 The handmaid’s tale – Chapter two

Resource 16

Setting, character and language

1. What is the effect of the asyndeton and lack of adjectives in the opening sentence, ‘A chair, a table, a lamp’? What does this immediately suggest about this place?
2. Create a visual representation of Offred’s room. What words would you use to describe this setting? Compare your image to a partner. How were your representations similar/different?
3. What might the ‘relief ornament in the shape of a wreath’ and the simile, ‘like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out’ connote about Offred’s world?
4. What is the impact of addressing suicide in such a desensitised and indifferent tone, ‘They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to,’ and even as a reprieve, ‘It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge’? What does this suggest about the lives of the handmaids?
5. In this chapter there is a strong sense of restriction and restraint in this society. How does Atwood’s restraint with language mirror the oppressiveness of Offred’s world?
6. Chapter 2 introduces Offred’s language play, her musings on language, and her reflection on her deliberate language choices, which continue through the novel.
   1. What is the effect of the following examples of antanaclasis (antanaclasis is a rhetorical device in which a phrase or word is repeatedly used where the meaning of a word changes in each case)?

‘Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?’

‘… this could be … a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. This is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances.’

* 1. ‘The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries.’ Here Atwood employs antimetabole (derived from a Greek word which means “turning about”, it is a literary term or device that involves repeating a phrase in reverse order). What is the effect?
  2. What is the significance of Offred’s language choices here: ‘The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is locked’?
  3. What is the effect of Offred’s figurative language?

‘Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way. The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase and I go with it, one hand on the banister, once a tree, turned in another century, rubbed to a warm gloss.’

‘There’s a grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time, and then the door to the motherly sitting room, with its fleshtones and hints.’

‘There remains a mirror, on the hall wall… round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.’

‘She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck.’

* 1. Offred reminisces about language and conversation:

‘I know what you mean, we’d say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: I hear where you’re coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a distant place. Which is would be, which it is. How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, or sorts.’ What does the word ‘quaint’ suggest about the present? How is the voice a traveller from the past? Why does Offred long for talk she once despised?

‘Fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororize, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic.’ What do we discover about Luke? What is the significance of the lack of a feminine form of the word ‘fraternize’ to the narrative?