 The handmaid’s tale – Chapter one

Resource 15a

1. How does the opening paragraph represent the past, and the passing of time?
2. What is a palimpsest and how is this metaphor further developed through Atwood’s imagery?
3. Describe Atwood’s narrative voice. Whose point of view is represented? How would you describe the tone and how is it created? What is the impact of the collective first person ‘we’?
4. What key images, words, or allusions establish setting and hint that Offred’s world is different to our own in this chapter?
5. ‘I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the picture flickering over lifting flesh.’

‘The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.’

Atwood juxtaposes imagery of sex between past and present. Explore the effect of this contrasting imagery and how it foreshadows what is to come in the narrative.

1. ‘We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma. Louise. Dolores. Moira. June.’

What does this passage reveal about Atwood’s imagined world? How does her language create a sense of fear and foreboding? How are the handmaids characterised here?

1. What conflicts are established in the opening chapter and how does Atwood explore them?