragraphs.

Discussion of thesis as it applies to second nonfiction book. Four to six paragraphs.

Discussion of supplemental sources from history, other countries, sociology, etc. Four to eight paragraphs

Conclusion -- One paragraph

Bibliography. One page

Appendices. Photocopied texts too lengthy to be quoted within the paper, relevant diagrams, drawings, or photographs.

The Handmaid's Tale Supplemental Sources:

Fiction and Nonfiction

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart* : This fiction novel tells the story of Okonkwo, an African who must make his own way in the world without relying on family. He has multiple wives and they must find ways to live peacefully together. Changing social norms and multiple wives may be of interest to students.

Atiya, Nayra Khul Khall: *Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* . These autobiographies are modern, and the simplicity and honesty with which they are told is quite effective. You may be appalled by the harshness of life for many Egyptian women, yet their spirits are very strong.

Buck, Pearl S. *The Good Earth* . There is plenty to think about in terms of the way women are treated, particularly in the face of sweeping social changes. The book has a lot to suggest about wealth and privilege, which are important in *The Handmaid's Tale* .

Golden, Arthur. *Memoirs of a Geisha* . Students will be interested in the life of a woman trained to entertain and to be an ornament. Offred makes the point of saying that Handmaids are not to be confused with geisha, and Golden's book tells the story of a geisha whose life may be compared to Offred's.

Hardy, Thomas *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* . I'd like to re-read this one, just for the simple pleasure of it as well as to make connections between this and *The Handmaid's Tale* . It's been awhile since I've read *Tess* , but I think we can compare the Commander's preachy hypocrisy and sexual indulgence to the seduction of Tess by rascally Alec d'Urberville. Both provide a contrast to the self-denial and pious religious devotion of Angel, Tess's husband.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* . Students will be able to discuss male oppression and female rebellion in both books. Additionally, part of Janie's story takes place in an all-black community, connecting the idea of racial segregation in the Republic of Gilead.

Lawrence, D.H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* . I think the issue of female sexuality --and the attempted oppression of it -- may provide some room for comparison, in addition to the the environmental/industrial issues.

Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here* . This book suggests a willingness by an uninformed public to support a fascist government. The consequences may be worse than they had bargained for, which is also true in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Lidz, Theodore, and Ruth W. Lidz. *Oedipus in the Stone Age: A Psychoanalytic Study of Masculination in Papua New Guinea* . This is

an interesting read, partly because the Papua have some very interesting initiation ceremonies into adulthood. The connections made may be more about the relationship of young men to old, and how older men try to increase power by denying the young. The Commanders severely limit the freedoms and privilege of subordinate males in *The Handmaid's Tale* .

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes*. Students who would like to think about an Econowife's life may be interested in reading about Angela's. She is too often at the mercy of her alcoholic husband's disease, and holds little power to improve her own life or the lives of her children.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* . This book is packed full of ideas that connect to just about anything, but one idea to toss up against *The Handmaid's Tale* would be the way men treat women they own. While Sethe is openly called a slave, Offred is not, though her the element of choice provided to her is minimal. The rights and parentage of children is another issue that may be explored as well.

Mosher, Steven W. *A Mother's Ordeal: China's One-Child Policy* . This book chronicles the tribulations of a mother trying to raise her family during Mao Zedong's efforts to create the New China. The adjustments citizens have to make are similar to those in the Republic of Gilead, plus there is an interesting passage that discusses why girl babies are thought to be inferior to boy babies, and not even worth naming, according to one grandmother.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *We Were the Mulvaney's* . Students who are interested in the effect of a daughter's chastity on a modern family will be interested to read this book, where the rape of a daughter results in her receiving little comfort and in the rest of the family falling apart.

Spence, Jonathan. *The Death of Woman Wang* . It's about government, the role of women, marriage and how families lived, so comparisons may be made to the new society that the Republic of Gilead is attempting to build, which has a number of things in common with Woman Wang's culture.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own* . Readers who would like a stream-of-consciousness essay on the rights and roles of women will find fertile ground in this book, with particular passages being very interesting to compare to *The Handmaid's Tale* .

Supplemental Sources

"Amnesty International's Report of Women in Afghanistan." ASA 11/13/99 www.amnesty.ca/library/1999/asa1111.htm. Students who would like to do a bit more research about women in Afghanistan would be very interested in this. It is quite readable and apt to provide some connections.

Forsyth, Adrian, and Bleck, Linda. *A Natural History of Sex: The Ecology and Evolution of Mating Behavior* . The Commander claims that Nature requires men to be unfaithful husbands and to prefer women who are deferential to men. This book will shed light on that subject. It's scientific and frank, and students will find the chapter titles very intriguing.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy* . While I have heard some discussion that suggests this book is less scholarly than it should be, it's an interesting read and it may provide an answer to a student who wonders why males are in control of most societies. While I am not an expert in the area, I found that it stimulated a lot of thought, which is an important quality in a book.

Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500 - 1800* . This book would work well for a student who would like to compare the fondness for "the good old days" with some old days that weren't so pleasurable.

Wrangham, Richard, and Peterson, Dale. *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* . This is an interesting book, particularly if you do accept human beings as primates. The explanations for why groups develop particular behaviors related to politics or mating or leadership are thoughtful, and students will undoubtedly make connections into their own behavior, as well as

the behavior of characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* .

Leon, Vicki. *Uppity Women of Medieval Times* , *Uppity Women of the Renaissance*, *Uppity Women of Ancient Times* , and *Uppity Women of the New World* . These books provide colorful biographies of women who didn't follow the rules of the day, which students will enjoy.

The Handmaid's Tale Supplemental Sources Project Rubric

(chart available in print form)

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