

- Read this extract from Chapter 13 and focus on the narrator's body and how she feels about it.

Extract 1

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland¹, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off² matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings³ of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe⁴, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh⁵ arranges itself differently. I am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time.

NOTE BOX

1. a low area of marshy ground 2. discarded, left aside 3. kind of liquid 4. lithe /laɪð/ agile 5. chair

1

The narrator's body.

a. Choose two colours and underline the words used to describe her body and relationship to it before and now.

b. What can you conclude?

c. Describe the feelings she experiences every month regarding her body.

d. What about her body and other people now compared to the past?

STYLE LAB

Metaphors and extended metaphors

The term “extended metaphor” refers to a comparison between two unlike things that continues throughout a series of sentences in a paragraph, or lines in a poem. It is often comprised of more than one sentence, and sometimes consists of a full paragraph.

● In this extract, what part of the narrator’s body is the subject of an extended metaphor? How? Why? What’s the impact on the reader?

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2 a. Look up the symbolisms of the following words.

pear :

moon :

wave :

sky :

b. Do you think they were chosen randomly or on purpose to describe her body? Why? Explain.

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FOCUS ON... Women and their bodies

For centuries, women have been associated with the **moon** since the menstrual cycle is roughly the same length as a lunar cycle. The moon’s influence on **sea tides** was often conflated with this and women represented as being unstable, changeable and controlled by an outside force, the moon.

This supposed changeability was also associated with **madness**. In connection with the moon, lunacy. And the word “hysteria”, considered a purely female form of madness, is derived from the Greek and Roman words for womb/uterus.

● To what extent is this passage in keeping with the traditional beliefs regarding the womb?

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3 Check your understanding

● Finish the sentences to explain the situation in the passage.

a. The narrator’s purpose is to

b. Her menstruation means

c. Her body no longer is

d. In this passage, her womb is turned into a landscape where

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▶ Read the following section of the same passage and find out about the people and the period mentioned. Is it reality? Present time? A dream? How do you know?

Extract 2

I am in our first apartment, in the bedroom. I'm standing in front of the cupboard, which has folding doors made of wood. Around me I know it's empty, all the furniture is gone, the floors are bare, the carpets even; but despite this the cupboard is full of clothes. I think they're my clothes, but they do look like mine, I've never seen them before. Maybe they're clothes belonging to Luke's wife, whom I also never seen; only pictures and a voice on the phone, late at night, when she was calling us, crying accusing, before the divorce. But no, they're my clothes all right. I need a dress, I need something wear. I pull out dresses, black, blue, purple, jackets, skirts; none of them will do, none of them even fit they're too big or too small.

Luke is there, behind me, I turn to see him. He won't look at me, he looks down at the floor, where the cat is rubbing itself against his legs, mewling and mewling plaintively. It wants food but how can there be any food with the apartment so empty?

Luke, I say. He doesn't answer. Maybe he doesn't hear me. It occurs to me that he may not be alive.

I'm running, with her, holding her hand, pulling, dragging her through the bracken¹, she's only half awake because of the pill I gave her, so she wouldn't cry or say anything that would give us away, she doesn't know where she is. The ground is uneven, rocks, dead branches, the smell of damp earth, old leaves, she can't run fast enough, by myself I could run faster, I'm a good runner. Now she's crying, she's frightened, I want to carry her but she would be too heavy. I have my hiking boots² on and I think, when we reach the water I'll have to kick them off, will it be too cold, will she be able to swim that far, what about the current, we weren't expecting this. Quiet, I say to her angrily. I think about her drowning³ and this thought slows me. Then the shots come behind us, not loud, not like firecrackers, but sharp and crisp like a dry branch snapping. It sounds wrong, nothing ever sounds the way you think it will, and I hear the voice, Down, is it a real voice or a voice inside my head or my own voice, out loud?

I pull her to the ground and roll on top of her to cover her, shield her. Quiet, I say again, my face is wet with sweat or tears, I feel calm and floating, as if I'm no longer in my body; close to my eyes there's a leaf, red turned early, I can see every bright vein. It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I ease off, I don't want to smother⁴ her, instead I curl myself around her, keeping my hand over her mouth. There's breath and the knocking of my heart, like pounding, at the door to the house at night, where you thought you would be safe. It's all right, I'm here, I say, whisper, Please be quiet, but how can she? She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, a very little window, like the wrong end of a telescope, like the window on a Christmas card, an old one, night and ice outside, and within⁵ a candle, a shining tree, a family, I can hear the bells even, sleigh bells, from the radio, old music, but through this window I can see, small but very clear, I can see her, going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away.

1. fougère 2. chaussures de randonnée 3. se noyer 4. asphyxier 5. inside

NOTE BOX

1 Paragraphs 1 to 3

- a. Pick out elements about the place and its characteristics. How would you define it?

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- b. What about the people mentioned, their relationship to the narrator and their characteristics?

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2 Paragraph 4 to the end

- a. Pick out elements about the place and its characteristics.

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- b. What senses are appealed to? Why?

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- c. The characters: who is with the narrator? Characteristics?

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- d. Focus on the narrator, her feelings and actions. How would you define her?

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- e. Focus on the sentences, their rhythm and length. What's the effect produced on the readers? What's the point?

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FOCUS ON... Dream sequences

A dream sequence is a technique used in storytelling, particularly in TV and film, to set apart a brief interlude from the main story. The interlude may consist of a flashback, a flashforward, a fantasy, a vision, a dream, or some other element. They are used to **shed light on the psychical process** of the dreaming character or give the audience a glimpse into the character's past.

- What do you learn about the character and the plot itself in the first part of this extract?

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f. "like the window on a Christmas card."

Why this reference? What's the impression on the readers?

STYLE LAB

Stream of consciousness

Stream of consciousness is a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. Modernist novelists like James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Virginia Woolf (*The Waves*) developed it.

- Identify instances of stream of consciousness here and describe the effect produced.

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FOCUS ON... Canada

Even if Canada and The United States have many common points (i.e. a common language, and a history of colonisation by the British, amongst others), they are politically different. Canada has a parliamentary, not a presidential system. Socially it is seen as more open and liberal.

- What role does Canada, Margaret Atwood's home country, play in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

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3 Check your understanding

- Tick true or false.

- a. The narrator's husband was called Luke.
- b. The narrator had a daughter.
- c. Luke is dead.
- d. The narrator's child was captured.
- e. We understand she is remembering a flashback.

True	False
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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YOUR TASK

 You are the narrator and after this dream, you think of your daughter and silently address her, write this unspoken speech.

- STEP 1.** Make a list of the feelings you experienced at that moment/ when fleeing and the reason for them.
- STEP 2.** Write down about your feelings now that she no longer is with you.
- STEP 3.** Organise your ideas, use link words when necessary.

READ ON

As you read, pay attention to the rhythm of the sentences: do they help you better understand / experience the situation?



The Ceremony

► Read this extract from Chapter 16 and focus on the situation: what is the Ceremony about? Who is involved?

The Ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton under-
drawers¹. What I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white
canopy of Serena Joy's outsized colonial-style four-poster bed², suspended
5 like a sagging³ cloud above us, a cloud sprigged⁴ with tiny drops of silver rain,
which if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four-petalled flow-
ers. I would not see the carpet, which is white, or the sprigged curtains and
skirted dressing table with its silver-backed brush and mirror set; only the
canopy, which manages to suggest at one and the same time, by the gauziness
10 of its fabric and its heavy downward curve, both ethereality and matter.

Or the sail of a ship. Big-bellied⁵ sails, they used to say, in poems. Bellying.
Propelled forward by a swollen belly.

A mist of Lily of the Valley surrounds us, chilly, crisp almost. It's not warm
in this room.

15 Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread.
Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic
bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is
fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This
20 is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means
is that she is in the control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The
rings on her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge⁶.

1. underwear 2. lit à baldaquin 3. falling slightly 4. with a pattern of flowers or leaves
5. with a big belly/stomach 6. vengeance

1 Read the description of the room and canopy carefully. What colour prevails? What impression does it give?

The prevailing colour is white, because, there is : a white carpet, a white canopy, white cotton, a sagging cloud
above us. The impression it gives is of purity. It is faded glory and old fashioned.

2 The people

a. Who is present? What about their positions? Attitude? Explain.

... The people present in the room are Serena Joy and the narrator.

Their positions are: The narrator is lying on a bed with her head on Serena Joy's stomach, Serena Joy is holding the narrator's hands.

... Their attitude is of master/slave, Serena Joy is holding the narrator's hands in a way that expresses control.

The fact that both women are fully clothed signifies that there is nothing sexual. It's purely functional. The narrator suspects anger from Serena. The narrator attempts to protect herself emotionally from what is about to happen by keeping her eyes closed.

b. The ship: focus on the description and the reference to the "belly". What / who does it stand for? Justify.

The belly is reference the the narrator that, if it succeeds, will have her stomach that will change size and become bigger.

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c. Comment on the contrast between the images used to describe the scene and the reality of the situation.

Everything is white, clean, pristeen, and in this environnement, are Serena Joy and the narrator, on a bed, holding each others hands. This scene represents a .biaised image of reality.....

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d. What about women's status here?

Depneding between which women you are, you have total power (such as Serena Joy onver the narrator), or you have no rights and have to fully obey to their masters wishes.

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FOCUS ON... Surrogacy in the Bible

This passage below was read every day at the Rachel and Leah Center, and is read earlier in this chapter by the Commander.

Genesis 30:1-3, "And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." (King James Bible).

● **To what extent is this passage a reenactment of this biblical episode?**

This passage of the Bible is fully reinacted in the text.

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STYLE LAB**Mirroring effect**

my head on her stomach,
her pubic bone under the base of my skull
My arms are raised;/ she holds my hands,
each of mine in each of hers

These sentences are organised around a central element thus creating 2 mirroring parts.

● **What can you infer about the meaning of this mirror effect (considering the situation)?**

There is an impression of total control, the narrators head is on Serena's stomach and her hands are held by Serena.

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3 Check your understanding

● **Fill in the blanks to explain the situation.**

The ^{ceremony}..... is about to start. The narrator and ^{Serena}..... are lying on the bed, under the (colonial-style four-poster bed...) ..Serena's Canopy.....

They are holding ^{Hands}..... yet, far from being a sign of communion, it may well mean ^{control}.....

YOUR TASK

After reading this passage you can't help but think of what so many women endure every day. You decide to speak up and denounce the situation during the weekly morning assembly at school.

STEP 1. Make a list of feelings you experienced when reading the passage.

STEP 2. Think about the role of fiction regarding real life issues and how it helps denounce them.

STEP 3. Make a list of structures / verbs you can use to encourage your classmates to act/ react and take action.

STEP 4. Make a short speech to voice your opinion and raise awareness.

READ ON

As you keep on reading to Chapter 20, pay attention to symbols (fruit, food in general and flowers) as well as to biblical references. Find instances of synesthesia.



► Read this passage from Chapter 20 and explain the topic broached here.

- I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk, you could've been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right, and I did get shit from some quarters! My oldest buddy¹ Trisha Foreman accused me of being pronatalist, the bitch. Jealousy, I put that down to. Some of the others were okay though. But when I was six months pregnant, a lot of them started sending me these articles about how the birth-defect rate went zooming up after thirty-five. Just what I needed. And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. Fuck that shit, I told them, I've started this and I'm going to finish it. At the hospital they wrote down "Aged Primipara" on the chart, I caught them in the act. That's what they call you when it's your first baby over thirty, over thirty for godsake. Garbage, I told them, biologically I'm twenty-two, I could run rings around you any day. I could have triplets and walk out of here while you were still trying to get up off the bed.
- 10 When she said that she'd jut out her chin. I remember her like that, her chin jutted out, a drink in front of her on the kitchen table; not young and earnest and pretty the way she was in the movie*, but wiry², spunky³, the kind of old woman who wouldn't let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line. She liked to come over to my house and have a drink while Luke and I were fixing dinner and tell us what was wrong with her life, which always turned into what was wrong with ours. Her hair was gray by that time, of course. She
- 15 wouldn't dye it. Why pretend, she'd say. Anyway what do I need it for, I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off⁴, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare⁵. So he went to the coast and sent Christmas cards. He had beautiful blue eyes though. But there's something missing in them, even
- 20 the nice ones. It's like they're permanently absent-minded⁶, like they can't quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet. They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right?

* Just before this in the book, the narrator describes recognising her mother in a documentary the handmaids watched at the Red Center.

1. friend (familiar) 2. skinny 3. brave 4. go away (slang) 5. crèche 6. forgetful

NOTE BOX

1 The mother figure

- a. How she looks: ... She is skinny.
- b. Her personality: ... She is courageous and doesn't believe street rumors.
- c. Her opinion on having kids: ... That it is not because that you're over 30 that you can't have a healthy kid.
- d. Her language and what it reveals about her.
She is determined, brave, strong, isn't afraid of saying what she thinks upfront.

2 Men vs women

a. How are men described? What type of relationship is put forward?

Men are described as bad, careless, selfish. They are just considered as tools to enable women to prosper.

b. "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women." How different is that from what's happening in Gilead? What is implied then?

It isn't different from what is happening in Gilead, apart from the aim. In the sentence, it is to make other women whereas in Gilead, it is to make children for the the commander.

3 a. The Xmas card: what sort of link does it establish between the characters?

There is the impression that it is a very faint link, the only time her mother would think about her father would be when she would receive a Christmas card from him.

b. When was a Xmas card referred to previously?

There are no dates that are mentioned in the text so it is impossible to know exactly when. We can only guess that it was before Gilead started.

FOCUS ON... Feminism in the 1970s

The women's rights movement, or women's liberation movement, developed in the U.S.A. in the 1960s and 1970s. It sought equal rights and opportunities and greater personal freedom for women.

The "first wave" of feminists fought for the **right to vote** early in the century. The "second wave" feminists lobbied and protested throughout the 1970s, for **equal pay**, **childcare** and the rights to **contraception and abortion**, and against **domestic violence, pornography** and prostitution. They often opposed norms they felt were imposed by a **patriarchal** society, like the pressure to wear skirts, high heels, bras and make-up, or to marry before having children.



● To what extent does the narrator's mother embody a typical 1970s feminist activist?

She embodies it completely and even thinks that men are worth nothing.

c. How different are their meanings?

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STYLE LAB

Free direct speech

I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said.

In this extract, the narrator lets us hear her mother's words directly, yet, she doesn't use inverted commas to indicate her words. She sticks to the original words and pronouns ("I", "you") though she integrates her mother's words to the narrative.

Don't get confused: free indirect speech means reporting the words, which means changing the pronouns!

a. Highlight other instances in the text.

b. What's the impact of this free direct speech on the reader?

It feels like the mother is directly talking to us, the words have more impact than if it was the narrator saying that, she remembered her mother saying ...

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4 Check your understanding

Finish the sentences.

- a. The narrator's mom had her at the age of³² and decided to raise her^{alone}
Without her father.
- b. Some people criticised her^{for having a baby when over the age of thirty.}
- c. She thinks she only needs a man to^{have kids.}
- d. She believes men are^{useless, unless it is to play football or repair cars.}

YOUR TASK

 For your history class, you have to write a short paragraph on women's status in the 70s in the U.S.A., focusing on single moms.

STEP 1. What were the characteristics of this period regarding women's rights?

STEP 2. Use the elements in the passage to give examples using the narrator's mom's experience.

STEP 3. Write a short paragraph. Don't forget to use link words.

READ ON

As you read, pay attention to the rhythm of the sentences: do they help you better understand / experience the situation?



