

In the Handmaid's Tale, Offred's relationship with her ideas of power influence her actions and thoughts. Perceived power in this novel has come from objects, such as cigarettes or magazines, or from relationships with people, such as that with the Commander. I first interpreted cigarettes as a symbol of freedom in this novel. They are something she yearns for. On page 69 she is wishing she wasn't trapped in a kind of solitary confinement, "If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands. I want a cigarette." She associates cigarettes with her past life, where she was free. From Offred's perspective, freedom is the ability to spend time how she wants to. The other night I restrung my acoustic guitar. A simple task, but pleasant in its own way. If I were confined to a room with nothing to do but stare at the walls, I don't know how I would cope. If I need to occupy myself, or distract myself from my mind, I can always just pick up my guitar to fill the time. Offred has nothing she can *just pick up*. Her brain immediately, in this absence of activities, turns towards yearnings of the past, things that she would have mindlessly done in the time before, like smoking a cigarette.

On page 209 she is contemplating what to do with a cigarette that Serena Joy gave her, and thinks "I don't need to smoke this cigarette. I could shred it up and flush it down the toilet. Or I could eat it and get the high that way." In this moment, the cigarette is merely an avenue to express her grab at power. Her ownership of the object does not equate to her freedom. Power in Gilead does not seem to have a close relationship with freedom. Even the people who have more power, such as the Commanders, are still restricted by whatever laws and rules are set up. But because Offred spends so much time in her head, she may conflate the feelings of power and freedom. Sometimes I realize that, technically, nothing is stopping me from doing whatever pops into my head. As I sit and write this, I could change all of the font to pink, or alternate every letter to a different color of the rainbow. I could ride the train I take to school in the morning all

the way to New Jersey tomorrow just to look around. Absolutely nothing is stopping me from, right this moment, painting myself green, biking to a field, and pretending to be part of the meadow. Except, of course, that I don't want to. But why? Why don't I do these weird, crazy things? I am stuck in a rhythm that I am scared to break out of. Wake up, get ready, go to school, do work, go home, do work, go to bed, repeat. It is hard, in a society that is so rigid with its publicly acceptable presentations of self, to even begin to brainstorm how to break the monotony. But even just realizing that you don't *have* to do everything expected of you is powerful.

As Offred is thinking about different things she could do with the cigarette, I think that she is realizing that she has access to some power. Especially when she says, "that way I could keep the match.... I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver. An escape, quick and narrow." If she were to actually think through the sequence of events that would happen if she burned down the house, it would quickly not become an option. If she escaped, she would have nowhere to run. She would probably get caught, and possibly be sent to the Colonies, or some other place deemed "horrible." But it is not the act, but the thought that gives her power. She does not have to follow through with setting the house on fire to know that she still *could* set the house on fire. Maybe it is a form of freedom for me to just recognize the rhythm I am stuck in for the moment. To know that nothing I do is *really* compulsory, and I have control over how I spend my life. Because I don't live in Gilead. Yet. All of the events Margaret Atwood writes about are based on true historical events that sometimes relate a little too closely with the present, such as book burnings, abortion laws, and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. But it feels deliberate that the author focuses on little things that give a sense of power or freedom so that readers can relate to the text. It's the little things, like my ability to play guitar, or know what freedoms I have, that when they're gone, are the most distressing.