

Edexcel English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Character Profiles Moira

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Introduction

Moira was and is Offred's best and oldest friend. She is often seen in Offred's memories, but the two meet at the Red Centre and again at Jezebel's. Moira is an **unconventional character**: She is **outspoken and rebellious**. She is also a lesbian, which signifies how she **rejects Gilead's strictly heterosexual relationships**. While Moira's fate is ultimately unknown, she serves as **Offred's moral compass** and is often a **source of hope** for Offred.

EXAM TIP!

Be sure to note when characters are portrayed in different ways. In the original text, film adaptation, and the graphic novel, she is white. In the television show, she is black (portrayed by Samira Wiley). Given Moira's resistance to oppression, think about how her different portrayals signify how society has changed to incorporate race as an important piece of one's identity. In other words, it's important to analyse what aspects of one's identity make someone more vulnerable to oppression.

Symbolism

Power of Female Friendship

Moira and Offred's friendship is meant to show how **women rely on each other in difficult times**, and can **use each other as sources of strength**. In Gilead, female friendships are prohibited:

"If I could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists. It's hard to imagine now, having a friend."
(Chapter 5)

This **indicates how important friendships can be to female empowerment and liberation, which is exactly why Gilead prohibits them**. By emphasising the relationship between Moira and Offred throughout the book, Atwood conveys how **the bonds between women are crucial to resisting oppression**.

Character in Context

- When *The Handmaid's Tale* was written, **homosexuality was becoming more accepted in American society**. The first gay pride parade was in 1970 and - with the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic - **gay rights were becoming a key political issue**. The emerging movement for gay rights, **coupled with the push for a new wave of feminism are two crucial pieces of context to Moira's character**.
- As this push for equality advanced, it was met with **resistance from far-right, religious groups** like the Moral Majority and condemnation from the Ronald Reagan administration. Conservatives in this time valued **heterosexuality and traditional gender roles**, some of the key pillars of Gileadean society.



- As it related to Moira's character, Moira is a lesbian and a feminist activist. Both of these are **symbols of rebellion against Gilead society** and, ultimately, are Atwood's way of rejecting conservative thought.
 - Moira's identity as a lesbian shows how she **rejects heteronormative expectations and asserts her right to love women**. In a real context, Moira gives visibility to the broader issues that the LGBTQ+ community was and is facing in a religious, conservative society.
 - Moira's identity as an outspoken feminist shows how she **fights for women's liberation and rejects Gilead's oppressive patriarchal norms**. Furthermore, her resistance highlights how Gilead - and therefore conservatism in general - wish to **silence any threat to the patriarchal norms**.

EXAM TIP!

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is important to analysing text through a feminist lens. Intersectionality talks about how different systems of oppression can overlap based on different aspects of one's identity (e.g. gender, race, class, and sexuality). Think about how Moira's character has different aspects of her identity that lead to her oppression.

Key Characteristics

1. Rebel

One of Moira's central characteristics is her **rebelliousness**. While in university, Moira throws water balloons at boys trying to climb the windows to steal their underwear (Chapter 10). At the Red Centre, she tries to escape. After her first attempt fails and she is tortured by the Aunts, she makes a second, successful attempt to escape. Moira's consistent rebellion to patriarchy and Gilead's oppression is central to her character. **Despite this, Moira's spirit is eventually broken by Gilead**. That's why, when Offred sees Moira resigned to her fate at Jezebel's, she realises how brutally oppressive Gilead truly is.



Key Moments

CH	OCCURRENCE	SIGNIFICANCE
13	Moirra Arrives at the Red Centre	<p>The Red Centre is a place where Handmaids are indoctrinated into their new roles and, by the time Moira arrives, Offred has already been there for a while. The two recognise each other immediately, but refrain from expressing it for fear of violence. Eventually the two meet in the bathroom and talk. Moirra's presence is a comfort to Offred, once again showing the importance of companionship - especially from other women - in times of hardship. Moira's arrival at the Red Centre is complicated though, for even though it provides Offred with a sense of safety and hope, it also signifies that Moira will be indoctrinated into Gilead and subjected to the same vicious oppression as Offred.</p>
15	Moirra's First Escape Attempt	<p>After Moira's first escape attempt, she is caught by the Aunts and brought back to the Red Centre. As Moira comes back with her feet broken, Aunt Lydia closes the curtains so the other Handmaids can't see.</p> <p>"Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (Chapter 15)</p> <p>By breaking Moira's hands and feet, the Aunts are taking away two of the most defining characteristics as humans and, thus, also take away Moira's sense of humanity and identity. In this part of Aunt Lydia's indoctrination, she is telling the Handmaids that they are only valued because of their wombs. In this scene, the reader sees how violence - and the threat of violence - is used to force the Handmaids into their new, submissive roles.</p>



<p>22</p>	<p>Offred Imagines Moira's Escape Attempt</p>	<p>Moira eventually escapes from the Red Centre. Although Offred didn't see it happen, she imagines how it played out by envisioning a conversation between Aunt Lydia and Janine. Moira's successful escape shows the other Handmaids that they can take power back from themselves, something that Offred describes as a "fantasy" (Chapter 22). While Moira's escape is an inspiration to the rest of the Handmaids, this scene in particular shows how Aunt Lydia serves as a gatekeeper between Moira and Offred's friendship, and more importantly signifies the battle between hope and resistance (Moira) and the forces that try to control it (Aunt Lydia).</p>
<p>28</p>	<p>Offred Loses Her Job</p>	<p>In a flashback to the pre-Gilead era, Offred remembers the day she lost her job and learned that her bank accounts were frozen. From this point forward, she essentially belonged to Luke, her husband.</p> <p>"They've frozen them," she said. 'Any account with an F on it instead of an M.'</p> <p>'But why?' I said. 'Why did they?'</p> <p>'They had to do it that way, Compucounts and the jobs both at once. Can you picture the airports, otherwise? They don't want us going anywhere, you can bet on that.'</p> <p>One of Atwood's goals in writing <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> was to convey that an oppressive, religious dystopia could happen anywhere, even in America. This chapter shows how the devolution of a free society could happen: not all at once, but a gradual erosion of women's rights until they are enslaved.</p> <p>Moira's presence in this scene is also important. She is more intuitive than Offred, and picks up on the early warning signs of Gilead's rise to power. Moira is able to comfort Offred, and also provide her with a dose of reality. This highlights the depth of Offred and Moira's</p>



		friendship and how friendship is a source of strength and resilience .
33	Moira Brings Janine Back to Reality	<p>One morning, at the Red Centre, Janine has an episode where she forgets who or where she is, and reverts back to her old life. While the rest of the Handmaids try to gently coax her back to reality, it doesn't work. Eventually, Moira slaps her and Janine refocuses.</p> <p>This scene shows how Moira is willing to help other people to keep them safe. At this point, she has experienced the violence from the Aunts firsthand and wants to prevent the other Handmaids from receiving the same punishment. Despite her rebelliousness and direct nature, Moira cares about the other women, and wants to keep them safe:</p> <p>“‘She does that again and I’m not here,’ Moira said to me, ‘You just have to slap her like that. You can’t let her go slipping over the edge.’” (Chapter 33)</p>
37 - 38	Jezebel's	<p>Towards the end of Chapter 37, Offred notices Moira working. The two meet in the bathroom (Chapter 38) and have a brief reunion. Moira tells Offred about how she was able to escape from the Red Centre and smuggled through the Underground Femaleroad towards Canada. Before she could escape the country, Moira was caught and tortured. She tells Offred that she was given a choice to work in the Colonies, or as a sex worker at Jezebel's. At the end of the conversation, it becomes clear that Moira is resigned to her fate, and has lost her fiery, rebellious nature.</p> <p>Throughout the novel, Offred's memories of Moira provide her with a sense of hope and a guide for her own subversion. The exchange between Offred and Moira at Jezebel's signifies how Gilead's relentless oppression can break anyone's will.</p>



Relationships with Other Characters

Relationship with Offred

Moira and Offred's relationship **epitomises female friendship**. Offred clearly admires Moira's **outspoken and rebellious nature** - which **contrasts with her own complacency** - and often uses her as a source of hope in Gilead's oppressive environment. When the two meet at Jezebel's, however, Moira seems to be **resigned to her fate** and Offred realises the toll that Gilead's oppression can have, even on the most independent and empowered people. Notably, Moira and Offred have **reversed character evolutions: Offred starts the novel resigned to her fate and evolves to be more empowered and rebellious, while Moira is the opposite**.

Relationship with Aunt Lydia

Aunt Lydia is a character foil for Moira. Throughout the book, memories of Aunt Lydia and Moira often appear together. This shows that, while Offred has been indoctrinated by Aunt Lydia, **she can still find the will to resist through her memories of 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)

While only Moira's voice is in this quote, the contrast between her and Aunt Lydia is apparent. **Moira encourages Offred to hold on to her identity** as an individual and to fight Gilead's oppression, whereas **Aunt Lydia would encourage Offred's subservience**.

Atwood often strategically places quotes from Aunt Lydia and Moira close together to **represent Offred's internal conflict**. Aunt Lydia's voice tells Offred to submit to the patriarchy and stay alive, while Moira's voice tells Offred to stay true to herself under the threat of violence. On a larger scale, **this dilemma is one that women face in everyday life**, as when women reject notions of patriarchy, they are often met with social ostracisation and, occasionally, violence.

KEY QUOTES

"If I could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists. It's hard to imagine now, having a friend" (Chapter 5)

- By telling the Handmaids that this society will eventually become ordinary, Aunt Lydia deliberately **encourages them to become complacent** and to accept their fate. This is likely a technique to break their spirit so they submit to this world that is so oppressive.



“I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken” (Chapter 28).

- **Moira is much more of an outspoken, radical activist than Offred is.** While this is an important part of Moira’s character, Atwood likely views Moira’s idea of a women-only Utopia as a **danger to the feminist cause overall**. In other words, Atwood thinks that feminism should include men, and having a **“women-only enclave”** is detrimental to the movement.

“Here is what I’d like to tell. I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time [...] I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again” (Chapter 38)

- Throughout the book, **Moira serves as a source of hope for Offred**. Offred portrays her as cunning, rebellious, and resourceful. Therefore, when she imagines that **“Moira escaped, for good”** Atwood means for **Moira’s survival to symbolise the larger survival of female autonomy and independence**. In other words, if a person like Moira can survive, then there is still hope.
- **Moira’s ambiguous ending symbolises how resistance against oppression never really has an end.** It is an ongoing fight. In this case, specifically, it’s also meant to show that when hope is gone, one must find it in themselves to continue to resist.

