 Characterisation – the protagonist narrator (‘Offred’)

Resource 17

1. ‘My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark.’ Chapter 14
   1. Why is our protagonist narrator unnamed throughout the novel?
   2. What does the convention of naming handmaids after their commanders reveal about this society?
   3. How does Atwood’s figurative language here highlight the grief of Offred’s loss of identity combined with a sense of hope for the future?
   4. What is Atwood speculating about her own world?
2. How does Atwood convey both strength and vulnerability in Offred’s characterisation? Provide examples from throughout the novel.
3. ‘I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last.’ Chapter 2. Offred is a survivor - compare her fate to other handmaids in the novel in the novel. How does she survive?
4. Offred’s narrative is a familiar one to speculative/dystopian fiction – an oppressed individual who challenges his or her oppressive society – the rebel. Yet Offred’s rebellions are small – she intends to survive. In Chapter 4, she makes eye contact with a Guardian – a forbidden act. ‘It's an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer.’
5. What other small acts of rebellion or defiance does Offred engage in? Provide quotes.
   1. How do these acts of defiance, these ‘rewards’ assist in her survival both psychologically and emotionally?
6. In Chapter 17 Offred returns to her room following the Ceremony and lathers her dry skin with butter, kept from her dinner, as beauty products are not allowed to handmaids.

‘Buttered, I lie on my single bed, flat, like a piece of toast. I can’t sleep. In the semi dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can’t see. There’s no breeze, my white curtains are like gauze bandages, hanging limp, glimmering in the aura cast by the searchlight that illuminates this house at night, or is there a moon?

I fold back the sheet, get carefully up, on silent bare feet, in my nightgown, go to the window, like a child, I want to see. The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow. The sky is clear but hard to make out, because of the searchlight; but yes, in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is a stone and the sky is full of deadly hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway.

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.

I want to steal something.’

1. Offred’s opening simile is chremamorphic, describing herself as a piece of toast, yet the environment around her is personified, anthopomorphised – the ceiling ‘stares’, the snow has a ‘breast’, the moon is a ‘goddess, a wink’. Why does Atwood create this juxtaposition?
   1. The asyndeton in ‘I fold back the sheet, get carefully up, on silent bare feet, in my nightgown, go to the window, like a child, I want to see’ creates a run-on sentence – what does Atwood reveal about Offred through this imagery and peculiar syntax?
   2. How does Atwood use the feminie symbol of the moon to suggest Offred still has power?
   3. How is the third paragraph proof of Offred’s resilience? Explore the anaphora and the verb ‘want’. They are demands as well as desires. What is the significance of Offred’s ‘former name’ here? Why does Atwood still not reveal it to us?
   4. What does the final sentence, ‘I want to steal something’ reveal about Offred?
2. Offred reflects on her visit with the Commander in Chapter 24, after she has played Scrabble and he has asked her to kiss him:

‘What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of a bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise you live in the moment, which is not where I want to be.

But that’s where I am, there’s no escaping it. Time’s a trap, I’m caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live.

Live in the present, make the most of it, it’s all you’ve got.

Time to take stock.

I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance.

But something has changed, now, tonight. Circumstances have altered.’

1. How does Atwood’s figurative language contrast having perspective with living in the moment?
   1. How are Offred’s circumstances now different to her ‘reduced circumstances’ of Chapter 2, and why?
   2. How is Offred’s perspective of her name represented differently to Chapter 14?
2. Atwood’s final section, the ‘Historical Notes’ at the end of the novel, provide a final comment on Offred, ‘But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated… But the woods, as you say, were full of these, so that is no help. She does not see fit to provide us with her original name, and indeed all official records of it would have been destroyed upon her entry to the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre.’

‘… many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she the instincts of a reporter or a spy.’

1. What is the impact of these final musings on Offred?
   1. Why is it significant that Offred told her own personal narrative, rather than providing factual details about Gilead – the political macro narrative?
   2. What comment do you think Atwood is making in having a male academic deliver this lecture?
2. How has Atwood used her characterisation of Offred to comment on her 1980s context as a whole? What are Atwood’s key thematic concerns as revealed through her protagonist?