**“The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood**

**Discussion Questions**

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?

2. In Gilead, women are categorized as wives, handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts, but Moira refuses to fit into a niche. Offred says she was like an elevator with open sides who made them dizzy; she was their fantasy. Trace Moira's role throughout the tale to determine what she symbolizes.

3. Aunt Lydia, Janine, and Offred's mother also represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote? What do the style and color of their clothes symbolize?

4. How did you feel about Serena Joy, the commander’s wife? What made her who she was? Talk about her life before Gilead? Was this what she wanted, did she “buy into” the premise of Gilead? Did she have more of voice that the handmaids? Did she have a better position?

5. Ofglen is the first character Offred meets who is a part of the resistance. How does she know Offred would be a potential member of the resistance? Why would any handmaid not be a part of the resistance?

6. At one level, *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the writing process. Atwood cleverly weaves this sub-plot into a major focus with remarks by Offred such as "Context is all, " and "I've filled it out for her," "I made that up," and "I wish this story were different." Does Offred's habit of talking about the process of storytelling make it easier or more difficult for you to suspend disbelief?

7. A palimpsest is a medieval parchment that scribes attempted to scrape clean and use again, though they were unable to obliterate all traces of the original. How does the new republic of Gilead's social order often resemble a palimpsest?

8. The Commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instincts?

9. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?

10. Babies are referred to as "a keeper, "unbabies, " "shredders." What other real or fictional worlds do these terms suggest?

11. Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?

12. If you read this in 1986 when it was written, would anything resonate differently for you? Did anyone read this long ago? Is history repeating itself, or why has this story made a comeback?

13. Author Margaret Atwood said, “I didn’t put in anything that we haven’t already done, we’re not already doing, we’re seriously trying to do, coupled with trends that are already in progress… So all of those things are real, and therefore the amount of pure invention is close to nil.” What means of effective oppression previously used in history did the rulers of Gilead use to keep their system in place?

14. How did you feel religion was handled in this book? It is a missive against religion? Atwood said the people running Gilead are “”not really interested in religion; they’re interested in power.” Do you agree?

15. What do you feel the "Historical Notes" at the book's end add to the reading of this novel? What does the book's last line mean to you?