

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Power

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In *The Handmaid's Tale*, **power is arguably the most important theme**. All of the other themes we'll examine in depth (gender, identity, class, rebellion, and religion) are **centred around ideas of power**.

In his [TED Talk](#) [1], Eric Liu defines power as **“the ability to make others do what you would have them do.”** **Power can change** based on the situation and a person's identity. In Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller's book, *A New Weave of Power*, they describe four ways that power can be expressed:

| Power Over | Power With | Power To | Power Within |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associated with coercion, force, and corruption • A situation where having power means taking power from someone else • Can perpetrate inequality and injustice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Working with others together to achieve a common goal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualistic • A person's potential to make change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person's agency and ability to make change • Wants people to realise they have power to shape their own life |

Source: <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/>

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, **Offred's relationships with other characters exemplify these different types of power**. The Commander is a symbol of power over; Ofglen is a symbol of power with; Moira is a symbol of power to; and Offred is a symbol of power within.

Power Over - The Commander

In Robert Dahl's [The Concept of Power](#) [2], he gives an example of power over: **“A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”** The Commander and Offred's relationship is an example of “power over.”

The Commander is an **archetype of power**. He is wealthy, white, Christian, and male: all of the things that Gilead values. Even his name - The Commander - **symbolises his dominance over others**. Even though Offred and The Commander are familiar and comfortable with each other at times, he always has **power over** her and can make her do things that she would not otherwise do.



The Commander & Power

Atwood uses The Commander to portray **gender power dynamics**. After their first meeting in his study, The Commander asks Offred to kiss him like she means it. Although reluctant, Offred realises she **doesn't have a choice**, and kisses him. As she's reflecting on the encounter, Offred explores **ideas of power**: **“Remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest [...] Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing” (Chapter 23).**

- This scene challenges the reader to think of **forgiveness as a tool for power**.
- **“Forgiveness”** is often viewed as a kind gesture and is **an important idea in Christianity**. In this context, however, it shows how the idea of **forgiveness can be corrupted and used to hold power over someone**.
- The phrase **“legs spread open”** is an **allusion to Offred's role as a Handmaid**, as she is in this physical position during The Ceremony. It is meant to convey Offred's sense of **powerlessness**.
- The Commander's position of power **allows him to break the rules and be forgiven for it**. If Offred were to break the rules, however, she would likely have much harsher consequences due to her role as a Handmaid.

Later, as their relationship progresses, Offred recognises that **“the Commander could give me away so easily, by a look, by a gesture” (Chapter 26).**

- This quote shows how Offred's relationship with The Commander puts her in a **vulnerable and powerless position**. She **cannot tell him no**, but she must live with the possibility that he could give her away to the authorities, which would likely lead to her being sent to the Colonies.
- Between Offred and The Commander, **only Offred is under the constant threat of death for breaking the rules**.
- This exemplifies how **Offred's fate is not in her control**, and **The Commander's power over her dictates her survival**.

After Offred meets with the Commander a few times, their relationship becomes more familiar and casual. About the **power dynamics in their relationship**, Offred says: **“It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it's of an equivocal kind” (Chapter 32)**

- She acknowledges that she does have some power in the situation, but that it is **“equivocal”** and **the true nature of their relationship is unclear**.
- This shows how **“power over” is always a struggle**: one person can have it, and others must fight for it.

At Jezebel's, The Commander takes Offred to a hotel room and has sex with her. **Offred isn't comfortable** that they're having sex outside of the Ceremony, but **cannot say no due to The Commander's power over her**. **“The fact is that I don't want to be alone with him, not on a**



bed [...] But my silence does not deter him [...] The trouble is that I can't be, with him, any different from the way I usually am with him" (Chapter 39)

- Offred expresses that she does not **"want to be alone"** with The Commander. In this situation, they are both **away from the formalities and restrictions of their roles**, but **The Commander still has power over Offred**.
- Even though **the situation and environment have changed**, Offred **"can't be [...] any different"** which shows how **The Commander has power over her, regardless of where they are**.
- Because The Commander still has power over Offred in this situation, **she cannot directly say no**. Instead, Offred is **silent**, and tries to **use her body language** to let The Commander know she's uncomfortable. The Commander, however, realises he still has power over her, ignores her signals, and **forces her to have sex**.

Power With - Ofglen

In Gilead, **Handmaids are prevented from forming friendships or alliances with one another**. This is a way to ensure that they **remain oppressed**, and **cannot unite and rebel** against Gilead. Ofglen and Offred's relationship, however, **demonstrates the potential power of companionship and alliances** (i.e. power with), and exemplifies what Gilead is trying to prevent. The idea of "power with" centres around **solidarity, empowerment, and shared power**; it often leads to **collective action**.

Ofglen is another Handmaid who is Offred's shopping partner. Since they are both Handmaids, they have a **similar status in society** and are likely to have similar experiences that create a more **egalitarian and reciprocal relationship**. Ofglen eventually reveals herself to be working for the resistance group, Mayday. As the two learn they can trust each other, they find **power with each other**.

Power and Companionship

On one of their shopping trips, Ofglen and Offred stop outside of Soul Scrolls. The two **are able to look at each other's faces** for the first time: **"Now I shift my gaze. What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window. She's looking straight at me. We can see into each other's eyes."** (Chapter 27)

- Mirrors and glass are an important **symbol** in literature. They are meant to **show truth and spiritual/physical reflection**.
- Offred and Ofglen's reflection in the window is meant to **symbolise their similarities and their role as each others' equals**.
- By looking **"into each other's eyes,"** the two women are able to **connect with each other**. This gives them a **sense of community and camaraderie, which they find empowering**. In other words, this is **the first moment where they find "power with" each other**.



After their eyes meet, Ofglen asks Offred if she thinks God listens to the prayers of the machines. In Gilead, to deny this is **treasonous and is punishable by death**. When Offred admits that she doesn't think God is listening, Ofglen **“lets out her breath, in a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together”** (Chapter 27).

- Handmaids are under constant scrutiny where one wrong move could lead to their death. This **constant threat of death is a form of control is oppressive**.
- In this moment, as Offred and Ofglen cross **“the invisible line together”** they essentially tell each other that **they're willing to risk their lives** for the other and **officially become allies**.
- By trusting each other, Offred and Ofglen are **choosing companionship and “power with” each other** as a way to **resist Gilead's oppression**.
- Ofglen and Offred's relationship is an example of **“power with”** because they are **equals, can empower each other, and work together towards liberation**.

Power of Information

In Gilead, **Handmaids are not allowed to read, write, or watch the news**. This prevents them from getting any information about the world around them, and is a **tactic for oppression**. When Ofglen learns that Offred is seeing The Commander in secret, she recognises the **opportunity to gain information**: **““But find out and tell us.’ ‘Find out what?’ I say. I feel rather than see the slight turning of her head. ‘Anything you can’”** (Chapter 35)

- **Information is powerful**, which is why the Handmaids are forbidden from getting it.
- Ofglen recognises that Offred's proximity to The Commander puts her in a position to get information that could help their cause.
- People in power - in this case, The Commander and other men in Gilead - will **control information in order to hold onto their positions of power**.
- Therefore, **gaining information can be an act of resistance** and **withholding it can be a form of control**.
- By working together to gain information, Offred and Ofglen are **using their power with each other to gain power together**.

Power To - Moira

The concept of “power to” is similar to the idea of “power with,” but there are a few key differences. While **“power with” focuses more on collaboration**, “power to” encourages people to recognise their own power. In other words, **“power to” is the power to be able to act, either alone or together, to make a difference**.

Moira often serves as an inspiration for Offred's subversion. She encourages Offred to resist Gilead's oppression and, in doing so, **inspires Offred to realise her own power to act**.

“I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack.”

Chapter 38





Image source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/10710442@N08/4764673605>

Power & Identity

Before the Ceremony, Offred thinks about her life with Luke and her daughter and **feels powerless** in her new role as a Handmaid. As she waits for the Ceremony to begin, she **imagines a conversation between her and Moira**: “I feel as if there’s not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I’m made of smoke, as if I’m a mirage, fading before their eyes. ‘Don’t think that way,’ Moira would say.” (Chapter 14)

- The words “smoke” “mirage” and “fading” are meant to convey **Offred’s sense of powerlessness**.
- Offred **no longer has a sense of identity outside of her role as a Handmaid**. Her only purpose is for **procreation**, and she feels like “there’s not much left.”
- Even as she’s **mourning the loss of her identity**, Moira’s voice encourages her to to not “think that way”
- By having **Moira’s voice in her head** to push back on the thoughts that she’s “fading”, Offred is able to hold onto **some aspects of her identity**, which gives her a **small sense of power**.

Moira’s Escape

Atwood uses **Moira to exemplify inspiring others to take action and realise their own power**. After her escape from the Red Centre, Offred remarks: “Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose [...] Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure [...] Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy.” (Chapter 22)

- By escaping from the Red Centre, **Moira rejects Gilead’s new society and takes back power for herself**.
- The Handmaids are **inspired by Moira’s escape**, and Offred describes it as their “fantasy.”



- Although none of the other Handmaids attempt to escape, Moira's successful escape **gives the Handmaids something to hope for**. She **shows them that they have the power to change their own situations** - should they find the courage to do so.
- This is an example of **Moira giving power to the other Handmaids**.

Power and Sexuality

In an argument, Moira tells Offred that sex between two women is more egalitarian than heterosexual sex. **“She said it was different, because the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even-stein transaction” (Chapter 28)**

- Moira's idea of **sexuality** is meant to **contrast with Gilead's/The Commander's idea of sexuality**, which is **coercive and based on an unequal balance of power**.
- For Moira, **sex can be empowering** whereas, for Offred, in Gilead, it's **dehumanising**.

Power Within - Offred

At the beginning of the novel and before Gilead rose to power, Offred was **complicit**. While her complicity was likely a **survival tactic**, it still shows how she **allowed for others to take power** and **promote an oppressive regime**. As the book progresses, Offred becomes more and more subversive, finding **power within herself to resist** Gilead's oppression.

Although it doesn't come until the epilogue, the quote: **“When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting” (Epilogue)**, sums up many of the power dynamics in the book. As a Handmaid, Offred is often powerless. As the book progresses, **Offred finds small ways to regain power**.

Power Through Memories

One of the key ways **Offred maintains her sense of identity and power is through her memories**. In a society where she is only valuable for her ability to reproduce, she uses her memories to tell her story and feel connected to herself. **“If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending.” (Chapter 7)**

- In Gilead, almost everything in **Offred's life is controlled by someone else**. Her story and her thoughts are her way of finding **“control”** and, therefore, **power within herself**.
- By controlling the **“story,”** Offred is able to regain some of her **power through storytelling and through her memories**.

One of the ways Gilead's controls Handmaids is by giving them a new name. As readers, we never learn Offred's real name, but **she remembers her old name**, and it helps her **feel power**. **“I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something” (Chapter 17).**

- Offred's **“former name”** is a reminder to herself that she once had an **individual identity**, and thus, had **power**.
- This reminder of her identity makes her **“want to steal something”** because she wants for something to **belong to her**.



- In a society where women don't even have their names, **possessions can serve as a physical representation of one's individual power**. Furthermore, by stealing something, Offred would be taking an object, which represents how **she is taking power for herself even if she's not allowed to have it**.

Power of Possessions

When Offred is first placed at her new assignment in The Commander's home, she feels **powerless** and **constrained** to her job as a Handmaid. She says: **"I would like to steal something from this room [...] It would make me feel that I have power"** (Chapter 14)

- This scene takes place as she's **waiting for the Ceremony to begin**. The Ceremony makes Offred feel like she doesn't have control, so by stealing something, she would be **reclaiming a bit of her own autonomy**.
- This shows how marginalised groups often have to **take power in small ways**, wherever they can.

Power of Ritual

"I rub the butter over my face, work it into the skin of my hands [...] As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire." (Chapter 17)

- Even though Offred decided not to steal something from the sitting room, she does take some butter.
- By taking the butter, she is able to use it for herself as lotion.
- This is her own ceremony: one that is entirely for her. By performing it, she is able to **reclaim a small bit of power and feel like an individual**.

Power Shifting

After Offred returns from Jezebel's with the Commander, she goes to meet Nick. As she walks through the house, she notices that **"the searchlights are off, which is not usual. A power failure"** (Chapter 40)

- Here, Atwood uses a **double entendre** to convey a **shift in the power dynamic** of the story overall.
- The **"power failure"** has two meanings. Literally, it means that the lights are off. Metaphorically, it means that there's a **failure in Gilead's power system**, which **allows Offred to have more control** over her situation.
- This scene comes right before her first encounter with Nick, after she gets back from Jezebel's with the Commander. Although Serena Joy orchestrates the first encounter, Offred begins to see Nick on her own time and thus reclaims some of her own power

As Offred is being taken away by the Eyes or Mayday, she comes out of her room and looks down at Serena Joy and The Commander. **"I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking"** (Chapter 46)

- By having Offred physically be **"above him, looking down,"** Atwood uses the **physical positions** of Offred and the Commander to convey that the **power dynamic has shifted**.



- Even though he's had power over her the whole time, **Offred is now the one in control**.
- This shows how **power can change based on certain scenarios**. In this case, Offred is now the one who has power to report The Commander for his rule-breaking. Now faced with the punishment of death or torture, **The Commander is no longer in control and his fate lies with Offred**.

Other Themes of Power

Context for *The Handmaid's Tale*: Power and Politics

The **power struggles and dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s** shaped Atwood's perspective on power and inspired her to write *The Handmaid's Tale*.

- The **feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s**, often called Second Wave Feminism, fought for greater freedom and more opportunities for women. **As women gained rights, they also gained more power**. This was seen as a threat by certain political groups, and was **met with resistance**.
- In 1981, **Ronald Reagan** was inaugurated as President of the United States. Throughout his presidency - which lasted until 1989 - the Reagan administration enacted a **conservative policy agenda that emphasised religious conservatism**. As the Christian-right rose to power, Atwood viewed this as a threat to democracy and feminism.
- Atwood grew up during the **Cold War**, and witnessed the ongoing **power struggle** between the Soviet Union and the West (the U.S., U.K., and NATO allies). While not as overt as the other two examples of power, this idea of **nuclear annihilation** is constantly in the background of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaids in Gilead live under **constant threat of being sent to the Colonies**, where they will eventually die of radiation poisoning. This reflects Atwood's own experience at being under the **constant threat of death/nuclear fallout** and being **powerless** to stop it.

Language as Power

Language is a powerful tool: it can be used to exchange ideas and beliefs. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, **Atwood uses language as a way to express who has power and who does not**. For example, only men and Aunts are allowed to read and write. Handmaids are forbidden from watching or reading the news. They often have to speak to each other in whispers and have a specific way of greeting each other. In other words, **their language is controlled**.

“Blessed by the fruit,” she says to me, the accepted greeting among us.

“May the Lord open,” I answer, the accepted response.

Chapter 4

This control of language is meant to show **the control that Gilead has over its citizens** - and Handmaids in particular.



While language can be used as a way to control information and oppress people, it can also be used as a **tool for resistance**. Moira, Offred's Mother, and Offred herself often use crude language and obscenities. This shows that they're **rejecting Gilead's control** over their use of language and **reclaiming it for themselves**. At The Red Centre, Offred notes that **“there is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power [...] It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with.” (Chapter 34)**. By reducing those in power to **“the common denominator”**, they can be **humanised** and are not as threatening. Similarly, using **vulgar language and obscenities goes against social norms**. In a society where norms are extremely oppressive, **going against them in any way is a form of reclaiming power**.

Feminine Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale is a work of **dystopian, speculative fiction**. Atwood imagined a fictional society - Gilead - that was based on **patriarchal ideals**. Gilead is both a **sexist and classist society, with rich men being the ones who hold the power**. Since the book is told from Offred's perspective, the reader is able to see how power works. Although this is indeed a work of fiction, Atwood purposefully wrote the novel so it was based in reality. In other words, **the power dynamics in Gilead often reflect the power dynamics we see in Western society as a whole**.

One of the key components of Gilead's society is its **patriarchal values**. This translates to Gileadean society as a whole, and in Offred's house, where she serves The Commander. Both of these, however, are meant to symbolise how, **in our society, it is often men who have power over others**. This idea is explored through Offred's relationship with The Commander. Although their relationship is complicated, it is central to the story as it illustrates **“who holds the real power” (Chapter 23)**.

Even in this patriarchal society, **women can be valued if they fit a certain ideal**. In Gilead, fertility and child-bearing are valued therefore **the only way women are valued is if they are able to have children**. This does allow certain women (i.e. Handmaids) a certain degree of power within society. However, this **power is diluted by Gilead's other patriarchal norms**. For example, Handmaids are always supervised, not allowed to form friendships, and are not allowed to read or write. Essentially, **Gilead recognises the power of women and does everything it can to prevent it from surfacing**.

Gilead's efforts to repress feminine power reflects Atwood's interest in the Salem Witch Trials and the Puritans. During the late 1600s in Salem, Massachusetts, several local women were accused of witchcraft and a wave of hysteria spread through the colony. Those accused of **witchcraft** were forced to stand trial and some were **executed**. Many of the accused were **women**.





An artistic interpretation of The Salem Witch Trials
 Source: <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/the-witch-no-1-je-baker>

Connecting this back to *The Handmaid's Tale*, this idea of **dangerous feminine power** is also seen in the way Gilead responds to the Handmaids. For example, when explaining the initial ceremony when they become Handmaids, Offred explains why Handmaids aren't allowed to become Wives: **"They're considered, still, too dangerous for positions of such power. There's an odor of witch about them, something mysterious and exotic; it remains despite the scrubbing and the welts on their feet and the time they've spent in Solitary"** (Chapter 34). This quote is a direct allusion to the **archetype of the witch**. In literature, **witches are symbols of sexuality, fertility, and female power**. By confining Handmaids to a role that is solely for the purpose of procreation, Gilead is able to strip away **other aspects of their identity that gives them power as women** and **render them effectively powerless**.

References:

- [1] Eric Liu's TED Talk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_Eutci7ack
- [2] Robert Dahl's *The Concept of Power*.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-A-Dahl#ref1178984>

