

Resource A

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Explanation 1 – a structural point

The contents page shows section titles alternating (roughly) with sections called NIGHT. So you might speculate that the NIGHT sections are likely to have a different function and/or style from the other sections.

In Activity 4, you will be working on the first three sections, up to page 50, trying to discern what is special about the NIGHT sections.

Explanation 2 – reader response, questions and prediction

'Novels are narratives, and narrative, whatever its medium – words, film, strip cartoon – holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers. The questions are broadly of two kinds, having to do with causality [e.g. whodunit?] and temporality [e.g. what will happen next?], each exhibited in a very pure form by the classic detective story and the adventure story, respectively' (David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, page 14. Reproduced with permission from Curtis Brown, London.

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What kinds of questions are raised in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Be very alert to this on your first reading as you can never have the first reading again. On any subsequent reading, you will already have a knowledge of the story as a whole, which will inform your reading of any of the parts. So record the questions as they occur to you, in a reading journal.

Explanation 3 – world of the book/setting

Any writer of fiction in which the setting differs markedly from the world inhabited by the reader, has to make the reader understand the world-of-the book (the setting). This can include historical fiction or, in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, speculative fiction. (This is Atwood's preferred term, though the book has twice been nominated for science fiction awards. Broadly, Atwood means that she is more interested in ideas and society than in imaginary future technology.) This book could also be called a near-future dystopia.

How is this induction of the reader to be done? Long exposition might be dull. However, making no explanation can be confusing for the reader, making the setting hard to visualise. Finding a better way is one of Atwood's early tasks in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of her solutions is to show the narrator's struggles to adjust to a new and very unpleasant political regime.

I NIGHT uses a memory of the narrator's. Set in an ex-college gymnasium, a setting familiar to most readers, a few odd features stand out, raising rather than answering questions for the reader about the world that the narrator inhabits. Examples would include the fact that the US no longer exists, the Aunts, the electric cattle prods. The reader expects these questions will be answered later in the story.

Explanation 4 – plotlines and the order of events

The Handmaid's Tale has two plotlines. The surface one is in the 'present-as-experienced by the narrator', and is written largely in the present tense.

This starts in section II SHOPPING. The narrator (as yet unnamed) is in residence in the Commander's house and goes shopping.

The sorts of questions it raises in me as a reader are not the usual future-driven ones of 'What will happen next?' but relate to the present ('What kind of world is this?') and the past ('How did US society come to be like this?').

This section also confirms, fleshes out, develops some of the hints and questions raised in I NIGHT.

In later chapters, choices and pinch points emerge for the narrator, the tension rises and the reader starts to care what happens to her. Then the reader starts to raise 'What will happen next?' types of questions.

The second plotline is about the past. It gradually fills in quite a lot of the backstory, thus explaining what kind of world this is, and some of how it came to be.