

Identity Politics and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY	5
CHAPTER ONE	9
Identity Politics in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985)	
Introduction	9
1. Totalitarianism and The Loss of Individual Identity in Gilead	10
2. The Gender Essentialism of Gilead	14
3. Female Rights and Atwood's Criticism of Radical Feminism	26
4. Gilead's Redefinition of Minority Identities	31
Conclusion	37
CHAPTER TWO	40
The adaptation of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985) to <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (2017-)	
Introduction	40
1. From Offred to June: an Adaptation of Anonymity	41
2. The Series' Updated Portrayal of Minority Identities	47
3. Totalitarianism on the Screen: Technology and Visual Violence	54
4. Serena, Fred, Conservative Activism and Identity Politics	65
5. Feminism and Identity Politics: Protesting for Female Rights as Handmaids	83
Conclusion	93
CONCLUSION	97
WORKS CITED	99

INTRODUCTION

When attempting to analyse patterns of identity politics in a popular medium, it is important to establish that identity - and by extension individualism - is a topic that is central to the genre. When analysing Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its 2017 Hulu series adaptation, a pattern of exploration of different types of identity and individuality come to light, namely the debate between gender essentialism versus constructivism and the effect that an anti-individualistic society has on personal identity. Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is part of identity politics in a Meta sense, as the book itself has been assigned a place within the genre of feminist literature - and the modern 2017 Hulu series has continued to work within that framework.

In this thesis, the concept of identity as presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* - both the novel and the Hulu series - will be dismantled to reveal the identity politics within its narrative and literary context. In the first chapter, identity politics within the 1985 novel will be explored, to find out how these fit in with the contemporary identity politics debate. The second chapter will contain an analysis of the 2017 series, which will be compared to the 1985 novel, to further explore how the book's identity concepts have been adapted for the modern small screen. Furthermore, the second chapter will critically discuss which adaptation choices have been made and how these affect *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) as an updated version of the book. The second chapter will also display the use of *The Handmaid's Tale* within contemporary identity politics, to show how *The Handmaid's Tale* - both the novel's source material and the series' adaptation - have become part of the current popular culture. As this thesis will show, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) contains the identity politics elements that are necessary to adapt it to a twenty-first century version. *The Handmaid's Tale* is (1) a still relevant speculative version of reality that explores a possible outcome of the essentialism - constructivism debate, where (2) totalitarianism is used as a political framework, inspired by historical politics - and where (3) the exploration of gender identity, minority identities

and identity in general is a main objective. Through these elements, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been able to participate in critical debates concerning the construction of identities, especially gender identities, in the broader context of feminism and identity politics as a whole, and to establish itself as a symbol of the modern identity politics debate featured on the small screen.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis has been divided into two chapters, corresponding to an analysis of identity politics present in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) discussed in chapter 1, and the adaptation of the novel to the series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-), discussed in chapter 2. This section will provide an overview of the methodology used to construct the critical arguments concerning the fictional narratives that are discussed.

Chapter 1 presents an analysis of the novel in which all significant examples of identity politics are revealed and critically discussed. This has been done by reading and reviewing the novel's identity politics content on the basis of four categories: (1) the political frame-work of Gilead, (2) the presence of essentialist gender theory within this framework, (3) references to feminism and Atwood's criticism of feminism, and (4) the redefinition of minority identities. To research the political framework in the novel, "totalitarianism" and "ustopia"¹ were used as the main political definitions for Atwood's Gilead. These terms were defined using *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (2000) by Juan J. Linz - a book that reflects on historical totalitarian regimes and their structures - and Margaret Atwood's *In Other Worlds* (2011) - a collection of essays on the science fiction and speculative fiction genres.² Another notable scholarly source on speculative fiction is Lois Feuer's "The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition" (2012), an analysis on the dystopian structure in Atwood's novel. To understand how gender and the on-going debate between constructivists and essentialists play a role inside the totalitarian "ustopia," *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* (2014, eds. Catharine R. Stimpson and Gilbert Herdt) was relied on as an academic resource on gender studies. To analyse the novel's feminist context, primarily Kim A. Loudermilk's *Fictional Feminism: How American*

¹ An "ustopia" is Atwood's term for a society that is firstly coined as a utopian ideal, but which has turned into a dystopian society.

² While the methodology points out the key sources that underscore the critical argument of this thesis, the content of these works cited will be discussed in detail in the chapters to come.

Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality (2004) was used to help analyse Atwood's portrayal of feminism in the novel. Other sources include *Hitler's Table Talk* (1953, trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens) - to compare the rhetoric in *The Handmaid's Tale* to the rhetoric of Hitler during the Second World War - and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: a Response to Evangelical Feminism* (2012, eds. John Piper, and Wayne A. Grudem), a fundamentalist Christian exploration of gender essentialism.

The second chapter contains a comparative analysis of the series relative to the novel. The series' first and second seasons are discussed in-depth, referring to detailed events and plot points in the series to analyse what parts from the novel's source material have been altered or added all together. The analysis of the series is divided into five parts: (1) the adaptation of Offred's character, (2) the series' updated portrayal of minority identities, (3) commentary of technology and the use of visual violence, (4) the series' portrayal of conservative activism within the context of modern identity politics, and (5) the series' portrayal of feminism, female rights and use in modern protest symbolism. Kimberly Fairbrother Canton's article "'I'm Sorry My Story Is in Fragments': Offred's Operatic Counter-memory" (2007) was used to explore the differences in the portrayal of Offred's character in the novel and the series, specifically to establish the problems that arise from the adaptation of an anonymous character to an actress on the small screen. To understand the series' adaptation choices for minority identities and the integration of these identities in a historical context, Gilbert Herdt's *Same Sex, Different Cultures: Exploring Gay and Lesbian Lives* (1997) was consulted. David L. Altheide's "Chapter 1: Fear, Terrorism, and Popular Culture" in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* (2010, eds. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell) was useful to understand the visual violence of the series as a symptom of the "post-9/11 society." John H. Wigger's book *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire* (2017) and Donald T. Critchlow's *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (2018) provided a concise representation of conservative activism and evangelical activists in the 1980's. Both Wigger's and Critchlow's works were used as

a historical basis to analyse Serena and Fred as fictional portrayals of conservative activists. George Michael's "The Rise of the Alt-right and the Politics of Polarization in America" (2017) was consulted to place Serena and Fred within the context of modern identity politics, in which - among other political developments - the "alt-right" is established as a relevant modern development of right-wing politics. To understand the novel in a broader political context, Gorman Beauchamp's "The Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2009) was used, to further analyse how this political context has changed with the influence from modern identity politics.

Furthermore, news articles, opinion pieces and other journalistic media have been consulted. Journalistic media has been represented heavily in the second chapter for two reasons: (1) *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) is a relatively new and on-going series, for which not many scholarly articles have been written (yet) to support the presence of modern identity politics, and (2) articles from journalistic media give a well-rounded view of the series' exposure in the mainstream, which is needed to determine the series' effect on the media, the mainstream audience and its role within contemporary politics. News articles include interviews with Margaret Atwood, actresses Elisabeth Moss and Samira Wiley, and the show's creator Bruce Miller to understand the relationship between the novel and the series. Moreover, opinion pieces and coverage for *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Vulture* and other news media are used to give more information on the reception of the series, and to illustrate current political developments.

Finally, the series itself was viewed, transcribed and analysed to obtain the information needed to determine the adaptation choices made to adapt the novel to the modern small screen.³ Still frames from the series have been obtained with capturing software, to visually illustrate scenes discussed in the second chapter.⁴ These visual aides are crucial for the reader to understand the

³ The series was viewed through Hulu's paid on-demand video service. As this platform is not available in The Netherlands, a VPN was used.

⁴ Movavi's Screen Recorder Studio, Movavi Software Limited (2019) was used to capture scenes from the series; while Adobe Photoshop CC (2015) was used to crop and colour correct these stills where necessary.

differences between the novel and the series, as the series acts as a visual medium as opposed to the purely written form of the novel.⁵ During the writing process, a few episodes from the third season were released by Hulu. Because of the limited amount of episodes, this thesis is unable to incorporate an in-depth analysis of the third season of the series as part of the broader analysis of the series. However, where it was appropriate, scenes from the third season have been described to underline explorations made in the first two seasons.

⁵ The stills from the series can be visually graphic.

CHAPTER ONE

Identity Politics in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) raises several questions about identity, namely: what is identity, and what is the "ideal" identity of an "ideal" society? But also: how much of our own individual identity do we have to sacrifice for the greater good? Margaret Atwood's novel is considered to be a display of extreme gender politics, as her "ustopia" - a society that is firstly coined as a utopian ideal, but which has turned into a dystopian society ("Other Worlds" 66) - shows how dividing the genders according to totalitarian doctrine leads to the loss of individual expression. In the case of this novel, extreme essentialism⁶ is used as the premise of the totalitarian world of Gilead. As this chapter will illustrate, different explorations of the concept of identity can be found throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, which includes - but is certainly not limited to - gender identity. In fact, the book explores multiple examples of identity politics and how they can and cannot work in certain aspects of a society, such as the effect of totalitarianism and its strictly hierarchical demarcated structure on individual identity. The structure of identity in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be divided into three main elements: (1) the anti-individualistic society of Gilead and its constructed demarcated identities, showing the oppression of individual identity expression; (2) gender identity: focusing on the gender essentialism versus constructivism debate and feminist theory, and (3) Gilead's redefining of other minority identities - such as racial and sexual minorities - and the consequences of this redefinition. This chapter will show that *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a speculative totalitarian political world in which identity politics is implemented, as is seen in Gilead's doctrine based on fundamentalist Christian interpretations of the Bible and the demarcation of the population into

⁶ Essentialism is based on the notion that gender differences are in essence inherent and biological. This is the opposite of constructivism, which is based on the idea that gender differences are completely constructed.

different classes based on sexual orientation, gender, race and fertility; this shows a reflection of a possible outcome of the identity politics debate that is still relevant today.

1. Totalitarianism and The Loss of Individual Identity in Gilead

Atwood's Gilead is a totalitarian society where the current definition of what constitutes an "individual identity" has been drastically changed to fit the political ends of Gilead. Through Offred's account of life in Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents to the reader how an ultimate authoritarian, anti-liberal and essentialist society is able to become a reality despite going against the government and dominant social stance on individual rights in the pre-Gilead United States. As the politics of the pre-Gilead United States mirror mainstream western politics, the reader is meant to evaluate these political changes as a hypothetical realistic possibility. The speculative nature of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) does not only emphasise the dangers of authoritarianism towards the reader, it also shows how panic could have been avoided through earlier awareness and diligence; revealing Atwood's ability to show disadvantages of both versions of the United States. Firstly, it is important to recognize Gilead as an authoritarian, totalitarian regime to further classify the treatment of its individuals as operating within that framework. To help define a "more essentialist definition [of totalitarianism]" (66), Zbigniew K. Brzezinski's definition of totalitarianism is useful:

Totalitarianism is a new form of government falling into the general classification of dictatorship, a system in which technologically advanced instruments of political power are wielded without restraint from centralised leadership of an elite movement for the purpose of affecting a total social revolution, including the conditioning of man on the basis of certain arbitrary ideological assumptions, proclaimed by the leadership in an atmosphere of coerced unanimity of the entire population.⁷ (Brzezinski qtd in Linz 66)

⁷ Citations that were written in the American English spelling have been changed to the British spelling to contribute to the linguistic consistency of this thesis.

Quoting Brzezinski's definition, Juan J. Linz suggests that totalitarian society is rooted in ideology, and that this ideology is strong enough to coerce a population into submission with or without violent force. Linz supplements this definition by putting forward three main characteristics of a totalitarian system in *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*: (1) There is a single centre of power, (2) there is an exclusive, autonomous and elaborate ideology at the forefront of this centre, which the leaders use as a basis for policies or manipulate to legitimise them, and where (3) social participation and active mobilisation for collective social tasks is encouraged and/or demanded, and where passive obedience is considered to be undesirable (70). Atwood's Gilead meets Linz's definition of what a plausible totalitarian society would look like: the role of the single centre of power is taken by the Commanders, who manipulate source material to convey an oppressive ideology - in this case, by using the Christian Bible as source material - and who demand the active participation of the inhabitants through violent force and coercion tactics.

Now that Gilead has been established as a totalitarian regime, the uprising of this regime must be analysed, as well as the role of identity within that regime. In the novel, Atwood grants the reader a look into the rise of Gilead and the political turmoil that preceded its existence to show the reader the danger of the influence of extreme essentialist politics. Gilead is shown to the reader by Atwood as an "ustopia," a term coined by Atwood to represent a society that is meant to function as a utopia by those who have imagined and founded it, but then ultimately turns into a dystopia as it is realised ("Other Worlds" 66-67). In Gilead, the totalitarian doctrine is indeed firstly proposed as a "perfect" catch-all solution to the life-threatening problems from "before." Because of these proposed solutions, the inhabitants take the oppression of the individual for granted in favour of the survival of society as a whole. The transformation of the novel's United States into the authoritarian Gilead is shown by Atwood through a few politically feasible stages: (A) mass panic and chaos originating from serious and complex socio-political and environmental problems; (B) drastic changes to establish a new society to implement the proposed solutions, and ultimately: (C) the oppression of individual rights as a catalyst to attempt to implement and keep these changes.

Atwood's novel demonstrates how problems such as pollution and infertility are able to create mass panic and chaos, which in turn allows for totalitarian political forces to take over the mainstream political structure. In Gilead, the problems are mostly of a biological and environmental nature:

The chances [of carrying a healthy baby to term] are one in four, we learned that at the Center. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies [...]. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants [...] and the mutant strain of Syphilis no mould could touch. [...] How could they, said Aunt Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing? Jezebels! Scorning God's gifts! (122)

Mass panic and chaos then creates crises that are no longer under the control of the pre-Gilead society - this lack of control makes the inhabitants open to the suggested massive changes. Despite its authoritarianism, Gilead then starts to pose as an attractive "choice" in a false dichotomy, where Gilead is placed opposite to a free and individualistic, but chaotic society that is shown to fail in proposing any feasible solutions: "[...] some women believed there would be no future; they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. [...] Such wickedness" (123). The panicked inhabitants are lured into Gilead's false sense of perfect order, where there seems to be at least some hope of the continuation of life without the massive problems such as infertility and pollution.

Linz's proposal that the participation of those involved in a totalitarian society is dependent on "voluntary manipulated involvement and a mixture of rewards and fears in a relatively closed society" (66) is consistent with the development of Gilead. As Linz states, "the commitment to ideology, the desire for monopolistic control and the fear of losing power" are all motivators for the

leaders, in Gilead's case the Commanders, to proceed with violent coercion methods (72). This motivates the Commanders to proceed to machine-gun congress (182-183) as a final act in the (B) stage, where drastic changes are required to establish a new society: "It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time." (182-183).

Similar to other totalitarian societies, cults or dictatorships, Gilead's leaders use methods of direct action and gradual persuasion to gain control over the United States. They shoot the president and kill Congress, causing the United States to come under military control (182-183). These killings are then blamed on Islamic terrorism, which makes it possible for Gilead's leaders to be established as the single source of power (182-183). After being established, they then legitimize the oppression of its authoritarian system as a non-negotiable sacrifice needed to reach the goals that have been set. The "old world" of free will is depicted as a false system as part of Gilead's propaganda, with which they attempt to glorify Gilead's motivations: "we were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice" (35). Absolute obedience is framed as a necessary feature, or "sacrifice," that the inhabitants of Gilead must make in order for Gilead's society to work; Gilead is then forcibly put forth as the only feasible way to allegedly "solve" all the problems of the pre-Gilead United States. Those who are in control of Gilead are either truthfully dogmatic and zealous, blinded by the newly found power, and/or simply in search of a position of power to take advantage of for personal gain. Those who are lured in as followers are usually either naively idealistic, brainwashed and/or are unable to see other options other than to comply. The inhabitants that are not lured into the ideology voluntarily and who, as such, do not want to comply are forced into complying by the regime through threats, torture and rigorous "re-programming" at training facilities, filled with propaganda and manipulated facts. As Lois Feuer explains, "individual humanity is [...] undesirable in the society-as-prison; [language] is restricted and controlled as an instrument of power. [Harvard], [...] bastion of reasoned discourse, has become the site of torture and mutilation of the regime's enemies" (84).

Alternative ways of thinking become illegal, as Offred says in the novel: “like other things now, thought must be rationed” (17). When complete obedience is not maintained, the non-participants are discarded and killed. Once Gilead’s followers start to understand the cost of their individual rights and wish to undo their choices, it is often too late to unravel themselves from the Gilead system and make it out alive. Openly questioning individual choices becomes impossible, and to deny that Gilead is the only legitimate form of society has become lethal for those who oppose the regime. Leaving Gilead, thinking of leaving Gilead and differing individual opinion have become inexcusable sins, which makes Gilead a trap - both a mental and physical trap - for those who want to express individuality. The analysis above establishes that Gilead from *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a totalitarian regime, in which the oppression of individual identity is successful in keeping the inhabitants in line of Gilead’s ideology, but at great individual cost.

2. The Gender Essentialism of Gilead

The academic debate between gender essentialism and gender constructivism is the most prominently featured aspect of identity politics found in Atwood’s Gilead. As Lois Feuer explains, Atwood brings essentialism to the “dystopian tradition,” by merging her concept of “ustopia” with essentialist politics (83). Essentialist politics are based on the idea of inherent imbedded differences between males and females, as opposed to gender being defined as completely society-constructed in constructivist theory (Stimpson and Herdt 12). The leaders of Gilead use essentialist ideas to define strict differences between the genders: Gilead’s ideology states that there are two genders based on the biological sexes, and that different rights and obligations should forcibly be assigned to both of these genders. This division functions as an essentialist tool to keep the inhabitants inside of the strictly demarcated structure. Gilead’s position on gender is further inspired by a Christian complementarian view of gender, where the societal responsibilities of men and women are described as being “complementary.” In complementarianism, men and women are described as being equal in status, but having separate definable talents and tasks

based on their gender that must be utilised to “complement” each other, such as the woman’s responsibility as a child carer and homemaker opposite the man as the household authority and main earner (eds. Piper and Grudem, 20-25). Followers of complementarian Christianity believe that this demarcation is based on God’s plan for man- and womanhood, as John Piper explains in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991):

The Bible does not leave us in ignorance about the meaning of masculine and feminine personhood. God has not placed in us an all-pervasive and all-conditioning dimension of personhood and then hidden the meaning of our identity from us. He has shown us in Scripture the beauty of manhood and womanhood in complementary harmony. (35)

Piper further points out examples of how “complementary harmony” is inspired by the Bible, quoting this Bible passage:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; [...] So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. (*The King James Version Bible*, Ephesians 5:22-31)

This idea of biblical complementarianism has been modified by Gilead’s Commanders to suit their political goals. The Bible source material has been twisted and implemented by the Commanders in an extreme form to function as an oppression tool - specifically for women - so that the inhabitants of Gilead automatically comply with the gendered rules that have been bestowed on them by the men in power. Gilead’s take on “complementarianism” puts the men of Gilead in an

automatic position of power, while rendering the wives and Handmaids powerless and submissive. The Commanders justify implementing this extreme gender essentialism by claiming it's a "natural" division of gender: "all we've done is return things to Nature's Norm" (232). By claiming its main control structure - gender demarcation - as a norm, the inhabitants of Gilead are made to believe that they are somewhat equal to the opposite sex in their complementary "masculine and feminine personhood" (35) in the way that Piper defines it above, while the inhabitants are actually trapped within the anti-individualistic and highly demarcated structure of Gilead.

Gilead's leaders use and alter biblical source material to justify the gender essentialism of Gilead. As was established above, the Commanders use the concept of complementarianism and modify this to suit their political agenda. As professor Pieixoto says in the "historical notes," in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead uses the Bible as a source of legitimisation for their laws and practices:

The need for what I may call birth services was already recognised in the pre-Gilead period, where it was being inadequately met by "artificial insemination," "fertility clinics," and the use of "surrogate mothers," who were hired for the purpose. Gilead outlawed the first two as irreligious, but legitimised and enforced the third, which was considered to have biblical precedents; they thus replaced the serial polygamy common in the pre-Gilead period with the older form of simultaneous polygamy practised both in early Old Testament times and in the former State of Utah in the nineteenth century. (317)

The alleged biblical precedent for using the Handmaids as surrogate mothers is stated as being based on the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah, as it suggests that a legitimate wife can bear children through her maid and claim these children for her own. The Handmaids' task of being impregnated through rape is justified by the Commanders by Genesis 30: "give me children, or else I die. [I am] in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Gen 29:29-Gen 30:7, qtd in *The Handmaid's Tale* 99). This Bible excerpt is chosen without context and is read out loud before the fertilisation ritual. In this ritual, the Handmaid must lay upon the knees of the wife

as the Commander rapes the Handmaid in order to impregnate her and to ultimately provide the Commander - and Gilead - with a child.

The rape of the Handmaid is not defined as rape, but is set up as a purely “biblical experience” where the Handmaids must remain dressed and veiled, and the husbands must remain clothed, avoid eye contact and are not allowed to show romantic gestures towards the Handmaid: “what’s going on in this room, under Serena Joy’s silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire” (105). This shows that the Commanders misuse and alter biblical passages to further their political agenda, and have carefully disguised these passages to fit into a production of dogmatic traditional values. The leaders of Gilead leave no room for the re-interpretation of the passages as they have altered and stripped them of context, forcing Gilead’s inhabitants to comply with their literal meanings. Furthermore, the Commanders forbid the women of Gilead to read and write, to avoid them from understanding and debating the context - and in most cases falsehood - of the biblically inspired material. By outlawing reading and writing, and by extension the critical evaluation of Gilead’s source material, the Commanders are able to cover up the modifications and keep the women in Gilead in a submissive “silenced” position. As Offred states, the punishment for reading is a cut-off hand on the third conviction (287), a punishment that seems brutalising enough to repel the women from reading. Furthermore, the leaders of Gilead have taken measures to ensure that text is stripped from everyday life: “they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone” (35). This passage illustrates the Commanders’ judgement of reading as a “temptation,” one of the biggest dangers to Gilead’s politics.

Because the first Handmaids of Gilead are still able to read, Offred is aware of the changes to the biblical source material, yet she is unable to speak up about them:

Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a disc; the voice was a man’s. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed*

are the meek. Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking. Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Nobody said when. (100)

This passage illustrates how Offred knows that the context of the verse has been modified to carry a different meaning more suited to Gilead's ideals, but that she is unable to check the facts out of fear of breaking Gilead's rules. As women in Gilead are not allowed to read and write, Offred is officially not allowed to know the context of the verse, and therefore could be severely punished for knowing and reciting the rest. In this case, Offred is able to understand that the verses have been modified because she recalls reading or hearing of this verse in the pre-Gilead society. A Commander is quoted by Offred as saying: "our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (320). This shows that the Commanders have orchestrated a world in which the women who do not know the context through reading and writing have to accept the modifications as truth. This way of "silencing women" and "[denying] women access to language," as Deborah Cameron puts it, "is an important aspect of women's oppression," which mirrors St. Paul's Christian opinion that "women should be silent in church" (Cameron, eds. Stimpson and Herdt 245). It becomes clear that the Commanders' motivation to disallow women to read and write originates both from the altered biblical material, and from a fear of criticism towards the ideology of Gilead.

The Commanders have created a frame in which the obedience of women to the state is strictly observed in order to withhold them ever questioning the modifications, while men are able to read freely. This suggests that the ultimate goal of the leaders of Gilead is absolute obedience from women rather than men, especially from the Handmaids:

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. [...] For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want things they can't have. (127)

This passage displays the idea that the current Handmaids' upbringing in the pre-Gilead society is regarded to be the only thing in the way of obedience, as they remember the true context of the biblical source material. Gilead's specific interpretation and modification of the biblical source material is designed to both lure followers into the ideology, and to keep the Commanders in power. Furthermore, the amount of oppressive tactics in Gilead's society shows the self-awareness that it could not function without the specific oppression of women, especially through the prohibition of reading and writing, as this could lead to the liberation of the precious fertile female population that is needed for Gilead's main goal of the survival of its population. Thus, the modifications that the Commanders have made to the biblical source material serve to verify Gilead's politics, which are then made undeniable within the totalitarian ideology to counteract the possibility of an open debate on the legitimacy of these modifications; specifically keeping the mostly fertile women of Gilead to defy or leave Gilead.

Besides the Commanders' modifications of the biblical source material, scapegoating is used to implement and maintain a strict gender division. As Feuer explains, in an essentialist society "each sees its opponents as 'the other,' abstracting so that it may dehumanise. In each case this abstracting is based on essentialist notions of 'feminine' and 'masculine' that belie their various mixtures in the unique individual, or deny the possibilities of a life without such labels" (88-89). In order to gain followers for their fundamentalist ideas, all the problems from before Gilead are explained away as punishments from God with women as the main culprits. Laying the primary blame on a single group - in Gilead's case "liberal" women, or to a greater extent the effect of liberalism on women - to further a totalitarian ideology is reminiscent of scapegoating tactics used by politicians throughout history.

One comparison that can be drawn is the blaming of the Jews in the Second World War for Europe's social-political crises. As Adolf Hitler is quoted remarking in *Hitler's Table Talk*, he believes that Europe - and in this specific quote, aimed at Romania - will be "cleaned" by the riddance of its Jewish population: "but the first thing, above all, is to get rid of the Jew. Without that,

it will be useless [to clean Romania]. If Antonescu sets about the job in this manner, he'll be the head of a thriving country, inwardly healthy and strong" (trans. Cameron and Stevens 68). Hitler also blamed the Jews for both the first and second World Wars, the reason that Europe was in crisis in the beginning of the twentieth century: "that race of criminals has on its conscience the two million dead of the first World War, and now already hundreds of thousands more [...]. It's not a bad thing, by the way, that public rumour attributes to us a plan to exterminate the Jews" (87). Hitler communicated the scapegoating of the Jewish population by type casting them as "devious" and "stupid" and by making the Jews the source of all problems, including the fall of the ancient Graeco-Roman Empire and the diminished "solidarity" of the European people:

The Jew can take the credit for having corrupted the Graeco-Roman world. Previously words were used to express thoughts; he used words to invent the art of disguising thoughts. Lies are his strength, the weapon in the struggle. The Jew is said to be gifted. His only gift is that of juggling with other people's property and swindling each and every one. [...] I've always said, the Jews are the most diabolical creatures in existence, and at the same time the stupidest. They can't produce a musician, or a thinker. No art, nothing, less than nothing. They're liars, forgers, crooks. [...] If the Jew weren't kept presentable by the Aryan, he'd be so dirty he couldn't open his eyes. We can live without the Jews, but they couldn't live without us. When the Europeans realise that, they'll all become simultaneously aware if the solidarity that binds them together. The Jew prevents this solidarity. (118-119)

Just as Hitler blamed the Jews for causing Europe's socio-political crises, the Commanders blame liberal "sinful" women for the crises that occurred in the pre-Gilead United States. In Gilead, the pre-Gilead women are mainly blamed for population decline through the use of birth control, their alleged preference for participating in the workforce rather than family life, and their presumed liberal attitudes to sexuality. These women are also blamed for the ecological disasters through their alleged participation in the consumerism-caused pollution, and their "lazy" and "irresponsible" liberal lifestyles that is said to have caused the rise of this consumerism.

Because the male leaders of Gilead believe that this demographic of so-called “liberal women” have deviated the furthest from their biblical roles, they are posed as the biggest offenders. In Gilead, solidarity is also an important theme; this is first established by creating a strict societal frame consisting of Gilead’s biblically inspired totalitarian laws, and secondly by using a common enemy and a scapegoat, mirroring Hitler’s portrayal of the Jews as the absolute enemy that a united Europe must fight against. Liberal society - especially the liberal women that live within this society - is chosen as Gilead’s main scapegoat; like the Jews in the Second World War, liberal “sinful” women must be institutionalised and be made to pay for their trespasses. The Jewish Star of David that was used to brand the Jews is mirrored in the Handmaid’s blood red attire.⁸ Furthermore, Gilead’s overt social goal to reverse the alleged offenses to God by abruptly “undoing” the effects of a liberal culture mirrors Hitler’s goal of forcefully ridding Europe from its Jewish population.

One of the ways Gilead strives to achieve the “purification” of the socio-political and environmental problems is by controlling the liberal freedoms of its population. This is achieved by branding these freedoms - such as choosing how to dress - as “sinful” and forbidden: “[dressing up] would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative” (242). Secondly, contemporary liberal society is painted by Gilead as being evil, as it allowed women to “stray away” further from Christian doctrine and thus causing God to bestow infertility on them as a punishment:

“Imagine,” said Aunt Lydia, “wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, the Unwomen were always wasting time. They were encouraged to do it. The government gave them money to do that very thing. [...] But they were Godless, and that can make all the difference, don’t you agree?” (128-129).

⁸ In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the main character Hester Prynne is made to wear a red “A” marking her as an adulteress after she gives birth out of wedlock. The red outfits in *The Handmaid’s Tale* bear a resemblance to this marking, as the red clothing is also used to mark these women as sinful; this can mean they are adulterers as is the case with Offred, or have committed another “sin” as it is defined by Gilead’s leaders.

Thirdly, the liberal women from the pre-Gilead area are branded as “Unwomen,” “lazy” and as “sluts”: “[liberal pre-Gilead women] said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia’s nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts” (123). Gilead uses such indoctrinating language to focus the blame of infertility solely on women: “there is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (71). Blaming liberal women for infertility creates a common scapegoat that Gilead women must strive to disassociate with. In this shaming structure, women are forced to believe that they are inherently sinful and guilty for defying Gilead’s version of God’s word, revealing an inherent sexism and gender demarcation within Gilead’s society. The inhabitants of Gilead are provoked by Gilead’s scapegoating tactics to be obedient and disassociate with liberalism and the “liberal woman” in order to solve the problems caused by the liberal pre-Gilead society.

Gilead’s hierarchical structure allows for the gendered politics described above to be carried out successfully. At the top of the Gilead hierarchy are the leadership roles, such as the male Commanders, followed by the Angels - who are the male soldiers of Gilead -, the Guardians - who are the male controlling force of Gilead -, and the Aunts, who are the female controllers of the Handmaids of Gilead. This shows that not only men make up the highest ranks; there is also a female class of Aunts:

[...] The best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. In the case of Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called “traditional values,” or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting. There was, too, a negative inducement: childless or infertile or older

women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies. (320-321)

This demonstrates that the female population of Gilead is not only oppressed by men, but by women as well, as especially older women are recruited as an oppressive force ironically known as “Aunts.” The power of the Aunts is significant when compared to the other female Gilead population, as they are the only female group that is permitted to read and write and exhibit a leadership role over the Handmaids (139). The wives have more freedoms than, for instance, a Martha or a Handmaid, but they have less rights than the Aunts.

Like the largest part of Gilead’s female civilians, the Commanders’ wives are restricted from leadership roles and more importantly; from reading and writing. However, the wives are permitted to run the household and take a diminished leadership role over the Marthas and Handmaids, whose transgressions are supposed to be “under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (170). However, the Commanders have jurisdiction over the wives, and even the Handmaids’ names suggest that they belong to the Commanders rather than the wives. This shows a falsehood in the proposed power that wives have: “[Offred] was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it” (318).

The lower-ranking population consists of the “Econopeople,” who are the civilian men and women of Gilead, and the Marthas, who are the servants to the Commanders and their wives (225-226). Every Econo-household functions similarly to the household of the Commander and his wife, namely consisting of strictly “complementarian” gendered responsibilities: the men are the leaders of the household and the women are the homemakers who are, again, not allowed to read and write. The Econowives have more freedoms compared to the Handmaids, mostly because they are not forced to be surrogate mothers of the Commanders’ children, and can often stay with their husbands from before Gilead. Nevertheless, they have a hard task of reflecting Gilead’s

essentialist view of gender responsibility by being a house maker and a mother without being able to utilise servants, as is the case for the Commanders' wives (34). Below the status of the Handmaid are only the prisoners and defectors who are forced to work in the Colonies or to do other forced hard labour, such as the "Unwomen."

Each separate class is assigned a specific symbolic coloured outfit or uniform to outwardly confirm their status, as well as houses, cars and other possessions; this makes it impossible to hide the status and identity of the inhabitants of Gilead; outward appearance becomes a mandatory means to show their place in the totalitarian structure. For example, the Handmaids are dressed in red and adorn a modest head covering called "wings," outwardly showing their controversial status as sinful women who are forced to be surrogate mothers, and highlighting them to make it easier to see and find them.⁹ The Handmaids are told by the Aunts in their training programmes that their place as a Handmaid is an honourable one, and that they belong to an army of women, or even a "sisterhood" (17-19). However, the Handmaids are primarily considered to be objects or vessels for and by the Commanders, and are seen by the Commanders as a necessary yet disposable tool to continue the population growth that has been diminished.

Gilead's women in general are not solely defined through their ability to conceive, as the wives of high-ranking Commanders who are defined as being "barren" are considered higher ranking nevertheless; the Handmaids are therefore not considered to be higher ranking due to their fertility, but their fertility does serve an important role in saving Handmaids from hard labour and from being killed. As Offred notes, they are not necessarily seen as honourable by the other classes, for example: "beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us" (54). Furthermore, the wives often resent the Handmaids: "it's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You

⁹ "Sinful women" means women who have committed sins in the eyes of Gilead's leaders. The Bible is usually used to define these sins. Fertile sinful women are given a chance as a Handmaid, while infertile sinful women are killed, turned into Martha's (dependent on the severity of the sin) or sent to the Colonies to eventually die.

should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them” (56). The Handmaids are supposed to be considered to be sinful by the higher classes, branded in red attire to shame and separate them in order to scare the other classes from becoming Handmaids.¹⁰ Yet, they are considered somewhat powerful and enviable because of their fertility: “in this house we all envy each other something” (57). This fertility is often the sole reason that the women are kept alive as Handmaids, imprisoning them as a vessel for a child that will legally belong to the Commander and his wife.

The vitriol between the higher and lower classes demarcates the classes, and confirms Gilead’s control over its population. Besides fear, rewarding obedience benefits the controlling structure of Gilead: “[the Guardians] think [...] of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibly to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own” (32). Like the Guardians and Angels, the Econopeople of Gilead are promised an eventual upgrade into the highest ranks: “some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife” (54). The fear of dropping to a lower level of the social hierarchy helps to keep the hierarchical structure of Gilead in place, as a lower level is considered to be a step closer to serving a death sentence in the Colonies. By granting those who comply with the Gilead structure a higher rank in the hierarchy, it becomes more attractive to become integrated into the Gilead structure. Additionally, by granting a group of women, the Aunts, a higher rank and control over the Handmaids, and by granting the Econowives and the wives of Commanders more freedoms than the women in the lower classes, a part of the female population is given a sense of control and satisfaction of their current higher status. This control is only superficial, however, as the increase in rights and status is only minimal, and as the main control remains in the hands of the male Commanders of Gilead - ultimately supporting the patriarchy:

¹⁰ As stated in footnote (5), these women are branded by their clothing, like Hester Prynne is branded with a red “A” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Gilead was, although undoubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content, like some sectors of the social fabric that gave rise to it. As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those you remove. (320)

This planning shows that the Gilead leaders emphasise the importance of the successful integration of women into the hierarchy of Gilead. This hierarchical control over its inhabitants - especially women - and the temptation of power and possible prospects of achieving a higher rank is ultimately needed to make Gilead's plans successful.

3. Female Rights and Atwood's Criticism of Radical Feminism

The Handmaid's Tale can be regarded as a feminist and female rights novel, as it speculates about a society in which especially women have severely diminished rights. The novel has been hailed as a "feminist dystopia," a "feminist parable or rallying cry," or even an "allegory of what results from a politics based on misogyny, racism and anti-Semitism," as Kim A. Loudermilk puts it (119). As described in the previous section on gender essentialism, *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a totalitarian society based on extreme gender essentialism, which is oppressive to individual rights. At first glance, the novel focuses heavily on the female experience inside of the totalitarian and "ustopian" Gilead: Gilead is an oppressive regime that leaves no room for protest, discussion or change - especially for the women, it is heavily focused on female voices and experiences, emphasises the misogyny and objectification of women that takes place, and displays Gilead as a patriarchal society in which only men are allowed powerful leadership roles. The loss of specifically female rights is shown by Atwood as a gradual process at first, and then sudden process: the women of Gilead slowly lose their rights starting with property rights, gender equality rights, rights to birth control and their bodies, and finally the right to read and write; this is done under the guise of anti-terrorism and safety precautions to ease the population into Gilead's ideology, followed by oppression with force, threats and violence.

A class of women called Handmaids are tasked with repenting for the liberal women - the main scapegoat of Gilead. These Handmaids are repeatedly raped and forced into surrogate motherhood to further the goal of population growth. Abortion is outlawed completely, and doctors who have carried out abortions in the past are executed.¹¹ Inhabitants that do not agree with the regime are silenced or killed. The “silencing of women,” as Deborah Cameron calls it, is a particular goal for feminists to raise awareness of, tasking themselves to discover ways in which ways women are silenced so that feminists can then “[break] the silence” (eds. Stimpson and Herdt 246). The right to female body autonomy - such as the right to abortion and birth control - is also an inherent part of feminist political goals; it encourages ways in which women can empower their individuality and take control of their own biological destinies. Breaking this power then reveals the anti-feminist and extreme gender essentialist agenda of Gilead. This suggests that Atwood’s novel is critical of essentialism, revealing Atwood’s alleged feminist mission to show the flaws in gender essentialism and the oppressive outcome of an inherently “anti-feminist” society. In addition, Atwood’s choice for a Handmaid as the main character of the novel - arguably the most violated “class” of females in Gilead - illustrates the violation of female rights first-hand to the reader, which shines a large spotlight on the effects of extreme gender essentialism and Gilead’s anti-feminist approach on the individuals of Gilead. Atwood’s showcasing of Gilead as an “ustopia” that violates female rights inherently as part of their highly gendered doctrine - and the subsequent horrifying consequences for the primarily female main characters - makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* suitably placed within the feminist and gender equality debate.

But Atwood’s Gilead is not just a speculative warning against anti-feminism and the essentialist right-wing; it also shows how feminists can hold extreme views that unintentionally further the essentialist agenda. Indeed, *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates the hypocrisy of Gilead - which reveals Atwood’s dislike for extreme politics such as totalitarianism and extreme

¹¹ While writing this thesis, the relevance of this topic has increased in modern politics as “Alabama’s governor signed the most aggressively anti-abortion law in recent American history” on May 15, 2019 (Law).

essentialism, including gender essentialism - but it also reveals a multifaceted view of feminism. As Loudermilk puts it, the novel shows “a profound ambivalence toward certain aspects of feminism; [...] [a] feminism that is ineffective” (121), and as Lois Feuer has remarked, Atwood states that “[feminists] are [their] own enemies” by exposing the covert essentialist views of the feminists in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (89). In the novel, Atwood’s stance on radical feminist politics is not just implied through the female main characters’ struggles with their own violated rights; it is also mentioned directly in the novel. The feminism that is shown is confrontational and exclusive, and the main character that symbolises this feminist movement is Offred’s mother. Offred introduces the reader to her mother through memory flashbacks, and presents her to the reader as a militant feminist who leads an exclusively female enclave of activists in the time before Gilead exists. These feminist activists aggressively rally against sexism in a way that demonises pornography and burns books that are deemed sexist or politically incorrect.

Some of the feminists’ activism is shown to the reader by Offred’s memory of going to a book burning¹² with her mother in the middle of the night as a child, where she is tasked with throwing a pornographic book into the flames. Her mother wants to shield her from the nude picture on the cover: “don’t let her see it, said my mother. Here, she said to me, toss it in, quick” (48). Feuer quotes Lorna Sage about the right-wing ideas that are hidden in this type of feminism: “what Atwood is after here - one of the book’s persistent polemical projections - is the tendency in present-day feminism towards a kind of separatist purity, a matriarchal nostalgia [that] threatens to join forces with right-wing demands for “traditional values” (qtd in Feuer 89).

By burning books, the feminists depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are not unlike the oppressors of Gilead, as censorship such as book burning is a main tool for furthering both extreme agendas. The feminists’ anti-porn stance is also something that radical feminists and

¹² The burning of books is a recognisable trope in dystopian fiction; the books symbolise the freedom of information, and the burning of them marks the eradication of freedom of speech and thought. Novels such as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) make use of this trope to illustrate the totalitarian nature of their fictional societies. To see how this has been illustrated in the series, see figure 9 (chapter 2).

Gilead agree on; in fact, the abolishment of pornography is recalled by Offred as one of the first actions of Gilead's rise to power. Even though the feminist reasoning for this conclusion is different, the rejection of the objectification of women and the "disrespect" of undressed or sexualised women is shared with Gilead: "consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation" (128). Furthermore, both Gilead and the feminist movement of Offred's mother are focused on a social division based on biological sex, and in the case of the feminists, the men are excluded: "a man is just a woman's strategy for making other women," Offred mother claims (130). With these parallels, Atwood shows a form of radical feminism that mirrors the exclusion of women and women's rights in Gilead by excluding men. The movements are both portrayed as dangerous, but the biggest difference between the two radical movements is that Gilead is successful in the implementation of their extremism,¹³ and that the feminism in the novel is not; as Loudermilk states: "Atwood's fictional feminists don't accomplish much, and what they do accomplish is wrong-headed, even dangerous" (121).

Another example of Atwood's criticism of feminism is the portrayal of Offred's friend Moira, who is also described as a feminist in the novel. Moira's feminism lands her in the same position as Offred, who is shown to be ambivalent to feminism herself - this suggests that feminism has not helped Moira to avoid becoming a Handmaid. Moira's feminist defiance of the Gilead system even causes her to be tortured by the Aunts, and finally brings her to a place called Jezebel's, where she is forced to do sex work in secret for the Commanders and other men in Gilead. The novel does not elaborate whether Moira escapes, but it does suggest that Offred - as a non-feminist - at least gets close to escaping. Both the mother's radical feminism and Moira's less radical feminism reveals that radical movements - whether it is the totalitarian right-wing or left-wing feminism - is ineffective in the long run. This illustrates Atwood's understanding of the multifaceted nature of

¹³ Political extremism is also a highly used trope of dystopian fiction, seen in novels such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and works by Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut and Ayn Rand, among others.

identity politics rather than one side of the debate; she does not define feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a movement that is helpful in preventing Gilead coming into being, or as the solution to Gilead's essentialism, rather it is shown as another version - albeit a milder version - of Gilead's gender politics.

By mirroring the politics that both radical feminism and Gilead uphold, Atwood provides a commentary of gender divisions in any form, including feminist gender divisions. As Loudermilk states, Atwood does not convey an anti-feminist opinion, but “[warns] feminists about certain roads she fears we are taking, thus expressing her discomfort with some elements of feminist politics, particularly the ideas of feminist poststructuralism and cultural feminism” (121). This goes against the understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a straightforwardly feminist novel; it is more fitting to regard Atwood's novel as an anti-totalitarian novel¹⁴ that emphasises the importance of individual rights rather than the importance of strictly female rights. The novel's core is showing the different definitions of “freedom” that the individuals enjoy before and in Gilead: “there is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it” (34). Atwood showcases the problems of both pre-Gilead liberalism and the totalitarianism of Gilead, but emphasises the lack of freedom of the latter. As Feuer puts it, “the issue here is what our present freedom costs us, weighed against the price the fundamentalist right exacts for the “protection” of women in Gilead” (88-89). With its main focus on individual freedom and ambivalence towards feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests that extreme gender politics is not synonymous with the right-wing, but that it can be part of any angle of the identity politics debate, including feminism itself.

¹⁴ As is typical of dystopian fiction, Atwood's main object of criticism is the disruptive element of her society that has turned it into a dystopia, which in the case of Gilead is Christian fundamentalist totalitarianism. George Orwell also criticises his novel's totalitarian society of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), by portraying the oppressive elements of this totalitarianism for the individuals that live in Oceania.

4. Gilead's Redefinition of Minority Identities

The redefinition of particular minority identities as “sinful” and “other” - in Gilead's case religious minorities, non-hetero, sexual and gender minorities, and racial minorities - is used by Gilead as a tool to oppress individual identity expression and to emphasise the “solidarity” needed to perpetuate Gilead's totalitarian hierarchy. As has been established in the first section of this chapter, Gilead is a totalitarian regime where openly questioning one's individual choices has become impossible; any form of individual identity expression that does not fit in with the Gilead structure and laws has become forbidden, and an active participation in Gilead's hierarchy becomes the only identity permissible.

The hierarchical identity that is assigned to the inhabitants of Gilead is a “role” that the individuals need to play in order for Gilead to be a well-working solidary system. This system requires an active participation enforced by the leaders' military power, as “passive obedience” is undesirable in the totalitarian system of Gilead (Linz 70). Identities that go against Gilead's doctrine are scapegoated and made “other,” including the expression of religious ideas that differ from the totalitarian religious views of Gilead, non-hetero or non-conforming gender and sexual identities that differ from Gilead's biblically inspired essentialist view of gender, and non-Caucasian racial identities. The reader learns of Gilead's prosecution of these different identities through Offred's accounts of “the wall,” a place where dead defectors are displayed as a scaring tactic and warning for the inhabitants of Gilead. The individual non-conformers to the Gilead identity are hunted and killed by Gilead's authorities, stripped of their individual identity and hanged from the wall as a warning:

The bodies' faces are covered by a bag, making it's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men look like dolls on which faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated

material, like flour or dough. It's the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life any more to hold them up. The heads are zeros. (42)

The anonymisation of these bodies is intentional, as Gilead's leaders do not condone individual expressions of identity and do not wish to display it after the death of the individual; the individual could rise up and threaten the totalitarian system of Gilead. Instead, these "scarecrows" are marked with symbols to indicate their "sin," the reason that they have been hanged from the wall. This symbol is the only thing identifying them, replacing their individual identities: "Only two hanging on [the wall] today: one Catholic, not a priest though, placarded with an upside-down cross, and some other sect I don't recognize. The body is marked only with a J, in red. It doesn't mean Jewish, those would be yellow stars. [...] What could it be? Jehovah's Witness? Jesuit? Whatever it meant, he's just as dead" (210-211). By reducing their identities to single symbols, Gilead has effectively dehumanised their victims and reduced them to their alleged crimes.

The indifference to the victims' individual identities and the simplification of their identity to their "sin" eases the scapegoating process, as it focuses the violence and hatred of these humans towards the reason they were killed rather than the emotional bond one has with a complex, multi-faceted human being. As Gilbert Herdt has stated in *Same Sex: Different Cultures*, sexual minority identities are often related to societal notions of man- and womanhood: "those who threaten or disrupt the social order are typically regarded as subversive [...] or religious heretics whose actions or existence [challenge] the status quo (1). Sexual minorities are thus in a "crisis of sexual being - [...] having bodies and desires at odds with the heteronormal roles and folk theory of human nature in their society," which then creates an "individual-against-society dilemma" (2). This dilemma is explored by Atwood in Gilead, and in the society before Gilead through Offred's accounts: "There was a time when we didn't hug, after she'd told me about being gay; but then she said I didn't turn her on, reassuring me, and we'd gone back to it. We could fight and wrangle and name-call, but it didn't change anything underneath. She was still my oldest friend" (181). This shows how Offred

did see her friend Moira as “other” before, but decided not to reduce her to simply an “other” in favour of her friendship. Gilead also considers these minorities as “other,” but, unlike Offred, completely avoids the humanisation of these “queer” identities by rendering them faceless, removing them from a possible friend - or even neighbour status.

Like the marking of the Jews with the yellow Star of David in the Second World War, Gilead’s defectors are sorted into a category marked with a single point of recognition, creating a category that becomes their entire identity. This is also the case with the inhabitants of Gilead; as established before, the demarcated groups within Gilead each have a different “uniform” that is coloured differently from one another, and the possession or lack of large houses, cars and other displays of status are erected to show-off the rank that these inhabitants possess within in the hierarchy. Each category within Gilead has obvious markers and symbolism to make the separation of these categories easier; and Gilead applies this strategy to its living as well as its dead. Apart from symbols, “sinners” are referred to with certain names, for example “gender traitors” for sexual minorities to make their identities synonymous with treachery (53). The dead are portrayed as “scarecrows” with symbols marking them as “other” and faceless “zeros” that are used as objects to scare and emphasise that other identities in Gilead other than those within the established hierarchy are punishable by death.

The outward propaganda of Gilead’s policy regarding the Jewish population displays how Gilead’s leaders are able to understand and manipulate Gilead’s inhabitants regarding identity expression. As Offred explains in the novel, in the “sect wars” that preceded the rise of Gilead, the Jewish population was given a choice of conversion or emigration:

[The Jews] were declared Sons of Jacob and therefore special, [so] they were given a choice. They could convert, or emigrate to Israel. A lot of them emigrated, if you can believe the news. I saw a boatload of them, on the TV, leaning over the railings in their black coats and hats and their long beards, trying to look as Jewish as possible, in costumes fished up from the past, the women with shawls over their heads, smiling and waving, a little stiffly it’s

true, as if they were posing; and another shot, of the richer ones, lining up for the planes. Ofglen says some other people got out that way, by pretending to be Jewish, but it wasn't easy because of the tests they gave you and they've tightened up on that now. You don't get hanged only for being a Jew though. You get hanged for being a noisy Jew who won't make the choice. Or for pretending to convert. That's been on the TV too: raids at night, secret hoards of Jewish things dragged out from under beds, Torahs, talliths, Mogen Davids. And the owners of them, sullen-faced, unrepentant, pushed by the Eyes against the walls of their bedrooms, while the sorrowful voice of the announcer tells us voice-over about their perfidy and ungratefulness. (211)

This excerpt suggests that Gilead's leaders use their version of the scripture to allow the Jewish population to avoid prosecution while many other religious minorities are not given this choice. This exception suggests that Gilead's doctrine is nuanced and consistent with scripture, adding to the propaganda and myth of Gilead as a saviour society, saving the liberal and sinful pre-Gilead society from infertility and ecological problems. The casualties that are made on the road to the achievement of their goals - such as "gender traitors" who stand in the way of Gilead's goal of fertility - are portrayed as necessary and just, and this is often backed up with Gilead's version of scriptural precedent. However, sometimes "gender traitors" are not killed and hanged from the wall, a large part is also sent to the Colonies to work, showing that Gilead seems to favour the achievement of their goals over the strict execution of their scripture; after all, they need workers to clean the land from toxic waste (260-261). In the "Historical Notes," the reader learns that the "exception" for the Jews was not truthful:

The National Homelands and the Jewish boat-person plan were both [Commander Judd's], as was the idea of privatising the Jewish repatriation scheme, with the result that more than one boatload of Jews was simply dumped into the Atlantic, to maximize profits. From what we know of [Commander] Judd, this would not have bothered him much. He was a hard-liner. (319-320)

This illustrates that the so-called “exception” made for the Jewish population was in fact a monetary scheme, devised without regard for human life. This reveals Gilead’s tactics of demarcating, anonymising and scapegoating individual identities is to manipulate the inhabitants into believing the Commanders’ devotedness to their own doctrine. It reveals that the Commanders are aware of the steps that are required to assimilate a multifaceted population of individual identities into a hierarchy of single, strictly demarcated identities, and that this is not without the outward justification through untruthful propaganda.

By portraying Gilead - through propaganda - as one united society that must work towards the communal goal of saving all the humans from biblical damnation, the Commanders are able to successfully justify their doctrine and the corresponding sacrifice of human life; by displaying the bodies of their “sinners,” they show their dedication to their scripture and their ultimate goals. The actual workings of Gilead behind the scenes are embellished or hidden, as they seem hypocritical; the emphasis on monetary gain from the “scheme” and the subsequent sinking of boats containing Jewish minorities goes against the dedication that the Commanders portray in their propaganda. By claiming to excuse the Jewish minority group, they seem consistent in their labelling and categorising of certain identities as something that is based on scripture. In reality, it is revealed that the scriptural precedent for certain identity prosecutions or lack thereof is yet another tool devised by the Commanders to manipulate, indoctrinate, oppress and control individuals from expressing their own identities in favour of Gilead’s power and solidarity.

Racial identity politics can be seen as the main premise of the rise of Gilead. As is stated in the “Historical Notes,” the rise of Gilead is associated with pre-existing racism towards non-white inhabitants: “[Gilead’s] racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did” (316-317). This “emotional fuel,” as it is called by professor Pieixoto in the last chapter of the novel, is not openly addressed by Gilead during its rise to power. In fact, Gilead’s leaders do not openly associate the “plummeting Caucasian birth rates” with racism, but frame

these problems as punishments from God directed at the entire population, to further their agenda. The reader does not learn about any racial motivations behind Gilead through Offred, who tells her story as a first-hand account and does not recall any race-related issues in Gilead. This shows that Gilead's inhabitants are not officially or openly aware of any racial motivation, and that the Commanders have disguised this fact for lack of scriptural or goal-oriented justification. As is concluded in the previous section, the Commanders warp the public perception of Gilead's goals in order to keep control of the population. It is only after the main story of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the "Historical Notes," that the reader finds out about a racial motivation for the rise of Gilead's totalitarian regime:

[It was an age of] plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time. The reasons for this decline are not altogether clear to us. Some of the failure to reproduce can undoubtedly be traced to the widespread availability of birth control of various kinds, including abortion, in the immediate pre-Gilead period. Some infertility, then, was willed, which may account for the differing statistics among Caucasians and non-Caucasians; but the rest was not. Need I remind you that this was the age of the R-Strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool. (316-317)

This excerpt shows which mechanics have been set in motion caused by racist fears, a lack of nuanced research and unresolved panic surrounding infertility and ecological problems. Gilead's leaders have simply used the widespread problems as a leverage to cover up their actual agenda of creating an environment for Caucasian population growth rather than the population growth in general. As Pieixoto tells the reader: "men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates" (317).

The novel reveals that the ultimate goal of the Commanders is to not only remain in power and to keep control of the inhabitants through so-called scriptural precedent, but that they also wish to have a racial “cleanse” of sorts, incorporating themselves into this agenda by taking on fertile women to rape and impregnate them. After lifting this veil, the Commanders’ motivations are revealed to be even more sinister and egotistical, exposing the true need for the purge of the “undesirable” individual identities and the emphasis on gender essentialism. The information in “Historical Notes” reveals that Gilead’s totalitarian structure is based on identity politics, starting with racial identity politics as a main motivation for Gilead’s rise, and being furthered by Gilead’s ostracism of individual identities in favour of only one identity: Gilead.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been established that *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) can be seen as a part of identity politics that remains relevant in the modern political environment. Firstly, Gilead is defined as a totalitarian society that fits the definition used by Juan Linz and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski. In totalitarian societies, the individual is inherently suppressed to serve the goals of the totalitarian state. Gilead is able to become a totalitarian state through three stages: (A) the mass panic and chaos originating from ecological and fertility problems; (B) the murder of the United States leaders to establish Gilead and implement “solutions” to these problems, and ultimately: (C) the oppression of individual rights within Gilead to uphold these “solutions.” Gilead is able to take power because of violence, persuasion and manipulated facts. Because of Gilead’s totalitarianism, individuality in Gilead is extremely diminished, and expressions of individuality become lethal.

The constructivism versus essentialism debate is featured heavily in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Biblical passages and complementarianism is used as the source material for Gilead’s extreme essentialist laws. These ideas are then modified by Gilead’s leaders to fit with their specific oppression tactics. A strict control of women is necessary to oppress women into cooperation,

severely reducing their individual rights - such as the prohibition of reading and writing. Liberal women are branded as "sinful" in Gilead and are scapegoated as the main reason for the ecological problems and infertility crisis, reminiscent of the branding and persecution of the Jewish population in the Second World War. Fertility becomes a commodity in Gilead, turning women - especially Handmaids - into objects; fertility is considered to be the only asset keeping "sinful" women from being killed. The implementation of a strict demarcated hierarchy with specified uniforms and customs keeps Gilead's inhabitants inside the structure of Gilead, especially integrating women into Gilead through the seeming increase in rights as they progress up the hierarchy.

Female rights are at the forefront of the novel, as they are systematically violated by Gilead's regime. Female rights being violated, such as the prohibition of abortion and birth control and the forced rape and surrogacy of Handmaids, are at the core of the novel. Because of the emphasis on female rights, the novel can be regarded a feminist novel. However, Atwood also provides the reader with a critique of feminism, as she equates Gilead's extremism with the extremism of Offred's mother's radical feminism. Moreover, Atwood illustrates how feminist characters in the novel are not successful in overturning Gilead. With her criticism of both Gilead and radical feminism, Atwood provides a commentary of gender divisions in any form.

Minority identities are framed as "other," and have to be either integrated or eradicated under Gilead's regime to keep the strict demarcated hierarchy in place. To diminish the power of the individual, bodies hanged from the wall are made anonymous and are branded with a symbol to mark their sin. This dehumanises them, as it equates them with their crime and strips them of their identity. The inconsistency in the treatment of these minorities - killing some, and using others for hard labour - shows that Gilead's main ecological and fertility goals are more important than a strict abidance of the scripture. Racial identity is also an important part of Gilead's politics, as Gilead wishes to further Caucasian birth rates rather than those of racial minorities. In essence, Gilead suppresses minority identities in favour of Gilead as one uniform identity. However, there

are inconsistencies due to the Commanders wanting to remain in power, causing a corruption in the way Gilead is ruled; as the case with the Jewish population in Gilead illustrates.

The Handmaid's Tale is able to portray an extreme outcome of the current identity politics debate; a society in which extreme essentialism has turned into violent totalitarianism. The totalitarian structure of Gilead with its emphasis on essentialism and biblical complementarianism show how extreme essentialism can lead to the detrimental oppression of individuality, violating the rights of women, minorities and the inhabitants in general.

CHAPTER TWO

The adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) to *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-)

Introduction

After more than thirty years, and an unsuccessful film adaptation in 1990, Margaret Atwood's novel resurfaced in popular culture as an online streamable TV-series on the video platform Hulu in 2017. According to IMDb, the average viewer rating of the modern series is a high 8,6 (out of 10), placing the series on IMDb's number 180 spot in the best rated series of all time ("The Handmaids Tale," IMDb). Having won more than fifty awards including two Golden Globes, along with over a hundred separate award nominations, it can be stated with certainty that the series is universally well-recognised by critics and viewers alike. But how was Atwood's 1985 novel able to transcend the time period in which it was written, and remain a valid commentary on identity politics after so many years? This chapter will answer that question by exploring the adaptation of the novel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-), and to find to what extent it has been updated to fit contemporary identity politics. Firstly, the changes that have occurred in the adaptation process can be described as an "update" of the source material. These changes are categorised as "character changes" and "stylistic changes;" the former being an exploration of the choices that have been made to specifically alter Atwood's characters, and the latter being an exploration of other updated topics. The first section of this chapter will explore the changes that have been made to update Offred's character in the series, and how these choices have affected the novel's core ideas of identity. The second section will discuss the changes made to minority characters, and how the portrayal of both sexual minorities (referred to as "LGBT+") and racial minorities have affected the overall update and reception of the series. The second section will also show the popular media criticism of the changes in race portrayal, to illustrate how adaptation choices can lead to controversy. The third

section will demonstrate further updated elements of the series, such as the contemporary portrayal of Gilead's inner structure, commentary of technology and the role of visual violence. The fourth section will discuss how the portrayal of conservative activism has been moulded to suit the current debate on identity politics, and how specifically the conservative ideas portrayed in the novel have been updated to fit this debate. The final section will explore the modern feminism of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-), to demonstrate the series' most prominent role in contemporary identity politics as a feminist's cautionary tale, and its role as a protest symbol. With these five sections, this chapter will show that the successful 2017 adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) displays the novel's persisting and upgraded relevance as a commentary on the topic of identity politics, while shifting focus towards a more feminist approach.

1. From Offred to June: An Adaptation of Anonymity

Compared to the novel, the adaptation of Offred's character in the series has caused some noticeable differences, leading to problems for the novel's original commentary on identity. Firstly, the series has moved away from Atwood's commentary on faceless totalitarian victims: the portrayal of Offred as a first-person narrator in the novel is different from the series' observable screenplay, which causes a loss of the novel's framing of Offred as an unknown. The first episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) starts in Offred's room, as she describes the scarce furniture and by extent the predicament that she is in, similar to the start of "Chapter Two" in the novel. This first scene in the series introduces Offred as the main character and narrator, with Offred saying "my name is Offred, I had another name, but it's forbidden now, so many things are forbidden now," foreshadowing the ending of the episode, where she declares her name to be "June" ("Offred," Season 1, episode 1). In the novel, Offred is not given a name; in fact, she remains completely anonymous and not particularly exceptional up to, and including, the "Historical Notes." In this last

chapter of the novel, Atwood's fictional future college professors look back on the Gilead regime and analyse Offred's taped account of her life in Gilead:

Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part. But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. (317-318)

Offred's anonymity and her identity as "one of many" serves two different purposes in the novel: firstly, the reader is able to identify with her, and to "occupy" her so that the events of the novel can be experienced by the reader through Offred's first person point of view. Secondly, it creates a subjective lens that creates a bias in the reader's judgement leaning towards believing all of Offred's experiences as factual. At the very end of the novel in the "Historical Notes," Offred's memory is revealed to be flawed and "fragmented;" the legitimacy of Offred's account of Gilead is called into question, as Kimberly Canton puts it (1-4). In the series, both of the aforementioned effects are lost through the medium of film. While the Offred in the series remains the main character with whom the viewer is meant to identify, her anonymity is lost; both through actress Elisabeth Moss's portrayal of her - as Offred now has a face - and through the richer exploration of who she really is, where she comes from, and the heroic actions she partakes in. As Margaret Lyons states in her article "'The Handmaid's Tale' Season 2 Is Brutal and Not Much Else," written for *The New York Times*, the series has departed from the novel to explore June's heroism rather than her "every woman" role:

As [*The Handmaid's Tale*] strays further from its origins, it also strays further from one of its significant ideas: that June (Elisabeth Moss) is ordinary. It's one of the haunting essentials of the book, where she's only ever called Offred, which reminds us that you don't need to

be Harry Potter or Katniss Everdeen¹⁵ or Jesus Christ to retain your humanity in even the most oppressive, heinous circumstances. (Lyons)

While June is displayed as a main character heroine, in the novel she is Offred; one of many Handmaids, with some backstory and minor identification points. The novel's Offred is only significant because of her taped account of Gilead, and even that significance is doubted by professor Pieixoto in the last part of the novel. In fact, her account is merely used for a broader narrative, that of Professor Pieixoto's study of Gilead in a historical perspective. Furthermore, with the "Historical Notes," Atwood shows that the fictional future of Gilead has not given the identities back to the captured women; thus Offred's "real identity" - meaning her given name and details from before Gilead - is not recovered in the novel. This anonymity serves to comment on the fragmentation of memory and the loss of identity within totalitarian regimes: Offred remains faceless, within and without the totalitarianism. Furthermore, the reader is able to identify with the ordinary identity of Offred in the book, and project themselves on Offred to explore the world of Gilead with her. In the series, however, she is June Osborne, the wife of Lucas Bankole, portrayed by an actress with an identifiable face. In an attempt to stay as close to the novel as possible, Offred's real name in the series, June, is taken from a passage in the novel. As it states below, identifying Offred as "June" was not Atwood's intention:

Some have deduced that Offred's real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium / dormitory, "June" is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish. (Atwood, interview by Kalorkoti)

Furthermore, the viewer does not follow Offred's story through the first-person account of Offred as in the novel, but as a silent witness, looking over June's shoulder to see for ourselves what June is experiencing in Gilead. As Canton puts it, the viewer becomes a "voyeur" rather than a critic: "the

¹⁵ Harry Potter is used as an example here, as he is the main character and hero in the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) franchise of books (and films) written by J.K. Rowling. Likewise, Katniss Everdeen is the heroine in the *Hunger Game* (2008-2010) franchise of books (and films) written by Suzanne Collins.

most significant alteration that occurs when the story moves from the page to the stage [is] that readers become viewers and therefore become implicated in the story, rather than passive critics of it" (Canton 3). The main unavoidable problem in this construction is that June becomes an identifiable person - the main character - caught inside undeniable and unfragmented events, rather than the fragmented "every woman" as Atwood has framed her in the novel. The final part of the novel, the "Historical Notes," serves to change the reader's opinion - even breaking the reader's trust - of Offred's foretold events: did it, in fact, all really happen in this way? The novel's title also alludes to this mechanism:

At some time during the writing, the novel's name changed to "The Handmaid's Tale," partly in honour of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," but partly also in reference to fairy tales and folk tales: The story told by the central character partakes - for later or remote listeners - of the unbelievable, the fantastic, as do the stories told by those who have survived earth-shattering events. (Atwood, interview by Kalorkoti)

As Atwood's explanation of the novel's title shows, the novel is meant to tell a "tale," a near-unbelievable story of a survivor of horrific events. The contents of this told story is the manifestation of the main character's fragmented trauma rather than a complete truth. Furthermore, Pieixoto's need for a historical timeline diminishes Offred's experiences, and with it, Offred loses the legitimacy of her point of view and ultimately, identity. As Canton puts it, "oppressed and subjugated groups must speak in the language of [the dominant] discourse," and by the integration of victims' personal stories into the historical timeline, these subjugated groups "have had to find their identities in the stories that never mentioned them" (Lipsitz qtd in Canton 3-4). Moreover, as Offred's storyline is expanded in the series, her actions are shown to be more active and heroic, as her regular defiance of Gilead (throughout the seasons) and both her escapes in the second season illustrate ("June," Season 2, Episode 1 and "The Word," Season 2, Episode 13). The novel's effect of Offred's anonymity and the possibility of bias and inconsistency of Offred's "tale" are lost through the filming process; Offred is no longer "one of many" and her

account is no longer subjective and questionable, causing a loss of this particular identity politics commentary that Atwood has laid out for the readers of the novel.

Of course, the series can explore the concept of anonymity on a different, mostly visual spectrum, making sure that the Handmaids' clothing is visually restricting and face-covering from the side, anonymising the characters of the series to the broadest extent possible. When the camera pans out in the particution scene¹⁶ of the first episode, all that the viewers can see are rows of unrecognisable Handmaids' faces, only able to identify them as Handmaids by the red outfits they are wearing (see figure 1). The first-person account is mimicked by the cinematographers¹⁷ by regularly showing frame-filling close-ups of Offred's face between her white wings, showing her emotions close-up (see figure 2). These particular close-ups are referred to as "claustrophobic close-ups" by film commentators such as the Screen Prism staff ("Framing Strong Women"). The effect of these close-ups is that the viewer feels physically and uncomfortably close to Offred, almost becoming a part of her through proximity.¹⁸ These visual choices also show an awareness of Atwood's choices in the novel, as it attempts to meet the commentary that Atwood has on the suppression of identity in the totalitarian system of Gilead - albeit in a visual manner rather than a written point of view. Offred's face - her identity - is now constantly and claustrophobically framed by her restrictive uniform, a symbol of the regime that itself is suppressing her identity. Nevertheless, the problem of Offred's identification remains, as Atwood's faceless and fragmented Offred is portrayed in the series by the inherently identifiable Elisabeth Moss. With this adaptation from novel to the screen, Offred has become "June," the main hero of

¹⁶ Particution is a Gilead ritual for punishing "sinners" through stoning or hanging.

¹⁷ According to the series' synopsis on Hulu, the cinematographers are Colin Watkinson, Zoe White and Stuart Biddlecombe.

¹⁸ These "claustrophobic close-ups" are also used for other characters in the series, often alternating the camera's focus from the character(s) in the foreground and the events in the background, to visually capture their relationship. A notable example of this, is when the Commander reads the news on his laptop (in focus), while Serena is seen in the background (blurry) to visually mark her exclusion from Gilead's system ("Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum," Season 1, Episode 4).

the story, causing the series to lose a part of Atwood's nuanced commentary of identity, memory legitimacy and the loss of personal experience and identity within historical storytelling.



Figure 1: The anonymous faces of the particicution scene (Still, "Offred," Season 1, Episode 1).



Figure 2: The "claustrophobic close-up" of June's face (Still, "Birth Day," Season 1, Episode 2).

2. The Series' Updated Portrayal of Minority Identities

Apart from the transformation from the novel's anonymous Offred into the series' identifiable June Osborne, there are many other book characters that have been adapted in other ways in order to suit the needs of the medium of a modern screenplay. With the series' departure from the one-sided view of Offred in the novel, the representation of multiple characters is possible. The series has made use of this by exploring minority identities. Not just Offred, but many characters are now followed by the viewer, and for this reason each character is given a diverse and expansive background story. This character diversification helps the similarly diverse audience to identify fully with Gilead's situation from multiple angles. As the series' creator Bruce Miller has remarked, adaptive changes were done "thoughtfully" and were used to better accommodate the viewer's experience:

If we changed something, we did it thoughtfully and for a reason. We discussed the repercussions of each change with Margaret. It's been a very active conversation back and forth. And I've been through the story a lot. We've picked it apart in the writers' room. [...] So we took great care, and most of the changes we've made were actually extrapolations: Taking a thing that was a sentence in the book and turning it into a whole episode. (Miller, interview by Dockterman)

As a result of these changes, some characters, such as Moira, Luke, Ofglen and Serena, have been given slightly different identities than those portrayed in the novel to fit and reflect the contemporary diversity of identity expression.

One example of diversification is Ofglen: a relatively minor character in the novel that has been given an extensive identity in the series. While Ofglen's story is not explored in the novel, the series' Ofglen has an elaborate background story that means to further incorporate LGBT+ identities into the series. In the series, Ofglen is revealed to be Emily, who used to be a university professor before her capture in Gilead. The series also portrays her as a lesbian who used to be

married to a woman, with a biological child that was adopted by her wife (“Unwoman,” Season 2, Episode 2). This is a relatively modern portrayal of an LGBT+ identity, explored through an original story that has been added to the novel’s source material for the series in both point-of-view scenes and through flashbacks to the pre-Gilead period. As the novel was written and set in the 1980’s, and the series is updated to represent the current day, it is important to understand socio-political and cultural differences between then and now to understand the changes that the creators have made to the novel’s source material. As Herdt states in *Same Sex, Different Cultures*, the self-identification of being “gay” and “lesbian” only started when “wide-scale liberation movements gained steam in the 1960’s,” and that “since that time, these identity systems have been exported to other cultures, which has created controversies in [...] countries that previously lacked these concepts” (7). This suggests that the concepts of LGBT+ identities were still relatively new and not fully integrated in the western culture of the 1980’s, and that there was not a fully established cultural framework in which these identities could be portrayed openly in western media. As LGBT+ visibility has increased significantly since then, the creators of the series have changed the more subversive nature of LGBT+ characters in the novel to a more openly gay, lesbian and queer cast of character to reflect the diversification of the present-day culture. The concept of a married, openly lesbian couple raising a child together could not have been a plausible part of the 1985 novel, as Atwood’s novel is meant to reflect the 1980’s political environment in which gay marriage was not culturally possible. However, a married same-sex couple is realistic and identifiable in the context of the present-day culture, and for this reason this exploration of LGBT+ identity is able to be incorporated into the series. In “Unwoman,” a flashback is shown in which Emily tries to flee from the United States with her wife and son. While trying to catch a flight to Canada, the Gilead-controlled airport security annuls Emily’s marriage to her Canadian wife, forcing her to stay in the United States that is about to be under the control of Gilead. This illustrates that the concept of the systematic oppression of LGBT+ identities within a totalitarian state - already present in the novel - can be used to fit the modern version of debate surrounding LGBT+ identities, such as forced

hetero normative blending (erasure) and the right to marry.¹⁹ Thus, the increase of LGBT+ identities in the modern series is more than just an arbitrary adjustment to update the source material; it is Miller's strategy to show a more accurate portrayal of the current integration level of these identities, and the current topical identity politics debate on sexuality and gender, causing a diverse audience to identify with the series' realism of the tragic events on a deeper level.

While diversifying the novel's characters in favour of more minority identities, Miller's team made the choice to racially diversify Moira and the rest of the series' cast with a controversial result. In Atwood's novel, Moira is the only "queer" main character, and in the series she is one of a few LGBT+ minorities; but the series also portrays her as a person of colour, despite the novel's position on racial segregation (see figure 3). Offred's husband Luke and their daughter - named "Hannah" in the series - are also portrayed as mixed-race and people of colour, while the novel suggests that at least Offred's daughter is blonde-haired: "[my daughter's] hair, cut when she was two, in an envelope, white blonde." (74). The series' main deviation from the novel in terms of race is the omission of Margaret Atwood's version of "apartheid," as the non-white characters in the novel are sent away rather than displayed:

In the original novel, [Gilead does] the South African [method of segregation] of years past. They ship people to a "national homeland" - you're told it's happening but you don't see it happening. Bruce made the decision that there would be many more multiracial relationships than there had been, since it was in the present time. June's partner is black, and that wouldn't have happened in the original novel because they were segregationists.
(Atwood, interview by Menta)

As the original novel hints at the racist white-supremacist undertones of Gilead, the series seems to lose these undertones by integrating multiple people of colour as active characters in the series. The racially diverse characters include Handmaids, Aunts, Guardians, delegations from other

¹⁹ "Gay marriage" has historically been - and remains - a very contentious subject in the United States. Specifically when it was legalised by the Supreme Court in 2015, the debate around gay marriage has reopened.

countries, Marthas, Econopeople, and even - albeit less common than Caucasian depictions - Commanders and their Wives. According to Samira Wiley - the actress that portrays Moira in the series - this is due to “audiences [not wanting] to see some ‘ideal woman,’ they want to see women who look like themselves, or look like their friends, their aunts, their mothers, their children,” showing that these changes are made to further portray the ever-expanding (racial) diversity of the current western population (Wiley, interview by Mulkerrins). The show’s creator Bruce Miller affirms this sentiment with his remarks that the racial diversification of the novel’s source material happened mainly due to two reasons: (1) the impact of an all-white world portrayed on a television screen and the (negative) implications for actor diversity and (2) the fact that “the evangelical movement has gotten a lot more integrated in the decades since the book was published,” (Miller, interview by Mitovich) causing the crisis of infertility to take precedent over racism in the Gilead set in modern society:

[...] It just felt like in a world where birth rates have fallen so precipitously, fertility would trump everything. I had a very spirited discussion with Margaret [Atwood] about it over a very long period of time, and she was spectacularly open even though she thought at first blush, “Well that would change everything.” (Miller, interview by Dockterman)

As Margaret Atwood, Bruce Miller and Samira Wiley explain above, the diversification of the series’ updated version of Gilead is meant to better reflect the modern culture, and to remove Gilead from a seemingly out-dated concept of (evangelical) racial bias. Miller has applied the same logic from the LGBT+ identity diversification update to a racial diversification update. However, this is built on the presumption that the idea of apartheid and racial bias portrayed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is out-dated and needs diversification as an updating tool; this changes the premise of the novel’s story by stripping most of the racist aspects that Atwood originally intended.

The series’ omission of a racist idealism of the Gilead in the novel has warranted criticism from the series’ audience and the media after the release of the first season, as some audience

members feel that racism through the practice of segregation²⁰ portrayed in the novel is still relevant enough to explore in the modern series. As Angelica Jade Bastién, writing for *Vulture*, has remarked: “[the Series’] post-racial view of [the United States] rings false because in times of strife, divisions don’t dissolve - if anything, they become more ingrained (which proves true for gender on the show)”. As a criticism of Miller’s evangelical integration argument, Bastién argues that the integration of the evangelical movement has only marginally improved since the 1980’s:

[T]he evangelical movement continues to twist scripture in order to support virulent racism - a practice that goes back to [the United States’] founding, when slaves were stripped of their own practices and forced into Christianity while being barred from reading the same Bible slave masters used to assert their superiority as not just [a] biological fact, but a spiritual imperative. (Bastién)



Figure 3: An example of diversified characters: Luke and Moira (Still, “Faithful,” Season 1, Episode 5).

²⁰ As Atwood has claimed, the segregation in the novel alluded to the historical “apartheid” of South Africa.

In Basti3n's article, Soraya Nadia McDonald - culture critic for ESPN's pop-culture website *The Undefeated* - is cited as underlining Basti3n's critical questioning of Bruce Miller's proposed premise of the series: "So Gilead is post-racial because the human race is facing extinction, and that prompted Americans to get over several hundred years' worth of racist education and social conditioning that depicted black people as inferior and less than human?" (McDonald quoted in Basti3n). In McDonald's original *Undefeated* article, McDonald further criticises the series' choices of race depiction as "[an] area that suffers from a lack of deep interrogation of how to make such a change realistic in a series that has been commended for, and that prides itself on, a vision of the world that feels all too possible" (McDonald), suggesting that the depiction of race in the series is - in contrast to what Bruce Miller argues - not a modern or realistic one, and as such does not fit in with the choices the series has made in favour of realism. As part of the criticism of the series' race portrayal, many criticisms like Basti3n's and McDonald's draw a comparison between the suppression, rape and coercion in *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) to the United States' history of slavery, suggesting that this historical context should be an important referential aspect of the series' realism:

[T]he history that *The Handmaid's Tale* trades in to the most profound degree is America's greatest sin: slavery. Black women were brutalised, raped, separated from their children and family, forced into servitude, and not allowed to enact the cultural practices that reminded them of the homes they were stolen from solely for the profit of white people. Watching *The Handmaid's Tale*, which ends its first season on Wednesday, I can't help but think about the voices of enslaved black women, given how this narrative so closely aligns with theirs. (Basti3n)

This comparison raises further questions about Miller's decision to incorporate people of colour as a reflective tool for contemporary diverse audiences, as many people of colour in the series' audience might feel that the political criticism is not going far enough. However, while some critics of the series might feel that the "omission" of the novel's racist version of Gilead might lead to an

over-optimistic or simplified view of race relations in the United States, representing people of colour in the series also helps to visually evoke the historical oppression of people of colour from the time of slavery. Furthermore, McDonald understands Bruce Miller's argument for a diverse acting cast for the series, and suggests that the series' writers keep this cast and instead try and incorporate the criticism of the show's portrayal of race in different ways:

[I]n our current climate of heightened media literacy, I doubt that Hulu would have been able to get away with airing such a high-profile series with no women of colour in consequential roles. So it's up to writers to do a better job of addressing the complications that race presents, especially in a work that's being sold as a glimpse of a possible future.

(McDonald)

It is important, therefore, by Bruce Miller's own proposed standards, that the comparison between the Handmaids in the series and the historical events that they are (partially) based on are apparent to appease this line of criticism. As then portrayal of race in the series is questioned, the adaptation choices of the novel into the series in general are questioned, showing the importance of adaptation choices and the reasoning behind them; this reveals that adaptation in favour of updating the material remains a subjective and grey area. With the release of the second season and the upcoming third season, the makers of the series have a unique opportunity to incorporate this wave of criticism from a modern identity politics standpoint into the upcoming episodes, and indeed, Bruce Miller has stated that the later seasons would deal more with the racial problems that have been addressed by the audience and media (Atwood, interview by Menta). Because the medium of television makes it possible for critics to give the show's writers immediate feedback, it in turn gives the show's writers a chance to incorporate part of this feedback in the on-going series. While the audience of the series remains torn whether the racial integration is more reflective of the current western society - with more interracial couples, more racial diversity - or reflective of ignorance towards current present-day racial problems, the diversification of the series' characters

remains a controversial decision; and will remain controversial until the show's creators decide to address these problems in future episodes.

3. Totalitarianism on the Screen: Technology and Visual Violence

Apart from the update and expansion of *The Handmaid's Tale's* characters, the series has moved towards a more modern representation of society through the expansion of Gilead's internal structure, violence and technology. With the update and expansion of the *Handmaid's Tale's* fictional environment, the series is able to provide commentary on current technological developments and make use of shocking visual violence to involve the current viewer in the feeling of a believable terror.

As stated in the previous section on minority characters, minority representation has been altered by the series' creators to better accommodate the modern society and the medium of the small screen. From this point of view, the world in which the characters reside must also be adapted to accommodate the overall update of the source material. The series' commentary of modern technology is incorporated as a natural part of Gilead's totalitarianism, and fits in with Gilead's alleged goal to return to a sober and austere lifestyle. As the Gilead in the novel wishes to "return to traditional values" (17), modern technology is forbidden in the present-day Gilead of the series, including smartphones, the internet and social media, tablets, laptops and computers. In the novel, however, technology is incorporated into the oppressive system; machines such as "Compucheks" are used to check identification digitally and easily (31). However, in the series, the use of this type of technology is understated, which goes against the expectation of a modern series: identification check-point are usually portrayed as "manual" checks, where the armed military looks at plastic identification cards rather than using a machine, computers and gadgets are omitted or extremely limited, and manual labour and the use of horses is emphasised over the

use of machinery (see figure 4). A more notable change from the novel is the omission of “Soul Scrolls,” which refers to a shop with a machine that digitally performs prayers:

Behind [the window of Soul Scrolls] are printout machines, row on row of them [...]. What the machines print is prayers, roll upon roll, prayers going out endlessly. [...] Ordering prayers from Soul Scrolls is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime, so of course the Commanders' Wives do it a lot. It helps their husbands' careers. There are five different prayers: for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin. You pick the one you want, punch in the number, then punch in your own number so your account will be debited, and punch in the number of times you want the prayer repeated. The machines talk as they print out the prayers; if you like, you can go inside and listen to them, the toneless metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over. Once the prayers have been printed out and said, the paper rolls back through another slot and is recycled into fresh paper again. There are no people inside the building: the machines run by themselves. You can't hear the voices from outside; only a murmur, a hum, like a devout crowd, on its knees. Each machine has an eye painted in gold on the side, flanked by two small golden wings. (175-176)

Fictional machines are described in the novel to underline the role of technology in utopian societies. The praying machinery described above is left out by the series, instead expanding Gilead's religious culture by emphasising Gilead's intimate religious rituals, such as the birthing ritual (“Birth Day,” Season 1, Episode 2) and “Prayvaganzas,” where multiple young men are ritualistically married off to young brides (“Seeds,” Season 2, Episode 5). As the series follows characters that have managed to escape to Canada - which is depicted as still being a modern, liberal society - the differences between modern Canada and Gilead become more pronounced. When the Waterfords visit Canada on a diplomatic mission, Canada is shown to be a reflection of modern western culture, in which people are independent, are able to use technologies such as

smartphones,²¹ and who can dress in the way that they want (“Smart Power,” Season 2, Episode 9). Although the modern western viewer is undoubtedly familiar with this kind of society, the viewer is presented with Canada through the perspective of Serena, who observes the clothing and technology of everyday Canadian life as an abnormality (“Smart Power”). This different perspective emphasises the use of technology and its use and importance in “liberal” culture. Another example of this, is the series’ plot concerning the written accounts of Handmaids. In Gilead, June tries to smuggle a parcel from Jezebel’s that contains a stack of illegal written letters from Handmaids (“Night,” Season 1, Episode 10). Without the distribution of these illegally written letters, these women are not able to contact each other, an important aspect of Gilead’s oppression that would have been made easier through modern technology - thus such technology is forbidden in Gilead. As the letters eventually reach Canada through Nick, it only takes a few hours to make these letters public in Canada through social media, spreading the news. The shocking news causes the Canadian government to turn Serena and Fred away, as there is a large amount of protestors waiting for them as they try to leave Canada (“Smart Power”). This shows that technology and social media specifically is instrumental in the communication between individuals, and that it is able to be instrumental in the protest against oppression. The series also uses technology to show the difference between male and female roles in Gilead; for example, the Commander is seen using a laptop to catch up on news on the internet, while Serena is not allowed to look at its screen (“Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum,” Season 1, Episode 4). In the novel, however, Serena often watches television to listen to Gilead propaganda, and even lets her household staff watch along with her: “Serena always lets us watch the news” (92). In the series, Serena and her husband do not own a television set, and Serena is instead portrayed as somebody who actively stays away from technology to support the regime.²² The change from the pre-Gilead period with political,

²¹ In the first episode of the third season, drones are shown as a technological tool to keep the Canadian - Gilead border under control. It is not clear whether they belong to Gilead or Canada.

²² Later in the series, Serena uses technology and other tools (illegal for women in Gilead) while her husband Fred is in the hospital. Fred later punishes her for using these tools.

technological and personal freedoms to a society with none of these is thus portrayed as an even more drastic, oppressive change - to the individual, and to women specifically. The series' Gilead demonstrates a modern take on a totalitarian state, in which Gilead's leaders are able to both return to more traditional values and keep their society from communicating digitally as well as through reading and writing. The abolishment of technology for women and lower-class men in Gilead fits in logically within the context of Gilead's values and totalitarian nature, and comments on our current dependence on these technologies to communicate freely.



Figure 4: The use of manual labour and horses in the Colonies instead of machinery (Still, “Unwoman,” Season 2, Episode 2).

As established earlier, Gilead's internal structure is totalitarian and oppressive to its inhabitants, mimicking the oppression from the Second World War- among others. In the series, the structures portrayed in the novel are expanded and elaborated to incorporate the modern viewer's understanding of violence and totalitarianism. As the novel is based on historical events that for some part are still on-going or recognisable, the material used in the series is able to remain

relevant today with a small amount of alterations. The novel was written forty years after the end of the Second World War, and the effect of specifically the Holocaust is apparent in the novel's handling of targeted violence and oppression. Liberal society - especially liberal women - is chosen as Gilead's main scapegoat for the ecological and fertility problems. Similar to the Jews and other targeted minorities in the Second World War, these women are institutionalised, marked, and made to openly pay for their alleged wrong-doings. As the series emerged thirty-two years later, there is a larger disconnect with the novel's referenced relevance of the Second World War and the period of the Cold War. Of course, events with enormous historical impact such as the Second World War and the Holocaust are still important and well-discussed topics today, but between the novel's publication in 1985 and the present day many violent acts have added weight and context to the way we define violence in our modern society.²³ For example, large violent attacks such as the September 11th 2001 terrorist attack on the New York World Trade Center buildings are intrinsically included into the current mainstream definition of violence. As David Altheide puts it in his chapter "Fear, Terrorism and Popular Culture," the United States' reaction to the 9/11 attacks showed a reflection of "collective identities," and the attacks were constantly "defined in the news media and popular culture as an attack on American culture, if not civilisation itself" (11). Altheide further stresses that the post-9/11 popular media started to show a trend of appealing to emotion, "[promoting] identification with narratives and tales of tragedy, overcoming adversity, and rising to defeat enemies," of which "[a more-pronounced] fear is the foundation for much of the dominant narrative" (12). With this change in the way that western civilisation views fear, western society has moved further away from the central horror narrative derived from the Second World War and the Cold War, and has entered into the "post-9/11 fear culture" in which (religious) terrorism, and a general fear of "others" inflicting violence on the dominant culture have

²³ However, the series' portrayal of the Colonies is very reminiscent of internment camps in the Second World War.

become more highly discussed aspects of reality.²⁴ An example of how 9/11 might have affected the series interpretation of the novel is by showing terrorism, but omitting specifically “Islamic” terrorism. In “First Blood,” Lillie (the second Ofglen) detonates a bomb in the newly built “Rachel and Leah Center,” causing many deaths and injured (Season 2, Episode 6). In the episode that follows, a funeral for the Handmaids that died at this “terrorist attack” - as it is called by Gilead’s Commanders - shows that many civilians died (“After,” Season 2, Episode 7). This shows a portrayal of what is recognisable to the modern viewer as a terrorist with a bomb. In both Atwood’s novel and the series, terrorism is portrayed as an important tool for the rise of Gilead, and the makers of the series are able to keep this background story while altering it to fit modern society. In the novel, Offred alludes to Gilead’s take-over “when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency,” saying that Gilead “blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time” (182-183). While Islamic terrorism was indeed an issue in the 1980’s, it has become a much larger recognised form of terrorism in the present-day.²⁵ In fact, “Islamic terrorism” has amassed a different, more tangible connotation in the modern post-9/11 culture, making it a more realistic threat to the every-day life of western civilisations compared to the 1980’s. Interestingly, the blame on Islamic terrorists by Gilead’s leaders has not (yet) explicitly been mentioned in the series - possibly revealing the controversial nature of the discussion of Islamic terrorism in the present-day. Because of the post-9/11 change in how the mainstream understands and defines violence, the series’ creators have been able to update the novel’s source material to fit this interpretation of violence.

To add to the realism of the series’ “visual violence” that is common in the post-9/11 pop culture, more multifaceted stories have been added to the series to increase the viewer’s empathy for Gilead’s oppression. To evoke this, the 2017 series displays the source material as a more

²⁴ This discussion is primarily present in the alt-right side of modern politics; this will be explained in the later section on conservative activism.

²⁵ For example, the 2004 bombing in Madrid, the 2005 bombing in London, the 2015 attack in Paris, the 2016 attack in Brussels, the 2017 Manchester attack, and the consistent attacks in the Middle-East (primarily on Syria).

brutal, serious and realistic tragedy that does not censor - and in most cases even emphasises - the violent scenes. These scenes have either been derived from the novel or are additions to the source material. As explained earlier, the medium of the small screen is able to adapt the novel's first person account to a multi-faceted view of Gilead life through other characters rather than just experiencing it through Offred's accounts. Because of this, richer in-depth background stories of the other characters have been added to the series - sometimes written from scratch rather than adapted from the novel - and this includes the violence that the characters endure. The series portrays Gilead's violent overtaking and oppression by showing it from multiple points of view. The violence of the series then becomes a way to show how Gilead is able to oppress its citizens, which is typical of totalitarian systems, according to Juan Linz:

Among [totalitarian systems] we very often find [...] men directly involved in the use of violence to sustain the regime [to be associates of the regime's leaders]. The army and the police play a prominent role in the [totalitarian] system, but assassination, attacks and harassment against opponents are often carried out privately with the knowledge of the ruler but without using the police or the courts. Certainly such arbitrary use of power and the fear of it can be found in the worst phases of totalitarianism. (152)

An important way in which the series reveals these totalitarian mechanisms to us is through the characters' perspectives. In the novel, Offred is the only source of information on the overtaking, and she recounts the terrorist attacks on the United States before Gilead to inform the reader of Gilead's inner structure. The series, however, shows these aspects through multiple points of view, which focuses on the realism of the violence of Gilead's inception rather than the biased view of the novel's second-hand account. Examples of scenes added to the series to emphasise the violent nature of Gilead include the multiple punishments of Handmaids, Janine (Ofwarren) losing an eye for insulting an Aunt ("Offred," Season 1, Episode 1), Lillie's (the second Ofglen's) tongue being cut out for speaking up to the Aunts ("Other Woman," Season 2, Episode 4), multiple scenes of Gilead's enemies being hanged - often with blood running from them (see figure 5) - and Emily's

(the first Ofglen's) torture and female genital mutilation scenes ("Late," Season 1, Episode 3). Authority figures such as Aunt Lydia are seen to be instrumental in the oppression of the Handmaids, and the use of violence in series is often framed as a necessity rather than a mindless act. After refusing to stone Janine to death, the Handmaids are violently punished for a long time to "teach them a lesson" ("June," Season 2, Episode 1). The violence used, such as the mock hanging, stone holding in the rain and the burning of the Handmaids' hands on a stove, is shown to be a tactic used by Gilead to scare the Handmaids into submission and to keep them from rebelling. After punishing the Handmaids, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that Janine will now slowly die at the Colonies, while she could have died quickly if they had agreed to stone her. After the bombing of the Rachel and Leah Center, Aunt Lydia says: "I wish I could give you a world without violence, without pain, it's all I ever wanted," while having committed many acts of torture and violence herself. In the first season, Emily (Ofglen) receives a severe punishment for being in a lesbian relationship with a Martha ("Late," Season 1, Episode 3). This visually shocking scene - along with the accompanying violent scenes in which the aforementioned Martha is being tortured and hanged by the neck ("Late") - changes the second-hand accounts of the violence in the novel into a realistic and undeniable tragedy for the viewer, and elaborates on the fear mechanisms in Gilead. Another departure from the novel is the way that Handmaids are identified; in the novel they receive a number tattoo on their ankle similar to the tattoo that prisoners of the concentration camps in the Second World War received (*Handmaid's Tale* 75), in the series they receive a forcefully stapled bovine ear tag. The ear tags are shown multiple times in the series as an important aspect of Gilead's oppression, as the series shows in detail how the tag is administered (see figure 6), how June has to cut it out of her ear with scissors when she briefly escapes ("June," Season 2, Episode 1), and how the ears of escaped Handmaids are healing gradually after their removal - symbolising oppression and the slow healing process after the trauma of oppression. The ear tags are not only more visually noticeable than an ankle tattoo, they also are able to translate the Handmaids' status; they are portrayed as being the property of Gilead as cows are

the property of a farmer. The portrayal of the manner in which these tags are administered (portrayed through another “claustrophobic close-up of June’s face) adds to the narrative of Gilead’s oppression and torture of the individual, and visually portrays Gilead’s power structures.



Figure 5: Enemies that are hanged from Gilead’s walls: a consistent visual aspect of the series (Still, “Birth Day,” Season 1, Episode 2).

Even though the violence in the series on its own illustrates and symbolises the oppression of Gilead, it must also be seen in the broader context of the series’ story. One criticism of the series is its use of “too much” violence. Especially the second season has been called “[overly] brutal” by viewers due to its visual violence, including Margaret Lyons’s “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Season 2 Is Brutal and Not Much Else,” a review for *The New York Times*:

Season 2 has been dutifully brutal, complete with ample torture, rapes, executions and murders. It gave in to every one of the show’s most tedious instincts, substituting slow

stares and endless montage sequences for any actual development or new interiority.

Every inch of existence is awful. (Lyons)

This critique shows how the series has emphasised the uncensored violence - in a way that makes it realistic enough for the viewer to consider it “brutal” - but also, as Margaret Lyons states, in a way that can be considered overly violent. Her critique shows that the series must be careful to balance the amount of violence with the story’s plausibility, and not to substitute interesting plot lines for violence. However, the violence in the series is not added just for shock value or as a portrayal of the totalitarian structure, but it is also able to be part of the exploration of character development. For example, Serena is seen being abusive and violent to her staff, especially to June (Offred); it is revealed by the series, however, that this anger is due to her longing for a child. Because of her frustrations for her loss of control within the regime, she tries to control June in an attempt to get the only thing that matters to her: a baby. This development shows a more human side to Serena, and deepens her background story. When Isaac and Eden (two additions to the Waterford staff) are sentenced to death by drowning (“Postpartum,” Season 2, Episode 12), it is very shocking to all the people present (see figure 7). In the next episode, “The Word,” June, Serena and Fred find out that Eden’s own father turned her into the authorities, which shocks Serena and June. Eden and Isaac’s bodies are hanged from the wall, and it is discovered that Eden had an illegal version of the Bible that she wrote and drew in (“The Word,” Season 2, Episode 13). This shocking event leads to Serena’s decision to stand up for the girls and women in Gilead to have the right to read the Bible. She speeches in front of a court of Commanders - and reads an excerpt from Eden’s Bible - in order to make a point (“The Word”). This plan backfires, and Fred sends her away to be punished.²⁶ Ultimately, because of this punishment and subsequent breakdown, Serena allows June to leave Gilead with Nichole (or Holly, as June names her), because she wanted “to do what is best for [her] baby” (“Night,” Season 3, Episode 1). Like Serena, June also endures a major breakdown due to trauma from violence. When June escapes the Waterford household in the

²⁶ The next section on conservative activism elaborates on this.

beginning of the second season, she is helped by a bread delivery truck driver called Omar (“Other Woman,” Season 2, Episode 4). When June is ultimately violently re-captured, Aunt Lydia shows her the body of Omar hanging from the wall, and blames June for his death and the fates of his wife (who must now serve as a Handmaid) and their son (who is reassigned to another family). Aunt Lydia tells June that she has to give up her identity as June to make room for Offred, who will be an obedient Handmaid. As June feels guilty, she becomes catatonic, and momentarily seems to lose her mind (“Other Woman”). With these scenes, the series is able to explore the topic of trauma and how it affects June’s personality, and have her recover from this trauma as a stronger and more determined opponent of Gilead. These examples show that the series has been able to use the violence to explore a realistic outcome of totalitarian oppression as it would look like in the modern world in all aspects, including how violence would change the emotional state of individuals and their decision-making processes. As a result, the viewers are able to understand the visual violence as an exploration of totalitarianism, and to experience the realistic multifaceted effects of this violence on the individuals of a totalitarian society.



Figure 6: The close-up process of Offred’s ear-tagging (Still, “Night,” Season 1, Episode 10).



Figure 7: Eden and Isaac are drowned for their infidelity, shocking all those who witness their death sentence (Still, “Postpartum,” Season 2, Episode 12).

4. Serena, Fred, Conservative Activism and Identity Politics

As previously established, the novel is able to speculate about an extreme outcome of the identity politics debate that is still relevant in the present-day. The 2017 series, however, has been updated to better fit the contemporary political debate on identity. To do this, a small amount of context adaptation is needed to increase the relevancy of the series for a modern audience, while also successfully adapting Atwood’s 1980’s idea of an “ustopia” to a twenty-first century audience without losing the relevance of Atwood’s political commentary. To adapt this in a way so that it remains relevant and keeps most of the source material and commentary, the political context of the novel as a commentary of conservative identity politics must be adapted to a commentary of contemporary conservatism.

Firstly, the novel must be seen as a critique of the religious and conservative right-wing politics that were especially prominent in the 1980’s. As Gorman Beauchamp has stated in “The

Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale*,” Atwood based the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) on historical and politically relevant events, stating that “she did not include anything in *The Handmaid's Tale* ‘that had not already happened or was not underway somewhere’” (Beauchamp 14). As Atwood states, inspirations for her novel came from different historical and political angles:

So many different strands fed into “The Handmaid’s Tale” - group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn program of the SS and the child-stealing of the Argentine generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy, the list is long. (Atwood, interview by Kalorkoti)

But as Beauchamp further states, the novel was also a specific reaction to the evangelical developments that were new and prominent in the time it was written in:

When Atwood wrote the tale in 1985, the religious right was riding high; the result largely of tent revivalism’s having discovered cable television. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority²⁷ - both now defunct - were receiving a lot of media attention; Jimmy and Tammy Faye Bakker had blubbered their way to a bizarre sort of celebrity; and [...] Jimmy Swaggert offered a nightly spectacle of evangelical rapture equalled in authenticity only by his peers in the World Wrestling Federation. All their grotesquery appeared to many observers as the goofy face of a serious sociological phenomenon, the coalescence of evangelical Christians - the [...] born-again [Christians] - into a sizable and significant voting bloc. On this premise, Pat Robertson in 1988 mounted a campaign for President - that went nowhere. Nevertheless, the Religious Right seems to have established a permanent caucus in the Republican Party. [...] It claims [...] to have defeated the Equal Rights Amendment, has spearheaded jihads against legalised abortion, gay rights, and the mainstream media and, in general, served as God’s PAC on earth. (14-15)

²⁷ The Moral Majority was a right-wing political organisation, with origins in fundamentalist Baptist Christianity.

This right-wing emergence included the “Moral Majority,” a conservative movement that, according to Donald Critchlow in *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, “played a major role in getting evangelical Christians involved in politics by registering to vote,” among other similarly evangelical movements (263-264). The evangelical material was distributed through the television - so-called televangelism - and in that way it was able to unite the conservative television viewers of the United States to a broader extent. The prominent presence of this religious right-wing televangelism is hinted at through Offred's description of Serena in the novel:

Sometimes when I couldn't find any [cartoons on TV] I would watch the Growing Souls Gospel Hour, where they would tell Bible stories for children and sing hymns. One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano. She was ash-blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes which she'd turn upwards during hymns. She could smile and cry at the same time, [...] It was after that she went on to other things. (26)

As is illustrated in the excerpt above from the novel, Serena is described as an older woman, a former televangelist, whose husband Fred is described as an architect of Gilead; two older, politically involved right-wing fundamentalists. In that way, Serena and Fred are comparable to evangelical figure heads such as Tammy Faye Bakker and her husband Jim, who ran an evangelical television programme called *The PTL Club*, or: *The Jim and Tammy Show*. This show was part of a “satellite network [including] more than 1300 cable systems and reached into fourteen million homes in the United States,” according to John Wigger's study of the Bakkers' career, called *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire* (“Introduction”). Tammy Faye Bakker - like Serena a blonde, petite woman - ran a biblical children's programme, sang hymns and also had “huge blue eyes which she'd turn upwards during hymns,” as Serena is described in the novel's passage above. As the novel was published at the height of the Bakkers' popularity, the Serena and Fred from the novel can be seen as Atwood's critique of this form of growing evangelical conservatism.

However, the televangelist movement is not the only part of Atwood's critique of right-wing conservatism that is represented in the novel. Serena and her husband Fred can be compared to the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly and her husband, also called Fred.²⁸ Phyllis Schlafly was, according to Critchlow, "a heroine of the right," and "the person most responsible for stalling progress of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), that only a year before appeared to be on its way to victory" (12). She "[denounced] the ERA as radical, unnecessary, and a threat to [the] legal rights of women and the American family," claiming that the Equal Rights Amendment would destroy the traditional values of the United States' family unit that were mainstream before the 1960's (12). Furthermore, Schlafly was instrumental in "[mobilising] tens of thousands of women across the nation" to protest equal rights, feminism and to support a Christian conservative activism that was carried out "with the same intensity of emotion that feminists brought to their cause," which ultimately "changed American politics" (12). Like Schlafly, Serena is shown in the novel as a public speaker for conservative values of Christian complementarianism.²⁹

By that time she was worthy of a profile: *Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn't singing any more by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all. (55)

The Serena described above is comparable to Schlafly, as they both made speeches on the "sanctity of the home." Like Serena, Schlafly did not stay at home herself for most of her political career, and thus presented her speeches as a sacrifice of sorts to fit in with her own ideals. Within the context of her traditional values, Schlafly's political involvement was only possible with the support of her husband Fred, who - among other things - helped her to further her political education (Critchlow 33-34). Schlafly would even go as far to make a point by thanking her

²⁸ This seems not to be a coincidental resemblance.

²⁹ Complementarianism is explained in the first chapter.

husband for allowing her to speak: “first of all, I want to thank my husband Fred, for letting me come - I always like to say that, because it makes the libs so mad!” (Schlafly qtd in Critchlow 247). As Schlafly was primarily active between 1960 and 1980 - at the height of social reform - her role in identity politics was politically relevant for the 1980’s context of the novel. Atwood’s critique of Serena - who is shown to have a background in both televangelism and conservative activism (in which figure heads like Phyllis Schlafly were active) - shows the relevancy of these movements at the time of the novel’s publication.

The Series’ portrayal of Serena omits televangelism, but still contains a portrayal of the Schlafly’s conservative activism. As Gorman Beauchamp clarifies in his 2009 article “The Politics of The Handmaid’s Tale,” the televangelists’ popularity and prevalence in the western (North-American) political environment dissipated since the publication of Atwood’s novel, mainly due to the numerous (sexual) scandals that were associated with televangelists in the course of the twentieth century.³⁰ As the rise of televangelism and Tammy and Jim Bakker’s careers (who were popular and powerful evangelical figure heads around the publication of the novel) have since been halted, it is no longer a believable context or comparison for the present-day series. But even though the Serena and Fred Waterford in the series - portrayed by actors Yvonne Strahovski and Joseph Fiennes - have been portrayed as younger activists with different background stories than described in the novel, the reference to Phyllis Schlafly’s activism remains. The Serena in the series’ version is portrayed as a former public speaker, who has sacrificed her personal freedom for the execution of her political goals. Like Schlafly, who “became an antifeminist who saw history as having fulfilled the promise of womanhood by allowing women to choose to become wives and mothers in traditional families,” (13) Yvonne Strahovski’s Serena is portrayed as a conservative activist and author preaching in favour of what Piper and Grudem call “biblical womanhood;” a call to return to traditional gender roles as they are described in the Bible. In the first season of the

³⁰ Many active members of the right-wing evangelical movements in the 1980’s were caught up in sexual scandals, such as Jim Bakker and the “Jessica Hahn Scandal” (Wigger 259).

series, it is revealed by a Mexican delegation guest of the Waterford household that Serena is the author of a book called "A Woman's Place," a call for women to return to a traditional home-maker role ("A Woman's Place," Season 1, Episode 6). In this conversation with the Mexican delegate, Serena tries to explain her former role as an author and political activist by stating that "women were abandoning their families, and we needed to make a change - we were running out of time," and: "I had a temper, in those days," revealing her idealistic passion for her cause ("A Woman's Place"). Furthermore, Serena proudly calls Gilead "a society that has reduced its carbon emissions by seventy eight percent in three years," showing that Serena believes in the ecological solutions that Gilead has provided. After this scene, a flashback of Serena's life before Gilead is shown. In it, it is revealed that her right-wing fundamentalist activism was a driving force behind the emergence of Gilead's ideas and later implementation, and that Fred and Serena worked together to bring down the American congress and the Whitehouse, declaring: "we're saving them, we're doing God's work." This shows that Serena believes deeply in the religious precedent behind Gilead's take-over,³¹ and extreme gender complementarianism - referencing talking points that Schlafly fought for.

Serena is able to remain a believable modern conservative activist for the modern viewer, by referencing new conservative and alt-right tactics that can be used to transfer these ideas into the mainstream.³² As stated above, the series portrays Serena as a prominent female right-wing figure head before Gilead. To remain relevant to the young modern viewer, her role as an idealistic right-wing speaker must be recognisable, and for that, the reference to Schlafly on its own is not sufficient.³³ The change in Serena's character - such as her age and the change from a passive follower to a passionate and more active tool in the rise of Gilead - also mirrors the current rise of

³¹ At least, she is shown to believe deeply in her ideology at the beginning of the series.

³² Serena's conservative subject matters - that both Phyllis Schlafly and Serena fought for through political activism - prove to be surprisingly relevant topics within the present-day identity politics, such as gay rights, gender essentialism and birth control.

³³ However, only small things have been changed to remove Serena from Schlafly. This shows that Schlafly's political view can still be relevant in contemporary culture.

conservative activism and the so-called “alt-right” in the United States. When discussing the “alt-right” movement in his article “The Rise of the Alt-right and the Politics of Polarization in America,” George Michael uses Paul Gottfried’s definition, calling it a “far right ideology that reject[s] mainstream conservatism,” and adds that this became a large movement in a time where “a number of well-educated rightist intellectuals sought to establish a new ideology capable of resonating with conservatives, especially young people” (9). Michael further states that the alt-right is a movement that is viewed by critics as “just a code term for white nationalism, a much-maligned movement associated with neo-Nazis and Klansmen,” while its members would define themselves as a “broader spectrum of rightist activists and intellectuals besides white nationalists, including those who believe in libertarianism, men’s rights, cultural conservatism, isolationism, and populism,” actively separating themselves from traditional conservative activism (9).³⁴ This new, alternative right-wing conservatism is further removed from a classic conservatism in which women are expected to stay at home and raise children, and instead focuses primarily on a rejection of left-wing identity politics, and - usually - emphasises racial identity (9-10).³⁵ The new conservative and alt-right movements include younger supporters, and a notable amount of passionate female speakers who are critical of left-wing politics and popular culture. The injection of alt-right ideas into contemporary society happens swiftly through younger, assertive and well-versed figure heads that use digital media such as YouTube and internet forums to spread their ideas (12).³⁶ By using these new forms of media, “the alt-right has become an integral part of the meme and trolling culture in cyberspace,” as Michael puts it, which primarily affects a younger audience (12). Within the new and alternative right-wing conservative movements, there are a few notable female

³⁴ “Alt-right” is a very contentious term, and thus this thesis uses it very carefully. The definition of this term is changing rapidly. At the time of writing, this thesis defines it as one of the new forms of new conservatism that are focused on identity politics, and it stands out among these forms as being focused on nationality and race in particular. It should not be used interchangeably with general “conservatism.”

³⁵ The omission of the novel’s racial segregation might be a tactic to combat this racial debate present in the alt-right.

³⁶ Many political figures, including alt-right and other conservative activists, have *YouTube* channels to promote and discuss their ideas to a broader world-wide audience.

speakers such as Tomi Lahren, Candace Owens and Lauren Southern,³⁷ all younger passionate conservative speakers that the series' younger Serena could be compared to. To give an example, Tomi Lahren is a former conservative television presenter (for Blaze Media, a conservative media company), who among other things, is described as a "conservative" and an "anti-feminist":

[Tomi] Lahren, [...] and the rest of their small production team are all young women - unusual in any media company, and a surprise in a[n] [anti-feminist] conservative outfit. [...] Historically, according to Professor Ronnee Schreiber at UC San Diego, conservative women have often been prominent in holding anti-feminist positions, not only as a movement strategy, but because "it's a media story, and it helps conservative women get media attention." (Schreiber qtd Wilson)

Like Lahren, the series' pre-Gilead Serena is a speaker who stands out because of her direct opinions, who goes against the mainstream opinions, and uses new media to further her own ideals. The Serena in the series is revealed to be a key figure head in a movement called "domestic feminism," ("A Woman's Place," Season 1, Episode 6) showing that Serena uses the term "feminism" to possibly gain more followers, rather than actively opposing the term by calling herself an "anti-feminist," as Lahren and other modern conservatives are often described. Furthermore, Serena's identity politics are different than that of the alt-right, using a traditional biblical view of gender roles - that is found in Phyllis Schlafly's speeches - as the core of her ideas rather than alt-right libertarianism, nationalism or racial identity.

Serena mirrors a new type of speaker that is more involved in debate and "new media" opinion pieces rather than the type of conservative campaigns that televangelists, "the Moral Majority" and figure heads such as Schlafly were a part of. In the second season of the series, Serena is seen screaming among a crowd of protestors, trying to impose on the crowd that "the future of mankind depends on what we do today," and "[the infertility] affects us all," (see figure 8)

³⁷ It is hard to define whether these figure heads can be called "alt-right," therefore this thesis defines them in a more general way as "modern conservative activists."

("First Blood," Season 2, Episode 6). This mimics the language of right-wing populism that can be found in the alt-right and other forms of alternative conservative activism. Before Serena speaks to the protesting crowd, Fred tells her: "[we want] our policies and ideas [to be] discussed in the mainstream," conveying to the viewer that their ideas are - not yet - mainstream. Serena is called a "strong woman" by her husband Fred in the context of her fearless public speaking among a protesting crowd ("First Blood"), which reveals that she is not afraid of going against the grain to convey her ideals. Likewise, Mike Ciavolo calls Tomi Lahren "a very determined, strong woman," who "has been fearless in the way she's presented her message" (Ciavolo qtd in Wilson). As Dan Cassino, a political scientist, has argued, "[Tomi Lahren's] willingness to make 'a right-wing criticism of pop culture' is one of the things that has so quickly developed Lahren's profile. [...] It is a sure-fire way to inject yourself into the soft news cycle." (Cassino qtd in Wilson). The series illustrates that Serena uses similar tactics to present-day conservative speakers - such as Tomi Lahren - to "develop her profile" and to "inject herself into the news cycle," as Cassino calls it above. Serena knows that she is going against the mainstream, but faces the mainstream anyway, like Lahren: "I'm very controversial, and I don't back down from being controversial" (qtd in Wilson). As Glenn Beck has stated, "Tomi speaks her mind and is fearless. At this point in history, people are looking for people that say what they believe, regardless of the consequences" (qtd in Wilson). The way in which Serena uses activism and identity politics in the series is recognisable enough for the viewer to believe that this more "traditional" conservatism is able to exist in a new conservative form of activism. Thus, even without a change in Serena's more traditional conservative ideas, Serena is recognisable as part of a growing group of new, passionate and young conservative activists.

When considering modern conservative figure heads to compare to Serena's mixture of traditional and new conservative activism, Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan B. Peterson comes to mind. As Dorian Lynskey - writing for *The Guardian* - describes in his article "How Dangerous is Jordan B. Peterson, the Right-wing Professor Who 'Hit a Hornets' Nest'," Peterson is

a “old-fashioned conservative who mourns the decline of religious faith and the traditional family,” but also somebody who “uses of-the-moment tactics,” like the publication of his lectures on *YouTube* that are able to reach a broader, younger audience (“Jordan B. Peterson”). Even though Peterson uses some of the same talking points and tactics as the alt-right,³⁸ Peterson is better described as an “alternative conservative” due to some critical differences between his ideas and those of the alt-right. The most important difference between Peterson and the alt-right is Peterson’s criticism of all identity politics, including the alt-right’s emphasis on nationalism and racial identity. In fact, Peterson calls himself a “classic British liberal,” who has actively denounced the alt-right’s stance on race, criticising what he calls “the pathology of racial pride” (qtd in Lynskey). As Lynskey further describes in his article, Peterson’s criticism of identity politics is a stance that “resonates with young white men who feel alienated by the jargon of social-justice discourse and crave an empowering theory of the world in which they are not the designated oppressors” (“How Dangerous is Jordan B. Peterson?”). Like Schlafly, Peterson’s career as a political critic started when laws were altered to accommodate left-wing social reform. The origin of Peterson’s fame in the identity politics debate comes from his rejection of left-wing identity politics entering Canadian law, comparable to Phyllis Schlafly’s strong rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment:

[Peterson was] troubled by two developments: a federal amendment to add gender identity and expression to the Canadian Human Rights Act; and his university’s plans for mandatory anti-bias training. Starting from there, he railed against Marxism, human rights organisations, HR departments and “an underground apparatus of radical left political motivations” forcing gender-neutral pronouns on him. (qtd in Lynskey)

³⁸ Peterson’s “alt-right tactics” include speaking and discussing at public events, having his own *YouTube* channel with millions of followers, using social media to spread his ideas, and his association with anti-feminism on these platforms. Furthermore, the alt-right has claimed Peterson as one of their figure heads, even though Peterson has often denied being part of the alt-right.

Peterson's criticism of left-wing politics, and his appeal to a more conservative thinking group of young white men, has solidified his place in the right-wing side of the identity politics debate.³⁹ Unlike most alt-right figure heads, Peterson is an academic who denies being a controversial provocateur, proclaiming that he "chooses his words carefully" (Peterson, interview by Cathy Newman). Furthermore, Peterson speaks up against identity politics in an academic setting rather than a populist one; in his lectures published on *YouTube*, Peterson references history, psychology and philosophy to support his arguments against identity politics ("Jordan B. Peterson"). In Matthew d'Ancona's article on Peterson, "Banning People Like Jordan Peterson From Causing Offence - That's the Road to Dystopia" (written for *The Guardian*), Peterson's academic way of discussing identity politics is described as follows:

Peterson is one of the most eclectic and stimulating public intellectuals at large today, fearless and impassioned in his philosophical inquiries, his application of clinical psychology to sensitive social dilemmas, and his critique of postmodernism and neo-Marxism in academia. (D'Ancona)

Peterson's background in lecturing at the University of Toronto and experience in practicing psychology gives Peterson a respectability that most of the public figure heads of the right-wing lack, which makes him stand out among conservative and alt-right dominated political discussions. He is considered to be "a secular prophet [...] in an era of lobotomised conformism" (Melanie Phillips qtd in Lynskey), a "moderate ideologue" (David Neiwert qtd in Lynskey), and a "true believer," who "attracts a heterogeneous audience that includes Christian conservatives, atheist libertarians, centrist pundits and neo-Nazis" (Lynskey). However, because of his broad appeal and respectability, critics of Peterson like Tabatha Southey have called him "the stupid man's smart person," emphasising the danger of right-wing ideas that have been packaged as academic ideas:

³⁹ Please note that this debate is centred in Canada and the United States, with branches in Europe and other "western" countries.

Peterson's secret sauce is to provide an academic veneer to a lot of old-school right-wing cant, including the notion that most academia is corrupt and evil, and banal self-help patter. [...] He's very much a cult thing, in every regard. I think he's a goof, which does not mean he's not dangerous. (Tabatha Southey qtd in Lynskey)



Figure 8: Serena speaking passionately amongst protestors (Still, "First Blood," Season 1, Episode 6).

Peterson's criticism of academia as a "corrupt" left-wing bubble is mirrored by Serena's speech during the university protest, where she tells the protesters: "you're spoiled, you're privileged, and you're living in an academic bubble!" showing Serena's typical right-wing stance against left-wing academia ("First Blood," Season 2, Episode 6). Even if Serena's subject matter is different to that of Peterson - as Peterson does not quote the Bible as the source material for his speaking points - they both fit into a political package that is a mix of Phyllis Schlafly's opposition to left-wing politics, presented to the mainstream through the mould of modern activism. Consequently, Serena's activism is portrayed as modern and recognisable political idealism with devastating totalitarian

consequences, warning the viewer for the type of speakers who critique left-wing politics - such as Peterson and Lahren - and what they might achieve in real life.

Another way in which the series incorporates the identity politics debate, is through the incorporation of the current debate of “freedom of speech,” showing how the use of this right might lead to the abolishment of this right, and ultimately to Atwood’s totalitarian utopia. Many modern right-wing speakers like Peterson have come forward to defend freedom of speech from what they consider left-wing censorship. Opinion writer Matthew d’Ancona explains Peterson’s rejection of a forced use of politically correct language:

As Peterson warns, everyone finds something objectionable or upsetting. It would be a moment of maximum peril if the primary test applied to expression became its capacity to offend. Why assume that those setting the rules would necessarily support the powerless or the disenfranchised? The injunction “you can’t say that” leads just as plausibly to Margaret Atwood’s Gilead or to Oceania. (D’Ancona)

Like Peterson, many right-wing activists emphasise the importance of the right to freedom of speech. This main talking point often comes from the standpoint that the left should not be able to censor conservative speakers from speaking at events.⁴⁰ In the flashback to the pre-Gilead period in “First Blood,” Fred and Serena are confronted with a possible cancellation of Serena’s speech at the university, due to dangerous protests. Fred rebukes the suggestion of a cancellation by passionately stating “[Serena] has a right to speak [...] this is America!” This sentence reflects the mainstream right-wing stance on free speech. By showing the difference between the United States’ right to speak and the subsequent oppressive totalitarianism of Gilead, the series is able to warn the viewer that totalitarian leaders are able to use free speech to seize power. The viewer becomes aware that the spread of Fred and Serena’s extreme ideas was only possible due to their right to speak. In Gilead, the result of Serena’s speeches is shown to include a ban on the freedom of speech; the tragedy and irony of this development is shown through Serena’s character

⁴⁰ The next section will elaborate on this.

development. Through Offred's account of Serena in the novel, Atwood reflects on the outcome of Gilead's ban on the freedom of speech and how it has become self-limiting within Gilead:

[Serena] doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (56)

The series continues this character development, portraying Serena as an example of how even true believers of the regime - who helped to ensure its existence - suffer under the lack of freedom under totalitarian oppression. In the episode "A Woman's Work," the Mexican delegate asks: "[did you ever envision] a society in which women can no longer read your book - or anything else?" Serena answers after choosing her words carefully: "No, I didn't [imagine a society in which women can't read]. God asks for sacrifices [...], that has always been his way - he gives the righteous blessings in return, and I think that it's safe to say that Gilead has been blessed in so many ways." This scene suggests that Serena is aware of her sacrifice and seems to agree with it under the guise of "necessity," but this agreement is later debunked by the series by showing her personal struggles with her lack of freedom. For example, the series shows how Serena is gradually shut out from the later stages of Gilead's take-over, despite being instrumental in its overthrowing. Fred even attempts to fight for her equal voice and voting power at first, but this is to no avail ("A Woman's Place," Season 1, Episode 6). When Fred tells Commander Putnam that Serena is frustrated for being shut out, Putnam responds by saying: "this is our fault. We gave [our wives] more than they could handle, they put so much focus on academic pursuits and professional ambition, we let them forget their real purpose. We won't let that happen again." Later, in Gilead, Fred has adopted Putnam's ideology. Every time that Serena asks Fred to be included in the advancement of the Gilead regime, Fred shuts her out, which is in line of his rights within Gilead. This episode from the first season ends with a tragic metaphor of Serena's sacrifice, as a flashback to the inception of Gilead shows how Serena's books - which were instrumental in Gilead's rise to power - are thrown away. These books are shown to be burned along with other books as a result

of Gilead's female writing and reading prohibition and literature purge (see figure 9). Furthermore, the series reveals that Gilead used "university purges" ("Unwoman," Season 2, Episode 2) and systematically killed journalists ("Baggage," Season 2, Episode 3) to help silence criticism.⁴¹ Other points of view than that of Gilead's regime are completely eradicated, and propaganda is put in place to facilitate Gilead's image to the outside world. However, Serena is not completely "speechless," as she ultimately stands up to the court of Commanders to defend the right for girls and women to read, because she wants to defend the right for her daughter Nichole (June's biological daughter)⁴² to read Bible scripture ("the Word," Season 2, Episode 13). As a result of this speech, however, Fred has her taken away, and a finger is cut off as a punishment for reading parts of the Bible in the speech ("The Word"). This marks a turning point in the character development for Serena, as she slowly breaks down emotionally in the episodes that follow, showing that she is now struggling deeply with the contradicting parts of her ideology. Ultimately, because of this struggle, she allows Offred to leave Gilead with the baby at the end of the second season, as she now realises the dangers of Gilead's oppression.⁴³ By showing how democratic freedom can lead to a totalitarian structure, the series emphasises the danger of the emphasis on free speech within identity politics, and how Gilead - that started out as an ideology within a democracy - can become victimising and corrupting to those who have actively defended it. Furthermore, the series warns the viewers of the consequences of allowing all types of activists to speak on an equal platform to discuss their ideas.

However, the series warns for extremism in general, from right-wing politics as well as the left-wing.⁴⁴ The series primarily criticises the left's attempt to silence speakers and the

⁴¹ More about the journalism purge is explored in the next section (5) on feminism and protest symbolism.

⁴² June calls her baby Holly, but she is named Nichole by Serena. In Gilead, Nichole is considered Serena's rightful child.

⁴³ She even states that she "did what was best for [her] child," ("Night," Season 3, Episode 1) suggesting that Gilead is not the best environment for her child.

⁴⁴ Like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) - a main inspiration for Atwood's work - *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) shows the downsides to extremism in all forms; this is also shown in the series.

mainstream's back-lash to conservative figure heads, and warns for its negative effects. In the novel, an extreme reaction to Serena's activism is described by Offred:

Around that time, someone tried to shoot [Serena] and missed; her secretary, who was standing right behind her, was killed instead. Someone else planted a bomb in her car but it went off too early. Though some people said she'd put the bomb in her own car, for sympathy. That's how hot things were getting. (55)



Figure 9: A book burning event at the beginning of Gilead's regime (Still, "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum," Season 1, Episode 4).

In the series' version of the shooting event, not only is Serena's assistant fatally shot, Serena is shot as well, rendering her infertile ("First Blood").⁴⁵ As stated above, the events of the series have been updated to fit the current political environment and its place within the mainstream. By

⁴⁵ In the novel, Serena is described as much older, and likely naturally no longer fertile. To explain Serena's lack of fertility in the series, she is shot in the uterus, rendering her infertile. The tie-in of her political agenda and her infertility is an important plot device in the series, as that is what ultimately propels her hatred and jealousy of the fertile Handmaids.

interpreting the modern setting of the protest as taking place on a university campus with emotional protesters calling Serena a “nazi” and a “fascist bitch” (“First Blood”), the series is able to mirror real-life protests (see figure 10). In fact, the attempt to shut down controversial speakers from speaking at events - specifically at universities - is a very recognisable situation in present-day identity politics, as the numerous university bans and protests of conservative speakers such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Jordan Peterson show. Although there have not been any actual attempts on their lives like Serena has to endure,⁴⁶ Yiannopoulos and Peterson (and alt-right and conservative speakers like them) are often met with aggressive protests, death threats and attempts to ban them from speaking at certain events. In the case of Yiannopoulos, the 2017 protest rally at the University of Berkeley was specifically violent, causing “\$100,000 worth of damage to the campus” and “at least six injured,” according to Madison Park and Kyung Lah, writers for CNN. The university’s administrators then “decided to cancel [the event] [...], and [to remove Yiannopoulos] from campus [...] out of concern for public safety” (qtd in Park and Lah). Yiannopoulos has seen many university protests due to his status as a provocative speaker, using the combination of his right-wing ideas and his self-proclaimed identity as a “dangerous faggot” (qtd in Michael 12) to criticise left-wing identity politics. As a sexual minority himself, he has put himself in a position to criticise the LGBT+ movement and other identity politics movements from a striking “inside” point of view, which is seen as the main reason for his large following and the large amount of vocal opponents. To illustrate his controversial status, Yiannopoulos’ speaking events are described by George Michael as follows:

[Yiannopoulos] regales packed audiences at colleges and universities with his forceful critique of political correctness, Black Lives Matter, [constructivist] feminism, and [so-called] ‘social justice warriors,’⁴⁷ delivered with verve, biting sarcasm, and panache. When faced

⁴⁶ No attempts on the lives of Yiannopoulos and Peterson have been recorded at the time of this thesis.

⁴⁷ These are all contemporary movements concerned with identity politics such as race, gender, sexuality and other social identity issues.

with hostile protestors and angry spectators, he is a master of forensic jiu-jitsu. His lectures mix performance with political commentary. (12)

As Yiannopoulos' ideas have been tailored to spark controversy, the emotional reactions at protests contribute to his plan to increase his notoriety and - by extent - to spread his ideas. As described earlier in this chapter, the tactic of expressing one's ideas fearlessly without regard for the consequences is a main aspect of the present-day conservative activism like the alt-right, as this is successful in injecting ideas into the mainstream and popularises their main points. Indeed, according to Heidi Berrich, his notoriety helped "[Yiannopoulos] [to propel] the alt-right movement into the mainstream" (qtd in Michael 12). Similarly, Jordan Peterson amassed a larger following after a televised debate with Channel Four's Cathy Newman. As Dorian Lynskey, an opinion writer for *The Guardian*, puts it:

Peterson could not have hoped for better publicity than his recent encounter with Cathy Newman [...]. The more Newman inaccurately paraphrased his beliefs and betrayed her irritation, the better Peterson came across. The whole performance, which has since been viewed more than [six million] times on YouTube [...] bolstered Peterson's preferred image as the coolly rational man of science facing down the hysteria of political correctness. (Lynskey)

The television interview with Cathy Newman turned into an emotional debate, which ultimately boosted Peterson's popularity rather than restricting it. Peterson's book *Twelve Rules For Live: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018) even became a "runaway bestseller" in multiple countries over the world after the debate (Lynskey). This illustrates that protest and heated debates often don't work to keep speakers from spreading their ideas, and that they often have the opposite effect. The series' version of Serena's university protest takes place in a flashback, after the reader has learned about Gilead's successful totalitarianism, showing that the university protests were ultimately not successful in keeping Gilead from happening. In fact, after Serena's passionate speech among the protesters, Serena's assistant claims that "Twitter is blowing up," exciting Serena with this apparent

good news, because her ideas have managed to enter popular media despite the large protest due to the exposure (“First Blood”). With this scene, the series critiques modern forms of protest - such as university protests - and illustrates how these protests of conservative speakers can have an adverse effect in favour of the speaker. This shows that the series is able to adapt Atwood’s politically speculative source material to fit the current identity politics debate, and to criticise both the subject matter of right-wing speakers and the protestors that oppose these speakers.



Figure 10: Protestors at Serena’s speech holding signs that say “Stop Nazi Hate” and “Resist,” among other things (Still, “First Blood,” Season 1, Episode 6).

5. Feminism and Identity Politics: Protesting for Female Rights as Handmaids

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is focused on female voices and experiences, emphasising the misogyny and objectification that takes place in the patriarchy, while also critiquing feminist movements for not taking stronger actions in preventing Gilead’s misogynistic politics. In Atwood’s Gilead, women are completely dependent on men and

all female's rights are extremely diminished: liberal women are marked as "sinful," these women are then kidnapped and forced to be raped to bear children for the Commanders and their Wives; they are forced to lose their name, identity, and right to their bodies and children, and birth control and abortion are outlawed completely. Furthermore, all women (except for the Aunts) are forbidden to read and write. The oppression of these rights is maintained by a hierarchy where men are on top, with both volunteers and oppressed individuals perpetuating the agenda. In the series, the emphasis of these violations has become even more pronounced through the reduction of Atwood's original criticism of radical feminism that is present in the novel. The meaning of the series' message has become a more feminist one; containing protest symbolism used to protest aspects of the current political climate in the United States. The series is able to act as inspiration for feminist protest symbolism in real-life, as activists use quotes from the series and dress up as Handmaids as a form of protest.

Atwood's ambivalence towards feminism as an ineffective movement can be recognised in the series as well as in the novel, but women in the series who do not partake in feminism are shown to be the reason for their ineffectiveness. "Baggage" is an episode that is dedicated to June's memory of her mother, which shows June's regrets and new-found understanding regarding her mother's activism (Season 2, Episode 3). This episode reveals that June's mother (called Holly in the series) is eventually sent to the Colonies, showing that the feminism was not effective in preventing Gilead or keeping herself safe. In "Baggage" June remarks: "I told her it wasn't safe, what she was doing," to which her friend Moira answers: "you were right," to which June concludes: "so was she. She knew, she always knew," revealing that June now agrees with her mother's activism in the light of Gilead's oppression (Season 2, Episode 3). The details of her mother's capture are not revealed in the series, but the series does explain that Holly was an abortion activist who performed abortions in secret, which might have been the reason she was shipped to the Colonies. However, Moira reveals to us that the abortion clinic's records were all destroyed, keeping June and Moira wondering how Holly was eventually caught, as there could be many

reasons.⁴⁸ As it is not clear whether Holly was targeted by Gilead for her abortion activism, she is portrayed as a victim of Gilead rather than an unsuccessful activist. At the end of this episode June bitterly says about herself “raise your daughter to be a feminist, and she spends all her time waiting for men,” revealing the disappointment she has in herself and her lack of feminism. Instead of showing a radical feminism that is ineffective, the series emphasises June’s choice to not partake in her mother’s more moderate feminist activism, through her ambivalence towards the events that led to Gilead. This suggests that the impartiality to feminism of women like June ultimately caused Gilead to take power, as Gilead’s leaders depend on (passive) followers to stay in power. Furthermore, Moira - who is described as “queer” and once started a “queer woman’s collective website” (as is revealed in “Baggage”) - does get out of Gilead in the series (as opposed to the novel, in which we do not know whether she ultimately makes it out), showing that a feminist is, in fact, able to escape Gilead. Where the novel’s feminism is shown to be ineffective in the long run, the series shows how a lack of feminist activists facilitated Gilead’s lack of backlash.

An important departure from the novel is the omission of radical feminism, replacing Atwood’s criticism of radical feminism with a portrayal of modern moderate feminism. In the novel, Offred’s mother is described as an abortion activist and a radical feminist who actively protests against pornography. Offred’s mother is quoted as saying “a man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (130), showing her radical ideas of male-exclusionary feminism. Through Offred’s account of her mother’s radical ideas, Atwood is able to portray radical feminism as a movement calling for “separatist purity [...] that threatens to join forces with right-wing demands for ‘traditional values’” (Lorna Sage qtd in Feuer 89). Particularly the radical feminists’ censoring and burning of pornographic books is depicted as a mirror image of the later burning of illegal books in Gilead; showing that “the ‘woman’s culture’ that Offred’s mother envisioned has eventuated in the oppression she thought she was fighting in burning pornographic magazines” (Feuer 89). In the

⁴⁸ Gilead’s reasons for sending women to the Colonies are numerous; it could be due to infertility, “gender treachery,” defiance or other broken rules in Gilead.

novel, Offred's relationship with her mother is portrayed as a difficult one, where Offred feels criticised by her mother for not participating in her mother's radical activism. In one part in the novel, her mother tells her "you're just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve [you]" (131), suggesting that Offred's lack of activism makes her useless in her mother's eyes, marking a radical mind-set reminiscent of Gilead's exclusion of free thinkers. At the feminist rally described in the novel, primarily pornographic books are burned, and a young Offred is shielded from seeing pornographic images by her mother (130). This prompts the reader to understand Offred's mother's activism as overly radical, and a mirror image of the puritan Christian's ban on pornography. In the series, this scene has been altered: June and her mother (called Holly in the series) go to a rally where women burn pieces of papers with their rapists on them, instead of burning pornographic books ("Baggage," Season 2, Episode 3). The series' version of the relationship between June and her mother - as in the novel - is also shown to be a difficult one, but the sharp criticism from her mother is softened in the series. The series depicts Holly as a rational, strong and caring mother, who does not call her daughter useless, but who tries to gently push her daughter towards a more feminist approach. With these alterations the series shows a modern, less radical take on feminism, choosing to omit the anti-pornography and book-burning activism - thus, by extension radical feminism - that is less relevant in the current types of feminist activism. Because of the series' omission of the pornography argument and emphasis on rape, the common ground between radical feminism and the fundamentalism of Gilead's ideas - a point made in the novel to provide criticism of radical feminism - is lost. The point made against rape more recognisable as a feminist point in the current political climate, than a stance against pornography.⁴⁹ The burning of pieces of paper with rapists on them shows the opposite of Gilead's systematic rape of Handmaids, rather than another version of Gilead's radical book-burning and exclusion tactics.

The series shows a feminist stance in the modern political debate, referring to current political events such as the #MeToo movement and "fake news." As described above, the series

⁴⁹ How this is more relevant in current politics is explored in the next part of this section.

reflects on the large-scale rape and abuse of women, both in and before Gilead. The burning of the pieces of paper with rapists on them is specifically relevant in contemporary politics as a reference to the “#MeToo” movement, in which victims have ousted their abusers publically. Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman and Haley Sweetland Edwards have written an article on the #MeToo movement, naming these so-called “silence breakers” the communal “Person of the Year 2017” in their article “*Time* Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers” for *Time*. In this article, Zacharek et al describe the beginning of the #MeToo movement in 2017:

Emboldened by [Ashley] Judd, Rose McGowan and a host of other prominent accusers, women everywhere have begun to speak out about the inappropriate, abusive and in some cases illegal behaviour they've faced. When multiple harassment claims bring down a charmer like former Today show host Matt Lauer, women who thought they had no recourse see a new, wide-open door. When a movie star says #MeToo, it becomes easier to believe the cook who's been quietly enduring for years. (Zacharek et al)

While the series does not reflect the exact movement - which was primarily built on the stories of famous figure heads - the series' portrayal is reminiscent of the solidarity in this movement, as a large amount of women have come together to burn paper with names of abusers on them.⁵⁰ Like the rally in the series, the #MeToo movement is a public display of a “shared experience.”

[W]hat separated them was less important than what brought them together: a shared experience. [...] [D]ozens of people representing at least as many industries, all of whom had summoned extraordinary personal courage to speak out about sexual harassment at their jobs. They often had eerily similar stories to share. (Zacharek et al)

Another scene that mirrors elements from the #MeToo movement is in “Smart Power,” when the Waterfords visit Canada on a diplomatic mission (Season 2, Episode 9). When the accounts of Handmaid's in Gilead are made public, they “go boom,” as Moira remarks, and the Waterfords are

⁵⁰ The series focuses on women burning papers, but it is important to note that there have been a lot of men coming forward in the #MeToo movement, even though most allegations come from women. All of the allegations described in the *Time* article are allegations against men.

sent back to Gilead. It is shown in the series that Fred and Serena lie to the press and the delegates to paint a brighter, less accurate picture of Gilead, and the accounts that are made public go directly against this “fake news”.⁵¹ When Fred asks why they are sent away after the Handmaid’s chilling accounts are made public, the Canadian delegate remarks “we believe the women,” to which Fred replies “yesterday you believed me,” calling the Canadians “cowards” (Season 2, Episode 9). This shows that the series portrays the Handmaid’s outing of their oppressors as similar to the #MeToo movement, suggesting that the #MeToo victims should be believed in a way that the Handmaids are believed by the Canadians.

As described above, the series depicts a version of a #MeToo type of feminist movement as an opposite movement to “fake news,” and by extension, the Trump administration. As the series consistently shows Canada to be the opposite of Gilead (a free and safe place that is the best version of our current western society), Canada’s decision to “believe the women” - the #MeToo route - is shown to be the morally just route. The unjust route is then shown to be Gilead’s “fake news” - the fake account of what is happening in their country - portraying the criticism of the concept of “fake news” and by extension, of the people who use this term to silence people. As stated in the first chapter, it has been established that propaganda and manipulated facts are a useful tool in the rise of totalitarianism. Famously, Donald Trump (the current president of the United States) has popularised the term “fake news,” which he has used to claim that certain news articles are manipulated and biased against him. As Trump claims that news coverage of him often contains made-up or taken deliberately out of context to paint him in a bad light, the freedom and impartiality of the press are taken into question, even when this coverage is, in fact, accurate and instrumental in the democratic criticism of Trump.⁵² In liberal media,⁵³ the term “fake news” has become synonymous with Trump’s desire to censor any criticism towards him.

⁵¹ “Fake News” will be discussed later in detail.

⁵² However, there are important exceptions. Some news coverage on Donald Trump has been proven to be actually “faked,” although most of Trump’s claims are not confirmed.

⁵³ “Liberal media” here means media critical of Trump.

Apart from his “fake news” remarks, Trump has made condescending remarks about women, as Zacharek et al have described in “Person of the Year 2017”:

The language used by the man who would become America's 45th President, captured on a 2005 recording, was, by any standard, vulgar. He didn't just say that he'd made a pass; he “moved on her like a bitch.” He didn't just talk about fondling women; he bragged that he could “grab 'em by the pussy.” That Donald Trump could express himself that way and still be elected President is part of what stoked the rage that fuelled the Women's March the day after his Inauguration. It's why women seized on that crude word as the emblem of the protest that dwarfed Trump's Inauguration crowd size. (Zacharek et al)

Trump's language - and by extent Trump himself - has become the opposite of the “silence breakers” who are part of the #MeToo movement. The “silencing” that Trump partakes in is criticised by the series as part of the injustice of Gilead. As Cameron has stated in the first chapter of this thesis, “silencing women” is a big part of a systematic oppression of women. When Fred remarks “yesterday you believed me” and then calls the Canadians “cowards,” it shows Gilead's extreme version of Trump's “silencing of women”. It illustrates how Trump's dismissal of the press and his politically incorrect language about women (and other minorities) can actually lead to real inaccuracies (as opposed to what he believes is “fake news”) and ultimately, to censorship.

The series shows the extreme outcome of this censorship in “Baggage,” when June hides in the building formally belonging to *The Boston Globe*, a newspaper. When June explores the building, she finds out that most of the journalists were murdered there, calling it a “slaughterhouse” when she discovers a wall riddled with bullet holes (see figure 11). This scene portrays the extreme outcome of a limitation of free press, as the freedom of opinion could be instrumental in mobilising protestors and ultimately bringing down Gilead (Season 2, Episode 3). The scene in “Smart Power” when the Waterfords are dismissed from Canada for the publication of the Handmaids' letters shows the opposite of the *Boston Globe* “slaughterhouse,” as the free press in Canada is instrumental in criticising Gilead and getting Fred and Serena out of Canada (Season

2, Episode 9). The Canada in the series becomes an ideal liberal view of our current society in which the press and women are believed. Opposite to Canada stands Gilead, a society that is shown to be an extreme outcome of Trump's type of politics - in terms of his criticism of the freedom of the press and the violation of female rights - which both have been adapted by Gilead's leaders as tactics to oppress women.



Figure 11: Offred touching the wall at the *Boston Globe* where journalists were brutally shot (Still, “Baggage,” Season 2, Episode 3).

Because of the recognisable portrayal of current political developments, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a more relevant text in the modern political environment. When writing on the political relevance of the novel, Beauchamp - writing in 2009 - claims that the novel's political warning is not as realistic as some would think:

The phenomenon [...] that Atwood extrapolates into Gilead - an intolerant, totalitarianoid fundamentalism, intent on culture war - obviously exists here and now; but is it really a

serious enough phenomenon to send the sort of frisson down the spine that a dystopia should? I think not. (15)

However, most recent news media writers have hailed the novel's source material as being frightfully accurate and relevant in modern times, more relevant than when it was published. In "In Trump's America, *The Handmaid's Tale* Matters More Than Ever," Adi Robertson, writing for *The Verge* states that the novel has become more relevant than before: "as the times changed, it stopped feeling relevant. But when I read it again, as the internet was debating whether gendered harassment should just be considered a basic fact of life, I decided that was exactly why it still mattered" (Robertson). This shows that the novel's material is able to resonate with the current political climate in a way that it could not when the novel was published. When Atwood is asked whether her novel was meant as a prediction for the present political turmoil, she replies that it is more accurately a warning, to help the reader (and viewer) understand that Gilead is not what we want to be headed towards:

Is "The Handmaid's Tale" a prediction? [...] [I'm] increasingly [asked this], as forces within American society seize power and enact decrees that embody what they were saying they wanted to do, even back in 1984, when I was writing the novel. No, it isn't a prediction, because predicting the future isn't really possible: There are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities. Let's say it's an anti-prediction: If this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen. But such wishful thinking cannot be depended on either. (Atwood, interview by Kalorkoti)

Atwood does not define *The Handmaid's Tale* as a prediction of the current political climate, but she does recognise the parallels of the source material and current political developments:

In the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades, and indeed the past centuries. In this divisive climate, in which hate for many groups seems on the rise and scorn for democratic institutions is being expressed by

extremists of all stripes, it is a certainty that someone, somewhere - many, I would guess - are writing down what is happening as they themselves are experiencing it. Or they will remember, and record later, if they can. (Atwood, interview by Kalorkoti)

This remark by Atwood underlines how the material from *The Handmaid's Tale* is able to portray the current fears of losing rights and liberties in the era of the identity politics debate.

One notable parallel between the novel, the series and modern politics is the recent illegalisation of abortion in many states in the United States, which warranted a large protest of women dressed as Handmaids. As Tara Law writes for *Time* in "Here Are the Details of the Abortion Legislation in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Elsewhere," this is "the most aggressively anti-abortion law in recent American history":

On May 15 [2019], Alabama's governor signed the most aggressively anti-abortion law in recent American history. If enacted, the law would permit abortions only if the mother's life is at risk or if the foetus cannot survive, but not in cases of rape or incest. [...] A growing number of states have moved to drastically restrict access to abortion. Over the past few months, several states, including Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia, have pursued "heartbeat" bills - legislation that would ban abortion as soon as a physician is able to detect a [...] heartbeat. (Law)

To protest this bill, many women dressed as Handmaids marched the streets of the United States, holding signs stating "Never Gilead," among other things that refer to the series ("Women Wear 'Handmaid's Tale' Outfits to Protest Abortion Bill") (see figure 12).⁵⁴ The fact that the novel's 1980's material has become even more relevant and symbolically translatable in the process of adaptation emphasises Atwood's message of anti-totalitarianism and the fragility of modern liberties.

Women dressed as Handmaids has become a symbolic way of protesting for women's rights, "wordlessly implying that the distinction between our world and the society Margaret

⁵⁴ This particular image was chosen because it is an example of the most recent cause against the abortion bill of May 15th. In fact, there are many pictures of women protesting dressed as Handmaids.

Atwood's creations occupy is getting smaller and smaller by the day," as Laura Bradley has remarked in "Under Their Eye: The Rise of Handmaid's Tale-Inspired Protesters" for *Vanity Fair*. Women dressed as Handmaids have been spotted at the Women's March against Donald Trump and Mike Pence, have been seen protesting the repeal of "the Affordable Care Act," and have been seen at other protests for women's rights, to protest controversial right-wing political developments (Bradley). As Margaret Lyons has stated, "the show's true calling card isn't agitation, it's aesthetics - and that aesthetic, with the red dresses [...] is powerful and important," marking the series' "iconic" Handmaid outfit as visually powerful and recognisable. As the recent illegalisation of abortion shows, laws concerning female rights can be overthrown easily in the modern political climate; and the Handmaid's striking outfit is a symbol of that. The overt criticism of the current political developments in the series has turned *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) into a realistic warning for the modern viewer, comparing the beginning of Gilead to the modern political decisions. As the main oppressive elements from Gilead have become parts of the current political debate (namely, gender essentialism versus constructivism, modern conservatism and identity politics, oppression of female rights and the freedom of the press), the novel's source material is able to be a symbolic part of female rights activism and feminism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) was compared to the Hulu series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) to explore how the novel has been adapted to better fit the current identity politics. Firstly, the adaptation of Offred as the main character was analysed, showing how the adaptation of a nameless and faceless Offred to the identifiable June has proved to be problematic for Atwood's commentary of identity loss. The novel's "Historical Notes" show that Offred's accounts were fragmented, subjective and unverifiable. The series' June, however, has been given a name, a recognisable face through Elisabeth Moss's portrayal, and a more heroic role. The medium of

film portrays the experiences of multiple characters rather than just Offred's, showing a more objective world to the viewer. The broader commentary of anonymity and biased memory has been lost, but the series has tried to remedy this with the visual aspect; obscuring the faces of the characters and using "claustrophobic close-ups" to create an intimate connection between the character and the viewer.

Because of this multifaceted view of Gilead - through multiple characters and their experiences - the series has been able to update the minority identities to better accommodate the modern viewer's experience. To better reflect a diverse audience, the cast has been diversified; LGBT+ characters and people of colour have been added and explored through background stories to fit the current integration level of these minorities, and the race segregation mentioned in the novel has been left out. The omission of racial segregation has sparked controversy, as some feel the omission is due to the censoring or playing down of current racial developments. The adaptation of the novel's minority identities is both successful - as it shows a more modern, fitting diverse society as is the case with the expansion of LGBT+ minority identities and other minor adjustments - and controversial, as is the case with the decisions in favour of racial integration.

Other changes include the omission of technology present in the novel. This fits the modern world of the series, as technology plays a larger part of everyday life: it is used to communicate, write and extend the reach of individual liberties. As these liberties are taken away from the individuals in Gilead, so is the technology; only Commanders are allowed to make use of technology. As an opposite to Gilead, the series shows Canada as a similar society to the current western society - filled with technological advancements - and illustrates how social media plays a large part in the freedom of expression in such a society. Furthermore, the lack of technology contributes to the Christian fundamentalist ideas in Gilead of returning to austerity. Visual violence is used to inform the viewer of the brutalities in Gilead, fitting a post-9/11 portrayal of violence in pop culture. The aforementioned multifaceted experiences play into this visual violence, as violence can be explored from multiple angles. Experiencing the violence visually then becomes

more realistic to the viewer than Offred's second-hand account in the novel. The violence is not just brutal and shocking; it also contributes to the overarching story line of the series, as it shows how different characters react to certain levels of violence and how they decide to react.

While the novel can be seen as a critique of politics of the 1980's, - namely, televangelism and Phyllis Schlafly's conservative activism - the series shows an updated view of the current political commentary. Serena's character is still recognisable as a modern Phyllis Schlafly, but new conservative political tactics have been added to fit the current political developments. Serena has been made to fit the world of the new conservative activism, in which the alt-right is a new right-wing movement, and in which new media is used increasingly to gain followers. A comparison is made between Serena and Jordan Peterson, a notable figure in the current debate on gender essentialism and male identity, against left-wing academia. The topic of "freedom of speech" is discussed as a notable subject in the series, showing how limiting freedom of speech can lead to the beginning of Gilead. Left-wing university protests are portrayed in the series to show how the current protest culture could be instrumental in the broadening of the speakers' audiences. The discussion of these topics in the series refers to the emphasis of these discussions in modern identity politics.

Finally, the role that *The Handmaid's Tale* plays in the broader context of feminism was discussed. Like the novel, the series shows how feminism can be ineffective in preventing Gilead from proceeding. The reason for this ineffectiveness is shown to be women like June, who did not contribute to the activism of her mother. June's mother's character has been changed to fit a more moderate view of feminism. The omission of Atwood's original comparison between radical feminism and Gilead's radicalism has changed the series' perspective on feminism; as the feminism in the series is shown as a direct opponent of Gilead's ideas, rather than a frightfully comparative movement. In the series, Canada is shown to be a pro-women society, in which women are believed, referring to developments such as the #MeToo movement. Gilead, on the other hand, is portrayed as an anti-women society, in which censorship and manipulated facts -

“fake news” - are rampant. By extension, Gilead is portrayed as an extreme version of Donald Trump’s stances on female rights and the press. The comparison between current political developments and the novel’s source material show how the novel is able to become even more relevant in contemporary culture, as the identity politics topics featured in the novel have become increasingly relevant and recognisable. A main example of a relevant comparison is the abortion ban of May 15th 2019; as this is associated with Gilead’s ban on abortion; protestors are able to use the series’ imagery and clothing to get the point across that such decisions belong to a totalitarian “ustopia” such as Gilead.

Thus, while there are a noticeable amount of deviations from the novel, the series’ writers have managed to preserve the majority of the source material while committing to politically relevant writing. The series is able to reflect the current political environment in which identity politics has become an increasingly relevant topic, by using the identity politics already present in the novel and updating them.



Figure 12: Women dressed as Handmaids to protest the May 15 abortion bill (Still, “Women Wear ‘Handmaid’s Tale’ Outfits to Protest Abortion Bill,” *Inside Edition*).

CONCLUSION

The Handmaid's Tale is still relevant within the context of modern western politics, especially the 2017 adaptation to the small screen. Both the novel and the series contain the identity politics elements that are necessary to reflect the current debate of identity politics. The series has used most of the novel's source material while adding and updating some elements to the extent that it fits the current political environment and the identity politics debate.

Gilead in both the novel and the series is portrayed as a totalitarian society, an "ustopia" imagined by Atwood using a political framework inspired by historical events. This society shows a speculative version of reality that explores what the United States would look like after extreme gender essentialism has won the identity politics debate. The novel's debate of essentialism versus constructivism has become relevant through its discussion by modern political figure heads (such as Jordan Peterson) and movements such as the alt-right, where identity politics is discussed extensively. The series' portrayal of Gilead becomes a symbol of where the current United States politics is headed under president Trump, showing how these mostly right-wing conservative changes might eventually lead to a version of Gilead. Canada (in the series), on the other hand, is shown as a more liberal version of the current political environment in which Gilead has not been able to take over. With this juxtaposition, *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) is able to convey a criticism of the identity politics debate, showing how divisive extreme political movements can be and how they are able to become a reality. The novel warns its readers that it is possible for rights to be taken away; the series has taken this warning and has been able to elevate its relevance by emphasising the developments recognisable to the modern political atmosphere. Because of the series' references to modern politics, it has been able to infiltrate modern politics through symbolism, clothing and references to the series, as Handmaids have become synonymous with the loss of identity, and by extension the loss of individual rights and female rights in particular.

With the adaptation from the novel to the series, Atwood's commentary of identity has been changed due to the multifaceted and visual nature of the screenplay, but it has not been lost altogether. Visually, the series is able to translate Atwood's idea of anonymity through camera work and costuming. However, the visual medium makes it very hard to portray the mechanism used in the novel that makes the reader doubt Offred's authenticity (using the "Historical Notes" at the ending of the novel to question her accounts). Because of the visual aspect of the series, the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) is portrayed as factual, multifaceted and from more diverse angles than the novel, contributing to the realism of the story but taking away Atwood's commentary on the subjectivity of individual experience. The series does attempt to rectify this, through the addition of multiple characters' background stories and points of view. Furthermore, the realism of the series makes the visual violence even more brutal, and underlines the message warning against totalitarianism that Atwood has imbedded in her novel. In the series, the individual in general is under a threat that is not only recognisable to the modern viewer, but also more realistic and shocking.

The criticism of radical feminism present in the novel has been omitted, changing the radical feminism used in the novel to display how this movement is similar to Gilead. Instead, feminism has been set up in the series as the opposite of Gilead, emphasising on rape - an important and inherent part of Gilead's structure. By emphasising the importance of female rights without the criticism of radical feminism has pulled the series towards a more pro-feminist stance that is more relevant in contemporary politics. Where the novel is a warning against political extremism in all forms, the series has taken on a more partial role, primarily warning against a possible extreme outcome of current right-wing politics. As the series has since departed from the novel's story, it remains to be seen if and how the show's creators further implement the feedback from the audience and the news media; and if and how they will incorporate other references to modern identity politics.

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