The Handmaid’s Tale: (f) The ending and its implications

Lesson focus:
- To examine the way the novel ends, and what this suggests about Atwood’s purposes.

Opening exercise:
- Collect a few novels (or short stories) and look at their endings.
  - Use stories already known to the students so that potential future reading is not ruined! (Familiar children’s books can be used.)
  - What kind of endings are there?
  - What different purposes and effects are created?
  - What makes an effective ending? (Structure and methods of narration in The Handmaid’s Tale)

Textual examination:
- The novel ends with the words, ‘Are there any questions?’
  - Students should be given fifteen minutes (or more?) to re-read ‘Historical Notes’ and write a list of:
    - The questions they have
    - The questions they think Atwood would want the reader to have.
  - Does it matter whether Offred is an identifiable individual, even within the construct of the novel? (Themes and significant ideas > Individualism and identity)

Discussion ideas:
- Discuss the questions listed in the previous exercise. Also, look again at Chapter 46.
  - What would be our reaction if the novel had ended there?
    - What do the ‘Historical Notes’ change?
    - What do they not change? (The Handmaid’s Tale > Synopses and commentary > Section 15: Night - Chapter 46)

Recreative task:
- Invent a new piece of information which has come to light. Devise:
  - The speech which Professor Pieixoto might deliver after receiving this information and / or
  - A speech by another academic which challenges the Professor’s views.

Critical task:
- What clues are given in the novel to alert us to the fact that it is ‘just a story’, before the ending?
  - Examine a selection of examples in detail.
  - (Themes and significant ideas in The Handmaid’s Tale > Myth and fairy tale)
  - (Structure and methods of narration in The Handmaid’s Tale)
  - (The Handmaid’s Tale > Synopses and commentary > Interpretation and the opening epigraphs)
  - (The Handmaid’s Tale > Synopses and commentary)

Extension task:
- Read one (or both) of Margaret Atwood’s later dystopian novels: Oryx and Crake, and The Year of The Flood.
  - What similarities of theme do you notice with The Handmaid’s Tale? (Critical approaches to The Handmaid’s Tale > Recent critical)
  - (The Handmaid’s Tale resources and further reading > Helpful reading around The Handmaid’s Tale)