
Resource C

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Answer to Activity 1

Your list should include the following.

- Front cover: picture, title, author, approving critical sound bite. Produced by publisher to attract reader.
- Back cover: approving critical sound bites, publication details, barcode, ISBN number, price. Produced by publisher to attract reader and to help bookseller to locate/order book.
- Inside front cover: brief overview of story and praise for author. Produced by publisher to attract reader.
- List of author's other work.
- Three epigraphs: produced by author to condition readers' expectations.
- Contents page: includes 'Historical Notes'.
- Page giving title of first Section: I NIGHT.

Answer to Activity 2

Handmaid is an archaic or Biblical word for a female servant.

Tale suggests a personal testimony, or a story. The word 'tale' can be fact or fiction. It is a probable allusion to the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer, one of the earliest works of fiction in English.

Answer to Activity 3

The first epigraph is from the Bible. Whether or not this is significant in the world of the story will become clear later.

The content of the epigraph concerns childlessness, possibly seen as the will of God. A solution offered is what we would now call surrogate motherhood, via the wife's maid. Now we can make more sense of the 'handmaid' in the title. Note that in the epigraph the maid is not offered a choice, so this is a form of rape. So issues of childlessness, inequality and coercive sex seem to be raised.

The second epigraph is from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Couched in very urbane terms, this savage 18th-century satire is unlikely to be known by A level students, so the teacher will need to explain its significance.

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (that the problem of the starving poor of Ireland should be solved by eating their babies) is a *reductio ad absurdum* intended to challenge the reader to think about underlying issues, and not meant to be read realistically.

Atwood's use of this epigraph implies the same attitude towards the reader.

The third epigraph is a Sufi proverb, so its provenance is outside the experience of most Western readers; that said, it makes enough sense on its own. The suggestion is that in a profoundly hostile or deprived context (such as the desert), there is no limit on what desperate acts people may be driven to, no protection against hardship. An affliction may seem unbearable yet must be borne.

This suggests that the world of the story we will read is extremely bleak and full of suffering for the character(s) we will care about.

Answer to Activity 4 (though, of course, students may have raised other points too)

1 NIGHT Chapter 1

Q: Who is 'we'? It seems to include the list of names at the end of the chapter – all female.

Past tense 'we slept' referring to the more distant past 'in what had once been the gymnasium'.

'We had... army issue blankets, old ones that still said US.' This suggests that the United States government used to have jurisdiction in the world of the book but this is no longer the case.

Q: What has happened to change this?

'Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods...'

Q: Who are they? Are they real aunts? If not, what does the title mean? What or who are the electric cattle prods for?

By the end of the chapter it seems clear that a group of females are imprisoned in an old education building in a society different from ours but in the near future.

Q: How have these differences come about?

Answer – Section II SHOPPING

In our world (and the narrator's previous world), shopping is a consumerist activity in a capitalist society and the connotations of shopping are **either**:

necessity, hassle, chore, shopping for the family, problems parking the car, tiring, managing with insufficient money

or:

shopping for oneself (if you have plenty of money and time, then you have plenty of choices and it can be a pleasure – one of the glittering prizes promised by consumerism).

In the world of the book, shopping is quite different. It seems that food is rationed, money is no longer used, literacy is used less and/or discouraged. The narrator is constrained as to where, when and with whom she goes shopping, subjected to security checks and surveillance. She's told by the maid what food to acquire.

So the everyday activity of shopping is a way to show the reader a lot about the world of the book.

Answer – III NIGHT

Quote a) is full of repetition and wordplay. Most importantly, the narrator can choose to step out of her very constrained present ('out of my time') and choose what to think about. She chooses three memories, which provide the reader with a good deal of backstory.

The first is with her friend Moira (included in the list of names in I NIGHT) when they were students. Date rape is mentioned as part of normal life. Note that this is coercive sex, though not of the same type as in the epigraph.

The second is with her mother as a child, burning pornography – a part of normal life to which her mother, and some others, objected.

The third is in hospital or prison after her daughter has been taken away because she is considered 'an unfit mother'.

Quotes b) and c) show details of her past world, which is also the reader's present world. The suggestion is that the narrator's present world is very different.

Quote d) shows that she is struggling to make intellectual and emotional sense of what has happened to her. The repetition intensifies this.

Quote e) confirms the suggestion in quote c) that she belongs to a group of people for whom literacy and education are now forbidden.

It also makes us begin to doubt her reliability as a narrator; if she can't write things down, how can she remember them accurately, and indeed how does this book come to be in front of the reader?

Quote f) opens the last chunk of III NIGHT. The whole chunk is metafictional. The narrator asserts that this is not a story but real. She also declares that the reader cannot hear her and does not exist. On the other hand, the reader perceives the opposite – that s/he *does* exist, the narrator *can* be heard and that this *is* a story. So the previous and usual assumptions about the relationship between writer and reader are played with, unsettled.

'Every novel must have a narrator ... but not necessarily a narratee. The narratee is any evocation of or surrogate for the reader of the novel within the text itself. This can be as casual as the Victorian novelist's familiar apostrophe "Dear Reader,"... But a narratee, however constituted, is always a rhetorical device, a means of controlling and complicating the responses of the real reader who remains outside the text' (David Lodge, page 80) (David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, page 80. Reproduced with permission from Curtis Brown, London. Copyright ©David Lodge]

On the whole the NIGHT sections do not advance the plot, but rather fill in the backstory and show the narrator's inner thoughts. However, other parts of the narrative do this too. The last two NIGHT sections, XIII and XV do advance the plot. Could this be because in the world of the narrator, her inner/past world and outer/present world are converging?

Answer to Activity 5

The narrator has become attached to Nick. Ofglen kills a political prisoner to shorten his suffering and prevent the betrayal of others. Ofglen is discovered and hangs herself before her arrest. Serena discovers Offred has been seeing the Commander illegally.

All these contribute to a sense of impending doom, and prepare the reader to fear for Offred's arrest while hoping for her escape in the final section XV.

Answer to Activity 6

Many readers find the ending abrupt and dissatisfying. Having identified with Offred, they want to know her fate.

Answer to Activity 7

The Historical Notes are an annoyance to many readers, but force us to think. In addition, Atwood, a master craftsman, has her reasons for including them, which may include the following.

- They are a framing and distancing device from the fiction, yet a part of the fiction, enriching it and making it more multidimensional.
- The Historical Notes go some way towards answering the questions/uncertainties raised by the ending of the novel, suggesting that Offred survived and the rebellion triumphed.
- The Historical Notes fill in a lot more backstory as to how the Republic of Gilead came about (the second plotline).
- They take the form of a parody of an academic symposium, shifting into a ponderous scholarly style, and might be seen at one level as a learned joke.

- They also provide some satire/critique on present day society, as speculative fiction is likely to do. For example, references to sexually transmitted diseases, pollution, birth services and government measures to increase the birth rate in Romania in the 1980s.
- Doubt is thrown on the reliability of the narrative when we learn that the tapes on which the narrative was recorded were jumbled and their sequence had to be guessed at by a pair of academics.

'If realism often tells the reader what to think, postmodern fiction puts the emphasis on the work of interpretation ... By making the novel more demanding and complex to understand, it is refusing a simple closure or ending and asks more of the reader ... Closure is a way of closing down the idea or argument: to reject closure is to be interested in opening arguments up ... While appearing to be playful and obviously fictional, many postmodern novels are deeply involved in politics and ethics' (Eaglestone, pages 12–13). (Extract from *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* by Robert Eaglestone, p.12-13, Oxford University Press 2013. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press)