

Worksheet 1 – Contexts

Recall

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.

- Which city was Atwood living in when she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*?
 - Toronto
 - London
 - Moscow
 - Berlin
- What year was *The Handmaid's Tale* published?
 - 1980
 - 1984
 - 1985
 - 1989
- Which of the texts below did not have a direct influence on *The Handmaid's Tale*?
 - The Canterbury Tales*
 - The Scarlet Letter*
 - Brave New World*
 - Frankenstein*
- How has Atwood described the genre of *The Handmaid's Tale*?
 - Magical realism
 - Speculative fiction
 - Science fiction
 - Critical dystopia

Bonus point: Why does she describe it as fitting this genre?
- In the novel, what is Serena Joy's job before she becomes the Commander's wife?
 - Makeup salesperson
 - Nurse
 - Gospel singer
 - Academic

Analysis

- In her lecture (1:22 – 2:58), Dr Davies quotes from an article that Margaret Atwood wrote in the *New York Times* in 2017. Reread the quotation, and then answer the questions below.

In the spring of 1984 I began to write a novel that was not initially called "The Handmaid's Tale." I wrote in longhand, mostly on yellow legal notepads, then transcribed my almost illegible scrawlings using a huge German-keyboard manual typewriter I'd rented.

The keyboard was German because I was living in West Berlin, which was still encircled by the Berlin Wall: The Soviet empire was still strongly in place, and was not to crumble for another five years. Every Sunday the East German Air Force made sonic booms to remind us of how close they were. During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain — Czechoslovakia, East Germany — I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing. [...]

Having been born in 1939 and come to consciousness during World War II, I knew that established orders could vanish overnight. Change could also be as fast as lightning. "It can't happen here" could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances.

- How does Atwood describe the experience of living in West Berlin?

- b) How do you think this context influenced *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- c) Why does Atwood think it is significant that she was born in 1939?

Evaluation

7. At the end of her lecture, Dr Davies describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as 'a warning to all of us'.
- a) Write a paragraph explaining what you think Dr Davies means by this statement.
 - b) Find three quotations from the novel that support your explanation, and annotate them to evidence your reasoning.

Challenge: Why might Dr Davies's use of the plural pronoun 'us' be significant? How is it different to her just saying the novel is 'a warning to society'?

Glossary

- **Totalitarian** – a system of government which tolerates only one political party, to which all other institutions are subordinated, and which usually demands the complete subservience of the individual to the State.
e.g. Soviet Russia was a totalitarian state.
- **Regime** – A method or system of rule, governance, or control.
e.g. Your father has gone on a diet, so we all have to join in with the new regime.
- **Iron Curtain** – a notional barrier separating Soviet countries and the West prior to the decline of communism in 1989.
e.g. In the UK, we cannot always be sure what goes on behind the Iron Curtain in Hungary.
- **Soviet** – A governing council organized on socialist principles; later, a description of something relating to the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), the name for the state that was established after the Russian revolution.
e.g. This building in Moscow is an example of 1930s Soviet architecture.
- **Theocracy** – A form of government in which God (or a deity) is recognized as the king or immediate ruler.
e.g. The mayor is such a religious man he runs the small town like a theocracy and insists all community activities begin with a prayer.
- **Puritan** – (*historical*) a member of a group of English Protestants of the late 16th and 17th centuries, who separated from the Church of England, because they considered it corrupt; a member of any religious group that advocates or aspires to special purity of doctrine or practice; a person characterized by extreme strictness or austerity in religion and morals.
e.g. Some of the first settlers in North America were Puritans fleeing Europe.
They are a bit of a Puritan when it comes to only buying organic food.
- **Liberal** – (*in politics*) Open-minded, tolerant; governing or governed by relaxed principles or rules; favouring social reform and a degree of state intervention in matters of economics and social justice.
e.g. In recent years, Ireland has becoming increasingly liberal in relation to LGBTQ+ rights.
- **Speculative** – Based on theory and conjecture, rather than practical knowledge.
e.g. I've made a speculative plan for what will happen to our business next year.

- **Dystopia** – an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic.
e.g. Orwell created a highly influential dystopia when he wrote 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'.