

► Read chapter 1. In what country is the scene set? Pick out elements to justify your answer.

We slept in what had once been in the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops<sup>1</sup> for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent<sup>2</sup> scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted<sup>3</sup> as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail<sup>4</sup>, garlands made of tissue paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

10 There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning<sup>5</sup>, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the end of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods<sup>6</sup> slung on thongs<sup>7</sup> from their leather belts.

20 No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire<sup>8</sup>. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

25 We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed:

Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.

1. circle 2. strong, powerful 3. wearing skirts made from felt (a thick material) 4. a sad cry 5. strong desire 6. *aiguillons* 7. straps 8. *barbelés*

## NOTE BOX

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**1** The place.

a. Focus on the description of the setting and its atmosphere. Complete the grid.

	Before	Now
Setting	.....	.....
Atmosphere	..... ..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... ..... .....

b. How would you define this place, then and now?

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**2** The people.

a. Find their names, occupations / roles, feelings and description and highlight them in the text. Choose one colour for "now" and another one for "once".

b. Compare them in the 2 periods: how would you define each set of characters?

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**3** a. The 5 senses: which ones are referred to? Give details.

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b. How are they appealed to?

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c. What's the effect on the readers?

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4 "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June."

a. Pay attention to the punctuation and rhythm of this passage. What does that make you think of?

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b. Look up the traditional meaning of each name. 

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c. What may this type of name suggest about the whole novel?

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d. What elements help you define the narrator?

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FOCUS ON... Palimpsest

A palimpsest used to be a parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing was erased or rubbed out to make place for the second. It's also used to refer to super-imposed layers or remnants indicating the presence of a former text, painting or other.

● What traces of "palimpsest" can you find in the passage?

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GRAMMAR LAB

Would

- a. Dances **would** have been held there.
- b. If only they **would** look.

● The modal "would" is used differently here. Which one indicates repetition/ habit? Which one indicates condition? Explain your choice.

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3 Check your understanding

● Tick true or false.

- a. The scene takes place outside.
- b. This place used to be a lively one.
- c. The characters in the gym work for the U.S. army.
- d. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth carry guns.

	True	False
a.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

YOUR TASK

After reading the incipit, you tell a friend about this novel you've just started reading, explaining the context, what you think this is going to be about and your feelings regarding this first chapter.

- STEP 1. Make a list of main events / elements you want to talk about.
- STEP 2. Make a list of your feelings / opinions regarding this passage.
- STEP 3. Choose the sentences / expressions you could use to explain the passage and give your opinion / share your feelings.
- STEP 4. Organise your notes and record what you want to say to your friend. Be convincing.

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- ▶ Read the first part of Chapter 2, and focus on the atmosphere conveyed. What's your general impression after reading the passage?

### Extract 1

A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath<sup>1</sup>, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must've been a chandelier, once.

5 They've removed anything you could tie a rope<sup>2</sup> to.

A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. When the window is partly open – it only opens partly – the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There's a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags<sup>3</sup>. This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?

10 On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolor. Flowers are still allowed. Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?

### NOTE BOX

1. /ri:ð/ round-shaped (funeral) garland of flowers 2. cord 3. vieux chiffons tressés en tapis

- 1 a. Give details about the furniture and style of decoration.

b. What is the prevailing colour?

c. What type of place does this room make you think of?

- 2 What natural elements are present in the scene?  
How? What may that imply?

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- 3 "They've removed anything you could tie a rope to.

Does each of us have the same print, the same chair,  
the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?"

- a. Who is "they"? "us"?

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- b. What is implied?

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- 4 Compare the narrator's situation in the first chapter and at the beginning of this second chapter  
(places, feelings...)

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### STYLE LAB

#### Hypotyposis

Hypotyposis is a life-like description of a scene or a thing. It's often achieved through **verbless sentences**. They give the readers the impression they are watching a painting, that their eyes are led from one element to the next.

- Can you find traces of hypotyposis here? Underline them in the text. What words help the scene come to life?

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### FOCUS ON... The language of flowers and colours

Very often, flowers and colours have a meaning and are a way to say something indirectly. For instance, it's commonly accepted idea that red roses stand for passionate love. In this passage, blue irises stand for "faith and hope" whereas white irises would have meant innocence and purity.

- As you read, pay particular attention to the flowers and their colours. They have a real meaning and are important for understanding some passages.

- 6 Check your understanding

All the sentences are false. Underline the wrong elements and correct them.

- a. The scene takes place at night. ....
- b. The main colour is blue. ....
- c. There are flowers in a pot, next to the window.  
.....
- d. The window is wide open to let some fresh air in.  
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- e. The narrator made the rug herself during her free time.  
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### READ ON

As you read on to the next extract, pay attention to the hidden references (flowers, colours, biblical references). What impression do they convey?





► Read this extract from Chapter 5, and identify the period of time that is focused on.

**Extract 2**

The sidewalks<sup>1</sup> here are cement. Like a child, I avoid stepping on the cracks. I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes, and stars of fluorescent fabric that reflected light in the darkness. Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads.

Women were not protected then.

5 I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into the laundromat<sup>2</sup>, by yourself, at night.

10 I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control.

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you're being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.

1. (U.S.) trottoirs 2. laverie automatique

**NOTE BOX**

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**1 a.** Underline the time references.

**b.** What element connects them? .....

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**2 a.** Find elements to complete the grid about women "once" and "now".

	Before	Now
Women's clothes	.....	.....
Men and women	.....	.....

**b.** "Women were not protected then. Rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew." What do these sentences suggest about "before" and about "now"?

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### 3 The laundromat. What does the narrator insist on? Why?

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### 4 a. Comment on her thoughts on freedom.

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### b. What about the use of the term "anarchy" to refer to "freedom to"?

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## FOCUS ON... Dystopias

A dystopia is an anti-utopia, an imagined world where life is dark for the dehumanised majority suffering from oppression, often under a totalitarian regime or following a cataclysmic event. It is a means for the writer to criticise and denounce topical issues, like in *1984* (George Orwell, 1949) or *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932).

● What traces of dystopia can you find here?

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## GRAMMAR LAB

### Verbs of the mind

- a. "I'm remembering my feet on the sidewalks."  
b. "I remember the rules."

● Verbs like *think*, *remember*, *believe* are not very often used in the continuous form. What difference can you make between the use of *remember* in these two sentences?

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### 5 Check your understanding

● Tick true or false.

- a. The narrator used to live in the same city.  
b. She was used to doing her own laundry.  
c. She felt protected in the past.  
d. She now lives in a state of anarchy.

True      False

    

    

    

    

## YOUR TASK

Using Margaret Atwood's style, write the paragraph to come right after this passage.

- STEP 1.** Make a list of ideas related to freedom / "don't underrate it".  
**STEP 2.** Write short sentences to respect Atwood's style.  
**STEP 3.** Read the last paragraph and your paragraph in one go: how does it sound?

## READ ON

Read on to Chapter 13. Look for events that help you understand women's status and the narrator's past life.



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