The Handmaid's Tale

1. Identity card

Title: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Author: Margaret Atwood

Date of publication: 1985

Genre: Dystopian novel / Speculative fiction

Historical and Cultural Context: Written during the 1980s, the novel reflects concerns about authoritarianism, religious extremism and women's rights. Inspired by historical events and political movements, Atwood imagines a society where individual freedoms, especially those of women, are severely restricted.

2. Plot summary

In a nutshell: the novel is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid living in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime where fertile women are forced to bear children for powerful families. Stripped of her identity and freedom, Offred struggles to survive while remembering her former life. Through her story, the novel exposes the dangers of oppression and the importance of resistance.

Key Moments:

- Offred begins her life as a handmaid.
- She remembers her husband Luke and her daughter.
- The Commander invites Offred to secret meetings.
- Offred starts a relationship with Nick.
- She is taken away by the Eyes, leaving her fate uncertain.

3. Main characters

Name	Role	Symbol
Offred	narrator and handmaid	resistance, identity
The Commander	powerful official	authority, hypocrisy
Serena Joy	commander's wife	oppression, frustration
Nick	commander's driver	hope, uncertainty
Moira	offred's friend	rebellion, independence
Aunt Lydia	trainer of the handmaids	control indoctrination

4. Major themes and links to the LLCER program

Première – Imaginations

How does the novel illustrate this theme?

- ➜ The novel imagines a dystopian future based on political and social fears.
- ➜ Fiction warns against the loss of individual freedoms.
- ➜ The imagined society reflects real-world concerns.

Key examples

- ➜ The Republic of Gilead.
- ➜ The role of the Handmaids.
- ➜ State control over reproduction.

Terminale – Arts and debates of ideas

How does the novel illustrate this theme?

- ➜ The novel questions power, freedom and gender inequality.
- ➜ It denounces totalitarianism and the abuse of religion.
- ➜ Literature becomes a warning against oppression.

Key examples

- ➜ Women's loss of rights.
- ➜ Offred's acts of resistance.
- ➜ The control of language and knowledge.

5. Key quotes and key words

"Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it."

"Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some."

oppression – freedom – identity – patriarchy – resistance – dystopia – control

6. Author's message

- ➜ Freedom should never be taken for granted.
- ➜ Authoritarian regimes threaten individual rights.
- ➜ Resistance can exist even in oppressive societies.
- ➜ History reminds us that democracy and equality must be protected.