

Macmillan Academy

A Level English Literature **'Bridging Project'**



Welcome to A level literature at Macmillan Academy Post 16. We are delighted to have you on board and hope that you will enjoy completing this bridging project. We would like you to complete as much of it as you can and bring along this booklet when you start your new course with us.

At A level, you will study two core areas of literature; aspects of tragedy and social and political protest writing. The aim of this project is to give you a great head-start with your understanding and interpretations of one of our core texts for the social and political protest writing element.

Although it could be claimed that all texts are political, what defines the texts in the social and political protest unit is that they have issues of power and powerlessness at their core, with political and social protest issues central to each text's structure.

It will be a huge help to you when you begin studying 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood, if you had good contextual knowledge and awareness of the kinds of things Atwood is satirising and commenting critically on in the novel. So, as you work through this booklet, you will be exploring:

- elements of dystopian fiction
- the political nature of satire
- social contexts
- political and historical contexts

As you work through this booklet, we hope you will enjoy your learning. Work at your own pace and do what you can. We look forward to meeting you soon and getting stuck in to the A Level course. If you have any questions, please email one of us:

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Part 1: Introducing 'Dystopia'

If you have read *The Hunger Games* or watched *The Matrix*, then you probably already know a little bit about fictional dystopia. So you might already know that dystopias present a world in which everything is imperfect, and things have gone terribly wrong. Dystopian fiction shows us a nightmarish image about what might happen to the world in the near future. Usually the main themes of dystopian works are rebellion, oppression, revolutions, wars, overpopulation, and disasters.

Through dystopia, authors can express their concerns about issues of humanity and society, and warn the people about their weaknesses. Authors use dystopia as a literary technique to discuss reality, and depict issues that might happen in the future. Dystopias also serve as warnings about the current state of affairs of a government, or of those in power. In dystopic writings, authors point out the wrongdoings in a society or a system – the reason that it is often called a critique.

Task 1: *Read the extracts below. These are taken from the following books, which are all well-known dystopian novels. As you read, annotate the extracts in the space provided, using the questions as prompts where you need to. Think about the kinds of ideas/issues each extract raises.*

Extract 1 is taken from the classic novel *1984* by George Orwell.

“The frightening thing, he reflected for the ten thousandth time as he forced his shoulders painfully backward (with hands on hips, they were gyrating their bodies from the waist, an exercise that was supposed to be good for the back muscles)—the frightening thing was that it might all be true. If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, IT NEVER HAPPENED—that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death?”

“The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. ‘Who controls the past,’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’ And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple. All that was

Are there any aspects of history that have been questioned or ‘re-written’? How much do we really know about the past?

Can you think of any ‘real’ examples of political censorship or propaganda?

How do you interpret the party slogan?

needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control', they called it: in Newspeak, 'doublethink'."

"To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink."

"Sometimes, indeed, you could put your finger on a definite lie. It was not true, for example, as was claimed in the Party history books, that the Party had invented aeroplanes. He remembered aeroplanes since his earliest childhood. But you could prove nothing. There was never any evidence."

Extract 2 is taken from Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

Peter shrugged. 'We are just talking about what it would be like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be.'

'Yes, Miss Lucy said, 'and you were saying to Gordon you'd have to go to America to stand the best chance.'

Peter J. shrugged again and muttered quietly: 'Yes, Miss Lucy.'

But Miss Lucy was now moving her gaze over the lot of us. 'I know you don't mean any harm. But there's just too much talk like this. I hear it all the time, it's been allowed to go on, and it's not right.' I could see more drops coming off the gutter and landing on her shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice. 'If no one else will talk to you,' she continued, 'then I will. The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to

What is 'doublethink'?

How do we know if what we read is true? Who 'controls' the writing of history and the media?

The setting is a school called Hailsham. What might be significant about this?

What is it that Miss Lucy reveals to the teenagers?

leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I have heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. So you're not to talk that way anymore. You'll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it's not so far off, the day you'll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.'

Then she went silent, but my impression was that she was continuing to say things inside her head, because for some time her gaze kept roving over us, going from face to face just as if she were still speaking to us. We were all pretty relieved when she turned to look out over the playing field again.

Why might there be a need for a large amount of organ transplants?

How does this idea of cloning for organ harvesting link to ethical issues in contemporary medical science?

Task 2: Which of these **features of dystopian literature** are evident in the two extracts you have read?

Typical features of dystopia	1984	Never Let Me Go
A background story of war, revolution, overpopulation, natural disaster or other climactic event resulting in dramatic changes to society.		
Science or technology more advanced than that of contemporary society. Usually, this advanced technology is controlled exclusively by the group in power.		
Extrapolation or exaggeration of current social and political issues/trends and developments into the future.		
Language as a means of oppression and or rebellion. Control of communication/censorship and propaganda.		
Issues of power versus powerlessness. Highly stratified society where people are placed into groups according to their status		



Interested in finding out more or reading some dystopian novels? Read a quick summary of 10 'devastating dystopias' here:

<https://www.britannica.com/list/10-devastating-dystopias>

Part 2: Understanding 'satire'



1. What do you notice about the 'spitting images' above? Why might these people been represented in such a way?

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2. Read through this definition of '**satire**' and highlight the key words, then see if you can condense it into a one sentence definition of your own.

Satire is a technique employed by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society, by using humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule. It intends to improve humanity by criticizing its follies and foibles. A writer in a satire uses fictional characters, which stand for real people, to expose and condemn their corruption.

A writer may point a satire toward a person, a country, or even the entire world. Usually, a satire is a comical piece of writing which makes fun of an individual or a society, to expose its stupidity and shortcomings. In addition, he hopes that those he criticizes will improve their characters by overcoming their weaknesses.

Satire and irony are interlinked. Irony is the difference between what is said or done, and what is actually meant. Therefore, writers frequently employ satire to point at the dishonesty and silliness of individuals and society, and criticize them by ridiculing them.

Write your definition here:

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3. One of the most famous pieces of satirical writing is 'A Modest Proposal' by Jonathan Swift, written in 1729. You can read it here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-h/1080-h.htm> **Why might Margaret Atwood want to use a quote from this pamphlet in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*? What might she be suggesting to her readers?**

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Part 3: Social Contexts

Because *The Handmaid's Tale* is a satire, readers should be aware that Atwood is making demands on them. She asks them to consider current social attitudes and to reflect on the ways in which we view and treat other people according to similarities and differences between their backgrounds and beliefs and ours.

Complete the tasks on each of the following issues:

1. Abortion

There is currently much debate about abortion. Find out what you can about the two-sides of the debate and underline the main arguments on each side in the table below:

'Pro-life' arguments	'Pro-choice' arguments

2. Homosexuality

Attitudes towards homosexuality have changed dramatically in the UK since the 1950s. Read this article <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40743946> and make notes below on the PMI chart (Find something positive, something negative and something interesting and record your ideas).

Positive	Negative	Interesting
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Interested in exploring this further? Do some research and find out where the law stands on abortion and homosexuality in other countries around the world. Are there still places where these are punishable by death?

3. Freedom of speech/the ethics of censorship

The freedom to say what one likes and to criticise whatever one wishes has often been seen as desirable. Yet in practice such freedom is often restricted, here in the west and elsewhere in the world, even in countries which seem liberal.

The question of whether there should be censorship at all is closely tied to the question of who should impose it. Who has the right to take on themselves the role of guardian of the nation's morals? And how easily can a government's well-meaning laws of restraint become the repressive clamp-down of a tyrannical régime?

To think more deeply about this issue, try to **respond to the questions below**:

1. Do you believe that people be able to say and write whatever they like or should there be restrictions, including laws preventing the expression of certain views?

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2. Can you give any examples of historic or contemporary use of state propaganda or censorship? Why was it deemed 'necessary'?

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3. Which are the most censored countries in the world today? (You could start here: <https://cpj.org/reports/2012/05/10-most-censored-countries.php>)

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4. What were some of the censorship and propaganda methods used by the Nazis to win the loyalty and cooperation of Germans? You could use the link below and identify key aspects. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda-and-censorship>

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5. In what ways has the current US President Donald Trump been adding to the debate over freedom of speech and censorship? You could look here:

<https://www.ft.com/content/4d1f7400-e65d-11e8-8a85-04b8afea6ea3>

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4. Birth rates, fertility and surrogacy debates

Birth rates are falling dramatically but why and is this a good or bad thing globally? What is causing this decline? How important is it to society that women have control over their own bodies and reproductive matters? Why are celebrities like Elton John and Kim Kardashian having babies through surrogates and what sort of ethical debates does this open up?

Task: Use the internet to do some research into birth rates and surrogacy and make notes notes, using the questions below as prompts:

1. What has happened to the birth rate in most developed countries over the last century? You could start here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-46118103>

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2. How important is it for women to have control over when and if to have children? You could use this article to help:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/21/the-guardian-view-on-family-planning-the-unsung-human-right>

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3. Are there any environmental or scientific reasons why fertility may be declining?

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4. What is 'surrogacy'? Can you think of any ethical issues surrounding surrogacy?

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Part 4: Political Contexts

We have established that *The Handmaid's Tale* is an effective satire in which Atwood draws attention to social issues in contemporary society, but she also uses satire to draw the readers' attention to unpleasant, brutal and horrific events in the past and in contemporary society. During the novel she draws on many examples of political regimes which have (*The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985)

During her novel she draws on many examples of régimes which have echo through the novel. It will be helpful to your understanding of the novel to have some knowledge of the political regimes and events which Atwood draws upon in her novel.

Task: Go to <https://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-handmaids-tale/31/2090> and read through the section 'Political Satire in *The Handmaid's Tale*'.

Use your reading to identify features of repressive regimes in the table below. The first feature has been done as an example:

Feature of repressive regime	Historic examples
<i>BRUTALITY</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>the massacre at Srebrenica of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs in the former Yugoslavia in 1995</i><i>the death camps in Nazi Germany</i><i>Sharia Law punishments</i>

Feature of repressive regime	Historic examples

(If you are finding this task hard, you could look for FANATICAL ADULATION OF LEADER, RESTRICTIONS ON BOOKS/ CENSORSHIP OF LANGUAGE/ BRAINWASHING and PROPAGANDA / PERSECUTION OF INTELLECTUALS/ OPPRESSION OF WOMEN).



Thank you for completing this Bridging Project. Please bring it with you when you join us in our A Level Literature classroom. We look forward to seeing how you got on and discussing these ideas and contextual references as we work through the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Feel free to get a head start with your reading of this novel or watching the (hard-hitting) TV adaptation from Hulu (All 4)

<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-handmaids-tale/episode-guide> (Series)

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Handmaids-Tale-Contemporary-Classics/dp/0099740915> (The novel)