

Worksheet 3 – Narration

Review: Lecture 2

In the second lecture of the unit, Dr Madeleine Davies discussed the opening and overall structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

- ✓ Based on what you learnt in the last lecture, explain the significance of repeated sections of the novel being set at night.

Recall: Lecture 3

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

1. In the 'Historical Notes' section at the end of the novel, what is the reader told about the method Offred used to communicate her story?
 - a) Written as a diary
 - b) Filmed to camera
 - c) Told to an anthropologist in an interview
 - d) Recorded on cassette tape
2. How does Dr Davies suggest that Atwood gives Offred's narrative credibility?
 - a) By presenting Offred as well-educated
 - b) Including the "historical notes" section
 - c) Having Offred admit to making mistakes
 - d) Proving Offred remembers the past exactly

Bonus point: Why does this create a sense of credibility?
3. What parallel does Dr Davies draw between Offred's narrative and Anne Frank's diary?

Analysis

4. In the 'Historical Notes' section at the end of the novel, the anthropologists suggest that they are not sure if they have put Offred's narrative together in the correct order. Below is a list of key events from the novel, in the order in which they are presented. Suggest an alternative order for these events, giving a justification for why you believe Offred could have told her narrative in that order:
 - Offred is imprisoned with several other women in a gym.
 - Offred is working at a Commander's house as a Handmaid. This is her third assignment.
 - During a flashback, Offred remembers her life with her husband, Luke, and their daughter.
 - During another flashback, Offred remembers the Women's Center, where she was held at the beginning of the book. Here the women are brainwashed, indoctrinated into being Handmaids and forgetting their old lives.
 - Offred is forced to have sex regularly with the Commander with his Wife present.
 - Offred starts meeting the Commander alone in secret. They play Scrabble and talk.
 - The Commander's Wife asks the narrator to have sex with Nick, the chauffeur, to try to get pregnant (since the Commander is probably sterile). In exchange, she shows the narrator a picture of her daughter, who is now three years older.
 - The narrator continues to have sex with Nick and develops feelings for him. She thinks she might be pregnant.
 - She sees a black van—which is what transports political prisoners—coming for her.
 - Nick assures her that they're resistance workers coming to rescue her, but the narrator doesn't know whether to trust him or not. The men take her away, but we never find out what happens to her.

5. Reread the quotation below from *The Handmaid's Tale*, which Dr Davies discusses in detail during her lecture (1:18 – 3:21):

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed [...] When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove.

- What are the connotations of the term 'reconstruction' in this passage? *Hint: Use the definition in the Glossary to help.*
- What is the effect of its repetition on the reader? How does it impact their perception of Offred as a narrator?
- Why has Atwood emphasised ambiguity and uncertainty throughout Offred's narrative?

Evaluation

6. Dr Davies discusses how Atwood parodies the philosophy of René Descartes, when Offred states 'I tell, therefore you are' (7:30 – 9:40).
- Read the quotation below from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* (1637). What do you think Descartes means by 'I think, therefore I am'?

I supposed that all the ideas that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be something; and [therefore] I observed this truth, I think, therefore I am

- How is Offred's phrase – 'I tell, therefore you are' – different to Descartes' original? What does Offred mean?
- What is the significance of Offred addressing the reader directly in her narrative, through the use of the second person? How does this give her narrative a different perspective to male thinkers such as Descartes?

Extension: In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred reflects that 'A story is like a letter'. Write your own letter for a reader 100 years in the future, explaining what *The Handmaid's Tale* is and how you reacted when you first read it. *Hint: You might like to open your letter with the phrase "Dear You..."*

Glossary

- Cultural anthropologist** – someone who studies human societies and cultures, and how they develop over time.
- Oral** – spoken, rather than written.
- Reconstruction** – a thing that has been rebuilt after being damaged or destroyed; an impression, model, or re-enactment of a past event formed from the available evidence.
- Credibility** – the quality of being convincing or believable.
- Paradoxical** – seemingly absurd or self-contradictory.

- **Parody** – an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect.