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Offred

Who is Offred?

- The main **protagonist** and narrator, Offred is a young woman who is trapped in Gilead as a Handmaid, a form of surrogate mother/servant.
- She was once married to Luke, and had a child.
- The name she is known by, Of-fred, is derived from the name of her current Commander – she does not reveal her former, real name.
- She is a survivor from the past who uses memories of her husband and child to help her carry on in the present.

The function of a Handmaid

Under the terms of the totalitarian Gileadean state, Offred's individuality is erased and replaced with the status of generic woman-for-breeding – she is one of the 'two-legged wombs' (p. 146). She is denied all her individual rights – her fate is to be virtually imprisoned in the domestic spaces of the home and only allowed out with a shopping partner and for Handmaids' official excursions like Prayvaganzas and Salvagings. Most of the time she is isolated and afraid.

At the age of thirty-three and potentially still fertile, she is a victim of Gileadean sexist **ideology** which equates 'male' with power and sexual potency, and 'female' with submission and reproduction. In her **narrative**, however, Offred resists being reduced in this way: she refuses to forget her past or her own name when she was a daughter, lover, wife, working mother and friend. She refuses to give up hope of escape.

The significance of a name

Offred's identity as an individual has been erased and she has been forbidden to use her own name. She keeps it, however like a buried treasure, as a guarantee of her other identity: 'I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day' (p. 94). She gives her real name as a love token to Nick, and he in turn uses it as an exchange of trust when he comes for her with the black van: 'He calls me by my real name. Why should this mean anything?' (p. 305). Offred does not trust the reader with her real name, however, which is a sign of her fear in a dangerous situation.

Study focus: Offred's psychological freedom

It is important to be able to write about how Offred retains her psychological freedom. She is a survivor from the past, and it is her power to remember which helps her to cope in the present. She reconstructs the past through **flashbacks** (these are her most effective escape routes from isolation, loneliness and boredom). The layered image of past and present her narrative provides in Chapter 1 is like a **palimpsest** (a manuscript where later writing has been superimposed on earlier, erased words). Offred succeeds in simultaneously inhabiting two spaces: her Handmaid's space (or lack of it), and the freer, happier spaces of memory.



Offred's lively curiosity

An attractive characteristic of Offred is her lively responsiveness to the world around her. She is sharply observant of physical details in her surroundings. She is curious and likes to explore. Her response to the Commander's Wife's beautiful garden is emotional, even poetic. She notes all its seasonal changes in detail, for it represents for her all the healthy growth and fertility of the natural world. These things are denied by the regime, but outside the window the beauty of the garden flourishes.

Her observations about the garden reveal her resistance to the regime: 'There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light' (p. 161). Her response to the moon is also poetic: 'a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is a stone and the sky is full of dead hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway' (p. 108). This ironic observation is typical of Offred's character and reveals her refusal to give up on life.

Subversion versus rebellion

Offred's attitude is discreetly subversive but never openly rebellious. She watches for those moments of instability which she calls 'tiny peepholes' (p. 31) when human responses break through official surfaces. It is this sharpness of mind which informs her mischievous, critical view of her present situation, as in the satisfaction she gets out of teasing the young guard at the gate: 'I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there' (p. 32).

She consistently refuses to be deceived by the **rhetoric** of Gilead, for she believes in the value of every individual. Of the men in her life, she says: 'Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other' (pp. 201–2). She yearns for communication and trust between people instead of mutual suspicion and isolation.

Ironically, Offred's fullest human relationship in Gilead is her 'arrangement' with the Commander: 'The fact is that I'm his mistress' (p. 172). This is where 'taboo dissolved' (p. 165), for it is in their Scrabble games that Offred is at her liveliest and her most conventionally feminine. In his study, Offred and the Commander relate to each other by old familiar social and sexual codes, which eases the loneliness both feel. It is after her first evening that Offred does something she has never done before in the novel: she laughs out loud, partly at the absurdity of it all, but partly out of a reawakening of her own high spirits. Yet she is too intelligent ever to forget that it is only a game or a **parody** of the past, and her outing to Jezebel's confirms this. For all its glitter, her purple sequined costume, like the evening, is a shabby masquerade, and in the clear light of day she is left sitting with 'a handful of crumpled stars' in her lap (p. 303).

Progress booster: Offred's model of resistance

It is important to keep in mind that *The Handmaid's Tale* is **dystopian** fiction. Political and/or social comment, driven by the need or want for change, can be in many ways more important than the characters, and through them Atwood may present us with models of an ideological position. Consider what kind of model complex characters such as Offred and Moira offer. For example, Offred's model of resistance is to work surreptitiously, while Moira is more confrontational. Another way to think of this is in terms of the contrast between moderate political resistance and direct action.

A02 PROGRESS BOOSTER

'I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance' (p. 279). Examine Offred's vocabulary of images, in the light of her statement. The use of natural imagery contrasts with the polluted, technological world of Gilead and so Offred's **narrative** can be viewed as feminine subversion in a male-dominated world.



A05

PROGRESS BOOSTER

A02

Consider in what ways Offred's tale can be thought of as a resistance narrative. Weigh up the evidence for and against – for example, Offred is neither a member of Mayday nor an obvious social dissident. How might her narrative seek to undermine the totalitarian regime she is now subject to?

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect, and then follow up with evidence or a detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, it is more likely to make you write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references that help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about Offred's **narrative** voice. Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

One of the chief concerns in a dystopian society is the control of body and mind, but ultimately we come to view Offred's narrative voice as one that seeks freedom from the strict conditions of control imposed upon her. As the narrative unfolds we learn of her grief and anguish – how does she achieve psychological and emotional freedom under a regime that would erase her identity? How does she deal with the loss of her loved ones and, as Offred reveals more of her past how do we come to view her voice as resisting, or even actively engaging in rebellion?

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'The Handmaid's Tale'.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the text as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about the role of gender politics in the novel:

Explicit meaning

When Professor Pieixoto says 'Our job is not to censure but to understand', it is more than just a statement of his academic aims with regard to Gilead. It also implies a certain amount of sympathy for the patriarchal regime.

Short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

Inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can also be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Plato') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'OK' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply' or 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Serena Joy's character is unfeeling – she hates Offred and is corrupt') but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Atwood **conveys** a sense of a character who, each time the Ceremony takes place, endures her own private pain. As readers **we** are compelled to feel an increasing sense of Serena Joy's helpless anguish as we consider Offred's question: 'Which of us is it worse for?' (p. 106).

EXAMINER'S TIP

Something examiners pick up on is that students often confuse 'narrator' and 'author'. Remember that Offred is a character as well as the narrator, and don't confuse her with the novel's author, Margaret Atwood.