

Worksheet 4 – Identity

Review: Lecture 3

In the third lecture of the unit, Dr Madeleine Davies discussed the narrative style that Atwood uses in *The Handmaid's Tale* and how it influences the reader's perception of Offred.

- ✓ Based on what you learnt in the last lecture, explain the significance of Atwood's use of the second person ("you") in Offred's narrative.

Recall: Lecture 4

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

1. What connection did Dr Davies draw between *The Handmaid's Tale* and another of Atwood's novels, *Alias Grace*?
 - a) They both explore repression in America
 - b) Both have protagonist with uncertain identities
 - c) Both their narrators are women
 - d) They are set in totalitarian societies
2. Which of Offred's family members were involved in feminist protests prior to the establishment of Gilead?
 - a) Her aunt
 - b) Her sister
 - c) Her mother
 - d) None of the above – it was Offred herself who attended
3. What was the Commander's job before the regime?
 - a) Salesman
 - b) Market researcher
 - c) Politician
 - d) Military officer

Analysis

4. In her lecture, Dr Davies discusses how Offred is required to put on a 'performance' as a Handmaid (6:40 – 8:10). In your own words, explain how the language in the quotation below suggests that Offred sees her identity in terms of a performance:

I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.

5. Rewatch the section where Dr Davies discusses Serena Joy's character.
 - a) Draw a mind map exploring Serena Joy's character, including details that Dr Davies mentions and your own observations from reading the novel.
 - b) Write a diary entry for Serena Joy. You may wish to include:
 - her memories of her life prior to Gilead
 - her current feelings about the regime
 - opinions about her husband, the Commander
 - what she feels towards Offred

Evaluation

6. Dr Davies suggests that one of the messages of *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the danger of being passive within society: 'don't stand on the sidelines and let things happen'. Think of three arguments in support of Dr Davies's statement, using quotations from *The Handmaid's Tale* as evidence.

Extension: Conduct a class debate, where you argue for and against Dr Davies's statement.

7. In her book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood discusses the theme of survival as a trope in Canadian literature:

I'd like to begin with a sweeping generalization and argue that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core. [...] The central symbol for Canada [...] is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*. [...] Our central idea is one which generates [...] an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience -- the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship -- that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.

- a) Describe in your own word what Atwood says about Canadian literature in this quotation.
b) To what extent do you think *The Handmaid's Tale* fits into a theme of survival? Write a paragraph in response, referencing both the novel and Atwood's quotation from *Survival*.

Glossary

- **Protagonist** – the leading character or one of the major characters in a play, film, novel, etc
e.g. Offred is the protagonist of The Handmaid's Tale.
- **Anonymity** – (*of a person*) not being identified by name; having no unusual or remarkable features.
e.g. The interviewee's face has been blurred, to preserve their anonymity.
- **Repressed** – restrained; oppressed; held back.
e.g. When the man knocked into her on the tube, she repressed her feelings of anger and said nothing.
- **Compose** – to put together, or make up something; to write something as an author; to create a piece of music; to adjust the body or mind so that it is calm.