

# Edexcel English Literature A-level

## The Handmaid's Tale: Character Profiles Aunt Lydia

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## Introduction

Aunt Lydia is an older woman who **indoctrinates Handmaids**. She is not anyone's biological Aunt: instead, she - and other women - were given the title of "Aunt" to **suggest some familiarity**. This is **ironic** because the Aunts - **instead of being protective, familiar allies** - are some of the fiercest supporters of Gilead and **commit the most atrocious acts of violence**. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is arguably the character who is responsible for the most misogynistic beliefs and horrific punishments. She's also an interesting character because she **exists both in Offred's memories and in her present**. Offred often interjects her own narrative with Aunt Lydia's indoctrinating messages. In this way, **Aunt Lydia serves as a malevolent guide for Offred** as she navigates the oppressive world of Gilead.

### EXAM TIP!

**Be sure to note when characters are portrayed in different ways... or not.** In Aunt Lydia's case, her portrayal remains pretty much the same in the original novel, film, TV show, and graphic novel. Think about why her character in particular has remained the same while the others haven't.

## Symbolism

### Oppressive Control

The reader - and Offred - **first meet Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre**, where Offred and other Handmaids are indoctrinated into Gilead's new society. While **Aunt Lydia is not an orchestrator of Gilead's society** like The Commander or Serena Joy, **she is its enforcer**. Aunt Lydia's dominant role at the Red Centre shows that she has tremendous control over Offred and the other Handmaids. Because the Red Centre serves as the gateway into Gileadean society, **Aunt Lydia is -- by extension -- a symbol of oppressive control**. This is also seen by how often her thoughts and ideas show up in Offred's narrative. In other words, **even though Offred has her own subversive thoughts, there is always Aunt Lydia's voice there telling her to fall into line and serve Gilead**.

In a way, Aunt Lydia serves Offred as both a **guiding force and a sort of survival mechanism**. While Aunt Lydia **perpetuates some of the most misogynistic ideas**, she is also able to get the Handmaids to submit to these ideas. In a society where **female submission is a key part of female survival**, Aunt Lydia's frequent presence in Offred's consciousness serves as a reminder to keep herself alive, even if it means losing her identity. **This battle between identity and survival is central to Atwood's message: is it worth it to stay alive if you lose yourself?**



## Character in Context

- **A Complicated Character:** In 2019, Margaret Atwood published *The Testaments*, a sequel which takes place 15 years after *The Handmaid's Tale*, and is **told partially from Aunt Lydia's perspective**. So, while Aunt Lydia is one of the main villains in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she becomes the protagonist in *The Testaments*.
  - This is an interesting choice on Atwood's part, as it **creates a moral dilemma** for the reader. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is one of the most misogynistic characters, and **often enforces Gilead's patriarchal power structure to the point of violence**. By giving her a backstory, however, **Atwood presents her as a victim and subversive of Gilead and, thus, makes her more sympathetic**.
  - **Atwood wants the reader to question who is really to blame for Aunt Lydia's actions:** is it Aunt Lydia herself, or is she just a victim of Gilead like everyone else? If Aunt Lydia were truly a subversive, yet benefitted from and enforced Gilead's oppressive regime on others, can she really be forgiven?
  - Atwood's philosophy surrounding **feminism** is that the worst thing women can be to each other is enemies, and that **the true enemy is patriarchy**. In other words, Atwood views women who divide women - whether their goal is to uphold patriarchy or strive for women's liberation - as enemies of the feminist movement overall. If Atwood were to answer the questions above, she would likely argue that it is more important to **forgive Aunt Lydia for her acts of violence than it is to hold her accountable and view her as an enemy**. Critics of Atwood, however, would argue that **her subversion does not justify her acts of oppression, and that she should be seen as a villain**. In either case, Aunt Lydia is a complicated character who is meant to highlight the dilemmas facing the many factions of the feminist movement.

### EXAM TIP!

Including critics' arguments, such as the ones above, will add nuance and help strengthen your argument.

## Key Characteristics

### 1. Merciless Matriarch

As an Aunt, Aunt Lydia adopts a **semi-maternal role** and cares for the Handmaids while they're at the Red Centre. Despite this, she is also **merciless**, and often uses her **position of power to inflict harm on the Handmaids**. Her loyalties aren't with any of the Handmaids who she is meant to protect, but instead **her loyalty is only to Gilead**.



## 2. Misogynistic

Similar to Serena Joy, although Aunt Lydia is a woman, she is not sympathetic to the plight of other women at the hands of the patriarchy. **Aunt Lydia specifically enforces Gilead's patriarchal ideals** and often **echoes its most harmful sentiments**.

### Key Moments

CH	OCCURRENCE	SIGNIFICANCE
13	Testifying	<p>At the Red Centre, Testifying is where the Handmaids confess to their sins. In this chapter, Janine talks about how she was <b>“gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion” (Chapter 13)</b>. After confessing, the Handmaids tell Janine that it was her fault. <b>This is one of the first instances that the reader sees the acts of indoctrination at the Red Centre</b>. By telling Janine that her sexual assault was <b>“her fault,”</b> the Handmaids (with the Aunt watching) are <b>repeating one the most misogynistic arguments</b>: violence against women is the victim's fault. This enforces the <b>harmful, patriarchal idea that men are never held accountable for their actions, and women are to blame</b>.</p>
15	Moira's First Escape Attempt	<p>After Moira's first escape attempt, she is caught by the Aunts and brought back to the Red Centre. As Moira comes back with her feet broken, <b>Aunt Lydia closes the curtains so the other Handmaids can't see</b>.</p> <p><b>“Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Chapter 15)</b></p> <p>In this part of Aunt Lydia's <b>indoctrination</b>, she is telling the Handmaids that they are <b>only valued for their ability to procreate</b>. This <b>dehumanises the Handmaids and further makes them lose their sense of identity</b>. By breaking Moira's hands and feet, the Aunts are taking away two of the most defining characteristics as humans and, thus, <b>taking away their humanity and identity</b> too.</p>



<p><b>20</b></p>	<p>Aunt Lydia Shows the Unwoman Film</p>	<p>During one of the film showings at the Red Centre, Aunt Lydia shows the Handmaids a documentary about the Unwomen. In it, <b>Offred sees her mother, who is at a protest</b> holding a sign that says “Take Back the Night.”</p> <p>For context, Take Back the Night is an organisation whose mission is to end sexual, relationship, and domestic violence. The first marches and events took place in the 1970s.</p> <p>Here, it’s an interesting <b>juxtaposition of Aunt Lydia - who is encouraging sexual subservience and violence - and Offred’s mother - who is fighting against it.</b></p>
<p><b>22</b></p>	<p>Offred Imagines Moira’s Escape Attempt</p>	<p>Moira eventually escapes from the Red Centre. Although Offred didn’t see it happen, she imagines how it played out by <b>envisioning a conversation between Aunt Lydia and Janine</b>. While Moira’s escape is an inspiration to the rest of the Handmaids, this scene in particular shows how <b>Aunt Lydia serves as a gatekeeper for the information the Handmaids receive</b>. Even though Offred finds hope in Moira’s escape, she is still relying on Aunt Lydia to tell her the truth of what happened. This shows how Aunt Lydia has worked her way into Offred’s consciousness and indoctrinated her, even outside of the Red Centre. More importantly <b>signifies the battle between hope and resistance (Moira) and the forces that try to control it (Aunt Lydia)</b>.</p>
<p><b>42 and 43</b></p>	<p>Salvaging and Particution</p>	<p>At the Salvaging, Offred sees Aunt Lydia for the first time since the Red Centre.</p> <p><b>“How many years since I’ve seen her? I’d begun to think she existed only in my head, but here she is, a little older” (Chapter 42)</b></p> <p>With Aunt Lydia in her memories, <b>Offred is able to distance herself from the violent oppression of Gilead</b>. When Offred sees Aunt Lydia again, however, the horrors and violence become real. First, Offred witnesses the Salvaging, where three women are hung on a stage that has been built in front of the university’s library. The Handmaids also have to place their hands on the rope to</p>



		<p>show “<b>complicity in the death of this woman</b>” (Chapter 42).</p> <p>Once the Salvaging is over, the Particution begins. Aunt Lydia says the man has been convicted of rape and is sentenced to death. Offred notices her own violent urge as the Handmaids swarm the man and kill him.</p> <p>This is the first time in the book that the reader <b>has seen overt acts of violence being committed</b>. Not only that, but <b>Offred becomes a participant in the violence</b>. Aunt Lydia’s presence at these events signifies that Offred’s <b>indoctrination as a Handmaid is complete</b>, as she’s able to first witness, and then participate in, acts of violence to maintain Gilead’s order.</p>
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## Relationships with Other Characters

### Relationship with Offred

Aunt Lydia usually appears in Offred’s memories and **serves as an internal voice to “help” Offred stay alive** in this new, oppressive society. This is complicated by the fact that, in order to survive in Gilead, Aunt Lydia must indoctrinate Offred and the other Handmaids to the point where they **lose their sense of identity**. Aunt Lydia’s relationship with Offred symbolises the oppressive control that Gilead has over women. Furthermore, by placing a woman in such a violent role, Atwood is suggesting that women can be and are complicit in perpetuating dangerous **patriarchal ideas** and **oppressing other women**.

### Relationship with Moira

Aunt Lydia is a **character foil** for Moira. Throughout the book, memories of Aunt Lydia and Moira often appear together. This shows that, while Offred has been indoctrinated by Aunt Lydia, **she can still find the will to resist through her memories of Moira**. Furthermore, by placing the two character foils together so frequently, this **represents Offred’s internal conflict**. In other words: does Offred **submit to the patriarchy and stay alive**, as Aunt Lydia would want? Or does she **stay true to herself and risk death**, as Moira would want?

*“What we’re aiming for, says Aunt Lydia, is a spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together”*

*“Camaraderie, shit, says Moira”*  
 (Chapter 34)



## Key Quotes

**“Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.” (Chapter 6)**

- By telling the Handmaids that this society will eventually become ordinary, Aunt Lydia deliberately **encourages them to become complacent** and to accept their fate. This is likely a technique to break their spirit so they submit to this world that is so oppressive.

**“It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it’s the Wives [...] Try to feel for them.” (Chapter 8)**

- Here, Aunt Lydia is encouraging Offred to prioritise someone else’s feelings over her own. This also encourages her to **submit to those that are in power** - in this case the Wives. This tactic also serves to **turn women against each other**. Preventing alliances in Gilead - particularly between women - is a key tactic to Gilead’s oppression. In other words, **by turning women against each other, Gilead is able to maintain its patriarchal ideals**. More importantly, however, by having this indoctrination promoted by a woman, this further discourages female alliances. **The only alliance that is allowed is between a person and Gilead**. When Gilead is acting against someone’s self-interest though, there is no choice but to conform.

**“I’m doing my best, she said. I’m trying to give you the best chance you can have.” (Chapter 15)**

- In a strange way, Aunt Lydia cares for the Handmaids and wants to protect them from harm, but the real harm is the society that she’s supporting. It’s a bit of a paradox: **Aunt Lydia is protective and an occasionally maternal character, but she uses these characteristics to indoctrinate women to an oppressive society.**

**“A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savors in her mouth. Think of yourselves as pearls. We, sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives” (Chapter 19)**

- This quote shows how **dehumanised the Handmaids** are to Aunt Lydia.
  - By saying **“a thing is valued,”** Aunt Lydia is referring to the Handmaids as things.
  - She then describes them as **“pearls”** which, while this might be understood as a compliment, still dehumanises them because it **fails to recognize their identity as individual, complicated women**.
  - Aunt Lydia has power over the Handmaids and they are **“hers to define.”** In other words, **Aunt Lydia can use her position of power to shape the very identities of the Handmaids**. Ironically, she shapes their identities as Handmaids by making them forget their identities as people.



- Similar to the Commander, Aunt Lydia views her job as a **moral quest**. This helps her **dissociate from the evils she commits**.

**“You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the one who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won’t want things they can’t have” (Chapter 29)**

- This quote shows that Aunt Lydia somewhat understands the hardship of the Handmaids. Instead of encouraging them to hold on to their memories, however, she longs for a world where women **“won’t want things they can’t have.”**
- This shows the **importance of memories and how they shape someone’s identity**. Because memories shape one’s identity - as we see through Offred’s telling of her story - it’s a key tactic of Gilead to remove women from their memories.
- Without their memories of how things were, Aunt Lydia - and therefore Gilead - envisions a world where women **“accept their duties with willing hearts.”** **By accepting these duties, however, women must be stripped of their identities.**

**“It’s Aunt Lydia. How many years since I’ve seen her? I’d begun to think she existed only in my head, but here she is, a little older” (Chapter 42)**

- Until this point in the book, Aunt Lydia has only existed in Offred’s memories.
- By wondering if **“she existed only in my head,”** Offred conveys how often **Aunt Lydia’s thoughts are intertwined with her own**.
- Now that she’s faced with Aunt Lydia in person, **the violence of Gilead becomes real**. Until this point, Offred - and therefore the reader - has only seen the results of the violence, but not the actual act of violence itself.
- In both the Salvaging and the Particution - both of which Aunt Lydia hosts - **Offred directly witnesses, and then participates in, acts of violence**.
- This escalation shows that **Offred’s indoctrination is complete**. Now, she is actively committing and participating in acts of violence that benefit Gilead. By having Aunt Lydia present, Atwood means to emphasise this idea, as **Aunt Lydia is a symbol of Gilead’s oppressive control**.

