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Close Reading Organizer - Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale **Sample Answers**

Directions: Read each summary entry and think about which themes listed in the Themes Key apply to it, then color in those themes in the Theme Tracker. Next, write a few sentences of Analysis to explain how the themes you chose apply to each summary section.

Note: There is not always a definitive set of “correct” answers for which themes should appear in the Theme Tracker. Answers that differ from the ones we propose below should therefore not automatically be treated as incorrect, and in fact can serve as great discussion starters.

Themes Key

1	Gender Roles
2	Religion and Theocracy
3	Fertility
4	Rebellion
5	Love
6	Storytelling and Memory

Summary	Theme Tracker						Your Analysis
The notes are a transcript of a discussion from “The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean studies,” which takes place in 2195 in Nunavit (modern-day northern Canada). Professor Maryann Crescent Moon introduces the speaker Professor Pieixoto from Cambridge University. She says she thinks Gilead is a worthwhile period to study. She reminds the attendees of upcoming events and talks, and tells Pieixoto to be sure to stay within the time limit so everyone can have lunch. His talk is	1	2	3	4	5	6	The professors’ names suggest that, in the future, formerly marginalized ethnic groups (like the Native Americans, evoked by the last name Crescent Moon) may have more cultural and academic dominance. After the emotional rollercoaster of the novel, Crescent Moon’s casual jokeyness comes as a shock.

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called "Problems of Authentication in Reference to <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> ."							
Professor Pieixoto begins with a joke, then launches into an academic discussion of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> . He explains that the tale came from a collection of unlabeled cassette tapes found in a locker in Maine. His co-researcher, Professor Wade, titled the story in reference to Chaucer.	1	2	3	4	5	6	Pieixoto also cracks a joke, which is almost offensive, given Offred's suffering. This is a subtle acknowledgment of the difficulty of empathizing with and imagining even the most dramatic history.
After transcription, the professors made sure that the tapes weren't a forgery. Professor Pieixoto emphasizes that the audience should try to understand rather than judge "the Gileadean." His team tried to work out where the story had been recorded, and who else may have been involved, but they found no leads. If the house had been on the Underground Femaleroad, maybe the occupants had been killed.	1	2	3	4	5	6	Pieixoto's emphasis on understanding, not judging, is unclear. Is it Offred whom we're not supposed to judge? Or is it Gilead in general? This is a subtle criticism of academic culture. When we focus on scholarly neutrality towards history, we risk making the same mistakes.
Professor Pieixoto describes other ways that they tried to find more evidence relating to the story. He describes how Offred became a Handmaid because she'd had a relationship with a married man. He talks about the various factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	Pieixoto's lecture both illuminates and obscures the story. Much like Offred had to do in Gilead, when imagining, for example, Luke's fate (Chapter 18), Pieixoto must keep several possibilities in mind at once. The additional, purposeful cause for

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that lead to infertility, from diseases to pollution (and later mentions that a sterility virus was specially created as a weapon). He relates the difficulty of finding anything more about Offred, Luke, Nick, Moira or Janine , as those may have been fake names. He suspects that Offred might have made the tapes within Gilead to help Mayday.							sterility that Pieixoto reveals further highlights the Handmaids' helplessness. The cards were stacked against them.
Professor Pieixoto describes trying to find the Commander . The researchers found a journal that describes two Fredericks. One, Frederick Waterford, used to do market research. He invented the Handmaid's red habits and the name "Particicution." Pieixoto points out that most of Gilead's customs were taken from other societies, not invented.	1	2	3	4	5	6	In interviews, Atwood also emphasizes that all of Gilead's laws were based on real, historical societies. Though the whole book is political, this final section shows how places like Gilead have already existed, and how easy that is to forget.
The other Commander possibility, Frederick Judd, helped with the massacre of the President and Congress and shipping away the Jews (and leaving many of them to drown in the ocean). Judd also came up with the Particicution ceremony itself. Judd conceptualized the Aunt system, understanding that women could control women. Waterford helped with the details.	1	2	3	4	5	6	Like Pieixoto, the readers have the opportunity to judge whether Offred's Commander seems more like Waterford or Judd. While Waterford seems morally corrupt, Judd seems genuinely psychopathic in a way we never saw in the Commander.

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Both Judd and Waterford were sterile. Waterford's wife Thelma had worked on television like Serena Joy . Waterford seems to be more likely to be the Commander . The authorities killed him after Offred's departure, for owning banned magazines and books and for hosting a rebel, probably Nick . Nick was probably an Eye as well as a member of the Resistance. Though the Commander would have known that Nick was an Eye, the Commander probably thought he was too high-ranking for his little violations to lead to Nick turning him in.	1	2	3	4	5	6	Waterford's fate brings to mind the Commander's confidence that he was allowed to own banned materials (25). In fact, Gilead was much stricter than he imagined. In the end, the people in charge of Gilead remain anonymous. The Commander is ultimately more aligned with the women of his household, a victim of the system.
Professor Pieixoto wonders what happened to Offred . Maybe she made it to Canada and then England, which was safest. Maybe she was captured. Maybe she cut herself off from society. After Ofglen's death, when it was clear the authorities knew about the local Resistance, Nick could have killed Offred to protect himself, but he got her to escape with the rebel Eyes instead.	1	2	3	4	5	6	The end of Pieixoto's speech may be the book's most important passage about love. From a historical point of view, we can understand how unexpected and irrational Nick's action was. For all his emotionlessness, he saved Offred because of love.
Professor Pieixoto closes with some poetic musings on the past, calling Offred's narrative "in its own way eloquent," and talking about the difficulties of	1	2	3	4	5	6	The book's melancholic ending affirms how easy it is to lack empathy, and how all of Offred's suffering and love (and ours, for that matter) fade into the jumble of human history.

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understanding messages from the past.							
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