

Worksheet 9 – The Historical Notes

Review: Lecture 8

In the eight lecture of the unit, Dr Madeleine Davies discussed the importance of language and literacy within the novel, and how women's access to language is policed in Gilead.

- ✓ What are the three fundamental rules the Handmaids must follow in Gilead?

Recall: Lecture 9

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

1. Who wrote the 'Historical Notes' section of *The Handmaid's Tale*?
 - a) Professor Pieixoto
 - b) Margaret Atwood's editor
 - b) Dr Madeleine Davies
 - c) Margaret Atwood
2. Which of these is not one of the functions that Dr Davies ascribes to the 'Historical Notes' section?
 - a) Give the reader key information about Gilead that Offred would not know
 - b) Show that the energies that gave rise to Gilead might continue in the future
 - c) Question the authenticity of Offred's narrative as a historical document
 - d) Make it clear to the reader that Gilead does come to an end one day
3. What is the name of the university where the talk is set in the 'Historical Notes'?
 - a) Harvard University
 - b) University of Cambridge
 - b) University of Central Gilead
 - d) University of Denay, Nunavit

Bonus point: What is the significance of this setting?

Analysis

4. Professor Piexoto references the Underground Railroad in his speech on *The Handmaid's Tale*.
 - a) Research the history of the Underground Railroad in America.
 - b) How does this history resonate with Atwood's presentation of the resistance group Mayday in *The Handmaid's Tale*?
 - c) Why is Professor Piexoto's attitude towards such resistance movements worrying?
5. Dr Davies suggests that there are hints in the 'Historical Notes' section, that some of the gender inequality that women experience in Gilead has persisted in this later society.
 - a) Make a note of all the references to casual sexism Dr Davies locates in this section.
 - b) Research the Everyday Sexism Project, where activist Laura Bates collected anecdotes from women about the forms of sexism they experience everyday:
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/apr/17/what-i-have-learned-from-five-years-of-everyday-sexism>
 - c) To what extent do the 'Historical Notes' warn the reader about the dangers of everyday sexism in contemporary society? *Write your response as a paragraph, using quotations from the novel and your research on the Everyday Sexism project for evidence.*

Evaluation

6. You are in a book group who are reading *The Handmaid's Tale*. Someone suggests that you

don't read the 'Historical Notes' section. Write down five reasons, with evidence from the text, for why the 'Historical Notes' section forms an important part of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Glossary

- **Utopian** – modelled on or aiming for a state in which everything is perfect; idealistic.
- **Transcript** – a written or printed version of material originally presented in another medium (e.g. a speech).
- **Symposium** – a conference or meeting to discuss a particular subject
- **Partial** – exist only in part, incomplete; favouring one side over another, biased.
- **Harrowing** – very distressing or upsetting.
- **Obsolete** – no longer used; out of date.
- **Underground railroad** – the Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by enslaved African-Americans to escape into free states and Canada.