

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Themes **Sample Answers** *Evidence and Analysis*



Directions: A theme is a concept or idea that an author explores in a literary work. For each theme, collect 5-6 details from *The Handmaid's Tale* (such as specific plot points, symbols, or quotes) that the author uses to explore that theme and enter them in the Evidence section of the table.

Next, use the evidence you've collected to write a Theme Description that explains the role of the theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Your Theme Description should be 1-2 paragraphs. Here are some questions to consider as you write each Theme Description:

- How do the ideas or actions of the main characters reflect different aspects of the theme?
- Does the theme develop or change over the course of *The Handmaid's Tale*? If so, how?
- If your evidence includes symbols, explain how the author uses those symbols to explore the theme.
- If your evidence includes specific quotes from the text, explain how those quotes provide examples of how the theme applies to *The Handmaid's Tale*?



Gender Roles

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
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| <p>Gilead is a strictly hierarchical society, with a huge difference between the genders. As soon as the Gileadean revolutionaries take over after terrorism destroys the US government, they fire all women from their jobs and drain their bank accounts, leaving Offred desperate and dependent. Luke, however, doesn't seem so furious at this turn of events, a subtle suggestion that even good men may have embedded misogynistic attitudes, and that Gilead merely takes these common views to the logical extreme. Soon Gileadean women find all liberties taken from them, from the right to choose their clothes to the right to read.</p> <p>Even women in positions of power, like Aunt Lydia, are only allowed cattle prods, never guns. The Commander's Wife, once a powerful supporter of far right-wing religious ideas about how women should stay in the home, now finds herself unhappily trapped in the world she advocated for. Gilead also institutionalizes sexual violence toward women. The Ceremony, where the Commander tries to impregnate Offred, is institutionalized adultery and a kind of rape. Jezebel's, where Moira works, is a whorehouse for the society's elite.</p> <p>Though the story critiques the religious right, it also shows that the feminist left, as exemplified by Offred's mother, is not the solution, as the radical feminists, too, advocate book burnings, censorship, and violence. The book avoids black-and-white divisions, forcing us to take on our own assumptions regarding gender. We may blame Offred for being too passive, without acknowledging that she's a product of her society. We may fault the Commander's Wife for not showing solidarity to her gender and rebelling against Gilead, without understanding that this expectation, since it assumes that gender is the most important trait, is just a milder version of the anti-individual tyranny of Gilead. These complicated questions of blame, as well as the brutal depictions of the oppression of women, earn <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> its reputation as a great work of feminist literature.</p> |

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____



Religion and Theocracy

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
|---|
| <p>Gilead is a theocracy, a government where church and state are combined. Religious language enters into every part of the society, from Rita's position as a Martha, named for a New Testament kitchen worker, to the store names like Milk and Honey. And religion, specifically the Old Testament, is also the justification for many of Gilead's most savage characteristics. Offred's job as Handmaid is based on the biblical precedent of Rachel and Leah, where fertile servants can carry on adulterous relationships to allow infertile women like the Commander's Wife to have families. Each month before the Ceremony, the Commander reads from Genesis the same lines that make the book's epigraph, justifying and moralizing the crude intercourse that will take place.</p> <p>Yet many of the biblical quotes in the book are twisted. The theocracy is so rigid about its religious influences, and so emphatic about the specific rules it upholds, that it even warps essential virtues like charity, tolerance and forgiveness. Offred knows that the prayers that the Aunts play the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center are not the words that actually appear in the Bible, but she has no way of checking. The Salvagings and executions are supposedly the penalty for biblical sins like adultery, but Offred knows that others are executed for resisting the government. <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> is not a criticism of the Bible in itself, but a criticism of the way that people and theocracies use the Bible for their own oppressive purposes.</p> |



Fertility

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
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| <p>Fertility is the reason for Offred's captivity and the source of her power, Gilead's major failing and its hope for the future. Inhabitants of Gilead give many reasons for the society's issues with creating viable offspring: the sexual revolution and birth control, pollution, sexually transmitted diseases. And the book hints at other, more subtle problems: in a society that restricts women so much, treating the potential child-bearers alternately as precious objects, bothersome machines, and prostitute-like sources of shame, how could anyone conceive? Similarly, though Offred knows her life depends on a successful birth, the atmosphere of extreme pressure and fear can't be as successful a motivator as the hope, love and liberty that characterized life with her first daughter and Luke. Despite the sterile atmosphere, markers of fertility, such as flowers and worms, throng in the Commander's Wife's carefully tended garden.</p> <p>The Commander and his wife host Offred for her proven fertility, and they even rename her as Fred's possession—her body's functions are valued, but her personhood is not. This division is highlighted in Janine's Birthing Ceremony, where Janine's Commander's Wife pretends to give birth at the same time, and the faked birth is treated as the authentic one. In this way, Gilead manages to strip away even the Handmaid's connection to the babies they bear in a version of a sharing, collective society gone totally wrong.</p> |

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____



Rebellion

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
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| <p>Every major character in the story engages in some kind of disobedience against Gilead's laws. Moir rebels most boldly, disguising herself and managing to escape from the Handmaids' imprisonment, though her daring escape proves futile, and she ends up at Jezebel's, resigned to her fate. Ofglen's rebellion is more community-minded, since she works as part of an organized resistance, although her careful plotting also ends badly. More unexpected are the small-scale rebellions from the Commander and the Commander's Wife.</p> <p>The Commander seems to have every advantage, being a man, powerful in the new regime, and wealthy. Gilead should be his ideal society, especially since the book suggests that he had a role in designing it. Yet he desires a deeper emotional connection, and cares enough about Offred's well-being to break the law and consort with her beyond his duties. The Commander's Wife also tries to get around the strictures of Gilead, setting Offred up with Nick in an illegal attempt to make a family.</p> <p>These rebellious acts, coming from Gilead's privileged group, add complexity to their characters and to the dystopia as a whole. No one in the book is purely evil, and no one is so different from real-world humans to fully embrace the lack of independence in Gilead. Whether large or small, attempting to destroy the Gileadean government or merely to make one's personal circumstances more tolerable, each character commits rebellious acts, highlighting both the unlivable horror of Gileadean society, and the unsteadiness of its foundations.</p> |

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____



Love

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
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| <p>Despite Offred's general passivity in the face of the oppressive society, she has a deep and secret source of strength: her love. Though love might keep Offred complacent, permitting her to daydream rather than to rebel outright, it's also responsible for the book's greatest triumph, as love drives Nick to help Offred escape, which she manages more effectively than Moira or Ofglen. Her love for her mother, her daughter, Luke, Moira, and ultimately Nick, allow her to stay sane, and to live within her memories and emotions instead of the terrible world around her. Although the novel never proposes an ideal society or a clear way to apply its message to the real world, and although the novel looks critically both on many modern movements, including the religious right and the extreme feminist left, love—both familial and romantic—surprisingly turns out to be the most effective force for good.</p> <p>Love is also a driving force behind other characters' actions. We know that Nick reciprocates Offred's feelings, but also the search for love, in the form of a real, not purely functional human connection, influences the Commander's desires to bend the rules for Offred. In the end, love is the best way to get around Gilead's rules, as it allows for both secret mental resistance, and for the trust and risk that result in Offred's great escape.</p> |



Storytelling and Memory

| Evidence | | |
|----------|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. |
| 4. | 5. | 6. |

| Theme Description |
|---|
| <p>The structure of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> is characterized by many different kinds of storytelling and fiction-making. For one, the title itself, and the fictional “Historical Notes on the Handmaid’s Tale” of the book’s end, frame the entire novel as Offred’s story, that she’s said into a tape recorder in the old fashioned storytelling tradition. For another, her whole story is also punctuated by shorter stories she tells herself, of the time before Gilead or Aunt Lydia’s lessons. These small flashbacks can be triggered by the slightest impression, and they occur so often throughout the novel that it seems like Offred lives in several worlds, the terrible present, the confusing but free past, and the Rachel and Leah Center that bridged them.</p> <p>Adding to the overlap of past and present, the tenses are always shifting, with some memories in the past tense, and some in the present. A third form of storytelling comes about because of the constant atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty. Offred constantly makes up fictions. She’s filled with questions—is Ofglen a true believer, or lying? Is Nick’s touching her foot accidental, or intentional? Offred must keep several stories in mind at once, imagining each to be true at the same time. This form of storytelling is most clear in her imaginings about Luke’s fate, where he could be dead, imprisoned or maybe escaped.</p> <p>Fourth, Offred also uses storytelling as a pastime. Since she has no access to any entertainment, and very few events happen in her life, she often goes over events from other people’s points of view, making up very involved fictions about what others might be thinking and saying. One major example is her long imaginary recreation of Aunt Lydia and Janine talking about Moira. Another is her creative ideas about what Nick might think of her and the Commander’s relationship. With more stories and memories than current-time actions, the book is profoundly repetitive. It forms its own kind of simple, quiet hell—we, like Offred, are trapped within the echo-chamber of her mind.</p> |