

# Handmaid's Tale Quotations

Chapter	Quotation	Theme
1	We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed:	
1	Anyways, they're doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work.	
2	Or I would help Rita make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch	
2	This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?	
2	The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly. I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the center, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way.	
2	I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatter-proof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.	
3	The Commander's Wife directs, pointing with her stick. Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for.  I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers.	
3	As for my husband, she said, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It's final. (Serena Joy)	
3	Aunt Lydia said it was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question. Try to think of it from their point of view she said, her hands clasped and wrung together, her nervous pleading smile. It isn't easy for them.	
4	This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. On a certain day she simply wasn't there anymore, and this one was there in her place. It isn't the sort of thing you ask questions about, because the answers are not usually answers you want to know. Anyway there wouldn't be an answer. (4.18)	
4	Low status: he (Nick) hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections. But he acts as if he doesn't know this, or care.	
5	One of them is vastly pregnant [...] There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on	

	a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved.	
5	There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimp, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can.	
5	We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless.	
5	Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.  There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom <b>to</b> and freedom <b>from</b> . In the days of anarchy, it was freedom <b>to</b> . Now you are being given freedom <b>from</b> . Don't underrate it.	
5	We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.  Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom.  Westernized, they used to call it.	
6	What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't.	
6	Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.	
7	This isn't a story I'm telling.  It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.  Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.	
8	It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them.	
8	The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother.	
9	In the afternoons, when Luke was still in flight from his wife, when I was still imaginary for him. Before we were married and I solidified. I would always get there first.  I was nervous. How was I to know he loved me? It might be just an affair. Why did we ever say just? Though at that time men and women tried each other on, casually, like suits, rejecting whatever did not fit.	
9	The stains on the mattress. Like dried flower petals. Not recent. Old love; there's no other kind of love in this room now.	

	When I saw that, the evidence left by two people, of love or something like it, desire at least, at least touch, between two people now perhaps old or dead, I covered the bed again and lay down on it.	
9	I am trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one.	
9	Nolite te bastardes carborundorum	
10	Is that how we lived, then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now.  We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.	
10	I ought to feel hatred for this man (Commander). I know I ought to feel it, but it isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love.	
11	When I'm naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only.	
11	Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.  "Lots of women do it," he goes on. "You want a baby, don't you?"  "Yes," I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. Give me children, or else I die. There's more than one meaning to it.	
12	I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.	
12	I lie, lapped by the water, beside an open drawer that does not exist, and think about a girl who did not die when she was five; who still does exist, I hope, though not for me. Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind?	
12	My nakedness is strange to me already. [...] Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.	
13	These pictures [of nineteenth-century harems] were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.  But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men.	
13	I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.	
13	Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.	
14	My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like	

	your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter.	
14	It's a Saturday morning in September. I'm wearing my shining name. The little girl who is now dead sits in the back seat, with her two best dolls, her stuffed rabbit, mangy with age and love. I know all the details. They are sentimental details but I can't help that. I can't think about the rabbit too much though, I can't start to cry, here on the Chinese rug.	
16	I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose.	
17	I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.	
17	As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire. We have ceremonies of our own, private ones.	
18	The message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her. [...] What has happened to me, what's happening to me now, won't make any difference to him, he loves me anyway, he knows it isn't my fault. The message will say that also. It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message.	
18	Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied. [...] I can stroke myself, under the dry white sheets, in the dark, but I too am dry and white, hard, granular; it's like running my hand over a plateful of dried rice; it's like snow. [...] I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor.	
19	I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.  These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself.	
21	Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy.  Our happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him. Oh, he said, oh Jesus, breath coming out in wonder.	
21	Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.	
22	Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman.  I think we found this frightening.  Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls	

	secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you'd come apart, you'd vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together.	
23	Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing.	
23	But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare.	
23	When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out.	
23	This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction.	
23	In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction.	
25	To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way. As a request it was opaque.	
25	There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently	
26	Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. It's something else to think about. I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow.	
27	To him I'm no longer merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven – to be crude – minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty	
28	You were a wanted child, God knows, she would say at other moments. [...] She would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn't turned out entirely as she'd expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well.	
28	She (Moir) disapproved of Luke, back then. Not of Luke but of the fact that he was married. She said I was poaching, on another woman's ground. I said Luke wasn't a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions. She said I was rationalizing. I said I was in love.	
28	I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them.	
28	I wandered through the house, from room to room. I remember touching things, not even that consciously, just placing my fingers on them; things like the toaster, the sugar bowl, the ashtray in the living room. (Offred is talking here of her house in the time before Gilead, after she lost her job.)	
28	The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal.	

29	And if I talk to him I'll say something wrong, give something away. I can feel it coming, a betrayal of myself. I don't want him to know too much.	
31	She'd like me pregnant though, over and done with and out of the way, no more humiliating sweaty tangles, no more flesh triangles under her starry canopy of silver flowers.	
31	Absurd, but that's what I want. An argument, about who should put the dishes in the dishwasher, whose turn it is to sort the laundry, clean the toilet; something daily and unimportant in the big scheme of things. We could even have a fight about that, about unimportant, important.	
31	"It's a risk," I say. "More than that." It's my life on the line; but that's where it will be sooner or later, one way or another, whether I do or don't. We both know this.	
32	The problem wasn't only with the women, he (Commander) says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore . . . I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy . . . You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. Do they feel now? I say. Yes, he says, looking at me. They do.	
32	Are they old enough to remember anything of the time before, playing baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding their bicycles? Reading books, all by themselves? even though some of them are no more than fourteen- <i>Start them soon is the policy, there's not a moment to be lost</i> -still they'll remember. And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years; but after that they won't. They'll always have been in white, in groups of girls; they'll always have been silent.	
35	Falling in love. [...] It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant, a creature from outer space. Everyone knew that.	
35	I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there.	
35	But she exists, in her white dress. She grows and lives. Isn't that a good thing? A blessing?	
35	It's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever – expanding perimeters of our lives. I was like that too, I did that too.	
36	Yet there's an enticement in this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative.	
37	"Yes," I say. What I feel is not one simple thing. Certainly I am not dismayed by these women (the ones at Jezebel's), not shocked by them. I recognize them as truants. The official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are. That is at least something.	
37	"So now that we don't have different clothes," I say, "you merely have different women." This is irony, but he doesn't acknowledge it.	
38	She (Moira) is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?	
38	I still can't believe it's her (Moira). I touch her arm again. Then I begin to cry.  "Don't do that," she says. "Your eyes'll run. Anyway there isn't time."	

38	Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again.	
39	What did we overlook?  Love, I said.  Love? said the Commander. What kind of love?  Falling in love, I said. The Commander looked at me with his candid boy's eyes.	
41	I tell him (Nick) my real name, and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout.	
41	I put his hand on my belly. It's happened, I say. I feel it has. A couple of weeks and I'll be certain.  This I know is wishful thinking.  He'll love you to death, he says. So will she.  But it's yours, I say. It will be yours, really. I want it to be.	
41	The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him.	
41	I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light [...] I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love [...]	
42	I've only been to one of these before, two years ago. Women's Salvagings are not frequent. There is less need for them. These days we are so well behaved.  I don't want to be telling this story.	
42	I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black who now seize hold of them and drag downward with all their weight. I don't want to see it anymore. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope	
44	"I am Ofglen," the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn't be easy to find her, now.	
44	"Behind my back," she (Serena Joy) says. "You could have left me something." Does she love him, after all? She raises her cane. I think she is going to hit me, but she doesn't.	
44	I want to turn, run to him, throw my arms around him (Nick). This would be foolish. There is nothing he can do to help. He too would drown.  I walk to the back door, into the kitchen, set down my basket, go upstairs. I am orderly and calm.	
46	Don't let the b*stards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or Don't be.	

	I suppose you could say that	
46	And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.	
Hist. Notes	The regime created an instant pool of such women by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and nonmarital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds that they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means.	
Hist Notes	Judd [...] was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature [...]."	