

AQA AS Level English Literature  
Activities and Exam Practice

Margaret Atwood's

*The Handmaid's Tale*

H. Alam



(Sample pages)

## Language focus

Understanding how Atwood use language in *The Handmaid's Tale* is crucial not only to gaining real insight into the story but also to dealing with essays and examination questions. Examiners are keen to find out how well students understand authors' intentions, their methods and whether writers have been successful in their aims. This is highlighted by the words of Assessment Objective 3:

**AO3** show detailed understanding of the ways in which writers' choice of form, structure and language shape meanings

But what does this mean? If you break down the wording of the objective you'll see that it has different elements, which suggests that you should be aware of:

- **Form.** You should know that the book is a work of prose, a satire, and that it is a dystopian novel. You should know what satire is used, the main features of a dystopian novel, and how they feature in *The Handmaid's Tale*. These may seem like simple points but you must be sure that you understand these basic ideas about form and their relationship to the meaning of the text.
- **Structure.** This book has an unusual style. You will need to identify features, such as the use of flashbacks, the first-person narrative voice and the way the book is divided into sections/chapters. It is important to understand why the author uses these features.
- **Language.** The simple use of certain words indicates things about the state of Gilead or about a character. For example, Offred's use of language may be different depending on context and it tells us something about how she thinks and feels. Language can create mood and tone, and control the reader's responses. You need to identify and consider these elements of language use.
- **How language shapes meaning.** It is important to understand that the writer's use of form, structure and language *all* contribute to how meaning is created and expressed. Understanding how all these factors combine to create an overall tone and style is the key to responding to A03.

So, in a question which tests AO3, you can be asked to focus on a number of issues relating to the form, structure, language and meaning of the text.

## Key features of Atwood's use of language

### Recurring Images – colours

Atwood relies heavily on using certain images which appear as motifs (themes) throughout the text. One central motif is the colour red.

References to red dominate the story and the red motif underlines how ideas are interlinked and interdependent. The colour acts as an extended metaphor throughout the novel. Some examples of the way the image of red is used:

- Offred is seen as a figure in red, setting off to go shopping with a basket like Red Riding Hood. The suggestion is that the Handmaids are innocent, childlike creatures. (But remember the Big Bad Wolf.) Even 'The sidewalk is red brick', as if the path is picked out like 'the yellow brick road' in *The Wizard of Oz*. Offred, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, wears red shoes. Yet there is an ironic contradiction in these images. The Handmaids are not innocent girls, and Offred's shoes are not magic like Dorothy's: they can't whisk her back to her past life. The Handmaids are in fact regarded as reproductive machines, part of a religious sisterhood: 'a sister dipped in blood' (page 19). Atwood describes the Commander as an animal, possibly a wolf (page 59).
- The Handmaids are surrounded by images of blood, first in childbirth and then in death when they attend the 'salvaging', or when they go to look at the people who have been executed (pages 42–3). Offred is also aware when she menstruates that she has failed to conceive a child. She feels 'defined' by the colour of blood (page 18).
- The Handmaids are always seen in their red uniform, even down to their shoes and gloves. From the opening pages we know that they are trained at the 'Red Centre'. Offred tells us, 'Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood which defines us' (page 18). Atwood links red and blood in Offred's mind and also makes the reader focus on this link. The Handmaid's lack of individuality is emphasised by the description of Ofglen.

She is 'A shape, red with white wings around her face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket' (page 28).

- Even the most innocent of images, such as flowers, are shown as bright red tulips 'redder than ever' (page 55.) Offred sees the tulips as genitalia and links them to fertility and life but Serena Joy clearly feels differently as she deadheads the flowers with 'a convulsive jerk' (page 161). The red tulips in Serena Joy's garden are linked with death, blood and destruction. The red

of the tulips is transformed by the complex links to the colour red. The constant association of red with pain or danger is transferred to the flowers, which in turn reflect Serena Joy's feelings.

- When Offred is overcome by feelings of hysteria she is afraid she will burst. She says 'I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth' (page 156). Again the image is of blood and the link is made not only to the blood of childbirth but also to the fact that she thinks she will burst and 'die of laughter'.

## Activities: Clothing and colour

- 1 Look carefully at the full description of Offred's uniform on page 18. What do you think is the reason for the shape of her uniform and what is the significance of the colour? You should also note her accessories, her bag and her umbrella, which are also red.
- 2 Make a list of the characters in the book and then identify which colour of clothes each group has to wear. Work out the role of these characters in the social order of Gilead and see if there is any significance in the colour they have been assigned. Don't forget to look at the characters seen at Jezebel's.
- 3 As you read the book, keep a log of any significant references to the colour red. Why does Atwood use this colour so often? What does it add to your understanding of her ideas?

## Flowers

Atwood makes use of the image of flowers at various points in the text. The first reference to note is the use of the image of red tulips. However, what is really important is not the tulips but the women's reactions to the flower – first Offred's, and later Serena Joy's. For Offred they symbolise life; for Serena Joy, who takes off their heads, they are an ending, a symbol of useless seed pods. You should be able to follow the image of the tulips and relate this to the role of the Handmaids. In this context the innocent image of the flowers is threatening because of the colour red, which can be a signal of danger and also because the Handmaids are supposed to be like the flowers – fertile.

Offred's life is surrounded by references to a red which echoes the red of the tulips. Even when she goes to look at the bodies hanging on the wall she is aware of the link between the red of the flowers and the blood escaping through material covering the faces of the dead. Yet the tulips are quite chilling when Serena Joy decapitates them because they are no longer of any use.

Offred is surrounded by images of flowers. She notices Serena Joy's garden and is reminded of her own garden and the trees and flowers she grew.



### Note

There are many other images which Atwood uses in order to develop her themes. Try to identify images which recur throughout the text and decide how they reflect, or add to our understanding of, a theme.