

# AQA English Literature A-Level

## The Handmaid's Tale Literary Form

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## Structure

The Handmaid's Tale is split into **fifteen parts**, denoted via **Roman numerals**. At the end of the novel follows a section called "**Historical Notes**". The fifteen parts are also split into **chapters**, of which there are **forty-six**.

Offred's narrative is the focus of all forty-six chapters. The Historical Notes section is the only **break** from her narrative and is given in the form of a **dictated lecture**, many years in the future, from a Professor of Gilead called **Professor Piexoto**. The Historical Notes section works to **reframe** the whole of Offred's narrative within the **wider historical context** of the universe in which Gilead exists, something Offred was **unable** to provide herself because of **limitations** on her freedom. Offred's narrative is incredibly **evocative** despite the restrictions imposed upon her in Gilead. She is **prohibited** from reading and writing, but nevertheless manages to tell her story. Her **mental fortitude** and the **spirit of her endurance** leaves a mark on history, as told by the Professor. Atwood can be seen here as commenting on the **importance** of telling your story, no matter the **consequences**.

Offred questions her **own reliability** as a narrator a few times during the story.

- 'It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances.' (Offred in Chapter 23)

Atwood, in making Offred announce her own narrative as a construct, is commenting on the often-blurry **line** between **fiction** and **reality**. This is a **trope** of **speculative fiction**. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood blends familiar **tropes of oppression** with the unfamiliar to create the unsettling context for Offred's narration. The fact that Offred explains to the reader that her narrative might not be **entirely reliable** is a reminder of the way stories are **disseminated** in times of war and **civil unrest**, often **anecdotally** and with **inaccuracies**.

Famously unreliable narrators include Nick from **F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*** and Holden Caulfield from **J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye***. In both novels, the ways the characters portray events are not necessarily **truthful** and are affected by their personal feelings. Nick is an outsider to the incredibly wealthy world of *Gatsby*, both in **class** and in **attitude**. both In **Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***, the narrators Captain Walton and Victor Frankenstein could be interpreted as **unreliable** in their interpretation of other characters, events, and in their opinions of themselves.

Fiction aside, real-life accounts written under **oppressive circumstances** include *The Diary of Anne Frank* which was written in hiding in Amsterdam during Nazi occupation, and *No Friend But the Mountains* by Behrouz Boochani, written on WhatsApp while the author was incarcerated in an Australian immigration detention centre.



## Genre

*The Handmaid's Tale* is **speculative fiction**. Speculative fiction is an umbrella definition which includes **science fiction**, **fantasy**, and **dystopian literature**, though the term was originally coined in association with the science fiction of the **mid-twentieth century**. Other examples of speculative fiction include **1984** by George Orwell, ***The Hunger Games*** by Suzanne Collins, and ***The Man in the High Castle*** by J.G. Ballard. Speculative fiction is also a popular genre in film and TV. Films include **2001: A Space Odyssey**, ***Blade Runner***, ***Inglourious Basterds***, and ***Mad Max***. TV series include ***Black Mirror*** and ***Stranger Things***.

Common themes running throughout all the examples listed above include **dystopia**, **science fiction**, **technological advancement**, and **social experimentation**. Many use the events of their narratives to criticise the **political environments** during which they were written. Orwell's **1984**, written in 1949, examines **mass surveillance**, **dictatorship**, and **social repression**, and the author used **Stalinist** Russia as inspiration. Through genre, Orwell examines the possibilities of what a **totalitarian Western state** might look like. **Oceania**, the state described in **1984**, exists in what was formerly the UK, the US, Canada, Latin America, Australia, and South Africa; in the same way that **Gilead** exists in what was formerly the United States.

Margaret Atwood's style of **speculative fiction** has come to exist in its own category. Much of the genre **encompasses science fiction**, often including **alien life forms** and **terra incognita**. Atwood's approach to speculative fiction exists much **closer to reality** as we know it. *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, is set in a world **removed** from our own but not **entirely dissimilar**. Atwood is quoted as saying of the novel, "There's a **precedent in real life** for everything in the book. I decided not to put anything in that **somebody somewhere hadn't already done**. But you write these books, so they won't come true." Rather than examining our **fear of the unknown** through fiction involving **extraterrestrials**, for example, Atwood examines the ways that what **we already know should be feared**, by twisting our **known reality** just enough for it to become **unfamiliar**.

## Language

*The Handmaid's Tale* is full of **Biblical references**. In the **epigraphs** that start the book, Atwood quotes **Genesis 30:1-3**, the first book in the **Old Testament**.

- “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.  
And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?  
And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.” (First epigraph)



The quote works to both set the **tone** for the rest of the novel and explains the **Biblical precedent** for the situation in Gilead. In this epigraph, Jacob's wife Rachel is **infertile**, and so she asks him to **impregnate** her maid Bilhah. The phrase "she shall bear upon my knees" is **reminiscent** of the Ceremony in *The Handmaid's Tale* in which Offred is forced to **copulate** with the Commander. The Book of Genesis is also the inspiration for the name of the Red Centre, which is known officially as **The Rachel and Leah Centre**, Rachel being Jacob's first wife and Leah being his second and preferred.

At the Red Centre, Aunt Lydia employs many **religious epithets** in her **educational practice**, as do the other Aunts. After Offred leaves the Centre, these phrases stay with her, and she quotes them often throughout the **course of her narrative**. Offred quotes Aunt Lydia as saying:

- **“You must cultivate poverty of spirit. Blessed are the meek.’ She didn’t go on to say anything about inheriting the earth.”** (Chapter 12)

Here, Aunt Lydia is referencing a section of the Bible in which Jesus famously gives his **Sermon on the Mount**. The full phrase is **“Blessed are the meek, as they shall inherit the Earth”**; meaning that those who **suffer now** will rise from their circumstances to **better days in future**. The fact that Aunt Lydia doesn't finish the phrase is **telling**, because the Handmaids have **no possibility** of rising out of their circumstances. Offred finishes the phrase for her, though only in her thoughts. Her **sarcasm**, and the fact that she knew the **rest of the passage**, betrays the fact that Offred is from an **educated background**. Throughout the book, Offred often uses the language of her thoughts to **undermine her oppressors**.

The name Gilead comes from a later reference in **Genesis**. Gilead is where Jacob, the grandson of **Abraham**, has his last meeting with his Uncle, under whom he had been working in poor conditions, before escaping to a better life. It exists as a mountainous region in **modern-day Jordan**. In Hebrew, Gilead means **‘eternal happiness’**, probably influencing the decision of the **religious leaders** in *The Handmaid's Tale* to name their state. In Gilead, cars are named after references from the Bible: Offred mentions that **Whirlwind, Chariot** and **Behemoth** are all names for vehicles, all of which are **allusions** to the Old Testament. **Law enforcement** is also named for the Old Testament, the Guardian Angels and the Eyes of the Lord, providing a metaphor for the **oppression of people** in Gilead on **religious grounds**. The shops in the town centre have Biblical names: **Milk and Honey, All Flesh**, and **Lilies of the Field**. We know this from the **images** on the shops' signs. The **written word** is **forbidden** in public, for fear of women reading. Women are not allowed to **read or write** – Offred explains that this is because of a **scriptural precedent**. This hits especially hard for Offred, a lover of words and **wordplay**, whose career before Gilead seemed to involve **writing** and **editing**. In Chapter 23, the Commander invites Offred to play Scrabble with him and through their games we see Offred's **enthusiasm for words** revealed. She plays increasingly **esoteric words** like 'zygote', 'larynx' and 'prolix', and even begins to make up **nonsense words** (mirroring Atwood's own use of wordplay in the novel). Through her use of language, Offred maintains a **sense of empowerment** against **oppressive circumstances**.



The novel is peppered with numerous words and phrases that have double meanings and **multiple significances**. Atwood is a master of **neologisms**, newly coined words made up entirely for the universe of Gilead. The **portmanteau word** for working class wives in Gilead is 'econowife', a combination of 'economic' and 'wife'. The names of the Handmaids are also **portmanteau** words, Offred meaning she is 'Of Fred', the **husband** she is assigned to. As a Handmaid, **even your name** no longer belongs to you.

## Context and Literary Influences

While the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* are extreme, they are rooted in affairs current to the 1980s. The rise of the Christian right and the **Reagan administration** all hinted at the potential rise of a **right-wing theocracy** in future. In the UK, **Margaret Thatcher** had just been elected, a Conservative politician whose leadership led to the **Miners' Strike** and the **Falklands War**. Many of the conservative politicians in power were elected in retaliation to the **sexually progressive movements** of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1973, **Roe vs Wade** was a ruling by the US Supreme Court that the **US Constitution** protected a pregnant woman's **right to choose** an **abortion** without **excessive government restriction**. This was a **major victory** for the **women's rights movement** but was seen as proof of the **moral degradation of society** by many in the more **conservative Christian right**.

The **Iranian Revolution of 1979** was recent history. During the revolution, Iran's totalitarian dictatorship under the **Shah (Royal leader)** was overthrown and replaced with the **Islamic Republic of Iran**. A new law under Islamic rule enforced hair coverings in public, even for those women who had never done so before the Republic. **Women's rights** globally were being called into question, not just in the West. To read more about the **Iranian Revolution** through a **feminist** lens, *Persepolis* by **Marjane Satrapi** details what life was like before and after the events of 1979.

*Frankenstein* by **Mary Shelley** is considered one of the earliest works of **science/speculative fiction**, a foundational text for the genre. In it, the author uses the monster as a device through which she examines **class**, **reproduction**, and the **social effects of the rapid technological advancements** of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She uses the monster to create a **social commentary** on the treatment of **oppressed people** in **Victorian** society. Like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, questions around **basic human rights** and **power dynamics** are brought to the fore. In Atwood's novel, Gilead is a device through which **class** and **reproductive rights** are examined. In *Frankenstein*, the creation of the monster and its **consequent tragedy** can be seen as a **metaphor** for the **anxieties** about **reproduction** that existed at a time when childbirth had a **high rate** of **morbidity** for both mother and child.

