 The handmaid’s tale – language and imagery

Resource 21

1. Find examples of neologisms throughout the novel. Make a list and identify the connotations of these new words.
2. Explore the biblical language used in the dialogue between Offred and Ofglen in Chapter 4. What does the expectation of these statements and response suggest about this society? Find other examples of biblical language and allusion from throughout the novel.
3. In Chapter 5 Offred muses on the changes in society past and present. Explore the passage where she thinks about visiting a laundromat in her past life. What is the impact of the rhetorical wordplay and repetition of ‘my own’ and ‘money’?
4. ‘There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.’ Analyse the impact on the juxtaposition between ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’. How does this sum up the nature of this society?
5. How does Atwood use imagery of setting in Chapter 6 to create a shocking juxtaposition between past and present?
6. What is the purpose of Atwood’s exploration of the nuances of language in the opening paragraphs of Chapter 7, as Offred ponders the difference between ‘lie and lay’? Find examples of other times throughout the novel where Offred reflects on language.
7. At the end of Chapter 12, Offred reflects: ‘I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.’ What is the effect of the antanaclasis of ‘compose’? How is a sense of lifelessness created here?