**Year 9 ILT Spring Term**

**Reading Comprehension 1- ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ by Margaret Attwood**

Read the passage carefully and then complete the tasks below.

*Taken from the opening to ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’, Our protagonist finds herself being imprisoned in an old school after a catastrophic event has changed the USA.*

We slept in what had once been 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 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 scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held here; the music lingered, a palimpsest\* of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was loneliness in the room, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, 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 ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.

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. The Angels stood outside it with their backs on 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.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness 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.

\* A palimpsest is a piece of paper that has been used more than once which still shows signs of the earlier writing or art work. It is like an echo of what was there before.

1. Based on their use in the following quotations, what do you think each of these key vocabulary mean?
   1. “A balcony ran around the room, for the **spectators**”
      * Onlooker
      * Judge
      * Guard
   2. “How did we learn it, that talent for **insatiability**”
      * Ignorance
      * Irritability
      * Unsatisfied
   3. “two by two around the football field which was **enclosed** now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire”
      * Open
      * Wide
      * Fenced
2. Where is the narrator forced to sleep?
3. What does she imagine happening in this place (line 5-9)?
4. How does the writer describe the atmosphere in the room? (line 10)
5. How do the women communicate with each other (line 28)?
6. Read paragraph 1. Find FOUR pieces of information about the room the narrator is in.
7. Find FOUR pieces of information about the character’s sleeping arrangements (lines 15-18).
8. Find a quotation which suggests that the Aunts are dangerous or menacing.
9. Find a quotation which suggests that the narrator is supposed to find the Angels frightening.
10. What impression does the narrator give the reader of her experience?