

Prompt (AP Lit Exam, 2015): Names are often keys to the significance of literary characters. Select a novel or play in which a central figure's name gives access to that character's ambiguity or complexity. Then write a well-organized essay analyzing how the name illuminates that character and informs the meaning of the work as a whole.

Novel: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood's book, *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of a woman surviving in a society that is terrorized by a power we know little about, and cruel to its women who are forced into color-coded roles. We do not know our protagonist's name. We know nothing about where she came from, or who she was, or where she is now. We know very little, except what she chooses to think about and share. She is quite good at censoring what crosses her mind; that is something we learn quite quickly.

The fact that this woman does not share her name with us -despite the entire book being her narrating her story to us- is in itself very insightful and important to the story she is telling and the picture she is painting with her observations and experiences in the society she exists in. *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a world where women are objectified and selected and delegated to different tasks. Men are in control, everything is unknown, and women are given a color to wear and a job to do. They do not get to ask questions, they do not get to read, they are to perform their duty and accept that they are not meant to know things anymore.

Our narrator has been told her name doesn't matter because all women in this society are being told that they do not matter as individuals. Women have become something replaceable. They are meant to be used and discarded. If one woman in red is unsatisfactory, there will be another to take her place.

Atwood's book is painting a picture of a world where women have been stripped of their identities, autonomy, and titles. She writes into being this extreme society where women have no rights, property, or names. They have become vessels, entertainment, and extra bodies. The nameless narrator does not even seem to mourn her namelessness. She has accepted that surviving is more important than having a name. *Handmaid's* explores these ideas of adaptation for survival, human emotions, and acts of bravery in extreme circumstances by taking us on the journey of living in this society through the thoughts of this nameless woman.

Partway through the book we can begin to understand that she and other women like her are not referred to as nothing. After all, the men in charge have to have something to call. Our nameless narrator is called Offred, but it is also apparent that she does not refer to herself by this name. All the other Handmaids like her have a similar title: Ofwarren, Ofcharles...etc. It is not a personalized name, the woman who occupied the position before our narrator was also called Offred, because she was also Of Fred. An object to be used by this man named Fred. The possessive nature of these titles enforces the theme in the book that women are objects, more things than human. If one fails or breaks, another can take its place, same name and all.

When our narrator refused to remember her real name I was irritated at first by her lack of courage; but I regained my respect for her when I learned more about the entirety of the situation she was trapped in. Now I admire her small act of bravery of refusing to think of herself as Offred. Even in the most horrible of circumstances humans will continue to cling to any shred of autonomy they can while still being able to survive.