

# Edexcel English Literature A-level

## The Handmaid's Tale: Character Profiles Offred

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## Introduction

Offred, the protagonist and narrator, is a **Handmaid**. The book is told from her perspective. By only having Offred's perspective, the reader gains insight into her thoughts and **memories**; this is particularly important because - as Handmaids - women are unable to read or write and are expected to be generally subservient.

The Republic of Gilead (or Gilead) is the hyper-conservative, **religious** government that replaces the United States after a coup d'état. In Gilead, women who had children before are made to be Handmaids. Handmaids are then assigned to powerful families to **procreate**. In this new society, this is the Handmaids' only role and women have very little **power**. Despite this, Offred finds small ways to **subvert** the oppressive **patriarchal** power structure. Offred is a dynamic and complex character who changes from someone who evolves from submissive to subversive.



*A group of Handmaids*

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

## Symbolism

Atwood uses Offred to symbolise both **the oppressive nature of patriarchy** and **resistance** to this oppression. Since the novel is told from Offred's point of view, we are able to see how she interacts with the world around her. Offred is not a perfect feminist heroine, however. She is a **dynamic character** who evolves from being **submissive** to being **rebellious**.

### Offred's Memories

Offred's memories are used to **juxtapose** the happier times in her past with the oppression of the present. She often remembers her family and her friends, but also details the events that made her current reality possible - such as the **Rachel and Leah Centre (or Red Centre)**.



**I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting.**  
(Chapter 20)

Offred also acknowledges that, in order to survive, she might have to lose part of herself, which is why her memories both trouble her and bring her comfort.

**I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last.**  
(Chapter 2)

Offred's memories also provide her with an escape from reality and are a way to **rebel** against her society. Ultimately, through her memories, Offred is able to connect with her past life, her humanity, and her identity which is an act of **self-preservation**.

### Offred's Name

In the novel, Handmaid's are not permitted to use their real names. Instead, they take on the names of their Commanders. In this case, Offred's name literally means "Of Fred," which symbolises **female subservience** and **male dominance**. Offred's name also references **the colour red** ("of red") as an **allusion** to the red dress that Handmaids are required to wear. Both of these things further tie her to her identity as a Handmaid, and reinforces the idea that Handmaids exist solely for the **benefit of men and patriarchy**.

**My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter.**  
(Chapter 14)

By stripping Offred of her real name and replacing it with a **slave name**, she is **dehumanised**, and her **individuality** and **identity** are taken away. Atwood may have done this intentionally, as a reference to **American slavery**, or perhaps to make it so the reader could envision themselves as Offred.

### The Colour Red

In Gilead, women's identities are broken up to represent different **patriarchal values**. By attaching a woman's identity to a single colour, she becomes one-dimensional. The Wives dress in **blue** to symbolise **purity and serenity**, and to invoke imagery of the **Virgin Mary**. Whereas the Handmaids dress in **red** to symbolise **menstrual blood**, which further represents **fertility and life**.

**I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time.**  
(Chapter 13)



**Red** can also symbolise **violence** and **desire**. This is **ironic** because sexual attraction - especially towards a Handmaid - is sinful in Gilead. Despite this, the Commander desires Offred. In the scene where the Commander asks Offred to kiss him (Chapter 23), Atwood uses **red** to symbolise both **blood (violence)** and **sexual desire**.

**I think about how I could approach the Commander, to **kiss him**, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to **true love**, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the **blood** coming out of him, hot as soup, **sexual**, over my hands.**  
(Chapter 23)

### EXAM TIP!

In general, colours are an important part of analysing symbolism, but in *The Handmaid's Tale*, they're particularly important. Think about why Atwood chose certain colours for different characters and what this says about their larger roles in society.

## Character in Context

- **Reagan-Era Conservatism in the United States:** When *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985, **religious conservatism** was on the rise in the United States. **Far-right religious organisations** such as the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and the Ronald Reagan administration brought ideas of female subservience and oppression into the mainstream area of thought.
  - Atwood intended for *The Handmaid's Tale* to be a warning against this rising extremism. Handmaids are meant to serve as a **personification of Christian ideals**. One of Atwood's key aims in writing *The Handmaid's Tale* is to show that a dystopian, oppressive patriarchy is possible. Ultimately, it is meant to serve as a **cautionary tale**.



*President Ronald Reagan*

Image Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Official\\_Portrait\\_of\\_President\\_Reagan\\_1981.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Official_Portrait_of_President_Reagan_1981.jpg)



- **Parallels with American Slavery:** Atwood draws some direct parallels with the ways that slaves were treated in America:
  - Slaves were unable to **read or write** and relied on **oral storytelling** to pass down knowledge between people. Handmaids are also forbidden from reading or writing, so Offred relies on oral storytelling.
  - **The Underground Femaleroad** is an allusion to the Underground Railroad, a network of houses that escaped slaves could follow when escaping to the North.
  - Slaves often had “**slave names**” where their owners would replace their birth names with something else. This parallels the way Handmaids take the names of their Commanders to convey that they are their property.

## Key Characteristics

1. Dynamic  
Offred begins the novel in a place of **resignation**. In other words, she recognises that she doesn't have much power over her situation and is complying with Gilead's rules out of **self-preservation**. Throughout the novel, we see her **evolve** and attempt to take back her **power** in any way she can. This is particularly evident in her relationships with men. While she takes joy in wielding power over the Commander during their evening games of Scrabble, she also uses Nick as a way to demonstrate her **power and sexual autonomy**.
2. Intelligent  
Offred is clearly smart. She is able to pick up on cues from her environment and adapt to them to **ensure her own survival**. When she plays Scrabble with the Commander, she lets him win once, even though she can beat him. Her ability to win at Scrabble shows that she is **intelligent in an academic sense**. By letting the Commander win, however, she shows that **she also understands the power dynamics of the relationship**. Once Offred realises she can **manipulate the Commander**, she uses this to her advantage, **showing her cleverness**.
3. Resilient  
Offred's evolution from a **submissive** character to a **subversive** one shows how she can adapt to her environment. From her internal monologue, we can see that she understands the world around her and how to navigate it. **She knows what to say to people in order to survive**. This resilience is crucial to her survival and is reflected in the mantra “**nolite te bastardes carborundorum**” (“**don't let the bastards grind you down**”).



### EXAM TIP!

When analysing language techniques, ensure you refer to Atwood explicitly. This shows the examiner that you are considering her methods directly.

### Key Moments

Chapter No.	Occurrence	Significance
<b>Recurring</b>	The Red Centre	The Red Centre first appears in Chapter 1, but it is one of Offred's <b>recurring memories</b> throughout the book. As the book progresses, we learn more about how Handmaids were introduced into the new way of life in Gilead. The Red Centre becomes a place for <b>indoctrination and imprisonment</b> , but also of <b>resistance</b> . This <b>juxtaposition</b> of ideals is an important theme throughout the book. At the end of the first chapter, Offred's first act of <b>resistance</b> is an act of <b>solidarity with the other women</b> : learning each other's names.
<b>2</b>	Offred's New Posting	When Offred is assigned to her new posting, the reader learns more about the rules in Gilead. Women have <b>been stripped of their rights as individuals</b> and are assigned to different roles, where they <b>exist solely for reproduction</b> (Handmaids) or <b>domestic work</b> (Marthas). Since this is Offred's third posting, and she cannot get pregnant, she will be deemed an <b>"Unwoman"</b> and sent to the Colonies to clean up radioactive waste.
<b>3</b>	Meeting Serena Joy	At Offred's new posting, she meets the Commander's Wife: Serena Joy. Offred recognises her from the pre-Gilead era as a singer from a Sunday-morning religious television programme. Serena Joy makes it clear that their relationship is nothing more than a <b>"business transaction."</b> In other words, Offred is a <b>"necessity"</b> because she can get pregnant, but she also reminds Serena Joy of her own inability to conceive. Similarly, Atwood uses Serena Joy's garden as a tool of <b>irony</b> : flowers typically symbolise <b>fertility</b> and, yet Serena is unable to have a baby of her own. By



		introducing Serena Joy in her garden, Atwood highlights the <b>power dynamic</b> between Offred and Serena Joy.
5	Offred Goes Shopping with Ofglen	<p>Ofglen is another Handmaid with whom Offred does the shopping. Handmaids are forbidden to go anywhere alone; <b>they shop in pairs as a way to police and spy on each other</b>. This relationship is meant to make women distrust each other and to prevent them from forming alliances. As they do their shopping, Offred notes that the shop signs only have pictures on them because women are <b>forbidden from reading</b>.</p> <p>After they finish their shopping, Ofglen and Offred see a group of Japanese tourists on the streets. Offred notices the women's short skirts, heels, and polished toenails. Again, Atwood uses <b>juxtaposition</b> to highlight the <b>oppressive nature of Gilead</b>. When the tourists ask if they can take pictures of the Handmaids, Offred declines. Another tourist asks if they're happy and Offred responds that they are.</p> <p>This scene further illustrates the ways in which Handmaids are <b>permitted to act in society</b>. They must appear to be <b>modest, docile, and submissive</b>.</p>
6	The Wall	<p>Once they're finished shopping, Offred and Ofglen take a longer way home, past <b>The Wall</b>. In the pre-Gilead era, The Wall was part of the university but now, it's used to display the hanged bodies of executed criminals. By using the university - a <b>symbol of thought, exploration, and liberation</b> - as the site for executions, Atwood intends to highlight how much the world has changed. She also uses The Wall as a way to <b>personify the threat of violence and death</b> that Offred and other Handmaids will face if they're caught breaking the rules. Throughout the novel, Offred is constantly <b>weighing acts of resistance with the implications for her survival</b>.</p>



<b>Recurring</b>	“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”	<p>Offred discovers “<b>Nolite te bastardes carborundorum</b>” scratched into the wall in her cupboard, left there by the Handmaid who came before her (Chapter 9). She later learns from the Commander that it means “<b>don’t let the bastards grind you down</b>” (<b>Chapter 29</b>) She also learns from the Commander that the previous Offred hanged herself.</p> <p>Offred having to ask the Commander what the phrase means is significant. This implies that the previous Handmaid who left the message learned it from the Commander. This is <b>ironic</b>, as Atwood undoubtedly intends for the Commander to be the one who is grinding people down. Furthermore, this shows that the Commander once again has <b>control</b> over the small <b>acts of resistance</b> that Handmaids are able to commit.</p>
<b>16</b>	The Ceremony	<p>The Ceremony is a ritual where The Commander has impersonal sex with Offred in hopes of procreation.</p> <p>“<b>My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing</b>” (<b>Chapter 16</b>)</p> <p>By referencing the specific colour of Offred’s skirt, Atwood intends to highlight how <b>the colour red symbolises fertility</b>. Offred’s dissociation from her body in this scene is likely an act of <b>self-preservation</b>. Overall, even though this scene involves sex, it’s meant to show how dehumanising, impersonal, and traumatic sex has become in Gilead.</p>





<p>23</p>	<p>Playing Scrabble with the Commander</p>	<p>In Gilead, women are forbidden from reading and writing, so Offred describes playing Scrabble as an <b>indulgent and sensual</b> activity:</p> <p><b>“Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife. Now it’s desirable. Now he’s compromised himself. It’s as if he’s offered me drugs.”</b></p> <p>The words that they play are sensory words (gorge, limp, quinze) that are meant to reinforce the idea that the game is indulgent. Note also how Offred plays “zygote,” a nod to her procreative role as a Handmaid.</p> <p>The game also represents a shift in the relationship between the Commander and Offred. He trusts her with something that is forbidden, but he is only indulging her because it benefits him as well. In other words, even though Offred is enjoying the game and it gives her a sense of identity, the Commander is still the one in power.</p> <p><b>“I win the first game, I let him with the second: I still haven’t discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange”</b></p> <p>Even though the Commander is the one in power, Offred recognises the <b>shift in their relationship</b> and how she may be able to use it to her advantage. However, the idea of <b>“exchange”</b> highlights Serena Joy’s earlier assertion that the relationship with Offred is nothing more than a <b>business transaction</b>.</p> <p>This scene is crucial to understanding the <b>power dynamics</b> of Gileadean society. Even though Offred is <b>empowered</b> by the game, she is only allowed to hold <b>power within certain boundaries</b>, and still remains in a <b>submissive role</b>.</p>
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<p>27</p>	<p>Ofglen Reveals Herself to be Subversive</p>	<p>On one of their shopping trips, Ofglen and Offred walk by <b>Soul Scrolls</b>, a store that prints prayers for a fee. <b>Ironically</b>, Offred notes that the store used to sell lingerie, another <b>juxtaposition</b> to compare the past world with the present one.</p> <p>As they're outside Soul Scrolls, Ofglen asks Offred if she thinks God listens to the prayers that are printed onto the scrolls.</p> <p><b>“I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one.</b></p> <p><b>I steel myself. ‘No,’ I say.”</b></p> <p>Through this interaction, Offred and Ofglen officially become allies. In a society that intentionally prevents people from forming alliances or attachments, this interaction signifies that - despite Gilead's best efforts - people are resilient, will resist oppression, and unite. However, this hopeful scene is almost immediately <b>contrasted</b> with the Eyes kidnapping a man off the street as Ofglen and Offred are walking by. By having these two scenes happen sequentially, Atwood reinforces the idea that, with <b>hope</b>, there is also an imminent threat of <b>danger</b>.</p> <p>In this chapter, Ofglen also reveals that the name of the resistance is <b>Mayday</b>. Mayday as a code word is also interesting because it has multiple meanings. Its literal meaning is a <b>cry for help</b>, but in this context, it's also a <b>rallying cry and a hopeful message</b>.</p>
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<p><b>28</b></p>	<p>Offred Loses Her Job</p>	<p>In a <b>flashback</b> 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><b>“‘They’ve frozen them,’ she said. ‘Any account with an F on it instead of an M.’</b></p> <p><b>‘But why?’ I said. ‘Why did they?’</b></p> <p><b>‘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.’”</b></p> <p>One of Atwood’s goals in writing <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> was to convey that <b>an oppressive, religious dystopia</b> could happen anywhere, even in America. This chapter shows how the <b>devolution of a free society</b> could happen: not all at once, but a <b>gradual erosion of women’s rights</b> until they are enslaved.</p>
<p><b>33 - 34</b></p>	<p>Prayvaganza</p>	<p>Prayvaganzas are mass public prayer events that are segregated by gender. The women’s Prayvaganzas are usually to celebrate arranged marriages, whereas the men’s are for military victories. During this Prayvaganza, an event which is supposed to be pious, The Handmaids use it as a way to communicate with each other and exchange information.</p> <p>By having the Prayvaganza as a backdrop for Offred’s <b>subversion</b>, Atwood uses this scene to highlight how resistance exists even in the most oppressive environments.</p>



<p>36 - 39</p>	<p>Jezebel's</p>	<p>In <b>Christian lore</b>, Jezebel misled saints of God into <b>sexual immorality</b> through <b>manipulation and seduction</b>, so it's a fitting name for the brothel that the Commander takes Offred to. When Offred goes to meet the Commander, he presents her with lingerie and make-up, two things that are <b>forbidden in Gilead</b>, and tells her that they're going out. Even though Offred knows this is dangerous, she accepts.</p> <p><b>"I know without being told that what he's proposing is risky, for him but especially for me; but I want to go anyway. I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things."</b> (Chapter 36)</p> <p>At Jezebel's, the Commander enjoys showing Offred off to the other powerful men in the room. When the two finally have a chance to talk, the Commander is dismissive of Offred's concerns that the club is illegal, telling her that <b>"everyone's human"</b> (Chapter 37). In this same scene, we learn that most of the women working at Jezebel's were well-educated women from the pre-Gilead era. By mixing the high-ranking and powerful men with sex workers in this scene, Atwood demonstrates the <b>power dynamic between men and women</b>. In other words, men are allowed to ignore the rules and remain in power, but women are forced to adhere to the strict societal norms or else be tortured or killed.</p> <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, Offred misses the Moira she knew before: spirited and rebellious.</p>
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		<p>Throughout the novel, Offred's memories of Moira provide her with a <b>sense of hope</b> and a guide for her own <b>subversion</b>. The exchange between Offred and Moira signifies how Gilead works to <b>grind people down</b>.</p> <p>After her conversation with Moira, the Commander takes Offred to a hotel room, which reminds her of her affair with Luke (Chapter 39). The Commander and Offred have sex, but the Commander is disappointed that Offred doesn't enjoy herself. Offred tells herself to fake it. Once again, Atwood uses Offred's memories to <b>compare the past with the present</b>. In this case, she uses the <b>juxtaposition of consensual sex with Luke and coercive sex with the Commander</b> to represent how little autonomy and choice women have in Gilead.</p>
40	Offred Meets Nick	<p>Upon returning from Jezebel's, Offred is escorted by Serena Joy to visit Nick, where the two have sex. This chapter is important because Offred gives two narratives of the event. In the first account, they have passionate sex. In the second, it's awkward. This shows how Offred may be a bit of an <b>unreliable narrator</b>, as the entire novel is based on her memories.</p> <p>Either way, she returns to Nick's apartment several times (without Serena Joy's knowledge). She views Nick's apartment as a <b>safe place</b> and one where she can possess more <b>autonomy</b>.</p>



<p><b>41 - 44</b></p>	<p>“Salvaging” and “Participation”</p>	<p>The Handmaids go to the old university to attend a Salvaging. As they approach, a bell tolls, which <b>foreshadows</b> death. At the Salvaging, three women are hung on a stage that has been built in front of the library. This <b>juxtaposition</b> is meant to signify the differences of the <b>past and the present</b>. Aunt Lydia, from the Red Centre, is there to escort the Salvagers to the gallows. The Handmaids also have to place their hands on the rope to show <b>“complicity in the death of this woman” (Chapter 42)</b>.</p> <p>Once the Salvaging is over, the Participation begins. Aunt Lydia says the man has been convicted of rape and is sentenced to death. Offred notices her own violent urge as the Handmaids swarm the man. Ofglen kicks the man in the head until he’s unconscious. Shocked, Offred asks her why she did that, and Ofglen explains that the man was not a rapist, but was a member of <b>Mayday</b>, and she kicked him to put him out of his misery.</p> <p>This is the first time we’ve seen the Handmaids <b>perpetuate violence</b> instead of being subjected to it. While the violence is no less horrific, the reader is able to <b>empathise</b> with Offred’s rage.</p> <p>After the Participation, Offred goes to meet Ofglen for their usual shopping trip, but there’s a new Ofglen in her place. After using the code word “Mayday” with the new Ofglen, she implies that she’s not a subversive, but knows what Mayday is. Before leaving, the new Ofglen tells Offred that the former Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the Eyes’ van coming for her.</p>
<p><b>45</b></p>	<p>Serena Joy Discovers Offred’s Relationship with the Commander</p>	<p>Offred feels <b>powerless</b> at the news of Ofglen but finds a new <b>determination</b> to stay alive. On her way to her room, she is confronted by Serena Joy, who is holding the lingerie that Offred wore to Jezebel’s. She tells Offred that she’s <b>“just like the other one. A slut. You’ll end up the same.”</b> Serena is threatening Offred. Nick is in the background for the entire confrontation but doesn’t say anything.</p>



46	Offred is Taken Away	<p>Offred waits in her bedroom for whatever comes next. As she waits, she repeats “<b>nolite te bastardes carborundorum</b>” to herself. As she’s looking out the window, she sees the Eyes’ black van pull up the driveway. Offred briefly contemplates suicide but realises there’s not enough time. To Offred’s surprise, Nick comes into her room and tells her that the people coming up the stairs aren’t Eyes but are a part of <b>Mayday</b>. He tells her to trust them. Left with no other options, Offred gets into the van.</p> <p>The novel has an <b>ambiguous ending</b>. The epilogue reveals that Offred at least survived long enough to record her story onto tapes, which were eventually found in Maine - thus <b>implying her escape</b>. It’s possible that Nick was also a subversive who, wanting to prevent Offred from meeting the same fate as her predecessor, alerts Mayday to take her away to safety. However, Offred’s true fate is unknown.</p> <p>“<b>And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.</b>” (Chapter 46)</p>
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### EXAM TIP!

Using and understanding terminology and literary devices, which you may be unfamiliar with (e.g. juxtaposition, foreshadowing, ambiguous ending, etc.) can be scary at first. Once you get the hang of it, though, this can greatly benefit AO2 for subject terminology.

### Relationships With Other Characters

Offred’s reality is a **mix of her past and her present**. By juxtaposing the two timelines, Atwood highlights the differences between the freedom of the past and the oppression of the present. The other characters in the book help shape this distinction.



## Characters in the Present

### Relationship with The Commander

The Commander is the **patriarch** of the household and has a complicated relationship with Offred. He initiates a relationship with Offred where they play Scrabble together in his office and he occasionally allows her to read – both of which are forbidden. Throughout the book, their relationship becomes more relaxed and friendly. There are even times when Offred finds herself feeling sorry for him and views him as a **victim of Gilead**, just as she is. Before they meet in his office, Offred watches the Commander from her window. This **objectivity** allows her to reflect on her feelings towards him:

**I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but it isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love.**  
(Chapter 10)

It is revealed in the epilogue, however, that the Commander was a key player in designing Gilead. Offred's relationship with the Commander shows **the humanity behind evil ideas**. After their first encounter in the Commander's office, Offred reflects on this and notes that it's **"easy to invent humanity, for anyone at all"** (Chapter 24). Since Atwood means to convey that a society such as Gilead could happen anywhere, the Commander is a **personification** of this idea. He is well-dressed, respectable, and occasionally sympathetic. This is meant to show that evil and oppressive people can appear to be normal, similar to how Nazi officers lived normal lives while working in concentration camps, a direct comparison that Atwood makes in Chapter 24: **"He was not a monster," she said. 'People say he was a monster, but he was not one.'** Whether intentional or not, this is a central idea around the concept of the **banality of evil**. The banality of evil is a term introduced by Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt in her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial. Arendt's central idea is that Eichmann wasn't a fanatic or a sociopath but was **an average person whose complacency with oppression allowed for unspeakable horrors**. While in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander was driven more by ideology than Eichmann arguably was, the comparison is still relevant, as even if a person is not explicitly evil on an individual level, they can still perpetuate, advocate for, and enforce evil and oppressive ideas for their benefit.

### Relationship with Nick

Through her sexual relationship with Nick, Offred is able to **reclaim some of her identity** as a sexual being and have **sex for pleasure**, instead of just **procreation**. Offred often finds herself longing for connection, love, and touch and through Nick, she is able to get those things - at least in part. By breaking the rules, Offred's relationship with Nick is also **subversive**, which gives Offred a sense of **empowerment**. Ultimately, Offred's relationship with Nick allows her to **escape** from her one-dimensional role as a Handmaid and allows her to exist as an **individual**. At the end of the book, Nick helps Offred escape, but it's unclear whether he gives her to the Eyes or to Mayday.





### Relationship with Ofglen

At the beginning of the book, Offred doesn't trust Ofglen. After she reveals herself to be a subversive, however, the two become **allies**. Ofglen encourages Offred's **resistance**, telling her to get more information from the Commander (Chapter 34). Ofglen is a key part of Offred's **transition from a complacent character into a rebel, as she connects her to a group and validates Offred's subversive thoughts**.

*There is an us then, there's a we. I knew it.*

(Chapter 27)

### **Characters in the Past**

#### Relationship with Luke

Luke is Offred's former husband who appears frequently in Offred's memories. They were separated when they tried to escape to Canada with their daughter. While Offred remembers him lovingly and remains loyal to him, Luke has his faults. Even though their relationship is described as relatively **equal**, Luke certainly benefits from Gilead's policies. When Offred is fired from her job, for example, she notices that Luke doesn't seem to mind. **"We're not each other's anymore. Instead, I am his" (Chapter 28)**. After Offred begins to **lose her autonomy**, she remembers that Luke begins to have more **control** over her life. **"I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her" (Chapter 28)**. Luke's insistence that Offred focus on **traditional values** (i.e. their family), prevents Offred from speaking out against her own **oppression**. Atwood intends for this to connect the patriarchal Gilead with the **feelings, thoughts, and behaviour of men in our own society**.

#### Relationship with Her Mother

Offred's mother was a **radical feminist**, and the two didn't always agree. Specifically, Offred was never comfortable being outspoken about feminism, even as her old life faded away and Gilead became a reality. Offred says that her mother expected too much of her, and that **"she expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms" (Chapter 20)**. While Offred's desire to separate herself from her mother's activism is a form of **independence and autonomy**, something that is subsequently stripped away in Gilead, she arguably remains complacent with the world around her until it affects her directly (i.e. when she loses her job). This continues into her role as a Handmaid, as she starts off as submissive and eventually becomes subversive once Ofglen validates her subversive ideas. Offred often **relies on more radical activists** in her life (e.g. Moira, Ofglen, her mother) to give her **guidance and validation**.

#### Relationship with Her Daughter

Offred's daughter is a minor character that only exists through Offred's memories, but she is important. She is Offred and Luke's daughter and was born before the rise of Gilead. When Offred and Luke try to escape, they're separated from their daughter. For a while, Offred doesn't know whether she's alive or not, until Serena Joy gives her a picture. Offred learns also that, while she was at the Red Centre, her daughter was given to an infertile couple (Chapter 35).



Offred's memories of her daughter are often given in snippets, **conveying that it's painful for her to think too much about her daughter**. When Serena Joy shows her the picture, Offred fears her daughter doesn't remember her and the thought makes her contemplate suicide.

Offred's daughter - like both Offred's mother and Offred herself - doesn't have a name. This could be to help the reader **empathise** with Offred more, as not giving her a name can help the reader see themselves in Offred shoes. This could also be to play on the theme of **removing humanity** from several female characters as they are **erased by Gileadean society**.

Offred's daughter is, **paradoxically**, both **a symbol of hope and one of torment**: Offred loves her but having her exist only in memory is agonizing.

## Characters in the Past and Present

All people who exist in both Offred's past and present are **women**, showing how people in a marginalised group can oppress people in the same group if it serves their benefit. Furthermore, the three women here represent different elements of the **culture shift** that occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### Relationship with Aunt Lydia

Aunt Lydia is the ruthless woman in charge of **indoctrinating Handmaids** into Gileadean society at the Red Centre. Even though she is a woman, and her **ironic** title of "Aunt" **conveys a sense of familial bonds**, she is responsible for some of the most **misogynistic and horrific moments**. She appears in Offred's past in her role at the Red Centre, and in her present when she leads the Salvaging and the Particitation. By including a woman in such a **violent** role, Atwood suggests that women can be and are complicit in perpetuating dangerous **patriarchal ideas** and **oppressing other women**.

### Relationship with Serena Joy

While she was an advocate for **traditional values**, and likely played a key role in establishing Gilead, Serena is extremely unhappy in her role as a Wife. Offred recognises her as a former singer on a Christian television programme and exists in Offred's present as the Wife of the Commander. From their first encounter, it's clear that Serena Joy has no sympathy for Offred and often takes her frustration out on her. Serena is extremely callous, as she **uses Offred for her own gain** by orchestrating her affair with Nick and using Offred's daughter as a form of **coercion**. Similar to Aunt Lydia, Serena's **willingness to oppress other women** - especially those in a lower position of power - is **crucial to ensuring Gilead's success**.

### Relationship with Moira

Moira and Offred's relationship **epitomises female friendship**. Moira in particular is a representation of **resistance**. In Offred's memories, Moira is rebellious and rejects many of the ideals that Gilead tries to force on its citizens. For example, Moira is a lesbian, which shows that



she **rejects Gilead's strictly heterosexual relationships**. She also escapes the Red Centre by tricking an Aunt and stealing her clothes. She serves as a **source of hope** for Offred. When the two meet at Jezebels, 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.

## Key Quotes

### **“In this house we all envy each other something.” (Chapter 8)**

- This quote demonstrates how women in Gilead are meant to be **adversaries**, not allies. They are always envying each other over the things that Gileadean society prevents them from having. For example, even though Serena Joy is arguably more powerful than Offred, she resents Offred's ability to have a baby.

### **“Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.” (Chapter 10)**

- *The Handmaid's Tale* is meant to be a **cautionary tale**.
  - The changes from the old world to Gilead didn't happen overnight. It was a slow boil, so to speak.
  - At the time it was written, conservative Christian thought was emerging more prominently in the U.S. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a warning for what could happen if these beliefs were able to take a strong, permanent foothold.

### **“I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (Chapter 13)**

- While she takes a bath, Offred reflects on how her body has changed. In the pre-Gilead era, she was able to use her body how she wanted to. Now, it is only useful for one purpose: **procreation**. Even then, Offred doesn't have control over what happens to her body, it is only a **“central object”** (i.e. a womb).
- This also references **the colour red**, an important theme that symbolises **menstrual blood/fertility**. In this case, Offred feels like she has lost her **sense of self** and is **disembodied** like **“a cloud.”**



**“Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies” (Chapter 21)**

- When Offred thinks about her mother here, it almost reads like a **prayer**. While Gileadean society revolves around Christianity, by making her own God into a woman - and more specifically, her mother - Offred is able to find an internal sense of belief.
  - Even though she didn’t always agree with her mother in the pre-Gilead era, she admired her in some ways.
- Offred’s mother was an outspoken feminist activist and fought for women’s equality. This quote is meant to show how **ironic** it is that, even though women are centred in Gilead, they are not powerful or independent.

**“A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze” (Chapter 27)**

- When out shopping with Ofglen, Offred describes how they’ll sometimes take different routes.
- Throughout the novel, Offred feels **imprisoned**. Although she is able to go outside and walk around without direct supervision, she can only go so far. Her movements are **restricted**.
- The maze, in this context, is meant to represent the city that Offred is in, but also Gileadean society as a whole. Gilead allows small freedoms, but it ultimately **restricts women** from existing outside those **oppressive boundaries**.
  - Offred only has power in certain spaces -- such as playing Scrabble with the Commander and Nick’s apartment -- and those spaces are forbidden in Gilead.

**“The Pornomarts were shut, though, and there were no longer any Feels on Wheels vans and Bun-Die Buggies circling the Square. But I wasn’t sad to see them go. We all knew what a nuisance they’d been” (Chapter 28)**

- Similarly to the **“boiling water”** quote, this shows how Gilead changed things gradually. This quote is important because it shows that, even though small liberties (e.g. Pornomarts, Feels on Wheels, and Bun-Die Buggies) were taken away, they were viewed as a **“nuisance,”** so it was an acceptable loss. This shows that people probably won’t resist change unless it makes their lives worse.



**“Occasionally I try to put myself in his position. I do this as a tactic, to guess in advance how he may be moved to behave towards me. 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)**

- Offred enjoys having some **power** over the Commander. By trying to understand him, he becomes more empathetic to the reader, but Offred also learns how to manipulate him.
  - Because society has determined that women - and Handmaids in particular - aren’t able to hold equal power to men, Offred’s power over the Commander is ambiguous, or **“equivocal.”** So, while she doesn’t have any legitimate, societal power over him, she is able to reclaim her power in other ways.

**“I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape.” (Chapter 41)**

- This quote shows that Offred regrets how complacent she was when Gilead was coming to power. She also recognises that she isn’t particularly a hero.
  - Atwood likely did this on purpose. While Offred is a sympathetic and likeable protagonist, she is not a flawless feminist heroine.
- Offred wishing her story **“had more shape”** also parallels how she feels about her body. In this society, when her body is subject to the people around her, she is at least able to control her story. Her story is **an extension of herself**. By saying that it doesn’t have shape, she’s implying that her story has been **disembodied** and **worn down** by the society around her, just as her body has.

