The Handmaid’s Tale: Historical notes

1. When is the epilogue set?

2. Are the activities which take place in the epilogue more or less familiar to us than the details of Gileadean life?

3. What are the differences between our present and the future outlined in the epilogue?

4. It transpires that the narrative was entitled The Handmaid’s Tale not by Offred but by Professor Wade partly in homage to Geoffrey Chaucer. How is this significant? How does this alter your perception of Offred’s story?

5. What do we discover about how life in Gilead changed after Offred’s narrative ends?

6. The historical glance back at Gilead, what preceded it and what was happening in other parts of the world at the same time, has the impact of drawing Offred’s experience much closer in time to our own. It is unsettling and sobering to learn that Gileadean practices were based on real practices currently or formerly in existence: ‘there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was syntheses.’ This serves to warn us that the reality of Gilead is not as far from our own experience as we thought while reading Offred’s story. The function of any futuristic novel is to warn of possible consequences of contemporary trends.

List all of the examples of real events that have contributed to the ideas presented in the narrative

7. How is the narrative technique in this section different from the rest of the novel?

8. The symposium ends with a request for questions, thereby inviting the reader to question the issues raised by Offred’s narrative and the Historical notes. Atwood’s endings are often open-ended. What is gained by Offred’s story not having a definitive ending?

9. Irony figures prominently in this section. Which details of Offred’s account does Professor Pieixoto interpret incorrectly?

10. To what extent are the Historical Notes necessary to the narrative of The Handmaid’s Tale? What do the Historical Notes contribute to the text? How do they alter how we perceive Offred’s narrative?

(These are all potential exam questions)