

Studying

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 **EMC**
Publications

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

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Introduction

This publication is designed to support the study of *The Handmaid's Tale* for English Literature or combined Language and Literature courses at advanced level – AS, A Level, IB, Pre-U or other equivalent qualifications.

The materials provide a suggested approach to teaching the text, with detailed classroom activities and supportive work in the early stages to set up key ideas and angles to prime students' thinking as they read on. Thereafter, manageable chunks of the book are suggested to allow for more independent reading, with activities to support students along the way, encouraging them to begin to take responsibility for tracking aspects of the narrative and presenting their thinking to the group. The 'After Reading' activities and resources are substantial, the idea being that plenty of time should be left after a first reading for reflection, pulling together key issues and ideas and going back into the text to explore overarching patterns, narrative techniques and themes to refine initial thinking.

The publication offers material to help students place the novel in its generic context. Whether the text is being taught in the context of a topic such as dystopia or not, an understanding of the generic context and the ways in which Atwood takes on, develops or subverts the genre is of vital importance. In the final section there are some pointers for comparative work, based on some of the most likely texts for students to study in conjunction with *The Handmaid's Tale*. There is also some support for contextualising the novel in the social, political and cultural setting of the time of writing, as well as the context of its reception since publication.

In the materials there are some creative as well as critical activities. These are designed to help students develop deeper critical understanding, by allowing them to experiment with language themselves. Understanding of narrative technique and the unique approach of a writer can be enhanced by this kind of creative work that reveals to students the kinds of choices open to writers and the differences that these choices make.

A note on the text

Extracts from *The Handmaid's Tale* have been checked against the Vintage edition, published 1996.

Symbolism – the colour red (pages 21-22)

The images for this activity are included as a colour PDF on the CD (see inside cover).

BEFORE READING

Five Short Extracts

- In small groups, work on one of these short extracts from the novel you're going to be studying.
 - What can you tell from the extract about the possible storyline or characters in this book?
 - What can you tell about the kind of book it is – its genre?
 - What issues are being raised in this extract? Any clues about underlying tensions and possible points of conflict?
 - What's interesting about the style in which this extract is written?
- Pool your ideas about the kind of expectations you have of this novel, having read and talked about the different extracts.

Extract 1 (page 33)

Doubled, I walk the street. Though we are no longer in the Commanders' compound, there are large houses here also. In front of one of them a Guardian is mowing the lawn. The lawns are tidy, the façades are gracious, in good repair; they're like the beautiful pictures they used to print in the magazines about homes and gardens and interior decoration. There is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children.

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.

Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers any more, and the university is closed.

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless.

Extract 2 (pages 146-7)

I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians. What secrets, what male totems are kept in here?

I'm told to enter. I open the door, step in.

What is on the other side is normal life. I should say: what is on the other side looks like normal life. There is a desk, of course, with a Computalk on it, and a black leather chair behind it. There's a potted plant on the desk, a pen-holder set, papers. There's an oriental rug on the floor, and a fireplace without a fire in it. There's a small sofa, covered in brown plush, a television set, an end table, a couple of chairs.

But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare.

Extract 3 (page 47)

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it.

I lie, then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling, behind the white curtains, between the sheets, neatly as they, and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.

But the night is my time out. Where should I go?

Extract 4 (page 99)

The water appears, the Commander drinks it. 'Thank you,' he says. Cora rustles back into place.

The Commander pauses, looking down, scanning the page. He takes his time, as if unconscious of us. He's like a man toying with a steak, behind a restaurant window, pretending not to see the eyes watching him from hungry darkness not three feet from his elbow. We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once.

The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored.

It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*. And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high-school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar. You're getting the best, you know, said Aunt Lydia. There's a war on, things are rationed. You are spoiled girls, she twinkled, as if rebuking a kitten. Naughty puss.

Extract 5 (page 181)

We said all this in my kitchen, drinking coffee, sitting at my kitchen table, in those low, intense voices we used for such arguments when we were in our early twenties; a carry-over from college. The kitchen was in a run-down apartment in a clapboard house near the river, the kind with three storeys and a rickety outside back staircase. I had the second floor, which meant I got noise from both above and below, two unwanted stereo disc players thumping late into the night. Students, I knew. I was still on my first job, which didn't pay much: I worked a computer in an insurance company. So the hotels, with Luke, didn't mean only love or even only sex to me. They also meant time off from the cockroaches, the dripping sink, the linoleum that was peeling off the floor in patches, even from my own attempts to brighten things up by sticking posters on the wall and hanging prisms in the windows. I had plants, too; though they always got spider mites or died from being unwatered. I would go off with Luke, and neglect them.

I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them.

That's like saying you should go out and catch syphilis merely because it exists, Moira said.

Are you calling Luke a social disease? I said.

Moira laughed. Listen to us, she said. Shit. We sound like your mother.

We both laughed then, and when she left we hugged each other as usual.

List of Section Headings

- Look at the section headings below, from the Contents page. Some sections include just one chapter, others several chapters. The 'Night' sections are just one chapter.
- What do they suggest to you about the novel? You might want to consider:
 - themes
 - genre
 - anything surprising or unusual about the headings for chapters in a novel
 - anything that is revealed about the way the novel seems to be structured.

I. NIGHT

VII. NIGHT

XIII. NIGHT

II. SHOPPING

VIII. BIRTH DAY

XIV. SALVAGING

III. NIGHT

IX. NIGHT

XV. NIGHT

IV. WAITING ROOM

X. SOUL SCROLLS

HISTORICAL NOTES

V. NAP

XI. NIGHT

VI. HOUSEHOLD

XII. JEZEBEL'S

A Novel About a Future World?

The statements below describe some of the features of the society presented in the book.

- Talk about what kind of issues and themes might be raised by a book which portrays such a society.
- Discuss which elements of this society are recognisable in aspects of our own world.

- A group of men called 'the Eyes' who watch everything you're doing and in which there is practically nowhere that you are free from observation.
- A group of women who are required to wear clothing that hides their bodies and veils to cover their hair, yet are expected to have sexual relations with married men.
- A society in which there are public ceremonies in which people are required to pray together, or watch executions together.
- A world in which people who don't conform are banished to distant places, ravaged by nuclear waste, from which they can never return.
- A world in which a wife doesn't give birth to her husband's children – there are other women whose specific role is to bear children.
- A place in which you can be declared an 'unwoman', if you don't obey the rules.
- A whole society in which romantic love isn't allowed, where parents are split up from their children and husbands and wives are forced to be separate.

'Freedom To' and 'Freedom From' – A Discussion

One of the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia, tells a group of women in the book:

There is more than one kind of freedom, [...] Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.

The Handmaid's Tale was first published in 1985. The narrator spends a lot of time remembering an earlier period, when she was growing up, in the 1960s and 70s. The 1960s and 70s was a time of great social change, especially for women. Aunt Lydia's suggestion is that in their earlier lives (in the 1960s and 70s) women were given freedom to do all kinds of things. Here are some of the 'freedoms to' that women were suddenly, supposedly, given:

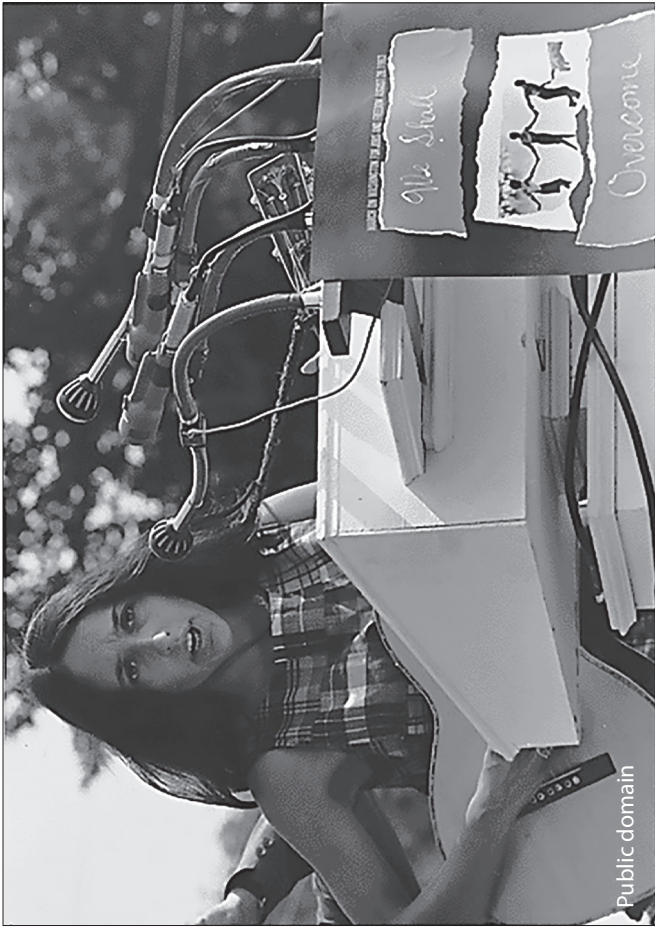
- Freedom to have sexual relationships with people as desired.
- Freedom to take up paid employment (supposedly) on an equal basis to men.
- Freedom to decide whether to have children or not (because of access to the pill and abortion).
- Freedom to express their sexuality in different ways, for instance in same sex relationships, not just in conventional marriage relationships.

■ What might be some of the 'freedoms from' that could have been lost, in this changed world?

Listed below are some freedoms to and freedoms from that might apply to you, in your own lives.

- Discuss whether any of these apply to you. Add any ideas of your own for other things not mentioned in the list.
- Now consider which are most important to you. Do any of the freedoms *from* impact on freedoms *to* (and vice versa)?

FREEDOM TO	FREEDOM FROM
Freedom to wear what you want	Freedom from fear of harassment
Freedom to stay out late	Freedom from the unwanted gaze of others
Freedom to spend your money as you like	Freedom from hunger
Freedom to consume what you like	Freedom from environmental destruction
Freedom to choose to have a child or not	Freedom from peer group pressure to conform
Freedom of expression	Freedom from offence on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, religion etc.
Freedom to have sex with whoever you want to	Freedom from sexual risk (disease, sexual harassment etc.)
Freedom to choose what kind of life to lead	Freedom from having to make your own decisions



DURING READING

Reading Chapter 1

Debating statements

Chapter One is important in establishing some of the key ideas and the narrative style of the novel. As Professor John Mullan says of the opening of all novels, it makes a 'contract' with readers about what they are letting themselves in for.



Read Chapter 1.

- Decide which of these statements best describe it and why. (You can choose more than one if you want to.)

1. Memory is raised as an important theme.
2. The tone is one of nostalgia and loss.
3. There is a sense of menace and threat.
4. There are 3 time frames – the past, the more distant past and now.
5. The focus is on female experience.
6. This is a retrospective first-person narrative.
7. The focus is on relationships and sexual experience.
8. What is being described is memories of growing up in an America of the not so distant past.
9. The reader is a bit disorientated – where are we, who's speaking, where's it all leading? It sets up some intriguing questions.
10. The opening doesn't announce its genre clearly. Are we reading romance, social realism, science fiction, horror or something else?

- Share your choice of statements in a small group or with the whole class.