The Handmaid’s Tale: (a) The opening

Lesson focus:
- To explore how the opening chapter sets up the novel.

Opening exercise:
- Read
  - Swift’s A Modest Proposal (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1080)
  - The story of Jacob and Rachel from Genesis 30:1-24 (http://texts.crossref-it.info/bible/genesis/30)
- Discuss
  - The significance of these stories
  - The extracts Atwood has used from them
  - What the Sufi proverb might mean.

Textual examination:
- Read Chapter 1, preferably aloud. Before any discussion, give out the Worksheet a) (perhaps enlarged to A3).
  - Students should individually fill in the middle column, noting any clues to the themes of the novel, or hints towards the style or content of the story.

Discussion ideas:
- Share the ideas which students have written down. The teacher can decide how much information about the novel to reveal.

Recreative task:
- Imagine that you have joined the women in the old school.
  - Write a diary entry describing your first day.
  - (If you are male, you will have to use your imagination even more. Or you could write as a guard.)

Critical task:
- Margaret Atwood would call the novel ‘speculative’ rather than ‘science’ fiction. What do you think this might mean?
  - Discuss the problems of this sort of fiction, with reference to other texts that you know, if possible.

Extension task:
- Students should keep the Worksheet in their files and add comments in the third column as they read through the novel. They are looking for examples of any similar ideas or developments of what they wrote in the second column.