

AQA English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Rebellion

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Rebellion

Rebellion is a recurring theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Throughout the book, each of the **main characters** rebel in some way. However, their **reasons** for rebelling are **different**. Some people, like the Commander and Serena Joy, go against Gilead's rules because they **benefit from doing so**. Other characters, like Moira and Ofglen, are activists who **directly fight and rebel** against Gilead's oppression because they want to **fight injustice**. Offred, on the other hand, is more **neutral**, although she does find ways to resist Gilead through **small acts of subversion**. These ideas of **who can rebel**, **why they rebel**, and **what defines rebellion** are important, as they provide insight into broader structures of **power, survival, and human nature**.

Rebellion in Context

The Handmaid's Tale was written at a **tumultuous** time in US history. People were protesting for and against issues like **war, LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, abortion rights, pornography, and civil rights**. Protests are a way to resist various forms of injustice or oppression, and are referenced throughout the book:

“But there were some women burning books, that’s what she was really there for [...] The woman handed me one of the magazines. It had a pretty women on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands” (Chapter 7)

- In this scene, Offred's mother attends a protest where women are **burning pornographic magazines**. Offred -- who's a child at the time -- doesn't understand what's happening.
- During the **1980s**, pornography became a **divisive issue amongst feminists**. Some feminists believed that pornography was **exploitative, dehumanising, and promoted violence against women**. Others argued that pornography is an example of free speech and should not be censored [1].
- Atwood likely found herself amongst the **latter group**, as she has been publicly **opposed to censorship**.

“I remember also my mother, years before [...] I remember her coming back to one of our many apartments, with a group of other women [...] they'd been in a march that day [...] Fucking bleeders, one of her friends said. They called the other side *bleeders*, after the signs they carried: *Let them bleed*. So it must have been the abortion riots” (Chapter 28)

- In **1973**, Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v Wade* and **guaranteed the legal right to abortion**. Although protected under the law, that did not stop people from **protesting on either side**.



Anti-abortion protest, 1986 [2]



- As time went on, prominent **anti-abortion leaders were elected into office** and this philosophy eventually became a **central platform of the Republican party**.
- Most feminists, on the other hand, supported abortion rights.
- Although reluctant to call herself a feminist, **Atwood is a fierce supporter of abortion rights**.
- The **anti-abortion movement** likely inspired many aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as Gilead is a society where **women have lost not just the right to abortion and birth control, but all bodily autonomy**.

Who is Considered a Rebel?

Another theme that *The Handmaid's Tale* explores is the idea of **who is considered to be a rebel**. All of the main characters rebel against Gilead in some way or another, but only **those who do not have power are considered rebels**. For example, Moira and Offgen are more likely to be thought of as rebels than The Commander and Serena Joy. The Commander and Serena Joy are in **positions of power**, and their acts of resistance towards Gilead are done for **personal gain**. Moira and Offgen's acts of rebellion are intended to **fight injustice**. In other words, for people like the Commander and Serena Joy, they are rebelling against Gilead because its stifling laws **make their lives inconvenient**, but for Moira and Offgen, they are rebelling because Gilead is **directly responsible for their oppression**.

The Commander

The Commander is the most powerful character in the book. As a man, he benefits the most from Gilead's oppressive regime. Despite this, he still **rebels against its strict rules**. He invites Offred to his study, where they read and play Scrabble together (Chapter 23). Later, they go to a brothel where they have sex (Chapter 39). **Both of these violate Gilead's rules and can be seen as acts of rebellion**. Interestingly, however, The Commander **uses Offred as a means of rebelling**. In other words, he uses his power and influence over Offred to benefit himself.

During one of their meetings, Offred and The Commander discuss why they meet, especially knowing that it's a **risk** to both of them (**but particularly Offred**). When The Commander tells Offred he hopes she enjoys coming to visit him, she tells him why she thinks that is: **"You want my life to be bearable to me," I say [...] If my life is bearable, maybe what they're doing is all right after all.**" (Chapter 29)

- In this scene, The Commander expresses that he feels **guilty** about Offred's situation and **wants to improve it** through their illicit meetings. However, this is **disingenuous**.
- His acts of rebellion are also just a way to justify to himself that the society he created really isn't that bad so he can **absolve himself of any wrongdoing**.
- Thus, **Offred becomes a tool** that The Commander uses to relieve his guilt and reassure him that **"what they're doing is all right after all."**
- In this case, The Commander is willing to rebel against Gilead to make Offred's life **"bearable"** and yet, **he directly benefits from her oppression**.



When The Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's, she is again used for his benefit. **“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.” (Chapter 37)**

- The Commander's **hubris** is another reason why he rebels.
- **“Breaking the rules”** is almost a **game** for The Commander.
- **Compared to people like Ofglen and Moira**, who rebel to resist injustice, The Commander is breaking the rules because he wants to demonstrate his **“mastery of the world.”**
- In other words, **he wants people to understand how powerful he is**. By bringing Offred with him to Jezebel's, he is using her as a way to demonstrate his power.

Ultimately, while The Commander does rebel against Gilead, he doesn't do so in a way that would actually change the society. **He will rebel against Gilead when it suits him, but won't rebel in a way that takes away his power.**

Serena Joy

Serena Joy also uses Offred as a tool for her rebellion. While not as powerful as The Commander, she still has **status** in Gilead, and can use her influence to get Offred to break the rules. **Similarly to The Commander** though, she doesn't rebel against Gilead in a way that would actually improve the situation for Offred and the other Handmaids, but instead **goes against Gilead only when it suits her**. Even though she's unhappy, she recognises that she benefits from Gilead's rule, and **won't rebel against the system directly**.

In their first meeting, Offred recognises that Serena might be willing to go against Gilead because she's **smoking a cigarette** -- something which is **forbidden**: **“She had a cigarette [...] She then was a woman who might bend the rules. But what did I have, to trade?” (Chapter 3)**

- In their first meeting, Serena tells Offred that their relationship is **“like a business transaction” (Chapter 3)**.
- Offred realises that, in order to get the cigarette, she will need to have something **“to trade,”** further showing that their **relationship is transactional**.
- Later in the book, when Offred agrees to sleep with Nick to increase her chance of getting pregnant, **Serena offers her a cigarette in exchange** (Chapter 31).
- **Similar to The Commander, she uses Offred as an instrument for her rebellion and for her own benefit.**

Serena demonstrates to Offred on several occasions that she's **willing to break the rules**. For example, in addition to smoking cigarettes, she also **suggests that The Commander is infertile**, something that is considered **“heresy” (Chapter 31)**.

- Both of these instances of rebellion show that Serena is willing to rebel against Gilead, **albeit in small, indirect ways**.
- However, due to Serena's transactional relationship with Offred, she **never has to do any of the rebelling herself**.



- Ultimately, Serena strategically uses her small acts of dissent (e.g. cigarettes, implying that the Commander is infertile) to **persuade Offred to rebel on her behalf**.
- This shows how **their relationship is transactional**, but also shows how **Serena is willing to rebel against Gilead as long as she is the one who benefits**.

Moira

Moira is the most rebellious character in the book; she takes direct action to resist Gilead. She is also a lesbian; thus she **rejects Gilead's heteronormative expectations**. However, because she is a lesbian, she is labeled as a "Gender Traitor" and threatened with death. Therefore, her rebellion against Gilead isn't just for comfort or power like The Commander or Serena Joy: **her rebellion is for her own survival**. Despite this, Moira ultimately ends up at Jezebel's with her rebellious spirit broken. While this shows that **Gilead's oppressive environment often breaks the spirit** of even the most rebellious people, Moira is an important character because she **epitomises the classic idea of a rebel**.

At the Red Center, Moira attempts to escape, but is caught and tortured. Despite this, she successfully escapes the second time. **"Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose [...] Moira was our fantasy."** (Chapter 22)

- Moira is able to take some of her **"power"** back by **escaping from the Red Center**, which is seen as a **"fantasy"** for the rest of the Handmaids who are being **indoctrinated into submission and complacency**.
- However, compared to The Commander and Serena Joy, Moira doesn't have power in Gilead and she is persecuted due to her sexuality.
- **By escaping, she takes back some of her power, but she is also able to ensure her survival.**

After Moira escapes from the Red Center, she is **eventually caught and sent to work at Jezebel's** as a sex worker. When Offred sees her again, she notices how Moira is **resigned to her fate** and is no longer the rebellious person she remembers. Offred says: **"I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack"** (Chapter 38).

- Throughout the book, **Moira and her rebelliousness are a source of hope** for Offred and the other Handmaids.
- When the two see each other at Jezebel's, however, Moira no longer has the **"heroism"** that Offred remembers.
- **Even though her rebellion is essential to her survival, Moira has been broken down by Gilead to the point that she is resigned to her fate.**

Ofglen

As a Handmaid, Ofglen is also directly oppressed by Gilead. While in the TV adaptation, Ofglen is a lesbian, the book doesn't specify her sexuality. In either case, Ofglen is similar to Moira in the sense that Ofglen also **directly rebels against Gilead** because she views it as a way to survive and be free of oppression.



Ofglen reveals that she's a **member of the resistance group Mayday**. When she reveals this to Offred, the two bond over their shared **subversion**:

“You were always so stinking pious.”

‘So were you,’ I reply. I want to laugh, shout, hug her.

‘You can join us,’ she says. (Chapter 27)

- Ofglen also provides Offred with a **sense of security and hope, like Moira**.
- However, also like Moira, Ofglen isn't able to survive Gilead. She is revealed as a rebel and commits suicide instead of facing torture by the Eyes.
- She is quickly replaced by a new Handmaid, and Offred recognises her own complacency: **“Now that Ofglen is gone, I am alert again, my sluggishness has fallen away, my body is no longer for pleasure only but senses its jeopardy” (Chapter 44).**
- Knowing that Ofglen is a member of Mayday and that there is a group resisting Gilead, Offred finds herself **relaxing**. In other words, the pressure to rebel against Gilead herself is gone; **she can rely on other people to do the direct action**.
- The comfort of knowing that there's *someone* who is resisting gives her a sense of hope, and she feels as though she doesn't need to do anything herself to rebel against Gilead.

Once Ofglen and Moira are gone, however, Offred feels as though she is no longer safe.

She recognises the impact that Gilead's consistent and violent oppression can have, as **many of the people who directly rebel against Gilead are not able to survive**. From the beginning of the book, Offred says that she **“intend[s] to last” (Chapter 2)**. Ultimately, Offred's **complacency and reluctance** to directly engage in rebellion may have been the thing that saves her life.

Is Offred a Rebel?

There is some debate around whether Offred is a rebel or not. While she finds small ways to resist Gilead, she does not directly take action like Moira, her mother, or Ofglen. Throughout the book, she is relatively **complicit in her own oppression**.



Margaret Atwood in 2017 [4]

As a character, **Offred is similar to Margaret Atwood**. While Atwood is a fierce advocate for reproductive rights, **she is reluctant to identify as a feminist or an activist**. In a speech for the women's rights organisation Equality Now, Atwood said: **“I am, of course, not a real activist—I'm simply a writer without a job who is frequently asked to speak about subjects that would get people with jobs fired if they themselves spoke. You, however, at Equality Now are real activists. I hope people will give Equality Now lots and lots of money, today, so they can write equal laws, enact equal laws and see that equal laws are implemented. That way, in time, all girls may be able to grow up believing that there are no avenues that are closed to them simply because they are girls” [3].**



Offred also relies on other people to rebel, but doesn't directly take action herself. In her essay *Selves, Survival, and Resistance in The Handmaid's Tale*, Elizabeth Hansot notes: **“Although Offred is drawn to the subversive potential [...] her isolation as well as her fear (of the Eyes, of spies among the handmaids, and of the never fully specified punishments if found out) severely limits her involvement”** [5]. However, Offred's reluctance to rebel began before Gilead came to power.

Before Gilead

Gilead's rise to power did not happen overnight, but with a slow, **gradual reduction of women's rights and autonomy**. As women lost their rights to have a job, handle money, and hold property there were protests, but Offred didn't go. As she remembers: **“I didn't go to any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes”** (Chapter 28).

- Luke persuades Offred to stay at home instead of going to the protests.
- By telling her to think about her family, Luke is echoing some of **Gilead's patriarchal ideas** by implying that **family is more important than individual rights**.
- Forced to stay at home, Offred begins to take on a more **traditionally feminine role**, even though it means she has to try **“not to cry at mealtimes.”**
- Despite her despair, Offred doesn't immediately try to help her situation.
- Offred likely doesn't rebel because she's afraid of the violence at the marches, or is worried that she may be reported.
- By making a choice not to rebel, but to stay at home away from the violence, **Offred is also prioritising her own safety**. While this may not make her a rebel, it is understandable.

Eventually, Offred realises that the situation is getting worse after Gilead takes over. She **decides to flee**. As they prepare for their journey, she says: **“It's going to be all right, I said, prayed in my head. Oh let it. Let us cross, let us across. Just this once I'll do anything”** (Chapter 35).

- While this may be seen as an act of rebellion, it is an **act of self-preservation**.
- She says she'll **“do anything”** to cross the border to safety, because **it means that she will be able to survive**.
- Later in the book, when faced with the possibility of being tortured by The Eyes, **Offred has a similar realisation**. She says that she will **“say anything they like, I'll incriminate anyone”** (Chapter 44) and **“I want to keep on living, in any form”** (Chapter 45).
- This shows that Offred is willing to do **“anything”** to survive, even if it means remaining as a Handmaid in Gilead.

As A Handmaid

Offred's determination to survive is apparent. As she arrives at The Commander's house for the first time, she remarks that: **“I try not to think too much [...] Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last”** (Chapter 2).



- Individuality and thinking are viewed as rebellious acts in Gilead, and Offred believes that they “**can hurt your chances [of survival].**”
- From the beginning, **Offred is saying that she plans to choose her own survival above anything else.**

Later in the book, when Offred discovers the existence of Mayday (Chapter 27), **she is relieved.** However, as Ofglen encourages her to become more involved and get information, **Offred is reluctant.** “**I can’t, I say to Ofglen. I’m too afraid. Anyway I’d be no good at that, I’d get caught**” (Chapter 41).

- Even though Offred is grateful that there is a resistance to Gilead, she does not want to be directly involved.
- By doing so, she is again **prioritising her own safety and survival, instead of rebelling and fighting injustice.**

Offred realises that “**Ofglen is giving up on me. She whispers less, talks more about the weather. I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief.**” (Chapter 41)

- Offred feels “**relief**” when Ofglen no longer expects her to rebel against Gilead directly, because it **ensures that she does not have to put herself in harm’s way.**

Offred has a similar experience with the phrase “**nolite te bastardes carborundorum.**” Even though it is seen as a **rallying cry** (the translation is “don’t let the bastards grind you down”), **Offred sometimes feels as though even this act of rebellion will jeopardise her chances of survival.**

- When she first discovers it, she deduces that the message was “**intended for whoever came next**” (Chapter 9).
- This small act of rebellion **connects her to the previous Handmaid**, but eventually Offred repeats the phrase to herself and thinks that this act of rebellion was **futile**: “**Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Fat lot of good it did her. Why fight?**” (Chapter 35).
- When Offred questions the futility of rebellion, it shows that she is **justifying her own passivity to herself.**
- In other words, she is asking the question: **why would I rebel if it means I’m just going to die anyway?**



A sign from the 2020 Women’s March in Raleigh, North Carolina [5]. In recent years, the phrase has become a popular protest slogan amongst feminists.



Despite her general **passivity**, Offred also has moments of **subversion**. For example, she reads while she meets with the Commander (Chapter 29), she goes to Jezebel's despite the risk because she wants **"anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things"** (Chapter 36), and she has an affair with Nick (Chapter 41).

- In these instances, **she is able to subvert Gilead because there are other, more powerful people involved** (i.e. The Commander and Serena Joy).
- So while Offred does use these events as a subversion, and a way to get things that **make her life more tolerable**, she is only doing so because it comes with **less risk**.

Occasionally, Offred **fantasises about being more rebellious**, but decides against it, as it is **too risky for her survival**. Before the Ceremony, she says that she would: **"like to steal something from this room [...] It would make me feel that I have power. But such a feeling would be an illusion, and too risky. My hands stay here they are, folded in my lap"** (Chapter 14)

- Even though **stealing** something would give Offred a sense of **"power,"** she **decides against it** because it is **"too risky."**
- This shows that **Offred is willing to choose her own safety over her own sense of empowerment**.

After her first meeting with The Commander, where he asks her to kiss him **"as if [she] meant it"** (Chapter 23), **Offred fantasises about taking revenge**. **"I think about how I could approach the Commander [...] I think about the blood coming out of him [...] In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't"** (Chapter 23)

- Murdering The Commander would certainly be a **direct act of rebellion** but, again, **Offred doesn't act on her fantasy**.
- Moreover, she also says that she didn't think about killing The Commander until long **after the fact**.
- This shows that Offred, while she's able to have rebellious thoughts, doesn't act on them **because she knows it would be dangerous**.

By the end of the book, Offred regrets not being more active and rebellious in Gilead. **"I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia."** (Chapter 41)

- By acknowledging her own **passivity**, Offred also acknowledges that she's a **flawed character**.
- Compared to people like Moira or Ofglen, she is definitely **not as heroic** and as she's telling her story after the fact, she wishes that maybe she had been.
- This quote also asks the reader an important question: **is it more important to take action, even if it costs your life and safety? Or is it more important to stay safe so you can tell your story?**



Offred's character is complicated: while she does not directly rebel against Gilead, she does break the rules in certain circumstances in order to make her life bearable. In other words, **Offred doesn't rebel against Gilead to change the society overall, but to make her own life more tolerable.** While this may not be as rebellious as Moira or Ofglen, this is also not as self-serving as The Commander or Serena Joy. In a way, Offred's lack of outright rebellion (as compared to Moira or Ofglen) as well as her regrets about this make a more **relatable** character.

Ultimately, Offred is probably not a rebel in the traditional sense, because she **prioritises her own safety over rebelling against oppression.** That being said, because she does this, she is able to **tell her story.** In a society that wants her to be erased, **one could argue that this is, in fact, an act of rebellion.**



Elisabeth Moss as Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* TV adaptation [7].



References

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_views_on_pornography#Sex-positive_and_anti-censors_hip_feminist_views

[2] Image Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-abortion_protest,_1986.jpg

[3] Speech by Margaret Atwood:

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/lifestyle-news/making-equality-reality-gala-margaret-atwood-amandla-stenberg-honored-1166497/>

[4] Image Source:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Margaret_Atwood_-_Foire_du_Livre_de_Francfort_\(37_025811914\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Margaret_Atwood_-_Foire_du_Livre_de_Francfort_(37_025811914).jpg)

[5] HANSOT, ELISABETH. "Selves, Survival, and Resistance in The Handmaid's Tale." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 56–69. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20719313. Accessed 29 May 2021.

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[6] Image Source:

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[7] Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/73886864@N08/47066443462>

