

Edexcel English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Character Profiles Serena Joy

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Introduction

Serena Joy is the wife of the Commander. In Gilead, **Wives** take on specific roles in the house and have more **freedom** than Handmaids, but are ultimately still in a **subordinate role**. In the pre-Gilead era, Serena Joy was a singer on a Christian television programme and later became an advocate for women staying at home. Despite this, she is clearly **unhappy in her role as a housewife**. Like her husband, Serena Joy is a **hypocrite**, and feels trapped by the society she helped create. She is cruel and manipulative, and uses her position of **power to oppress other women**.



Serena Joy

Image source:

<https://www.nme.com/news/the-handmaids-tale-serena-yvonne-strahovski-loathes-character-season-two-2367641>

In the book, Offred describes Serena Joy as an older woman who uses a cane. In the television show, she's depicted as a **contemporary** of Offred's and is much younger (shown here). While Offred hopes that Serena Joy would be like "an older sister" or "a motherly figure" (**Chapter 3**), Serena is neither. In fact, Serena Joy's character demonstrates how women can be the most ardent supporters of patriarchy. Serena's **willingness to oppress other women** - especially those in a lower position of power - is **crucial to ensuring Gilead's success**.

EXAM TIP!

Be sure to note when characters are portrayed in different ways. In Serena Joy's case, Atwood imagines her to be old because, at the time, there were several older women who advocated for traditional values. In the television show, however, Serena is much younger, and is Offred's contemporary. **Think about what this says about women's roles in upholding patriarchy, and how it might have changed since the book was originally published.**

Symbolism

Before Gilead, Serena Joy was an advocate for **traditional values**, and likely played a key role in establishing this new society. Atwood created her to exemplify the **hypocrisy** of women who use their positions of power to oppress other women. Serena Joy is also an **ironic character**: her name suggests that she should be peaceful and joyous, she is neither. More so, by having her wear **blue**, Atwood also connects Serena Joy (and the Wives in general) to the **Virgin Mary**. Additionally, Serena Joy's **garden** is a symbol for **fertility** (even though she herself cannot have children), **violence, and power**.



Women As Enforcers of Patriarchy

Even though Serena Joy is a **static character**, she is a complicated one. While she is a woman, and therefore oppressed by Gilead, she is also extremely cruel and hurts other women just to make herself feel powerful.

Some of the defining beliefs of the **modern feminist movement** are **choice and equality**. In other words, a woman should be able to choose whether she wants to be a housewife or have a career, and women should view each other as equals. By making Serena Joy a **villain**, Atwood isn't trying to criticise women who prefer to be housewives. Instead, Atwood is arguing that women who **enforce traditional values** and **force them onto other women** are a **threat to women's equality**. In 'Women disunited : Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a critique of feminism', Alanna Callaway argues that, while *The Handmaid's Tale* does examine the 'consequences of patriarchal control and 'traditional' misogyny,' that **there's a more sinister, more violent form of misogyny: "women's hatred of women."** Serena Joy represents this idea. Women are sometimes the most fervent advocates of things that work against other women, even though it also acts against their own self-interest.

EXAM TIP!

Including critics' arguments, such as Callaway's essay, will help strengthen your argument.

Serena Joy's Garden

In Gilead, Wives are only able to perform certain tasks such as knitting and gardening. The **garden** is significant because the flowers in it are a symbol of **fertility**. Furthermore, the flowers she is growing are red tulips and **the colour red** also symbolises fertility. This is **ironic** because Serena Joy is infertile and cannot have children.

"Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for."

(Chapter 3)

Atwood also uses **imagery** of the red tulips to describe blood and violence:

"The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there."

(Chapter 3)

As Offred and Ofglen walk by The Wall and see the people who have been executed, Offred compares the blood on one of the bodies to the tulips in Serena Joy's garden (Chapter 6).

Through the use of the colour red as symbols of both **fertility** and **violence**, Atwood suggests that the two are associated. Furthermore, by having Serena Joy in charge of the garden,



Atwood implies that Serena Joy is in control of both **violence and fertility**. This proves to be true later in the book, when Serena arranges for Offred to have an affair with Nick (i.e. controlling fertility). When she discovers Offred's affair with the Commander, she also threatens Offred with violence (“**you’ll end up the same**” (Chapter 45)).

The Colour Blue

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 **images** of the **Virgin Mary**.

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 which values are important in Gilead (**purity, serenity, motherhood**). This is **ironic** because Serena Joy is none of these things. Instead, she is cruel, violent, and manipulative.

EXAM TIP!

In general, colours are a key aspect of 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

- **Religious Conservative Women:** While many of the prominent religious, conservative leaders during the 1980s were men, they weren't exclusively men. During the 1980s, there was a **societal backlash against the feminist movement**, and several **women emerged as leaders of this anti-feminist crusade**. Atwood likely viewed these women as a **threat to women's rights and equality** - not because they preferred traditional domestic roles - but because they were trying to force their lifestyles on other women and hinder the progress of the feminist movement overall. Some of these women likely served as **inspiration for Serena Joy's character**.
 - **Phyllis Schlafly:**
 - A powerful conservative activist who **promoted traditional values and**



Phyllis Schlafly

Image source:
[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Phyllis_Schlafly_by_Gage_Skidmore_3_\(cropped\).jpg](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Phyllis_Schlafly_by_Gage_Skidmore_3_(cropped).jpg)



- opposed feminism**, LGBTQ+ rights, and abortion
- She successfully **campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)**.
 - The **ERA** is a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that guarantees legal rights to all American citizens **regardless of sex**. Schafly **opposed the ERA**, arguing that it would benefit young career women and neglect older, middle-class women. In other words, she argued that the ERA would actually harm women, and benefit men. Schafly **strategically manipulated women's empowerment** in order to promote her own agenda and is a large reason why the ERA has never been ratified.
 - Atwood likely viewed Schafly as a **hypocrite** because, even though she was a woman herself, and should be an ally of women's equality, Schafly instead **used her position of power to promote the oppression of other women**.
- **Tammy Faye Bakker:**
- A conservative television personality who, along with her husband, **hosted a Christian news programme that endorsed traditional values**
 - Bakker's rise to fame showed the **increasing prominence and societal acceptance of televangelists** (ministers who use television and other forms of media to share their evangelical Christian beliefs)
 - Atwood likely viewed televangelists as one of the **dangerous methods religion can influence American culture**.

Key Characteristics

1. Lack of Empathy

Serena Joy is **extremely callous**. When Offred shows up at her new post, Serena Joy makes it clear that their relationship is nothing more than a **“business transaction.”** In other words, Offred is a **“necessity”** because she can get pregnant, but she also **reminds Serena Joy of her own inability to conceive**. Instead of being empathetic, Serena resents Offred for her role, even though Offred doesn't have a choice. This lack of empathy continues throughout the book. After realising the Commander is likely infertile, **Serena uses Offred's loss of a child to get a child of her own**. Ultimately, even though Serena is also oppressed as a woman in Gilead, she doesn't have any empathy for other women. Instead, she views them as the enemy. By designing Serena's character this way, Atwood is saying that **women like this are key to Gilead's success**.

2. Hypocritical

Similar to other people in power in Gilead, Serena Joy is a **hypocrite**. In the pre-Gilead days, she was **an advocate for traditional values** - specifically keeping women in the home - but would travel around and give speeches. She viewed this as a **“sacrifice”**



(Chapter 8). However, when she was “**taken at her word**” (Chapter 8) and forced to stay at home, she didn’t like it. Furthermore, **even though she preaches traditional values, and is likely a supporter of Gilead, she often breaks the rules**. Just like the Commander, this demonstrates that people in power are not held to the same standard when it comes to following the rules.

3. Unlikeable

Compared to the Commander, who is occasionally sympathetic, this is not the case with Serena Joy: she is always **an antagonist**. This characterisation is important because it shows that **women who oppress other women are the worst type of villain**.

However, Atwood could also mean that we as a society tend to **judge women harsher than men, even when they’re equally at fault**. In either case, even though Offred is encouraged to “**pity**” her, Serena Joy is an unlikeable character.

EXAM TIP!

The Handmaid’s Tale is usually read through a feminist lens. Think about how Serena Joy’s character is seen through this lens. For example, how does her gender help shape her identity as a villain? How would feminists view her character?

Key Moments

CH	OCCURRENCE	SIGNIFICANCE
3	Offred Meets 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 “ business transaction .” In other words, Offred is a “ necessity ” because she can get pregnant, but she also reminds Serena Joy of her own inability to conceive .
16	The Ceremony	The Ceremony is a ritual where The Commander has impersonal sex with Offred for the purposes procreation . The Ceremony takes place in Serena Joy’s bedroom, and she often cries during it. “ Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who’s being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful ” (Chapter 16)





		<p>Even though Offred doesn't have a choice to have sex with the Commander, Serena Joy grabs her forcefully, showing that she resents Offred for doing this. This shows that Serena Joy views Offred as the villain, and is punishing her. By creating an environment where the two women view each other as adversaries, Gilead is able to maintain its patriarchy. As critic Callaway notes, "The patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery."</p>
31	Arranges for Offred and Nick to Have Sex	<p>This scene is important because we see how easily Serena uses Offred for her own gain. In Gilead, if a woman isn't able to get pregnant, it's her fault. After several attempts with the Commander, Serena acknowledges that he might be the one who is infertile and arranges for Offred to have sex with Nick. Offred, afraid of the consequences, is hesitant:</p> <p>"It's a risk,' I say. 'More than that.' It's my life on the line" (Chapter 31).</p> <p>After Offred agrees, Serena offers to show her a picture of her daughter. By using her daughter as a tool to get what she wants, Serena is essentially exploiting Offred's loss of a child in order to get a child of her own.</p>
35	Shows Offred a Picture of Her Daughter	<p>As she's in her room, Offred remembers being separated from her family. She doesn't linger on the thought and starts to cry; thinking about her family - and the loss of her family - is extremely painful.</p> <p>Then, Serena Joy arrives with a photo of Offred's daughter, making the loss more real. As Offred looks at the picture, she realises her daughter doesn't remember her. While Serena may think that she's doing Offred a favor, this act was extremely cruel. Not only does it break Offred's heart, it shows that Serena knew Offred's daughter was alive and chose to withhold that information until she could use it to her benefit. While it's possible Serena meant this as a kind gesture, she deliberately used Offred's daughter - and the pain of losing a child - as a way to get a child of her own.</p>



45	Discovers Offred's Lingerie	<p>As Offred returns to the house from the Particicution, Serena Joy confronts her, holding the cloak and lingerie that she wore to Jezebel's. She drops the lingerie, "slithering down over the step like snakeskin" (Chapter 45). By using a simile to compare the lingerie to snakeskin, Atwood is alluding to the Biblical story of Genesis, where the snake tempts Eve to eat the Forbidden Fruit. In this case, she implies that Serena views Offred as the temptress who damns all of mankind. As the reader, we know that Offred didn't have a choice in accompanying the Commander to Jezebel's, and it's likely that Serena Joy also knows this. However, she views Offred's actions as more treacherous than her husband's and is determined to vilify her:</p> <p>"Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same." (Chapter 45)</p>
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Relationships with Other Characters

Relationship with Offred

Serena Joy's relationship with Offred is tense, and is meant to represent how women can be the most vicious adversaries to one another. Serena's **willingness to oppress other women** - especially those below her - is **crucial to ensuring Gilead's success**. Gilead is designed to uphold the power of the Wives. At the Red Centre, **Handmaids are encouraged to feel sympathy for the Wives**, and that the resentment and abuse they may encounter is just a part of the process.

"It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you."
 (Chapter 8)

By being taught to view the Wives as rivals who feel enmity towards them, the possibility of female resistance to the regime is weakened. Furthermore, learning to accept the abuse they face **teaches Handmaids to accept their own dehumanisation and by extension the oppressive status quo**. This central idea of power is a key aspect of Serena Joy and Offred's relationship. Even though they are both victims of Gilead as women, **Serena Joy uses her position of power to further dehumanise Offred**.



“Possibly she’ll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I’m a piece of furniture. She’s done it before.”
(Chapter 14)

Relationship with The Commander

The Commander has **power** over his Wife, Serena Joy, and she resents it. In the pre-Gilead era, Serena Joy was a singer on a Christian television programme and a strong advocate for **traditional values**. While she likely played a key role in establishing Gilead, she is extremely unhappy in her role as a Wife. The Commander and Serena Joy’s relationship isn’t affectionate. The only time the two are seen together is during **The Ceremony** and when Offred is being taken away.

Relationship with Nick

Nick is The Commander’s driver, and **doesn’t have much of a relationship with Serena Joy**. However, when we first see the two together they are working in the garden. The garden symbolises fertility and **the setting foreshadows the affair** between Nick and Offred that **Serena will eventually orchestrate**. Nick is also the only other man in the house, but Serena is able to tell him what to do. This shows that her **power is not simply determined by gender**.

EXAM TIP!

The Handmaid’s Tale is usually read through a feminist lens. One of the key aspects of using a feminist lens for analysis is examining the different roles of characters and how they’re shaped by gender. Think about how Serena Joy’s relationships with other characters is (or isn’t) determined by gender.

Key Quotes

“Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn’t do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all.”

(Chapter 8)

- By advocating traditional gender roles but refusing to follow her own advice, Serena Joy is a **hypocrite**.
 - By saying that her hypocrisy is a **“sacrifice”** she is able to make herself into a **martyr for the cause**.



“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)

- Atwood implies that Serena liked giving speeches because it **gave her a sense of power and a sense of purpose**. However, once she was **“taken at her word”** she was forced to give up her voice, and became **“speechless.”**
- Even though she’s living in a world she helped create, **Serena is unhappy because she’s powerless**. She’s limited herself to the house, to a domestic life, where she serves her husband and has no autonomy or power of her own.

“Serena has begun to cry. [...] She’s trying not to make a noise. She’s trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us” (Chapter 15)

- During the Ceremony, Serena begins to cry.
- **This is the first time we see an emotion from her that isn’t anger**. She’s **“trying to preserve her dignity”** by hiding her tears, and therefore revealing how unhappy she is.
- While Serena is not a sympathetic character, this is an important scene. By describing her emotion, the reader can imagine how horrible it must be to watch your husband have sex with someone else, in your bed, while you watch.

“She was gripping my hands so hard that her rings bit my flesh, pulling my hands back as well, which she must have done on purpose to make me as uncomfortable as she could” (Chapter 26)

- Any sympathy we had for Serena is gone in this scene. Stripped of her power, she takes her anger out on Offred.
- This shows how the most **oppressed people are often targets for other people’s anger and violence**. In other words, Serena should be angry at Gilead, or even herself, for the situation. Instead, she takes it out on Offred, who has no choice.

“‘She hanged herself,’ he says; thoughtfully, not sadly. ‘That’s why we had the light fixture removed. In your room.’ He pauses. ‘Serena found out,’ he says, as if this explains it. And it does. (Chapter 29)

- As Offred tells it, Serena’s violent tendencies become more apparent throughout the book.
- First, she painfully held Offred’s arms during the Ceremony. Now, we learn that she likely threatened the former Offred with violence, or was directly violent towards her.
- This shows how **women can commit acts of violence towards other women**. In this case, Offred is not worried about the threat of violence from the Eyes, but from Serena too.



“‘Bitch,’ she says. ‘After all he did for you.’” (Chapter 46)

- As Offred is being led away, the Eyes (or Mayday) tells Serena that they can't tell her what Offred is being taken away for.
- Offred notes that Serena didn't call the Eyes as her punishment and that what she was planning was **“far more private” (Chapter 46)**
- So while **Serena wanted to punish Offred**, when she realises that it could put the Commander at risk, she becomes hostile.
- This shows that, even though she's angry at Offred for having an affair with her husband, **she still doesn't blame him**. In fact, **Offred is the only one she blames**. Despite the Commander sexually assaulting her repeatedly and using his power over her, Serena Joy thinks that he did Offred a favor.
- This shows how **she is willing to ignore the oppression of other women to fit her narrative and uphold patriarchal ideals**.

Works Cited

1. Callaway, Alanna A., "Women disunited : Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a critique of feminism" (2008). Master's Theses. 3505. Accessible at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/3505/#:~:text=Recommended%20Citation,3505.

