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Comprehension

aims

- To examine the **types of questions** that occur in the Comprehension section.
- To understand the importance of **choosing the questions wisely** before answering any of them.

While the Comprehension section appears straightforward, it does amount to **25% of your final total**, so treat it with care.

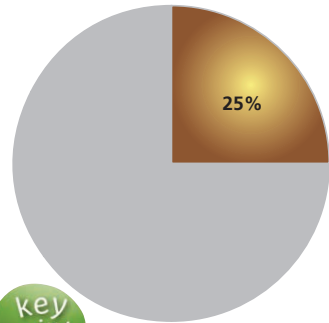
Comprehension means to understand something. The Comprehension section is a fairly gentle start to your Leaving Certificate, since the questions aim to test your ability to respond logically and creatively to questions on a given text.

Three or four different **extracts** will appear on the exam paper. These will consist of written pieces usually from a magazine, book, newspaper or other source.

There are two types of questions to answer:

- **Question A:** broken into three parts and amounting to 50 marks in total.
- **Question B:** a single question requiring a longer answer and also amounting to 50 marks in total.

You must choose one Question A for one text and one Question B for a different text.



key point

If you choose the *same* text for Question A and Question B, you are guaranteed to lose at least 50 marks, which is 12.5% of the total. This can mean a serious drop in your final grade. Do not make this mistake!

How to Approach the Comprehension Section

Take time to **read all of the comprehensions**. Choose your **Question B first**. This is a more demanding exercise, so you should pick the one you feel best suits you. Then select your **Question A**. The standard is similar across all questions. **Once your choice is made, answer Question A and then Question B**. The most important rule for Comprehension questions is: **answer the question asked**.

Language Genres in the Comprehension Section

Informative language

All of the texts contain information. This is factual, impersonal language. It is not emotive and it speaks directly, e.g. *Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark*. **It is most likely that A questions will ask you to locate specific pieces of information in the given text.**

Narrative language

This language tells a story. Clearly you need information to tell a story, so there will be some crossover with informative language here. But narration happens in a time and place (setting) and uses words to create situations, images, feelings and reactions. For example: *I will always remember the day that I broke my leg*. **Narration is likely to be found in B questions.**

Persuasive language

Persuasive language often provides a one-sided, opinionated version of events. The main goal of persuasive language is to make the audience **feel** a certain way, by playing on emotions such as fear, excitement, desire, etc. All forms of advertising, for example, use persuasive language, through buzzwords, slogans and colourful phrases, e.g. *8 out of 10 cats prefer it; Unbeatable value at our new store; The time for change has come, etc.*

B questions that involve a talk with an audience, advertisement scripts or political speeches must all involve persuasive language.

Argumentative language

An argument presents facts in a clear, logical and convincing way. For example: *Uniforms should be compulsory in schools for the following three reasons ...* Each of your A answers should read like a short argument, where you tackle the question by using evidence selected from the text. **Most comprehension exercises involve arguing your point in a logical and clear way.** B questions, such as a debate or journalistic article, are likely to involve argument.

Aesthetic language

All good writing is aesthetically pleasing, even if you don't immediately recognise this quality. But what is aesthetic language? A simple way of understanding this is to ask: **does it sound good to read?** This happens when we write answers as if we were artists enjoying our work, rather than students struggling to succeed.



Choose your questions carefully! Choose Question B, then choose Question A. Once you've made your choice, complete Question A first, then Question B.

'Students struggling to succeed' is a simple example of alliteration, an aesthetic feature. 'The exam is a marathon' is a metaphor. 'The exam hall is like a pressure cooker' is a simile. All of these features of language show how we can elevate and improve our expression through the use of aesthetics. You can write like this too!

Comprehension: 'A' Questions (50 marks/35 minutes)

- These short questions will ask you:
 - **What** is the writer saying?
 - **How** does the writer say it?
 - What is your **response** to it?
- Each question will be marked out of 10, 15 or 20 marks. All the questions in the section will add up to a total of 50 marks.
- You must **write a little more** and think carefully about any 20-mark questions.
- It is a good idea to read the questions first, **underlining key words** so as to work out the **purpose** of the question.
- This allows your mind to figure out answers **subconsciously** as you read.

Sample Question – 2015 Exam Paper, Text 2

'THE REAL MRS BROWN'

*This adapted text is based on edited extracts from **The Real Mrs Brown: Brendan O'Carroll**, an authorised biography by Brian Beacom. In it we discover the influence of Brendan O'Carroll's mother, Maureen, on his popular sitcom character, Agnes Brown.*



Read the question before reading the text, to see if it helps you form an answer.

1. Flashback to 17 September, 1911 in Dublin City, Ireland. Seventeen-year-old Lizzie was set to marry Michael McHugh. The pair were madly in love and ready to head to America together to start a new life – but without telling Lizzie's parents. Lizzie's father was deeply against them marrying. When he heard of their romance he attacked Michael, breaking his forearm and collarbone. Michael and Lizzie knew that they had to escape Ireland. That's why they had saved for a year to buy tickets for the long sea voyage. But Lizzie's mother found out about the plan and convinced her husband he had to accept Michael, or he'd lose his daughter forever. Michael and Lizzie's father shook hands and the next day Michael McHugh put an advertisement in the newspaper offering his boat tickets for sale. The ship they would have sailed on was the *Titanic*.
2. Meanwhile, Lizzie and Michael became Mr and Mrs McHugh and a child was born: a baby girl. She was christened Maureen and she was to become Brendan O'Carroll's mother, the woman who provided most of the inspiration for Brendan's sitcom heroine, Agnes Brown. Speaking of his mother, Brendan O'Carroll said, 'People used to ask me if Agnes Brown was based on my mother and I'd say no. But in recent times, I've come to realise just how close they are.'

Indeed. Both are battlers. Both could find a colourful adjective when roused, although Maureen was smarter and way more ambitious than the havoc-creating, uneducated, Agnes Brown. Maureen could definitely deliver a cutting one-liner, just as Agnes does. Maureen could also take a simple tea towel and turn it into a weapon, as Agnes frequently does. Both Maureen and Agnes would lay down their lives for their kids, but loved to make fun of them. Brendan's mammy also had the ability to get what she wanted out of people, just as Agnes can, using the cleverest of psychology, becoming a bit pathetic when required. And if that didn't work, like Agnes, she would tell the world exactly where it was going wrong.

3. Maureen's healthy disrespect for authority – life is to be challenged and rules are there to be broken – is evident in Agnes. As Agnes does, Maureen lived in crowded houses, and managed to create her own safe little world. There are more similarities. Maureen wasn't entirely comfortable with modern devices either. She had little time for small-minded people. Agnes Brown now and Maureen O'Carroll then would be ready and willing to smack the face of injustice.
4. Maureen had incredible energy and studied hard, and her reward was to be sent to University College Galway, a rare achievement for a woman at that time. She became a teacher of languages, and loved her career. But on the day she married Gerry O'Carroll in 1936, she was fired from her job as it was illegal for female teachers in Ireland to be married. Did Maureen O'Carroll take this lying down? 'My mother was a force of nature,' Brendan recalls. 'She said, "I'm not having that!" and joined the union and battled to get that law changed. She shares that feisty, fighting spirit with Agnes Brown.'
5. It wasn't a huge surprise when the Irish Labour Party asked her to run for parliament, Dáil Éireann. But it was a surprise when she won in the General Election of 1954. It was remarkable for a working-class female to achieve that level of success. What made it all the more extraordinary was that she had given birth to nine children. And, in what offers an insight into the character of Maureen O'Carroll, one of her kids, Phil, was adopted.
6. Why does *Mrs Brown's Boys* work? It's Agnes Brown, of course. Every family has one: the busybody, the scathing commentator, the woman with a sharp tongue who can still hug her kids like they are babies.





Question (i)

Based on Maureen O'Carroll's experiences, outlined in the extract above, which word or words from the following do you think best describe the situation experienced by many women in Ireland in the past?

Challenging Difficult Unequal

Explain your answer, supporting the points you make by reference to the text.

(15 marks)

SAMPLE ANSWER

I think the words 'challenging' and 'unequal' are two words that describe the situation for women in Ireland in the past. It seems that women were expected to get married and have many children back in the time of Maureen O'Carroll. There was a great challenge in feeding and clothing so many children. She had nine, which is very unusual for today. It is very unequal because she had to quit her job as a teacher. To me that sounds very wrong. It was wrong then and is wrong today still.

EXAMINER'S ASSESSMENT

The candidate chooses two words, but does not adequately expand upon either of them. This answer would be better if the candidate made a **POINT**, by choosing one word and then using a **QUOTATION** to support the choice. It would benefit from have some follow-up **EXPLANATION** or commentary after that. For the full 15 marks, **TWO brief points**, well made, is usually sufficient. This answer is perhaps too brief and lacking development to score highly. The candidate does show some level of **understanding**, however, and the answer is broadly correct. Language and mechanics are **basic but correct**.

MARKS AWARDED

5 + 4 = 9/15 (O4 Grade)



Answers require you to follow the 'POINT-QUOTE-EXPLAIN' formula for each paragraph you write.

Comprehension: 'B' Questions (50 marks/35 minutes)

B questions could be considered 'short essay' questions. These questions test your personal writing skills within a closely defined task. Therefore you must always bear in mind **what the task is**.



Remember this as a golfer would: you are trying to score a **par** on each question. Always know your purpose, audience and register for each question on Paper 1.

Each B question will have:

- A specific **purpose**: what you must write.
- A stated **audience**: to whom the piece is addressed.
- A particular **register**: the piece must sound right.

PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, REGISTER

The **purpose** and the **audience** will be indicated in the question itself. Close reading of the questions will reveal them to you.

However, **register** is more difficult to define. The scenarios below will help you to understand and find the right register:

- Imagine speaking to a small child and explaining something complicated. You will use certain words and phrases and take a gentle tone in order to be understood. You would not speak the same way to an adult about the same issue. You expect that the adult will understand differently, so you change your language and tone to suit the audience.
- Explaining the economic situation to a group of students in university will require lots of factual analysis and statistical data. A politician explaining the economic situation to voters will need a much more careful (and perhaps emotive) approach in order to be understood.



Register is a blend of suitable **vocabulary, tone and treatment of the task.**

Types of B Questions

By looking at past papers, you will notice that some B questions require similar answers. They can be grouped into types in order to help with revision and practice.

1. Writing for media

Examples include:

- Review
- Newspaper article
- Report
- Commentary on an event
- Advertisement script
- Blog.

This type of question involves writing for the media. Questions can take many forms, but there are overall similarities within the type.

If you like to read newspapers, blog or follow current affairs, a media-type question may suit you. Perhaps there is a journalist or sports commentator inside you waiting to get out! If you like **expressing opinions to a broad audience**, consider this option on the exam paper.

30-mark questions

Since there are **30 marks** available, spend no more than **25 minutes** on this question. This includes writing a **short plan or brainstorm** before you begin. These are the types of questions that you should **practice beforehand** when studying.

Typical tasks

- Take a **personal point of view** on a theme/issue in the studied text.
- Imagine that you are ‘character x’ and write an **account of a key moment**.
- Write a **journalistic article** of some sort based upon the events of the studied text.
- Write a **diary/journal entry** of a key character.
- Write a **letter to/from** a character from the text.

key
point

The writing skills needed on Paper 1 are just as important in Paper 2.

Selected Single Texts

You just need to revise **ONE** text.

We will concentrate our notes on **six of the more popular texts** suggested for Ordinary Level students.

We will focus on the three key elements of revision:

- a) the storyline/plot
- b) the characters
- c) two main themes and issues

Find the notes below for your chosen text.

1. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (2020/21)

Important note on studying this text

Atwood's novel (1985) has been made into a film (1990) and more recently a TV series (2017 onwards). While these adaptations are interesting, the Leaving Cert requires you to study the novel only. It can be confusing if you decide to watch the film, and especially confusing if you watch the TV series. Ensure that you focus on revising the novel only when preparing for the exam in June.



Storyline

Published in 1985, Margaret Atwood set *The Handmaid's Tale* **sometime in the future**, roughly the early 21st century. It contains a number of interesting plot features, twists and unusual circumstances. Though brilliantly written and highly regarded, it can be a challenging book to read.

- The United States of America is now called **Gilead** and has changed hugely. The story is told by **the female protagonist, a Handmaid named Offred**, who recounts her daily life, sometimes through flashbacks and snippets. This allows the reader to **reconstruct the events** leading up to the beginning of the novel.
- Offred is not her real name (it is never fully revealed), instead she is known as Offred, with the suffix 'Fred' denoting her association with the **Commander**. Her name is a play-on-words or pun on the idea of being 'offered' up.
- Gilead is a **totalitarian state**, where freedom is strictly controlled, and where a **ruthless and severe form of Christianity** has replaced the previous system of democracy.
- People have been separated into strict categories with specific roles. Effectively, Gilead is a **white supremacist and Christian fundamentalist dystopian society**.
- Offred was originally married to **Luke** and she is the mother of a **five-year-old daughter**. She had attempted to escape to Canada, away from Gilead. She was caught and separated from her family.
- She has not seen Luke nor her daughter since, and frequently yearns to be with them again. Her own **mother** also disappeared at this time.
- Offred is selected as a potential 'breeder' or **Handmaid** and is given the **long red uniform and white head covering**. Other women wear different colours to indicate their position. **Marthas** are infertile women chosen to do domestic work. **Econowives** are poorer women, married to lower-ranked men and producing lower-classed babies.
- Offred is held and controlled at the '**Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre**' (**RED Centre**) named after two women from the Old Testament. It's similar to a prison inside a compound, surrounded by fences topped by barbed wire. After training is complete here, Handmaids are selected to work for a Commander.
- She meets up with her old, rebellious college friend **Moira**, a lesbian, and they grudgingly follow the direction of the female bosses, the **Aunts**, particularly **Aunt Lydia** and **Aunt Elizabeth**.
- Everything Offred and Moira say or do is closely monitored, not just by the Aunts but also by their fellow Handmaids, creating a **climate of paranoia and fear**.
- The Handmaids offer each other **small secret comforts**, such as touching hands briefly at night time as they sleep beside each other.

- Moira eventually escapes but is captured soon after. She chooses to work as a prostitute in Jezebel's, a brothel set up for the needs of the Commanders, instead of facing certain death in the colonies beyond Gilead.
- Offred serves the Commander and his wife, **Serena Joy**, an advocate for traditional family values and a former Gospel singer.
- The door to Offred's room must always be open and the **Eyes**, Gilead's **secret police force**, watch her every move.
- Offred tells us of the **Ceremony** in which the Commander reads from the Bible, then goes to the bedroom, where his wife and Offred wait for him. He has sex with Offred as Serena sits behind her, holding her hands. This happens monthly **in the hopes of pregnancy**.
- However, one day, Offred visits the doctor and he offers to have sex with her to get her pregnant, suggesting that **her Commander is probably infertile**. She refuses, knowing how dangerous such a move would be. She truly trusts nobody.
- Offred is partnered with **Ofglen**, a rebellious Handmaid. They go to the shops together and on these trips, they develop a relationship.
- Ofglen tells Offred of a secret organisation named **Mayday**. The organisation seeks to overthrow Gilead and return the country to its former self. She hopes Offred can help with the secret plans of Mayday.
- After a while, Offred becomes somewhat attached to the Commander, but the relationship is uncertain and complicated. He tries to win her affections, offering her gifts and eventually letting her dress differently.
- They play Scrabble (which is forbidden, since women are not allowed to read) and he lets her look at magazines. Eventually, **he asks her to kiss him**.
- The Commander then takes Offred away to Jezebel's, full of Commanders and other powerful men from many nationalities. They engage in sex in an upstairs room.
- After Offred fails to conceive during the monthly Ceremony ritual, Serena suggests that Offred have sex with **Nick**, who is employed by the Commander as a gardener, driver and low-ranking officer in Gilead. They must then pretend that the Commander is the father.
- This is a central moment in the story: **it could make or break Offred's future**. In return, Serena promises to bring Offred a picture of her daughter.
- Offred realises that **Serena has always known the whereabouts of her daughter**. Shortly after this, Offred begins visiting Nick regularly.
- Offred becomes caught up in this affair and **ignores Ofglen's earlier request** that she gathers information from the Commander for Mayday. She starts to feel close to Nick.
- Sometime later, all the Handmaids take part in a **group execution** of a supposed rapist, supervised by Aunt Lydia. Ofglen strikes the first blow. Later, she tells

Offred that the so-called rapist was a **member of Mayday** and that she hit him to ensure he would not suffer a worse fate.

- Shortly thereafter, a new Ofglen meets Offred. This new woman is not part of Mayday, and she tells Offred that **the old Ofglen hanged herself** when she saw the secret police coming for her.
- At home, **Serena has found out about Offred's trip to Jezebel's** and she sends her to her room, promising punishment. Offred waits there and she sees a black van from the Eyes approach.
- Then Nick comes in and tells her that **the Eyes are really Mayday members** who have come to save her. Offred leaves with them, on her way either to prison or to freedom, **we never find out which it is**.

Epilogue

The novel closes with an **epilogue from 2195 A.D.**, after Gilead has been overthrown. It is written as a lecture given by a **Professor Pieixoto**. He discusses the importance of Offred's story, which has turned up on cassette tapes in Bangor, Maine. He suggests that Nick arranged Offred's escape but that **her fate after that is unknown**. She could have escaped to Canada or England, or she could have been recaptured. This is how the novel ends.



Five Key Words

- **Handmaid** – a fertile woman, required to produce children in Gilead
- **Commander** – a powerful, elite man who is required to impregnate a Handmaid
- **Ceremony** – the ritual of sexual intercourse in Gilead
- **Mayday** – a secret resistance group, trying to topple Gilead
- **Prayvaganza** – public religious events, designed to brainwash and control

CHARACTERS

1) Offred

- Offred never reveals her real name but from the opening pages, it is possible that she was originally named June. She has no family or friends to speak of, though she has flashbacks to a time in which she had a daughter and a husband named Luke. **The cruelty of her daily life in Gilead torments her** and in effect, this account of life is true not just for the Handmaids, but for all inhabitants of Gilead.

- By choosing not to name her, Atwood emphasises how **Offred's identity is entirely erased** and replaced with one completely dependent on her Commander. This is also tied to Offred's role in Gilead, effectively as a breeding machine, and how it is used to ensure the powerful have offspring to follow in their footsteps.
- But Offred is also rebellious in her own mind. In Chapter 5, she reflects on the idea of freedom and makes an important distinction: '*There is more than one kind of freedom ... freedom to and freedom from.*' A Handmaid must give up so many free things in order to live. She is no longer free 'to' do things. But she is also free 'from' other troubling things like disease, illness, poverty and infertility. While not fully accepting her situation, she is determined to survive her circumstances, even risking execution by establishing a relationship with Nick and believing in a possible escape.
- We can **admire Offred's ability** to cope with the level of personal anxiety and paranoia in her world. She is able to tell of these awful times in very clear detail. On the other hand, a Handmaid named **Janine** has totally surrendered to the rulers of Gilead and **appears weak in the eyes of Offred**. Offred is attracted instead to the rebelliousness of both Moira and the first Ofglen, and remains keenly observant and aware of her situation to the end.
- Her **eye for detail**, her **vivid memories** and her **account of the vicious cruelty of Gilead** allows Atwood to paint a picture of a dystopian world through Offred's personal experience.

2) The Commander

- The Commander is the head of the household where Offred works as a Handmaid. He **controls their relationship** – although he may have less influence over his relationship with his wife Serena, who seems devious. **He attempts to appear decent**, a man who is prepared to put the ideology of Gilead in place, to impregnate a Handmaid and safeguard the nation, to do 'his duty' as befits his rank. But in another way, he could be considered a serial rapist, having monthly sex with a woman placed in this position against her will, her only other option being an almost certain death.
- Another difficulty with his character is that he may be an **unintended victim of Gilead totalitarianism**. He attempts to share some tender moments with Offred, such as playing Scrabble and providing her with various clothes to wear. He appears to seek a genuine intimacy of sorts. Offred sometimes finds that she likes him in spite of everything. Secretly, **he might be making the best of a society he actually opposes**. Like much of the book, his true thoughts are not made explicitly clear, nor can we totally trust what he says.
- However, we learn from various clues in the text and from the epilogue that the Commander was actually involved in creating Gilead. To consider him as

some sort of victim is to ignore the **dystopian and dysfunctional world he participates quite enthusiastically in.**

3) Serena Joy

- As the Commander's infertile wife, **Serena Joy is neither of the two things that her name may suggest.** This is actually her stage name, when in pre-Gilead days she was a Gospel singer, then a vocal 'anti-feminist' activist who worked passionately for 'traditional values'. We have no idea what her actual name is, other than 'the Commander's Wife.'
- She is **desperately unhappy** and serves very little function in Gilead now, other than to partake in the sex ceremony. It is Offred who makes the most telling observation: *'Which of us is it worse for, her or me?'*
- Serena initially encourages Offred to break the law to try for pregnancy, but when she hears of other sins on Offred's part, we see that **jealousy and bitterness are not far from the surface.** Serena's unhappiness shows that this male-dominated society cannot bring happiness even to its most pampered, powerful and wealthy women.

4) Moira

- A long-time friend of the narrator, **Moira, is a rebel at heart** who is **tenacious** and stands up for herself. They have known each other since college and Moira is the **only direct living link Offred has with the previous world.** (We cannot be sure about Luke or other family members.) She demands her own rights and represents the typical reaction of the marginalised or the downtrodden, at least initially. She did manage to escape the Red Centre breaking a toilet to do so.
- **She just won't forget about the 'time before'** and the world that used to be. She is an inspiration, even if secretly, to those other women and Handmaids who dream of real freedom one day.
- **Moira's ultimate fate** however, like many of the other characters, **remains unresolved.** When we last hear about her, she is working at Jezebel's and her spirit seems broken. The fact that she would rather accept work as a prostitute in Jezebel's than head to the colonies demonstrates that Gilead has simply worn her down. Her eventual fate remains undisclosed and she is **ultimately a sad figure in this story.**

5) Aunt Lydia

- Aunt Lydia works at the Red Centre, the re-education centre where Offred and other women go for instruction before becoming Handmaids. She says what is perhaps the most frightening of all the quotes in the book, in Chapter 6: *'This may not be ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. This will become ordinary.'*

- What makes this statement so terrifying is that the novel strongly suggests that **Aunt Lydia is right**. If people continue to do their duties as ordered, eventually, if enough time passes, they may forget what it was like to live in a free, democratic world. **‘Normal’ becomes whatever the rulers of such a world demand**. She appears only in Offred’s flashbacks and her words haunt her daily life, drumming this new ideology into her head. For all these Handmaids, this ideology is almost impossible to ignore, feeding a kind of terror and emotional torment that won’t relent. **In powerful tones, Aunt Lydia voices the propaganda of Gilead.**

6) Nick

- A good question to ask is whether Nick can be trusted at all. His final words to Offred, as she is bundled into the black van, implore that she should **‘trust’ him**. We must believe, therefore, that he is not an Eye but in fact part of the Mayday resistance movement. Nick is a **mysterious figure**, although unlike Luke, he exists in the narrator’s present instead of just in her memory. Is he really just a gardener, a chauffeur, a handyman, a **handsome idiot**? Or is there more to him? From the beginning, the narrator considers him to be a suspicious character: *‘He’s too casual, he’s not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don’t think so.’* Offred is generally quite observant and hesitant so when she says *‘I smell a rat’*, she may indeed be correct.
- By the later stages of the novel, Offred is desperate to pour out her feelings to Nick and it might well be that he is just a **lucky guy who takes advantage of a desperate woman**. His interest in Offred is most likely just sexual and in that light, his apparent passion for her can be seen for what it actually is – nothing more than lust and excitement in a highly-controlled world.

Other Characters

- **Luke** is Offred’s former lover with whom she had a child. He is a constant memory evoked throughout, a symbol of future happiness. He had an affair with Offred while he was married to another woman, then got a divorce and became Offred’s husband. He is separated from Offred and the couple never see one another again. Offred’s memories of Luke contrasts with the passionless, regulated relations in the new society.
- **Ofglen** is another Handmaid, Offred’s shopping partner and a member of Mayday. At the end of the novel, Ofglen is found out and she hangs herself rather than face torture and reveal the names of her co-conspirators.
- **Cora** works as a servant in the Commander’s household. She is a **Martha**, an infertile woman who does not qualify for high status and instead carries out domestic work. Cora seems more content with her role than her fellow Martha, Rita. She hopes that Offred will be able to conceive because then she will have a hand in raising a child.

- The **Handmaid Janine** is always ready to go along with what Gilead demands of her, submitting to authority. Offred despises Janine for taking the easy way out and accepting this horrible fate.

Themes

1) Power

While there are numerous themes and issues in this novel, the most important theme by far is **power**, especially **the manipulation and abuse of power**. Almost all the major issues, characters and events bring the reader back to questions of power, control and freedom in one way or another.

Here are four possible areas to consider when revising:

- Atwood shows us a world in which **power is apparently held by men only. But this is not strictly true**. In order for this society to exist, there must be many people, including women, prepared to protect this power structure. The Aunts, in particular, encourage the sexual control held over women. Not to mention women like Serena Joy, a former champion of ‘family values’, who initially accepts the Handmaids into the house and then proceeds to treat them with utter contempt and disdain. To describe the theme of power in the novel as simply ‘men-controlling-women’ is not as accurate as detailing the layers within this power structure, **layers in which various women also safeguard the ideals of Gilead**.
- Another characteristic of **this kind of power is its extreme visibility**. Soldiers with guns are everywhere and a general sense of fear and paranoia is maintained among the public. Sinners are executed and their bodies are displayed publicly. The ideals of Gilead are always on show. Furthermore, by sending pairs of Handmaids shopping in clear daylight, Gilead presents their status, like all other women, as second rank to the rest of the community. This power structure is **designed to turn people, perhaps even close friends or associates, upon each other** if they deviate from the norm. It means nobody can really be trusted, not even the people you are closest to.
- A third characteristic of this type of power is the way in which individual **people still manage to find ways around its abuses**. The only place that people are really free in Gilead is in their own heads. This is an important message in the novel and is central to the journey of Offred through her various ordeals. She comes to realise that **her sexuality, no matter how restricted it is, is her only source of power in this dystopian world**. In understanding the importance of her fertility as a woman, Offred can successfully manipulate authority. She knows that she can create desire in men and build up an inevitable jealousy in other women. While it is dangerous for Offred to disobey the expected norms of a Handmaid’s role, her awareness of her own power means that she can cope better than others with the challenges of being a Handmaid.

- Finally, one of the most memorable quotes of the novel is the Latin phrase that Offred discovers scraped in her room by a previous inmate: *'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum'*. It roughly translates as **'Do not let the bastards grind you down'**. There is some reflection in the book as to who actually wrote it and much debate in the real world as to whether the phrase is an accurate translation or not. But the message is quite clear and precise; it sums up the best response one can have to a structure in which power is being abused so noticeably.



Look carefully at how the writing skills in Paper 1 are then applied to 30-mark questions in Paper 2. Look at the example below.



SAMPLE QUESTION AND ANSWER (30 MARKS/25 MINUTES)

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (2020/2021)

Question

Write a piece in which you compare how Offred and Moira cope with life in the Republic of Gilead. Support your answer with reference to the novel.

SAMPLE ANSWER

The kind of relationship that Moira and Offred have, since their college days, does not exist in Gilead anymore. The closest we get to a genuine friendship in *The Handmaid's Tale* is between these two female characters. The concept of friendship is one of the casualties of this new world – everybody is suspicious of everybody else. But I think Offred and Moira know each other in a much deeper way and manage to maintain friendship, at least as long as they are in contact with each other. However, they have very different ways of coping with the miseries they face.

I think Moira is the more interesting of the two when it comes to how she copes with Gilead's society. I would describe her as defiant, brave and heroic. She is a lesbian, meaning that she does not conform to the strict male–female sexual code of Gilead. She reminds us of a more liberal past, or in the eyes of Gilead, a sinful bygone era. But more than that, she is the only character who stands up to authority directly. She attempts to escape from the Red Centre twice, the second time successfully. And by stealing the clothes of the Aunt, she proves to us that she won't be bound by rules of dress, behaviour or the restriction of her individual freedom. It is easy to

admire Moira but the fact that she ends up a prostitute in Jezebel's, servicing men, is a depressing end. The lesson from the book is that even the most rebellious of people like Moira can be completely crushed by a regime as cruel as Gilead.

If Moira is the rebel and the other Handmaid Janine is completely submissive to the tyranny of Gilead, then Offred falls somewhere in the middle. She tries to blend in as best as she can – this is a way of coping with trauma.

Offred is intelligent, perceptive and kind-hearted. It makes her a good narrator of the novel but at the same time, she is not exactly a hero or a champion that we should admire. She copes with Gilead by managing to conceal her true feelings and thoughts, while outwardly trying to fit in with Gilead's rules. I think she becomes more passive and acceptant of Gilead as things unfold. Life become almost normal. It is really Nick who arranges her escape rather than any attempt made by herself.

Also, Offred frequently presents us with flashbacks of her previous life – her memories of Luke, their child, happier times back in college, among other things. This is another coping mechanism, thinking of pleasant times past and retaining hope that one day that version of the world might return. Given the way the novel ends, as she is bundled into the black van, we cannot be sure if it works out for her at all.

In the end, Offred and Moira are two of the many ordinary women of this dystopian world who try their best to cope with an extraordinary situation. They both have their own way of coping; Moira is outwardly rebellious and Offred is more reflective and passive.

(522 words)

EXAMINER'S ASSESSMENT

Lots of detail here and the candidate is familiar with the characters and the plot. The language is of a very good standard and the answer is structured. However, it lacks quotation or more detailed referenced in order to achieve the top marks. Point-Quote-Explain would improve the grade.

MARKS AWARDED

7 + 7 + 7 + 3 = 24/30 (O2 Grade)