

## **Edexcel English Literature A-level**

### The Handmaid's Tale: Character Profiles The Commander

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## Introduction

The Commander is the head of Offred's household and is a high-ranking official in Gilead. He is a member of the Commanders of the Faith (or just known as "The Commanders"). His real name is Fred, but Offred often refers to him as just The Commander. He is Serena Joy's husband.

In the book, Offred describes The Commander as "**a semi-retired man**" with "**silver hair**." In the television show, he's depicted as a contemporary of Offred's and is much younger (shown here).



Since the book is told from **Offred's perspective**, we're only able to tell what she thinks of him. He is intentionally meant to be a **sympathetic** character, as Offred sometimes views him as a victim of Gilead. While intentional, Atwood intends for this sympathy to be **deceptive**. So while The Commander may appear to be unassuming and even likeable, he is **directly responsible for Offred's oppression**. He is meant to show how oppressors don't often look evil, but nonetheless have the capacity to commit atrocities.

*The Commander*

Image Source: Flickr

### EXAM TIP!

**Be sure to note when characters are portrayed in different ways.** In The Commander's case, Atwood imagines him to be old so he can be deceptively unassuming. She also likely made him this way as a comment on power is concentrated in the hands of older white men (this is true now and was especially so at the time of the book's writing). In the television show, however, he appears to be much younger. **Think about what this says about who holds power, and how it might have changed since the book was originally published.**

## Symbolism

Atwood uses the Commander as a **symbol of power** and, specifically, how those in power are often able to break the rules they set without repercussions. The character of the Commander also demonstrates how **appearances are deceptive**: those who advocate for and benefit from the oppression of others are often unassuming.



### Power and Hubris

While Offred often has to consider whether her **rebellion** will end with her being killed or not, the Commander doesn't appear to have this problem. Throughout the novel, The Commander **uses his power to flout the rules**. This is meant to show how those in power often have the privilege of not following the rules they create. However, **The Commander's power is also the root of his hubris**, which eventually leads to his downfall:

**"Like most early Gilead Commanders who were later purged, he considered his position to be above attack."**

(Epilogue)

### Duplicity

While The Commander tries to make life more bearable for Offred, he never acknowledges his role in making it that way in the first place. By separating himself from the issue, The Commander is able to distance himself from the **oppressive environments he's created** and that he benefits from. This is exemplified in the way that Offred describes The Commander -- because the book is told from her perspective, the reader only has Offred's thoughts as a lens through which to view him. Offred often describes the Commander as **child-like** or as an **old man**. In either case, he is perceived as **unthreatening**. However, The Commander played a critical role in **designing and establishing Gilead**. This **juxtaposition** between The Commander's two identities shows how people who are capable of evil things are often unassuming and can justify their actions to themselves.

### Character in Context

- **Reagan-Era Politics:** When *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985, **religious conservatism** was on the rise in the United States. As president, Ronald Reagan re-shaped American politics and **his legacy has heavily influenced the modern conservative movement in the United States**. The Commander is a reflection of how Atwood viewed politicians in this era, as there are several key comparisons:
  - **Both are straight, white, able-bodied, Christian men who embrace "family values".** While this might not be overtly significant - as there are a lot of people who hold that identity - this shows who is allowed to hold power. In other words, both The Commander and Ronald Reagan show that power is only allocated to people of a specific, privileged group.
  - **Both are unassuming and well-groomed.** Oftentimes, in literature, villains are portrayed as dirty, ugly, etc. In this case, Atwood purposefully makes The Commander the opposite. By doing so, she shows that villains can be - and often are - the people who look like "respectable" members of society.
- **Influence of Religion on Policy:** During the 1980s, **far-right religious organisations** such as the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition gained a foothold in US politics. Their **radical positions** were further legitimised by President



Ronald Reagan, and these groups promoted a **specific legislative agenda** that included:

- **Restoring organised prayer in schools**
  - This effort was overturned by the Supreme Court, but was a key part of Reagan's campaign.
- **Opposition of 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. Ronald Reagan strongly opposed the measure, as did other conservative groups, saying that it would disadvantage housewives. The ERA has never been ratified.
- **Opposition to Abortion**
  - The right to abortion was passed in 1973. While Reagan himself didn't introduce any legislation to oppose abortion, religious conservative groups have sought to overturn this law. This movement gained momentum in the 1980s and further shows the influence that religious groups can have on public opinions of specific issues.
  - One of the central ideas of the pro-choice movement is that a woman should be able to choose when and if they become pregnant. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all choice is completely taken away.
- Both in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in US politics, **religion is used to justify oppressive policies that marginalise women and maintain patriarchy**.

#### EXAM TIP!

After it was published, some conservative activists wanted to ban *The Handmaid's Tale* for "vulgarity and sexual overtones." [1] Think about **why** people want to ban this book and what it says about the influence of conservative thought in modern society.

### Key Characteristics

#### 1. Patriarch

The Commander is clearly a powerful person, both within his household and in Gilead. His **power within the house** is meant to represent the power he also has in the society around him. In other words, **the power dynamics in the house are a microcosm of the power dynamics in Gilead**, especially between men and women.

**"Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household.**

**The house is what he holds. To have and to hold till death do us part"**

**(Chapter 14)**

One of the primary ways the Commander maintains his power is through sexism. Throughout the novel, he makes **sexist comments** about women and often perpetuates



the idea that he is superior because of his gender. For example, he tells Offred that “**women can’t add**” (Chapter 29).

## 2. Deceptively Unassuming

One of the most important characteristics of the Commander is that he is polite, well-groomed, sympathetic, unassuming, and capable of developing a society that forces women into sexual slavery. This **juxtaposition** is intentional, as Atwood wants the reader to realise that those who are responsible for the most grave injustices are often not “**monsters**” (Chapter 39).

## 3. Hypocritical

The Commander is incredibly hypocritical. Although Offred suspects that he feels **trapped in Gilead** just as she does, the key difference is that this is the society he helped **create**. In other words, **Gilead is a prison that the Commander built** and it is much better for him than it is for women.

It’s clear that the Commander believes in Gilead’s Christian ideals (i.e. sex is a sin, women are subservient, etc.), but he constantly breaks the rules for his own benefit. He uses his power to get forbidden items (Scrabble, lingerie, magazines), he starts an affair with Offred, and he goes to a brothel. A common theme in the Commander’s **hypocrisy** is that **many of his transgressions rely on women**. For example, he relies on Offred for intellectual conversation and visits sex workers for pleasure. Despite women playing a key role in all aspects of his life, he continues to treat them as if they are lesser than him.

## Key Moments

| Chapter | Occurrence                                       | Significance  |
|---------|--|---|
| 8       | Offred Notices the Commander Outside of Her Room | <p>When Offred notices The Commander outside of her room, this is the first time we see him <b>break the rules</b>.</p> <p><b>“He isn’t supposed to be here [...] He is violating custom, what do I do now? [...] Was he invading? Was he in my room?” (Chapter 8)</b></p> <p>While this is a seemingly <b>innocent</b> act, Offred isn’t sure how to perceive it, but she feels threatened. Offred’s room is one of the <b>few safe havens</b> she has in Gilead, and The Commander has invaded it. By breaking the rules and crossing into her space, <b>the Commander is demonstrating to Offred that he is in control</b>. Not only</p> |



|           |                           |  |
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|           |                           | <p>that, but he has the <b>power to violate her boundaries</b> at any time, and there is nothing Offred can do to stop him. He has control over her, and anything else he wants, and he knows it.</p>  |
| 16        | The Ceremony              | <p>The Ceremony is a ritual where The Commander has impersonal sex with Offred in hopes of procreation.</p> <p><b>"This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty."</b> (Chapter 16)</p> <p>By referring to The Ceremony - the only permitted sexual act in Gilead - as a "<b>duty</b>," Atwood shows how <b>dehumanising, impersonal, and traumatic sex</b> has become in Gilead.</p>  |
| 23        | First Meeting with Offred | <p>This scene helps us learn more about how <b>the Commander uses his power to coerce Offred</b>. As she's walking up to the room, debating whether or not the risk outweighs the consequence, Offred notes:</p> <p><b>"But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power"</b> (Chapter 23)</p> <p>While The Commander doesn't commit an overtly violent act of sexual assault, he <b>uses his power as a weapon to force Offred into doing what he likes</b>. While in this case it's playing Scrabble (which Offred enjoys) and kissing him sincerely (which Offred doesn't enjoy), he is clearly using his power over her to make her behave like he wants her to.</p> |
| Recurring | Playing Scrabble          | <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>   |



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|  |  | <p>The game also represents a <b>shift in the relationship between the Commander and Offred</b>. 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 <b>sense of identity</b>, the Commander is still the one in <b>power</b>.</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 <b>the relationship with Offred is nothing more than a business transaction</b>.</p> <p><b>"Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes sly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too"</b><br/><b>(Chapter 32)</b></p> <p>Scrabble is a <b>metaphor for the larger 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>role of submission</b>. Similarly, the Commander can cheat without consequence, and even encourages Offred to do so too. While Offred has to remain cautious due to the constant threat of violence, <b>the Commander can break the rules, because he's the one who made them</b>.</p> |
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#### EXAM TIP!

Language - and who gets to use it - is an important theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Commander gatekeepers Offred's access to information and language. Using a feminist lens, what do you think Atwood is trying to say about the dynamics between men and



|         |   |   |
|---------|---|---|
| 29      | Commander tells Offred the meaning of 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 also 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 <b>the Commander even has control over the smallest acts of resistance</b> that Handmaids are able to commit.</p>  |
| 36 - 39 | Jezebel's   | <p><u><a href="#">Chapter 37</a></u></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>” (<b>Chapter 37</b>). 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 dynamics 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. Before this point, we had only seen him use his power to benefit Offred (mostly himself, but Offred as well). Here, we see his power at its peak, <b>deliberately flaunting the rules to benefit himself and his ego</b>.</p> <p>Perhaps the most important part of Jezebel's is the reader sees the extent of The Commander's <b>hypocrisy</b>. He has designed a society that values <b>sexual abstinence, purity, and traditional family values</b> and yet, he is not held to <b>this standard</b>.</p> |



|                 |                                  |   |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|---|
|                 |                                  | <p><u>Chapter 39</u></p> <p>At Jezebel's The Commander and Offred have sex in a hotel room. This is the first and only time that they have sex outside of the Ceremony. This chapter is incredibly important, as <b>the Commander uses his power (and the unspoken threat of violence) to coerce Offred into having sex with him</b>. As The Commander starts to seduce Offred, she recognizes that his touch isn't sensual, but "<b>it means ownership</b>" (<b>Chapter 39</b>). Eventually, The Commander takes off his clothes and - without his uniform - Offred realises that he looks "<b>smaller, older, like something being dried</b>" (<b>Chapter 39</b>). <b>Even without his uniform - a symbol of his power - he still has power over Offred</b>. As the Commander turns out the lights so the two can have sex, Offred tells herself to fake it. She reminds herself that, despite the Commander using his power to coerce her into having sex with him, the Commander is "<b>not a monster</b>" (<b>Chapter 39</b>).</p> <p>This scene shows how <b>women are expected to adhere to men's expectations and succumb to their desires</b>. This <b>patriarchal submission</b> is often at the sake of their own well-being, and is a central idea in perpetuating <b>male dominance</b>.</p> |
| <b>Epilogue</b> | Commander's identity is revealed | <p>In the epilogue, we learn more about the Commander. First, we learn that his name was likely Fred Waterford - a former market researcher who designed the <b>red Handmaids' costumes</b> and came up with the names for Particicution and Salvaging. Then we learn that Waterford was executed for his "<b>liberal tendencies</b>" (<b>Epilogue</b>), possession of forbidden literary materials, and harbouring a subversive (i.e. Offred).</p> <p>While the Commander wields power throughout the novel, the epilogue reveals that he was eventually killed for the things he used to demonstrate his power with. Ultimately, <b>it was the Commander's hubris that led to his death</b>.</p>  |



## Relationships with Other Characters

The Commander's relationship with everyone in his house is **defined by power**. He's the patriarch and is meant to represent patriarchy. This theme is further emphasized by his relationships.

### Relationship with Offred

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. Throughout the novel, however, it becomes clear through their interactions that **The Commander is using his power over Offred for his own gain**. In other words, **he doesn't see her as an equal, but as an instrument for his own pleasure**.

### Relationship with Serena Joy

The Commander also 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 is the only other man in the house. Despite also being a man, The Commander also has **power** over Nick.

Since the novel is told from Offred's perspective, the interactions between Nick and The Commander are limited. What's more important, though, is how their relationships with Offred are different. The Commander uses his power to coerce and manipulate Offred. Offred's relationship with Nick, however, is much more egalitarian. 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's relationship with Nick allows her to **escape from her one-dimensional role as a Handmaid** and allows her to **exist as an individual**, while **her relationship with The Commander forces her to remain in her singular identity**.



## Key Quotes

**“The Commander sighs, takes out a pair of reading glasses from his inside jacket pocket, gold rims, slips them on. Now he looks like a shoemaker in an old fairy-tale book. Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?” (Chapter 15)**

- A **recurring theme** with the Commander is that he is **deceptively benevolent**. Atwood uses this description of him as “a shoemaker in an old fairy-tale book” **contrasts** with the violence of the Ceremony he is involved in.
- By noting his “**disguises of benevolence**” Atwood makes it clear that the Commander’s benevolence is a **facade**, and is cautioning the reader to not assume someone’s moral character based on their appearance.

**“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.” (Chapter 23)**

- **Physical positions are used to represent more abstract concepts of power.** For example, someone who is kneeling has more power over the one who is lying down, and someone who is standing has more power than everyone else.
  - In this case, the Commander is the one standing and Offred is the one lying down with “**legs spread open**.”
- By expanding on this thought and describing **power as a form of forgiveness**, Atwood uses **religious language** (i.e. the idea of forgiveness) to highlight the power the Commander has. In other words, the Commander will be forgiven for his behaviour; he is able to break the rules and get away with it, while Offred may be killed if she does the same.
  - This idea of **power and privilege**, and who has it, is a central theme in the novel.

**“He wanted me to play Scrabble with him, and kiss him as if I meant it. This is one of the most bizarre things that’s happened to me, ever. Context is all.” (Chapter 24)**

- The Commander and Offred’s first meeting is incredibly important, as it helps the reader learn more about the Commander. This quote shows that Offred, despite being a victim of the Commander, feels a bit of **tenderness** towards him. Because the story is told from **Offred’s perspective**, by saying that the Commander wanted to play Scrabble and be kissed meaningfully, the reader could believe that he’s innocent and lonely.
- While this scene makes the reader feel some **sympathy** for the Commander, Atwood quickly reminds us to remember the “context.” In this case, the **context** Atwood wants the reader to remember is that **the Commander has tremendous power over Offred**, and she is not allowed to say no.
- So, even though the Commander is not openly hostile - and is even kind - to Offred, he is still **directly responsible for her oppression**, both within the household and in society.



- Atwood once again cautions the reader to not be deceived by this seemingly innocent act. While the act itself is not innocent or sympathetic, the **horrific and oppressive context in which the act takes place should outweigh any sympathy.**

**“He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, offkey, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak. How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation. A big child, she would have said to herself.” (Chapter 24)**

- Right after the first meeting with the Commander, Offred's thinks about an interview she saw with the mistress of a Nazi. The mistress and the Nazi official's relationship can be **compared** to relationship between the Commander and Offred.
- In the interview, the woman speaks affectionately about her lover, who was a high-ranking official who supervised a concentration camp and is described as cruel and brutal. This **parallels** the way that Offred often talks about the Commander.
- By describing her lover as “**a big child**” the woman **infantilises** him. In doing so, she also conveys that he is not a threat and could not possibly be capable of committing atrocities, or even if he was, that it certainly wouldn't be on purpose.
  - Throughout the novel, Offred often talks about the Commander as either child-like or a kindly old man. **This makes him appear unthreatening and disguises his motivations and harmful actions.**
- Later in the novel, as the Commander is initiating unconsensual sex with Offred at Jezebel's, she tells herself: “**He is not a monster, I think**” (Chapter 39).
  - This theme of whether or not the Commander is a monster is important. **Monsters can be anyone, even people who are friendly, unassuming, and respected in society.**

**“‘Me?’ He continues to smile. ‘Oh there’s not much to say about me. I’m just an ordinary kind of guy” (Chapter 29)**

- Whether intentional or not, this is an idea that is central to 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.**



**“We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away,’ said the Commander. ‘Think of the trouble they had before. Don’t you remember the singles’ bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market.” (Chapter 34)**

- This quote is an example of **dramatic irony**.
  - Demonstrates how the Commander can justify his actions to himself. He clearly **views himself as a savior**, but he fails to consider the impact his actions have on women and other oppressed groups.
  - “Meat market” is a slang term and a **euphemism** meant to describe a place where people are treated like meat.
    - The Commander uses this term to convey his disgust at the “**indignity**” of the old world
    - This is **ironic** because Gilead treats the Handmaids as wombs and not as people.
    - The Commander had a direct role in the resulting **dehumanisation of women**, but fails to acknowledge it.

**“He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He’s breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it [...] It’s a juvenile display, the whole act, and pathetic; but it’s something I understand.” (Chapter 37)**

- Once again, **Offred infantilises the Commander** and describes him as “**juvenile**.”
- More importantly, by publicly flouting the rules, the Commander intentionally demonstrates his power to Offred and the others around him in order to inflate his ego.
  - This is an example of **hubris**.

**“He pulls down one of my straps, slides his other hand in among the feathers, but it’s no good, I lie there like a dead bird.” (Chapter 39)**

- The **imagery** of a bird in this scene is important. Generally speaking, birds are **symbols of freedom**. While saying that she is lying on the bed “**like a dead bird**” is a **humorous description**, it also hints at something darker. A dead bird is one who can no longer fly or escape. In this case, the dead bird is a **metaphor** for **Offred’s feelings of imprisonment** in this particular moment with the Commander and in Gileadean society as a whole.

**“I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking.” (Chapter 46)**

- When Offred is taken away, the Commander realizes that his **power** is in jeopardy. By describing the **positionality** of the scene, with Offred “looking down” and the Commander “shrinking,” Atwood conveys how **the power dynamic has shifted**. In this scene, the Commander realizes that Offred has power over him, and that he might face **consequences** for his actions.



## References

[1] 'Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale among most challenged books in U.S. in 2019', CBC

[https://www.cbc.ca/books/margaret-atwood-s-the-handmaid-s-tale-among-most-challenged-books-i-n-u-s-in-2019-1.5540046#:~:text=Atwood's%20dystopian%20The%20Handmaid's%20Tale,writers%20who%20have%20been%20censored](https://www.cbc.ca/books/margaret-atwood-s-the-handmaid-s-tale-among-most-challenged-books-in-u-s-in-2019-1.5540046#:~:text=Atwood's%20dystopian%20The%20Handmaid's%20Tale,writers%20who%20have%20been%20censored).

