

**STUDY  
REVISE** **AND**  
for AS/A-level

# The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood

- Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- Learn how to respond critically to your text
- In-depth analysis of all aspects of the text

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# Using this guide



## Why read this guide?

The purposes of this A-level Literature Guide are to enable you to organise your thoughts and responses to the text, to deepen your understanding of key features and aspects, and to help you address the particular requirements of examination questions and non-exam assessment tasks in order to obtain the best possible grade. It will also prove useful to those of you writing an NEA piece on the text as it provides a number of summaries, lists, analyses and references to help with the content and construction of the assignment.

Note that above all else teachers and examiners are seeking evidence of an *informed personal response to the text*. A guide such as this can help you to understand the text, form your own opinions, and suggest areas to think about, but it cannot replace your own ideas and responses as an informed and autonomous reader.

## How to make the most of this guide

You may find it useful to read sections of this guide when you need them, rather than reading it from start to finish. For example, you may find it helpful to read the 'Contexts' section before you start reading the text, or to read the 'Chapter summaries and commentaries' section in conjunction with the text – whether to back up your first reading of it at school or college or to help you revise. The sections relating to the Assessment Objectives will be especially useful in the weeks leading up to the exam.

NB: Line references in this guide refer to the 1996 Vintage edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*.



# Key elements

This guide is designed to help you to raise your achievement in your examination response to *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is intended for you to use throughout your AS/A-level English Literature course. It will help you when you are studying the novel for the first time and also during your revision.

The following features have been used throughout this guide to help you focus your understanding of the novel:

## Context

**Context** boxes give contextual information that relates directly to particular aspects of the text.

## Build critical skills

Broaden your thinking about the text by answering the questions in the **Build critical skills** boxes. These help you to consider your own opinions in order to develop your skills of criticism and analysis.

## CRITICAL VIEW

**Critical view** boxes highlight a particular critical viewpoint that is relevant to an aspect of the main text. This allows you to develop the higher-level skills needed to come up with your own interpretation of a text.

## TASK

**Tasks** are short and focused. They allow you to engage directly with a particular aspect of the text.

## Taking it further ►►

**Taking it further** boxes suggest and provide further background or illuminating parallels to the text.

## Top ten quotation

A cross-reference to Top ten quotations (see pages 97–100 of this guide), where each quotation is accompanied by a commentary that shows why it is important.

Top ten quotation



# Contexts

## Target your thinking

- What different critical positions might be applied to *The Handmaid's Tale* to extend your knowledge of the text? (A01)
- How can setting *The Handmaid's Tale* within a broad range of contexts deepen your understanding of the text and the ways in which different readers might respond to it? (A03)
- What links might be traced between *The Handmaid's Tale* and various other literary texts? (A04)
- How can applying various critical approaches enrich your understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the ways in which different readers might interpret it? (A05)

## Biographical context

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, the second of the three children of scientist Carl Atwood and his wife Dorothy. Atwood had an unusual childhood in which she often missed out on formal schooling in order to accompany her father, an entomologist (expert in insects), on his field trips and expeditions. An early, voracious and advanced reader, she explored writing from within genres as diverse as comics, mystery stories and fairy tales. Not until almost the end of the Second World War did Atwood finally begin to live in more conventional city surroundings and to attend school regularly. Having begun to write at the age of just six, she knew she wanted to make it her career even before she went to university.

A prize-winning student, Atwood graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in English, having taken minors in Philosophy and French. Having been awarded a fellowship to study at Harvard University, her work there with Professor Perry Miller affected her so profoundly that he is one of the dedicatees of *The Handmaid's Tale*; much of the novel is of course set in and around the Harvard campus. Atwood's long-term relationship with the writer Graeme Gibson produced her only child, Eleanor, who was born in 1976.

Atwood has published some important works of literary criticism in which she describes Canadian literature as marked by the themes of survival and victimhood and theorises as to the impact and implications of these key themes on her mother country's writing and culture. She has taught at many universities and been awarded honorary degrees by Oxford, Cambridge and the Sorbonne. Her interest in how history and narrative can entwine and enrich one another can also be seen in some of the novels she has published since *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000).



▲ Margaret Atwood  
(during an interview in  
Toronto, 2014)

The winner of numerous prestigious literary prizes and awards, Margaret Atwood is a founder member of the Writers' Trust of Canada, which aims to support the writing community of her native country. For her epic contribution to Canadian literature, Atwood was inducted into the national Walk of Fame in 2001. A noted humanist, Atwood believes in human beings as the agents of their own destiny and values rational critical thinking over religious faith; significantly she was named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association soon after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### TASK

Create a visual representation of the contextual background to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Working with other students, you could design a timeline or wall display to illustrate the key historical, political, social and cultural contexts to which Margaret Atwood was responding.

## Political, social and historical contexts

### Reaganism

'Reaganism' is the term given to the conservative political and economic ideologies associated with the American President Ronald Wilson Reagan (1911–2004), who dominated global geopolitics throughout the 1980s. A former Hollywood film actor, during his two terms as president, from 1981–89, Reagan implemented a radical plan of conservative reform initiatives, slashing taxes in order to reduce government spending, establishing the so-called War on Drugs, and invading the island of Grenada as part of his fervent anti-communist agenda, even though it was in fact a British Crown Colony. Hugely popular, Reagan won two landslide election victories and the strong personal relationships he formed with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had much to do with the ending of the Cold War. Even today, Reagan remains one of the most widely popular and iconic American Presidents ever, with his conservative agenda now seen as having led to a major shift to the right in American political thinking.

### The rise of the conservative religious right

In tandem with the political and economic paradigm shifts engineered by Reagan, various social and cultural changes took place during the 1980s that Margaret Atwood viewed with much disquiet. During the 1980s various right-wing evangelical Christian groups became increasingly vocal in their determination to influence public policy and social attitudes in accordance with their religious beliefs. The Christian right grew exponentially in influence during the 1980s and the advent of televangelism allowed for the widespread dissemination of their socially conservative condemnation of Darwinism, scientific research, homosexuality, divorce, abortion, contraception, obscenity and pornography. The parallels with the Republic of Gilead should be clear.

### The 1980s anti-feminist backlash

In 1991, the American writer Susan Faludi published *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, a study of what she saw as a media-driven wish to turn back the clock following the advances made by feminist campaigners during the 1970s. Faludi suggested that this typically hostile response was an



example of the classic knee-jerk historical reaction that reoccurs periodically whenever women seem to have achieved a measure of social equality, status or progress.

Margaret Atwood was intensely concerned with the growing counter-attack against feminism that took place in the 1980s. This was led by conservative social commentators such as Phyllis Schafly who saw the liberation of women as posing a clear threat to 'traditional family values'. In a kind of 'two-steps-forward, one-step-back' dance, just as women seemed to have made some substantial advances in terms of social equality, their achievements were openly criticised by those cultural conservatives who felt endangered by the changes they saw happening around them. Ironically, of course, this anti-feminist retaliation worked on the 'attack is the best form of defence' idea, as a kind of pre-emptive strike designed to stop women in their tracks long before they ever reached their goal of total equality. In a reversal of logic that the Republic of Gilead itself might be proud of, the very changes that had led to women having a fairer stake in society came to be blamed for egging them on to ruin. From this ideological standpoint, abortion and contraception do not liberate women from the fear of having an unwanted child, but instead threaten the very concept of the traditional family. Thus Atwood began to write *The Handmaid's Tale* just at the historical moment when, after women had begun to make obvious sustained progress towards full empowerment, equality and social justice, an all-too-predictable conservative counter-offensive kicked in.

### Context

The idea of an 'anti-feminist backlash' is far from new. *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) was the firebrand Calvinist cleric John Knox's notorious polemical attack on what he saw as the obscene situation of three major European countries being ruled by women, namely Elizabeth I of England, Mary Queen of Scots and Catherine de Medici, the Regent of France. Knox argued that allowing female rulers ran contrary to the word of God.

## Environmental concerns

After the Second World War and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, an increasing awareness of the manifold ways in which humanity was putting the planet at risk gradually started to sink in with the general public. Global issues – such as oil spills, climate change, nuclear testing, air pollution, energy problems and the overuse of pesticides – led to a climate of growing public concern. The burgeoning environmental movement galvanised much public support and recognition by staging the same kind of successful protest marches and meetings as had galvanised the civil rights and anti-Vietnam protesters of the 1960s.

Anti-nuclear protests reached a peak in the 1970s and 1980s, with the infamous 1979 meltdown at the Three Mile Island reactor in Pennsylvania – the worst nuclear accident in US history – causing a major public scandal. Unsurprisingly, given the panic induced by this incident, an anti-nuclear rally held in New York's Central Park in 1982 attracted a million demonstrators. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the pollution that has caused mass infertility in the former USA, now the Republic of Gilead, appears to be national and limited. In *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood escalates her portrayal of environmental Armageddon to a global level, describing a bleak post-apocalyptic world of bioterrorism and catastrophic climate change. As a member of the Green Party of Canada, Margaret Atwood was extremely concerned by the high-profile environmental problems that began to penetrate deep into the public consciousness during the 1980s, and *The Handmaid's Tale* is saturated with echoes of this apprehension.

## Literary and cultural contexts

### CRITICAL VIEW

Some would argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of American literature, since Atwood was living in Massachusetts when she wrote it and since its setting and themes reflect the USA of the 1980s. On the other hand, CanLit critics would argue that overwriting Atwood's identity as a Canadian in order to annex *The Handmaid's Tale* and incorporate it within the canon of American National Literature is an act of cultural imperialism akin to Professor Pieixoto's interpretation of Offred's narrative.

### Canadian literature (CanLit)

Bordered by the USA to the south, Canada gained full independence from the United Kingdom only in 1982; today it is a key member of the Commonwealth and retains Queen Elizabeth II as official Head of State. When Margaret Atwood was a university student in the late 1950s, 'Canadian literature' as a distinct body of work simply did not exist; today, however, 'CanLit' certainly does exist, and Atwood herself is perhaps its single most important living exponent.

It is well worth thinking about how Atwood uses the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* to represent the USA, the global superpower that is her mother country's nearest neighbour. The critic David Staines argues that 'Perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbour as well as an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the American future. In implied contrast to Gilead is its northern neighbour, once again the final stop of a new underground railroad, this time one that smuggles handmaids to the freedom of Canada' (Staines, in Howells 2006: 21).

As Gina Wisker has noted, much of Atwood's work:

*...concentrates on exploring and rewriting representations of Canada and what it means to be Canadian ... However the themes and concerns of her novels ... are also generalisable to many other locations and contexts, to other societies and places, and so they speak to us as readers whether we are located in the US, Canada, UK, or Australasia, Europe, the Caribbean. The Canadian context is noticeable in The Handmaid's Tale as Canada features as a place of relative equality and security, while the US has been polluted, has undergone terrible wars and reverted to a version of religious fundamentalism which operates a class system based on fertility or lack of it, and patriarchal power. Considering Atwood as a Canadian writer means recognising*

*the relationship between the US and Canada, where the US is often seen as a brasher more powerful neighbour and Canada as more liberal and tolerant, less warlike.*

(Wisker 2010: 6)

## The Future Library

As the first contributor to the Future Library project, Margaret Atwood has recently written a story that will be read only in a century's time, long after her own death. Her book is the first of a hundred to be written by different authors between now and 2114; a forest has been planted in Norway and its trees will be used to make the paper on which the Future Library will be printed. According to Atwood, 'it goes right back to that phase of our childhood when we used to bury little things in the backyard, hoping that someone would dig them up, long in the future, and say, "How interesting, this rusty old piece of tin, this little sack of marbles is. I wonder who put it there?"' Moreover, she argues, 'when you write any book you do not know who's going to read it, and you do not know when they're going to read it. You don't know who they will be, you don't know their age, or gender, or nationality, or anything else about them. So books ... are like the message in the bottle' (Flood 2014, see p.102).

The young artist in charge of the Future Library, Katie Paterson, argues that the contributors can write whatever they like 'in any language and any context ... on the theme of imagination and time ... I think it's important that the writing reflects maybe something of this moment in time, so when future readers open the book, they will have some kind of reflection of how we were living in this moment' (Flood 2014). No wonder Margaret Atwood was Paterson's dream first author; the central premise of a woman's words being locked away to await decryption by readers as yet unborn is, after all, the DNA of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

## Performance context

When studying *The Handmaid's Tale*, watching Volker Schlöndorff's 1990 film version of the text will certainly enhance your ability to engage with the text, as long as you keep asking yourself what has been gained and what has been lost in the move from page to screen.

### Context

Margaret Atwood's interest in writing and communication led her in 2004 to invent the LongPen, a remote robotic device that means that she no longer needs to physically attend bookshop signings. Using the LongPen, Atwood can see and hear a person buying her novel thousands of miles away as she signs their personal copy.

### TASK

Watch the final scene of the 1990 film version two or three times and compare it closely with the printed text. How do you interpret the director's vision here?



### TASK

As you apply different critical positions to *The Handmaid's Tale*, keep a detailed reading diary. Discussing your interpretations with other students can help you to challenge and develop your own ideas.

### Building critical skills

As well as Roland Barthes, other critics closely associated with reader-response include the German Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007) and the American Stanley Fish (b. 1938). You might wish to research their ideas online and see how far you think they might be applied to *The Handmaid's Tale* and the other texts you are studying for A-level.

## Critical contexts

### Ways of thinking about texts

As an A-level student, you are required to demonstrate an understanding that the meaning of a text is not 'fixed' and that at various places within a text different interpretations are possible. These different interpretations may be supported by reference to the ideas of named critics or particular critical perspectives, but they may also emerge from your own discussions with other students and with your teacher. Either way, what really matters is that you have come to a personal interpretation of the novel through an understanding of the variety of ways in which its meanings are made.

### Critical approaches

In 1968 the French literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote a hugely influential essay called *The Death of the Author*, in which he argued that the idea of an author or authority led people to believe it was possible to decode and hence explain the essential 'meaning' of a text. For Barthes, the multiple different ways of making meaning in language and the fact that it is impossible to know the author's state of mind pretty much made a mockery of the idea of a 'knowable text'. The Marxist Barthes saw the concept of the author as another method of transforming a text into a consumer product that could be used up and replaced in a bourgeois westernised capitalist culture.

While the 'death of the author' theory might at first seem to suggest Roland Barthes effectively cut the reader's safety rope and left him or her dangling off a literary cliff, in fact his ideas can be seen as heralding the 'birth of the reader' and so empowering him or her. The reader-response approach to literature suggests that writers and readers *collaborate* to make meanings and that our responses will depend upon our own experiences, ideas and values. Unlike literary theories or critical positions that concentrate on the author, content or form of the text, reader-response theory privileges the role of the active reader in creating textual meanings. If you remember this, you may well feel more confident in assessing the performances, interpretations and literary-critical points of view you encounter. Moreover, by setting the novel at the centre of an intertextual web of contexts and connections, you can start to trace the assumptions underlying both *The Handmaid's Tale* itself and the responses of various readers to the text. By resisting the notion of fixed meanings, you are free to make the most of the shifting and unstable nature of the text itself. Thus while this section covers a variety of modern critical approaches that can shed considerable light on the novel, remember that you too are a critic, and as such you should always try to form your own interpretation of the text.

## Feminist criticism

Feminist critics are interested in how women are represented in literature and in challenging dominant traditional attitudes and ideas about how female characters (who are often seen through the eyes of male writers) feel, act and think. Feminist criticism challenges patriarchal assumptions by unpicking the gender stereotyping embodied in a text and exploring how such stereotypes can be undermined and resisted.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is, of course, an iconic text within the canon of women's writing and it is impossible to imagine studying it without applying a feminist critique of some kind. Women characters drive this first-person account by a female narrator and play major roles in the text, while core issues associated with traditional male and female gender roles – such as childbirth, homemaking, education, work and civil rights – are extensively debated within the context of the novel. Relationships between female characters are varied, vividly drawn, interestingly problematic and highly convincing, and male–female relationships are analysed and dissected in forensic detail. Nevertheless, given that *The Handmaid's Tale* was written more than three decades ago, it is worth asking yourself if there are any aspects of the ways in which female characters are represented within it that may now seem dated or stereotyped.

### CRITICAL VIEW

In her influential work *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous (b. 1937) coined the term *écriture féminine* to articulate what she saw as the challenges women face to find a way of expressing female difference in texts. Her view is that language is not neutral, but forces women writers to communicate in a 'male' voice, not allowing them to truly express themselves; *écriture féminine* theoretically offers a way for women writers to escape this trap.

## Political criticism

The German philosopher and political thinker Karl Marx (1818–83) was the founder of modern communism. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx stated, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.' Thus a Marxist literary critical perspective sees works of literature as inevitably conditioned by and reflective of the economic and political forces of their social context.

Political criticism, which might include historicist and Marxist approaches, reminds us that literary texts are products of a particular set of socio-political circumstances – and that they cannot be divorced from these. Historicists remind us how texts engage with the warp and weft of history and look at the ways in which readers often find in texts ideas that confirm their own. Marxist critics see

### Building critical skills

A historicist view of *The Handmaid's Tale* might stress that explaining how the Gileadean coup was in part triggered by economic and environmental problems reveals Atwood's concerns about the consumerist and materialistic nature of American society in the 1980s. A Marxist reading of the text might well suggest that human relationships are inevitably warped and distorted by the forces of a capitalist system. How do you respond to these views?

literary texts as material products, which are part of – and help to explain – the processes of history, as Terry Eagleton notes:

*Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.*

(Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976: 2)

Marxist critics see capitalism as a system in which most people work to produce goods and services but do not share equally in the benefits of their labour because the ruling class owns the means of production. Hence Marxist critics see literature as inevitably bound up with the economic and political forces of the times in which it was written. Although not often characterised as an overtly or primarily 'political' writer, Margaret Atwood was still very much engaged with contemporary (i.e. 1980s) American society. For Atwood, a character like Offred, who lacks any social, political and economic authority, is by definition clearly and heavily politicised. The writer's conception of a nightmare system of government, predicated on establishing inequality and unfairness among the people it rules, makes *The Handmaid's Tale* an overtly political text. The narrative constantly exposes and condemns the norms, ideas and values of the Republic of Gilead, together with its laws, religion and system of education. It is certainly possible to view the novel through a Marxist critical lens as being a text about inequality, injustice or oppression, in which the characters' lives are powerfully shaped by the social and economic conditions in which they live. Aspects of the text that would be well worth reviewing through this critical lens include:

- ▼ The closure of women's bank accounts and the sacking of women workers after the Gileadean coup.
- ▼ The strictly hierarchical social structures within the Gileadean regime.
- ▼ The division of the labour force, both male and female.
- ▼ The ways in which citizens who are perceived as an economic burden are persecuted, exiled or killed.

### Psychoanalytic criticism

Sigmund Freud published one of the founding texts of psychoanalysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1900. Psychoanalytic critics see literature as dreamlike, since both fictions and dreams are inventions of the mind that, although based on reality, are obviously not literally true. Psychoanalytic critics look at the significance of the subconscious in order to explore literary representation of character. Working with the theories developed by Freud

over a century ago, they analyse the effect of dreams, unconscious desires and aspects of human sexuality, attaching great significance to the underlying hidden meanings of words and actions as revealing the essential truth about someone's state of mind. Several key scenes and events within *The Handmaid's Tale* lend themselves to being viewed through this critical lens, such as:

- ▼ **Offred's dream sequences and romance fantasies** might be viewed as regressions to the past or as displacement illusions predicated upon the present being too frightening to be looked at directly.
- ▼ **Offred's apparent symptoms of sensory deprivation and synaesthesia.** The ways in which Offred's subjective internal experiences often seem to go against 'normal' rules suggest that seeing the world differently is another of her defence mechanisms. Sensory deprivation (sometimes called perceptual isolation) is when a victim's ability to use one or more of their senses is cut off; this can cause fear, depression and even hallucinations. Offred experiences these kinds of symptoms in response to having what she can see (and often specifically *read*), hear, taste and touch artificially restricted. The term synaesthesia (which is derived from the Greek meaning 'union of the senses') describes a kind of sensory confusion, in which stimulating one sense triggers a response in another, such as being able to smell a colour. Synaesthetes perceive the world differently and, unlike those who suffer sensory deprivation, can find their experiences pleasant. When reading the forbidden letters while playing Scrabble with the Commander, for instance, Offred wants to taste the tiles. 'The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious' (Atwood 1996: 149). Elsewhere she describes feeling like 'the sound of glass. I feel like the word *shatter*' (p.113). Later still, she describes a man's voice as 'metal-coloured, horn-shaped' (p.230).
- ▼ **The relationship that develops between Offred and the Commander during their secret meetings** might be likened to a form of capture-bonding sometimes known as Stockholm Syndrome. This phenomenon occurs when prisoners or hostages develop such positive emotional ties to their captors that they may come to identify with them despite being threatened or abused. One attempt to explain this apparently bizarre behaviour uses the theories of Sigmund Freud to argue that emotionally bonding with the captor allows the victim to protect and preserve a sense of their own self-worth and is a defence or survival instinct or strategy used by victims of abuse.
- ▼ **The feigned illnesses of the Commanders' Wives**, who often take it in turns to pretend to be sick; Offred thinks their hypochondria makes their empty lives more interesting. Medical experts have long noted how the mind and the body interact and the father of modern psychiatry, Sigmund

### Building critical skills

In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim applied a psychological reading to various famous fairy tales, arguing that being exposed to their darker themes of violence, abuse, abandonment and death allows children to externalise their deepest emotional fears and come to terms with them. How far do you think that reading dystopian fiction might perform a similar function for adults?

Freud, was very interested in the idea that some illnesses are psychosomatic and stem from psychological rather than physical causes. While the Wives may be faking their physical symptoms, is it possible that their hollow lives are creating very real mental health problems?

### Context

Famous victims of apparent Stockholm Syndrome include Patty Hearst, the American heiress held hostage by a gang of revolutionaries who was brainwashed into robbing a bank alongside them, and Natascha Kampusch, the Austrian kidnap victim held prisoner by Wolfgang Priklopil for eight years. Newspaper reports suggest that when told of Priklopil's suicide, Kampusch cried and lit a candle for him. You can read an excellent article by Kathryn Westcott on this phenomenon on the BBC website (a full web address can be found on p.103)

- ▼ **The nervous breakdowns suffered by Janine/Ofwarren at the Red Centre and after the Particicution**, when she seems to suffer an episode of dissociative fugue. A fugue state is a rare psychiatric condition in which the patient undergoes a severe identity crisis; the disorder is often sparked off by a period of intense physical or emotional stress. At times people may even seek to establish a new identity while in a fugue state, only to then undergo an episode of amnesia. In regressing to her former life as a waitress, this seems to be exactly what Janine is doing.

### Queer theory

The term 'queer theory' was coined in 1990, but since the late 1960s, as Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan note, critics had begun to examine the 'history of the oppression of gays, lesbians, and practitioners of sexualities other than those deemed normal by the dominant heterosexual group', as well as the 'countercultures of gay and lesbian writing that existed in parallel fashion with the dominant heterosexual culture' (Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory*, 1999: 888). Queer theory is grounded in a debate about whether a person's sexuality is part of their essential self or is socially constructed, questioning the default representation of heterosexuality as 'normal' and exploring 'non-heteronormative' sexual behaviour.

The key character to consider here is Moira, whose bravery, humour and daring is celebrated and admired by the narrator. While the Gileadean Republic within the text insists that heterosexuality is 'normal' and homosexuality 'abnormal', going so far as to execute gay men as 'Gender Traitors', the reader is encouraged to celebrate Moira's heroism and defiance. It might be possible to argue that the fact that she plays only a supporting role in the text – albeit a significant one – suggests that positioning a lesbian character as the text's

narrative focus was a bridge too far for Atwood. Moira's refusal to become a Handmaid, however, means that she could never have told the story Offred narrates: that of a much more ordinary and much less heroic woman enduring life under the regime. Offred can function as an 'Everywoman' character in a way that Moira never could.

### CRITICAL VIEW

Critics closely associated with queer theory include the Americans Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009) and Adrienne Rich (1929–2012). You might wish to research their ideas using the internet and see how far you think their ideas might be applied to *The Handmaid's Tale* and the other texts you are studying for A-level.

## Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a way of reading texts that involves looking at the ways in which literature treats the subject of nature and the environment. The disaster that has overtaken the former North America and rendered most of its population sterile is left unnamed, but the looming fear of being sent to the Colonies to pick over nuclear waste is a powerful agent of social control within the Gileadean regime. Most people banished there survive for less than three years. This critical lens may well be useful to you when looking at the key environmental messages embedded within *The Handmaid's Tale*.