

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Identity

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Identity

Taking away someone's identity is one of the key ways Gilead maintains **control**. In other words, Gileadean society is **designed** to strip everyone of their identity, but even more so for **women**, and for **Handmaids** in particular. This **loss of identity** represents women's **loss of power** on a very fundamental level. **Without identity, there is no basis for individuality**; without individuality, it becomes easier to **dehumanise** someone.

Throughout the book, Offred's identity **changes**. In one sense, she becomes **more rebellious** against Gilead and **regains some aspects of her identity** but, in another sense, she becomes more **resigned to its oppression and to her identity as a Handmaid**. It's a constant **internal battle** for Offred: she must give up her identity in order to **survive**, but **what is survival without one's identity?**

What is Identity?

Generally speaking, our identity is our sense of who we are and can be shaped by our values, relationships, and affiliations. In the 1970s **Henri Tajfel** introduced the concept of **social identity theory**, which examines the parts of our identity which are shaped by our **relationships with others** [1]. For example, one's politics, family, friends, job, religion, favourite sports team, etc. are all things that **shape our identity**. These are also things that can **make us part of a group**. Tajfel theorises that people tend to **prefer those who are inside** of their group (in-group members) over those who are outside of it. Our preference for people who are part of our own in-group over those outside of it creates an **us vs. them mentality**. Sometimes this mentality is **harmless**, as with sports rivalries or friendly competition between universities, but in other cases, this us vs. them mentality can lead to **oppression** (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) and, in the most **extreme** cases, can be used to commit **genocide**.



Identity in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In the essay 'Identity, Complicity, and Resistance' by Peter Stillman and Anne Johnson, the authors note that: "Gilead also adopts measures **specifically aimed against women, their individuality, and their identity**" [2]. Women are fired from their **jobs**, their **money** and **bank accounts** are transferred to their male spouses or caregivers, **families** and **friends** are separated, and they lose the right to access **reproductive healthcare**. All of these policies **take away some aspect of their identities**.

"Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (Chapter 10)

By the end of Gilead's **indoctrination**, all aspects of a person's identity are **stripped away** until they are only able to **identify** as the role that Gilead has **assigned to them**. In other words, Gilead's policies make it so a **person's identity is limited to their prescribed societal role**. For example, **Offred is only allowed to be a Handmaid**, a "**two-legged womb**" (**Chapter 23**), **and nothing else**. The things that Handmaids are **prohibited** from doing (e.g. having **activities/hobbies**, owning **possessions**, being called by their **name**, having **friends**, etc.) are all **restrictions** Gilead has put in place in order to **prevent them from having identities outside of their procreative abilities**.

While other **women** in Gilead are subjected to **oppression** (Wives, Econowives, Marthas, etc.), they **do not face the same loss of identity** as the Handmaids. For example, Serena Joy is allowed to have a **hobby** (knitting), watch TV/access information, have **friends**, and **leave the city limits**. The Marthas are able to have a **job** (housekeeping) and **socialise** with each other. **Handmaids aren't allowed to do any of these things**. Wives and Marthas are also allowed to **keep their names**, a key difference from the Handmaids.

Names

Handmaids 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 that she is **not her own person**, but **belongs to someone else**. Offred's name also references **the colour red** ("of red") as an **allusion** to the red dress that Handmaids are required to wear, further tying her to **her identity as a Handmaid**. Finally, Offred is also a pun on the word "offered," which symbolises that she is a **sacrifice or an offering**.

In any of these cases, Offred is **not viewed as an individual**, but instead is meant to be a **symbol of fertility, sacrifice, or patriarchy**. By taking the name of her Commander, she is able to be **replaced**: There was an Offred who came **before** her and there will be one who comes **after** her. In this sense, she is not an **individual**, but merely a **thing** that is used to **achieve a goal** (i.e. having a baby).



“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)

After the first **Ceremony**, Offred feels **powerless and violated**. When she returns to her room, she thinks about her **husband**, Luke, and longs for a sense of identity **outside of her role as a Handmaid**: **“I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.” (Chapter 17)**

- Offred connects her **real name** with being **“valued.”**
- She goes onto note that she wants to be **“more than valuable.”**
 - Gilead only **values** Handmaids for their **ability to get pregnant**, so by saying this, Offred is saying she wants to have **more value than just her fertility**. She wants to be an **individual** with her own sense of **identity**.
- When Offred **repeats** her former name to herself, she is **reminding** herself that she did have an identity **before she was a Handmaid**. This is what she means when she talks about **“what I once could do, how others saw me.”**
 - Even though this is just a **memory**, making this **connection to her former self** helps give her a sense of identity.
- By **remembering her old life** and **repeating her old name**, Offred is privately **resisting Gilead’s control** and reminding herself of her individuality.

As the book progresses, however, Offred becomes more **resigned** to her role and **starts to lose her sense of identity**. The scene where The Commander asks Offred to kiss him **“as if [she meant] it” (Chapter 23)** shows that, even if Offred is able to temporarily find an **identity outside of Gilead’s expectations** (i.e. breaking the rules and playing Scrabble), she is still **powerless**. In other words, even when she is able to do things that Handmaids aren’t allowed to do, she is still subjected to the same **dehumanisation**.

After this **meeting the Commander**, Offred goes back to her room where she says: **“I must forget about my secret name [...] My name is Offred now, and here is where I live,” (Chapter 24)**. By telling herself to **“forget about her secret name”** and admitting that her name **“is Offred now,”** Offred recognises that she has **no real identity** of her own anymore. This **resignation** is also a **survival tactic**.

Offred goes on to **“take stock”** and make mental notes about herself: **“I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance.” (Chapter 24)**

- Offred starts by **describing** things about who she is as a **person** (her age and hair colour). Even though they are **small details**, they are part of who she is as an **individual**.
- Then, she mentions she **can’t remember what she used to look like**. This shows that she’s **forgetting her old self and old identity**.



- After this, Offred **shifts** and **no longer describes herself as a person**, but instead talks about her “**viable ovaries**” -- the only part of her that is **valuable** in Gilead and thus, the **only part of her that gives her a sense of identity**. In other words, Offred is reducing her own identity to her reproduction.
- By saying “**I have one more chance**,” Offred means that she has **one more chance to get pregnant**, or she’ll be shipped to the **Colonies**. This shows that **forgetting her old identity** as a person, and instead focusing on her fertility, is **crucial to her survival**.

Later in the book, Offred begins her **affair with Nick**. There is more of an **equal power dynamic** between the two and, even though their first meeting is **arranged by Serena Joy**, Offred feels as though she has more **autonomy** -- and therefore more of an **identity** -- in her relationship with Nick. During their first meeting she tells Nick her “**real name, and feel that therefore I am known.**” (Chapter 41).

- When she tells Nick her **real name**, she feels like she is “**known**” outside of her role as a Handmaid and **seen as a person**.
- This **contrasts** with how she felt after her meeting with the Commander, when she wanted to **forget her name**.
- While her relationship with the Commander is **coercive and dehumanising**, Offred’s relationship with Nick is **autonomous and intimate**.
- In a society where Handmaids have **very little choice** about their situation, Offred’s choice to continue her relationship with Nick, in spite of the fact that it is forbidden, shows that Offred is **finding an identity** and acting **against Gilead’s** dehumanising control.

The **last time** Offred mentions her real name is in the last scene, as the van pulls up to take her away. She briefly meets **Nick**, where he reassures her that it’s **Mayday** -- not the **Eyes** -- that are coming. As he’s telling her this, **Nick uses Offred’s real name**. In response Offred thinks: “**Why should this mean anything?**” (Chapter 46). Despite Nick’s reassurances, the ending of the book is **ambiguous**.

- Offred’s **ambivalence** to being called her name **contrasts** with her desire for her name to be used earlier in the book (Chapter 17).
- There are two interpretations of this scene. Offred’s question of “**why should this mean anything?**” could show that her real name **doesn’t mean anything to her anymore**. However, it could also imply that there’s deeper meaning in Nick using her name. In this case, it could show that Nick is using her real name to **connect her to her old identity**, thus **recognising her as an individual**, and showing her that she can **trust** him.
- These different interpretations of her question **parallel the ambiguous ending**: Will Offred **escape Gilead** and **re-discover her identity**? Or will she be turned over to the Eyes and **have her identity erased**?

Memories

One of the ways Offred is able to hold on to her identity is through her **memories of her family and friends**. Stillman and Johnson observe: “**when Offred looks inside herself, she does find a set of memories that allow her to recall a sense of self [...]** Throughout the book



she tries to hold on to these, but they fade away” [2]. Gilead uses this method of control to **dehumanise** Handmaids. By making them **forget their relationships** with the people they love, they are **forced to adhere to their societal roles**.

As the book progresses and Offred becomes further **separated from the person she was** in the pre-Gilead area, her **memories of her family become more and more distant**. For example, she starts to refer to her family in the past tense: “**Luke wasn’t a doctor. Isn’t.**” (Chapter 6). Later in the book, Offred does the same thing with Moira: “**She was still my oldest friend. Is.**” (Chapter 28).

- Our **relationships with others** -- especially our loved ones -- are a **big part** of our individual identities.
- This shift into the past tense shows that Offred is **forgetting her closest relationships**.
- **As she forgets her loved ones, she also loses her identity.**

Atwood also uses **imagery** and **metaphor** to convey Offred’s **loss of identity**. When Offred remembers the day she tried to flee the country with her family she says: “**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**” (Chapter 15)

- By describing herself as “**smoke**,” Offred is saying that she feels like she is **shapeless**, **abstract**, and **temporary**.
- Similarly, by saying that she is a “**mirage**,” Offred implies that she is just an **illusion**.
- Both of these metaphors **compare Offred** to things that are **shapeless** and can **easily fade or disappear**.
- This is meant to symbolise that, **as Offred loses her family, she is also losing herself**.

This **imagery** of **fading** also appears later in the book when Offred thinks about **her family**: “**I need to remember what they look like [...] But they fade, though I stretch out my arms towards them, they slip away from me, ghosts at daybreak. Back to where they are. Stay with me, I want to say. But they won’t. It’s my fault. I am forgetting too much.**” (Chapter 30)

- In Chapter 15, Offred describes herself as “**fading before their eyes.**” In this case, it’s **her family** who **fades away**.
- The **image** of Offred **stretching out her arms** towards her family shows that she wants them to “**stay with [her].**”
- By describing her family as “**ghosts**”, it implies that they are **in the past**, and that they are “**slip[ping] away.**”
- Finally, Offred blames herself for forgetting her family, saying that “**it’s [her] fault**” for “**forgetting too much.**”
- Even though her **memories are fading** and she’s forgetting her family -- **and therefore her identity** -- she also **blames herself** for not being able to hold onto it.
- This **self-blame** is also a key aspect of Gilead’s dehumanisation; at the Red Center, the Handmaids were taught to **blame themselves** (Chapter 13).
- This shows that Offred is **internalising some of Gilead’s most harmful practices**. **Without a sense of identity**, however, she is **resigned to Gilead’s oppression**.



In exchange for having an affair with Nick, **Serena Joy** offers to bring Offred a **picture of her daughter**. In the picture, her daughter is older. Offred feels as though **her daughter has forgotten her**, and says: **“I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now [...] A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become.”** (Chapter 35)

- By using this **imagery** of a **shadow**, this symbolises how Offred **no longer views herself a real person**.
- Offred then goes on to describe herself as **“a shadow of a shadow,”** implying that she is **actively being erased and becoming less of a person**.
- Even though she is still physically alive, Offred describes herself as a **“dead mother.”**
- Throughout the book, Offred’s memories -- particularly of her **daughter** -- are very **central to her identity**. Once that tie is severed, she no longer has a tether to her old self and feels as though she is **“dead.”**
- Overall, this scene symbolises Offred’s **loss of her identity as a mother**.

Friendships

In the same way that Handmaids’ past relationships are severed, Handmaids are also **prohibited from establishing new friendships**. Going back to **Tajfal’s theory of social identity**, this means that Handmaids **aren’t allowed to form social groups**. Without a **social group**, this aspect of **social support** and parts of their **identities** are taken away as well.

One day, as Offred goes to meet Ofglen for their usual shopping trip, she realises that the Ofglen she knew has been **replaced by someone else**, who has also taken the name **Ofglen**. Even though she’s worried about her **friend**, she feels that she can’t ask about what happened to the old Ofglen because: **“We aren’t supposed to form friendships, loyalties, among one another.”** (Chapter 44)

- While Gilead takes away Handmaids’ identities by not letting them form bonds with each other, this scene also shows how the **Handmaids are quickly replaced**.
- When Ofglen is replaced so quickly, she is essentially **erased**.
- By **erasing** her, this shows that Handmaids are not defined by their identities as people, but by their **social role**. In other words, as long as they can **perform their duty** (i.e. have a child) then they don’t need to be recognised as individual people. **Their identity is irrelevant**.
- Ultimately, Offred mourns the **loss of her friend**, and therefore experiences a further **loss of her identity**, as she realises that their identities truly don’t matter in Gilead.

Clothes

A person’s **clothes** are a form of **self-expression** and **identity**. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, instead of wearing regular clothes, Handmaids are **required** to wear a **red dress** with a **white bonnet**. If these are the only clothes they’re able to have, their sense of **self-expression** is **limited** and their identity is **restricted**.

Before she goes shopping for the first time, Offred describes what the Handmaids wear: **“everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of red, which defines us**



[...] The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it's not my color." (Chapter 2).

- Since all of the Handmaids are **required** to wear this **uniform**, it's a **physical representation of their social group**.
- Offred describes the dress they wear as "**red, which defines us.**" Here, red is meant to symbolise **menstrual blood**, which in turn defines a person's **fertility** and **ability to procreate**. By having the Handmaids wear **red**, Gilead is forcing them to **outwardly express themselves and identify as Handmaids**, and nothing else.
- Similarly, the "**white wings**" are designed to prevent the Handmaids "**from being seen.**" If the Handmaids aren't able to be **seen**, then they aren't able to have an **identity**; they become more like **faceless objects** and **less like people**.
- The **white** in their wings is also meant to **symbolise sexual purity**.
- The Handmaids' **uniforms** are specifically designed to take away any sense of their **individuality and identity**, and instead further tie them to their **societal role** and **social group**.



Handmaids in their uniforms. [3]

Image source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vpickering/32171601077>

As she's shopping with Ofglen, Offred finds herself remembering what she used to wear: "I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control. Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs" (Chapter 5).

- Offred's **memory** of the laundromat is a **juxtaposition** of her past life and her current reality as a Handmaid.



- This is meant to show the **difference** between the sense of **freedom** Offred had when she could wear “**shorts, jeans, [or] jogging pants**” and the **restriction** of the **Handmaid’s outfit** she has to wear now.
- Offred also talks about how having her own **money** and **clothes** gave her a sense of “**control**.”
- In addition to giving her **control**, these things also were **important to her identity as an individual**.
- Since Handmaids aren’t allowed to have **money, possessions, or wear their own clothes**, this memory is meant to highlight how different the world is, and how **many aspects of Offred’s identity have been taken away**.
- Furthermore, describing the Handmaids as “**red pairs**” shows that they are **identified only by the colour they wear** and, therefore, are **defined by their roles as Handmaids**.

Space

Another way that we can **shape and express our identities** as people is through **the spaces we inhabit** (e.g. our houses or bedrooms). In Gilead, Handmaids aren’t allowed to have either of these. Without a space for themselves, the Handmaids are left **without a form of self-exploration or self-expression**. In other words, Handmaids are **not allowed to occupy or own their own space**, which **dehumanises** them and **erases their identity**.

While Offred technically has a **room** (i.e. a space of her own), she initially feels **conflicted** about its **ownership**. In Chapter 2, she says: “**The door of the room -- not my room, I refuse to say my -- is not locked**” (Chapter 2).

- In this case, Offred doesn’t want to acknowledge the room as hers because then it would mean that she belongs in that house, being a Handmaid.
- **Admitting** that the room is hers would be the **first step** in losing her identity.

A few chapters later, Offred notices **the Commander** looking in her room, and starts to feel a bit **possessive**. The last sentences of Chapter 8 are: “**Was he invading? Was he in my room? I called it mine.**” (Chapter 8) Then, Chapter 9 begins with: “**My room, then. There has to be some space, finally that I claim as mine, even in this time.**” (Chapter 9)

- The ways **chapters start and end** can be significant and **provide insight** to a theme that the author wants to bring the reader’s attention to.
- In this case, Offred refers to the room as “**hers**” and **Atwood takes care to underline this**.
- This shows that there is some **significance in whether the room is Offred’s or not**.
- In Chapter 2, Offred **didn’t want to call the room her own**, because she didn’t want it to be a place that **shaped her identity**.
- In this scene, however, she calls the room “**mine**” showing that she **acknowledges that the room is, in fact, hers**.
- One interpretation of this could be that she’s becoming more **resigned to her role as a Handmaid**. Now that she has a **room**, she also has a **place**, and her place is as a **Handmaid**.



- Another interpretation of this is that Offred wants to “**claim**” it as hers and therefore have **ownership over something**. This ownership would then give her a sense of **identity**.
- However, it could be argued that **it wasn't really Offred's room to begin with**. It's a room where the Handmaids before her have lived and where the Handmaids who come after her will live. In other words, **it's the Handmaid's room**. Furthermore, the Commander demonstrates that he can **invade her space** whenever he likes, which shows that the room **doesn't really belong to Offred at all**.

Activities

A person's **activities and hobbies** not only give them something to do, but also provides **a group** to align themselves with. For example, a person who **knits** is identified as a **knitter**; this label (knitter) then **gives them a social group**.

Like other instances in Gilead, **Handmaids** are not allowed to do any activities or have any hobbies other than those that **reinforce their identities as Handmaids**. Specifically, they are only allowed to practice **birthing techniques**. This shows that, instead of being able to knit like the Wives or cook like the Marthas, the Handmaids are only allowed to do things that further associate themselves with their **function: procreation**.

“If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands. I want a cigarette. [...] I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls [...] I wish I had a pig ball” (Chapter 13)

- By comparing herself to a “**pig**,” Offred suggests that she views herself as an **animal**.
- Similarly, by not having anything to **entertain** herself with, like a “**pig ball**” she is implying that she's **treated worse than an animal**.
- Offred longs for something to do because having a hobby would **give her a social group** and **a sense of identity** (i.e. embroider, weaver, knitter, or smoker) **outside of her role as a Handmaid**.

Instead of being able to do any of the hobbies she mentions, Offred is only able to practice **birthing techniques** to pass the time: **“I lie down on the braided rug. You can always practice, said Aunt Lydia. Several sessions a day, fitted into your daily routine. Arms at the sides, knees bent, lift the pelvis, roll the backbone down. Tuck. Again.” (Chapter 13)**

- Ultimately, by not allowing Handmaids to have any hobbies or activities to do, this **isolates them from any group that might share those hobbies**.
- In order to keep themselves entertained, however, they're allowed to do birthing exercises.
- This “hobby” only works to **reinforce that their sole purpose -- and sole identity -- is to procreate**. This further ties them to their identities as Handmaids and takes away their identities as individuals.



Physical Self/Body

Offred's connection with her **physical self** and **her body** are also a way she **expresses identity**. In Gilead, Handmaids are only valued for their ability to get pregnant. So, as Offred becomes more and more separated from her old identity, and subsequently becomes more resigned to her role as a Handmaid, **she expresses this loss by using imagery to convey her sense of shapelessness**. This shapelessness is a way to show that she **doesn't feel like a person** and is losing her sense of identity. Eventually, it gets to the point where Offred doesn't view her own body as **human**, and only sees it as a way to **procreate**. She also realises that, by resigning herself to this idea, **she is able to stay alive**.

“I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.” (Chapter 12)

- Instead of being a place for self-expression and **autonomy**, Offred's body **“determines [her] so completely.”**
- More specifically, Offred's **ability to have a child** is what **“determines”** her **identity**.
- She resists this limited identity and reveals her desire for a **multifaceted** identity.
- Offred and the other Handmaids' reduction of their identities to their bodies is consistent with a longstanding Western tradition of women being overidentified with their bodies (while men are associated with the mind, with rational and abstract thought).

“I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am...” (Chapter 13)

- A **“cloud”** is a **changing, intangible shape**. Similar to when she described herself to smoke or a mirage (Chapter 15), a cloud is also **shapeless**. By making this comparison, Offred implies that she is shapeless too.
- The phrase **“central object”** is alluding to her **reproductive organs**. So, by saying she's **“congealed around a central object”** Offred is saying **her entire identity is centred around her ability to reproduce**.
- She also describes the **“central object”** as **“hard”** which **contrasts** with the shapeless image of the cloud. This shows that the **“central object”** (i.e. her womb) is **“more real”** than she is.
- In this case, **“more real”** is meant to show that **Offred as a person doesn't exist**. Only her womb and fertility exist.
- **By having her identity centred around one part of her body (i.e. her womb), all other aspects of her identity are erased;** they fade like clouds.

By the end of the book, Offred has lost her identity and then regained parts of it (partially through her affair with Nick). However, as the black van arrives to take her away, Offred admits that: **“I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others” (Chapter 45)**

- This sentence is important because it shows that, in Gilead, you can either have an **identity** or **“keep on living”** but **not both**.



- In this last chapter, Offred “**resign[s]**” to have others use her body “**freely.**” In other words, **she has given up her body, and her identity, so that she can live.**



References

[1] <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>

[2] STILLMAN, PETER G., and S. ANNE JOHNSON. "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in The Handmaid's Tale." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 70–86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20719314. Accessed 15 May 2021.

[3] Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vpickering/32171601077>

