



# The HANDMAID'S tale

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE FOR GRADE 12**

---

"There is nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* that didn't happen somewhere."

- MARGARET ATWOOD -



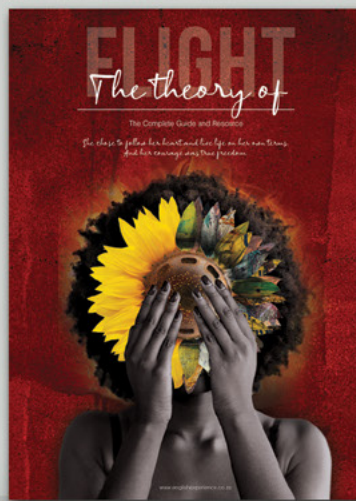
# IEB MATRICS

## WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

***The Handmaid's Tale:***  
**Complete Guide and Resource**



***The Theory of Flight:***  
**Complete Guide and Resource**



***The Tempest: Complete***  
**Guide and Resource**



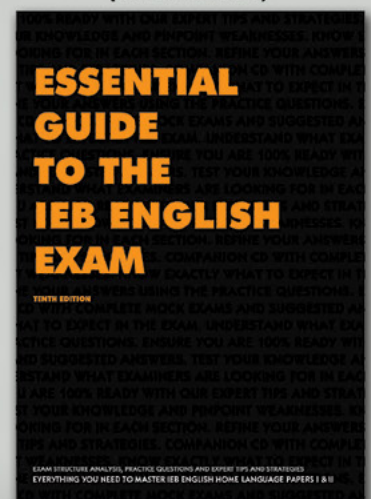
***The Complete IEB***  
**Poetry Resource for Grade 12**  
**(Sixth Edition)**



***The Complete Life Orientation***  
**Resource for Grades 10-12**



***Essential Guide to the IEB***  
**English Exam for Grade 12**  
**(Tenth Edition)**



**The English Experience**  
Publishers of high-quality educational resources  
[www.englishexperience.co.za](http://www.englishexperience.co.za)  
[info@englishexperience.co.za](mailto:info@englishexperience.co.za)  
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

the  
**English**  
experience

# The Handmaid's Tale

THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE FOR GRADE 12

**PUBLISHED AND EDITED BY: THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE**

**ISBN: 978-1-77634-566-3**

All references made to the novel in this resource and the companion disc refer to the Vintage 2010 edition of the novel (ISBN 978-00995-11-663).

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## COPYRIGHT THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE 2022

Copyright subsists in this work. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this resource may be copied, adapted, reproduced, duplicated or used in any form or by any means (graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems) or otherwise dealt with without the prior written consent of The English Experience CC first being obtained. Any such unauthorised acts constitute copyright infringement and expose the infringer to action under civil law and, in certain circumstances, to criminal sanctions.

**Please note:** Encrypted paper has been used in this resource to protect our copyright.



# Table of Contents

## Foreword

About the English Experience.....	6
Our approach.....	7
Using this resource.....	8

## Background to the novel

### Author background

Author biography.....	10
Author quotes: The author in her own words.....	15

### Historical context

Writing <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> in West Berlin .....	25
The United States in the early 1980s .....	27
America in the 1600s .....	28
The Salem witch trials .....	29

### Literary context

Speculative fiction.....	31
Science fiction: The 'literature of ideas'.....	32
Dystopian fiction .....	33
Feminist science fiction.....	35
Literary allusions and possible influences: The Bible and <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> .....	38
Enrichment task.....	40

## Introduction to the novel

Synopsis.....	44
Major characters .....	46
Social hierarchy of Gilead .....	52
Timeline of events.....	54

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD
BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL
INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL
CRITICAL COMMENTARY
LITERARY ANALYSIS
LITERARY ESSAY
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Themes.....	57
Fast facts .....	62
Enrichment task.....	63

## Critical commentary

### Preparation

Reading novels for academic analysis.....	69
Detecting patterns of meaning and form .....	69
Glossary of important literary terms.....	71

### Summaries and analyses

Using this section .....	72
I. Night .....	72
II. Shopping.....	74
III. Night.....	87
IV. Waiting Room.....	90
V. Nap .....	103
VI. Household.....	106
VII. Night .....	111
VIII. Birth Day.....	117
IX. Night.....	130
X. Soul Scrolls.....	132
XI. Night.....	147
XII. Jezebel's.....	150
XIII. Night .....	174
XIV. Salvaging.....	176
XV. Night .....	186
Historical Notes.....	188
Enrichment tasks .....	192

## Literary analysis

Plot summary.....	198
Narration and structure.....	201
Character analysis.....	205
Themes.....	217
Symbols.....	230



Motifs .....	233
Important quotations .....	236
Enrichment tasks .....	244

## Literary essay

Essay writing techniques .....	260
Annotated essay examples .....	267
Practice essay questions .....	271
Examination preparation .....	278
Revision reading quiz .....	280
Suggested further reading .....	284

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	285
-------------------------------	-----

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Foreword

## About the English Experience

*The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind the English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate – enriching and challenging both educators and students – without losing sight of the important goals of academic success and examination readiness.*

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource the English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features – including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials – designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher-order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as historical fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers – together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help to ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While academic success is a non-negotiable consideration, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.

*'One must always be careful of books,  
and what is inside them,  
for words have the power to change us.'*

- CASSANDRA CLARE -



Visit [www.englishexperience.co.za](http://www.englishexperience.co.za) to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code using the camera on your device or phone to launch the site automatically. Please note that you may need to have a 'tag reader' app installed. There are free versions of these apps available, which you can download from the app store on your device.



# Our approach

Perhaps the toughest challenge with teaching literature to modern students is convincing them that the extra effort required in reading a novel – compared with the passive immediacy of movies and TV shows – is worth it. Decoding the language and bringing the text to life in the imagination can be taxing for young adults so it is perhaps not surprising that many of them see novels as works through which they must slog to earn marks or pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind. Even though the language, themes and settings of the novel are likely to be easily accessible to Grade 12 students, particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help them empathise fully with the characters and their struggles.



**Reading a written description of a person, event or place encourages us to use our imaginations as we picture everything in our minds, unlike watching a movie or TV show, which creates these images for us on the screen. Ultimately, we are only limited by what we can imagine.**

We passionately believe that studying literature rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and those around us. Our experience of this rewarding understanding is why this resource does more than provide students with a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the text. It also encourages them to engage with the novel on a personal level and to develop their own responses through the extensive chapter-specific questions, enrichment tasks and essay topics.

Throughout this resource, students are challenged to agree or disagree with both the characters and events in the novel and the analysis that has been suggested. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the novel, students are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals, as well as learners.

Ultimately, we have approached *The Handmaid's Tale* the same way we approach every text: with two interrelated goals in mind. Our first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and academic success. Our second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Using this resource

*This comprehensive resource includes: an extensive introduction to the author, the novel and its context; detailed summaries; rich literary analyses; diverse, chapter-specific short questions; challenging essay questions; and stimulating enrichment tasks – in short, everything needed to study the novel intensively and bring it to life.*

### Preparing with the right mindset

We recommend working through the **Background to the novel** section first so that students become familiar with the author and the context of the novel. This section starts with an introduction to the author so that students can gain an understanding of the experiences that helped shaped her perspectives and inspired her to write the novel, together with her explanation of the issues she wished to explore and her interpretation of the novel.



© coreymill (DeviantArt)

Next, a succinct discussion of the genre of dystopian fiction and science fiction, and the sub-genre of feminist science fiction is provided to help students situate the novel within its **Literary context**.

Since the characters in the novel are shaped by their experiences as citizens of the patriarchal theocracy of Gilead, a brief introduction to the historical eras and social movements that inspired the depiction of that world is provided to help students interpret the

perspectives and motivations of the characters more completely.

The **Introduction to the novel** completes the preparatory section of this resource. It provides students with an initial overview and appreciation of the plot, characters and themes of the work, before they engage with the text itself.

By working through this comprehensive introductory section first, students will be prepared, engaged and able to read the novel with the right mindset.

### Assimilating the novel methodically

Once students have been prepared and have read through the novel, the chapter-based summaries and analyses provided in the **Critical commentary** section ensure that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid.

Each chapter is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included, and students are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions.

Students can then methodically build on this foundation, only dealing with the whole novel once they have worked through it step by step.

At the end of the summaries, there is also a series of enrichment tasks which, together with the wide selection of rigorous essay topics in the **Literary essay** section, ensures that students also tackle the novel in its entirety.



## Analysing the novel intensively

When students are familiar and comfortable with the novel, they can begin analysing the text more intensively and critically. The **Literary analysis** section includes detailed analyses of the plot, narration and structure, characters, themes, motifs and symbols in the work. It also highlights key quotations from the novel, with suggested interpretations.

## Ensuring examination readiness and success

To ensure examination readiness and success, the resource also features an extensive section on the **Literary essay**. This section provides guidelines on writing literary essays, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a selection of essay topics. It also includes suggested further reading, a useful revision quiz and suggestions on how to prepare for an examination.



© Leslie Balleweg



### What do you think?

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us by emailing [info@englishexperience.co.za](mailto:info@englishexperience.co.za) or calling our offices on (011) 786-6702.

### Key to using the boxes in this resource:



#### Definition / Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text



#### Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information



#### Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic



#### Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily



#### Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention or of which you need to be aware



#### Quote

An interesting or important quotation from the novel

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Background to the novel

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Author background

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, author Margaret Atwood has created a powerful and disturbing novel that explores the notions of identity, freedom, power, sexuality, religion, gender roles, storytelling and memory set in a near-future patriarchal theocracy. In this section, we present a short biography of the author, followed by a collection of her comments and observations regarding the novel, what inspired her to write it and the issues she wished to explore in the text.

### Author biography



© Gordon Hay (margaretatwood.ca)

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa in Canada on 18 November 1939 to Carl Edmund and Margaret Dorothy Atwood. For much of her early childhood, she, along with her mother and older brother, Harold Leslie (her sister, Ruth, was born later, in 1951) would accompany Carl Atwood – an **entomologist** – on his months-long research expeditions in northern Canada. During these months in the wilderness, Margaret would obtain workbooks for her children so they would not fall behind in their schoolwork. Atwood was nearly a teenager before she began attending school full-time. After school, Atwood studied at Victoria College, University of Toronto, graduating in 1961, and then she completed a master's degree at Radcliffe College, Harvard University, graduating in 1962.

In 1968, she married American writer Jim Polk. After their divorce in 1973, she formed a relationship with another writer, Graeme Gibson. They were together until Gibson passed away in 2019. They have one daughter, Eleanor 'Jess' Atwood Gibson, who was born in 1976.



**Entomologist:** a scientist who studies insects. Pictured is entomologist Nancy Miorelli who tweets pictures of herself with bugs on her face using the hashtag #FaceBug to counter common fears and misconceptions about the creatures.

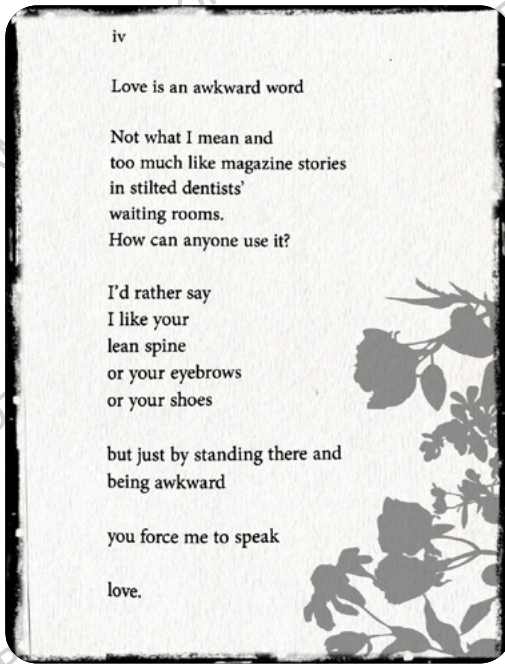


© Nancy Miorelli



© Nancy Miorelli





An extract from Margaret's poem "Letters, Towards and Away", published in *The Circle Game*.

work has also been adapted for the screen. The novels *Surfacing* and *The Robber Bride* were, for instance, produced as films in 1981 and 2007 respectively, while *The Handmaid's Tale* was first adapted as a film for television in 1990. More recently, her novel *Alias Grace* was adapted as a series for Netflix, while *The Handmaid's Tale* was adapted for Hulu.

Atwood has won numerous awards for her work. She has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize several times, including for *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1986, and she won the prize in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin* and again in 2020 for the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* (she shared the prize with Bernardine Evaristo, author of *Girl, Woman, Other*). She also won the Arthur C. Clark award for science fiction for *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1987.

*Her fiction has imagined societies riddled with misogyny, oppression, and environmental havoc. These visions now feel all too real.*

- Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*

Yet her work has not always been well-received. *The Handmaid's Tale* was banned from high schools in San Antonio, Texas because of its references to sex and the use of Christianity as a means of oppression. Atwood responded

## A prolific writer

Atwood began writing as a child, but it was not until she was a teenager that she started to write in earnest. For Atwood, being a writer was something that occurred naturally. She explains that she was 'crossing the football field on the way home from school [in 1956]. I wrote a poem in my head and then I wrote it down, and after that writing was the only thing I wanted to do.'

Atwood self-published her first work – a collection of poetry titled *Double Persephone* – five years later. In 1964, *The Circle Game*, her second collection, was published by the Cranbrook Academy of Arts. Atwood has since been a prolific writer. Her published works includes novels, short fiction, poetry, children's books, graphic novels and non-fiction. She has also written television, radio and theatre scripts and has edited several books. Some of her



One of Atwood's graphic novel series is the humorous superhero adventure, *Angel Catbird*. In the novels, genetic engineer Strig Feleedus becomes embroiled in a war between animal/human hybrids after accidentally merging his DNA with that of a cat and an owl.

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



to these claims, writing about the necessity of her warning readers about possible future social crises. She wrote, 'If you see a person heading toward a huge hole in the ground, is it not a friendly act to warn him?'

Indeed, Margaret Atwood once commented that 'Nothing makes me more nervous than people who say, "It can't happen here." Anything can happen anywhere, given the right circumstances' when speaking about *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although this novel is dystopian in nature, Atwood has pointed out that many of the laws and social practices she writes about are not entirely fiction: they either have happened in the past or there are modern equivalents.



© Shelly Grimson



**'It scares me. But I have to write it.'** Atwood's agent, Phoebe Larmore, describes seeing Atwood while she was writing that novel. She recalls, 'I had been quite ill that year, and Margaret came and sat on my sofa, and I think she looked worse than I did. I asked her what was happening. She said, "It's the new novel. It scares me. But I have to write it."'

## Early influences

Atwood's parents loved the outdoors and encouraged their children to spend time outside. This appreciation of the natural world is reflected in Atwood's work. In *Cat's Eye*, for instance, the protagonist's family spend much of their time in the wilderness as well. A concern with the destruction of the natural environment is also evident in her dystopian novels, including the *MaddAddam* trilogy, as well as *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Another aspect of her upbringing that perhaps also influenced her work is her childhood presumption of equality between men and women. In the wilderness, Atwood's mother would raise her children as equals, paying no attention to the usual conventions of raising girls. Indeed, as Atwood observes,



© Margaret Atwood (margaretatwood.ca)



© Margaret Atwood (margaretatwood.ca)

'In the woods, you wore pants [...] because if you didn't wear pants and tuck the tops into your socks you would get blackflies up your legs.' Moreover, as journalist Rebecca Mead suggests, it is perhaps 'Atwood's early years in the forest that endowed her [...] with a critical distance on codes of femininity – an ability to see those codes as cultural practices worthy of investigation, not as necessary conditions to be accepted unthinkingly.'

This ability to examine the world around her in close detail is clearly reflected in Atwood's work. As writer and critic, Francine Prose has observed, Atwood is able to use fiction as 'a means of exploring and dramatising ideas'. One of these ideas is that of morality. Although Atwood notes that it may perhaps be difficult to engage with moral issues 'without preaching too much and reducing the characters to mere allegories', when the issues in question are prominent, then 'the characters will act within – and be acted upon by – everything that surrounds them.' This influence of social context is evident in her fiction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, the protagonist is confronted with a changed society, and it is within this new context that she must survive.



Atwood writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in Berlin in 1984.

© Isolde Ohlbaum

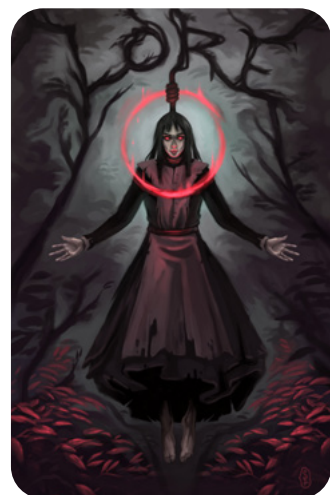
## Writing about women

Many of Atwood's protagonists are female – such as Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*; Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*; Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin*; Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*; and Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman*. Many of these works have also engaged with issues such as gender equality and the repression of women. For these reasons, Atwood's work has often been celebrated as feminist literature; however, Atwood cautions against generalising or idealising women – a tendency she believes is evident in the



### Half-Hanged Mary – a family connection?

*The Handmaid's Tale* is dedicated to Mary Webster. Possibly related to the Atwoods, Webster was accused of witchcraft in Hadley, Massachusetts in the 1680s. As Atwood explains, 'The townspeople didn't like her, so they strung her up. But it was before the age of drop hanging, and she didn't die. She dangled there all night, and in the morning, when they came to cut the body down, she was still alive.' Webster, who apparently lived for 14 more years following her unsuccessful hanging, subsequently earned the moniker 'Half-Hanged Mary'. (This story is reflected in Atwood's 1995 narrative poem, "Half-Hanged Mary".) The author explains that *The Handmaid's Tale* is also dedicated to Mary Webster 'because she is an example of a female person wrongly accused. But she is slightly a symbol of hope because they didn't actually manage to kill her. She made it through.'



© Sarah Lindstrom (aristation.com)

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



narrative of some types of feminism that 'women are better than men'. She says that she has 'always been against the idea that women were Victorian angels, that they could do no wrong. Rather, common themes in her work are that women can be supportive, but they can undermine one another, or even actively work against each other; for instance, she explains that, in dictatorships, one of the ways those in power control subordinate groups such as women is by 'creat[ing] a hierarchy where some members of the group have power over the others. You get those people to control their own group for you'. This belief is reflected in her fiction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, the Aunts control the Handmaids and are responsible for ensuring that they comply with their new role.



*Women's rights are human rights because women are human.  
It's not a hard concept.*

- Margaret Atwood, The Irish Times

## Environmental activist

Atwood is not only concerned with the environment in her writing, but she is also recognised as an environmental activist. Her Twitter thread is commonly filled with posts about environmental initiatives and climate change awareness, and she has also been involved in promoting awareness through other forums. She has also written extensively about the topic in an essay titled 'It's not climate change – it's everything change' (2015), given interviews as an environmental activist; engaged in conversation with Greta Thunberg on BBC Radio 4 in 2020 and participated in the Imagination and Climate Futures Initiative (2014). Her office, O W Toad (an anagram of her surname), also follows green policies, which are detailed on her website.



# Author quotes: The author in her own words

What are Margaret Atwood's perspectives on the issues raised in *The Handmaid's Tale*? What did she hope to convey through the work? This section consists of a selection of quotes from interviews with the author and extracts from essays written by her on topics related to the novel.



© Sunday Times Style Magazine UK (thetimes.co.uk)

## On writing:

'Writing is (...) a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It's also a witnessing. Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know. The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens, and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer bears witness. Bearing witness is not the same as self-expression.' – Extract from *Second Words*, a collection of essays by Margaret Atwood

'[Everyone] 'writes' in a way; that is, each person has a 'story' – a personal narrative – which is constantly being replayed, revised, taken apart and put together again. The

significant points in this narrative change as a person ages – what may have been tragedy at 20 is seen as comedy or nostalgia at 40.' – Interview with Mary Morris for *The Paris Review*

## On history and truth:

'History is a myth. There isn't anything in the sky called "History". I hate to break this to you. It's something people make up. (They're supposed to make it up out of things that really happen, but sometimes they don't even do that.)' – Extract from interview with Andrew Tate for *High Profiles*

'It's true that that's what you saw, but it doesn't necessarily mean that thing was there.' – Interview with Molly Young for *Vulture*

'There may not be one Truth—there may be several truths—but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist.' – Interview with Marilyn Berlin Snell for *Mother Jones*

## On gender roles:

'I noticed from looking at my notes that I started actually thinking about [the book] in 1981. What had just happened? Ronald Reagan had been elected, and the religious right was on the rise in those years, the early Eighties, [...] that is when people started saying things like "Women belong in the home." And

*History is a myth. There isn't anything in the sky called "History". I hate to break this to you. It's something people make up.*

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I started thinking, "Well, if they do, how are you going to get them back in there?" [...] In the Thirties, during the Depression, it was considered bad manners and not permissible, once you got married, for you to have a job if you were a woman. You were supposed to give up that job so that some man could support his family. Then it was the Forties and "**Step up, gals, roll up your sleeves.** We need you to work at a factory, have a victory garden", do all of those things. Women were doing all kinds of things they never would have in the Thirties: driving trucks, earning salaries. A very big social stir-up, fermentation, and an equally big unsettling of previously received sexual mores. How can I put this? A lot of partying while the bombs were falling!' – Interview with Tessa Stewart for *Rolling Stone*

'[W]e got the birth control pill about the mid-Sixties, and then, not coincidentally, the **miniskirt** and, not coincidentally, the so-called sexual revolution. A lot of thinking went on around that: Should



**Step up, gals, roll up your sleeves:** 'Rosie the Riveter' is a famous poster used to recruit female workers for the American defence industries during World War II in the 1940s. Women workers were needed to replace the men who had enlisted to fight in the armed forces.



© J. Howard Miller (Wikimedia Commons)



In many ways, the **miniskirt** became an expression of the 1960s sexual revolution and feminism. The iconic skirt symbolised the desire of young women to escape the restrictions of traditional female roles and sexual mores. Its provocative and rebellious raised hemline was regarded as daring, fun and liberating.





women behave like men? How did men behave? Should you have wide-open freedom, or would that turn into a different form of oppression? In the Fifties you were supposed to say no, and in Seventies, you were supposed to say yes, and if you didn't, then you were a prude. Sex, drugs, and rock & roll, that was the undercurrent of the Seventies. A huge amount of feminist writing took place — some of it pretty extreme, some of it historical. Then arrived the Eighties and **Ronald Reagan**: "This has gone too far. Let's roll it back." And *The Handmaid's Tale* came out of that." – Interview with Tessa Stewart for *Rolling Stone*

'In a feminist dystopia pure and simple, all of the men would have greater rights than all of the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women. But Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded an Econowife.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*



Former American president, **Ronald Regan** (pictured) was known for being anti-abortion and famously quipped, 'I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born'. He described himself as a 'born-again Christian' and supported prayer in American schools, questioned scientific evidence of climate change, opposed publicly funded health care, supported capital punishment, and dramatically expanded the 'war on drugs' being waged by the American government (largely against its own citizens).



© Warner Bros (Wikimedia Commons)

## On dictatorships:



© The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts

'Stories about the future always have a *what if* premise, and *The Handmaid's Tale* has several; for instance: if you wanted to seize power in the United States, abolish liberal democracy, and set up a dictatorship, how would you go about it? What would be your cover story? It would not resemble any form of communism or socialism: those would be too unpopular. It might use the name of democracy as an excuse for abolishing liberal democracy: that's not out of the question, though I didn't consider it possible in 1985.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*

'Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren't there already; thus China replaced a state bureaucracy with a similar state bureaucracy under a different name, the USSR replaced the dreaded imperial secret police with an even more dreaded secret police, and so forth.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



FOREWORD

'It was either Hitler or Goebbels who said if you tell the big lie often enough, people will believe it. Make the lie big, and [tell] it often. We saw that. And it's not a question of left or right – so-called left regimes have done the same thing. It's a question of totalitarianism or not totalitarianism.' – Interview with Tessa Stewart for *Rolling Stone*

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

'It is also true that in situations where people have not had any power, and suddenly they get power, some people are going to abuse that power. Finding out you've got power, and can get somebody fired, when you haven't had any – that can be a pretty heady feeling. I mean, let's all dance around the **guillotine** as we chop off the heads of the aristocrats. Here's my short version: if you're going to speak truth to power, make sure it's the truth. That's a good maxim.' – Interview with Miranda Swayer for *The Guardian*

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL



Decapitation machines have been used to execute people for centuries, but the modern device (*pictured*) became popular during the French Revolution of the 1790s. Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin was opposed to capital punishment, but proposed the revolutionary government adopt a more humane approach to beheading 'enemies of the state' - since decapitation by axe and sword was often botched and caused additional suffering. He was horrified when his name became synonymous with the machine he helped to develop.



A crowd gathers to watch a criminal being executed by guillotine in Paris in 1939.

© Roger Vollett (The Image Works)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

'Well of course, no repressive regime ever comes in by saying, "Hi folks, I'm a repressive regime and I'm going to really take away your freedom." They always say, "Listen, the country is a real mess, and we have to do something about it, and we're going to help make things much better."' – Extract from interview with *Studs Terkel*

LITERARY ESSAY

'My ever-present question, since I was born in '39, is: If there were to be totalitarianism in the United States, what would it look like? What would be the slogan? What would be the excuse? Because they all come in with: "We're going to make things so much better, but first, we have to get rid of those people."' – Interview with Tessa Stewart for *Rolling Stone*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Like many books, The Handmaid's Tale began with the question, What if? I guess I was tired of having people say, "It can't happen here".*



© Banksy

'I thought it was a very strange sort of book for me to be writing. Also, I was afraid people would think it was merely paranoid. Like many books, *The Handmaid's Tale* began with the question, What if? I guess I was tired of having people say, "It can't happen here." They were right only if you accepted their definition of "it". "It" could mean Russian-style communism or Germany under Hitler, but what if we were looking



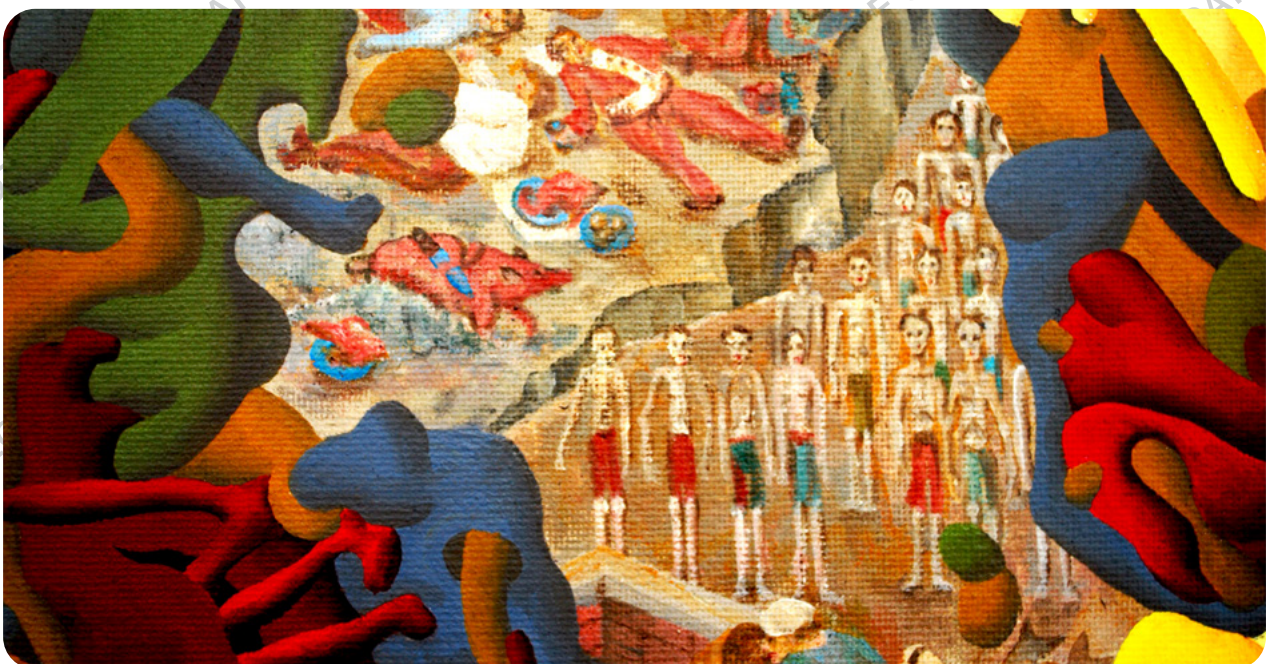
© discogangsta (DeviantArt)

at the wrong "it"; what if while we were busily staring down the wolf at the door, another one was creeping over the back fence? Once any democracy starts curtailing freedom in the name of freedom, it may land us in trouble. What if you wanted to take over the US today? What flag could you wave successfully? *The Handmaid's Tale* is one answer to these "What ifs?" – Interview with *Penguin UK*

'Like the American Revolution and the French Revolution and the three major dictatorships of the 20th century [...] and like the New England Puritan regime before it, Gilead has utopian idealism flowing through its veins, coupled with a high-minded principle, its ever-present shadow, sublegal

*Once any democracy starts curtailing freedom in the name of freedom, it may land us in trouble.*

opportunism, and the propensity of the powerful to indulge in behind-the-scenes sensual delights forbidden to everyone else. But such locked-door escapades must remain hidden, for the regime floats as its *raison d'être* the notion that it is improving the conditions of life, both physical and moral; and like all such regimes, it depends upon its true believers.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*



© Werner Horvath

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS





© Godless Magazine

**Anti-papal image from the Russian magazine, *Godless*, in 1934. It depicts the Pope as a spider supervising the burning of books written by Marx, Lenin, and Darwin. The magazine was funded and distributed by the atheist Soviet government, which sought to wrest power and influence away from the Church.**

*Religion is the opium of the people.*

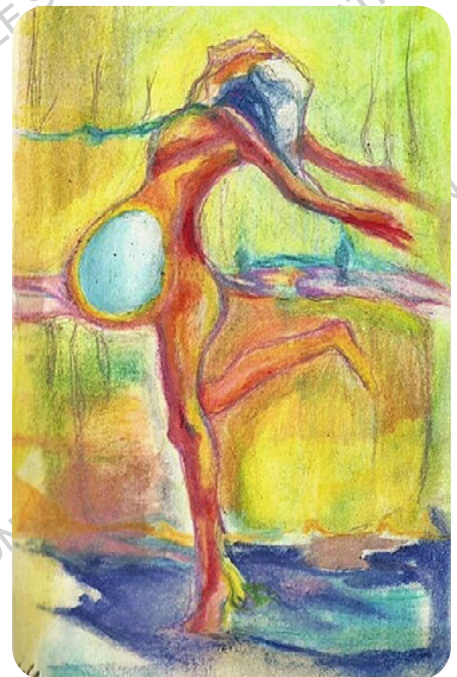
- Karl Marx

## On religion and theocratic oppression:

'I think that religion is one of those things that is probably built in, like art – like the brain pattern that makes you feel sad when you see somebody crying in a movie. It may just be part of being human. It's not a question of whether people are going to have religion or not, so then it becomes a question of "What kind are they going to have?" And who is going to try to grab hold of that and manipulate it for their own ends? Because all of our emotions are manipulable, there's no question.' – Extract from interview with Andrew Tate for *High Profiles*

'[I]f religion is an evolved adaptation, it's no good to tell people they shouldn't do it. People have a predisposition to believe things they can't actually prove. In good circumstances, that can be very unifying and motivating; in bad circumstances it can unfortunately be manipulated and can do a lot of harm. So [...] it's not a question of whether "religion" is "good" or "bad". It's a question of how people are using it and to what ends. Are they using it to increase their own affluence or to further their military or political aims? That often happens. Or are they using it to achieve a relationship with a numinous world that they can't point to as existing in solid objects? What is that hammer being used for? Is it being used to build a house or to murder a neighbour?' – Extract from interview with Andrew Tate for *High Profiles*

'Like the original theocracy, this one would select a few passages from the Bible to justify its actions, and it would lean heavily towards the Old Testament, not towards the New. Since ruling classes always make sure they get the best and rarest of desirable goods and services, and as it is one of the axioms of the novel that fertility in the industrialised West has come under threat, the rare and desirable would include fertile women – always on the human wish list, one way or another – and reproductive control. Who shall have babies, who shall claim and raise those babies, who shall be blamed if anything goes wrong with those babies? These are questions with which human beings have busied themselves for a long time.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*



© GracieGebhard (DeviantArt)



'[Y]ou quite frequently have, in totalitarianism, [situations] like that. These rules are for everybody else, but we can have our **dacha**, our imported French wine, we can have our orgies, we can have whatever we want. It's just that other people can't; they have to live virtuously and obey our command. The popes were notorious in the Renaissance, of course. Virtue for everybody else, but they were quite lavish and had mistresses and children they then appointed to church positions. We'd call it abuse of power.' – Interview with Molly Young for *Vulture*

'Recently, someone said, "Religion doesn't radicalise people, people radicalise religion." So, you can use any religion as an excuse for being repressive, and you can use any religion as an excuse for resisting repression; it works both ways, as it does in the book. So that was one set of inspirations.' – Interview with Emma Watson for *Entertainment Weekly*



© Victo Ngai

*People have a predisposition to believe things they can't actually prove.*



The Russian word **dacha** is usually translated as 'summer residence'. During the 17th and

18th centuries, the Russian aristocracy used their dachas for social and cultural gatherings, which were usually accompanied by masquerade balls and firework displays.



© Victor Gabriel Gilbert (Wikimedia Commons)

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



## On feminism:

[Atwood] wanted to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, she documents in her 2005 book *Moving Targets*, as a counterpoint to speculative works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that had sidelined women characters – to create “a dystopia from the female point of view”; however, she clarifies, “this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a ‘feminist dystopia,’ except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered feminist by those who think women ought not to have these things”. – Interview with Sophie Gilbert for *The Atlantic*



© Dan Leydon

‘[I]f offered a position of power within a relatively powerless position, some people will take that. People say, “Why do you have Aunt Lydia?”, “Why do you have the female Aunt being so controlling to women?” And I say because they would be! That’s how such a power structure would operate, that’s how they’ve operated in the past: You give somebody a bit more power over the others, and they will take it. So, it’s not a case of all women being angelic. We know that’s not true. Women are human beings, a mixed lot. I tried to be true to human nature.’ – Interview with Emma Watson for *Entertainment Weekly*

*[G]iving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered feminist by those who think women ought not to have these things.*

## On reproductive rights:

‘Who’s going to pay for the orphans and the dead women, because that’s what you’re going to have. And I’m waiting for the first lawsuit. I’m waiting [for] the family of the dead woman to sue the state, and I’m also waiting for a lawsuit that says “If you force me to have children I cannot afford, you should pay for the process. They should pay for my prenatal care. They should pay for my, otherwise, very expensive delivery, they should pay for my health insurance, they should pay for the upkeep of this child after it is born”. [...] That’s where the concern seems to cut off with these people. Once you take your first



© Barbara Kruger (WikArt.org)



breath, [it's] out the window with you. And it is really a form of slavery to force women to have children that they cannot afford and then to say that they have to raise them. [...] If you're drafted into the army, the other situation in which the state seizes control of your body, at least you get three meals a day, clothing, and a place to sleep. So, if you're going to do that to women, pay up.' – Margaret Atwood, 2017, during a panel at a *BookCon* conference

*[!]It is really a form of slavery to force women to have children that they cannot afford and then to say that they have to raise them.*



© myudamageeee (DeviantArt)

'As in the Bible, there is no talk of male sterility. That's not acknowledged. So that's forbidden, in fact. So, if a woman does not have a child, that is her fault, and she is considered to be incapable of doing so although in fact it may be the man – but you're not allowed to say that.' – Extract from interview with *Studs Terkel*

'The Handmaids themselves are a pariah caste within the pyramid: treasured for what they may be able to provide – their fertility – but untouchables otherwise. To possess one is, however, a mark of high status, just as many slaves or a large retinue of servants always has been.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*

'Since the regime operates under the guise of a strict Puritanism, these

women are not considered a harem, intended to provide delight as well as children. They are functional rather than decorative.' – Extract from an essay written by Margaret Atwood for *Literary Hub*

'[I]n several countries we've seen regimes that have taken children away from their mothers and have redistributed them to [...] powerful members of the hierarchy. We saw that in Argentina [...] and that happened also in Poland under the **Nazis**. The Nazis took little blond Aryan-looking Polish kids, and they just took them, and they placed them with high-ranking German families to be brought up as Aryan children. [...] [A]s I say, there's nothing new in this book.' – Extract from interview with *Studs Terkel*

'[Salvaging] is a term I lifted from the Philippines, where, under the Marcos regime, the execution of one's political enemies, the assassination of political enemies was called "salvaging".' – Extract from interview with *Studs Terkel*

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



The SS ('Schutzstaffel') was the elite paramilitary corps of the **Nazis** (Nazi Party) in Germany from the 1920s to the 1940s. Its black-uniformed members described themselves as 'political soldiers' and wielded immense police and military powers. A programme called *Lebensborn* - a neologism meaning 'fountain of life' - was set up within the SS in 1935. Its purpose was to increase the birthrate of 'racially pure' Aryan babies and create a 'master race' in accordance with Nazi eugenics. The programme provided funding to SS members to have large families and recruited 'racially pure' young women to have sex with SS officers (typically already married) in the hope of producing additional Aryan children, such as Nazi supporter Hildegard Trutz (*pictured below left*) who volunteered to join the programme after graduating from school. It is estimated that 20 000 babies were bred through the programme during the 12 years of the Third Reich (1933-45). The programme intensified during World War II and thousands of foreign children (*pictured below right*) were abducted in German-controlled countries like Poland and placed with 'suitable' German families, while SS personnel were encouraged to impregnate foreign women.



© German Federal Archives (Wikipedia)

© (Wikimedia Commons)

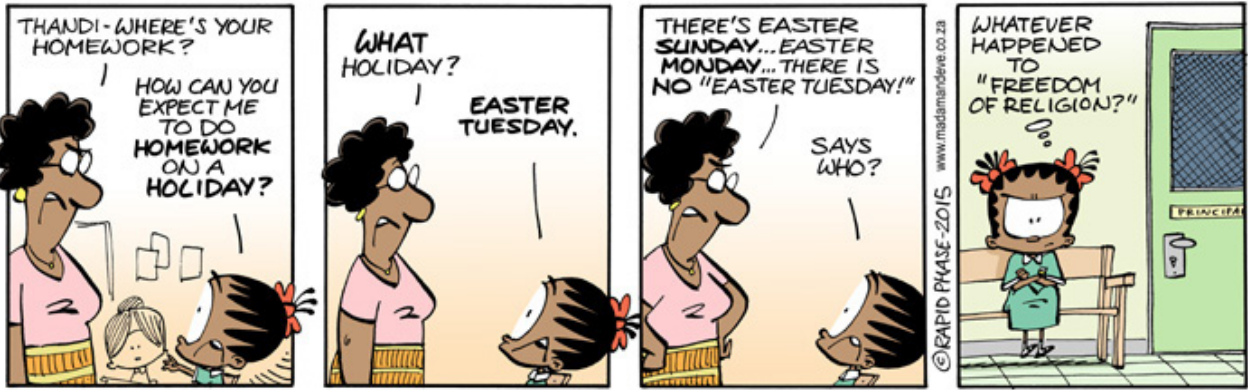


# Enrichment task

## Exercise 1: Visual literacy

Consider the following cartoon and answer the questions that follow:

### Text 1



1.1 What is 'freedom of religion'? (2)

---



---



---



---

1.2 What does the student, Thandi, seem to assume 'freedom of religion' means? (1)

---



---



---

1.3 What does Thandi question in frame 3, and what does her questioning of this ambiguity or vagueness highlight? (3)

---



---



---



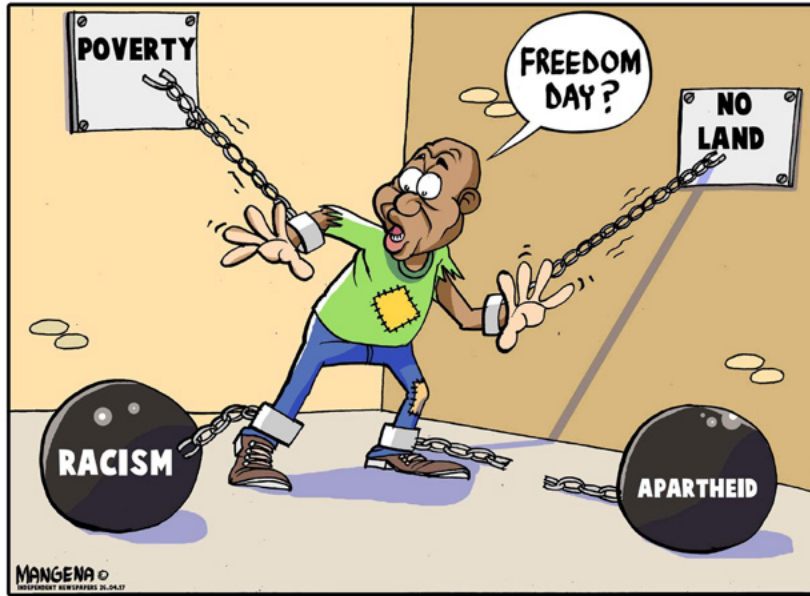
---



---

Consider the following cartoon and answer the questions that follow :

**Text 2**



1.4 What is represented by the broken chain in the cartoon? (1)

---

---

---

1.5 What does the man's outfit suggest about his situation? (1)

---

---

---

1.6 What message does the cartoon convey? (3)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

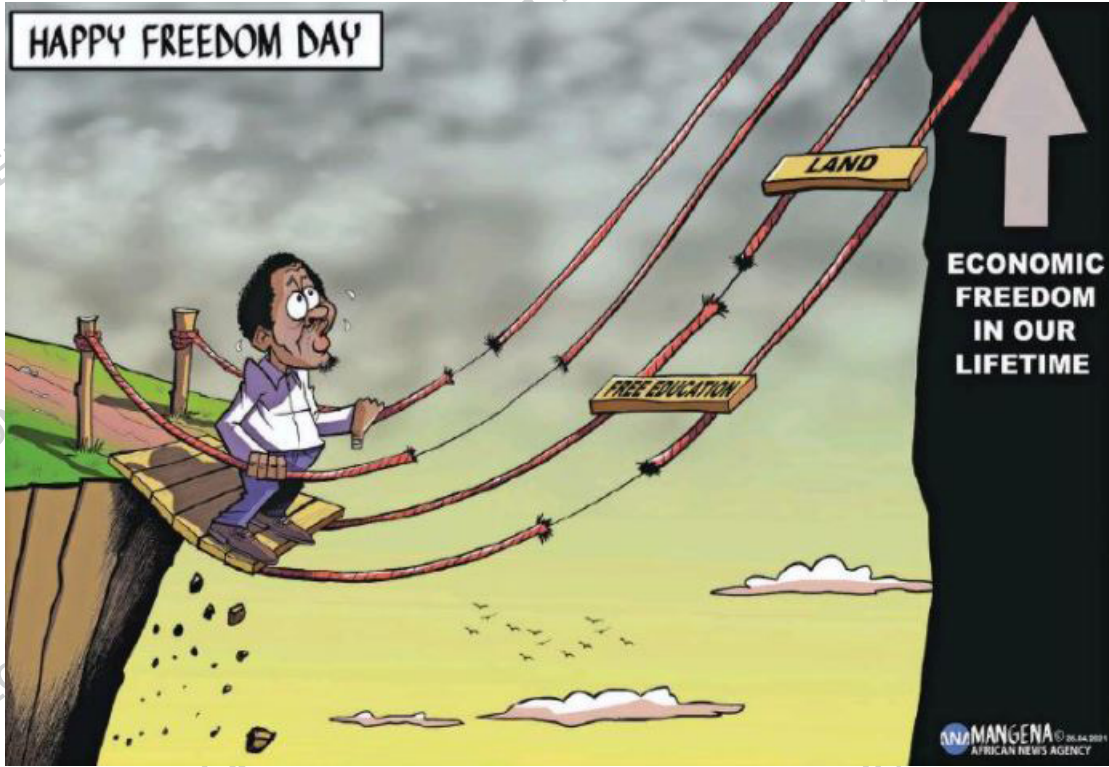
---

FOREWORD
BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL
INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL
CRITICAL COMMENTARY
LITERARY ANALYSIS
LITERARY ESSAY
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Consider the following cartoon and answer the questions that follow :

**Text 3**



1.7 What visual clues convey the precariousness of the man's position? (2)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

1.8 What message does the cartoon convey? (3)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---





# Critical commentary

## Preparation

### Reading novels for academic analysis

When reading a novel that you are required to analyse for academic purposes, it is best to approach the text in a slightly different way than you would if reading a novel for pleasure. The following are a few tips to keep in mind when reading novels for academic analysis.

- **Eliminate distractions**

It may sound obvious, but make sure you are paying attention when you read. Often when we are reading, our attention wanders and we do not really take in what it is that we are reading. Be sure that when you are reading a novel for academic purposes, your attention stays focused and that you are not distracted by your phone, television, friends or family members.

- **Make notes and highlight**

Make notes in the page margins as you read. Marking important passages as you read them will help you save time when you are looking for them again later and will also help to keep you focused as you read.

- **Discover and confirm meanings**

Underline unfamiliar words so that you can look up their definitions and make a note of their meanings.

- **Look for themes, motifs and symbols**

Keep the themes of the novel in mind as you are reading and keep asking yourself how these themes are being explored, conveyed and developed in the narrative. Make notes of any recurring motifs and symbols and what these represent in the text.

### Detecting patterns of meaning and form

Remember that you are reading for meaning (what is being said) and for form (how it is being conveyed). Literary analysis is about detecting patterns in the text and determining how these patterns convey particular messages. The following are a few questions to keep in mind when detecting patterns of meaning and form when reading novels for academic analysis.



© len-yan (Deviantart)

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Patterns of meaning

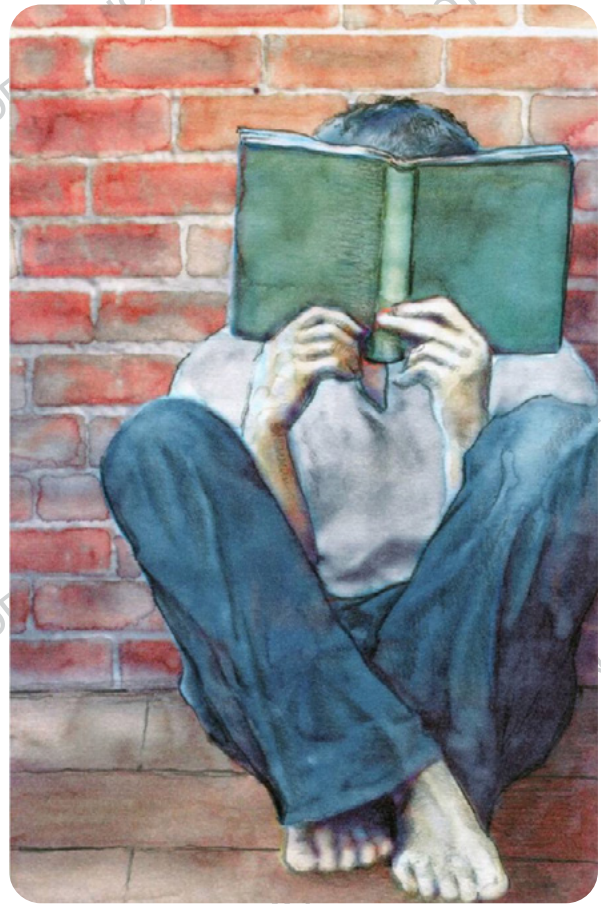
*(i.e. what is the text saying?)*

- How is the plot structured?
- What happens in the narrative, and in what order?
- Where and when does the story take place?
- Who is the subject of the story?
- What are the recurring themes in the narrative?
- What message is being conveyed?
- How do you feel about what is happening in the story?

## Patterns of form

*(i.e. how is it being said?)*

- Who is the narrator of the text? When or on what occasion(s) is this narration taking place?
- How does the point of view from which the story is being told affect our understanding?
- How are the characters developed throughout the text? How do they interact with one another, and why?
- Is the narration sequential or achronological? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Why is the narration structured in this way?
- What symbols and motifs recur in the text and how do they amplify or subvert the themes of the novel?
- What do the title and chapter headings tell us about this narrative and how we should interpret it?



© Eduardo Estrada



*'Study hard, for the well is deep,  
and our brains are shallow.'*

- RICHARD BAXTER -





## Glossary of important literary terms

**antagonist:** a character in the narrative who is presented as the main foe of the **protagonist**.

**archetype:** a very typical or common example of a particular type of person or thing.

**bildungsroman:** a genre of literature in which the protagonist, usually an adolescent, undergoes spiritual, intellectual, moral, psychological and/or social growth throughout the course of the narrative and, in doing so, achieves maturity. Also known as a 'coming-of-age' story.

**catharsis:** the often painful process through which a character heals, usually through the release of strong or repressed emotions.

**connotation:** an idea, association or feeling that is evoked by the use of a particular word, in addition to its literal meaning.

**context:** the 'things around the text'; the particular circumstances that form the setting for a narrative event, statement or idea.

**dénouement:** the climax or finale of a narrative in which the various strands of the plot are drawn together or resolved.

**diction:** the choice of words used.

**discourse:** written or spoken communication or, in literary terms, the treatment of a particular subject within the narrative.

**foil:** a character who contrasts starkly with another character, usually the protagonist, in order to emphasise the particular qualities or traits of the other character.

**form:** the structure or design of a particular literary work.

**genre:** in literary terms, a particular and distinguishable category of writing which employs distinct, common conventions that are recognisable across all works of the same type.

**ideology:** a system of beliefs or ideals which often forms the basis for a political or economic policy such as apartheid, democracy (political), capitalism, socialism (economic).

**irony:** a perceptible inconsistency (sometimes humorous) in an apparently straightforward statement or situation which, given its particular context, takes on the opposite meaning or significance. In the case of **dramatic irony**, the reader or audience may know more about the character's situation or circumstances than the character and is, consequently, able to recognise a sharply different or contrasting perception of the situation from the character.

**metaphor:** a Figure of Speech in which one thing is taken to represent or symbolise something else, in order to transfer particular associations or qualities on to the thing or idea being represented.

**paradox:** a statement that is so obviously untrue or contradictory that it leads the reader to consider alternative contexts in which it may be considered accurate; or a situation, person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities.

**point of view:** the position or vantage point from which the events of a story are presented to the reader.

**protagonist:** the main/central character in the narrative.

**syntax:** the way in which words, phrases and clauses are arranged to form a sentence.

**theme:** the central message, idea or insight of a literary work.

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Summaries and analyses

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Using this section

Working through the novel chapter by chapter ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid, and then gradually and effectively expanded. Students are not required to deal with the entire novel until they have worked through it in a methodical, step-by-step manner.

Each chapter and sub-section is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included, and learners are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. At the end of the summaries, there is also a series of enrichment tasks that, together with the wide selection of rigorous essay topics in the **Literary essay** section, ensures that students tackle the novel in its entirety and are prepared for the final examination.

## I. Night

### Chapter One (pp. 15 – 16)

#### Summary

The novel begins with the protagonist, who is unnamed at this point, explaining that 'we' slept in what had been a school's gymnasium. The narrator imagines the basketball games and school dances that were held there and reminisces how '[w]e yearned for the future' (p. 15). Those memories then give way to the narrator's current situation: she and others try to sleep in army cots 'set up in rows, with spaces between so [they] could not talk' (p. 15). She describes the 'army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S.' (p. 15) and how the 'Aunts' with 'electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts' (p. 16) would patrol the rows between the cots. Outside the building are guards with guns patrolling the fields. Those women kept inside the building would, when the 'Aunts' were not looking, stretch their arms towards each other and whisper their names: 'Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June' (p. 16).



## Glossary

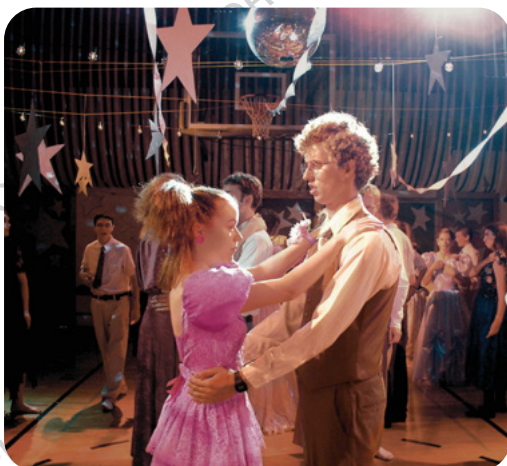
**pungent (p.5):** strong, pervasive

**palimpsest (p.5):** something reused or altered that still bears visible traces of its earlier form (originally a piece of parchment where later writing has been superimposed over earlier writing)

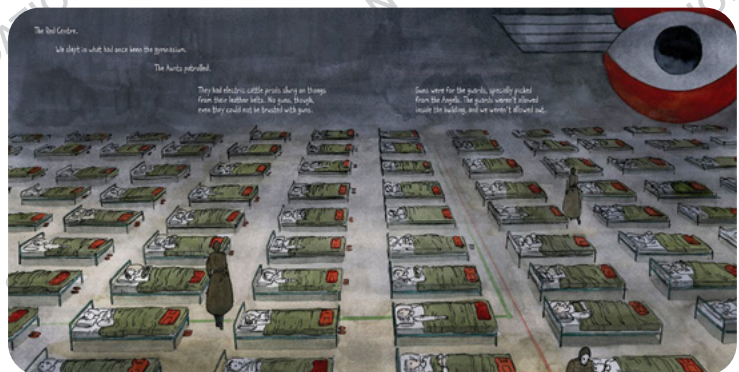
**garland (p.5):** a decorative wreath of flowers

**insatiability (p.5):** characteristic of having an unappeasable or voracious appetite

**flannelette (p.5):** type of cotton material resembling flannel



© Paramount Pictures



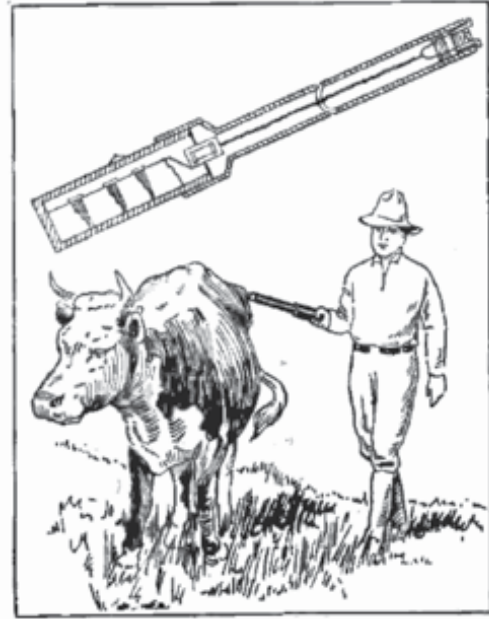
© Renee Nault (Penguin)

A high school gymnasium being used as the venue for a promenade dance (prom) (pictured left) and an artist's impression of the repurposed gymnasium in the novel (pictured above).



**Analysis**

In these opening pages, the reader is introduced to a changed world. Clues such as blankets that 'still said U.S.' (p. 15) and the narrator's focus on what the past was like show that the world presented in this chapter has undergone substantial change. This contrast between past and present is initially revealed through the description of the building's previous use juxtaposed with its current use: while the gymnasium was used for basketball games and school dances before, it now appears to be used to house a group of women. It seems that these women are not there by choice. The fact that there are other women who carry electric cattle prods 'patrol[ling]' (p. 16) the rows of beds implies that the women sleeping in the cots are prisoners. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the women in the cots 'weren't allowed out, except for [their] walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire' (p. 16). These images portray a school turned into a prison, with the women inside as the captives (with the exception of the patrolling Aunts). At the end of the chapter, we learn, in addition to freedom of movement, simple desires such as touch and being called by their own names are also denied these women.



When "Bossie" Becomes Unruly It's an Easy Matter to Hustle Her Along with This New "Electric Shocking Prod."

1917 advertisement for a cattle prod promoting its ability to coerce and control 'unruly' cows.

© The Electrical Experimenter Magazine (Wikipedia)

**Questions**

1. How does the narrator create a continuity between the past and the present in this opening chapter, and what is the effect of doing so? (2)

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

2. Provide a synonym for 'yearned'. (1)

---



---



---



---

- FOREWORD
- BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL
- INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL
- CRITICAL COMMENTARY
- LITERARY ANALYSIS
- LITERARY ESSAY
- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

3. What are the implications of the statement 'we still had our bodies' (p. 16)? (2)

---



---



---



---



---

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## II. Shopping

### Chapter Two (pp. 19 – 23)

#### Summary

Chapter Two opens with the narrator (whose name is only much later, on page 96, revealed to be Offred) describing the items in the bedroom. She notes that the chandelier has been removed, the window 'only opens partly' (p. 19), the framed picture on the wall has no glass – all to prevent the woman in that room from 'open[ing]' (p. 20) an escape in herself.

When the bell rings, Offred pulls on her gloves. She describes her outfit, which is all in red, other than the white wings that surround her face. She walks out of the room and down the stairs towards the kitchen. There, Rita, a 'Martha', is making bread. Offred thinks of how Rita disapproves of her, of who she is in the red dress – she once overheard a conversation between Rita and Cora during which Rita suggested that the narrator had 'debase[d] herself' (p. 22) because she could have chosen to go to the 'Colonies' (p. 22) instead.



© emcquire (Flickr)

Offred imagines sitting at the kitchen table with Cora and Rita, talking about 'aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that [their] bodies, like unruly children, can get up to' (p. 22); however, she knows that this will not happen because '[t]he Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us' (p. 23). She then thinks of Luke and how she 'used to tease him about being pedantic' (p. 23) to ensure that the produce is fresh and of good quality.

Rita gives the narrator tokens, which 'have pictures on them, of the things they can be exchanged for' (p. 23) – in this case, 'twelve eggs, a piece of cheese, a [...] steak' (p. 23) – and tells Offred to '[t]ell them who it's for and then they won't mess around' (p. 23).

[5]



#### Glossary

**archaic (p.9):**  
old-fashioned, obsolete

**pier-glass (p.21):** a large mirror usually used to fill space between windows

**decorum (p.23):** behaviour that is in keeping with good taste and propriety, etiquette



### Analysis

The details provided in this chapter offer insights into the narrator's situation. As she is sitting in the room, naming and describing each piece of furniture, it seems as though Offred's world has closed in around her and it is perhaps for this reason – that she is confined without activity or entertainment – that she has resorted to such a close inspection of the room. In her description of the room, it becomes clear that Offred is understood to be a suicide risk; the chandelier from which she could hang herself has been removed, she cannot climb out of the window, nor can she use glass to cut herself. To deal with her circumstances, which seem trying enough to tempt her to suicide, we are told that 'Aunt Lydia' has encouraged her to '[t]hink of it as being in the army' (p. 19).

Other indications are provided that suggest the world has changed: time 'is measured by bells' (p. 20); the dresses Rita and the narrator wear are similar in that they are long and concealing; people are called by titles (for example, Martha, Commander and the Commander's Wife); and tokens are used instead of money. Yet, in spite of this changed world, the narrator appears resolved: she 'intend[s] to last' (p. 19).



*The title of 'Martha' is probably a reference to Luke 10: 38 – 42 in the Bible. While Jesus speaks with Martha's sister, Mary, Martha is concerned with domestic tasks.*

### Questions

1. Why do you think the narrator refuses to call the room 'my room' (p. 20)? (2)

---



---



---



---



---

2. Why might the narrator feel that 'thought must be rationed' and that '[t]hinking can hurt your chances' (p. 19)? (2)

---



---



---



---



---

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

3. What does the narrator mean when she says Aunt Lydia is 'in love with either/or' (p.20)? (3)

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

4. What clues are given regarding permissible behaviour and roles for women in this society in this chapter? (4)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

[10]



# Narration and structure

What is the author trying to say? How are we encouraged to react to the ideas presented in the novel? In this section, we examine some of the literary devices, writing techniques and structural elements that the author, Margaret Atwood, uses to convey the message of her novel.



## Narration

*The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated in the **first person** by Offred, who speaks of both her experience as a Handmaid in Gilead and her earlier life in America; however, as readers find out in the final chapter, titled 'Historical Notes', Offred would only have recorded her story after the fact, thus even the 'present' in the novel is being told from a later perspective. This, together with other devices used in the novel, makes it clear that Offred's story is a construct (a theme that will be addressed briefly in this section and more fully in the **Themes, Motifs and Symbols** section from page 217 of this resource). The narrative is **non-linear** as well – as is evident in the tale's structure – and the narrator herself, whose real name is never revealed, is often unreliable, withholding relevant information or deferring her revelations, or even 'ma[king] [things] up' (p.275).

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

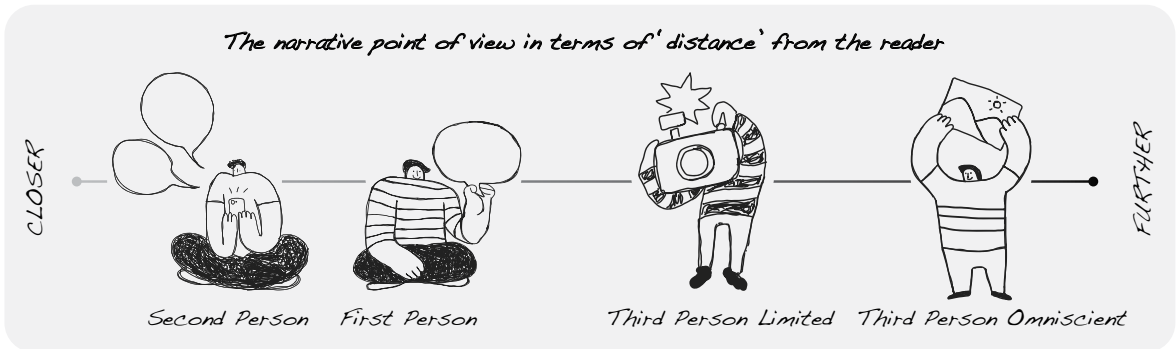
LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

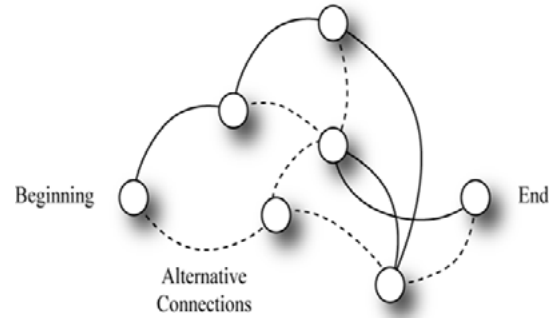


When discussing narrative point of view, the narrative voice (who is speaking) and the focalisation (from whose perspective the story is told) need to be considered; for example, a story which is told in the **first person** (using the pronoun 'I') is narrated and focalised by the same character. That character is, thus, both the speaker and the person from whose perspective the story is told. A story which is told in the second person is narrated by one character to another character (using the pronoun 'you'), for instance, an author narrating to his or her audience.





**Non-linear** narrative means that the events in the narrative are not told in chronological order. Unlike in linear narrative, in which the plot follows a linear timeline (beginning, middle and end) and where it is clear that one event or decision causes a subsequent event or decision, in a non-linear narrative, the events are told out of chronological order and the links between various events are often unclear. Readers are required to pay close attention to the narrative and often make their own connections.



© Professor Sandcastle



© Ruth Meharg

## Structure

The novel is divided into sections, which are subdivided into chapters. Alternating sections are titled 'Night' – except for Section V, 'Nap'. Although Offred's narrative of her present is constantly interrupted by her memories of the past, it is predominantly at 'Night' (or before her 'Nap') – during which times she allows herself to escape into her memories.

Those memories are usually of her time at the Rachel and Leah Centre and of Moira, Luke, Offred's mother, and Offred's unnamed daughter. The narrative often indicates this shift to Offred's memories by changing tense from the present to the past tense; for instance, in Chapter Seven, the first chapter of Section III, 'Night', Offred lies on her bed and thinks, 'Where should I go?' (p. 49). She then pictures Moira, sitting on her bed, and recalls their conversation: 'You're getting ashes on my bed, I said. If you'd make it you

wouldn't have this problem, said Moira' (p. 49). Similarly, in Chapter Thirteen, which comprises Section V, 'Nap', in the present, Offred is lying down on the rug, when she recalls how '[i]n the afternoons [at the Centre] we lay on our beds for an hour in the gymnasium, between three and four [...] They were giving us a chance to get used to blank time' (p. 82).

This switching between past and present tense is not always consistent, however; for instance, later in Chapter Thirteen, Offred switches back to the present tense, even though she is still thinking of talking to Moira in the Centre. One paragraph finishes in the past tense – '[t]hat was all we said' – and the next reverts to the present – '[i]t makes me feel safer, that Moira is here' (p. 83). This use of tense switching serves several purposes. In this case, the present tense creates a feeling of immediacy. The reader thus experiences this scene in the present, as Offred did, which creates suspense. Similarly, the present tense is used in Chapter Thirteen, when Offred is remembering how she and Luke attempted to escape to Canada with their daughter: 'I'm running, with her, holding her hand, pulling her, dragging her through the bracken, she's only half awake because of the pill I gave her, so she wouldn't cry or say anything that would give us away, she doesn't know where she is' (pp. 86-87). While the use of the present tense in



this instance conveys a sense of urgency, it also effectively begins to blur the distinction between past and present, reality and memory. That sense of these boundaries being permeable is reinforced in the next paragraph, in which Offred says, 'The bell wakes me [...] I sit up, on the rug, wipe my wet face with my sleeve. Of all the dreams, this is the worst' (p. 87). In this example, Offred seems to be experiencing these events in the present because she is dreaming. In other examples, she is awake, yet she switches to the present tense anyway. In those cases, it seems that, even when Offred is awake, she is living in different worlds, characterised by different timeframes. She seems trapped in her head, and past and present begin to blur together. This technique creates a sense that the reader too is trapped in Offred's head, trying to stay sane in the endless repetition of the days and coping with the loss of her family, her freedom and her way of life.

## Stories are constructs

The second predominant feature of the novel is its emphasis that story is a **construct**. While all tales are created, *The Handmaid's Tale* makes this feature apparent to the readers. In other words, the narrator ensures that the readers know they are experiencing a story that she is telling. She does so through imagining an audience and by explaining that her story must be 'reconstruct[ed]' (p. 277); for example, in Chapter 7, Offred says, 'I would like to believe that this is a story I'm telling [...] It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling in my head, as I go along. [...] But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is



© Mark Henson

no one' (p. 51). It appears that Offred wishes this story was fiction, but it is not, since it is 'real' for her; however, it is also a 'story' in the sense that she is narrating it, which in turn presupposes that there is an audience. Yet although Offred admits that her experience is both real and has been narrated as a story, she does not believe that this tale will have an audience, because at this point, there is no one to whom she can tell it. The fact that it is revealed in the 'Historical Notes' that Offred recorded these tapes after those experiences may indicate that either she did not believe that anyone would ever listen to them, or that nobody was there with her to experience her life as a Handmaid – i.e. there was no one she could tell at the time.



© Myrotique (Deviantart)

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS





A **construct** is something that has been created. In literary terms, it means that the story that is being told has been constructed actively and deliberately. In other words, at various points in the narrative, it is clear that the narrator is actively working to tell a story. Whenever she tells the reader that she cannot remember precisely what happened, or invents events that did not happen, or demonstrates that she is actively selecting what parts of her experience are included in the story, she is making it clear that the story she is telling is something that has to be constructed.



© Ambrosii Holbein

Indeed, that revelation in the 'Historical Notes' – that Offred is telling her story after the fact – goes some way towards explaining why Offred is so aware of why she has to reconstruct her experiences, which means that her narration is not always reliable; for instance, after one memory in Chapter



© Agnes Toth

7, Offred thinks, 'But then what happens, but then what happens?' (p. 51). In Chapter 40, Offred explains 'I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction' (p. 277). She also apologises for the fragmented nature of her narration in Chapter 41: 'I'm sorry [this story is] in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it' (p. 281).

Additionally, in the process of that reconstruction, Offred has had to decide what to include in her story; for instance, in Chapter 41, she says, 'I've tried to put some of the good things in [the story] as well' (p. 281). Some details have been added afterwards: 'In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction' (p. 152). Similarly, when Offred describes the first time she has sex with Nick, she says afterwards, 'I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here's what happened' (p. 275). After her second description, she says, 'It didn't happen that way either' (p. 277).

While some information is added, other information is omitted – most, notably, her real name. The narrator says, 'My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day' (p. 96). The reason Offred withholds her name may be to avoid identification and perhaps recapture. After all, none of the names she provides in her narrative are shown to be true in the 'Historical Notes'. She could also be trying to survive by

# Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, shapes or colours used to represent something else, usually an abstract idea or quality. Symbols usually represent something else by association, resemblance or convention, and provide subtle clues to the deeper layers of meaning in a literary work. There are numerous symbols used in *The Handmaid's Tale*, including the garden, the colour red, the Eyes, the Wall and the Red Centre. In this section, we examine some of the more prominent symbolism used by Atwood in the novel.

## The garden

At several points in the novel, Offred comments upon the garden, which she explains is the 'domain of the Commander's Wife' (p. 24). In that garden, Serena Joy tends to various flowers, such as daffodils and tulips. She notes that, for the Wives like Serena Joy, a garden is something to 'order and maintain and care for' (p. 24). Yet, while that garden must ostensibly serve as something that the Wives can nurture and control – perhaps in place of the children so many of them do not seem to have – Offred also believes that '[t]here is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently' (p. 163). The images presented suggest that new life and growth cannot be controlled entirely, that nature has a purpose and intention of its own. Thus, the garden serves as a symbol of both reproduction and rebellion – and perhaps implies that the regime is like a gardener attempting to subdue natural impulses that will ultimately refuse to be dominated or suppressed.



© Yelena Revis

## The colour red

The colour red is often mentioned in the novel, usually in relation to the Handmaids. As Offred describes, almost her entire outfit 'except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us' (p. 20). In this regard, the colour is symbolic of fertility and would appear to indicate their function as Handmaids: to give birth, which itself is a bloody process, and is linked to or associated with the menstrual cycle.



© Viktor Sheleg

The colour red also seems to be a mark of shame in the novel. Historically, red has been associated with sexual desire and, by extension, women who commit sexual sins. Offred alludes to this when she explains that Rita's frown 'isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck' (pp. 21 – 22). Red perhaps



highlights the ambiguous sinfulness of the Handmaids' function in a Puritan theocracy like Gilead. Rita's disapproval is mirrored by the Wives, who call the Handmaids '[l]ittle whores' (p. 127), which reflects the association of red with women living in 'sexual sin', from Mary Magdalene to Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

At other times, the colour red is linked to danger and violence – the blood exposed by violence, such as the red 'smile of blood' (p. 44) on the hanged man. These two images – fertility and violence – seem to come together in the image of the tulips: the stems are a 'darker crimson' and look 'as if they have been cut' (p. 24). It is perhaps also telling that, when the flowers produce seed pods, Serena Joy cuts them off, preventing the flower from fulfilling its reproductive purpose.

### The Eyes

The Eyes are the secret police of Gilead, the branch of the regime tasked with internal security. As their name and logo suggests, their role is one of surveillance, in that they spy upon the populace and seize, torture and kill those suspected of dissent. The Eyes watch without being seen, either from behind darkened windows or glasses, or because they are undercover. The Eyes are a source of fear for Offred, who fears them after her conversation with Ofglen.

Another symbol that reminds Offred of an eye is the plastered-over portion of her ceiling from which a chandelier used to hang. As Offred eventually learns, the chandelier was removed when her predecessor committed suicide by hanging herself from it. At that point, there seems to be a shift from it being a symbol that reminds her of constant surveillance to a source of comfort. She thinks that that woman is now 'safe' (p. 225) or 'protected' (p. 225) in death.

### The Wall



© Rogério de Moraes

The Wall functions as a symbol of power and warning, given that it is used to display the bodies of dissidents or rebels. Offred also wonders at what lies behind the Wall, in what used to be a university, perhaps Harvard. Universities are traditionally viewed as places that promote free speech, critical thinking, and open discussion – acts which are now considered forms of treason. The contrast between the previous use of that building and the purpose for which it is currently being used seems striking. That change seems to illustrate the regime's intention: to stifle debate and critical thinking, and perhaps also to indicate that knowledge is of value no longer: obedience is.



© Chuck Baird

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



## The Red Centre

The conversion of the high school to the Red Centre seems to demonstrate both the social factors that motivated the regime and the changes that it has brought about. Offred notes that the school was perhaps one of those closed owing to a 'lack of children' (p. 125), which was one of the pressures that drove the Sons of Jacob to act, as well as being the reason for the creation of the Handmaids. The school also offers insight into parts of history that are now erased: the parts that speak of 'yearning' (p. 15), 'sex' (p. 15) and 'love' (p. 125). Ironically, it remains a place of education – indeed, Offred directly compares the 'movies' they were shown at school to those shown at the Red Centre (pp. 129 – 130); however, what is taught differs starkly: learning about 'the rest of the world' (p. 129) has been replaced with a type of re-education, or indoctrination, during which women are forced to prepare for a new role that requires a new type of knowledge, such as knowing not to speak to the Wives 'unless they asked you a direct question' (p. 26).



© Genieve Figgis



# Motifs

A motif is a repeated or recurring element within a text, such as an image or a phrase, that has symbolic significance. Examples of motifs used in the novel include violence, the garden and flowers, clothing, and language.

## Violence

Images of violence pervade the novel. Before Offred seems to encounter any scenes of violence herself, the language she uses to describe her surroundings seems to indicate the violent nature of that society. Offred mentions the 'electric cattle prods' wielded by the Aunts, who 'could not be trusted with guns' (p. 16); she



© Faith Ringgold

speaks about the 'escapes [that] you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge' (p. 20); her clothes are 'the colour of blood' (p. 20) and, as Offred is leaving on her walk, she notes the 'darker crimson' on the flowers, which look as though they have been 'cut' (p. 24). When Offred leaves for her walk, Ofglen tells her about the 'war' which is 'going well' (p. 31) and, at the checkpoint, Offred says that '[I]ast week they shot a woman, right about here [...] they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise' (p. 32).

At the Wall, the reader, like Offred, is fully confronted with the violent nature of the regime. Offred describes the bodies hanging on hooks. There are bags over the heads, which Offred says make the men '[seem] like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted [...] [O]n one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile' (p. 44). Similar violence suffuses the brutal rituals of the regime, such as the Salvagings and Particications.

Moreover, Offred herself seems fixated on the idea of stealing a knife (e.g. p. 59; p. 110). After her first visit to the Commander's study, she thinks that she could 'kiss him, here alone [...] and put my



© Renee Naitit

arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands' (p. 152). She also describes her own image as being covered in blood (p. 21) and compares the cut radishes to '[l]ittle Aztec hearts' (p. 220), a reference to human sacrifice. All of these images seem to demonstrate how Offred is affected by the regime, and also perhaps reflect her own anger and helplessness.

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVEL

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL

CRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## The Handmaids' clothing

Offred describes her outfit as being concealing: the 'skirt is ankle-length' and the 'sleeves are full' (p. 20). She wears gloves and a veil, as well as 'white wings' (p. 20) around her face. The purpose of this clothing seems to reflect her status as a 'chaste vessel', one which restricts what those outside the household can see of her.

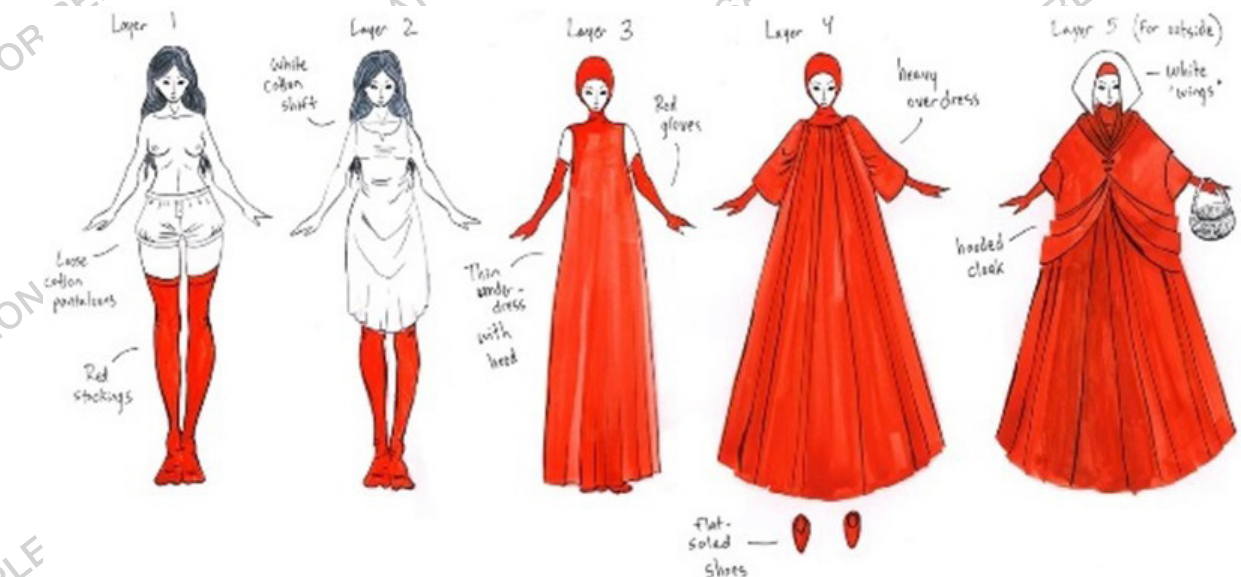
Yet the outfit seems to limit Offred's vision as well. She says, '[g]iven our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything' (p. 42). The outfit seems designed to further isolate the Handmaids. Figuratively, they are not able to get a 'full view' of anything, which perhaps implies that they are intentionally kept in ignorance, which is supported by the fact that they are not allowed to read. Literally, they seem to be prevented from looking other people in the eye, which perhaps prevents them from forming connections with others. Indeed, as Offred observes when she sees Ofglen's reflection in the shop window, '[t]here's a shock in this seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time' (p. 178). What's more, 'this meeting of eyes holds danger' (p. 178),



© Janna Klävers

in that the women seem to be transgressing, overcoming the limitations presented by their clothing, which could invite further transgression. In this case, it does seem to foreshadow exactly that, as Ofglen tests Offred by asking if she believes that God 'listens' (p. 180) to the machines.

Yet just as these women are constrained by their clothes, they also seem to be defined by them. When Moira swaps her Handmaid's outfit for the clothes of an Aunt, she is able to escape. She tells Offred that '[i]n that brown outfit I just walked right through [the Red Centre]' (p. 258) and through the city. Similarly, Offred passes for a Wife when she wears one of Serena Joy's blue cloaks. These instances seem to imply that the only real difference between these women is what they wear: other factors, such as status, are perhaps artificially imposed.



© Renee Nault





# Annotated essay examples

## Essay topic 1:

Write a well-structured essay in which you examine how identity and individuality are treated in Gilead. [30]

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



### Notes on the essay topic:

- This question requires you to consider what identities and how much individuality is permitted to be expressed in Gilead.
- This analysis should focus specifically on the attitude of the regime towards the uniqueness and independence of the populace.
- Key words include 'examine', 'identity', 'individuality' and 'treated'. You should try to use some of these words in the essay itself.

### Essay:

### Comments

#### Introduction

*In Gilead, people are assigned roles, first according to gender, then according to status. Moreover, each person is expected not only to fulfil the duties of that role but also to comply with the rules in place that govern the behaviour of each class of people. For that reason, identity appears to be something that is created and conveyed by the regime rather than developed through an individual's experiences, interests and relationships. This essay will examine how colour, role and names are used to create and limit identity and individuality. In so doing, this essay will aim to show how management of identity and the suppression of individuality are techniques used to impose control over the populace in Gilead.*

Note the structure of the introductory paragraph: the thesis statement is indicated in **bold** (this is the main argument to which we will refer throughout the essay). The underlined sentences provide a 'preview' of the argument, as these are the topics that will be discussed in the body of the essay.

#### Body

*As Offred observes, she is defined by the colour red. That colour points to the key function of her role, which is childbirth. Yet the Handmaids, who are all identified as such, are not alone in the way that they are identified by colour. As Offred also notes, Marthas wear green, the Wives wear blue, and the Commander wears black. This use of colour creates a visual distinction among the groups, in that the way people are primarily identified in Gilead appears to be by colour; for instance, on her walk to the shops, Offred observes that '[t]here are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called' (pp. 35-36).*

In the second paragraph, the sentence in **bold** indicates the topic sentence. This is the point with which this paragraph will deal. The quotations and examples from the text support the claim being made by the topic sentence. The underlined sentences form the analysis or elaboration of this point and explain its relevance to the thesis statement. Note how direct quotations can be integrated in different ways; in this paragraph, the quotes are incorporated into the sentence grammatically.



## Essay (cont'd):

*The roles indicated by these various colours include Commanders, Angels, Guardians, Wives, Aunts, Marthas and Handmaids. These roles seem strictly defined; for instance, the Handmaids are tasked with bearing children while the Marthas are household servants. Furthermore, the women's roles seem restricted to the household. That seems clear in Aunt Lydia's vision of each woman in a household 'performing her appointed task', because she asks, 'Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household?' (pp. 173-174).*

*This erasure of individuality seems compounded by the use of names in the novel; for instance, in the Historical Notes section, it is revealed that the names the Aunts use are in fact 'derived from commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period, and are thus familiar and reassuring to them' (p. 323). The Handmaids too have different names, namely 'of' followed by the name of the Commander to whom they are assigned. From Offred's account, it is apparent that she cannot use her real name because 'it's forbidden' (p. 96). The effect on Offred is clear: she says, 'I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter' (p. 96). Thus, this is a method of erasing the Handmaid's identity. Moreover, because they take on the Commander's name and are not given a new name of their own, it seems as though the Handmaids are meant to be indistinguishable - there is nothing about them that is their own, and which they can use to assert their individuality.*

*It seems evident that the regime has discouraged expressions of individuality in order to assert its control over the population. In addition, by providing people with a new identity - and ensuring that there is no escaping that identity, given their clothes and titles - the regime is forcing the citizens to comply and accept these new roles. It is possible that the regime's reasons for using such techniques is that it hopes that superficial compliance will eventually result in internal acceptance of one's place, which in turn perhaps removes any cause for rebellion.*

## Comments

Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of this paragraph (Topic sentence – Evidence – Analysis). The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point. Providing page references may not be possible in an examination context, but you should still alert your examiner to the fact that you are quoting or paraphrasing from the novel.

As in the previous paragraphs, the sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point.

The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the introduction. The sentence in **bold** indicates a concluding restatement of the thesis statement.

Body

Conclusion

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Essay topic 2:

Consider the following statement by former South African president, Nelson Mandela, and write an essay in which you comment on the way the regime in Gilead seems to approach education, and for what purpose: 'Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world.' [30]

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



### Notes on the essay topic:

- This question requires you to discuss the approach of the regime to education.
- This analysis should focus specifically on how citizens are educated or re-educated, the purpose of the education available, and how this relates to the statement provided in the question.
- Key words include 'comment on', 'education', 'purpose', 'powerful', 'weapon' and 'change'. You should try to use some of these words in the essay itself.

### Essay:

### Comments

#### Introduction

*Although very little insight is given into how Gileadean society functions outside of Offred's experiences, some indication is given into how citizens are educated - or, in the Handmaids' case, re-educated. Moreover, the way in which the regime treats past symbols of education, such as school and universities, also provides some clues regarding its attitudes towards education. This essay will thus examine how past and current systems of education intersect in the novel, first by focusing on the Red Centre, then on the university. Then, education in general will be examined to illustrate the regime's approach to education - namely, that obedience is more desirable than an educated populace, and education is discouraged because it may lead to rebellion and change.*

Note that the first paragraph describes the context of the topic posed in the question (education in Gilead). It then previews the argument that will be presented by describing the topics that will be discussed in the body of the essay (the underlined sentences) and concludes with the thesis statement or main argument of the essay (indicated in **bold**).

#### Body

*Through Offred's observations, it becomes clear that the Red Centre - where the prospective Handmaids are housed and re-educated - was previously a high school. Offred describes how they 'slept in what had once been the gymnasium' (p. 15), how Aunt Lydia speaks to them in a 'classroom' (p. 58) and how 'Once a week we had movies' which they watched in 'the Domestic Science room' (p. 129). Yet unlike the education one would have traditionally received at a school in America, the women at the Red Centre are instead subjected to propaganda and taught how to fit into this new society by submitting to the requirements of the regime.*

In the second paragraph, the sentence in **bold** indicates the topic sentence: this is the point with which this paragraph will deal. The quotations and examples from the text support the claim being made by the topic sentence. The underlined sentences form the analysis or elaboration of this point and explain its relevance to the thesis statement. Note how direct quotations can be integrated in different ways; in this paragraph, the quote is grammatically incorporated into the sentence.



## Essay (cont'd):

Similarly, it seems as though any skills and knowledge the Handmaids may have learned prior to the formation of Gilead have become undesirable in the present, as seen in the repurposing of the university by the regime. The grounds have been converted into a building where prisoners are kept, tortured and questioned, while the Wall around the grounds is used to display the bodies of people killed within those Walls. Indeed, some of those hanged on the Wall have been killed as a result of the education they received, such as doctors who have performed abortions - the men hanging with a placard showing 'a drawing of a human foetus' (p. 44). This university-turned-prison highlights the priorities of the regime. Whereas education could otherwise be seen as desirable owing to the change it can bring about in the world, education is perhaps seen as a threat in Gilead - for that very reason.

*It makes sense that people in Gilead would not be taught anything that would cause them to disagree with or challenge the regime; for example, women (apart from Aunts) are not allowed to read, which prevents them from having access to information other than that which they are told. Even the Bible, which provides the basis of the laws and customs in Gilead, is kept locked away, perhaps to prevent citizens from realising that the regime has been selective in what it uses from scripture, and sometimes even amends it. Evidence of this is provided when Offred says of one of the Beatitudes: 'I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking' (p. 102). Rather, it seems as though the Handmaids are prevented from questioning any of these laws, as Offred observes when she says that Ofglen's question, 'Do you think God listens [...] to these machines?' would ' [...] In the past [...] have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. [But] [...] right now it's treason' (p. 179).*

*It appears that the key trait the regime wishes to instill in its populace is unquestioning obedience, which the regime has, at least in the case of women, deemed godly, given 'the woman [should] learn in silence with all subjection' (p. 235). That obedience would perhaps be subverted by previous models of education, in which the knowledge and skills required to criticise the regime would be developed. **The regime is opposed to change - demonstrated in the way it enforces obedience and punishes dissent - which is evidently the reason why traditional forms of education have been abolished or repurposed.***

## Comments

Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of this paragraph (Topic sentence — Evidence — Analysis). The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point. Providing a page reference may not be possible in an examination context, but you should still alert your examiner to the fact that you are quoting or paraphrasing from the novel.

Note how this paragraph expands on the points made in the previous paragraph to develop the main argument of the essay. The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point.

It is sometimes useful to support your conclusion with a relevant quote from the text that encapsulates your main argument. The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the introduction, but restated in an original way. The sentence in **bold** indicates a restatement of the thesis statement.

Body

Conclusion

FOREWORD

BACKGROUND  
TO THE NOVELINTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVELCRITICAL  
COMMENTARY

LITERARY ANALYSIS

LITERARY ESSAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Prepared for Matric English finals?

## ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE IEB ENGLISH EXAM

TENTH EDITION

EXAM STRUCTURE ANALYSIS, PRACTICE QUESTIONS AND EXPERT TIPS AND STRATEGIES  
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MASTER IEB ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE PAPERS I & II

Exam structure  
analysis, practice  
questions & expert  
tips and strategies

Essential Guide to the  
IEB English Exam

Order your copy today!



**The English Experience**  
Publishers of high-quality educational resources

[www.englishexperience.co.za](http://www.englishexperience.co.za)  
[info@englishexperience.co.za](mailto:info@englishexperience.co.za)  
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

the  
*English*  
experience



# A NEW WAY TO EXPERIENCE ENGLISH

- **PROVEN** — USED BY OVER 120 TOP SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AND THOUSANDS OF PAST STUDENTS
- **TRUSTED** — HIGH-QUALITY, AUTHORITATIVE CONTENT CRAFTED BY A TEAM OF ENTHUSIASTIC EXPERTS
- **TESTED** — EACH RESOURCE USES AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING METHOD THAT DELIVERS
- **FOCUSED** — *ON PROCESS*: APPLYING AND MASTERING CRITICAL LEARNING SKILLS
- **COMPLETE** — UNIQUE COMBINATION TEXTBOOK AND WORKBOOK ENSURES STUDENTS ALWAYS HAVE WHAT THEY NEED
- **INSPIRING** — SYLLABUS IS BROUGHT TO LIFE AND PRESENTED IN A FRESH, INTERESTING WAY



Find out more:

Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

Fax: +27 (0)86 612 4437

E-mail: [info@englishexperience.co.za](mailto:info@englishexperience.co.za)

Postal: Suite 111, P.O. Box 92418, Norwood, 2117

[www.englishexperience.co.za](http://www.englishexperience.co.za)

**THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE - FREEING EDUCATORS TO TEACH!**