

The commander: a
corrupt or
sympathetic
character?



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“ Better for some never means better for all.”

In everyday life we encounter people who can be nice, moderate, or are just monsters. Those monsters are corrupt, inconsiderate, or badly-behaved people. In literature this person is called the antagonist, someone who makes the main characters life harder than it should be. These characteristics can be seen to fit Fred Waterford, the main Commander of *The Handmaids Tale*. Fred Waterford being one of the main commanders who aided in creating this treacherous regime is so self centered and does not care about the prosperity of women, being the agent of Offred's misery. Primarily the Commander abuses his power within the regime to women being totally obnoxious about his control. Furthermore, the Commander shows his corrupt ideology throughout the novel and does so being totally arrogant. Additionally, he is oblivious to what the women have to go through, and the discomfort that is present in Gilead all due to his corrupt insight. Lastly, he helped create the regime but decides to break the strictly enforced rules. Due to his lack of understanding of women, his arrogance, twisted ideology, and hypocrisy, Fred Waterford makes Offred's life completely unbearable.

The Commander shows his power to women in many different ways throughout the novel. His arrogance is presented to the reader in ways that the reader can not overlook such as the Commander showing Offred that he can get anything for her when he showed Offred the *Vogue* magazine. Offred describes the occurrence as “ Staring at the magazine, as he dangled it before me like fish bait”(pg. 156). The Commander is showing Offred that he is the real deal here because these magazines are banned within Gilead, and

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are thought to be extinct. Conclusively, the commander waiting before giving the magazine to Offred is showing his capability like a human would when giving a treat to a dog, it shows complete dominance. To add on, the Commander does not follow protocol pre-ceremony. Usually, the Commander is supposed to ask permission to enter, as the waiting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory. It is a little act that is big to her. The commander, as usual, is being arrogant because "before Serena Joy can speak (grant permission), he steps forward into the room anyway." (pg. 86). Once more the commander is being inconsiderate of his wife [Serena Joy] because the waiting room is her area and he totally disrespects the little amount of power that she gets. Conclusively, the Commander shows his power, lack of respect and irritability to women within Gilead. To sum up, Fred Waterford shows his complete disrespect and power over women by degrading Offred in every chance that he gets. Women are going through tough times and are being smart about taking care of themselves with limited resources, using butter as lotion. Offred is open to Fred about this and he laughs at Offred showing disrespect. When Offred tells the Commander this he replies with "Butter. That's very clever. (He laughed)" (pg. 159). Offred thinks that she could have slapped him but does not because the Commander has so much power. This shows the lack of sympathy that Fred has, and Offred becomes enraged with him due to his lack of understanding of what these women have to go through. All in all, the Commander's relentless arrogance shows the reader that he abuses his power, and has a complete misunderstanding of the women in the regime, making their lives a living hell.

Moreover, the Commander makes the women within the regimes lives completely unbearable due to his depraved ideology. Atwood introduces to us that Fred Waterford is high ranking and aided in the establishment of Gilead, which the reader knows is a corrupt gender dominant setting. For instance, the Commander asks Offred of her views on the regime during one of her visits to his office. With no reply, Fred says “ You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs... Better for some never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some.” (pg. 211). The reader gets a clear impression of the Commander’s corrupt ideology here because he is saying that they created this regime for the better of men and knew that women would have to suffer for them. This shows the reader the inconsideration that Fred has especially when in modern society gender dominance is greatly forbidden. These acts clearly symbolize those of a monster. With this in consideration, the Commander’s corrupted ideology continues at Jezebels when Offred describes the Commander getting a room key and how she is expected to have sex. Specifically, “ The Commander has a room key.... He shows it to me, slyly. I am to understand. (pg. 251). His ideology is that he dominates Offred, and he has the assumption that it does not matter if Offred enjoys it, he is the one in control. This continues in the bedroom when Offred clearly does not want to sleep with the Commander, when it comes to the time Offred “ Fakes it”(pg. 255). Recurrently the Commander shows his ideology when Offred has to fake what was happening and had no say about if she wanted it. Decisively the commander yet again shows his negligence towards women and expresses his corrupted ideology. Thirdly the Commander knows what he wants to do with Offred in an intimate way. Specifically, he prowls outside her room as if he is examining

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the territory. Offred describes this moment as “ Something has been shown to me, but what is it? Like the flag of an unknown country...It could mean attack, it could mean parley, it could mean the edge of something, a territory.” (pg. 49). In this instance, Atwood uses words that are commonly used when talking about war like “ flag”, “ attack”, “ territory”, “ parley”, and “ country”. Despite the mixed signal from the Commander, the control is clear and Offred receives her potential threat. To conclude the Commander’s ideology is so corrupt, although he knows what he is doing, being arrogant and inconsiderate making Offred’s life worse in an extra way.

Additionally, Fred advances his cruelty when he is only thinking about himself and puts Offred at risk for his own benefit making Offred’s life a risky mess. Firstly, the Commander showed his obliviousness by trying to touch her face during the ceremony when Serena Joy is right there. Specifically, Offred describes the occurrence as “ He reached his hand up as if to touch my face; I moved my head to the side, to warn him away, hoping Serena Joy hadn’t noticed” (pg. 162) The Commander once again is being reckless possibly compromising Offred’s secrets at his own benefit. Offred knows that her life is potentially at stake here, If Serena Joy had seen this then there is the potential of Offred being transferred to the colonies. As a result of this careless act by the Commander, Offred is at a high risk. Nonetheless, the Commander uses Offred once again at the Jezebels as if he is showing her off. Fred wants to bring Offred to Jezebels but only to have sex with her and to be in control of her. Offred is at high risk here as it is extremely illegal for a handmaid to be there and the Commander carelessly sneaks Offred in. The Commander says “ Now I’ll have to ask you to get down onto the floor of the

car... We have to get through the gateway” (pg. 232). When the Commander says this both Offred and the reader know that the Commander comprehends the risk here just so he can have sex with Offred freely. This being said the Commander is being selfish putting himself ahead of others by endangering Offred’s life with the possibility of being sent to the colonies or being apart of the next women salvaging.

Lastly, the Commander is inconsiderate when he arranges for Offred to meet with him for his entertainment, because he can not do it with Serena Joy. Offred describes this as “ Now it is forbidden, for us. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife” (pg. 138-139). This being said the Commander knows that he can’t have any fun with Serena Joy, so he uses Offred as his entertainment knowing that Offred is exposed to great danger. As can be seen, the Commander is self-centered and does not care about the well being of Offred, endangering her life in many instances. Being self-centered and only caring about himself, the Commander is completely oblivious to what is happening in the regime. Being one of the founding Commanders, Fred puts himself first. With this in mind, the Commander uses Gilead for individual gain, putting women below him. To begin the Commander imposes these strict rules that can get people killed, but decides to break them when he kisses Offred. Precisely the Commander says, “ I want you to kiss me” (pg. 139). The Commander is not asking Offred to kiss him, rather telling her. This is another example of Fred controlling Offred, and the Commander being naïve using Offred as an object for his personal gain. It is also ironic that he aided in the creation of the regime but does what he wants within the regime showing inconsideration of

what others have to put up with in Gilead. In addition, we see the hypocrisy taking Offred to Jezebels, an illegal prostitution center, he is even willing to break the rules of Jezebels which is a contradiction to the rules alone. “ The Commander has a room key.... He shows it to me...I am to understand.” (pg. 251). This suggests to Offred that they are going to have sex in a room. Fred seems as if he has done this before, where he takes his handmaid out to a prostitute installation and has sex with them. Yet again this desire for companionship by Fred shows how naïve he is being, especially creating the regime and breaking the rules. Lastly, the Commander shows his inconsideration and obliviousness to the lack of attention that he gives his wife, Serena Joy, instead showing it to the temporary Offred. When Offred asks the commander why he didn't give it to his wife, he replied: “ We don't seem to have much in common, these days.” (pg. 158). This shows the reader that the Commander is once again being inconsiderate because he is not showing much attention to Serena Joy who is permanently his wife, whereas he is treating the temporary handmaid Offred, which is forbidden by the rules of his government. With all being said, the Commander comes off as an oblivious, self centred monster who makes Offred, and Serena Joy's lives that much worse.

Ultimately, women's lives are completely unbearable due to the monstrous characteristics of the Commander, Fred Waterford. He does so by showing his capable power to Offred, implying to her that he can get whatever he wants, being ignorant about the creativity that the handmaids had of using butter as lotion due to the lack of decency for women within the regime, and by taking away the little power that Serena Joy possesses, in the waiting

room. Nonetheless with the Commander's corrupt ideology, saying that better never means better for everyone it shows how self-centred he is and doesn't care about others, which clearly are traits which a monster would possess. He also uses other people putting them at risk for his own benefit being inconsiderate of what other people must go through, just being inconsiderate. Lastly being one of the founding commanders of Gilead he breaks rules that are strictly enforced to others because he feels obligated enough and more powerful than others. With the idea of being a monster, it is clear that the Commander is as corrupt, badly behaved, and inconsiderate as suggested. Being the obvious antagonist, Fred Waterford truly does make Offred's life completely miserable and brutal.

Citations

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