

## Worksheet 8 – Words and Silence

### Review: Lecture 7

In the seventh lecture of the unit, Dr Madeleine Davies discussed how the Handmaids' bodies are presented in the novel.

- ✓ Why does Offred describe her own body as 'treacherous ground'?

### Recall: Lecture 8

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

1. What are the three fundamental rules the Handmaids must obey?
2. Why does Gilead limit the Handmaids' access to language?
3. What is the Latin phrase Offred finds written inside her cupboard?  
a) *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*    b) *illegitimi non carborundum*  
c) *non quit*    d) *lectio libertas*

Bonus point: What does it mean in English?

### Analysis

4. In her lecture, Dr Davies references the fact that slaves in the United States were banned from learning to read or write. She quotes the scientist Carl Sagan, who has connected literacy to emancipation from slavery:

Frederick Douglass taught that literacy is the path from slavery to freedom. There are many kinds of slavery and many kinds of freedom, but reading is still the path.  
– Carl Sagan, *The Demon-haunted World* (1995)

- a) Explain in your own words what Carl Sagan means.
  - b) Why might Sagan make such a strong connection between literacy and freedom?
5. Re-read the quotation below from *The Handmaid's Tale*, which Dr Davies analyses in her lecture (4:55 – 6:23):

We play two games. Larynx, I spell. Valance. Quince. Zygote. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. Limp, I spell. Gorge. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious.

- a) Highlight all the words and phrases that involve sensory description.
- b) What is the effect of the sensory description in this passage? How does Atwood use the senses to present Offred's relationship to language?

## Evaluation

6. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights doesn't directly mention reading and writing, although these may be considered to be covered by Article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Write an **open letter** to the United Nations arguing that access to reading and writing should be directly named as basic human rights.

You should:

- Use a formal writing style.
- Refer to *The Handmaid's Tale* as evidence for your claims.
- Include some historical context as evidence.

## Glossary

- **Literacy** – the ability to read and write
- **Emancipation** – the freeing of someone from slavery; the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation.
- **Open letter** – a letter addressed to a particular person or group of people but intended for wider publication (e.g. in a newspaper or online), so that a wider audience can also read it.
- **Voluptuous** – relating to or characterized by luxury or sensual pleasure.