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### Above but, Behind

When I first started reading the Handmaid's Tale by Margrat Atwood, I (as I'm sure many other first time readers experienced this as well) thought what I read: The Commander's wives were, in all ways, above the handmaids. Until I read about the ceremony, and then again when I read about the Birth Day. It seems to make sense that the Commander's Wife would hold more power than a handmaid and technically, logistically, they do. Until you find this pattern that changed that for me.

The commander's wife is always behind the Handmaid, and therefore in my mind, the Handmaids are ahead. The first time you see this is when reading the ceremony, (93) "Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her Legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me." This is significant because during such an intimate act Serena Joy is still behind Offred. I am sure that if she desired, Atwood would have been able to conjure up some contraption that they could use that puts the Serena Joy back in front, but she doesn't and I think its to show that Offred holds a certain power over Serena Joy, Serena Joy has been forced into a position where she has to rely on Offred for a child. Standing *behind* Offred.

A second example of this is during Birth Day. All of the Handmaids and Commander Wife's gather in a room while a Handmaid gives birth. (125) "She scrambles onto the birthing stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her" Similar to the ceremony, the Commander's wife is so desperate here to feel some sort of importance or responsibility that she tries to feel it through the Handmaid and therefore showing signs of weakness by voluntarily placing herself *behind* the Handmaid.

Something that I would want to point out is the fact that whenever Atwood mentions a Commander's wife being behind a Handmaid she also mentions that the Commander's wife is above the Handmaid, "Above me" and "behind and above Janine" I think that this is also purposeful and that Atwood uses this so show that although the Hanmaids do hold this power over the Commander's Wife, the Commander's wife is still more *powerful*. I know that this is making everything you just read seem redundant but I don't think it is. Between the two of them, the Handmaid is going to have more power because they have something the Commander's Wives want, it's as simple as that. But in this society, when talking about rankings the Commander's Wives are ranked higher and therefore are more powerful. So the use of the word behind is referencing the power the handmaids hold and the word above is for the Handmaid's tale.

The Last thing I would like to mention is just a silly idea I have without any quotes to back up or expand my reasoning. Where are you when you are planning to stab someone in the back? Behind the person you are wanting to stab. So I have a feeling that that can be taken as another reason why the

Commander's wife is always stationed behind the Handmaid. She's prepared to do what's necessary if the handmaid screws up or screws over. Which is also why I think it was important to bring up the idea that even though the handmaids have more power than the Commander's wife, the Commander's wife is more powerful. They can punish the handmaid for the smallest things and it's okay, normal even.

So in that way Atwood positions and shapes the relationship between a Commander's wife and a Handmaid. Showing the way they hold power over each other physically really emphasizes the different kinds of power that they have. Nothing is one hundred percent one dimensional, so even though both of these ladies have power they still are, in certain situations powerless. The Commander wives are Behind but above and the Handmaids are in front but below.