

# The Handmaid's Tale

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## AIMS

**THIS GUIDE WILL GIVE YOU OPPORTUNITIES TO: -**

- familiarise yourself with the text;
- study the presentation of the main character, Offred, her reliability as a narrator and relationships with other key characters and with the reader;
- study the presentation of other important characters;
- examine Atwood's major themes and preoccupations in the *Tale*, especially: -
  - feminism/the search for individual identity & freedom
  - political extremism/religious fundamentalism
  - victimisation/survival/Atwood's *Canadianism*
  - the need for individuals to accept responsibility for society's problems and to *pay attention*
  - writing and communication as forms of resistance;
- understand the time-scale of the novel and to assess the success of Atwood's dystopian vision;

- examine the ironic texture of the novel and the different narrative strands: -
  - Offred's fragmented memories
  - *Night* sections
  - *Historical Notes*;
- examine the different types of language: -
  - Offred's (including the slang used by Moira, Offred and Offred's mother in the *time before*)
  - the official language of Gilead
  - the language of Pieixoto in the *Historical Notes*;
- look closely at Atwood's style of writing, in particular: -
  - the importance of narrative detail
  - imagery and symbolism, especially of colour/light, human body/mutilation, nature, pairings/opposites/ambiguities, mirrors and fairytales
  - use of Biblical and literary allusions;
- consider the relationship between the *Historical Notes* and the rest of the novel.

Before embarking on the STUDENT GUIDE, you should have read and have a working knowledge of the text of *The Handmaid's Tale*. You will also need to consider each chapter in detail, before attempting the UNITS of work that follow. These can be used as a basis for discussion, annotation, individual research and feedback or for written response, depending on the requirements of the course tutor. A list of possible coursework essay titles is provided towards the back of the booklet.

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT, ALTHOUGH YOU WILL BE WRITING IN RESPONSE TO AN INDIVIDUAL TITLE, A COMPLETE AND ROUNDED KNOWLEDGE OF THE TEXT IS ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO WRITE CONVINCINGLY.**

The six study UNITS are as follows: -

UNIT 1: Title, dedications, epigraph and ch. 1-13

UNIT 2: Ch. 14-24

UNIT 3: Ch. 25-30

UNIT 4: Ch. 31-39

UNIT 5: Ch. 40-46

UNIT 6: *Historical Notes*

## ESSAY TITLES

Compare and contrast Offred and Moira as feminist heroines in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Turn to page 114 of *The Handmaid's Tale* and read from *Here is what I believe* to the end of the chapter. How characteristic is this section of Atwood's style in the novel as a whole and what does it reveal about the portrayal of Offred?

Re-read pages 127-130 (from *Once a week we had movies...to...Back on the earth, my mother is part of the crowd now, and I can't see her any more*). Use this section of the novel to discuss the role of the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Offred may be the heroine of her own story, but there are many other heroines in her narrative. Discuss **three** of them and their function in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Offred describes her narrative as *this limping and mutilated story*. How does this image relate to **either** the content **or** the structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Re-read Chapter Eighteen (pages 113-116) and use it to show how the *Night* sections are different from the rest of the novel. What do you think is their function and importance?

What is the function of the *Historical Notes*, and how do they assist your interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale*?

*Writing is an act of faith; I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are.* (Margaret Atwood). Use this as a starting point to discuss Offred's narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

What effects does Margaret Atwood achieve through interweaving Offred's past with her present?

Turn to Chapter Forty-One and read from the beginning (page 279) to *Neither of us says the word 'love', not once. It would be tempting fate, it would be romance, bad luck.* (Page 282.) Use this section to discuss Offred as narrator.

*Love? said the Commander...Falling in love, I said.* How significant are male-female relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Discuss Offred's vocabulary of images in *The Handmaid's Tale*. What is their significance and how effectively do they highlight Atwood's preoccupations in the novel?

How does Atwood create an illusion of realism in her futuristic world of Gilead?

*No one is exempt from guilt, no one is blameless, Atwood implies, when it comes to the creation of a Gilead.* (B.H.Rigney.) Discuss *The Handmaid's Tale* in the light of this statement.

Discuss Atwood's use of narrative detail in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Comment on the effectiveness of Chapter Forty-Six as an ending to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

## Links

These are some links to very useful resources on Margaret Atwood. Click on them to open them up:

<http://www.web.net/owtoad/>

## BACKGROUND READING

### BY ATWOOD: -

*Dancing Girls and Other Stories* – short stories written 1964-77, published 1985.

*The Edible Woman*. 1976

*Surfacing*. 1976

*Bodily Harm*. 1983

*Cat's Eye*. 1990

*The Robber Bride*. 1995

### OTHER 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY DYSTOPIAN NOVELS: -

*Animal Farm*. George Orwell. 1945.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*. George Orwell. 1949.

*Brave New World*. Aldous Huxley. 1932.

**CRITICAL STUDIES: -**

*York Notes on The Handmaid's Tale*. Longman Literature Guides.\*

*Margaret Atwood*. Barbara Hill Rigney. Macmillan Women Writers, London 1987.\*

*Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth Century Women's Fiction*.  
Kate Fullbrook.

Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead. 1990.

*Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*. Coral Ann Howells.

Methuen, London and New York. 1987.

*The Canadian Postmodern: A study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Linda Hutcheon.

Oxford University Press. Oxford. 1988.

*Fear of the Open Heart: Essays on Contemporary Canadian Writing*.  
Constance Rooke. Coach

House Press, Toronto. 1989.\*

\*books with specific sections on *The Handmaid's Tale*

**INFORMATION FROM CD-ROM, AVAILABLE ON REQUEST FROM DEPARTMENTAL FILE: -**

Essays on: -

Atwood's Poetry

Atwood's Early Fiction

*Dancing Girls*

Biographical details & brief synopses of novels, including *The Handmaid's Tale* & *Cat's Eye*\*

Atwood's major works/preoccupations and some critics' comments on her work\*

*Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition.* Amin Malik. 1987.\*\*

\*sections of these essays are printed in this guide

\*\*entire text of the essay printed in this guide

### **ALSO AVAILABLE FROM DEPARTMENTAL FILE: -**

A study of *Clusters of Images, Symbols and Motifs in The Handmaid's Tale*, produced by a group of Post-16 students.

## **USEFUL QUOTATIONS**

### **BY ATWOOD**

*Young girls should not wear red.*

*In some countries it is the color  
of death; in others passion,  
in others war, in others blood.....*

*Dancing in red shoes will kill you. (The Red Shirt – poem from Two-Headed Poems, Atwood 1978)*

*Beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera; mid-air. They look arranged. They look like showbiz. (The Handmaid's Tale. p.289)*

*I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. (The Handmaid's Tale. p. 298)*

(Throughout her work Atwood frequently refers to the film *The Red Shoes*, starring Moira Shearer as the girl who dances herself to death. What might be

the significance of the story and star of this film, do you think, in developing our understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale*?)

*To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. (Marrying the Hangman – poem from Two-Headed Poems)*

*The woman  
they did not kill.  
Instead they sewed her face  
shut, closed her mouth  
to a hole the size of a straw,  
and put her back on the street,  
a mute symbol. (Notes Towards a Poem that can Never be Written – poem from True Stories. 1981)*

*There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know. (Second Words – Selected Critical Prose. 1982)*

*A country or a community which does not take serious literature seriously will lose it. (Second Words.)*

## **CRITICS ON ATWOOD**

**Barbara Hill Rigney: *Margaret Atwood*. Published by Macmillan Press. 1987. (Extracts)**

*Given Atwood's frequent use of the archetypal fertility myth and her association of artistic creativity with procreation....., it is not surprising that the protagonist in 'Surfacing' is also, like all of Atwood's heroines, a failed artist as well as a failed mother.*

*No person, adult or child, male or female, is truly innocent in Atwood's literary world, and perhaps especially not children.*

*Atwood's works have always been political in that they represent a social consciousness, a concern for the survival of individuals, particularly women, in a world characterised by hostility and violence that is both latent and overt.*

*The human race may indeed 'have it coming', and yet, in Atwood's own terms, it is still possible to care, to forgive and to redeem. Language is a 'fragile protest', but it represents the only salvation possible; ... 'you must write this poem', she says, 'because there is nothing more to do.' ('True Stories'). In her next two novels, 'Bodily Harm' and 'The Handmaid's Tale', and in her poems, 'True Stories', Atwood writes that poem, the one..... 'that invents nothing/and excuses nothing' ('True Stories).*

*Only in the later novels and poems does Atwood expand her political view to encompass a world in which both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see 'who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death'.*

*Oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological, is Atwood's subject in 'Bodily Harm' and 'The Handmaid's Tale' and in the poems entitled 'True Stories'.*

*The heroines of the novels begin as typical Atwood women; they are not quite so young as earlier protagonists, but like them they protest their own innocence and attempt withdrawal from circumstances for which they do not accept responsibility.*

*For Atwood, writing itself becomes a political act; the writer is always a reporter of truth, even when her subject is fiction.*

*To 'pay attention', to look beneath the surfaces, to touch and to tell are also imperatives for Offred of 'The Handmaid's Tale. Not paying attention, in fact, is the great fault of Offred's entire society, and the price exacted is the loss of freedom. By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have forfeited human rights and become slaves in the near-future society of Gilead, an Orwellian dystopia dominated by the horrors of theocracy and puritanism. Big Brother, in this novel, is not simply an embodiment of patriarchy, nor of God, but rather of ideology in general; Gilead has permitted itself to be poisoned with radioactivity and with a far more pernicious entity: fanaticism that is political, religious and moral....the individual is truly a part of the whole and shares responsibility for every aspect of the system, including the perpetration of atrocity....The real collusion .is the avoidance of responsibility.*

*Offred values her own physical survival above the sisterhood, and, in so doing sacrifices her own integrity, that which is, for Atwood, more crucial even than life.*

*To have in one's possession a pencil is to commit a crime against the state; to participate in a clandestine game of Scrabble is to chance disaster. But Offred knows by now that communication is imperative; she must assume a future audience.... 'I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it....By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you....Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.' .....The very act of writing, of recording, is for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final and irrevocable commitment to one's society and to one's humanity.*

*Language, in itself, is the ultimate affirmation and the greatest revolution.*

*As the pervasive symbol of American literature, according to Atwood, is the frontier, so the dominant image in Canadian fiction is survival, the unheroic survival of victimisation. (-thinking here of the victimisation of animals, Indians, Eskimos, settlers and explorers-)*

*'The Handmaid's Tale' is dedicated to Mary Webster and its principle subject is the suppression of language, especially language as used by women.*

*In 'The Handmaid's Tale', as in the actual and current situation, some feminist groups exercise the same faulty judgement, (i.e. as those who abuse censorship), thereby forfeiting their own freedom along with that of both the writers and the reading audience.*

## **OTHER CRITICS**

*Atwood is constantly aware of opposites....self/other, subject/object, male/female, nature/man....and of the need to accept and work within them. (Sherrill Grace)*

*Atwood has been concerned in her fiction with the painful psychic warfare between men and women, (but) in 'The Handmaid's Tale, a futuristic satire, she casts subtlety aside, exposing woman's primal fear of being used and helpless. (Barbara Holliday)*

*'The Handmaid's Tale' is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist attitudes. But it (is) so much more than that....a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words. (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt)*

*Atwood has emerged as a champion of Canadian literature and of the peculiarly Canadian experience of isolation and survival. (Susan Wood)*

## **APPENDIX**

One of Atwood's epigraphs is taken from *A Modest Proposal*, written in 1729 by Jonathan Swift.

Swift (1677-1745) was Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Dublin. He was an Irishman who wrote for a largely English audience, an audience that in the Eighteenth Century needed educating about Irish matters in general and the famine in particular. A cry for help from the Irish people came when three bad harvests in a row had caused particular hardship, but worse and more permanent was the deliberate economic oppression of the Irish by the English who governed them.

*A Modest Proposal* was written as a bitter and sarcastic attack on British government policy. It has possibly yet to be surpassed in terms of its savage satire. A shortened version of the original is presented here.

### ***A MODEST PROPOSAL (1729)***

*It is a melancholy Object to those who walk through this great Town, or travel in the Country, when they see the Streets, the Roads, and Cabbin-doors crowded with Beggars of the Female Sex, followed by three, four or six Children, all in Rags, and importuning every Passenger for an Alms. These Mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelyhood, are forced to employ all their Time in stroling to beg Sustenance for their helpless Infants; who, as they grow up, either turn Thieves for want of Work; or leave their Native Country, to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes.*

*I think it is agreed by all Parties, that this prodigious Number of Children in the Arms, or on the Backs, or at the Heels of their Mothers, and frequently of their Fathers, is in the present deplorable State of the Kingdom, a very great additional Grievance; and therefore, whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy Method of making these Children sound and useful Members of the Commonwealth, would deserve so well of the Publick, as to have his Statue set up for a Preserver of the Nation.*

*But my Intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the Children of professed Beggars; it is of a much greater Extent, and shall take in the whole Number of Infants at a certain Age, who are born of Parents, in effect as little able to support them, as those who demand our Charity in the Streets.....*

*I shall now therefore humbly propose my own Thoughts; which I hope will not be liable to the least Objection.*

*I have been assured by a very knowing American of my Acquaintance in London; that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a Fricasie, or Ragoust.*

*I do therefore humbly offer it to publick Consideration, that of the Hundred and Twenty Thousand Children, already computed, Twenty Thousand may be reserved for Breed; whereof only one Fourth Part to be males; which is more than we allow to Sheep, black Cattle, or Swine; and my Reason is, that these Children are seldom the Fruits of Marriage, a Circumstance not much regarded by our Savages; therefore, one Male will be sufficient to serve four Females. That the remaining Hundred Thousand, may, at a Year old, be offered in Sale to the Persons of Quality and Fortune, through the Kingdom; always advising the Mother to let them suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good Table. A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter.*

*...I have reckoned upon a Medium, that a Child just born will weigh twelve Pounds; and in a solar Year, if tolerably nursed, increaseth to twenty eight Pounds.*

*I grant this Food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords; who, as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children.*

*I have already computed the Charge of nursing a Beggar's Child (in which list I reckon all Cottagers, Labourers, and Four Fifths of the Farmers) to be about two Shillings per Annum, Rags included; and I believe, no Gentleman would repine to give ten Shillings for the Carcase of a good fat Child; which as I have said, will make four Dishes of excellent nutritive Meat, when he hath only some particular Friend, or his own Family, to dine with him. Thus the Squire will learn to be a good Landlord, and grow popular among his Tenants; the Mother will have eight Shillings net profit, and be fit for Work until she produceth another Child.*

*Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the Times require) may flay the Carcase; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable Gloves for Ladies, and Summer Boots for fine Gentlemen.*

*As to our City of Dublin; Shambles may be appointed for this Purpose, in the most convenient Parts of it; and Butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the Children alive, and dressing them hot from the Knife, as we do roasting Pigs.*

(The spelling and punctuation are typically 18<sup>th</sup> Century.)

DMS August 1998

### ***Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition. Amin Malik. 1987.***

One of *The Handmaid's Tale's* successful aspects concerns the skilful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles, yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror – in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instances of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

What distinguishes Atwood's novel from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus. Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere 'breeders'.....The handmaid's situation lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining woman not as an autonomous being, but as simply what he decrees to be relative to him. *For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute --- she is the Other.* This view of man's marginalisation of woman corroborates Foucault's earlier observation about the power-sex correlative; since man holds the sanctified reins of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires.

However, not all the female characters in Atwood's novels are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic. The Aunts. A vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the church-state's staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons: *'Modesty is invisibility', said Aunt Lydia. 'Never forget it. To be seen – to be seen – is to be' – her vice*

trembled – ‘penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.’ She called us ‘girls’. On the other hand, Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood’s heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke, presently presumed dead. Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll of human suffering, she refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead. Indeed, we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty; the narrative reports most of the violence after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes. Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled then manipulative, at times, a fool.

Some may interpret Atwood’s position here as a non-feminist stance, approving of women’s status quo. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Lorna Sage describes *The Handmaid’s Tale* as Atwood’s *revisionist look at her more visionary self*, and as *a novel in praise of the present, for which, perhaps, you have to have the perspective of dystopia*. It is really difficult to conceive Atwood’s praising the present, because, like Orwell who in *Nineteen Eighty Four* extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in Twentieth Century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity. The novel’s mimetic impulse then aims at wresting an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: it appeals for vigilance and an appreciation of the mature values of tolerance, compassion and, above all, for women’s unique identity.

The novel’s thematics operate by positing polarised extremes: a decadent present, which Aunt Lydia cynically describes as *a society dying ... of too much choice*, and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Naturally, while rejecting the indulgent decadence and chaos of an anarchic society, the reader condemns the Gilead regime for its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition: ‘*There is more than one kind of freedom*’, said Aunt Lydia. ‘*Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.*’ As illustrated by the fears and agonies that Offred endures, when human beings are not free to aspire toward whatever they wish, when choices become so severely constrained that, to quote from Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*, ‘*only the necessary is necessary*’, life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. Interestingly, the victimisation process does not involve Offred and the handmaids alone, but extends to the oppressors as well. Everyone ruled by the Gilead regime suffers the deprivation of having no

choice, except what the church-state decrees; even the Commander is compelled to perform his sexual assignment with Offred as a matter of obligation: *This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.*

Since the inhabitants of Gilead lead the precarious existence befitting victims, most try in varied ways to cope, endure and survive. This situation of being a victim and trying to survive dramatises Atwood's major thesis in her critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she suggests that Canada, metaphorically still a colony or an oppressed minority, is *a collective victim* and that *the central symbol for Canada...is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance*. Atwood, furthermore, enumerates what she labels *basic victim positions*, whereby a victim may choose any of four possible options, one of which is to acknowledge being a victim but refuse *to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable*. This position fully explains Offred's role as the protagonist-narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimised woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. Her double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor. This impulse to survive, together with the occasional flashes of warmth and concern among the handmaids, transmits reassuring signs of hope and humanity in an otherwise chilling and depressing tale.

What makes Atwood's book such a moving tale is its clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a vice like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptibly, yet convincingly, transfigured into a fully-roundedness that parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead. Moreover, Atwood skilfully manipulates the time sequence between the heroine's past (pre-Gilead life) and the present: those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery and suffering under totalitarianism. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively shown how the misogynous regime functions on the basis of power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear, not

desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities of a grim dystopian nightmare: initially, the narrative voice, distant and almost diffidently void of any emotions, emphasises those aspects of frugality and solemnity imposed by the state, then progressively tyranny and corruption begin to unfold piecemeal. As the novel concludes, as the horror reaches a climax, the narrative voice assumes a fully engaged emotional tone that cleverly keeps us in suspense about the heroine's fate. This method of measured, well-punctuated revelations about Gilead connects symbolically with the novel's central meaning: misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy they may appear at their initial conception, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthlessly tyrannical nature.

Regardless of the novel's dystopian essence, it nevertheless avoids being solemn; on the contrary, it sustains an ironic texture throughout. We do not find too many frightening images that may compare with Oceanea's torture chambers: the few graphic horror scenes are crisply and snappily presented, sparing us a blood-curdling impact. (Some may criticise this restraint as undermining the novel's integrity and emotional validity.) As in all dystopias, Atwood's aim is to encourage the reader to adopt a rational stance that avoids total *suspension of disbelief*. This rational stance dislocates full emotional involvement in order to create a Brechtian type of alienation that, in turn, generates an ironic charge. This rational stance too should not be total, because Atwood does want us to care sympathetically about her heroine's fate; hence the emotional distance between reader and character must allow for closeness, but up to a point. Furthermore, Atwood is equally keen on preserving the ironic flair intact. No wonder then that she concludes *The Handmaid's Tale* with a climactic moment of irony: she exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues.... The entire *Historical Notes* at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognising or experiencing the pathos expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed in ritualistic, fashionable jargon, but no spirited illumination ever comes out of their endeavours. Atwood soberly demonstrates that when a critic or scholar (and by extension a reader) avoids, under the guise of scholarly objectivity, taking a moral or political stand about an issue of crucial magnitude such as totalitarianism, he or she will necessarily become an apologist for evil; more significantly, the applause the speaker receives gives us a further compelling glimpse into a distant future that still harbours strong misogynous tendencies

While the major dystopian features can clearly be located in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony. Dramatising the interrelationship between power and sex, the book's feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically. The novel's ironic tone, on the other hand, betokens a confident narrative strategy that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet firmly, openly and conclusively, thus skilfully succeeding in securing the reader's sympathy and interest. The novel shows Atwood's strengths both as an engaging story-teller and a creator of a sympathetic heroine, and as an articulate craftswoman of a theme that is both current and controversial. As the novel signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Atwood's creative career, her self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre.

## UNITS

*(Separate task-sheets to accompany the approaches outlined below are available and are stored in the tall frame in B11. Tutors will advise students on the selective use of these.)*

### UNIT 1: Title, dedications, epigraph & chapters 1-13.

This unit explores: -

- the significance and implications of the word *handmaid*, the reference to Perry Miller, Mary Webster, the passage from Genesis, Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (see Appendix) and the Sufi proverb;
- Atwood's use of narrative detail, especially of interiors;
- categorisation of people, especially women, in Gilead into function-groups;
- the character and reliability of Offred as narrator;
- Offred's relationships with her mother, Moira and Serena Joy;
- language-use, including: surreal language, slang, Biblical language;

#### ***freedom to and freedom from***

- indoctrination
- clusters of images, symbols and motifs.

## UNIT 2: chapters 14 – 24.

This unit explores: -

Atwood's presentation of the Commander through Offred's narrative in the *Household* section;

patriarchy; microcosm & macrocosm;

Offred's character-development;

*Birth Day*: horror/commonplace/black humour;

*woman's culture*;

twinning/pairing

## UNIT 3: chapters 25 – 30.

This unit explores: -

Offred's visits to the Commander's room;

the origins of the Gileadean regime (Luke and Offred);

Offred and Ofglen;

*Vogue* magazine – its significance.

## UNIT 4: chapters 31 – 39.

This unit explores: -

*Jezebel's*: group discussion on issues raised by this section of the novel – responses to specific quotations;

the role and significance of Moira;

## UNIT 5: chapters 40 – 46.

This unit explores: -

Offred as narrator – disjointed narrative and structure;

the importance of communication;

*Night* sections – significance & effect;

fairytale and children's stories;

pairings/opposites & ambiguity in the final chapters;

Offred – further character development;

Offred/reader relationship: shifting tone from detached to fully engaged;  
executions – narrative style and perspective.

UNIT 6: *Historical Notes.*

This unit explores: -

function of this section: perspective on Offred's narrative, what it adds,  
Pieixoto's role and character, tone of lecture;

changes in society since Gilead? – lessons learned/not learned?

***THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

**UNIT 1: Title, dedications, epigraph & ch. 1-13.**

**Task 1**

What can we learn, from the title, dedications and the three quotations which form the epigraph, about Atwood's purposes in writing the novel?

Hints: -

consider implications of the word *handmaid* and other *Tales* in literature;

Perry Miller was Atwood's American Studies Professor at Harvard and an expert on Puritan history;

Mary Webster, one of Atwood's Puritan ancestors, was hanged for a witch at Connecticut in 1683, but survived the hanging and was allowed to go free;

read Genesis 30;

read Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (see appendix in study guide);

consider the Sufi proverb

## Task 2

What does Atwood achieve by the use of dense narrative detail, especially when describing the interiors of rooms? Focus on chapters 1, 2, 9 & 12. From each of these chapters select examples of the detailed description of everyday objects and suggest how Atwood uses these details to: -  
link past with present;  
link one character with another  
create a certain mood or narrative voice

## Task 3

People in Gilead, especially women, are categorised and separated into functions. Draw up columns and record details of these function-groups. Leave room to add to your columns as you work through the rest of the novel.

Group name	Colour-code	Details of function/ lifestyle/speech etc.
1. Handmaids 2. Marthas 3. Aunts ..... and so on	red	Enforced separation from families & surrogate motherhood/no individual identity/ virtual prisoners of state/ names – patronymics based on Commanders': Offred= Of Fred/forced to use restricted Biblical language/infertility punishable by removal to Colonies and death as – <i>unwomen...</i>

#### **Task 4**

Assess what you have learned so far about the character of Offred and her reliability as narrator.

Make a flow chart with Offred's name at its centre. Aspects to include could be: -

how she behaved in the *time before*;

how she responds to the repressive regime of Gilead: is she merely passive or are there hints that she may eventually rebel?

how reliable is her memory?/would she have any reason to distort the truth deliberately?/who is her audience?

Provide quotations and page references to support your comments.

#### **Task 5**

Examine Offred's relationships with three key figures: her mother, Moira and Serena Joy. In what ways is she like them? In what significant ways is she different?

#### **Task 6**

Collect examples of the three types of language used by various characters in ch.1-13:

Offred's almost surreal language when she attempts to sink inside her own body (p.83-84);

slang used by Moira, Offred and Offred's mother in the *time before*;

the official, Biblical language of Gilead, used by the Aunts and Handmaids.

What effects does Atwood achieve through these contrasting types of language?

### **Task 7**

*'There is more than one kind of freedom,' said Aunt Lydia. 'Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from... We were a society dying', said Aunt Lydia, 'of too much choice.'* (p. 34-35)

Consider exactly what Aunt Lydia means by *freedom to and freedom from*. How does Atwood suggest in these chapters that some feminists may have contributed to their own loss of freedom? (See pages 34, 35, 48 & 49.)

### **Task 8**

*'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.'* (p.43)

What evidence is there in ch. 1-13 that Offred has already become indoctrinated to some extent? See pages 38, 39, 59 etc.... Collect quotations with page references as evidence.

### **Task 9**

Start to collect examples of the various clusters of images, symbols and leitmotifs. Comment on the language and possible interpretations of each example. Begin with ch.

1-13 and add to your lists as you work through the novel.  
Set aside a sheet of A4 for each cluster: -

colour and light

human body and mutilation

animals and nature

parings and opposites

mirrors

fairytale

(any others)

## *The Handmaid's Tale*

### **UNIT 2: CH. 14-24**

#### **Task 1**

Consider how Atwood presents the character of the Commander through Offred's narrative in the *Household* section: ch.14-17. How do you, the reader, and Offred feel towards him? Does he evoke strong negative or positive feelings or a more neutral and mixed response? To what extent does her account condition your response? Provide examples from the text to support your views.

#### **Task 2**

The regime in the Commander's household and in Gilead as a whole can be linked. Both could be described as *patriarchal* regimes. Use a dictionary to establish the meaning of this. Consider what features the two regimes

have in common. Look up the term's *microcosm* and *macrocosm*; could they be relevant here? How? Explain.

### **Task 3**

Discuss and make notes on the **development** of Offred's character in these chapters. Make another flow chart, again with Offred's name at its centre. Include: -

change in tone of narrative and relationship with audience: see p.89-90 etc.....;

her less passive role: ch. 14 & 15;

her first real act of rebellion: see ch.17;

a sense of individuality and hope re-emerging: see ch. 23 & 24;

relationships with Commander and Nick and ending of ch. 24.

### **Task 4**

Atwood often combines or juxtaposes commonplace, everyday details with horrific elements very effectively. Focus on ch. 19-21 in which the *Birth Day* is described. Pick out details to show how the black humour of this episode is sustained.

### **Task 5**

*Mother, I think. Wherever you are. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists.* p.136.

What did Offred's mother mean by *a woman's culture*? Does Offred blame her to some extent for what has happened? How would you describe Offred's relationship with her mother? Quote from the text to support your comments.

### **Task 6**

One of Atwood's recurrent devices in the novel is that of twinning or pairing. With which other characters is Offred twinned or paired in these chapters? Quote details from the text. See p.101, 104, 106, 109 etc....

## ***THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

### **UNIT 3: CH. 25-30**

#### **Task 1**

Offred's regular visits to the Commander's room have brought about a significant change in her relationships with the Commander and Serena Joy. What has changed and why? Make notes with details from the text and page references.

#### **Task 2**

Pages 182-192 fill in details of how the Gileadean regime came about. Make a list of events in order, starting as follows: -

President of U.S.A. and congressmen assassinated

Army declares state of emergency

newspapers censored or closed down

Compare Offred's reactions to the changes with Luke's. What is significant or worrying, for Offred, about their different reactions? Quote from the text. Give the following extract careful consideration: -

*That night, after I'd lost my job, Luke wanted me to make love. Why didn't I want to? Desperation alone should have driven me. But I felt numbed. I could hardly even feel his hands on me.*

*'What's the matter?' he said.*

*'I don't know,' I said.*

*'We still have...' he said. But he didn't go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn't be saying 'we', since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.*

*'We still have each other,' I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent?*

*He kissed me then, as if now I'd said that, things could bet back to normal. But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was as small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.*

*'He doesn't mind this,' I thought. 'He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his.'* (p.191)

### **Task 3**

Focus on ch. 27. What is interesting about Atwood's presentation of the relationship between Offred and Ofglen, particularly her use of language and imagery? Select relevant details and comment on their effectiveness.

#### **Task 4**

What is the significance of the Commander's gift to Offred of a copy of *Vogue*? With which of Atwood's favourite motifs are such magazines associated? See p. 164-166.

### ***THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

#### **UNIT 4: CH. 31-39**

#### **Task 1**

This unit covers the section entitled *Jezebel's* in the novel. *Jezebel's* is a state-run brothel in which the privileged men who frequent it are indulging the same male sexual fantasies as in the time before Gilead. Work in small groups and discuss what you think is meant by each of the following comments and how you react to them. Appoint a group leader, whose task is to give everyone a fair chance to be heard. Aim to collect a range of views, but avoid a general *free for all*. Focus on the novel: -

p.128: *Sometimes the movie she (Aunt Lydia) showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies and eighties... 'Consider the alternatives,' said Aunt Lydia. 'You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then.'*

p.130: *'I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies... They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football.'*

p. 221: *'The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them any more... There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for.'*

p. 232: *'Those years (of equality) were just an anomaly, historically speaking,' the Commander said. 'Just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm.'*

p. 245: *He (Commander) slips around my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band, like tags for airport luggage. 'If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental.'*

p. 248: *...and as he talks his spine straightens imperceptibly, his chest expands, his voice assumes more and more the sprightliness and jocularly of youth. It occurs to me he is showing off.*

p. 249: *'It means you can't cheat Nature,' he says. 'Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan... Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes in the old days? To trick men into thinking they were several different women. A new one for each day.'*

p. 255: *They like to see you painted up. Just another crummy power trip.*

Finally, decide in your groups what messages Atwood is trying to put across here about relationships between men and women. How relevant are these messages for today's society?

## **Task 2:**

Focus on p. 261-262. Why is Offred so desperate to create a heroic ending for Moira? What does it reveal about both women? Why is Moira's character so important in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

## ***THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

### **UNIT 5: CH. 40-46**

## **Task 1**

Focus on the first six paragraphs of ch. 41, in which Offred talks about herself as narrator. She calls her story *limping and mutilated*. In what ways do the structure and narrative styles of the novel match this description. Discuss this with a partner.

Why do you think Atwood has created this sense of fragmentation and apparent lack of structure? **Is** the novel unstructured or is this merely an illusion? What is Atwood trying to do? Does she succeed? Provide textual evidence in support of your views.

## **Task 2**

*...it hurts me to tell it over, over again,* says Offred of her story. Why, then, does she tell it? What is Atwood saying about **communication** in *The Handmaid's Tale*? Find quotations from elsewhere in the novel, which indicate the importance of communication.

### Task 3

This unit opens with a *Night* section. What is noticeable or different about the content, mood, style and tone of these sections of the novel? Select examples from the text to illustrate your answer.

### Task 4

Atwood refers to the grotesque *dance* of the executed handmaids in their red shoes on p.289. What story does she have in mind and how is it connected with the story of Offred? Look for other references to fairytales and children's stories in the novel and try to explain their significance. Make a list in two columns: -

fairytales	significance in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>
1. p. 18: <i>Like a path through a forest...</i> the path through the forest usually leads characters in fairytales into safety or danger (e.g. <i>Hansel &amp; Gretel, Babes in the Wood, Red Riding Hood, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i> etc.).	Offred's <i>journey</i> in the novel leads her either to freedom or to death – the ending is ambiguous – but, like the little girl in the red shoes, she has risked death for the sake of art (communication).
2. p. 19: <i>myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A sister, dipped in blood.....</i>  etc.	Like <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , Offred wears red and carries a basket. The home-baked items in Red Riding Hood's basket are gifts for the kindly grandma (matriarch), but it is the wolf who awaits her. Offred is safe provided she obeys and is able to exchange fertility for her continued safety, but the patriarchal state (wolf) will dispose of her if she fails.

### **Task 5**

Examine Atwood's use of the following in these final chapters: -

pairings and opposites

ambiguity

Quote examples of each and comment on their effect.

### **Task 6**

How would you describe Offred's character and state of mind at the end? In what ways has her character developed and how have these changes come about?

### **Task 7**

By careful selection of quotations, **at least one from each of units 1-5**, try to trace the gradual development of Offred's relationship with the reader, starting with the distant, detached tone of the early chapters - (*I try not to think too much.....Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last.*) – moving through various stages to the fully engaged tone on the final pages – (*By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there. I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.*)

### **Task 8**

How effective is Offred's account of the two horrific executions? Look at **tone** in particular.

***THE HANDMAID'S TALE***  
**UNIT 6: *HISTORICAL NOTES***

**Task 1**

Consider why you think Atwood has ended her novel with this distant perspective on the events Offred has described. How has your reading of *Historical Notes* changed your understanding and interpretation of Offred's account? What would the novel lose if this section were omitted?

**Task 2**

Examine the character of Pieixoto. How is he presented? What are his main concerns in examining the transcripts of Offred's tape recordings? Can you detect Atwood's attitude towards him? Describe the tone of his lecture. What is his function in the novel? Quote from the text to support your answer.

**Task 3**

In what ways has society changed since the Gileadean era? Which lessons have been learned; which have not? There are five significant periods of time in the novel: -  
1950s & 1960s – Offred's childhood with her mother;  
1970s & 1980s – Offred's student days with Moira and marriage to Luke;

Gilead (Atwood's fictitious society – probably around 1990s – 2000;

The time in which the novel is read: i.e. 1987 onwards;  
2195 – Pieixoto's lecture in Denay Nunavit.

Think, in particular, about attitudes to women, freedom, individuality and equality in each of these periods. Here are a few quotations to start you off. Find some more of your own from each period of time: -

1950s/1960s: *A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. 'Just do the job, then you can bugger off,' I said, 'I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare.'* (Offred's mother: p.130-131)

1970s/1980s: *I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes.* ( Offred: p.189)

Gilead: *'You are the transitional generation,' said Aunt Lydia. 'It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.'* ...*She said: 'Because they won't want things they can't have.'* (Aunt Lydia: p.127)

2195: *Thank you. I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word 'enjoy' in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (Pieix: p. 312)*