

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Gender

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Gender is an important theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's intention was to draw attention to the **inequalities faced by women because of their gender**, as well as to (albeit to a lesser extent) the **oppression of other marginalised groups**.

At the time *The Handmaid's Tale* was written, **women were gaining more civil rights**. This progress was met with **opposition from religious conservative groups** and, with these groups entering the mainstream sphere, Atwood **feared that a society like Gilead was possible**.

What is Gender?

Gender - and gender theory - **discuss the social and cultural differences between men and women**. Typically, **Western society is male-dominant**, or patriarchal. As gender theory has evolved, theorists argue that **gender is a social construct**: people are born a certain sex, but their **gender is shaped by the society around them**. For example, if a person is born female, then they are **socialised** to become girls and embrace a **feminine identity**.

However, because many societies are patriarchies, **feminine traits/activities are typically viewed as inferior to masculine traits/activities**. For example, being emotionally sensitive is viewed as a feminine trait, while being strong is viewed as a masculine trait and it is strength, rather than sensitivity that is valorised. Another example would be how **housekeeping and childrearing are viewed as feminine work**, and is often viewed as less important than work that is viewed as more masculine (e.g. being a CEO or manual labor). **When taken to the extreme**, like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, **these beliefs can be used to perpetuate violence and oppression towards women**.

Timeline of Gender Theory in the United States

	Time Period	Key Philosophy	Outcomes
First Wave Feminism [1]	1848 - 1920	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's suffrage • Primarily lead by white, middle-class women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women gained the right to vote (although black Americans were still kept from the polls through poll taxes and literacy tests) • More women in higher education and political offices
Second Wave Feminism [2]	1960s - 1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women entering the workforce • Rejection of domesticity • Over time, different strains of feminism emerged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded reproductive rights (e.g. access to birth control and legal abortion) • Increased access to education • More feminist



			organisations founded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal Pay Act of 1963 - made it illegal to pay someone less based on their sex • Roe v. Wade (1973) - legalised abortion
Third Wave Feminism [3]	1990s - 2010s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolishing gender stereotypes • Reclaiming derogatory terms • Sexual liberation • Emphasis on race, class, and transgender rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminist movement began to include women of all races, classes, and cultures • Utilising the internet as a place for activism • Expanded discussions about violence against women • Continued fight for reproductive rights
Fourth Wave Feminism [4]	2012 - present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intersectionality • Rejection of gender norms and binaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilisation of social media for activism • #MeToo campaign • Time's Up movement • Women's March

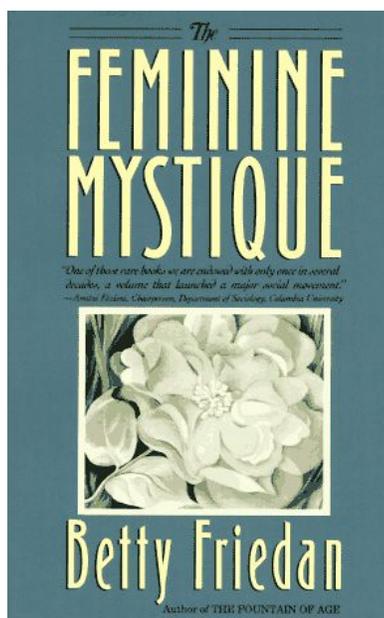


Image source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vcucns/8682593717>

The Handmaid's Tale was originally written in the 1980s - during **Second Wave feminism**. Many historians credit the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963 as **the start to this era of feminism**. Friedan talks about how **the perfect nuclear family didn't reflect the true goals and aspirations of women** - many of whom were miserable in their strictly domestic roles, despite ubiquitous representations of happy housewives. The book's message resonated with many women, who began to **embrace lives that existed outside of the traditional, domestic sphere**.

Although the *Handmaid's Tale* wasn't published until 1985 -towards the end of Second Wave Feminism - it still was **heavily influenced by this era**. In Gilead, those in charge want to **return to the 1950s era of domesticity and strict gender roles**.

Atwood saw this as a setback from the progress that feminists had made by the 1980s. As time went on, however, several **different theories and schools of thought emerged amongst feminists at**

this time. Most notably, a divide emerged between **liberal feminists** and **radical feminists**.



Liberal feminism -- which is sometimes called **mainstream feminism** -- focuses on achieving gender equality and **women's rights through political and legal reform**, within the framework of a society [5]. **Radical feminism**, on the other hand, calls for a **radical change to society where male supremacy is eliminated**. It also focuses more specifically on **race, class, and sexuality** and how these impact a person's identity [6]. Margaret Atwood likely views herself as more of a liberal feminist, while characters such as Moira and Offred's mother are more representative of radical feminism.

Comparing *The Handmaid's Tale* book with the television series shows the evolution of feminist and gender theory. While both of them centre around Offred's experience as a Handmaid, they are adapted for their respective time periods. For example, the novel was published in **response to Ronald Reagan's presidency** and the **emergence of the religious right** and the TV series was released shortly after **Donald Trump was elected president** and the **religious right has become more mainstream in American politics**. Both the novel and the TV series are meant to serve as **cautionary tales**, and are meant to be a **response to the political climate**, both of which are **highly patriarchal and, at times, oppressive**.

Gender Roles

In Gilead -- a religious patriarchy -- there are **roles for men and women that are shaped around Biblical ideas of gender**. While high-class men are assigned to be Commanders, and are able to **participate politically, socially, and economically** in Gilead, the women are assigned to more domestic and subservient roles. This is **reminiscent of the gender roles of the 1940s and 1950s** in the United States. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, different women occupy different domestic roles. The Wives keep order in the house; The Handmaids' duty is to procreate; and The Marthas' job is to cook and clean.



Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/crestresearch/34311139864>



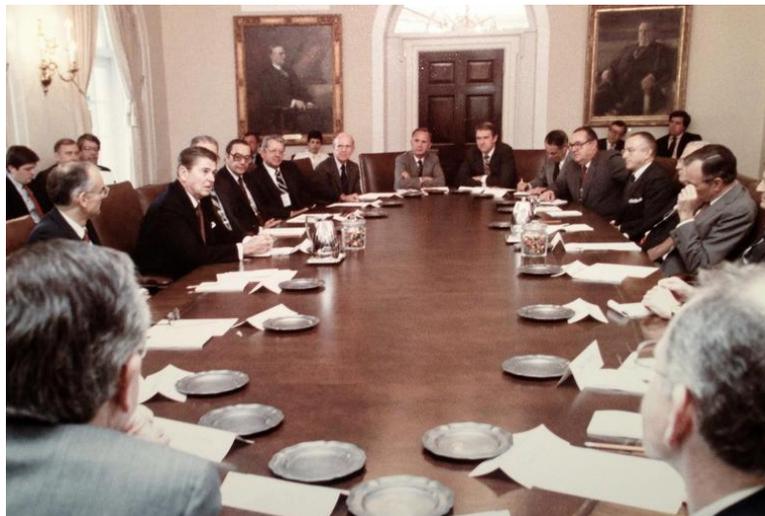
By analysing the different roles of men and women, we can see which **traits that society values** and gain an insight into **society's idealised versions of gender**. The literary concept of **The Other** is also an important one. The Other is typically someone who **doesn't fit into social norms** -- in this case, people who don't fit neatly into traditional ideas of masculine or feminine -- and **symbolises people who are not accepted by society**.

Masculinity

While **feminine identities are fragmented to symbolise different gender roles and ideals**, the prominent male characters are meant to **symbolise different manifestations of patriarchy**. The Commander, Luke, and Nick all have different relationships with Offred, each with different power dynamics and varying degrees of equality.

The Commander

The Commander symbolises masculine ideals. He is white, straight, Christian, able-bodied, and male. Most importantly, though, he is powerful. **Atwood intentionally made the Commander this way to reflect American ideals of masculinity**. At the time that *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, many -- if not all -- of the people in power resembled The Commander.



Ronald Reagan meeting with the National Petroleum Council, 1983

Image Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Reagan-meets-with-National-Petroleum-Council.jpg>

Out of the other male characters, The Commander's relationship with Offred is also the most **unequal**. Even though the Commander appears benevolent at times, he is **directly responsible for Offred's oppression**. He has power over her, and everyone else in the house: **"There's no doubt about who holds the real power"** (Chapter 23).

One of the primary ways the Commander **maintains his power is through sexism**. Throughout the novel, he makes **sexist comments** about women and often perpetuates the idea that he is **superior because of his gender**. For example, he tells Offred that **"women can't add"** (Chapter 29).



While Offred sometimes feels sympathy for the Commander, as **he is also confined by gender roles**, he is the one who created this system and thus, he is the one who **benefits** from it. He even acknowledged that, when they were creating Gilead, there would have to be inequities: **“Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some” (Chapter 32).**

- Here, The Commander shows that he recognises that while Gilead has arguably improved life for people like him -- who fit into traditional masculine ideals -- it has made things **“worse for some.”**
- The people who he is referring to here are **women and other marginalised groups**. Even though he acknowledges that there’s **injustice**, he doesn’t use his power to do anything about the system that he’s created.
- Furthermore, despite Offred’s occasional sympathy for the Commander, it becomes clear through their interactions that **The Commander is using his power over Offred for his own gain**.
- In other words, **he doesn’t see her as an equal, but as an instrument for his own pleasure**.

Luke

Luke is **Offred’s husband** and, although the two love each other, he is still a bit **misogynistic**. He is meant to **contrast with the Commander** and show that **even modern men** - those who are not blatant misogynists and may even identify as a feminist allies - **can be oppressive towards women**.

Before Gilead rose to power, Offred remembers a time where she and Luke watched Serena Joy’s religious programmes: **“Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest” (Chapter 8).**

- The difference between Luke and Offred’s reactions to Serena Joy is important.
- Luke thinks she’s **“funny”** which shows how **he doesn’t take her and her ideas seriously**. Looking a little bit deeper, he likely thinks she’s funny because **he’s aware of the fact that he would not be as affected if what she was preaching about came to be**.
- Offred, on the other hand, thinks that Serena Joy is **“frightening.”** **Serena is advocating for a regressive, patriarchal way of life, and Offred recognises the danger that it poses to her as a woman**.

“I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not. I want to be more than valuable” (Chapter 17).

- Offred’s relationship with Luke shows how their relationship **empowers her and often provides her with comfort**.
- Now, in this society that doesn’t value women, Offred’s relationship with Luke - as flawed as it may be - **symbolises a time when she had autonomy and value**.



After Gilead comes to power and makes it illegal for women to work, the power dynamic between Luke and Offred changes: **“I didn’t go to any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking” (Chapter 28)**

- Even though Offred recognises the danger of this new society and wants to participate in the protests, Luke convinces her not to.
- Instead of supporting her, **he tells her to prioritise her family**, which echoes the **misogynistic idea** that women shouldn’t protest, vote, or work because it would take them away from their domestic duties.
- Now that **Luke has power in their relationship**, he wants Offred to choose more **traditionally feminine duties** like doing **“more housework, more baking.”**
- By having their relationship **shift from relatively egalitarian to unequal**, Atwood means to convey that **even the most progressive men can still hold and perpetuate patriarchal ideas when it benefits them.**

“That night, after I’d lost my job, Luke wanted to make love [...] He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his” (Chapter 28)

- This is a moment of realisation for Offred. Even though the two eventually attempt to escape, **she recognises that Luke might like this new system of government because it gives him power.**
- The idea of women being possessed by men (i.e. **“I am his”**) shows how **women are starting to lose their autonomy and sense of identity**. This is seen throughout the book, as The Commander doesn’t treat Offred as a person, but as a **possession or a commodity.**

One night, as The Commander and Offred are playing Scrabble, she notes that the Commander doesn’t seem as hostile towards her as Luke sometimes was. **“I sense in him none of the animosity I used to sense in men, even in Luke sometimes. He’s not saying bitch in his head” (Chapter 29).**

- **This comparison between Luke and The Commander is ironic** because The Commander has contributed more directly to Offred’s oppression, yet she feels like he is more benevolent than Luke.
- This also shows how Luke would sometimes resent Offred when she showed that she was smarter than he was. While this is definitely sexist, so is The Commander’s condescending praise.
- Ultimately, **both of these relationships are unequal**. Although Luke can certainly perpetrate sexist ideas at times, Offred still was able to **choose him as a partner** and **speak out if she disagrees. These elements of choice and autonomy are crucial**, as she was not able to choose her relationship with the Commander nor is she able to speak out.



Nick

Out of all the men in the book, **Nick and Offred's relationship is the most equal**. While he does have **more status because of his gender**, he also serves The Commander. When Offred sees him for the first time, she notes that he must be **“low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one” (Chapter 4)**. This shows how **women are treated like currency or status symbols** in Gilead, but never as actual human beings. Even so, Nick's low status means that **he is not meant to symbolise an ideal, like The Commander, nor is he meant to be a husband like Luke**. Instead, **Nick is meant to symbolise an equal**.

After the Ceremony, Offred sneaks into the sitting room to steal something, but instead finds Nick. Offred isn't afraid of Nick because **“he too is illegal, here, with me, he can't give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we're mirrors. He puts his hand on my arms, pulls me against him, his mouth on mine” (Chapter 17)**. The fact that they are both **breaking the rules** bonds them together and **makes them equals**. By saying that they are **“mirrors”** this **symbolises their similarities and their role as each others' equals**.

The first time the two have sex, it's arranged by Serena Joy. After this though, Offred continues to see Nick on her own **“without Serena knowing” (Chapter 41)**. While her **relationship with the Commander is coercive and unequal**, Offred begins to have an affair with Nick because it is **empowering and gives her a sense of identity**: **“I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely” (Chapter 41)**.

Femininity

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the **roles of women** are **divided into different identities that are meant to represent different feminine ideals**. For example, the **Wives symbolise domesticity**; the **Handmaids symbolise reproduction**; and the **Marthas symbolise housekeeping and caregiving**. Each identity and role is meant to stand on its own. By designing their society this way, Gilead is able to **reduce women to one aspect of their identity** and, thus, not acknowledge them as real, complete individuals.

There is also a **hierarchy** between these roles. In general, **Wives have more power** than the Marthas or the Handmaids, but the **Handmaids are able to have children, so they are viewed as more valuable** to society. However, Offred often envies the Marthas and the Wives because they have a bit more **freedom** than the Handmaids:

“Or I would help Rita make the bread [...] I hunger to touch something other than cloth or wood” (Chapter 2).

“But I envy the Commander's Wife for her knitting. It's good to have small goals that can be easily attained” (Chapter 3).

This idea of **envy** comes up a lot when talking about **feminine roles**. When segmenting their identities into separate roles, the **women are taught to view each other as adversaries**. In other words, they **“all envy each other something” (Chapter 8)**. This **envy is strategic**, as it **prevents the women from forming friendships or alliances** and organising to overthrow the ruling powers of the Gilead.



Handmaids and Reproduction

In Gilead, women's identities are broken up to represent different **patriarchal values**. The Handmaids are meant to symbolise reproduction. This is shown because they wear the **colour red**, and are often **dehumanised** to the point where they're only **valued for their wombs**.

“Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (Chapter 2)

- While **red** can symbolise other things - such as violence and desire - it most prominently **symbolises menstrual blood**, which further symbolises **fertility**.
- By saying that the colour red **“defines”** the Handmaids, Atwood is saying that they are **defined by their fertility and their ability to reproduce**.
- The Handmaids also wear white **“wings.”** The **white symbolises purity**.



A group of Handmaids

Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vpickering/47078392652>

“We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Chapter 23).

- The phrase **“two-legged womb”** implies that the Handmaids are not viewed as people, but merely as **“sacred vessels”** for reproduction.
- In this example, Atwood uses words that are associated with **Christianity** (**“sacred”** and **“chalice”**) to exemplify the way that **Christianity and religion have facilitated the dehumanisation of the Handmaids**.
- This quote is also an example of **synecdoche, where a part of something is meant to represent the whole**. In this case, the **womb is meant to represent the whole woman**. Atwood deliberately uses synecdoche here to show how women are, indeed, only seen as **“two-legged wombs.”**



“Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Chapter 15)

- This quote from Aunt Lydia comes right after Moira’s first escape attempt and, after being captured, the Aunts break her hands and feet.
- Scientifically speaking, **hands and feet are two of the characteristics that** make us uniquely human.
- By breaking Moira’s hands and feet, the Aunts - who represent Gilead’s oppressive control - **dehumanise her**.
- The euphemism **“for our purposes”** is **referencing the Handmaid’s ability to have a child**. By saying that their hands and feet **“are not essential,”** Aunt Lydia is telling the Handmaids that their **only purpose is procreation**. They are not human beings in their own right.

Wives and Domesticity

While the Wives don’t have much power in Gilead due to their gender, they do have **power within their household**. In a way, they are **government-regulated matriarchs**, as they have more status than the Handmaids or the Marthas, but are still **unable to participate in society as equals to men**. The Wives also wear **blue**, which **symbolises purity and serenity, and invokes imagery of the Virgin Mary**.

“I was expecting a Martha, but it was her instead, in her long power-blue robe, unmistakable.” (Chapter 3)

- The comparison between the Virgin Mary and the Wives is important because it shows the use of **Christian iconography** in Gilead.
- By having the Wives associated with the Virgin Mary, it also shows what values are important in Gilead (i.e. **purity, serenity, motherhood**).
- **The Wives are a way to symbolise Gilead’s ideal version of a woman: domestic, subservient and pure.**



Serena Joy in *The Handmaid’s Tale* TV Show

Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mikijourdan/47065680852>



“You don’t see the Commanders’ Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars.” (Chapter 5)

- Handmaids and Marthas usually have to walk, but because **the Wives have a higher social status**, they are able to travel in cars.
- This exemplifies the **hierarchy** of women in Gilead: **wives are the most powerful**.

“She doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word.” (Chapter 8)

- Wives are a **symbol of domesticity and marriage**. Like the Handmaids, many of them had different identities before Gilead.
- Before Gilead rose to power, Serena Joy would make speeches about the importance of women staying in the home, but wouldn’t follow her own advice. This is an example of her **hypocrisy**.
- This quote is **ironic** because Serena Joy - and presumably other Wives - **enjoyed having an identity as something other than a housewife**. Once she is **“taken at her word”** and is resigned to the household as unequal to her husband, Serena is **“furious.”** Through Serena, Atwood may be casting doubt on the veracity of the beliefs held by socially conservative women who advocate for traditional gender roles. Do they really believe what they are saying?

“No benches for them, they get real seats, upholstery. They face front and are not curtained off. They know where they’re going” (Chapter 19)

- This is another **example of the inequalities** between The Wives and the other women in Gilead.
- On the way to a birth, the Handmaids are placed in a van where they sit on benches and are curtained off so they can’t see where they’re going.
- This difference shows how the **Wives are treated better than the Handmaids because they have a higher social status**.
- The fact that the Wives **“know where they’re going”** is also telling. **The Handmaids are not usually given information because of the fear that they’ll escape**. By letting the Wives see where they’re going, Atwood implies that there’s **no concern that the Wives will escape**. This is likely because they are content - to some degree - in their roles, as **they have power** that other women (such as Handmaids) don’t.

“Whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (Chapter 26)

- This quote shows that the Wives are the ones who are in charge of the Handmaids and the Marthas, yet another **example of the power the Wives have over other women**.



Marthas and Housekeeping

The Marthas are women who don't have as much status as Handmaids or Wives, but work as **household servants**. The name "Martha" comes from the Bible, and is named after one of Jesus' friends who is **practical and domestic**. The Marthas wear **green**, which is a colour **associated with cleanliness and health**. They represent **housekeeping**.

"Or we would gossip. The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house" (Chapter 2)

- Similarly to the Wives, the **Marthas have a way of getting information** that the Handmaids don't.
- Because they have a lower status than the Handmaids, **they aren't as restricted** in the ways that they speak to each other.
- Despite this, their only official role in Gilead is to work as housekeepers in wealthy households.

"The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women, the Marthas, the Econowives in their multicolored stripes" (Chapter 33).

- This quote shows the **class difference** between the women in Gilead.
- While the Wives sit on chairs, and the Handmaids kneel in the front, the Marthas are sent to the back, symbolising through space their inferiority position.

Other

In literature, there is the idea of **"The Other."** The Other is someone who doesn't belong and somehow doesn't fit in with society's ideals. As a symbol, The Other is important because it **encompasses other identities that are not ideals**. Historically, The Other is usually someone who is a different sex/gender, race, religion, class, political ideology, or sexual orientation [7]. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, **The Other is usually punished**. This is an important insight into what kind of identities were considered socially (un)acceptable at the time that the book was written.

The Wall

The Wall is a symbol of Gilead's oppression, It is where people who go against Gilead's ideals are displayed after they are executed. While macabre, this is a useful way for the reader to **determine who is viewed as an Other in Gilead** and, thus, **who was viewed as an Other in American society at the time**.

1. Abortion Doctors

"The men wear white cots, like those worn by doctors of scientists [...] Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus" (Chapter 6)

- As women began to **gain more rights during Second Wave Feminism**, the debate around **reproductive freedom** and rights came to the forefront in American politics.
 - The **anti-abortion (or "pro-life") movement**, which typically consists of **religious conservatives**, argues that life begins at conception and that **abortion is immoral**.



- The **pro-abortion (or “pro-choice”) movement**, which is typically associated with **feminists**, argue that women should have the right to **choose when and how to get pregnant**.
- Because Gilead is a religious patriarchy, they are strictly anti-abortion. Doctors who performed abortions in the pre-Gilead era are viewed as **“war criminals” (Chapter 6)** and are murdered and their corpses are displayed on The Wall.
- Atwood intends to highlight how abortion doctors are **demonised by Gilead** for **supporting the reproductive rights and bodily autonomy** of women.
- When analysed further, because Gilead relies on the dehumanisation of women to coerce them into sexual slavery, **abortion doctors become a symbol of a time where women had choice and autonomy** in regards to reproduction. In other words, abortion doctors are viewed as dangerous because they **symbolise reproductive freedom in a society that has none**.



Women's Rights Demonstration, 13 November 1989

Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dukeyearlook/4460729996>

2. The LGBTQ+ Community

“There are three new bodies on the Wall. One is a priest, still wearing the black cassock [...] The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery” (Chapter 8)

- In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender treachery is a **euphemism for homosexuality**. At the time that it was published, the gay rights movement had just started to enter the mainstream.
- Similarly to women's rights, as the gay community became more visible, as did its critics. The Reagan administration in particular was especially **harmful to the gay community**. As the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerged and primarily affected young, gay men, the Reagan administration failed to act and publicly conveyed **strong anti-gay sentiments** throughout his presidency.



- Gilead is meant to be an extreme version of the U.S. in the 1980s and imagined a society where LGBTQ+ people are **not just stigmatised, but murdered for their gender identity and sexual orientation**.
- The association between gender treachery and homosexuality shows just how **deeply entangled** gender and sexuality are. **Heteronormative gender ideals** mean that those who are not heterosexual are considered gender traitors.

The Colonies

The Colonies are areas of the country that have been **contaminated by radioactive waste and pollution**. Certain people who don't conform to Gilead's ideals, or those who aren't useful to its society, are made to work in the Colonies until the radiation kills them. Similarly to The Wall, **The Colonies symbolise social ostracisation** and are used as a way to **control** people -- particularly women -- **through fear**.

“He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped of to the Colonies, with the Unwomen” (Chapter 12)

Gilead's primary goal is to increase rates of reproduction, since the population is declining. Since Gilead is highly patriarchal, women are the only ones who are blamed if they cannot get pregnant. **“There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law” (Chapter 11).**

- Older women or women who are unable to get pregnant within a certain time period are categorised as **“barren,”** labeled as an **“Unwoman,”** and sent to the Colonies.
- By **linking gender and reproduction** so inextricably, it further **diminishes the identity of women** to only their reproductive ability. The negative prefix “un” indicates that women in *The Handmaid's Tale* who cannot have children exist in a kind of **symbolic void**.
- In other words, the idea of an **“Unwoman”** shows that **reproduction is central to the definition of womanhood**.

“There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Chapter 16).

- Similarly, **women who rebel against Gilead** are often sent to the Colonies.
- This shows how **rebellious women are not valuable**, as they go against the traditional gender roles that Gilead preaches.
- Because Gilead's continuation relies on women being subservient and docile, any women **who may speak out against Gilead's oppression** must be discouraged through the constant threat of the Colonies.
- The threat of being shipped to the Colonies is also used as a way to **coerce women into being Handmaids**: women are able to choose between becoming a Handmaid or going to the Colonies, where they will inevitably die of radiation poisoning.
- This **“choice”** - or lack thereof - shows how **women are forced to conform to traditional gender roles**.

“I'd say it's about a quarter men in the Colonies, too. Not all of those Gender Traitors end up on the Wall” (Chapter 38)

- Gay people also are sent to the Colonies. For all of the reasons listed above, the **LGBTQ+ community is often ostracised from society**.



The Aunts

The Aunts are a bit of an **outlier** in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are **older women**, so they cannot have children, but they are allowed to **have power in society because they are the enforcers and most loyal followers of Gilead's regime**.

The Aunts often **resort to violence** to indoctrinate the Handmaids: **“They had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts” (Chapter 1)**.

- While violence, power, and control are traits that are more typically associated with men, the **Aunts are permitted to break with traditional gender norms**.
- Ultimately, the Aunts are a reminder that women can exist outside of feminine gender roles, just as long as their ultimate mission is to **serve the patriarchy** they live in.

Race in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Although there are several **allusions to American slavery** in *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are conspicuously no people of different races in Gilead. While only briefly mentioned, it is implied that Gilead is conducting a **racial genocide**: **“Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule,” says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen [...] Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm, is the theory” (Chapter 14)**.

- While it makes sense for such an oppressive society to work to erase any racial or ethnic minorities, **Atwood has been criticised** for her decision not to include any non-white characters in the book.
- Critics of Atwood argue that she **erases Black stories**, but is comfortable using American slavery as a basis for the systems of oppression in Gilead [8].
- Interestingly, the TV show has more Black, Asian, and Latina characters. This is likely due to **Fourth Wave Feminism's commitment to intersectionality**.
- In either case, **racial minorities are often ostracised and erased** in American society and literature.

Class in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The **Econowives** are women from a lower class who **perform all of the household duties**. As feminism evolved to be more intersectional and include people from different races and classes, the Econowives are meant to **symbolise the class divide**. **“There are other women [...] some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can” (Chapter 5)**

- To symbolise that they perform all domestic duties (i.e. all the duties of Handmaids, Wives, and Marthas) the Econowives wear **multi-coloured** dresses.
- While Econowives are arguably **more independent** than the other women in Gilead, this independence is viewed as lower class and is **stigmatised**.
- Even though they are able to perform different tasks compared to the other women in Gilead, Econowives are still expected to perform **traditionally feminine duties**, such as



house-keeping and child-rearing. So, even though they may not be as socially restricted as upper class women, they are still **forced to adhere to strict gender roles**.

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