

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Religion

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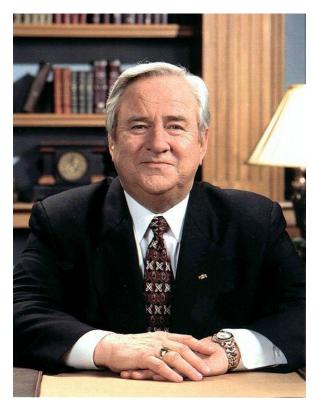


Religion plays a huge role in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the book, Christian extremists overthrow the U.S. government and replace it with a totalitarian patriarchal theocracy. This new society is called the Republic of Gllead, or just Gilead. Even though Gilead claims to promote Christian values such as charity and forgiveness, in reality, these values are distorted and used as a way to promote the oppression of women. However, Atwood uses religious symbolism, allusions, and other motifs to criticise the way religion can be used as a justification for this oppression. In the book, people in power use certain passages from the Bible in order to make them feel that they are morally right, even when they are committing violence.

Context

The Handmaid's Tale was first published in 1985 during **Ronald Reagan's presidency.** Reagan - a **conservative** - was particularly popular with **Christian** groups. During his presidency, the **Christian right gained political power** and emphasised **"family values**." In other words, they advocated for a return to the **traditional**, **heterosexual**, **nuclear family**.

As president, Reagan supported a return to **traditional values** and was popular amongst **white**, **working class Americans**, who felt **racist resentment** due to the rights gained by Black people during the **Civil Rights Movement**. Reagan also appealed to groups like the **Moral Majority**, who supported his election in 1980.



Jerry Falwell [1]

The Moral Majority was a political organisation that was founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell. Falwell was a televangelist, who used his platform to advocate for conservive values. Specifically, the Moral Majority promoted religious fundamentalism, which insisted on a strict, literal interpretation of the Christian version of the Bible. Members of the Moral Majority typically viewed the modern lifestyle as self-indulgent and sinful, as the decades before were a time of increased sexual and religious freedom, as well as advancements in civil liberties. While technically not affiliated with any political party, the Moral Majority's agenda focused on "moral" issues rather than political ones. By framing their philosophy this way, they were able to find **common ground** with different religious communities and political parties, although much of the organisation's support came from conservative Protestant Christians.





The Moral Majority opposed abortion, gay rights, pornography, and the Equal Rights Amendment. They supported prayer in public schools, teaching Christian scripture as superior to modern science, and creationism. As the organisation's influence grew, they were able to successfully lobby legislators and advance their agenda. Although the organisation was disbanded in 1989, the year Reagan left office, its influence still lingers in American politics today.

Atwood herself identifies as a "strict agnostic" [2] and firmly believes that, while religion can be a **positive influence**, it can also be **corrupted**, and should not be used to dictate political policies. In an interview with Narrative Magazine in 2011, Atwood said: "I'm a strict, strict agnostic. It's very different from a casual, 'I don't know.' It's that you cannot present as knowledge something that is not knowledge. You can present it as faith, you can present it as belief, but you can't present it as fact." [3]

Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* as a **response to the emergence of the religious right**. The **novel** is meant to serve as a **cautionary tale** that speculates on what could have happened if groups like the **Moral Majority** had achieved **ultimate power**.

In 2017, Hulu adapted *The Handmaid's Tale* as a **TV show**. While there are a few differences between the novel and the TV adaptation, the first season remains largely true to the content of the novel. More importantly, however, the TV show was **released** shortly after the **election and inauguration of Donald Trump**. Much like Reagan, Trump gained the **support of religious conservatives** during his campaign and many of his policies were enacted to appeal to this base of voters. The adaptation of the *Handmaid's Tale* to the **modern era** is meant to show that perhaps, Atwood's **dystopian world** is not a thing of the past, but is a **concern in the present**.

Character Name	Biblical Significance	Significance in The Handmaid's Tale
Offred	Offred's name has many different meanings, but one interpretation is the similarity between "Offred" and the word "offered." This interpretation is significant because it implies that Offred is a religious offering or sacrifice.	Offred has to sacrifice several important things throughout the book: her name, identity, family, body, and freedom.
Moira	While the name Moira doesn't appear in the Bible, it's derived from the Hebrew name Miryam, which means "rebellious." This name is also associated with Mary, which alludes to either the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene - two prominent Biblical figures.	Moira is certainly the most rebellious character in the book. She is a lesbian and feminist activist, which shows how she rejects Gilead's heteronormative expectations and resists Gilead's patriarchal norms.

Biblical Allusions: Names and People [4]



Luke	In the Bible, Luke is the author of the third Gospel and the book of Acts. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the origins, birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The Book of Acts tells how the Christian church was founded and how its message was spread to the Roman Empire.	Luke's name is meant to draw parallels between how Christianity was founded and spread and how Gilead came to power. Luke's appearance in the book signifies different points in Gilead's rise to power; Biblical Luke tells the story of the rise of Christinanity. Luke's role could also allude to Jesus' life and how it draws parallels with Offred's. While the Gospel of Luke talks about Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Offred has a similar journey in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> . Her indoctrination as a Handmaid symbolises her death, her involvement in Mayday symbolises her resurrection, and her eventual escape symbolises her ascension.
Aunt Elizabeth	The biblical Elizabeth's story is told in the Gospel of Luke: Elizabeth is an older woman who is barren and unable to have children (Luke 1:7). She is married to Zechariah, and through divine intervention, the two are able to have a child. The child is John the Baptist, who eventually baptises Jesus.	This is significant because it highlights the idea of childbirth and fertility. By choosing this name, Atwood draws attention to the concept of barren women, which are typically sent to the Colonies. In the epilogues, Piexeito describes the Aunts as: "Childless or infertile or older women [] could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy" (Epilogue). Aunt Elizabeth and Biblical Elizabeth are both older women, but are able to "escape redundancy" through childbirth. For Aunt Elizabeth, she indoctrinates Handmaids and coaches them on their roles as "two-legged wombs" (Chapter 23). She is also present during Ofwarren/Janine's labor (Chapter 20), further associating her with themes of childbirth.

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Illustration of Elizabeth and Zechariah [5]		
Aunt Lydia	Biblical Lydia appears in the book of Acts, which is also authored by Luke. In the Bible, Lydia is baptised and becomes the first person to be converted to Christianity in Europe. (Acts 16:14 - 15 NIV)	In the book, Aunt Lydia is one of the most fervent supporters of Gilead's theocracy, and indoctrinates Handmaid's into their roles using Biblical references. Ironically, however, Aunt Lydia misquotes the Bible nearly every time she references it: <i>"Blessed are the meek. She didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth" (Chapter 12).</i> Aunt Lydia's character is meant to show how religion can be distorted to serve a certain agenda.
Marthas	In the Bible, Martha also appears in the Gospel of Luke. She and her sister - Mary - open their home to Jesus and his disciples. While Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen to his sermon, Martha is busy preparing the meals and doing the housekeeping. When Martha asks Jesus to tell her sister to help her, Jesus to tell her sister to help her, Jesus tells her that Mary's decision to sit at his feet and listen was the better choice. (Luke 10:38 - 42 NIV)	Martha's dedication to the housework in the Bible is the basis for the role of an entire class of women . The Marthas in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> are domestic servants , who are in charge of all things related to housekeeping , such as cooking and cleaning.

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Sons of Jacob	Jacob is the son of Issac and appears in the book of Genesis. God promises Jacob that his descendants will spread all around the world and will eventually rule it. Jacob has twelve sons, who establish the twelve tribes of Israel. (Genesis 28:10 - 14 NIV)	The Sons of Jacob are the founders of Gilead . By associating themselves with the Biblical Jacob, they are implying that they are divine patriarchs who are destined to rule the earth . By using the name from the Book of Genesis , Atwood also means to draw parallels between the Biblical genesis of man and the genesis of Gilead . Both are extremely patriarchal . Since genesis means the beginning , Gilead uses the stories from Genesis as the foundation and justification for its oppressive society.
Handmaids	In the book of Genesis, Rachel is married to Jacob, but cannot have children. So they can have a child, Rachel suggests that her handmaid, Bilhah, should have sex with her husband and carry their children. (Genesis 30:1-3 NIV)	This Bible verse appears several times throughout the book: the book's epigraph, before the Ceremony, and in Offred's memories. "Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. Give me children, or else I die [] And so on and so forth" (Chapter 15). Atwood repeats this Bible verse to show how important this specific narrative is to Gilead. By interpreting this verse literally, it justifies Handmaids being forced to bear children and other forms of patriarchal oppression.
Angels	In the Bible, angels typically appear as protectors. In literature, angels are an archetype for compassion, kindness, and spiritual connection.	In <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> , Atwood uses this term ironically . The Angels are upholding Gilead's oppressive regime through violence . The idea that angels are God's soldiers is also at play here: implying that the founders of Gilead view themselves as divine figures , or God-like since the Angels are soldiers for their cause .

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Biblical Allusions: Places [4]

Place	Biblical Significance	Significance in The Handmaid's Tale
Gilead	Gilead appears several times in the Bible, but is first referenced in the Book of Genesis . In the Bible, Jacob takes his wives (Rachel and Leah), Rachel and Leah's handmaids, and his children to begin a new society in Gilead, where Jacob will be the authority figure . (Genesis 31:21 - 22)	Jacob's desire to create a world where he is the ultimate patriarch parallels the main idea behind the creation of Gilead in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> .
Rachel and Leah Center (The Red Center)	The Rachel and Leah Center gets its name from the story of Rachel and Leah in the Book of Genesis. Rachel and Leah are Jacob's wives, but the two are in constant competition with each other over who can have more children. When she can't get pregnant, Rachel suggests that they use her handmaid so that she can have children.	The Rachel and Leah Center is the site where Handmaids are indoctrinated before they are assigned to their households. By naming it after Jacob's Wives and not their Handmaids, Atwood is erasing the Handmaids' relevance and instead focuses on the wives who have more power . This parallels the dynamic between Wives and Handmaids in the novel. <i>"It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the</i> <i>Wives" (Chapter 8)</i> Similarly, the competition between Rachel and Leah reflects how women in Gilead are always at odds with one another. <i>"In this house we all envy each other</i>
		something" (Chapter 8)
Jezebel's	In Christian lore, Jezebel misled saints of God into sexual immorality through manipulation and seduction. The name Jezebel has come to mean a wicked, immoral, or sexual woman.	This is the name of the brothel that The Commander takes Offred to. Even though the men are the ones committing the immoral/sexual acts, the name Jezebel's implies that women are still to blame for their promiscuity .
Stores	Each of the stores (All Flesh, Lilies of the Field, Milk and Honey, Loaves and Fishes, and Daily Bread) in Gilead has some reference to the Bible.	While none of them are particularly significant to the story overall, Atwood makes these allusions to show how deeply Christianity is integrated into Gileadean society.

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Phrases [4]

Phrase	Biblical Significance	Significance in The Handmaid's Tale
"Blessed be the fruit"	When Mary is pregnant with Jesus, she goes to visit her friend Elizabeth , who is also pregnant. Elizabeth's baby moves and she tells Mary: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:42).	This quote is an acceptable greeting in Gilead, and are Ofglen's first words to Offred. The full quote is shortened to emphasise the importance of having children. By making this a greeting, Gilead is reminding the Handmaids that their only value to society is their ability to give birth.
"May the Lord Open"	In Rachel and Leah's story, their wombs are often referred to as either "open" or "closed."	In Gilead, this is the acceptable response to "blessed be the fruit." It signifies how the Handmaids are meant to hope that they will be "open" and can therefore fulfill their only purpose.
"Praise Be"	When used in the Bible, the phrase "praise be" is meant to show one's praise to God . For example: "Praise be to God who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" (Psalm 66:20).	Interestingly, the Gileadean adaptation of this phrase omits any mention of God. This shows that religion and religious language is not really meant to be a form of worship, but instead is used as a method of control.
"Under His Eye"	This phrase refers to the Eye of God (also known as the The Eye of Providence, or the all-seeing Eye). The Eye of God is a symbol that's meant to show how God is always watching and appears throughout the Bible and in literature. While it can symbolise protection, it can also symbolise being constantly watched and judged for one's actions. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3).	In this context, this phrase is meant to show how the Handmaids are under constant surveillance. It's an acceptable way to say goodbye and, ultimately, it symbolises people's lack of freedom. <i>""Under His Eye,' she says. The right farewell" (Chapter 8).</i> Note that Gilead's network of secret police, also referenced as the The Eyes of God. The Eyes spy on citizens and report them should they break the rules. This constant surveillance and fear of punishment is one of Gilead's methods of control. <i>"Then one of the Eyes move in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over, into a limp cloth bundle" (Chapter 27).</i>



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Balm in Gilead/Bomb in Gilead	The "balm in Gilead" refers to a verse in the Old Testament: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" (Jeremiah 8:22) Later, it was adapted into a hymn, which worships Jesus, referring to his ability to heal and comfort people.	While the hymn uses this phrase as a reverence for Jesus' ability to heal people, the original verse suggests that there isn't balm (and therefore, no faith) in Gilead. This shows how, instead of being blessed through Jesus' healing, people in Gilead are subjected to harm and violence. Offred remembers that Moira purposefully misquoted this hymn, and instead called it <i>"There is a Bomb in</i> <i>Gilead" (Chapter 34).</i> In a society where the Bible is taken literally, Moira's deliberate revision of this hymn shows how she is finding subtle ways to resist Gilead's indoctrination.

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Children of Ham	The concept of the Children of Ham appears in the book of Genesis. Noah has three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. One day, Ham angers Noah and Noah curses Ham's children to a life of servitude (Genesis 9:25). While the Bible doesn't describe Noah or Ham in racial terms, over time Ham and his children were eventually portrayed as Black . Many historians believe that this Bible verse was used as justification for the enslavement of African Americans .	In the book, The Children of Ham are mentioned once: "'Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule,'" says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen [] Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm, is the theory" (Chapter 14). In this context, the Children of Ham are Black Americans. By specifically using the term "Children of Ham," Atwood is saying that Gilead is using a racist interpretation of the Bible to justify resettlement of Black Americans, just as this Bible verse was used to justify slavery. "Resettlement" in this case may also be a euphemism for genocide or slavery, as there are no Black people (or other racial/ethnic minorities) in the novel.
Testifying	The concept of testifying appears throughout the Bible and in the Christian religion. This typically refers to confessing one's sins .	In the novel, Testifying is used as a way to humiliate Handmaids as part of their indoctrination. "Aunt Helena is here, as well as Aunt Lydia, because Testifying is special" (Chapter 13). During Testifying, Janine tells the group of Handmaids "about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion" (Chapter 13). Instead of offering their support, the women in the room point at Janine and tell her it was "her fault." Offred remembers how Janine was brought to tears and, "even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her." Testifying in this context does involve confessing one's sins, but instead of receiving forgiveness, it's used as a tool to reinforce harmful, sexist ideas.

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Other Religious Allusions

There are several instances throughout the novel where Atwood refers to **Bible verses** or other **religious symbols**. For example, Offred will often refer to certain verses or hymns and **change the words**. By changing the words, Atwood **emphasises certain aspects of Gileadean society**.

"Oh God, King of the Universe, thank you for not creating me a man. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled" (Chapter 30)

- This phrase is **adapted** from a **prayer** that traditionally says: **"Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe who has not created me a woman"**
- Offred changes this phrase and instead thanks God for "not creating me a man."
- This change is **ironic**, as in Gilead, **men** are **valued** much more than **women**.
- However, even though she is subjected to rape and toture, Offred is able to have children (i.e. be *"fruitful"*), which gives her value in society.
- By following the idea of **childbirth** with the prayer **"oh God, obliterate me"** Offred conveys to the reader that **having children will reduce her to nothing**.
- In other words, Offred has to "obliterate" herself in order to have value in this patriarchal society.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, could save a wretch like me, who once was lost, but now am found, was bound, but now am free" (Chapter 10)

- Here, Offred is quoting Amazing Grace. The original text of this song says: "once blind but now I see"
- This change emphasises that Offred longs for freedom. Her role as a Handmaid has "bound" her to a life of servitude and oppression.
- After she sings the song to herself, Offred notes that "such songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous" (Chapter 10)
- Not only does **Offred's version** of the hymn show how she wants **freedom**, it is also a way to **resist Gilead's oppression**.

"And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (Chapter 46)

- These are the last lines of the book, as Offred is either taken away by Mayday or by The Eyes. The ending is intentionally ambiguous, but the way Atwood phrases it has Biblical significance.
- The idea of darkness vs. light appears frequently in the Bible. Light is usually associated with Jesus, God, and/or religious salvation, whereas the dark represents sin and temptation. For example:
 - "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8 NIV)
 - The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5)





- Offred's speculation about her fate is described in Biblical terms to show that she is either going towards "the light" (i.e. to escape with Mayday) or towards "the darkness" (i.e. to be tortured by the Eyes).
- "The darkness within" could also represent how Offred has gone against Gilead's religious ideals and, from their perspective, is a sinner and a subversive.
- Ultimately, this shows that Offred's idea of light and salvation is her escape from the religious oppression of Gilead.

Hope, Charity, and Faith

One theme that is present throughout the story is **hope**, **faith**, **and charity**. These three ideals are seen as **key virtues within Christian theology**, and provide a way to **salvation**. Offred personifies these ideals throughout the story. When Offred embraces these ideals, however, she does so in a way that **goes against Gilead**. This is **ironic** because, in order to find salvation through hope, faith, and charity. Offred has to **resist** the very values and **religious ideals** that Gilead tries to force upon her. Ultimately, **Offred is able to find salvation through rebellion**.

"I get out of bed, go to the window, kneel on the window seat, the hard little cushion, FAITH, and look out. [...] I wonder what has become of the other two cushions. There must have been three, once. HOPE and CHARITY, where have they been stowed?" (Chapter 19)

<u>Hope</u>

The first time Offred mentions feeling hope is when she sees Serena Joy smoking a cigarette. Since Gilead bans all things that could be seen as vices, Offred notes that "the cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope" (Chapter 3).

- The black market represents a group of people who have organised to provide small comforts to people (e.g. cigarettes) but, in doing so, rejects some of the strict rules of Gileadean society.
- Therefore, Serena Joy's cigarette symbolises to Offred even the most pious and devoted supporters of Gilead can break the rules.
- If the rules are broken, even small ones, this is an **act of resistance** that gives Offred hope that people are **resisting Gilead's tyranny**.

One of the more significant times Offred feels hopeful is when Ofglen reveals the existence of Mayday: "but I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree." (Chapter 27)

- Instead of finding hope in God/Jesus like in the Christian belief, Offred finds hope in the fact that there is a resistance.
- Mayday is a group that works to resist Gilead's oppression, but because so much of Gileadean society is based on traditional religious beliefs, Mayday is also rejecting these beliefs.
- Offred's hope is **ironic** because, even though it is a **Christian value**, she finds it in the group that is **resisting these traditional values**.

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Faith

In the closet of her room, Offred finds the phrase "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" carved into the wall of her closet by the Handmaid who came before her (Chapter 9). The Commander later explains that it means "don't let the bastards grind you down" (Chapter 29) This phrase is a form of prayer for Offred, and is repeated throughout the book when Offred needs to find strength. For example, before the Ceremony, Offred says: "I pray silently: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Chapter 15).

- In a Christian context, people often view their faith in God as something that gives them strength and helps them through trying times.
- In Offred's case, nolite de bastardes carborundorum serves a similar purpose.
- She remarks that, because Handmaids are forbidden to write, the message in the cupboard is *"intended for whoever came next"* (Chapter 9). Knowing that this message was intended for her provides Offred with a connection to predecessor and makes her feel as though she is not alone. Particularly in a society that discourages female alliances and friendships, this connection helps Offred feel like she has an ally.
- Offred's repetition of the phrase comes at times when she is feeling helpless, confused, or uncertain. For example, Offred repeats the phrase before the Ceremony (Chapter 15), after her first meeting with the Commander (Chapter 24), when she remembers being separated from her family (Chapter 35), and before she is taken by the Eyes/Mayday (Chapter 46). By repeating the mantra at these moments, it shows how important it is to her and how it becomes a version of faith.
- Offred's faith is not faith in the traditional, Christian sense, but is instead with a phrase that means "don't let the bastards grind you down."
- In this case, the "bastards" are the men in power and Gilead as whole. By finding her faith in this phrase, Offred is embodying a Christian value by rejecting a society that embraces Christian values.
- Interestingly, "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" has also become a common mantra in modern day feminist protests.



A protestor's sign at the 2018 Women's March in Seneca Falls, New York [7]





Charity

After Moira's feet are broken after her escape attempt from the Red Center, the other Handmaids rally around her and do their best to support her under the circumstances: "We stole extra paper packets of sugar for her, from the cafeteria at mealtimes, smuggled them to her, at night, handing them from bed to bed. Probably she didn't need the sugar but it was the only thing we could find to steal. To give" (Chapter 15).

- → Charity, in the Biblical sense, is a way to express love to another person and usually involves giving something to someone who is less fortunate. It's an act of kindness and generosity. For example:
 - "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink" (Matthew 25:35 NIV)
- → In The Handmaid's Tale, the Handmaids express their love to Moira by giving her extra packets of sugar. Offred notes that, even though she probably didn't need it, it was the only thing the Handmaids had "to give."
- → This act of charity is also an act of rebellion for the Handmaids; they are showing their support for Moira, even though she rebelled and tried to escape.

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