

Edexcel English Literature A-level

The Handmaid's Tale: Themes Class

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Class is a recurring and important theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Gilead, the fictional, patriarchal dystopian society where the novel takes place, **citizens are defined by their social class**. There are several factors that contribute to a person's class, including **gender, age, race, sexuality, status, and power**. Regardless, each class has **different** societal roles, and these roles have implications for how specific people can **participate in society**.

What is Class?

While it is difficult to define class, it is generally accepted that class can be thought of as a **person's place in the social hierarchy**, but it can also be related to **income and wealth**. Throughout history, there have traditionally been three levels of economic classes: **lower, middle, and upper**. However, there are different ways to think about class.

Intersectionality

As Gilead is a **religious patriarchal society**, themes like **race and gender** often **intersect with class**. This theory of how different aspects of a person's identity intersect is known as intersectionality. This term was first coined by feminist **Kimberlé Crenshaw** in 1989. In an interview with Time Magazine in 2020, Crenshaw elaborated on her theory by saying: **“Intersectionality is simply about how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life” [1]**. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender affects a person's class because it **determines their role and status in society**. For example, only **fertile women** are assigned to be **Handmaids** because their only role in society is to **reproduce**. Their status as a Handmaid then **determines certain aspects of their lives**. As it relates to Crenshaw's explanation of **intersectionality**, race, sexuality, and age can impact a person's social class, which certainly increases their exposure to **“the bad things in life.”** In *The Handmaid's Tale* **people of colour, old women, gay people**, and other people who **do not adhere to Gilead's social ideals** are sent to the Colonies. Wealthy, educated, able-bodied, straight, white men, however, are able to become Commanders, which increases their **“access to the good things”** while all other people are assigned to the **lower classes**.

Marxism [2]

Karl Marx's theory of class suggests that class is determined by **ownership of property and labour** (the means of production) and that there are two main social classes: **the proletariat** and **the bourgeoisie**. The proletariat are the **working class** whereas the bourgeoisie are people in the higher classes who **control the labor of the proletariat**. This structure creates **social inequality**.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are certainly instances of **class inequality** that demonstrates **Karl Marx's theory**. In the essay *The Handmaid's Tale Through the Lens of Marxism*, the author argues that: **“The Handmaids additionally stand as a symbol of the proletariat, subjugated by the bourgeoisie to the point of slavery, harshly indoctrinated [...] and are denied basic freedoms” [3]**.

Through a **Marxist lens**, Gilead's **proletariat** would likely include the Handmaids, Marthas,



Jezebels, Econopeople, and people who work in the Colonies. The **bourgeoisie** would be Commanders, Wives, and Angels. However, Marx's theory **doesn't account for roles such as Eyes, Guardians, and Aunts**, who have some social **power**, but do not have as much **influence** as the higher classes (bourgeoisie) while simultaneously not being as **exploited** as the lower classes (proletariat). In other words, there are certain instances where Marx's theory can be used to analyse class in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it **does not accurately describe the entire social structure**.

Weberian [4]

Max Weber was a sociologist who examined the **social structure** of many different societies. He hypothesised that **social class** is an interplay between **class, status, and power**. He defines these as:

- **Class**: a person's **wealth** or **economic position** in society
- **Status**: the amount of **respect** a person or position is regarded by others
- **Power**: a person's ability to get others to **do what they want**

Similarly to Marx, Weber believed that a person's class position was determined by their **position in the means of production**, but Weber expanded his theory to encompass more **complex social structures**. For example, Weber's theory suggests that a person could lack economic power/wealth but still have high status.

Weber's theory of class seems to fit the more nuanced **social roles** in *The Handmaid's Tale* better than a Marxist philosophy. For example, those who are the **highest social class** (Commanders, Wives, and Angels) **have wealth, status, and power** while the **middle classes** (Aunts, Guardians, Eyes) **may not have wealth, but they have status and power**, albeit to a lesser degree than the higher class. The **lower classes** (Handmaids, Marthas, Jezebel's, etc.), however, **have neither wealth, status, nor power**.

Class Hierarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the **class hierarchy is shaped by Gilead's ideals**. In other words, the closer a person fits with the values that Gilead promotes, the higher their social status is. For example, **men typically have higher positions than women** because Gilead is a patriarchy. Similarly, older women, LGBTQIA+ people, and people of colour are **sent to the Colonies** because they cannot have children, or they **threaten Gilead's heteronormative and white supremacist ideals**.

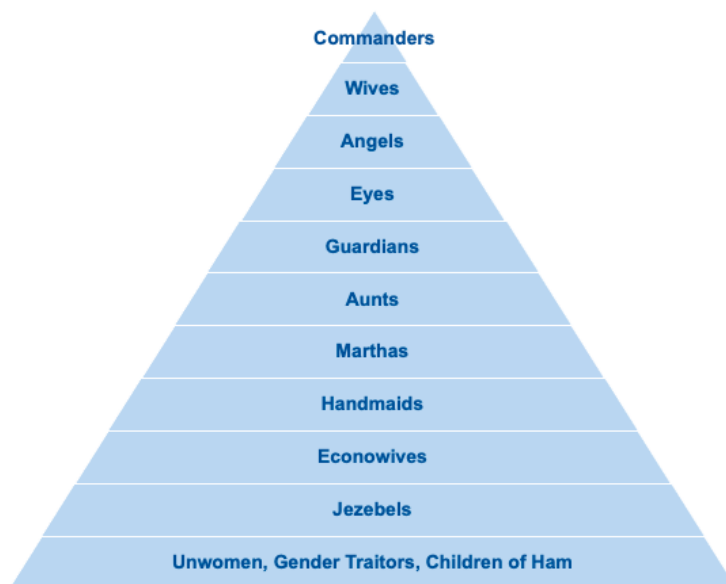


Diagram adapted from [5].



Commanders

The Commanders are the **most powerful people and make up the highest class** in Gilead. Since Gilead is a patriarchy, the Commanders are in charge of not just their **household**, but also have a say in the **society** around them. For example, many of the Commanders **played a key role in designing Gilead**.

With this elevated social class, there comes certain **benefits**, like privilege with food and luxury items. When Offred goes on her first shopping trip, she reflects on how the Commanders are still able to get coffee (Chapter 2). Similarly, she's instructed to get quality eggs: **“Tell them fresh, for the eggs,’ she says. ‘Not like that time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen. Tell them who it’s for and then they won’t mess around”** (Chapter 2).

- This shows that The Commander has **respect** and **his status** allows him to get a better selection of food at the store.

For example, Offred says: **“Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household”** (Chapter 14).

- Even if the Wives have **authority over the staff**, the husbands/Commanders have **power over the Wives** and are, therefore, **“the head of the household.”**

Wives

The Wives of Commanders -- or just Wives -- also have considerable **power and influence**, but are **not as powerful as their husbands**, simply because they are **women**. The Wives are in charge of all household matters, including staff (e.g. Handmaids, Marthas, etc.). As Offred explains: **“The transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the wives alone”** (Chapter 26).

- While they are still not as powerful as their husbands due to their gender, the Wives' high social class gives them power over other classes, like Marthas and Handmaids.

Due to their **social class**, they're also allowed certain **privileges and luxuries** that are not allowed by the lower classes. For example, they can ride in cars instead of walk (Chapter 5) and they can drink coffee, tea, and wine (Chapter 20).

Angels

Angels are **high-ranking men** that serve as **Gilead’s soldiers** on the front lines. They also **guard the Red Center** (Chapter 1) and **neutralise rebel groups** (Chapter 14). Due to their high social class, they may qualify for a Wife, and perhaps even a Handmaid, after they have served Gilead (Chapter 34). Wives and Handmaids also serve as **status symbols**. In this case, it indicates that Angels are high class, but not yet as high up as the Commanders.

Eyes

The Eyes (formal title: Eyes of the Lord) are Gilead's **secret police**. While they sometimes torture and kill citizens suspected of **subversive activities** (Chapter 27), some Eyes are simply **informants**. Presumably, they are all men, although this is never specified in the book. Offred



suggests that some Guardians may be Eyes but, due to the Eyes' secrecy, this is difficult to confirm.

Guardians

Guardians of the Faith -- or just Guardians -- are **Gilead's guards and police**. They can also serve as **personal bodyguards and servants for Commanders and Wives** (Chapter 4). They rank **lower** than other branches of Gilead's armed forces: they can be **promoted** to Angels and have some privileges in society. In the book, Nick is a Guardian (although he is suspected of being an Eye).

When she first sees Nick, however, Offred observes: **"He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections"** (Chapter 4)

- This shows how **women are used as status symbols for men**.
- Because Nick **"hasn't been issued a woman,"** this suggests that he is not as powerful or influential as the Angels or the Commanders.
- Despite his **"low status,"** Nick is offered certain **freedoms**, such as having **his own apartment**.

Aunts

Aunts are a class of **older women** who are responsible for **indoctrinating Handmaids and enforcing Gilead's rules**. They typically consist of older women and, although they aren't allowed to carry guns, they are able to torture the Handmaids should they break the rules. Aunts also preside over **births, Salvagings, and Particutions**. While their role is restrictive, they **enforce Gilead's ideals**, so they are able to have certain **privileges**. For example, they are the only women in Gilead who are allowed to **read and write**.



An Aunt holds a cattle prod while filming an episode of The Handmaid's Tale [6].



In the epilogue, the **Aunts' background** is explained further: **“Childless or infertile older women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies” (Epilogue)**

- This shows that Gilead does not value **“older”** or **“infertile”** women. Because these women are **viewed as disposable**, they're often **shipped to the Colonies**.
- Aunts are able to **“escape redundancy”** and elevate themselves from the level of an Unwoman to the role of an Aunt.
- While they **gain status and power** in society, they are **not as powerful or influential** as the higher ranking men and women.

Marthas

The Marthas **work in the houses of powerful people** - such as Commanders - as servants, cooks, and housekeepers. They also likely have their own **network of communication** and ways of getting information (Chapter 35). They are viewed as lower class because they serve the **higher ranking** people in society and, like Handmaids, are viewed as **status symbols**. Compared to the Handmaids, however, the Marthas are likely viewed as a **slightly higher class** because they are allowed **certain freedoms** such as baking, cooking, and socialising (Chapter 2). They are also not subjected to the same horrific treatment and abuse as the **Handmaids**.

Handmaids

Handmaids are arguably the **most oppressed** class in the book. This class consists of **women** who are capable of having a child, and their only responsibility is to procreate for more **powerful families**. If they are successful, they are **re-assigned** to another house of **high-ranking people**. If they are unable to have a child, they are sent to the **Colonies**.

While many in Gilead try to describe being a Handmaid as **“a position of honor” (Chapter 3)**, they are consistently **dehumanised and abused**. Unlike other classes, they aren't able to **form friendships, have hobbies, or their own possessions**. Furthermore, they aren't able to advance their position and become a Wife (Chapter 34). They are often threatened with **“reclassification [as] an Unwoman” (Chapter 23)** should they break the rules. Ultimately, the Handmaids are the **most essential class** -- as they are the ones ensuring the survival of the human race -- but **they are also the most abused**.

Econowives

Econowives are the **wives of lower-ranking men** -- such as Guardians. As a result, they are the ones in charge of all of the domestic duties, including child-rearing (Chapter 5). While they are members of the lower class, they also have some **liberties**. For example, it is implied that they are able to have friends and walk where they want to. They are not viewed with the same **“respect” as Handmaids**, but they are also **not subjected to the same dehumanisation**.

“Some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife”
(Chapter 8)

Jezebels



A Jezebel is a **woman** who is forced to become a **sex worker**. In the novel, only **Commanders and their guests** are able to access these women so they are also **status symbols**. Similarly to Econowives, due to their low social status, they are able to have **certain privileges** that usually are **forbidden**. For example, they can wear make-up, drink alcohol, socialise with men, and engage in lesbian relationships (Chapter 38). This **freedom comes at a cost**, however, as after a certain amount of time, they are sent to the Colonies or otherwise discarded.

“Know what they call this place among themselves? Jezebel’s. The Aunts figure we’re all damned anyway, they’ve given up on us, so it doesn’t matter what sort of vice we get up to”
(Chapter 38)

Unwomen/Gender Traitors/Children of Ham

The people who are sent to the **Colonies** (Unwomen, gender traitors, and The Children of Ham) are the **lowest social class in Gilead**; they have no power, influence, or status. Unwomen are usually older women, rebels, “gender traitors,” nuns, and other **social pariahs** in Gilead (Chapter 38). Similarly to how **Handmaids** are only used for their reproductive abilities, people working in the Colonies are only seen as useful because they can work at **“the toxic dumps and the radiation spills”** (Chapter 38).

Reclassification as an Unwoman is often used as a **threat** to Handmaids, Aunts, and Marthas. For example, Moira tries to convince Janine to act normally by telling her that if she doesn’t, she will be reclassified and **“then they burn you up with the garbage, like an Unwoman.”** (Chapter 33)

- The comparison between **“an Unwoman”** and **“garbage”** is meant to show how Unwomen are **viewed as trash and not human beings**.

Children of Ham

Similar to gender, race often affects a person’s social class. In this case, Gilead is a society that **embraces values of white supremacy** and it is implied that Gilead is conducting **racial genocide**: **“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).

- **“Children of Ham”** is a Biblical allusion to Noah’s son Ham, whose children are cursed by Noah to live a life of servitude (Genesis 9:25). Many historians believe that this Bible verse was used as justification for slavery.
- While **Atwood has been criticised** for her decision not to include any non-white characters in the book [7], Gilead’s **“resettlement”** of Black people and other people of colour does seem to align with the horrific racist beliefs that religious extremists perpetuate.
- As it related to **class**, this shows that Gilead views **non-white people** as **inferior** to their white counterparts, and (presumably) send them to the Colonies or other labour camps.
- In other words, Gilead designates non-white people to the **lowest social class** because they are a **racist** society.



References

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[3] Roozbeh, R. (2018) 'The Handmaid's Tale Through the Lens of Marxism', *Studies in Literature and Language*, 17(1), pp. 16–20. doi: 10.3968/10328.

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[6] Image Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/joeflood/47108277661>

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