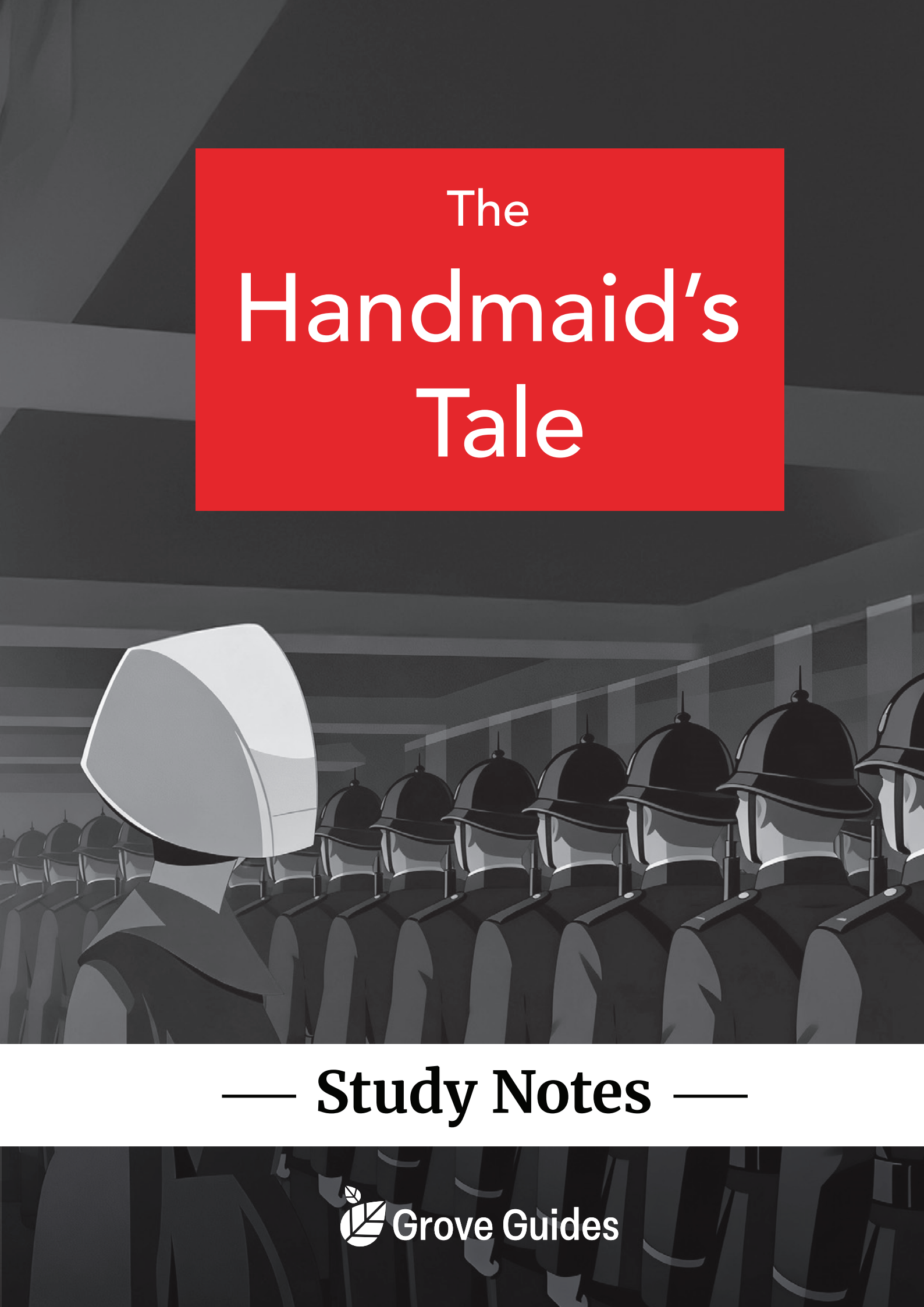


The background of the cover features a stylized, dark-toned illustration of a room. In the foreground, a line of Handmaids is shown from behind, wearing their iconic white wigs and dark uniforms. They are standing in a room with a high ceiling and a large window in the background. A prominent red rectangular box is centered in the upper half of the image, containing the title text in white.

# The Handmaid's Tale

— Study Notes —



Grove Guides



# Literary Context

## Genres

**Speculative Fiction:** Explores “what if?” scenarios and addresses real-world issues through an imagined reality. Includes subgenres such as science fiction, fantasy, utopian/dystopian fiction, apocalyptic, superhero, and supernatural fiction.

**Dystopian Fiction:** Features invented political or social systems, rules based on extreme ideology, and societies controlled through surveillance, propaganda, violence, and intimidation. Often reflects real-world political and social issues.

**Nuclear Dystopia:** A dystopian society shaped by a nuclear event or catastrophe, reflecting 20th-century anxieties about nuclear weapons and disasters.

## Other Influences

**Feminist Literature:** Focuses on women’s experiences and explores different feminist perspectives.

**Biblical References:** Gilead’s ideology, beliefs, language, and laws are based on a distorted interpretation of religious teachings.

**Satire:** Uses exaggerated, dark, and sometimes humorous scenarios to criticise real-world oppression and political issues.

## Narrative Structure

**Main Story:** Introspective, first-person perspective (Offred’s); personal, fragmented, and nonlinear.

**Epilogue/Historical Notes:** Lecture format, detached analysis by an academic male figure (Professor Pieixoto).



# Setting

**Main Settings:** Gilead

**Real-Life Inspiration:** New England (Massachusetts area)

## Key Locations

### *Republic of Gilead*



Gilead is a theocratic, military dictatorship governed by an extreme, distorted interpretation of religion. Several locations highlight it's oppressive, threatening atmosphere:

- **The Commander's Home:** A microcosm of Gilead; it appears domestic and respectable but is a place of imprisonment, surveillance, slavery, and abuse.
- **The Red Centre:** Formerly a school, transformed to a training centre where the Aunts indoctrinate women into Gilead's ideology and prepare them for their roles as Handmaids.



- ➔ **Gilead Streets:** Outwardly orderly and picturesque, but characterised by silence, fear, paranoia, and oppression.
- ➔ **The Wall:** Likely based on the Harvard wall; a symbol of Gilead's power where the bodies of executed "enemies" are displayed.
- ➔ **Jezebel's:** A secret club where women are forced into prostitution, revealing the hypocrisy of Gilead's leaders.

## Outside Gilead

Other locations contribute to the atmosphere of fear and hope:

- ➔ **The Homelands:** Undescribed regions where Black and ethnic minority Americans were forcibly relocated after the establishment of Gilead.
- ➔ **The Colonies:** Toxic wastelands where those deemed undesirable or enemies of Gilead are sent to clean up radioactive waste.
- ➔ **Canada:** A free and democratic nation that symbolises freedom.



# THEMES

## Theme 1:

### Female Subordination in Patriarchal Systems

The Sons of Jacob justify Gilead's creation by blaming falling birth rates on the sexual revolution, and birth control.

This reflects real-life anti-feminist arguments about the dangers of female independence.

Gilead is structured around controlling reproduction and reducing women to their fertility.

### Erosion of Women's Rights

- Bank accounts are seized.
- The right to vote, own property or read is removed.
- Identities are erased and re-defined by men.
- Roles are assigned based on fertility.

### Consequences for Women

- Dehumanisation
- Sexual slavery
- Systematic rape and abuse
- Isolation
- Constant surveillance and threats of violence

**Key Idea:** Atwood warns of the dangers of patriarchal control over women's bodies and lives, and highlights the importance of female independence and autonomy.



Clearing The Path Through Complex Texts