The Handmaid's Tale

Revision Notes

Quite simply, the easiest way to revise a novel is to re-read it. I’m not suggesting for a moment that you need to pour over the novel in the same that you did as we read it; I suggest that you skim the novel, looking for specific examples from your revision list.

In the IOC you will need to be able to identify the key themes and characters in the novel and to draw upon your knowledge of the text for examples.

The most important thing to remember on the day is not to panic!
- You will have guiding questions, one of which will likely have a section of the text upon which you must comment, whilst the other will be a theme or character based question.
- Go with your gut instinct and jot down your ideas as soon as you can.
- You then need to organise your ideas into a logical order and begin to plan.
- Do any of the quotes you have learned fit in here? Can you perhaps make them work for you? You could even try to use them against you.
- Make the passage work for you. You are not being tested on what you don’t know – it’s what you do know and how you express it that is what counts.
Characters

**Offred**
- We never learn her real name – only identification is through the patronymic Offred.
- She is both protagonist and narrator and is the most realised character.
- Reader has great sympathy for Offred but feels let down by her marginalisation.
- Previous life is characterized by motherhood, marriage, work and friendship.
- She was not political and did not foresee what was going to happen.
- Only means of survival is through small rebellions.
- She has an ironic, cynical sense of humour and a strong sense of holding onto the past. As a result, she never adopts the role of Handmaid psychologically.
- She separates her body from her mind to prevent a mental collapse.
- Her life is very restricted so in order to remain intellectually healthy she plays word games with herself.
- She is an astute observer and describes those around her in a satirical and precise way.
- She is a self-conscious narrator – she reminds the reader of the flaws in the act of storytelling. She is only human after all. Hers is a very subjective narrative. She has to recount unpleasant experiences in order to communicate the truth of her experiences.
- She retains a sense of privacy – we never hear about her first night with Nick, her daughter’s real name or even her own.
- She is both independent and feminine – middle ground between extremes of feminism.
- She is educated and intelligent – recognises and highlights the ironies and contradictions of the ‘time before’ and of the Gileadean regime.
- She has limited choices but takes responsibility for her actions.

> ‘Thinking can hurt your chances and I intend to last.’
> ‘Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?’
> ‘The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet.’ (pg 48)
> ‘We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance. You have to work at it.’ (pg 66)
> ‘I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.’ (pg 76)
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‘What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth...Otherwise you live in the moment...Live in the present, make the most of it, it’s all you’ve got.’ (pg 153)

‘I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it.’ (pg 279)

‘What else do we know about her...Not very much’

Remember: The reader only sees the other characters through Offred’s eyes.
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**The Commander**

- The description of the Commander is constantly changing as Offred’s feelings towards him change.
- He is quite an elusive character despite the fact that his is the strongest relationship Offred has.
- Ruthless and imposing, well educated and clever.
- Among the elite who are responsible for the implementation of the Gileadean regime.
- He is blind to the effects of the regime he helped to introduce. He genuinely believes that the regime is a good thing.
- He shows no remorse over the death of the previous Offred.
- He too is lonely and isolated in his own regime and has to break some of the rules he introduced.
- Becomes more and more unlikeable as the novel progresses.
- Paternal and patronising to Offred.
- His behaviour at Jezebels reveals his ignorance and deeply sexist opinions.
- Appears to be a vulnerable old man as he watches Offred being taken away.
- He gives the regime a human face. He seems to be an average kind of guy.

‘I can see now, it’s the Commander, he isn’t supposed to be here … He is violating custom.’ (pg 59)

‘He looks like a midwestern bank president…his manner is mild…He looks over us as if taking inventory…He manages to appear puzzled, as if he can’t quite remember how we all got in here.’ (pg 97)

‘This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.’ (pg 105)

‘For him, I must remember, I am only a whim.’ (pg 168)

‘How can I describe what really goes on between us?’ (pg 235)

‘Tonight I have a little surprise for you,’ he says. He laughs; it’s more like a snigger. I notice that everything this evening is little. He wishes to diminish things, myself included.’ (pg 241)

‘He is showing me off, to them…but he is also showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He’s breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it.’ (pg 306)
Serena Joy

- Most important female figure in Offred’s daily life.
- Representation of the spurned wife. She is desperate to have children but unable to, so she suffers the procreation arrangements.
- Indulges her mothering instincts by nurturing plants in her garden and knitting.
- Serena Joy is trapped in her own ideals.
- Frustration and unhappiness are evident in her chain-smoking and surly manner.
- Characteristics are: jealousy, gossipping, cold and vindictive.
- Serena Joy believes in love – her love for her husband verges on possessiveness.
- She is both wretched and generous to Offred.
- Mixed feelings when Offred leaves.
- Serena Joy arouses the reader’s sympathy.

‘I am a reproach to her; and a necessity.’

‘Which of us is it worse for, her or me?’ (pg 106)

Moira

- She is a very strong character with a strong sense of survival which pervades her actions.
- Possibly the most influential character on Offred. She is a beacon of hope for Offred.
- Unconventional and self-assured, individual and funny.
- Her humour at the Red Centre is important to the other Handmaids as it is the only weapon they have against the tyranny of the Aunts. But she jokes about everything and tries to laugh off danger.
- Politically feminist and lesbian. Very conscious of her rights.
- Betrays herself and her ideals at Jezebel’s.
- Despite several attempts to escape, she is captured and condemned to a factious life within the regime.

‘She was now a loose woman.’

‘I’d like to say she blew up Jezebel’s, with fifty commanders inside it...But as far as I know that didn’t happen. I don’t know how she ended...because I never saw her again.’ (pg 262)
Nick
- Attractive and sexy but with an air of mystery. His motives and desires are never revealed.
- He is an Eye and a trusted member of the Commander’s household.
- He shows a rebellious streak when he winks at Offred and touches her feet during the Prayers.
- He fulfils Offred’s fantasy of being rescued. Possibly a member of Mayday.

Luke
- ‘New man’ of the twentieth century: involved in child rearing, cooking, household chore and is supportive of Offred when she loses her job.
- Presented as a shadowy figure in Offred’s narrative – perhaps suggesting that he is (or she believes he is) dead.
- His memory is vital to her survival.
- He is the only person from the ‘time before’ who never resurfaces.

Offred’s mother
- Member of the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s.
- Records of her participation in events such as book burnings is based on facts – he exploits are taken to the extreme in Gilead.
- She is disappointed that Offred takes for granted the advances in women’s rights that her generation achieved.
- Links to Moira are obvious.
- Also links to Serena Joy – each woman is undermined by her own ideals in Gilead.
- She is reduced to being an Unwoman, clearing toxic waste in the colonies. She is used as an example in documentary films.

‘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.’ (pg 137)
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**Ofglen**
- Altruistic heroine – works tirelessly for the resistance movement. She shows mercy and bravado.
- Represents collective resistance in opposition to Moiré’s lone rebellion.
- Where Offred struggles with cowardice, Ofglen is decisive and courageous.
- Reacts very differently to Offred when she knows the black van is coming for her.
- Is her suicide an act of valour?

**Janine**
- Victim of freedom and oppression.
- Rape is a crime of power – Janine suffers twice in different ways. In the ‘time before’, when women were not protected she is gang raped, and as a handmaid, her Unbaby is destroyed. In both situations, she is a powerless individual woman, victimised by a powerful group of men.
- She is a devout believer in the system but is destroyed by its practices – she goes mad.

**Professor Pieixoto**
- Tries to be analytical and impartial about the text he is studying.
- Does not take Offred’s testimony seriously because of his inability to place it completely in a context of known historical facts.

‘The past is a great darkness and filed with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day’ (pg 324)

**The Aunts**
- Older women who train Handmaids, deliver births and preside over Salvagings.
- Betray other women through their collaboration with the new regime.
- Use physical punishment as a means of control.
- Names suggest that they are caring and supportive.

‘The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, Knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.’ (pg 33)
‘There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.’ (pg 34)

**Other characters**

- **Angels** – soldiers of the Gileadean army
- **Marthas** - female servants such as cooks and housekeepers
- **Guardians of the Faith** – members of the police force
- **The Eyes** – secret police within the police force
- **Econowives** – wives of common men
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Themes, Images and Narrative Devices

This section of the booklet contains revision information on Themes and Narrative Devices.

This revision pack is not the only revision you should be doing! It is merely a springboard from which you can begin the process. An excellent resource to employ is the purple booklet – start from page 51 and work onwards!

The themes, which are covered by this booklet, are by no means the definitive list. They are simply the themes which are most frequently commented upon, particularly in examinations. You will no doubt be able think of a whole host of connected themes and imagery used in the text and you should not be afraid to revise these in detail and use them in the examination.

In particular, we will be looking at:

- Dystopian Literature
- Women and Feminism
- Language
- Imagery and Motifs
- Social and Historical Context

If you think back to the lessons on The Handmaid’s Tale, we identified thematic strands such as:

- pornography
- social control
- censorship
- freedom
- the Bible
- the double
- the environment
- the past
- sex
- naming

and, you should have these annotated in your copy of the text from the class readings.
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The Dystopian Genre

- *The Handmaid’s Tale* is actually quite difficult to locate in terms of genre. On one level it’s a fictive autobiography; on another, science fiction; on another, romance. However the novel seems to fit best into the category of Dystopian Fiction.

- Dystopia is best described as the complete antithesis to Utopia. Dystopian literature presents a futuristic dysfunctional society, usually characterised by inequality and lack of freedom.

- Other novels in the genre include, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K Dick and of course, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell.

- *Handmaid* has very close links to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both novels feature:
  - an oppressive society governed by an elite in the very near future
  - characterised by a distorted language
  - societies are at war
  - propaganda
  - restriction of personal freedom

- An author’s purpose in writing dystopian fiction is to explore the possible development of current societal trends and warn readers of their potentially dangerous consequences.

- Atwood collected news clippings during the 80s and took the emerging trends to their logical extreme.

- Dystopian fiction often satirising the present.

- Satire: a form of writing in which societal practices are ridiculed to expose vice or folly. Atwood satirises feminism, religious fundamentalism, the dawn of the computer age and so on...

Gilead

- Atwood’s dystopia is a society based on brutality and force, which has adopted many of its ideals from the past. (see section on Historical context)

- The modern Gilead does not provide equality of opportunity for its citizens. This is ironic as Gilead uses Puritanism as a foundation, yet the Puritans originally fled to the New World to escape intolerance.

- As already mentioned, dystopian societies rely on propaganda as a means of social control. In chapter 14, Offred tells us ‘...it’s the Montreal satellite station, being blocked.’ No external information is allowed into the Republic.

- In chapter 19 we learn the reasons behind the formation of the Republic:
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- Environment is toxic from pollution
- Pollution has led to drop in the birth rate
- The Republic is in very real danger of dying out
- Agent Orange is blamed for many biological problems – this was used by the US in the Vietnam war – how far was the ‘time before’ a dystopia already?

- In a Utopian society, freedom is crucial to fulfilling the needs of the individual. Freedom allows individuals to realise their potential and contribute to society. In a dystopian society there is a lack of desire for freedom.
- Gilead is dysfunctional – characterised by the Commander. He should be a model member of society but in chapter 36 we learn that he takes joy in flouting the very rules he helped to introduce – ‘Up for a little excitement?’
- The society must be failing if its leaders, the very people whom it benefits, find its laws too restrictive!
- Chapter 45 – ‘I feel, for the first time, their true power’ is an allusion to Nineteen Eighty-Four. In Orwell’s novel the protagonist, Winston Smith, in a broken state, finally accepts the totalitarian regime ‘The Brotherhood’. However, Winston gives in after physical torture, Offred gives in because she is guilty at being a coward.
- The Historical Notes illustrate that Gilead was a dysfunctional society, a society not able to function properly – we learn that the Republic collapses.

Women and Feminism

- Feminism is a difficult word to define. Originally the term referred to equal rights for women.
- The first wave of feminism began in C19th and was concerned with the sexual division of labour.
- The second wave of feminism took place in the 1960s and was originally known as the Women’s Liberation Movement. Concerned with liberation from male subordination through language and culture. It seeks to create a woman-centred world view.
- 1980s some branches went beyond equality and demanded superiority over men. Many women felt criticised by feminists for wanting to stay at home with their children. (Offred’s mother).
- This splintering caused backlash – many people felt that such extremism within the movement was setting it and women back culturally.
- Atwood uses some of these militant feminist ideas in her novel:
  - desire for freedom from pornography
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- desire for freedom from sexual violence

- She creates a women’s culture – In Gilead, women are categorised according to their age, marital status and fertility. Women are controlled by other women.

- The novel has been described by many as pornographic. Some definitions state that pornography is any media or behaviour that is degrading to women. Atwood demonstrates that treating women as reproductive objects is degrading...

- Ultimately, all women lose more than they gain.

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- Chapter two – Offred no longer has the collective defiance available to her in the Red centre – she will have to fight for her survival herself.

- Gilead is a patriarchal society, yet there are women who hold some power. Each woman has power over the other, often regardless of the hierarchical structure. Aunts control the Handmaids – how are they portrayed?

- Perhaps interesting to note that the Commander’s Wife is introduced before the Commander BUT this is Offred’s feminine narrative.

- Chapter four – ‘I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there.’ Offred is aware of the sexual power she holds over men and swings her hips defiantly.

- Chapter seven – Offred is not allowed to write so her resistance is through her thoughts. She thinks about her mother who was feminist in the late 1960s – how is it ironic that Offred’s mother used to attend book burnings?

- In Offred’s mother we see the extreme results of the women’s movement and with Serena Joy we see the extreme results of the anti-feminism backlash.

- In Chapter eight, Offred notices the irony in SJ’s loss of status and her frustration at staying at home which was the ideal she used to preach. ‘How frustrated she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word.’

- Chapter eleven – ‘Give me children, or else I die’ – from the Bible (Genesis 30:1)

- Chapter twelve – Offred separates her mind from her body when she is about to bathe.

- ‘Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.’ Chapter thirteen – the handmaids believe that Janine brought her rape upon herself. Shows the extent to which the women are complicit in their own oppression.

- Chapter sixteen – the Ceremony. ‘Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable.’ Offred has no power in the act committed upon her body. Does SJ contribute to the violation against Offred or is she equally violated?
• Chapter nineteen – ‘I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.’ – biblical quote from Genesis. Eve is given pain in childbirth for eating the forbidden fruit – In Gilead natural childbirth is used to remind women of patriarchal control.

• Chapter twenty – ‘You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia...’ Atwood brilliantly juxtaposes this with Offred thinking about her mother. Her mother’s generation was also a transitional one.

• Chapter twenty two – Because Angels are not allowed to look at women they do not realise that Aunt Elizabeth is actually Moira!

• Chapter twenty six – ‘To him I am not merely empty’ – She is no longer an empty vessel to the Commander – she has shown that she is intellectual and the nature of their relationship has become more intimate; she is now his mistress.

• Chapter twenty eight – KEY CHAPTER – shows how women were complicit in their downfall. People seemed to be largely ignorant of the changes that were taking place.

• Chapter twenty nine – ‘The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains’ – Pen Is Envy. This comes from the Freudian theory of penis envy –that is that all women envy men their penis because it is external and therefore a more powerful symbol than the female genitalia. – Only the male elite are allowed pens and the pen, to Offred is a medium through which ideas can be represented. How does Offred suggest the creative force of the penis in her description of the feel of the pen??

• Chapter thirty four – ‘Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better.’

• Chapter thirty seven – Jezebel’s – Handmaids are used for procreation and prostitutes for sex – Why? How does this make Offred feel?

• Chapter thirty nine – the tattoo on Offred’s ankle reminds her that she is someone else’s property.

• Chapter forty three – the Participution – the feelings that have been stored up by the Handmaids now have an outlet – the scene is full of hysteria – Where does the word hysteria come from??

• Ofglen and Offred are opposites – where Ofglen is heroic, Offred is cowardly.

• Historical Notes – suggests that societal conditions for women got worse before they got better.
Language

- The language of The Handmaid’s Tale seems quite straightforward at first glance, but every word has been carefully chosen for specific effect.

- Atwood’s many allusions to literary and cultural sources demand a high level of cultural literacy.

- Many of the allusions become distorted – for example Aunt Lydia’s sayings outrageously distort biblical references. Atwood alludes to, among others, Freud, Shakespeare, Descartes, Chaucer and Karl Marx.

- There are also contemporary references to feminism, Islamic traditions, slavery, Puritanism, music such as Elvis and Beethoven.

- She invents neologisms (new words), a very common idea in Dystopian writing. Look at Econowives, Prayvaganzas, Salvagings and Particicution – What words have been used in their creation?

- Offred enjoys word play and often thinks about the multiple meanings of words.

- She also uses and variety of speech patterns, depending upon who she is speaking to.

- When Offred is in the Commander’s office in chapter twenty nine, she has no flashbacks. Her memories serve to exercise her language facilities. Her memories are a dialogue she has with herself, so when she is with the Commander she is already engaged in dialogue.

- The various characters also speak differently – look at the language used by Rita, Professor Pieixoto, the Commander and Offred – they all speak very differently, again something that Atwood has carefully crafted.
Imagery and Motifs

- The major motifs running through the text are flowers, doubles, eyes, missing persons, ghosts and food. You no doubt have many others you would add to this list.

- Flowers – The flowers in the story represent Offred. Offred has a painting of flowers in her room, the garden is important to Serena Joy and Offred, but they are a reproach to the Commander’s Wife as they are fruitful where she is barren. She tends them as though they are the children she cannot have.

- Chapter three – Offred identifies herself with the tulips which are ‘red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there.’

- Doubles – Offred leads two lives; interior and exterior; linear, physical, and sensory, memory, non-linear. She has two identities; Handmaid and mother, wife, lover. She has two names. She knows that she and Ofglen look like doubles as they shop. BUT remember, mirror images are often in reverse or opposites.

- Chapter 46 – ‘There were always two of us.’

- Many of the other characters have doubles – Nick and Luke, Moira and Ofglen, Moira and Janine.

- There are several references to eyes – she feels as though she is constantly being watched. There are the Eyes of the Lord, the secret police which are a very real manifestation, but she also makes reference to other characters’ eyes. She also says that the hole in her ceiling where the chandelier used to be looks like an eye.

- The text is full of ghosts or missing persons. Moira and Offred’s daughter are found, but Offred’s mother and Moira remain lost. Offred’s predecessor haunts her thoughts, and Offred becomes a ghost to her daughter. Other characters such as the Commander, Nick and Ofglen also miss their lives before. Offred also becomes a missing person.

- There are many references to the moon. In Roman mythology, Diana was the goddess of chastity and the moon – why is this symbolism relevant to Offred? Look at chapters twelve and thirteen where much of this imagery is employed.

- Chapter thirty – this entire chapter contains imagery of falling – re-read the chapter and find as many examples as you can.

- Chapter twenty four – ‘All I can hear is my own heart opening and closing, opening and closing, opening.’ On surface level, Offred seems to be falling asleep, but on a symbolic level, she is being transformed emotionally – her heart is opening to the Commander and then closing itself off again. The closing word ‘opening’ also prepares us for a change in the narrative.
**Social, Historical and Cultural Context**

- Many of the social, historical and cultural strains that have been woven together to create Gilead have their roots firmly in the past.
- Offred says, ‘It’s only recent history that offends them.’ Which particular current trends does she refer to?
- One aspect of the historical context of the novel is the founding of the United States. Followers of the Puritan religion who sailed on the Mayflower established the first successful settlement in America. They had a very strict moral and religious code. They regarded luxury, pleasure and social indulgence as sinful. They also originally used the birthing stool used in Janine’s delivery.
- The rise of the political right is represented by the Commanders.
- The novel also touches on another important area of American history, slavery. Like the slaves, Handmaids are referred to by their patronymic, they are separated from their birth families, they are tattooed, and should they escape, they are severely punished.
- More recent history is also drawn upon – the effects of late C20th environmental issues such as toxic pollution also play a part in the formation of Gilead.

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- Chapter one – the Aunts carry electric cattle prods, originally used during the American civil rights demonstrations of the 60s.
- Chapter thirteen - Offred looks at the C19th ‘erotic’ paintings with new eyes – she realises that cultural products are analyzed and valued according to the cultural baggage of the reader.
- Also in chapter thirteen, Atwood draws upon the growing idea during the 80s that women were somehow responsible for rape committed against them. Often, the victim would be put on trial for wearing provocative clothing etc.
- Chapter thirty eight –the Underground Femaleroad is a direct allusion to the Underground Railroad which took slaves from safe house to safe house to freedom in Canada.
- Historical Notes – Much of this section is a careful mockery of current academic practices – Atwood subverts the current trend of the study of ethnic groups as academic subjects and has non-Caucasian cultures studying Caucasian.
Narrative Techniques

- The novel is a mosaic of narrative genres – fictive biography, science fiction, dystopian fiction and romance.
- Three stories are being told at once – the ‘time before’, the time at the Red Centre and the present.
- As we read through the novel, the setting becomes increasingly familiar, thereby shifting our perception of the time period the story is set in the present.
- The reason for the fragmented story is explained by Professor Pieixoto in the Historical Notes.
- In Chapter two, Offred spends an inordinate amount of time describing her room. Due to her lack of freedom, her life becomes monotonous, so her imagination which remains free runs wild.
- Offred’s narrative is actually well-balanced and Atwood is always hinting at what is to come (foreshadowing). Look at the following examples and say which details resurface later in the story. (Chapter three – the introduction of Serena Joy, Chapter four – the introductions of Nick and Ofglen)
- The narrative switches relentlessly between time zones. More often than not, the present narrative is informed by the past. In this sense, Offred is like a palimpsest – traces of the past transcend the present.
- Offred is a self-conscious narrator who is aware of the limitations of narrating a reality and the human need for telling stories.
- Historical Notes are written in a completely different style – language of academia. Professor Pieixoto’s narrative is a reconstruction of Offred’s story from a male perspective.
- In her narrative, Offred gives a voice to the marginalised people in her society.
- Whose narrative though, is Professor Pieixoto concerned with??

Look in detail at:

- Chapter seven – The structure of Offred’s family’s escape from Gilead is important – it begins with the immediate after effects of Offred’s capture and works back – it’s like a camera lens zooming in and then widening out to let in more detail.
- Chapter twelve – In the build up to the Ceremony, a great sense of tension is built up – how?
- Chapter fourteen – Again, more details of Offred’s failed escape and capture, but told in reverse.
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- Chapter twenty two – Offred addresses the reader directly – ‘Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira.’ There is a hint that this may not be a written account. The narrative technique is tricky – Offred tells us the story of Moira’s escape through a retelling of Janine’s conversation with Aunt Lydia – lends itself to comedy.

- Chapter 40 – Pathetic Fallacy – a thunderstorm is brewing – foreshadowing a possible release of powerful emotions that Offred has been storing up.

Think about:

- Would you change the narrative structure at any point? How would you do it?
- What do you think is gained by the open ending of the story?

Quotes from Margaret Atwood

- ‘I do see the novel as a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality, although even that is a very malleable substance.’

- ‘People can be morally superior when they are in a position of relative powerlessness. For instance, if you’re a woman being victimised then you can afford moral superiority. But once you have power, you have to take responsibility.’

- ‘I don’t write pretty books. I know that.’

- ‘The readers...really have to labour to produce your text for themselves.’

- ‘There was a risk that (The Handmaid’s Tale) would be thought feminist propaganda of the most outrageous kind, which was not really what I intended. I was more interested in totalitarian systems...The character telling the story was brought up in our time, in our language.’

- ‘Offred was boxed in. How do you tell a narrative from the point of view of that person? The more limited and boxed in you are, the more important details become...Details, episodes separate themselves from the flow of time in which they’re embedded.’

All of the above quotations have been taken from a book called Margaret Atwood: Conversations edited by Earl Ingersoll – it’s in the library!
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Questions

1. How does Atwood present the Commander in the novel?

2. The following extract marks the beginning of the episode which deals with the birth of Ofwarren’s baby. By referring to both subject matter and style, consider the importance of the whole episode in the novel.

   While I’m eating the second egg, I hear the siren, at a great distance at first, winding its way towards me among the large houses and clipped lawns, a thin sound like the hum of an insect; then nearing, opening out, like a flower of sound opening, into a trumpet. A proclamation, this siren. I put down my spoon, my heart speeds up, I go to the window again: will it be blue and not for me? But I see it turn the corner, come along the street, stop in front of the house, still blaring, and it’s red. Joy to the world, rare enough these days. I leave the second egg half eaten, hurry to the closet for my cloak, and already I can hear feet on the stairs and the voices calling.

3. What contribution is made to the novel by the character Moira?

4. Consider the way Atwood presents Professor Pieixoto’s conference speech in The Historical Notes. What is its significance to the novel as a whole?