

# The Handmaid's Tale, now streaming on Showmax

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The time: Oh, not so far from now. The place: Once known as the United States of America, it is now called the Republic of Gilead. The rule: A military dictatorship enforcing laws based on an extreme fundamentalist misinterpretation of The Bible. The show: The Handmaid's Tale (2017-current, Season 1 is on Showmax).

This fascinating dystopian drama series is based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel. It takes all the human rights issues that are plaguing the United States (and, let's not kid ourselves, planet Earth) today – and their roots in religious fundamentalism, hatred, wilful ignorance, racism, homophobia and misogyny – through to their nightmarish conclusion. It's like a terrible warning from the future, but it's a future where they understand that there's nothing we love more than a great show! [The Handmaid's Tale](#) won eight Emmys, including Outstanding Drama Series, Directing (Reed Morano) and Lead Actress (Elisabeth Moss), plus the Golden Globes for Best Drama and Best Actress.

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## From here to there

Rather than being dumped into this scenario, viewers witness through flashbacks how the United States became Gilead – a place where women are treated as men's property and assigned strict, demeaning social roles dictated by their appearance and fertility. We're shown how the individual women fought against a system that forced them from their normal lives into absolute slavery practically overnight, following a steep decline in birth rates and a government coup by a cult militia called the Sons Of Jacob, and how any rebellion was crushed. Above all, though, [The Handmaid's Tale](#) follows how resistance takes place both before and after a brutal change of regime and how necessary resistance and hope are to survival.

## Dress to repress

But aside from being a political drama, [The Handmaid's Tale](#) shows incredible thought into world building, which makes it a must-see for speculative and science fiction fans. Nowhere is this more striking than in the six basic positions that women

hold in Gilead and the details of how those positions are enforced. Head of wardrobe Ane Crabtree ([Westworld](#), 2016-current, also on [Showmax](#)) has dressed the characters in visually striking uniforms, depending on their social position, to demonstrate one of the ways in which Gilead not only denies women's individuality and dictates how they are to be treated based on their appearance, but also enforces these rules by stripping away women's compassion for one another by eroding any common ground.

The six lives of women in [The Handmaid's Tale](#)

### [1. Wife](#)



**Identified by:** teal blue uniforms, the colour of the sky. They are linked in the show to the Virgin Mary.

**Character:** Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski)

Serena is married to Commander Fred (Joseph Fiennes) and, as such, holds a “pure” (but mostly infertile) woman’s most privileged position in Gilead – and she is allowed to keep her original name. In episode 6, a flashback into Serena’s life before Gilead shows her as a conservative activist and TV evangelist – the kind of woman writing books titled *A Woman’s Place*, and centring women’s social value on their reproductive ability, and their “natural” social position as subservient to all men. Now Serena has got what she asked for and she is no longer permitted to read or write, never mind participate in government or make speeches.

### [2. Aunt](#)



**Identified by:** a khaki-brown uniform that Ane based on women's World War II uniforms, playing up their unquestioning obedience to authority.

**Character:** Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd).

Lydia uses slut-shaming and victim-blaming to disempower the women sent to her for re-education as Handmaids. Aunts are older women, past the age of fertility, who provide Commanders (the male ruling class) with Handmaids – fertile women they have tortured into terror and submission and trained until they will no longer physically resist ritualistic rape at the hands of the Commanders and their Wives in the monthly “breeding ceremony”. Before Gilead, someone like Lydia would have been screaming outside an abortion clinic or supporting genital mutilation in the name of tradition.

### [3. Econowife](#)

**Identified by:** a blue and green uniform that places them socially between the Wives and the servant-class Marthas.

**Character:** background characters in the first season.

Married to lower-class men, they have to do everything around the house as a combined Wife, Martha and Handmaid, as well as dress in poorly made tatters.

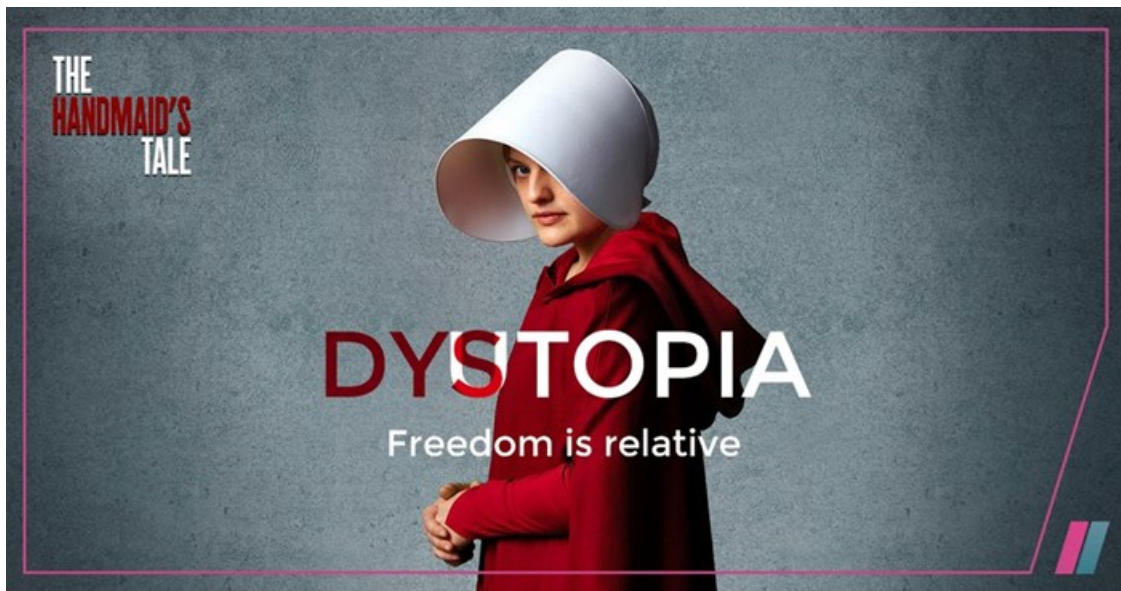
### [4. Martha](#)

**Identified by:** drab, moss-green uniforms with pinafores, based on an old mop that Ane saw.

**Character:** Rita (Amanda Brugel).

Marthas (named after the Martha in the New Testament, who complained about her sister Mary listening to Jesus while she had to work) are unmarried, infertile women assigned to be house slaves who clean and act as nannies. They are allowed to keep their original names and Marthas are also allowed to boss the Handmaids about a little.

### [5. Handmaid](#)



**Identified by:** red, tent-like dresses, set in opposition to the Wives' fitted teal gowns. Ane's reference point was the way a red maple leaf looked against the blue sky. The blood-red shade is also a reminder of their fertility. The white wings of their headpieces are an isolating tool (based on women's head coverings in ultra-conservative societies) meant to prevent them from communicating without being obvious.

**Character:** June/Offred (Elisabeth Moss)

The Handmaids are fertile women assigned to be Gilead's breeding herd because of some sort of alleged immorality, regardless of their sexual orientation. Their names are all prefixed by the letters "OF" – as in one of his – and the second part of the name is the name of their owner. So June has now become Fred's sex-slave "Offred". Politically "asleep" in her ordinary life before the coup, Offred is now determined to survive and, if possible, escape Gilead and find her stolen daughter Hannah (Jordana Blake).

## 6. Unwoman



**Identified by:** skimpy, sexualised clothing

**Character:** Moira (Samira Wiley)

An Unwoman is one who has proven to be infertile after being "tried out" by three Commanders, many times (since any

mention of men's possible sterility is a capital offence in Gilead). It also includes the rebellious – including nuns, feminists, lesbians (referred to as gender traitors and generally put to death if proven infertile) and widows. As such, an Unwoman is deemed both useless and dangerous to social order. Unwomen are sent to The Colonies to clean up toxic waste until they die, which takes a couple of years, or, like Offred's best friend and fellow trainee handmaid Moira, sent to secret brothels like Jezebel's, where they are forced into prostitution because, despite Gilead's God-fearing ways, "men have needs".

As Commander Fred tells Offred in episode 5, "We only wanted to make the world better. Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some."

### Did you know?

Female children in Gilead who have not yet been assigned their roles dress all in pink.

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Additional sources: Vanityfair.com, Vogue.co.uk, Vulture.com

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