 Atwood’s narrative structure

Resource 20

1. Consider the structure of the novel in sections, and the section titles.
   1. There are seven sections called ‘Night’. What is common about these sections? How is Offred’s tone or mood here different to the other sections? Why ‘Night’ and what is the impact of beginning and ending with ‘Night’.
   2. What do you notice about the language of the other section titles?
2. Atwood uses flashbacks (in literature we can discuss this as analepsis) to shift in time within the narrative.
3. Find examples of both internal analepsis (flashbacks to an earlier point within the narrative – within Gilead) and external analepsis (flashbacks to a time before the narrative started – before Gilead) that are significant to Offred’s story.
   1. How does the seemingly random and fragmented nature of the movement between past and present in Offred’s narrative reflect her story itself?
4. The ‘Historical Notes' completely alter our perception of the novel. We have been made aware throughout that Offred's account is a construct, but now we are told that the order of the material is totally arbitrary. We are also asked to consider the Republic of Gilead not as a possible future state, but as one that existed in the past, as far as the speaker is concerned
5. In what ways do the Historical Notes change your perception of the novel?
   1. What is Atwood’s purpose in closing her narrative with the Historical Notes?
   2. Is this an effective way to end the novel? Why/why not?
   3. What would have been the effect if the Historical Notes had been put as an Introduction rather than at the end of the novel?