

Worksheet 2 – Structure and Beginnings

Review: Lecture 1

In the first lecture of the unit, Dr Madeleine Davies discussed the social and historical contexts that influenced Atwood when writing *The Handmaid's Tale*.

- ✓ Based on what you learnt in the last lecture, name two historical contexts that influenced *The Handmaid's Tale* and explain their significance.

Recall: Lecture 2

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

1. What can we assume is Offred's real name?
a) April
b) Dolores
c) Alma
d) June
2. Which of the following is not one of the connotations of "tale" that Dr Davies discusses?
a) A euphemism for a woman's bottom
b) An act of counting or numbering
c) A reference to Geoffrey Chaucer's writing
d) Something that is imagined, or untrue
3. Which two of the below are chapter headings from *The Handmaid's Tale*?
a) Night
b) Gymnasium
c) Afternoon
d) Birth Day

Bonus point: Why does Dr Davies say these headings are significant?

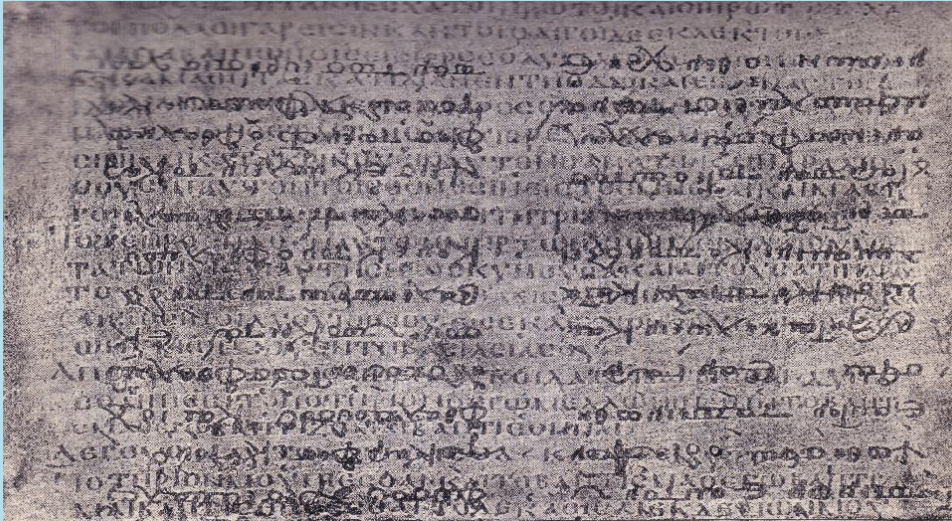
Analysis

4. Re-watch 5:54 – 8:40, where Dr Davies discusses the opening of the novel. She focuses on the quotation below, which she describes as feeling 'intimate... like a whisper':

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

- a) What do you think Dr Davies means when she says the opening of the novel feels 'like a whisper'?
- b) Highlight three phrases from Atwood's opening that you believe create a sense of intimacy. *You might choose to focus on: the use of the first person; sensory description; imagery.*
- c) Now write a brief analysis for each phrase you chose for b), explaining how Atwood's use of language creates a sense of intimacy.

5. a) In your own words, explain the meaning of Atwood's phrase 'a palimpsest of unheard sound'.
- b) How might the novel as a whole be compared to a palimpsest? In your answer, you can refer to the image of a palimpsest below:



Source: Plate XXIV. *The S.S. Teacher's Edition: The Holy Bible*. New York: Henry Frowde, Publisher to the University of Oxford, 1896.

Evaluation

6. Write an alternative opening paragraph to *The Handmaid's Tale*, describing the gymnasium from the perspective of either:
- an Aunt, who patrols the gymnasium continually, wearing an electric cattle prod.
 - an Angel, who works as a guard outside and has been called into the gymnasium.
7. Reread your writing from question 6, or share it with a partner. Discuss the questions below to extend your thinking about the opening of the novel:
- a) How does your description create a different atmosphere to Atwood's opening?
 - b) Why do you think Atwood chose to open the novel in the way she did?
 - c) How is it significant that the first word of the novel is the pronoun "we"?

Glossary

- **Handmaid** – a female servant; (*more broadly*) someone or something that is subservient.
e.g. Editors should not be considered as the mere handmaids of writers.
- **Archaic** – very old, or old-fashioned.
e.g. These days VHS players are considered an archaic piece of technology.
- **Satirist** – someone who writes using humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.
- **Palimpsest** – a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.

- **Circumscribed** – restrict something within limits.
e.g. During the coronavirus lockdown, people's freedom of movement was circumscribed to prevent infections spreading.