**‘The Handmaid’s Tale’**

**Margaret Atwood**

**Allusions**

‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is full of Allusions. Research the categories below in order to gain further understanding of their significance.

* Biblical Allusions:
* Jezebels
* Rachel and Jacob (Genesis)
* Gilead
* Freud and his theories – ‘Penis Envy’
* Marxism
* George Orwell’s ‘1984’
* Descartes’ theory – “I think, therefore I am”
* Puritan New England

Why has Atwood included Allusions in the text? What do they tell us about Offred and Gilead?

**Setting**

The setting in ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ is incredibly influential upon its characters. It is suggested that the novel is set early in the 21st Century. The story spans the 3-4 months of summer and flashes back in time often. The flashbacks indicate that Gilead seems to be around five years old. Offred’s daughter was in daycare, “about three or four” when the revolution took place. She is five when they try to escape and “she must be eight” when Offred sees her photo. As readers we know that Gilead is relatively new, through information such as “blankets that still said the U.S” and through the fact that the Handmaids are told they are pioneers, front-runners of the new system: “You are a transitional generation.”

Work through the points below, giving as much detail as possible and using quotations:

* Where is the novel set?
* In which contemporary geographical place is Gilead located? Cite evidence.
* What contemporary university is referred to? Give information about this university. Why is its inclusion important?
* What are we told about the world outside of the house/Gilead? What is the significance of that?
* Make notes on the following areas of the Commander’s house, using quotes to support your comments: Offred’s room (Chapter 2 and 9); The garden; The sitting room (Ch. 14), The Commander’s study (Ch. 23)
* Make notes on the town and specific settings within it
* Make notes on Jezebel’s. Focus upon the contrast with the rest of the Gilead settings (Ch. 37)
* Research a Totalitarian regime, either one that is contemporary or historical. How does Gilead echo this setting?

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**Themes**

Control is the overriding theme presented within the novel, but there are subsets of this theme. Using the subsets below, find three examples (using quotations and list the page reference) that highlight each idea.

* Control of thought
* Control of women
* Control of movement
* Control of sexuality
* Control through fear

Closely analyse one section of the text that shows ONE theme and discuss how it encapsulates the theme (photocopy and annotate this)

**Characters**

1. *Major Characters*

*Offred*

*The Commander*

*Serena Joy*

*Moira*

*Nick*

COVER THE POINTS BELOW:

* Facts, for example – Offred is 33 years old, has had a daughter…
* Actions, for example – Offred capitulates to the regime because she is too afraid for her daughter to protest
* Adjectives/Phrases – Offred is educated (university graduate; good job in the library)
* Conclusions/overall description – for example; The whole story is told from Offred’s p.o.v…she is not a hero…she is passive

1. *Minor Characters*

Janine/Ofwarren

Luke

Offred’s mother

Aunt Lydia

FOR THE MINOR CHARACTERS, COVER THE POINTS BELOW:

* Overall description, as well as discussing their significance

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**Narrative Structure**

The structure of this novel is discontinuous, fragmentary, revelatory and episodic. There is a considerable use of interior monologue. Rather than following a straightforward chronological narrative, the story is gradually revealed to the reader through some narrative and dialogue, combined with interior dialogue that includes a great deal of flashbacks, hint and allusion. It gradually builds a cumulative picture of the setting, the characters, the themes and events of the story. The story needs to be pieced together, like a jigsaw puzzle, with the final picture revealed only as the last pieces are put in.

* What do you notice about the use of present and past tense? Of speech marks? Of capital letters?
* Very little actually happens in Offred’s story. Why is this appropriate to the themes of the novel?
* What is the strength of this type of narrative structure? Why is it appropriate and more effective than a straightforward narrative would be?
* What is the point of view of this novel? What is the effect of this POV on the story? How reliable is the narrator?
* What is the dominant overall tone of the writing?