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## A Crisis of Selves From Page to Screen

A comparison of the representation of Offred and June's identity conflict in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the Hulu adaptation thereof in a television series (2017)

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## **List of abbreviations**

*THT* Atwood, M. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage, 1996.

## Introduction

Margaret Atwood's famous novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), has undoubtedly joined the list of dystopias that are now being taught internationally. Following Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) among others, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes its place in the dystopian tradition, as "Atwood has been quite explicit about the novel's dystopian roots from the beginning" (Weiss, 2009, 123). More than merely a dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* is also considered as a piece speculative fiction, which according to Atwood herself means "literature that deals with possibilities in a society which have not yet been enacted but are latent" (MasterClass, 2019). To make her fiction even more realistic, Atwood stipulated:

One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. (2017)

Her decision to make her novel a speculative fiction using only types of violence that have already taken place sometime in the past creates a *déjà-vu* that intensifies the readers' reactions when learning about the story of a Handmaid in Gilead.

Set in the near future in the United States of America, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a violent totalitarian and theocratic regime named the Republic of Gilead, in which the female protagonist tries to survive. In this society, biology and the Bible are used to justify women's inferior position to men, and women have barely any rights left as men detain all the power. Following a fertility crisis across the country, "the elite of the regime arrange to have fertile females assigned to them as Handmaids" (Atwood, 2017), or as the main character puts it: unwilling "two-legged wombs" (*THT*, 147) whose role is to procreate for others. The protagonist of the novel is Offred, whose "name is composed of a man's first name, 'Fred,' and a prefix denoting 'belonging to'" (Atwood, 2017). Assigned to the Waterford household as a Handmaid, Offred has to participate monthly to the Ceremony, an occasion on which her Commander rapes her while his Wife holds Offred's wrists. In the event that a Handmaid does not comply with Gilead's rules or does not obey the Aunts, "the governing overseers of all matters pertaining to the female sex" (Butler, 2010, 44), she can be very harshly punished. And if after three assigned households, a Handmaid does not bear any children, she joins the

Unwomen at the Colonies, where she has to work as a slave on radioactive grounds. Consequently, Offred's main purpose in the story she is narrating is to survive by keeping a low profile.

Atwood's novel has been applauded by many for its innovative female protagonist, Offred, as "what distinguishes Atwood's novel from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus" (Malak, 1987, 6). Coral Ann Howells furthermore describes Atwood's work as a "woman's survival fiction" in which "Atwood challenges the masculinist discourse of the dystopia ... by focussing on what has traditionally been left out, which is a feminist perspective on events" (1998, 39). Atwood's novel is in fact told by a female first-person narrator who recorded her story on "thirty tape cassettes" (*THT*, 313) to tell her experience as a kind of testimony to us. To the question "is *The Handmaid's Tale* a 'feminist' novel?", Atwood herself answers in an essay

If you mean a novel in which women are human beings — with all the variety of character and behavior that implies — and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes. (2017)

While Atwood's novel has been adapted in many ways since its publication, a new success was brought upon Offred's story thanks to the adaptation thereof in a television series by screenwriter Bruce Miller for Hulu. After the release of the first season made of ten episodes, the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* "made history when it scored the Emmy for Best Drama Series, which is the first time a streaming series has ever won this award" (Feldman, 2018). As we will see in this study, the television series "succeeds in visualising Atwood's novel in a fresh and affective way" (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 349). Using the audio-visual techniques of voice-over, music, lightning, framing and close-ups on the expressive faces of the characters, the television series makes Offred's tale even more captivating and disturbing than Atwood's novel, if possible. Moreover, "one aspect that contributes to the affective nature of the series is also the excellent acting by Elisabeth Moss" (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 350) who plays Offred, for it has brought her "the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series" (Television Academy). In addition to making an impressive *The Handmaid's Tale* cinematographic adaptation, the series' "uncomfortable timeliness and prescience in the era of Trump" (Howell, 2019, 2) has made Atwood's fiction more likely to occur than ever and substantially increased the sales of her novel. In fact, "the

day after Trump was elected, sales of Atwood's book increased 200% from the year before" (Reilly, 2017). The reason therefore is that the series, although it was in the making well before the elections in the United States, "offers depictions of totalitarian repression and abuse grimly reminiscent of Trumpian excesses, while tapping into concerns of #MeToo and #TimesUp movements focused on breaking silence about women's experience of sexual aggression" (Howell, 2019, 2). More than adapting Atwood's novel in a more affective way, the series is thus resonant with contemporary gender issues, as "Miller utilizes and manipulates Atwood's original story to draw attention to these issues, which we still need to address and solve or otherwise we risk our world completely destroyed turning into one like the Republic of Gilead" (Hershman, 2018, 64). *The New York Times* pointed out how "at the women's marches ... protesters carried signs referencing the novel, with slogans like, 'Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again!' and 'The Handmaid's Tale is NOT an Instruction Manual!'" (Alter, 2018). Incidentally, *The Handmaid's Tale* is now used as protest during women's marches, since the red uniforms worn by the Handmaids in Atwood's novel are now used as a symbol of oppression of women and demonstrators have been seen wearing them "from Argentina to the US, the UK and Ireland, and [it] has emerged as one of the most powerful current feminist symbols of protest" (Beaumont & Holpuch, 2018). Furthermore, while Atwood's novel deliberately leaves a lot of doubt at the end regarding the characters, the television addresses to all the readers' questions. After reading the book, we do not know if Moira, Luke and Offred's daughter are still alive, we do not know if Nick and Offred ever saw each other again and we do not know if Offred eventually got pregnant. In contrast therewith, the series of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the storylines of other characters, such as Luke, Moira, Ofglen and the past of Nick and Serena Joy, making them even more complex and leaving us with no doubt concerning their fate. As Erick Neher suggests in his work on *The Perils of Adaptation*, a cinematographic adaptation "also concretizes what is generally left open, malleable, in literature" (2014, 122). Aside from researching its feminist agenda and dystopian characteristics, Atwoodian scholars have also studied *The Handmaid's Tale*'s protagonist at length, debating "the question of Offred's heroism" (Weiss, 2009, 120). After the Hulu television series was released in 2017, critics have additionally started comparing Atwood's novel with its adaptation, researching the differences and similarities. Although the recent adaptation remained in many ways close to Atwood's story, the screenwriters made numerous alterations and even expanded Offred's storyline in the second, third and fourth season.

The present study aims to bring up a new discussion of Atwood's fiction by comparing the main character of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the novel and in its Hulu adaptation. As Olivia Hershman explains in her article on Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, "while Atwood's novel has inspired much academic scholarship, there is no such scholarship on Miller's recent and award-winning adaptation of the novel" (2018, 58). While Offred's heroism in the novel has long been debated, few have taken the television series as a new perspective on her character. Besides, the Hulu adaptation of Atwood's novel has emphasized the intricacy of the protagonist's character as "Hulu's series not only restores Offred's voice to the centre of its storyworld, but showrunner Bruce Miller envisions that voice as a distinct character, June" (Howell, 2019, 7). Also, in both the novel and the television series

the government further asserts its control by putting women into roles that require only a few skills, preventing their self-expression, initiative, knowledge, independence and action. These measures function as a means to strip women of their identities and lower the chance of rebellion. (The Goods, 2017)

As a result, the main character's unending struggle in both media is to survive and retain a sense of self and her former identity as June. Therefore, the purpose of this study is specifically to examine in what ways the television series complexifies how the main character experiences an identity crisis between her imposed obedient role as Offred and her former identity as June. Additionally, the objective is to research whether in Atwood's novel and the Hulu television series, Offred manages to overcome gender and social constraints in Gilead, or if she stays trapped in her role as the oppressed Handmaid. This research also discusses to what extent the series complexifies or simplifies Atwood's novel and what limitations this popular genre brings on Offred's story. Nevertheless, this dissertation solely analyses the first two seasons of the television series, the first season being parallel to Atwood's novel and the second one expanding Offred's story. The reason therefore is that from the third season on Offred is posted elsewhere as a Handmaid and her name is thus changed. Observing the identity conflict between the personas or selves of Offred and June after the second season is hence irrelevant.

The first chapter of this thesis is a state of the art, summarizing different approaches to Atwood's protagonist in the novel and the film and series adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The second chapter explains who Offred and June are, and why it is believed they are two different personas of the same character. The first part argues that Offred's persona is

merely Gilead's construct; a passive and submissive mask the main character is wearing by force. In the second part, June's persona, rebellious and spirited, and Offred's former identity are both discussed. In the third part, this dissertation shows that those two selves are in conflict in the main character's mind. The third chapter investigates how the main character uses the Handmaid's mask as a means of survival on screen compared to the novel. The study in fact analyses how Offred wears her Handmaid's mask, a learned pattern of behaviour making her look like a meek and irreproachable Handmaid, to preserve her past identity as June and how she uses it as a way to disembody and survive harsh situations. The way June uses Offred's identity to get what she wants and rebel is also explained. In the fourth chapter, three characters preventing Offred from retrieving her past identity, alias June, are identified. The three characters discussed are Aunt Lydia, who brainwashed the main character, Serena Joy, who continuously humiliates her and Fred Waterford who uses his masculine superiority on her. Finally, the fifth chapter observes the symbols of June's rebirth in both the novel and the television series, through the analysis of extracts in which she refuses to be Offred, the obedient Handmaid.

## Chapter one: from novel, to film, to series

### 1.1. The debate around Offred's heroism in Atwood's novel

Since its publication in 1985, Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* "has triggered a staggering amount of critical commentary" (Dopp, 1994, 43). While some compare Atwood's novel with other dystopian classics such as Orwell's *1984*, others have focused on how the political novel is a critique of the second wave of feminism. However, "one of the major areas of debate among scholars of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the question of Offred's heroism" (Weiss, 2009, 120). On the one hand, Offred has been described by authors as being not only a victim in the Republic of Gilead, but also responsible for her own oppression. On the other hand, critics depict Offred as a rebellious and courageous woman, finding forbidden love in a totalitarian regime and telling her story as a survivor. *The Handmaid's Tale* and its protagonist have thus caused much ink to flow over the years. The debate around Offred's heroism has probably been one of the most recurrent in the Atwoodian studies, and this thesis is going to add to it by analysing Offred's agency in a new perspective with the Hulu adaptation.

On one side of the discussion on the protagonist's rebelliousness, critics argue Offred to be "a sly, subversive survivor" (Malak, 1987, 8), and "cite her irony, her language play, her insistence on retaining personal memories, and even the fact that she 'wrote' the Tale in the first place as subversive" (Weiss, 2009, 120). Among the scholars portraying Offred as a defying character, Hilde Staels sees the protagonist as a victim of Gilead who resists through narrating. According to Staels, Offred shows her rebelliousness "by giving expression to her inner feelings and bodily sensations from her situation on the periphery of society" (1995, 233), by remembering her name (*THT*, 94), by her will to survive and her insistence on remembering the past (1995, 235). All in all, Offred "resists Gilead's transparent, quantifiable products of meaning by creating heterogeneity" (Staels, 1995, 236). Subsequently, Coral Ann Howells describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as "a woman's tale of resistance" (1998, 35), where Offred narrates her story with irony and defiance, and shows multiple survival tactics. Offred's priority in the novel is, in fact, to survive in Gilead: "I intend to last" (*THT*, 17), she says. The fact that she succeeds in surviving and that her "reconstructed message delivered nearly two hundred [years] later ensures the survival of her voice and her version of Gileadean history" (Howells, 1998, 46), are proof enough for Howells that Offred is a

courageous and defiant survivor in Atwood's dystopia. Moreover, Howells asserts that "Offred claims her own private space by her refusals; she refuses to forget the past, she refuses to believe in the absolute authority of Gilead, just as she refuses to give up hope ... Crucially, Offred refuses to be silenced" (1996, 132). Furthermore, scholars who believe Offred is a resisting victim in Gilead often refer to her love affair with Nick, the Commander's driver, as a rebellious act against the regime. Elisabeth Hansot suggests "Offred is a survivor whose various disciplines of survival implicate her in sites where collective resistance is being carried out" and that site "in which she and Nick are lovers, is ... literally and figuratively the most dangerous one of all" (1994, 67). Allan Weiss points out how some critics "argue that in a world that outlaws passionate love, Offred's relationship with Nick is a subversive one simply by its very nature" (Weiss, 2009, 122). Atwood herself adds that "if the regime forbids love affairs, then one of the rebellious things that you can do is *have one*" (qtd. in Weiss, 2009, 122). The risk Offred is taking to secretly meet with Nick and be herself with him ("I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" *THT*, 282) is thus interpreted by some as a rebellious act. In fact, Lois Feuer debates that "it is through Offred's affair with Nick ... that her re-created self desires and rebels" (1997, 86).

On the other side of the debate around Offred's heroism, scholars disagree with the idea of Offred being a rebel or merely a victim trying to survive. Some consider the protagonist of Atwood's novel to be "a participant in the regime" (Weiss, 2009, 122), complicit in her own oppression. Stillman & Johnson share this point of view, as they explain how Offred failed to act before and during Gilead's regime: she mocks her mother and best friend who take action during the coup, she little by little accepts her position in this new society because of her love affair with Nick, and she consciously chooses to stay ignorant rather than to think and act (Stillman & Johnson, 1994). To this list of complicit acts, Weiss easily adds that "Offred feels the authorized emotions she is expected to" (2009, 134) and that "in the end, she does nothing" (2009, 136). And while some write that Offred's relationship with Nick is an act of rebellion, other critics disagree. Weiss underlines that her love affair with Nick "is conducted with the tacit approval of at least one of her superiors, Serena Joy, so that she can become pregnant at last" (2009, 135).

Stillman & Johnson furthermore add that Offred's love affair with Nick

paralyzes her and delivers control of her destiny into the hands of others. Because of her relationship with Nick, Offred 'no longer want[s] to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom' ... Instead, she comforts herself with the idea that she has 'made a life' for herself in Gilead. (1994, 78)

And while Nick probably saves Offred at the end of the novel by helping her escape Gilead, Sarah Morrison suggests that Nick "is presented as the heroine's potential protector, a candidate for the role of hero. With few options, Offred is ... 'essentially passive and in need of rescue by a man'" (Morrison, 2000, 321). Offred's love affair with Nick is thus not always interpreted as a rebellious act, but rather as a temporary escape from her life as a Handmaid and a relationship that prevents her from defying the regime. Additionally, Weiss concludes the subject of Offred's heroism in his article by writing that Atwood's main character is "guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires. She prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment" (1994, 138). He goes even further by saying that while Offred "does not belong to the upper levels of Gilead's power hierarchy ... she is no less responsible for its destruction of freedom, for its atrocities, and indeed for its very existence (Weiss, 1994, 138).

Another recurrent reference in the debate around Offred's position in *The Handmaid's Tale* are the "basic victim positions" defined by Margaret Atwood herself in her work *Survival*, written in 1972. As Michael Foley puts it,

Atwood provides a discussion of four such mental postures, what she calls the "Basic Victim Positions":

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.

Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.

Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

Position Four: To be a creative non-victim ...

The Basic Victim Positions is a convenient framework for a discussion of the women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially of the Narrator herself. (1990, 51)

Both Foley and Jamie Dopp base their opinions about Offred's rebelliousness on this theory. In fact, Dopp argues that "the dominant subject-position offered by *The Handmaid's Tale* is a

victim-position” (1994, 43). While according to Dopp Offred is stuck in Position Two, Foley suggests that Offred “is a fully developed character complete with inconsistencies of thought and feeling and the constant potential for change” (1990, 54). While at times she shows she has hope with her phrase “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (*THT*, 101) which she repeats almost as a prayer, at other times she seems to have given up. Therefore, Foley explains that “this lifelike progress, two steps forward, one step back, finds her at one time or another occupying every one of the Basic Victim Positions and sometimes more than one at the same time” (1990, 55). However, he eventually agrees with Dopp on Offred’s final victim position in the novel, which is Position Two (Foley, 1990, 56). In spite of the fact that Dopp and Foley agree on Offred’s last victim position, both portray the protagonist in a very different manner. Dopp describes Offred as passive and unresistant, while Foley applauds “her honest, patient and courageous struggle for freedom and dignity, and her ultimate triumph through love and the power of words” (1990, 57). In the same manner, Malak insists that “Offred’s progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome” (1987, 8). The debate around Offred’s heroism is thus an unending one and we can shed a new light onto it by analysing Offred’s character not only in Atwood’s novel but also in the adaptation thereof in the Hulu television series.

## **1.2. Cinematic adaptations of *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction has undoubtedly entered the tradition of famous dystopian novels, and as such, it has been adapted several times “in various media, including opera, ballet, theatre, radio, and film” (Howell, 2019, 1). Recently, with the author’s contribution, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been turned in a television series by the screenwriter Bruce Miller for the Hulu online streaming platform. With the success of the series, the story originally created by Atwood has only recently “become a transmedia property whose dystopic storyworld extends beyond the bounds of any single text” (Howell, 2019, 1). Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in fact, draws the viewers’ attention in the era of Trump, whose presidency in the United States of America has impacted women’s rights and treatment. As Atwood writes in the article “Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid’s Tale* Means in the Age of Trump” for *The New York Times*, “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” (2017). Therefore, protesters sometimes use the famous red uniforms of the Handmaids and other elements from the story to march for women’s rights. Gradually, a new interest grew for Atwood’s dystopia. Yet, few critics have discussed the differences between the novel and the adaptation thereof in a series. New elements from the television series can hence be used in the debate around Offred’s character.

### **1.2.1. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1990), a movie adaptation**

The only other cinematic adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* beside the Hulu series is a Hollywood movie from 1990, produced by Daniel Wilson and directed by Volker Schlöndorff. A critic points out that “few screen adaptations have been completed, owing to the complexity of [Atwood’s] narratives and her language, and especially her focus on character interiority” (Howell, 2019, 5). This dissertation will only base its research on the comparison between Atwood’s dystopia and the Hulu adaptation thereof for numerous reasons. Mainly, contrary to the television series, the movie adaptation of 1990 does not do Offred’s character justice. Firstly, the movie focuses a great deal on making the story a Hollywoodian thriller which at the time included “sex, violence, and controversy” (Howell, 2019, 5) without paying attention to Offred’s inner dialogues. In the 1990 *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there is consequently a focus on violence and sex as it is easy to transpose into action and, because of that, the original emphasis on Offred’s feelings and interiority is completely absent (Leclaire, 1993). Amanda Howell also explains how the lack of voice-over for Offred’s thoughts completely altered Atwood’s story “given that the book was ‘so much a one-woman interior monologue’” (2019, 6). Secondly, Howell considers that there is another reason to the silencing of Offred’s voice in the movie adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. She argues that Schlöndorff decided to focus on Offred’s Commander instead since he was in his view the most interesting character. Because of this favouritism for the male character, Offred is “no longer narrator of her own story [and she] is substantially the object rather than the subject of its narrative” (Howell, 2019, 6). Therefore, in Wilson and Schlöndorff’s cinematic adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “la dystopie, seule, a été conservée, les autres dimensions : roman introspectif, méta-roman, ont été abandonnées, ainsi que la multiplicité du point de vue féminin, et sa manière d’écrire le corps” (Leclaire, 1993, 25). This adaptation focuses more on making Atwood’s story a Hollywoodian thriller than giving voice to Offred’s inner thoughts. Because this dissertation focuses on the inner identity conflict of Atwood’s

protagonist, the 2017 television series is a better primary source to work with. The latter gives Offred a voice-over and gives the viewer an access to the Handmaid's interiority while the movie does not. This is made possible by their use of the female gaze, as is explained in chapter five of this dissertation.

### **1.2.2. Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present)**

To this day, Hulu has released three seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale* series: the first season premiered in 2017 with ten episodes, the second season launched in 2018 with thirteen episodes and the third season was released in 2019 with thirteen episodes as well. An upcoming fourth season made up of ten episodes is in the making and will premiere in 2021 (Thrillist Entertainment, 2020). While the series is largely based on Atwood's story, only the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* is parallel to the novel. The last words of the first season outline the end of the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale's* novel from page to screen. The last moments of the season are, in fact, identical to the book: Offred ends up in a van with no idea of her destination. Even her last words are the same in both media: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light"<sup>1</sup> (*THT*, 307). Although the novel ends there, without taking the Historical Notes into account, the television series expands Offred's story by inventing what happens next in the second and third seasons. After being taken into a van at the end of the first season, the second season starts with Offred being punished alongside other Handmaids for refusing to stone Janine to death. However, her pregnancy saves her from further torture and, during an appointment with a gynaecologist, she is able to escape thanks to Nick. After spending two months in hiding in an abandoned warehouse and in an ordinary Econofamily, Offred manages to get on a plane to seek asylum in Canada. But, before take-off, she is captured again and returned to her household as Handmaid. Her running away has caused Offred to be subject to more violence and abuse, although in the eyes of Gilead's society, in order to save the baby she is carrying, her escape is framed as a kidnapping. In the meantime, a fellow Handmaid orchestrates a bomb attack on important Commanders of Gilead and Fred Waterford is taken to the hospital. During his absence, Serena Joy and Offred find an unexpected solidarity by illicitly working together. Once he has

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<sup>1</sup> "Night." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 58'01".

recovered, Offred manages to convince Fred to let her see her daughter, Hannah, who was taken from her at the beginning of Gilead. However, the reunion does not go as planned as Hannah found a new family and is mad at her mom for abandoning her. Moments later, Offred hides in a vacant house and becomes once again a fugitive. But time passing by, Offred gives birth alone and realises she and her child need medical attention. Sacrificing her freedom, she attracts attention and is captured once more. Offred's new-born baby is brought to the Waterfords' household and becomes Serena Joy and Fred's daughter, Nichole. In the season finale, we see that Marthas, Handmaids, Nick and Offred have plotted together to allow her and her baby to escape Gilead. After running into Serena, who eventually lets them go, we follow Offred's escape into a van with Emily (formerly known as Ofglen). However, at the last moment, Offred decides to stay in Gilead to save Hannah, and she gives her child to Emily in the hope they escape to Canada. In the meantime, the series also follows the storylines of Emily, Moira and Luke and gives us an interesting glimpse into the Colonies where the Unwomen work, and Canada where Handmaids are taken in as refugees.

This dissertation on the comparison of Offred and June in both Margaret Atwood's novel and the adaptation thereof in a television series draws the line at the second season. In the third season, after going back to Aunt Lydia, Offred is assigned to a new household and is thus given a new name, Oflawrence. Because her name has changed once more and because, according to me, she manages to regain her agency and sense of self after season two, this thesis will not take the third season into account. What is more, the fourth season of the Hulu television series of *The Handmaid's Tale* has not yet been released.

In their review of the first season, Koistinen and Samola explain how "the series does not break the 'fidelity' towards the original novel in a significant manner" (2018, 348), as the story more or less remains the same, only with added scenes and elements and sometimes in a different chronological order. Still, they have every reason to do so, as Jean Mitry explains in *Remarks on the Problem of Cinematic Adaptation*, "among the most obvious and frequently encountered errors of adaptors is transposing a novel in time while retaining the original structure and order of development" (1971, 5). Though there have been some more important changes from page to screen, Margaret Atwood supports Bruce Miller throughout the adaptation process, as the latter says in an interview,

as I was thinking about things that I might change in the world, the book versus the television show, and how I might try to update it, we had lots of

discussions about that. She was very involved ... I was working very hard to recreate the experience of the book on television. (Renfro, 2017)

Atwood is in fact quite present in the realisation of the series, as in addition to having a cameo in the first season, “Atwood herself is one of the producers” (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 349) of the Hulu series. Furthermore, to keep the main ideas of the novel, the screenwriter “kept to the core premise, which is, nothing goes in that doesn’t have a real-life referent” (Grady, 2017). This means that, similarly to the novel, every type of violence that occurs in the series has already happened before, sometime somewhere in the world. However, some important differences between the novel and the adaptation thereof are worth noting. Firstly, “while Atwood’s novel takes place in the near future as anticipated by its 1980s perspective, the television series takes up the near-future of *our* time with many details being dauntingly familiar from present societies” (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 347). Modern elements can thus be found in the television series that are not present in the novel, such as smartphones and the ride-hailing app Uber<sup>2</sup>. Bruce Miller explains this choice in an interview, stating: “I think we wanted to just make sure that it felt like ‘now’ because it’s scarier ... We wanted to update it or make it current in any way we could” (Renfro, 2017). Secondly, “the most crucial difference is the inclusion of people of color, who had been systematically banished from society in the book” (Reilly, 2017). In that way, the Hulu television series “eliminates the black genocide in the backstory of the novel to depict a more racially diverse set of characters” (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 348). This difference from page to screen also allows the viewer to focus more on the oppression of women in particular in Gilead’s regime. In fact, Moira’s dark skin in the television series does not cause her to be victim of any racism, but her gender and her sexual orientation makes her a victim and gender traitor to Gilead. Bruce Miller explains that this has been “a pretty complicated discussion between [him] and Margaret” (Renfro, 2017), but he felt that this aspect of the novel had to be updated too, as it had become obsolete. He believes that in a world where it is nearly impossible to procreate, people would not pay attention to the children’s skin colour anymore. Besides the fact that people today already feel more comfortable with adopting a child of another ethnicity, Miller argues that “in a world where fertility rates have fallen so low, that fertility would trump everything” (Renfro, 2017). Moreover, Miller explains that there is a fine line between

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<sup>2</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 48’26”.

showing racism and being racist when producing a television series: “in this day in age, what's the difference between making a TV show about racism and making a racist TV show? I really didn't know. It's a distinction without a difference. They look the same on television” (Renfro, 2017). A third difference in adaptation is that we do not only follow Offred's storyline on screen, although she remains the main narrator. As Olivia Hershman suggests in her paper on Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, “the space Miller creates for hope and resistance greatly differs from that withing the 1985 novel” (2018, 57), since the viewers are showed a near-happy ending when revealing what becomes of Luke and Moira when they flee to Canada. Additionally, whereas Atwood “ends Ofglen's life by suicide ... Miller is not so kind and instead uses Ofglen's story to reiterate ... how these women bear the cost of resisting their post-apocalyptic world of domination and oppression” (Hershman, 2018, 58). By showing Ofglen's trial for being a gender traitor, her clitoridectomy, and eventually her posting as an Unwoman in the Colonies, the series brings the viewer to better understand the operating of Gilead's regime and gives voice to other female characters, pluralizing focalizations. On top of revealing what happens to other characters' storylines that have been cut off in the novel, the series divulges the lives of some characters before Gilead. As a result, the viewer is given more information on characters like Serena Joy, Aunt Lydia, Emily and Nick, making them even more complex characters than in the novel. A last significant change is that while the Hulu series uses a voiceover for Offred's narration, there is no sign of the conference presentation given by Professor Pieixoto in the Historical Notes at the end of Atwood's novel. As Koistinen & Samola suggest, “there is no indication that this story is being told withing that sort of metanarrative frame” (2018, 348).

With the changes that Atwood's story underwent from page to screen, one may ask what the television series tries to convey. Dana S. Florczak, in a comparative work of the novel and the series, identifies a “shifting message of the 2017 Hulu adaptation of Atwood's original novel” (2018, 43). In fact, Florczak suggests that “the role of men – as both allies and abusers – and their relationships with women are emphasized far more than in the original text” and that women “are vastly more active and heroic, taking steps to physically and verbally fight the regime as opposed to focusing on internalizing strength to survive” (2018, 43). Whereas Offred's boldness in the novel is internal, both in her discourse and her memories of the past, the main character of the Hulu adaptation is much more active. Therefore, on screen, the “women become heroines rather than flawed humans attempting to survive at any cost” (Florczak, 2018, 43). The reason why the screenwriter of the television series portrayed

Offred as more active than in the novel – for instance by making her go to the protests with Moira before Gilead, in contrast with the novel where Luke convinces her to stay home – is linked to the series' reception. A television series tackling all our modern issues surrounding gender but giving the viewers a female protagonist who does not fight for her rights, lets people walk all over her and stays in a victim position is robbing women of their hope to achieve equality in our society. By depicting Offred as an active heroine, “Miller’s recent adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a product of twenty-first century feminism and ultimately serves as a cautionary tale and as a call to action for our current society” (Hershman, 2018, 63). Plus, a television series needs more action and tension on screen than a novel does to win the loyalty of the viewers. As Sarah Sepulchre explains in her book *Décoder les séries télévisées*, “la gestion de la programmation, la création de personnages captivants, l’émergence du suspense ... créent de l’attachement à une fiction” (2011, 68). The main character of the television series thus needed to be portrayed as more rebellious and externally active than in Atwood’s novel.

### **1.2.3. The audio-visual storyworld of Offred**

In order to properly analyse how the protagonist’s identity conflict in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the 2017 cinematographic adaptation is represented, the methods of analysis of the television series need to be clarified. As Mitry suggests, an adaptation “is a matter of passing from one *form* to another, a matter of transposition, of reconstruction” (1971, 1). The reconstruction of Offred’s story on screen is therefore worth studying individually, and not necessarily by constant comparison with the novel to evaluate its faithfulness. Besides, “the success of an adaptation is not defined by fidelity to its source but by the rules of the adaptive form” (Neher, 2014, 120), meaning that this dissertation is not going to research to what extent the Hulu series is or is not faithful to Atwood’s novel, but rather how the screenwriters depicted the protagonist’s identity crisis on screen. With this aim in mind, the audio-visual techniques used by the television series ought to be explored.

The television series having to film most of the scenes of the first season inside a house, “the most striking thing about the show, visually speaking, is its lighting” (Schneider, 2018), or how the cinematographers and screenwriters make use of the natural light coming from windows to make a space full of light or giving the feeling to be entrapped in the dark. In figure 1, Offred is sitting in front of her window, as she often does, to be in the light as if

she wants to avoid or escape the darkness of her room that she is trapped in. Also, putting her in the middle of the frame, surrounded by a big dark room makes her look small, and the backlighting almost makes her invisible, as the features of her face are not discernible.



FIGURE 1: “OFFRED.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1, HULU, 2017. 55’28”.

Beside the lighting, “the show employs meticulous composition to achieve its effect. Utilizing a style à la Wes Anderson, Watkinson favors the symmetrical” (Schneider, 2018). The precise framing of each scene is thus participating in making Gilead’s world an outwardly organised and controlled society. On top of the very neat and balanced visuals, like the perfect bun of Serena Joy in the middle of a frame in figure 2, the symmetry “can be seen in the way Offred and Aunt Lydia occupy equal segments to the left and right of Offred’s bedroom window” (Schneider, 2018).



FIGURE 2: “NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 4, HULU, 2017. 9’36”.

Moreover, the organisation of characters in the frame sometimes gives the viewer more information on Gilead’s stratification. In figure 3, the hierarchy between the different casts of women in the Republic is shown through the women’s position in the frame, as well as with the colour of their uniforms. In the foreground are the Wives, in the blue colour of the Virgin

Mary, indicating their divine pureness. Behind them stands an Aunt in a brown uniform, resembling the colour of the Nazi army uniform, symbolizing their authoritative power over the Handmaids. In the background sits Offred, in her red uniform symbolizing fertility and menstrual blood. Hidden in the very background of the frame, barely visible through the open door of the kitchen are the Marthas, blending into the background with their grey uniforms, representing their invisible roles as servants in Gilead.



FIGURE 3: “LATE.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 3, HULU, 2017. 12’17”.

Hulu’s way of composing the frame is also through close-ups of the characters’ emotional faces, sometimes taking up all the space (see figure 4). As Alexandra Noemina Radut explains, “the human face expresses truth and depth, the intimate spark of life ... Consequently, the human face represents the most cinematographic thing” (2015, 76).

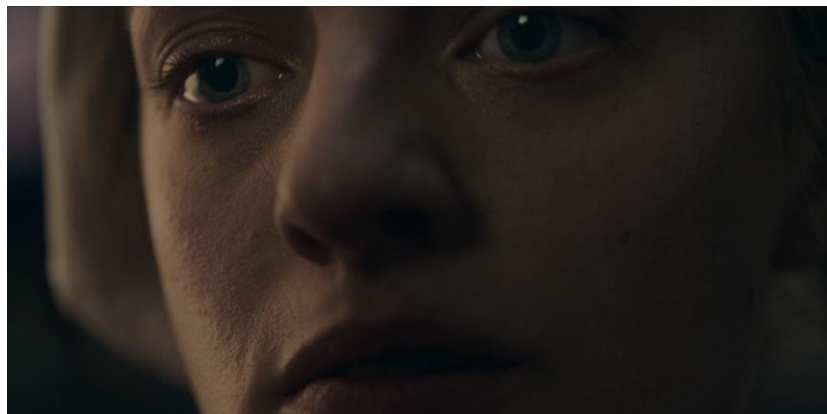


FIGURE 4: “A WOMAN’S PLACE.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 6, HULU, 2017. 12’37”.

To make the close-ups reveal even more of the characters' emotions, the actors do not wear makeup. As Bruce Miller clarifies,

It changed the performances amazingly. [With Elizabeth Moss] I feel like you can see every thought that she has go across her face. Even when she doesn't want it to, you can see it flick across her face. Yvonne's the same way, except she wants it even less to show ... You can see it, the kind of tremors under her skin, which you don't see if you're covering everything up with makeup ... It seems like we've just kind of freed up these actors to use a whole other set of muscles and tools that normally would be literally hidden. (Renfro, 2017)

The Hulu television series also did their best to show different point of views of characters and used lighting, framing and composition to translate how they feel in the visuals. Reed Morano, one of the cinematographers reveals in an interview:

I think about where the character is, or who the character is, and what they're looking at. How do you put yourself in the character's shoes, and how do you experience the scene from their point of view? ... If you have a character who's being threatened, how do you evoke the sensation of being under pressure and there being tension and danger in the room? That might translate to a certain contrast and darkness and mysteriousness for the room, or it might translate to the camera being placed higher or lower to diminish or empower your character ... You could put your subject in the middle of a really exposed large space and diminish them in the sense of having a really, really large architectural frame with just a small singular figure, which might evoke a sense of being exposed or alone or isolated or insignificant. There's many ways to translate the way you want something to feel. (Huls, 2019)

An example of such use of composition and frame to translate what the character feels on screen, is a scene where Offred is being isolated in her room for two weeks by Serena Joy, and the main character feels trapped. In figure 5, the cinematographer's use of frame to entrap Offred parallels with her situation in the story. Just like she is trapped in the frame, Offred is stuck in her bedroom.



FIGURE 5: “NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 4, HULU, 2017. 02’07”.

Another cinematographic technique that the television series often uses is the shallow focus. Shallow focus in cinematography refers to “the technique that keeps one part of an image in focus while the rest is out of focus ... It helps emphasize one part of the image over another to draw the viewer's eye to a particular area of the frame or subject” (Maio, 2019). The Hulu series tends to use this technique a lot, in particular for the numerous close-ups on the characters’ faces (see figure 6), making the viewers concentrate on and empathise with the face’s emotions.



FIGURE 6: “OFFRED.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1, HULU, 2017. 46’16”.

Evan Puschak in a video essay explains how “these days, super shallow focus is ... a fashion more than a technique, so it's really, really cool to see an episodic show like *The Handmaid's Tale* incorporate the effect in a systematic way as a motif of its visual language” (2017). The video essayist furthermore clarifies that the cinematographer of the television series “used lenses that opened all the way up to apertures of 1.3 and 1.4, which means your depth of field is going to be razor thin and everything outside of that field is going to be blown out in a pretty uniform blur” (Puschak, 2017). According to Puschak, this shallow focus is used by the

series for three main reasons: “first to capture the main character's point of view ... second, shallow focus is used to help create the world of Gilead” (2017) and third to connect two different worlds, the United States of before in the flashbacks and the Gilead of the present. This study comes back to Offred’s point of view later on in this chapter. What concerns the second reason, the television series uses shallow focus to portray how women are deprived of information in Gilead as the “shallow depth of field captures this perfectly, because it literally narrows the visual information in focus” (Puschak, 2017). Additionally, shallow focus connects the worlds of past and present as this technique is used in both: “even though Reed and Watkinson adopt a more hand-held verite style for the flashbacks, the shallow focus remains” (Puschak, 2017). Puschak interprets this choice of filming as a way to indicate that both societies, of the past and the present,

suffer from problems of limited perspective. In Gilead, perspective is limited by force, but in our world, perspective is limited by choice ... It brings home a vital message, that our rights are not guaranteed by the world. We ... have to protect them everyday, because they can be taken away from us if we don't pay attention to the world beyond our focus. (2017)

The cinematographers of the Hulu television series thus use shallow focus in a very effective and methodical way to make us feel closer to the characters and the story of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Knowing what audio-visual techniques the television series uses is of importance to this dissertation since it helps study the protagonist on screen:

Étudier le personnage de série suppose de prendre en compte la bande image et la bande sonore ... Certaines séries utilisent même la musique pour caractériser les personnages ... Il n'est cependant pas question de faire une analyse esthétique plan par plan des fictions télévisuelles, de décrire chaque image, chaque séquence, chaque geste, chaque dialogue ... ce processus n'est pas exempt d'une certaine subjectivité. (Sepulchre, 2011, 134)

Therefore, the analysis of the television series in this study is a personal interpretation of the story and audio-visuals, just like the analysis of a novel can be subjective. In order to analyse the protagonist’s identity crisis on screen, this research focuses mainly on the audio-visual techniques Hulu uses with Offred’s character, to make the viewer identify with her and feel intimate with her thoughts. Thanks to various cinematographic techniques, “by contrast to its previous screen adaptation, in HULU’s serialization of *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred’s voice

is once again its centre” (Howell, 2019, 7). With close-ups on Offred’s facial expressions, the carefully chosen music in the background, the silence, the framing or the slow-motion, the television series “make[s] the audience experience ... fictional violence in a more visceral manner than written text” (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 349) and invites the viewers to relate to Offred more than in the novel. The most challenging part in the adaptation of the novel into a series “was turning what [Morano] calls this ‘internal, cerebral story’ full of flashbacks and voiceover into visually arresting episodes” and that is why “she opted for intense close-ups of Moss’ expressive face” (Reilly, 2017). As explained earlier, shallow focus is a cinematographic technique that the series regularly uses for such close-ups, and to concentrate on the emotions that Offred is feeling because of Gilead’s atrocities, Puschak argues that

with a camera mere inches from her nose, the filmmakers combine a wide ... lense, used only for these shots, with a shallow depth of field to create intense intimacy. And with her bonnet on, it's almost as if we're under a blanket with the character. The shallow depth of field extreme close-ups are an effective way to get the audience to identify with Offred. (2017)

As Alexandra Noemina Radut quotes in her work on the nudity of the visage on screen, “the most expressive technique, which gives rise to various interpretations, is the act of approaching the human face: the close-up. The face and the hand reveal detailed emotions, the intimate existence” (2015, 77). Close-ups on Offred’s face thus drive the viewer to identify with the protagonist. Offred’s hands are also used to show her emotions. In figure 7, the camera focuses on how Offred clenches her fists, trying to contain herself while she lies to the Mexican ambassadors visiting Gilead, by saying she has found happiness in her position.



FIGURE 7: “A WOMAN’S PLACE.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 6, HULU, 2017. 12’48”.

However, close-ups on the characters’ faces remind us that “in an authoritarian state, where your physical being is affectively controlled by someone else, your only agency is mental.

The mind is where you have to retreat, to escape, to plan, and to remember. It's only a thin plane of focus, but it's still yours" (Puschak, 2017). As a result of the protagonist's agency being only mental in Gilead, a voice-over, "camera techniques, music and sound effects are used to imply Offred's inner states throughout the series" (Koistinen & Samola, 2018, 350) and bring us closer to her character. In fact, as analysed further on in this dissertation, "popular music also helps to shape Offred's inner voice" (Howell, 2019, 8). This new way of portraying the protagonist of Atwood's story on screen brings a new perspective into the debate of Offred's heroism and sense of self and will enable me to research more profoundly the identity crisis between Offred and June in both the novel and the television series.

## Chapter two: Offred and June's personas

In Margaret Atwood's novel, Offred's real name from before the Republic of Gilead is never revealed, as "the names of the Handmaids are buried by necessity" (Butler, 2010, 96). Nevertheless, a lot of readers have speculated that Offred's real name is June, since "the name June is mentioned in the list of names whispered from bed to bed in the training center early in the novel, but we hear nothing subsequently about anybody named June, although the other names ... belong to characters who figure in later episodes of the story" (Templin, 1993, 149). While Atwood says that it was "not [her] original thought", she acknowledges that "it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish" (2017). Numerous scholars have hence used the name "June" in their work to refer to *The Handmaid's Tale's* protagonist (Staels, 1995, 237). Consequently, even if it is never explicitly disclosed in Atwood's novel, I am going to work on the basis that Offred's real name is June.

In contrast to the novel, the screenwriters of the Hulu television series have decided to reveal Offred's real name in the first episode of season one, based on the suspicions of the scholars: "My name is June"<sup>3</sup>. The protagonist of the story is, in fact, called June Osborne in the series and her former name is repeated several times in flashbacks and by Offred herself. Furthermore, the television series emphasizes aspects of Atwood's story and of Offred's character that enable the viewers to notice an identity conflict in the protagonist between her former bold self as June, and her oppressed self as Offred. The series' screenwriter himself, Bruce Miller, stated in an interview that "the biggest conflict ... in the show is between June and Offred" (Grady, 2017). Because this conflict was subtler in the original *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is barely any research done on this subject. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to research this identity crisis between Offred and June, both in the novel and the television series. This loss of sense of self is explained by Alanna A. Callaway by the fact that "Handmaids have ... lost control of their bodies, and, therefore, of their identities" (2008, 38).

Consequently, like the two faces of the same coin, the main character is both Offred, a compliant Handmaid trying to survive, and June, a headstrong and free spirit who wants to rebel. In my opinion, the scholars describing the main character as a compliant, passive and

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<sup>3</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55'50".

inactive heroine in their work are actually depicting Offred's personality. Other sources describing Offred as courageous, rebellious and active are, in my view, depicting June's personality. Nevertheless, June and Offred cannot completely be opposed as if one persona is better than the other, since they have flaws and the protagonist needs to juggle with both to survive in a violent regime like Gilead.

In this chapter, both personas of the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* are described. In this context, persona means "the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others" (Lexico). Offred and June are thus not opposed in a way that legitimates one identity over the other, but rather they are compared as two personas in conflict in a same character's mind. In the first part, Offred's Gilead-constructed persona is portrayed, while June's free persona is studied in the second. The third part of this chapter clarifies the distinction between the two personas and explains where this opposition comes from.

## **2.1. Offred's Gilead-constructed persona**

The main character as we know her from Atwood's novel is named Offred or 'of Fred', revealing that she is deprived of her individuality, humanity and freedom, as "she is the designated property of a specific commander" (Butler, 2010, 43). Handmaids in the Republic of Gilead are in fact "robbed of their identities and even their given names" (Templin, 1993, 145). Offred is thus subjected to her role as a Handmaid and is denied a sense of self, as "she [is not] supposed to have any personality beyond her training, rituals and duties" (Butler, 2010, 43). Additionally, the tattoo on the protagonist's ankle reminds her, along with her name, that she has become "a national resource" (*THT*, 75); "[Offred's] identity only relates so far as she is an article of property, owned and controlled by another individual" (Butler, 2010, 96). In the Hulu television series, Offred is also reminded that she is only her Commander's belonging, as she says in her voice-over when taking a bath before the Ceremony, "I am to make myself clean. Washed and brushed like a prize pig"<sup>4</sup>, and after that the camera focuses on the red Handmaid tag that Offred has on her ear, with a number, just like cattle:

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<sup>4</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 22'57".



FIGURE 8: “OFFRED.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1, HULU, 2017. 25’01”.

As the main character is reduced to her status in the theocratic regime, and the Handmaid’s role is forced upon her, this dissertation argues that her persona as Offred is merely Gilead’s construct. Offred says it herself, “My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a *made* thing, *not* something *born*” (*THT*, 76, italics added for emphasis). June, the protagonist’s former persona, is compelled to wear the Handmaid’s mask, or in other words Offred’s persona, in order to survive in Gilead. Elisabeth Hansot, in her paper on *Selves, Survival, and Resistance*, argues that her persona as Offred is “the rudely reduced self she is allowed in the present” (1994, 59), while her persona as June is stuck in the past.

As was discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, numerous scholars have debated on Offred’s heroism in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as on one side she is ironic and challenges those who would silence her by telling her story, but on the other side, she consciously decides to stay ignorant and not to participate in Mayday. Among those who describe Offred as a victim, “many recognized that Offred has played a role in her own oppression, whether or not she can do anything about it now” (Weiss, 2009, 122). As Weiss points out, “Atwood’s own view of Offred is clear: she has described Offred as ‘an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine)’” (2009, 123). In this study, I argue that the many critics describing *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s main character as an inactive heroine are describing Offred’s persona. In fact, to survive in this theocratic regime, Handmaids have to be submissive and passive. The protagonist’s only way of staying alive is thus by taking Offred’s identity as her own. This necessity for the protagonist to wear the Handmaid’s mask is researched in the third chapter of this dissertation.

## 2.2. June as Offred's former self

There is, however, another side to the main character in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One that is not obedient and victimized, like Offred. This second side of her identity is active, rebellious, sarcastic and spirited. She is a mother, a lover and a supportive friend. In fact, Hansot suggests that “the images of herself as mother, daughter, friend, wife are counterparts to Offred’s now hobbled and increasingly frustrated sensuality” (1994, 60). The main character shows all those traits in the past, before Gilead, and it has been argued that her real name at that time was June (Templin, 1993, 149). This research thus considers this second side of the main character to be June; or in other words, Offred’s former identity of before Gilead.

The name ‘June’ originates from the Roman goddess Juno who “presided over every aspect of a woman’s life” and protected “legally married women” (Wasson, 2015). It is thus reasonable to say that June’s character is supposed to be a spirited mother and lover, who is inclined to protect her fellow sisters. Another interpretation of the name ‘June’ can be given by Templin:

‘June’, from the Latin for ‘Junius’, the name of an important Roman family, is also the most popular of the names based on the months of the year and one which suggests youth and innocence. Thus, the name, and its loss, are quite appropriate, since Offred (or June) could be said to represent despoiled innocence or victimized womanhood. (1993, 149)

In short, the name ‘June’ can be linked to womanhood, sisterhood and love, all of which June is trying to find back in Atwood’s novel and its adaptation. June’s personality is visible in all its splendour in the novel and the television series’ flashbacks of before Gilead. In the novel’s flashbacks, June is described as a happy and free woman. Her cheerful memories especially contain Moira, Luke and her daughter. When talking about Moira, she says: “I’m laughing. She always made me laugh” (*THT*, 66). June is also depicted as an academic and well-read woman who likes words (*THT*, 149). In fact, Stillman & Johnson even argue that the main character “engages sympathy because she has some endearing academic traits” (1994, 72). However, it is true that in Atwood’s novel June is also depicted as ignorant and innocent before Gilead: “We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it ... We were the people who were not in the papers” (*THT*, 66). Ignorance is something they chose for, as “it gave [them] more freedom” (*THT*, 67). Furthermore, Atwood’s June does not protest in the streets for her freedom, in contrast to her mother,

because “Luke said it would be futile and [she] had to think about them, [her] family” (*THT*, 189). If we take another look at Offred’s sentence in the novel: “What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (*THT*, 76), Hansot suggests that “‘something born’ is the earlier Offred”, the “earlier self” (1994, 60), or in other words the protagonist’s persona as June. However, June now seems to be “a fictive character” (Hansot, 1994, 60) in the past memories that Offred recalls. Some critics have furthermore judged this former self to be “Offred’s resistant identity” or even “her real identity” (Kuźnicki, 2017, 35).

While June in Atwood’s dystopia seems to choose ignorance even before Gilead, June from the Hulu television series is more active. In the first season of the series, June’s mother does not appear, and June becomes the active protester in the streets instead, accompanied by her best friend Moira<sup>5</sup>. In spite of her chosen ignorance before Gilead in the novel, June has thus a fierce and active persona in the series. On that matter, Howell argues that “while June’s voice is clearly that of Atwood’s narrator, June is also the product of American television: vocally rebellious, increasingly heroic, very much like Atwood’s Moira, in fact” (2019, 8). While numerous critics have argued that in the novel Moira is “Offred’s revolutionary alter ego, engaging in the sorts of subversive acts that Offred herself is afraid to” and at the same time exposing “Offred’s cowardice through the difference between how they behave” (2009, 137), Moira seems more like June’s equal in the television series. In the Hulu series’ flashbacks, June is described as a feisty, active and free woman, working in something she likes, with a happy family. Therefore, the contrast between Offred and June’s personas on screen is more observable, since we are given flashbacks of a bold and free protagonist, but in the present she is submissive and quiet. What I am claiming in my dissertation is that June and Offred are the main character’s opposite personas, just like Moira and Offred are alter egos in Atwood’s novel.

### **2.3. Offred versus June**

The distinction between Offred and June’s personas is actually relatively recent. Although scholars have already referred to Atwood’s protagonist as June in the past (Templin, 1993, 149), they have not tried to oppose Offred and June or analyse the protagonist’s crisis of

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<sup>5</sup> “Late.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 41’30”.

selves. The opposition of her personas has only started surfacing with the release of the television series adaptation, as the identity conflict is more noticeable on screen. Nevertheless, Offred's crisis of selves is evident in Atwood's novel as well, since "throughout the novel she vacillates between her present indoctrination and her former ideology" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, 164). Some scholars, such as Elisabeth Hansot, have opposed Offred's past and present selves, or have discussed the "passive-active tension" (Kuźnicki, 2017, 39) the protagonist is experiencing, reminiscent of the conflict between Offred and June's personas. Moreover, Sayyed Rahim Moosavinia and Tayyebeh Behvand Yousefi have identified such an opposition of selves in their paper *New Norms of Gender and Emergence of Identity Crisis in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale'*. They argue that Offred "still feels attached to her former ideology ... [but] her life depends on the internalization of the latter" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, 163). As a result, the critics point out, there is "an evident inconsistency in Offred's personality that surfaces in the form of an identity crisis" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, 163). Consequently, "Offred yearns for sense of herself as an individual independent from others while the self is split mercilessly" (Gayret, 2019, 109).

Yet, the identity conflict of the protagonist seems more explicit on screen, as Bruce Miller, the Hulu series' screenwriter, said in an interview with Margaret Atwood:

The closest relationship and the biggest conflict as I see it in the show is between June and Offred: Offred is pushing compliance while June is pushing rebellion, and trying to live even while you're trying to survive. And that ends up being the only person she can trust. June and Offred are the only two people who really have an open relationship. (Grady, 2017)

Amanda Howell may be one of the first scholars to really discuss the differences between Offred and June in the Hulu adaptation, as she points out that there is a "difference or tension between Offred's voice and June's, the outward voice of obedience on the part of one who wants to survive and the inward voice of rebellion" (2019, 8). In her thesis on the protagonist's assertiveness in Miller's series, Laure Meunier also acknowledges how

asserting June's name actually conveys a duality in itself which hardly appears in the novel, that is, the struggle between the protagonist's inner and outer selves. This alternation between those two names enhances the protagonist's forced compliance and bursts of defiance which is a dialectic reflecting her constant struggle. (2019, 23)

The identity conflict between Offred and June's personas is especially noticeable in the television series thanks to the audio-visual techniques the cinematographers use to translate

the protagonist's emotions. Mostly, we are given access to Offred's thoughts through facial close-ups, voice-over and music. As Alexandra Noemia Radut suggests, "the close-up, if objectively composed, perfectly directed and played, is the most forcible means at the disposal of the film director" (2015, 77). Howell noticed it too in the television series, as she says, "outwardly expressive of the sardonic inner voice of Atwood's Offred, every exasperated roll of June's eyes that's hidden from those in power is captured for the audience in extreme closeup" (2019, 8). Music also gives away Offred's emotions, as Hulu's music supervisor Maggie Phillips explains herself how "like the voiceovers, the music gives us an insight into June, before Gilead, before Offred" (Dray, 2019). An example thereof is the last scene of the first episode of the series, after Offred reveals in the voice-over that her real name is June<sup>6</sup>. Howell points out that "this voicing of intention is amplified by Lesley Gore singing over the closing credits, 'You Don't Own Me'" (2019, 8). The lyrics of the song only support June's words "I intend to survive ... my name is June"<sup>7</sup> and the close-up on June's bold face at the end. As Dray claims, it is "a song that roars with defiance in the face of socially ingrained sexism" (2019). Therefore, in the television series, it is evident when June intervenes, or when Offred takes over.

The differences between the two different personas are also symbolically showed sometimes in the Hulu television series. An example thereof is when the protagonist has sexual intercourse with the male characters Luke, Nick and Fred. On screen, we understand that the protagonist is herself, cheeky and bold June, when she is on top of the man she is having sex with. It is only when she takes control of the situation that she is truly enjoying herself. Otherwise, in cases such as the Ceremony, "sexual intercourse ... requires women to be passive and subordinate, and men to be dominant and in control" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, 165). Therefore, when the protagonist is depicted as passive during sex, she is wearing the Handmaid's persona, Offred. An evident contrast of this is shown in the first season, when Serena asks of Offred to have sex with Nick under her supervision, and parallel to these scenes we are given flashbacks of June and Luke's love affair. On the one hand we see June

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<sup>6</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55'50".

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 55'33".

on top of Luke (see figure 9), as she tells him “I need to be on top, okay”?<sup>8</sup>; she is laughing and enjoying herself while they are getting intimate, and grabbing his hands to take control of the situation. On the other hand, in the next scene, we see Offred awkwardly lying on her back on Nick’s bed (see figure 10), her hands beside her, while Nick has sex with her, and Serena waits at the door.



FIGURE 9: “FAITHFUL.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 5, HULU, 2017. 23’14”.



FIGURE 10: “FAITHFUL.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 5, HULU, 2017. 23’56”.

However, when she comes back to Nick later that night, alone, June takes unmistakably over as she gets on top of him during their sexual intercourse<sup>9</sup>. Another clear contrast they made between June and Offred in terms of intimacy is when Offred is with her Commander at Jezebel’s. When at first we see Janine screaming and struggling when she is being raped by

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<sup>8</sup> “Faithful.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 5, Hulu, 2017. 22’59”.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 51’15”.

her Commander and his Wife<sup>10</sup>, the series then gives a direct parallel to a scene where Offred lies on her back, eyes attached to the ceiling while Fred has sex with her.



FIGURE 11: “THE BRIDGE.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 9, HULU, 2017. 24’35”.

Even though when asked “Did you like that?” she answers “yes”<sup>11</sup>, her repulsed expression clearly states the contrary. In this case, the main character was obviously being Offred, obedient and passive, to survive her rape by the Commander, while with Luke and Nick in other scenes she takes action and control during intimacy by being June.

In the television series, we can also witness remaining sparks of June’s personality in Offred whenever she becomes sarcastic in her voice-over but stays polite when speaking up: “*I kinda want to tell her that I sincerely believe Ofglen is a pious little shit with a broomstick up her ass. Under his Eye*”<sup>12</sup>. We can also identify June in her facial expressions, as was said above. When she has a determined look on her face or a smirk, June’s persona is taking over. To illustrate, when June spits the macaroon Serena just gave her like a treat one gives to a dog, she smiles at herself in the mirror, proud of herself.

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<sup>10</sup> “The Bridge.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 9, Hulu, 2017. 23’43”.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 25’07”.

<sup>12</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 10’18”.



FIGURE 12: “BIRTH DAY.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 2, HULU, 2017. 21’20”.

The boundary between Offred and June’s identities is not always perfectly clear in the novel nor in the series. Offred and June are two different personas of a same person, but they are sometimes also melting into one. The protagonist can be sarcastic but prudent, rebellious but discreet. This intricate differentiation between the two selves of the protagonist is easily summarized by the Hulu television series’ poster for their second season.



FIGURE 13: ALLOCINE. *THE HANDMAID’S TALE: LA SERVANTE ÉCARLATE*.

The poster shows the protagonist’s face split in two, Offred on the left side and June on the right. Yet, Offred’s side seems to be ripped paper put on top of June’s picture, symbolizing the protagonist’s public Handmaid persona covering her inner former identity. The bottom of the poster additionally reads “Reclaim your name”, suggesting that June has to regain her identity and agency in the second season, but still has to wear Offred’s mask to survive.

Like two faces of the same coin, Offred and June are thus two opposite identities who are in conflict in the main character's mind throughout the novel and the television series. Despite the obvious crisis of selves happening here, no study has ever been conducted before on the subject of its representation in both media. In this dissertation, Offred's struggle to reclaim her former bold self as June is thus studied, and its representation is compared. The objective of this dissertation is not only to compare the identity conflict in the novel and the television series, but also to research whether the main character manages to regain her former agency again at the end, June's agency, or if she stays trapped in her role as the oppressed handmaid, Offred.

## Chapter three: The Handmaid's mask as a means of survival

While the main character of Atwood's dystopia experiences an identity conflict between her former self and her Gilead-constructed self, taking on the persona of the obedient Handmaid is primordial for her survival in the regime. At times, Offred is thus forced to rely on her identity as Handmaid to protect herself. However, "the necessity of correctly inhabiting the public persona ... merges with the risk of inhabiting it too fully" (Hansot, 1994, 63). Consequently, while Offred is compelled to wear the Handmaid's mask for her survival, she is jeopardizing her persona as June, her former self, at the same time. To the question of "how does Offred keep a distance from her performance, preventing the mask of handmaid from obliterating her other selves?" (Hansot, 1994, 62), Hansot answers that Offred's escape from her persona as Handmaid and way of retrieving her former identity and agency is by remembering the past. What is crucial to June's survival is thus both her Handmaid persona to hide her former self from the atrocities of Gilead, and her memories of her past persona for her not to lose her sense of self. This tension between appearing to be an obedient Handmaid and not losing her sense of self is one of the most difficult conflicts the main character has to face in her identity crisis. This tension and "the demanding work of impersonation" (Hansot, 1994, 58) is thus also one that is most represented in both the novel of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the adaptation in a television series.

This chapter investigates how the main character uses her Handmaid's mask as a means of survival and to preserve her past identity as June. Moreover, it explains how the protagonist uses her role as Handmaid as a way to disembody and survive harsh situations. Then, it shows that June uses Offred's persona to get what she wants or needs from certain people in Gilead.

### 3.1. Self-preservation

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel and the television series adaptation, Offred's biggest concern is to protect herself. She wants her name, her identity and her past to be kept away from the destructive agenda of Gilead, in the hope that she can retrieve all these once she has her freedom back. Offred is determined to safeguard her memories of the past for later. Consequently, "this conscious act of protecting her real identity may suggest some survival instinct hidden deep inside Offred" (Kuznicki, 2017, 35). In fact, in order to preserve herself in her time as a victim in Gilead, "physical survival ... is Offred's basic priority" (Howell,

1998, 41). While waiting to escape or be rescued from her position, all she really needs to do is stay alive: Offred says, “meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later” (*THT*, 116). Hansot also points out that “it is clear from the outset that Offred intends to be a survivor” (1994, 57). At the very beginning of Atwood’s novel, the protagonist says, “I try not to think too much ... Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to survive” (*THT*, 17). Therefore, living and protecting her former self are crucial to the protagonist.

### **3.1.1. Protect the past**

Surviving in the Republic of Gilead as a Handmaid is thus Offred’s “primary goal” (Weiss, 2009, 121) and in the hope she one day manages to get out, Offred keeps her real name hidden in Atwood’s novel. By doing so, she is protecting her former self as June, as “her name is ultimately her identity” (Butler, 2010, 43). She is aware, however, that concealing her name makes her forget who she truly is:

I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong. It does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up one day. (*THT*, 94)

By keeping her name hidden, Offred tries to protect her old self of the horrors of Gilead. Offred further believes that in safeguarding her valuable name and her past, she can go back to her old way of living when Gilead is over, as she says: “if this is a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off” (*THT*, 49). As a matter of fact, “her name becomes the essence of who she is and thus she keeps it to herself in the hope that she will someday get her identity back” (Gayret, 2019, 108). But in order to protect herself, she is compelled to wear the Handmaid’s mask, and give the impression that she has become the obedient and meek Handmaid they want her to be. For “without masks there is no long term survival” (Hansot, 1994, 63).

In the novel, Offred still thinks of her past before Gilead in her moments of boredom and passive waiting in her bedroom: “The night is my time out. Where should I go?” (*THT*, 47). Although it may be painful, “this reimmersion in the past is always in the service of the present” (Hansot, 1994, 61), as it gives her hope. In those moments, she reminds herself of her normal life before Gilead, with her family and Moira. Those memories “allow her to

recall a sense of self. She can remember her job, her love for her husband Luke, her child, her friends, her education, fun – the successes and failures of everyday life” (Stillman & Johnson, 1994, 73). However, sometimes Offred does not want to have false hopes and tries to let go of the past because she thinks it is easier. When talking about her daughter for instance, Offred tries “to think of her as dead” (*THT*, 74). She tries to do the same at times when thinking about Luke in the past tense: “Luke was not the first man for me, and he might not have been the last” (*THT*, 239). But at one point, Offred’s attempts to cut ties with the past go too far and she starts to regret it: “I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to remember what they look like ... Stay with me, I want to say. But they won’t. It’s my fault” (*THT*, 203). Consequently, she tries to hold her memories back, and she tries to believe everyone is safe and sound to feel at peace. In fact, she desperately tries to speak of her husband in the present tense: “And he was, the loved. One. *Is*, I say. *Is*, *is*, only two letters, you stupid shit, can’t you manage to remember it, even a short word like that?” (*THT*, 239). Moreover, she tries to imagine that Moira is safe: “Here is what I’d like to tell. I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time ... I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again” (*THT*, 262). Hilde Staels mentions that “the scholars ignore Offred’s conscious effort to call the lost, loved ones back into existence. They do not try to comprehend the articulation of her inner world as a deliberate attempt at survival” (1995, 243). The stories she tells herself about her loved ones are hence only a way to keep her sanity and stay alive. When waiting for a message from Luke, Offred thinks “it’s this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive” (*THT*, 116). The process of remembering her past is therefore a means of enduring her present life. As Hansot suggests, “the enforced passivity of her existence in the present ... leads her to revisit the selves she summons from disjointed fragments of the past” (1994, 59). Not only does Offred need to protect her former self and memories to retrieve them later, but the past is also essential to endure her life in Gilead. As Staels suggests, “Offred re-enacts the past in the present ... it is an act of survival that saves her from despair and that resurrects the missing part of herself” (1995, 235). More than just keeping her alive, her memories also ensure that she does not forget about her agency and former self.

In the Hulu television series adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the memories of her loved ones are also a way to survive for Offred. However, while in the novel Offred tries to safeguard and protect her memories and her name by hiding it away from others, the

protagonist of the television series uses her past without being afraid of unearthing it. Recalling the fact that Offred did not reveal her true name in Atwood's novel, Bruce Miller, the series' screenwriter, suggests in an interview:

I think Margaret intended her not to have a name. ... I felt like ... it's an important thing that she has a name because part of the show is that she's not going to let that go. She is strong and stubborn, even though she has to be on the outside kind of content looking and silent and meek and keeping a hold of her identity was such an important part that it needed the name to do it. (Renfro, 2017)

In the first episode of season one, Offred accordingly recites those words, giving her the will to go on: "I intend to survive, for her. Her name is Hannah. My husband was Luke. My name is June"<sup>13</sup>. As Bruce Miller said, the fact that Offred does not let go of her name in the television series means that she does not want to forget about her former self and agency. Also, Offred in the series reveals her daughter's name, whereas we never learn how her daughter is called in the novel. Hence, more than just divulging her true name, what Offred in the series does differently than her character in the novel is that she speaks of her daughter to others:

*Ofglen*: How old is your daughter?

*Offred*: Eight. She'd be eight.<sup>14</sup>

While in the novel Offred rarely thinks of her daughter and does not talk about her at all with others, in the television series Offred speaks of her not only to Ofglen, but also to Fred and Serena Waterford, in the hope they will help her see her again. In season two, in the nursery talking about the wonders of a new-born with Serena, Offred asks empathy from her:

*Offred*: If I could see her. It would just make me feel so much better. Just to know she's okay.

*Serena*: That's not possible.

*Offred*: Serena, please. Just a few minutes. I won't tell anyone.

*Serena*: Absolutely not.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55'34".

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 51'35".

<sup>15</sup> "First Blood." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 34'03".

After refusing, Serena asks of her to collect her things downstairs, where she had been sleeping, to go back to her room. On the way, she meets Nick, to whom she also talks of her daughter like she was already common knowledge:

*Nick:* What happened? June?

*Offred:* I thought she could be decent. I asked about Hannah.

*Nick:* You know she'd never do that.

*Offred:* She is my daughter. I want to see my own daughter!<sup>16</sup>

Besides her daughter, Offred does not know begin season one if her husband is still alive. She believes Luke is dead, as she explains to Ofglen “We tried to cross in Maine with my husband when we split up. They shot him”<sup>17</sup>. However, five episodes later, she learns from a Mexican trade delegate that Luke is still alive, and she manages to get a message to him. When talking about Nick in her voice-over, Offred says “I want to know him, memorize him, so I can live on the image later. I should have done that with Luke, because he’s fading day by day and night by night”<sup>18</sup>. Learning that Luke is alive makes Offred realize how much she forgets about him, and makes her want to regain those memories of her past self.

Holding onto her past and her loved ones by telling their name and hers is Offred’s way in the adaptation to preserve her sense of self. However, in order to survive in Gilead, Offred must not show that she still holds onto her past, since “the absolutist regime wants to abolish the past” (Staels, 1995, 235). Her remembering of the past and her loved ones is thus an act of resistance against her oppressors, in the novel and the series. Hansot suggests that “in both their making and their maintenance, the selves that Offred laboriously constructs are potential acts of hidden resistance” (1994, 59). In the Hulu series, the protagonist understands it is risky, additionally knowing thanks to Ofglen that there is an Eye in her household, as in her voice-over she says, “Someone is watching. Here. Someone is always watching. Nothing can change. It all has to look the same”<sup>19</sup>. Ending the episode with the feisty song ‘You Don’t Own Me’ by Lesley Gore, the lyrics of the song “You don’t own me, I’m not just one of your

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<sup>16</sup> “First Blood.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 35’37”.

<sup>17</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 52’02”.

<sup>18</sup> “Jezebel’s.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 01’33”.

<sup>19</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55’21”.

many toys”<sup>20</sup>, explicitly show that while Offred does wear the Handmaid’s mask for her survival, Gilead does not own her, as her former self and her memories are protected and preserved. In that way, Offred “holds the past in her head, and recites her own name – June ... She tears down Gilead’s regime, thought by thought. And, most of all, she forces herself to push on and survive” (Dray, 2019) thanks to her past. Hershman additionally suggests that “June’s act of storytelling gives her a way to not only connect herself with her before, but provides a way for June to use her before to understand and resist her present self and the post-apocalyptic after in which she finds herself” (2018, 62). In fact, a lot of flashback shown in the television series adaptation have a direct link to what occurs in the present, helping the viewer to better understand what Offred feels and interpret what happens.

The way of representing Offred’s attachment to the past to survive is thus different in the novel and the series. While she keeps her name buried in the novel, Offred reveals it in the series to show she will not let go of her former self as June. Still, in the novel, “Offred used to silently repeat her hidden name (June) to maintain her existence” (Staels, 1995, 234). Laflen even argues that “Offred’s identity is too seriously compromised by her position as a Handmaid, and that she identifies with this position despite her memories of her former life — evidence of which is that she does not include her name in the record” (2007, 94). Then, although in Atwood’s dystopia Offred tells herself stories of her loved ones being safe to feel comforted, she also sometimes tries to let go of her past, thinking that it is only hurting her. In the adaptation, in comparison, while Offred does think that her husband is dead at the beginning, she speaks of her daughter often to keep her hopes up that one day she is going to find and save her. Keeping her memories and loved ones alive is thus Offred’s goal in the series, compared to the novel where she keeps them buried for later. As Hansot argues, “Offred does much of the work of the past ... in solitude” (1994, 63) in the novel, never telling anyone about her daughter and husband. Nevertheless, in both Atwood’s novel and Hulu’s adaptation, Offred is at risk of losing her former self and her agency by wearing the Handmaid’s mask. Her memories of the past are the only thing that can help her in her identity crisis to find her way back to her former self, June. In that way, “Offred attempts to distance herself from her crudely scripted public persona” (Hansot, 1994, 63), while still

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<sup>20</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55’54”.

trying to survive by using it. In both the novel and the television series the identity conflict is therefore represented by Offred wanting to preserve self, her former persona as June and her memories of her loved ones.

### **3.1.2. Disembodiment as a splitting of selves**

In the protagonist's identity crisis, one of the biggest drawbacks she encounters is when she experiences disembodiments for different reasons in both the novel and the series. In this case, I argue that the disembodiment she suffers from "occurs when a person's identity is separated from their physical presence" (*Cyborg Anthropology*, 2011). The protagonist's identity conflict is thus impacted by her disembodying, as she loses her sense of self. Whenever she is confronted with Gilead's violence and atrocities, the fear of losing her life is so overwhelming that her persona as June sometimes completely disappears to make way for Offred's persona. Offred being an obedient Handmaid, she runs less risk to make a mistake or be rebellious and be taken by the Eyes. Also, June is incapable of being herself whenever she has to go through the Ceremony, the monthly night where she is raped by the Commander under his Wife's contemptuous eyes. At that moment, she experiences a physical disembodiment, where her personas do not feel attached to her body. Rubenstein furthermore suggest that "images throughout the narrative reinforce the symbolism of disembodiment and dismemberment" (1988, 13). Lastly, living in a society where the main character's identity is limited to her role as Handmaid, she often forgets her sense of individuality and self.

Whenever the main character disembodies or loses her sense of self, she tries to protect herself. However, at the same time, she is letting her Handmaid persona take over in her identity crisis. Disembodying too often or at extremes can make June's persona go missing for a while.

#### **3.1.2.1. June is missing**

Offred's attempts to preserve herself and her voice as June does not always go as planned. Gilead's violent acts onto her or others surrounding her makes Offred more and more afraid for her life. Compelled to wear the Handmaid's mask, the main character sometimes falls into the other extreme by forgetting June or her sense of self, and letting Offred take over.

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred seems to be so afraid for her life that she is ready to sacrifice her former self to live. She says "I must forget about my secret name and all

ways back. My name is Offred now, and this is where I live” (*THT*, 153). Explicitly stating that she wants to let go of her former identity, the protagonist is at risk of losing June forever. With the death of her shopping partner Ofglen at the end of the novel, Offred sees how much she is at risk of being taken by the Eyes herself. She realises she would give anything to be safe, to survive, even her identity. She pleads the lord, saying “Dear God ... I’ll obliterate myself, if that’s what you really want; I’ll empty myself, truly, become a chalice” (*THT*, 298). Vowing to give up her identity, she eventually vows to let go of all the things that make her who she is besides her Handmaid’s persona: “I’ll give up Nick, I’ll forget about the others, I’ll stop complaining. I’ll accept my lot. I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent. I’ll abdicate. I’ll renounce” (*THT*, 298). At that moment, Offred submits to Gilead, and her bold former self as June is nowhere to be seen. In the main character’s identity crisis, Offred the obedient Handmaid has taken over for her own survival as she adds, “I want to keep on living, in any form” (*THT*, 298).

In spite of her will to regain her former agency and sense of self by revealing her name and thinking and speaking about her loved ones, Offred in the television series is also at risk of losing her past self sometimes because of Gilead. Begin season two, after managing to be a fugitive for two months and trying without success to escape Gilead by plane to save herself and the baby she is carrying, June is recaptured and she is told that everyone who helped her along the way was very harshly punished, if not dead. Guilt is consequently crushing June into a shell as she wants to forget about her former agency that led her to escape and cause such pain, letting her Offred persona completely take over. Laying in the dark on her back in the closet, her fingers looking for the words ‘Nolite te bastardes carborundorum’ that they have removed, Offred’s voice-over continually repeats “My fault. My fault. My fault. My fault. My fault”<sup>21</sup>. She then thinks “I have done something wrong ... something that’s drowning me ... I might as well be dead. Please God let Hannah forget me. Let me forget me”<sup>22</sup>. Crushed by the horrors of Gilead, June dies inside of the main character, so the Handmaid’s persona automatically takes over the next morning. In the ongoing identity conflict in the television series, at that precise moment, Offred’s persona has won over her host, as at the end of the episode she recites as a mantra “We’ve been sent good weather.

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<sup>21</sup> “Other women.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 49’00”.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 50’00”.

We've been sent good weather. We've been sent good weather"<sup>23</sup>. Together with the song 'Hate' by Cat Power, singing the lyrics "I hate myself and I want to die", it is clear that June is lost. Silent in her voice-over and dialogue, meek in her posture and without her looks full of meaning and disdain, the main character is unrecognizable. As Howell explains, "June's voice – blackly humorous, critically intelligent, irreverent, and increasingly, over the course of the series, brave – is for the first time entirely silent" (2019, 9). Serena herself notices it and misses it, as she says to Aunt Lydia that Offred "is quite unlike herself"<sup>24</sup> and complains to Offred later on their mandatory walk that Offred does not hold her end of the conversation. She mocks her by adding "*Yes, Mrs. Waterford. No, Mrs. Waterford. What is the matter with you?*"<sup>25</sup>. Offred is so different that even Nick dares to question Serena about it:

*Nick:* Is Offred – I'm worried about the Handmaid.

*Serena:* The doctor says that she's in perfect health.

*Nick:* I'm worried about her mental state.

*Serena:* Her mental state? ... The Handmaid is not your concern.<sup>26</sup>

Following this, Nick finds Offred unconscious in the rain outside at night, her underwear covered in blood because of what looks like a miscarriage. Waking up in the hospital, Offred realises she has not lost her baby and "drawing the blanket over herself and her monitored belly, June addresses her unborn child away from the prying eyes of guards being the two-way mirror" (Howell, 2019, 9). Boldly, she starts telling her baby "I will not let you grow up in this place. I won't do it ... They do not own you. And they do not own what you will become ... I'm going to get us out of here. I promise you"<sup>27</sup>. It is as if her incident and the realisation that her baby is still alive after all she has been through in Gilead woke her from her absent state in Offred's persona and brought back June's sense of self.

Consequently, while the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* wants to safeguard her memories and hold onto her former self, which gives her the will to survive and escape, Gilead's atrocities can make June completely flee her body, leaving it at Offred's care. Nevertheless, it is represented differently in the novel and the series, as in the novel Offred

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<sup>23</sup> "Other Women." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 52'48".

<sup>24</sup> "Seeds." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 5, Hulu, 2017. 06'17".

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 15'01".

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 16'07".

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 49'00".

pleads to God and promises to renounce to her self as June in order to live, and in the series the fact that June is missing is much more disturbing and caused by guilt rather than survival instincts. Howell argues that “June’s voice ... becomes most evident when it disappears” (2019, 9). The vanishing of her sarcastic voice-over and her rebellious glances at the camera during close-ups frighten the viewer, as the protagonist’s “affects and reactions are concentrated in his gaze” (Radut, 2015, 76). June’s disappearance has thus more effect in the adaptation thanks to the cinematographic techniques they use to show her persona.

### 3.1.2.2. Point of view shots for physical disembodiment

When confronted with horrors in Gilead, the rebellious June once again turns into the docile and passive Offred. However, sometimes the atrocities and violence are so terrible that the main character experiences a full disembodiment. In fact, “detaching from her body enables her to detach from her emotions” (Callaway, 2008, 57). The best illustration to Offred’s disembodiment is her state of mind when she has to go through the Ceremony.

In Atwood’s novel, “to endure the Ceremony, Offred must detach from her body” (Callaway, 2008, 57). Therefore, instead of describing or feeling what is happening to her body, Offred’s thoughts wander as she “picture[s] the unseen canopy” (*THT*, 105) and describes in meticulous details what is surrounding her to distract herself:

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. What I could see if I were to open my eyes would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy’s outsized colonial-style four-posted bed, suspended like a sagging could above us ... I would not see the carpet, which is white, or the sprigged curtains and skirted dressing table ... It’s not warm in this room. (*THT*, 104)

Deliberately trying to think of something else than her body being violated, her narrative is losing itself in unnecessary description. This distance Offred takes from the present moment is her way of disembodiment. Her sentence “if I were to open my eyes” shows that she does not want to see what is around her, because what she would see is not the canopy – she would see the Commander raping her. Keeping her eyes closed gives her the opportunity to detach herself from what is happening. Besides, when she does think of the sexual act going on, she describes it in a very detached way: “My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body” (*THT*, 104). Offred even admits to disembodiment and distracting herself from what is happening: “One detaches oneself. One describes” (*THT*, 106), and she even plans it before

the Ceremony: “Steel yourself ... I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh. This state of absence, of existing apart from the body” (*THT*, 169). She knows that to protect herself she has to “detach herself emotionally from the Ceremony” (Howells, 1998, 44). In fact, she “disembodies herself during the Ceremony ... in order to alleviate the pain” (Gayret, 2019, 111).

In the television series, Offred also tries to protect herself by disembodiment, although it is represented in a slightly different manner. In the adaptation, we do not always have access to Offred’s thoughts. Instead, the first time, we are given a close-up on Offred’s lifeless face, to make us identify with her, while the Commander rapes her. Offred’s eyes stay wide open, staring at the ceiling, not even blinking; she looks dead:



FIGURE 14: “OFFRED.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1, HULU, 2017. 30’36”.

In a further shot she actually looks like a disarticulated puppet, pushed by the steady rhythm of the Commander’s penetration. Nevertheless, in another Ceremony, we find Offred lost in thoughts, just like in the novel. The first images we are given of the Ceremony are point of view shots of the ceiling of the bedroom and the details on it:



FIGURE 15: “BIRTH DAY.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 2, HULU, 2017. 1’24”.

In her voice-over, Offred tells us how the blue of the ceiling reminds her of her former car: “our car was that colour. We bought it off craigslist. It smelled like maple syrup. Luke said there was a leak in the radiator, it was probably bad or kids. After we got it fixed, I missed that smell, and so did Hannah”<sup>28</sup>. Again, the unnecessary details in her train of thoughts show how Offred tries to distract herself from what is happening. Additionally, it indicates that she is detaching herself from her body. A more shocking disembodiment comes at the end of season two. While she is pregnant and should not have sexual intercourse according to the Gilead’s law, Serena convinces her husband to rape Offred so that the baby is born more quickly. Screaming and struggling, Offred eventually stops fighting. Using the visuals again, the television series films a close-up of Offred’s absent face and we hear in her voice-over: “one detaches oneself”<sup>29</sup>. So, while the representation of Offred’s disembodiment is different in the television series because we are given close-ups on Offred’s lifeless face, it is evident that in both the novel and the adaptation Offred needs to detach herself from her body in order to protect herself.

### 3.1.2.3. Loss of individuality and sense of self

In the dystopian world Atwood created, “the ideal is the absolutely unified individual, whose inner life is gradually stultified and in the end totally and finally conditioned by Gilead’s law” (Staels, 1995, 231). Offred is hence expected to lose her individuality, by being part of the Handmaids, and her sense of self, since she is only serving the society “for breeding purposes” (*THT*, 146). The identities of Handmaids do not matter to the regime, as they are “containers, it's only the insides of [their] bodies that are important” (*THT*, 107). As Howell argues, Offred is “silenced and made strange to herself by her indoctrination as a Handmaid” (2019, 4). In her ongoing identity conflict in both the novel and the television series, Offred is not in harmony with her body at times.

When becoming a Handmaid in Gilead, one of the first things that the regime takes away from you is your individuality. As a Handmaid, you are “a national resource” (*THT*, 75) wearing a small tattoo on your ankle in the novel, or a tag on your ear in the television series.

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<sup>28</sup> “Birth Day.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 2, Hulu, 2017. 01’19”.

<sup>29</sup> “The Last Ceremony.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 28’11”.

As Feuer suggests, “loss of identity is an ever-present threat” (1997, 84). For instance, the main character of Atwood’s novel loses her individuality at times and sees herself in the red cloaks of all the Handmaids, as “another contributing cause which sabotages female individuality in the novel is color-coded clothes” (Gayret, 2019, 109). Offred says when she sees a Handmaid passing by: “she’s like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away” (*THT*, 54), or when Ofglen approaches her: “a shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket” (*THT*, 28). The uniforms the Handmaids are given suppresses any form of individuality, as even the faces of the women are not shown because of the white wings. Offred thus sees herself in every one of them and loses her distinctiveness. Moreover, “Offred at times becomes subsumed by her category and thinks of herself as ‘we’” (Feuer, 1997, 84). At numerous times, she uses the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘I’: “the Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (*THT*, 21). The most flagrant example of this is when Ofwarren/Janine gives birth with the Handmaids surrounding her. Chanting with the other Handmaids to help Janine breathe on rhythm, Offred says: “it begins to catch me ... already I can feel slight pains, in my belly, and my breasts are heavy ... the false pains clench at me, the others feel it too” (*THT*, 134). Together as a group, all the Handmaids go into trance and become one: “we grip each other’s hands, we are no longer single” (*THT*, 135). When the baby is born she says, “we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy” (*THT*, 136) and she feels so relieved: “we’ve done it” (*THT*, 137). That is when Offred’s individuality is lost, when ‘we’ replaces ‘I’. Not only did Offred’s personality and uniqueness disappear, but her body is also one with the others. She explains how her “breasts are painful, they’re leaking a little” as she holds her “ghost baby” (*THT*, 137) on her lap.

The adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in a television series has a unique way of showing how the Handmaids lose their individuality in Gilead. Every time Offred gets together with other Handmaids on her way to events, at Salvagings or births, they are placed in a circle and the shot is taken from above, in a Bird’s Eye view, so that we do not know which Handmaid is Offred. With their red cloaks and white headgear, they all look the same, and sometimes melt into one. This way of representing the Handmaids in the series clearly depicts how Gilead sees them and wants them to look. While in the novel the emphasis is put on Offred’s use of ‘we’ in the narrative, the television series focuses on the visuals.



FIGURE 16: "BIRTH DAY." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 2, HULU, 2017. 26'31".



FIGURE 17: "OFFRED." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1, HULU, 2017. 46'41"

Besides her individuality, the Republic of Gilead strips Handmaids from their sense of self and Offred is no exception. In her identity crisis, losing her sense of self does all but help her retrieve her persona as June. She says in the novel, "I too am a missing person" (*THT*, 113), implying that her former self has disappeared, together with her voice and agency. This transpires in Offred's way of talking about her body. She says, "my nakedness is strange to me already ... I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (*THT*, 72). Because of what Gilead made of her, a Handmaid whose body is more important to society than her identity, she feels out of place in her body. When contemplating herself in the mirror Offred declares: "I can see ... myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak" (*THT*, 19). She even says that her ambitions have been replaced by others': "I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own" (*THT*, 83). Even in her way of describing herself, Offred focuses on the fact that she is fertile: "I am thirty-three years old. I

have brown hair. ... I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance” (*THT*, 153). Apart from her memories, Offred sometimes feels like she has no ounce of herself left in her body:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will ... There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently ... To feel that empty, again, again. (*THT*, 84)

Her body feels empty because it is not inhabited by her identity; Offred has lost her sense of self. When speaking about her body again, she adds: “there’s something dead about it, something deserted” (*THT*, 114). Stillman & Johnson are convinced that Offred “fails ... to structure a sense of self” (1994, 75). The scholars argue that beside detaching from her body,

Offred does try to retain some sense of herself as a distinct individual differentiated from others, but that self breaks down inexorably, and in the most minute detail. At first she rigorously and confidently refuses to call the room she sleeps in “mine” ... but eventually she labels it “mine” ... Then ... she sees as “ours” ... the house of the Commander and Serena Joy. (Stillman & Johnson, 1994, 73)

In addition to feeling out of place in her body, Offred constantly claims she is “feeling like a child” (*THT*, 146) in Atwood’s novel. Her image of herself and her body has become distorted and she loses her awareness of who she is. Offred repeats she is “like a child” (*THT*, 108) “being allowed up late with the grown-ups” (*THT*, 92) and waiting for her “bedtime story” (*THT*, 98). With this erroneous image of herself, “Offred struggles to ‘reconstruct’ her fragmented selfhood” (Rubenstein, 1988, 14). She knows that to feel whole again, like her former self June, she needs love, as she asks, “can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied” (*THT*, 114).

In the television series, the protagonist’s loss of sense of self is mainly represented in the way Offred’s persona takes over and makes June’s identity withdraw. An example of this was explained earlier in this dissertation, explaining that in the beginning of season two June’s persona went completely missing from the main character. Other than the identity crisis, the television series rarely depicts Offred losing touch with her body. In other words, Offred in the adaption does not speak of herself like a child and does not feel estranged with her body. Nevertheless, there are still moments on which Offred suddenly realizes how she must look to other people, when she sees herself reflected in mirrors. An illustration thereof is when she just had to have sex with the Commander at Jezebel’s and runs into a prostitute giving herself as a sex object to a man in the elevator. Staring at them with shock as they pass

behind her, the mirror in the elevator at the same time reflects her figure and we understand that she sees herself as others must see her. Subsequently, Offred loses control over her body, and eventually over her sense of self.



FIGURE 18: “JEZEBEL’S.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 35’43”.

### 3.2. Facial close-ups and exploiting the Handmaid’s mask

In the protagonist’s continuing identity conflict between Offred and June’s personas, Offred’s mask has thus helped protecting her from Gilead’s atrocities. Still, the main character is always at risk of losing her former self, June, whenever she wears Offred’s mask too long. Nevertheless, there is another occasion on which the Handmaid’s mask can be of use and on which the protagonist can benefit from her identity crisis. By wearing the mask of a meek and obedient Handmaid, the main character can turn things in her favour. In fact, by controlling her gestures and her facial expression in both the novel and the series, Offred manages to fool people. She says in the novel, “I knock on his door, hear his voice, adjust my face, go in” (*THT*, 241). And when she has to remind herself how to act, she describes “all you have to do, I tell myself, is keep your mouth shut and look stupid” (*THT*, 247). In both the novel and the television series, June is thus exploiting the Handmaid’s mask to find little ways to rebel and make her life more comfortable in the Republic of Gilead.

Firstly, one of the most obvious times June uses Offred’s mask at her own advantage in the novel is when she meets with her Commander in secret. The first time she learns Fred invites her downstairs she says, “But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It’s this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me ... If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear” (*THT*, 146). Here, Offred explicitly declares that she wants to see him to find out how she can profit from the situation by finding

his weak spot. Despite her terror, Offred does not lose sight of what she came in for: “What does he want? But I won’t give it away, this eagerness of mine. It’s a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged ... I’m not giving anything away: selling only” (*THT*, 148). It is thus clear from the start that the protagonist uses her status as a Handmaid to get what she wants. Of course, being there is already winning something as “this is freedom, an eyeblink of it” (*THT*, 149), but it is not enough for her. After having agreed to kiss Fred, Offred goes back to her room and thinks “something has changed, now, tonight ... I can ask for something” (*THT*, 153). Instantly, she recalls Aunt Lydia talking about how all men want is sex. That is how Offred knows she is going to get what she wants from Fred, as she says that “men are sex machines ... You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good” (*THT*, 154). However, she knows that it is not a game, that she has to be careful: “I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall” (*THT*, 154). After this realisation, Offred comes to think of a documentary on television she once saw, about the mistress of a camp supervisor where Jews were contained during World War II. In some way, she finds that she identifies to this woman now. She adds at the end, as if talking about herself instead of this mistress, “nobody asked her whether or not she had loved him. What I remember now, most of all, is the makeup” (*THT*, 156). Thinking of the makeup, the protagonist understands that it is only with the Handmaid’s mask that she will be able to get what she wants from her Commander; she needs to wear makeup, just like that mistress did. Her disguise as the well-behaved and innocent Handmaid works, as later on she explains “on the third night I asked him for some hand lotion ... I wanted what I could get” (*THT*, 166). With time, Offred manages to ask something more valuable during her meetings:

Things have changed. I have something on him, now ...  
“What would you like?” he says, still with that lightness, as if it’s a money transaction merely ...  
“Besides hand lotion, you mean,” I say.  
“Beside hand lotion,” he agrees. ...  
“I would like to know ... whatever there is to know ... what’s going on.” (*THT*, 198)

On one of her shopping errands, Ofglen in fact told Offred that she knows she is seeing her Commander and asks of her to tell her anything she learns to help the Mayday cause. The main character therefore uses the Handmaid’s mask not only for herself, but also to rebel.

In the television series, the protagonist also puts on the meek Handmaid's mask to benefit from Fred's weaknesses. However, while in the novel it is more often represented in the way Offred talks about it as an exchange, in the series it is more represented through visuals and close-ups on the main character's face. Nevertheless, the exchange is still obvious in their dialogue, as Offred asks for things just after Fred says he wants something from her:

*Fred:* I want a rematch tomorrow, after the Ceremony.

*Offred:* It's a date. Can you do me a favour?

*Fred:* Sure anything, within reason of course.

*Offred:* I was just wondering if you could translate something for me – I think it's Latin – *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.<sup>30</sup>

But the Handmaid's mask is as its most evident whenever Fred approaches Offred physically. When Offred receives a picture of her daughter from Fred, she cannot refuse Fred's attention in exchange, and her face tenses into a façade:



FIGURE 19: "FIRST BLOOD." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 6, HULU, 2017. 47'42"

Offred has to accept Fred's touch and has to put on her Handmaid's mask, in the hope he continues to grant her things. And it works, as a few episodes later, Fred says "I've planned a surprise for you. I think you'll like it"<sup>31</sup> before bringing her to see Hannah. Another moment where it is obvious that the protagonist uses her Handmaid's mask to be in her Commander's good graces is when she goes to his office to apologize for breaking the rules with Serena in season two. In a point of view shot of the Commander, we see Offred's calm and meek façade

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<sup>30</sup> "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 45'18".

<sup>31</sup> "The Last Ceremony." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 37'54".

in figure 20 as she says to the Commander: “I just wanted to apologize. I guess I was only trying to help you, I’m really sorry ... Can you forgive me?”<sup>32</sup>.



FIGURE 20: “WOMEN’S WORK.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 47’32”.

When the Commander closes his door after telling Offred to go sleep, the camera again directs at Offred. While the song ‘Rain Sometimes’ by Penny Goodwin in the background suddenly distorts itself, deforming the singer’s voice, Offred’s Handmaid’s mask falls off and the camera focuses on her distraught face as she collapses on the ground and starts crying.



FIGURE 21: “WOMEN’S WORK.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 48’47”.

Evidently, Offred does not care about what the Commander is actually feeling, but she does not want to lose the agreement they have, because without it she cannot bargain things with him. Also, she fears for her life if the Commander is not on her side. That is why the main

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<sup>32</sup> “Women’s work.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 46’53”.

character has to put on her Handmaid's mask, for her own benefit and survival, although inside she is actually in panic.

In Gilead, everyone's goal is to survive, and all Handmaids probably experience a similar identity conflict between their public persona and their former selves. In fact, Stillman & Johnson argue that "each Handmaid, like Offred, must struggle to maintain any sense of her identity as she faces empty days and lonely nights" (1994, 74). To stay alive, Offred needs to protect her past by presenting herself as an obedient Handmaid or even disembodiment at times. By wearing Offred's name instead of June's, she hides her former self and agency, for "names both identify and mask their carriers" (Hansot, 1994, 69). Yet, this Handmaid's mask she is wearing is also a danger to her former identity. By forcing herself to wear this mask in Gilead, Offred is threatening to lose her sense of self and her voice. In the television series, to remember her past self and her loved ones, Offred does something that her character does not do in the novel: she speaks about herself and her family to others. Once she does that, she feels known and she is keeping them alive. An illustration thereof is when Offred explains to Ofglen on one of their walks how she tried to escape Gilead with her husband and daughter but did not manage to get to safety. At the end of their conversation, Ofglen says to her "it was nice to finally meet you"<sup>33</sup>, implying that her public persona as a Handmaid has fallen to finally let transpire the main character's persona as June. In the protagonist's identity conflict, the past is therefore a very significant aspect. In fact, "Offred's revisiting of the past now labelled as retrograde ... offer an opportunity to explore how she is able to salvage selves amid a coercive regime" (Hansot, 1994, 57). While the tension between using the Handmaid's mask to protect herself and not being swamped by it is real, June also uses Offred's public persona for her own purposes. Hansot likewise argues that "Offred learns to be a meticulous student of the body postures, the gestures, the speech forms that the public persona requires ... But the effort drains her and the risk is that she becomes this mask" (1994, 62), making the identity conflict between Offred and June even more complex.

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<sup>33</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 52:35".

## Chapter four: obstacles to retrieving a sense of self

Throughout the protagonist's identity crisis in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both the novel and the television series, many are the obstacles preventing her from retrieving a sense of self and maintaining her in the Gilead-constructed Handmaid's persona. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the main character needs to be careful when wearing the Handmaid's mask not to become it too fully, and she has to try and keep her individuality and sense of self despite Gilead's atrocities. Nevertheless, Gilead's violence is not the only guilty in the protagonist's struggle to retrieve her bold former self. For her to regain her agency, Offred needs to get her sense of self back. However, three characters, by the way they treat her, prevent the main character from doing that and instead shape her into a pious and scared Handmaid. The analysis of Offred's relationship with these characters enables us to better understand how she loses her sense of self and how it is represented in the novel and the series. In fact, Sepulchre argues, "l'analyse des personnages secondaires permet souvent de conforter les conclusions sur le(s) personnage(s) principal(aux)" (2011, 143).

The first part of this chapter discusses how Aunt Lydia's brainwashing from the Rachel and Leah Centre conditions the main character to think like Gilead and to abandon her former identity as June. The second part investigates how Serena Joy's continuous humiliation of Offred keeps the latter in her obedient place and strips her from her agency. Then, the way Commander Waterford uses his masculine superiority to sexually objectify Offred and make her less than a human being is analysed.

### 4.1. Aunt Lydia's increased violence and brainwashing

In *The Handmaid's Tale's* Historical Notes, Professor Pieixoto pointed out that in Gilead, "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (*THT*, 320). In fact, the Republic of Gilead has suppressed any possibility of female solidarity by establishing "a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women ... and maintaining the new social order" (Callaway, 2008, 49). As Callaway furthermore explains,

At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers ... the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the

patriarchal order. In full collusion with the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation. (2008, 50)

The Aunts of Gilead thus have to brainwash the fertile women until they become obedient Handmaids for the society's elite. By losing control over their thoughts, their name and over their body, Handmaids ultimately lose their identity. In that way, Offred's brainwashing by Gilead's Aunts prevents her from finding her way back to her former self. Not surprisingly, the representation of this indoctrination of Handmaids, and especially Offred, by the Aunts is not entirely similar in the novel and the adaptation thereof by Bruce Miller. This research focuses on Aunt Lydia's character as I believe she is responsible for a significant part of Offred's struggle to regain her agency. More than just turning June into Offred in the Red Centre, Aunt Lydia maintains the protagonist in her Handmaid's role along her postings.

In Margaret Atwood's novel, Offred explains how her brainwashing by Aunt Lydia finds its origin in the Rachel and Leah Centre, where women are being trained into docile Handmaids. Offred describes how she and other women were taught to treat Janine for instance, a gang rape survivor: "Crybaby. Crybaby. We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of myself. I didn't then" (*THT*, 82). As Callaway argues, "within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts" (2008, 53). It is because of this psychological and physical abuse that Offred starts having thoughts that are not her own. She acknowledges during her training: "already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure" (*THT*, 143). To make them feel secure in Gilead and hate the past, the Aunts made the Handmaids watch specific pornographic movies in which women were "being raped, beaten up, killed ... cut into pieces", and they then asked Handmaids to "consider the alternatives" (*THT*, 128) of Gilead. The power of their indoctrination is such that those movies had the desired effect on Offred, as she says, already doubting herself, "Moirra said later that it wasn't real, it was done with models; but it was hard to tell" (*THT*, 128). Another way for Aunt Lydia to model Offred at Gilead's will is by telling her who and what she is: "a thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be value, girls ... We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" (*THT*, 124). Aunt Lydia's goal is to make of these women pious little girls who will obey, by changing who they are at the core: "all of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia" (*THT*, 124). Ultimately, that is how Offred loses her sense of self and her former bold identity. The fact that the protagonist has been brainwashed by the Aunts is quite

noticeable in her discourse. Every time Offred thinks of the way Gilead works, or of the way things were in the past, she always goes back to what Aunt Lydia told her. The words “said Aunt Lydia” (*THT*, 65) appear an incalculable number of times in the novel. In fact, in her everyday inner comments, Offred often quotes what Aunt Lydia taught her at the Red Centre: “where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said” (*THT*, 18). Most of the time she acknowledges that those thoughts are Aunt Lydia’s, and not hers, by citing her name. However, sometimes it seems Offred internalized Gilead’s ideas. When talking about the Japanese tourists she encounters in the streets, Offred thinks, “we are fascinated, but also repelled ... It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this” (*THT*, 38). Angela Laflen in her article on the fascist style of Gilead suggests that

Atwood uses this encounter to demonstrate the difficulty of resisting identification with Gilead. Despite rejecting Gilead’s ideological agenda ... Offred’s mind is still captive to the ideology to the extent that she interprets what she sees, at least initially, through Gilead’s lens. (2007, 94)

At other moments in the novel, Offred admits her indoctrination by Gilead and Aunt Lydia. She says when seeing the carvings on her desk at the Red Centre, “these habits of former times appear to me now lavish, decadent almost; immoral, like the orgies of barbarian regimes” (*THT*, 123). Even at the end of the novel, after struggling to retrieve a sense of self and her own thoughts and voice, Offred seems to give in: “everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in” (*THT*, 298). Laflen also suggests that the fact that “Offred sees the women through the lens of Gilead is obvious in the language she uses ... [and] that this is Aunt Lydia’s language rather than Offred’s” (2007, 94). Aunt Lydia’s defining and shaping of Offred therefore prevents the main character to reconnect with her former self and her voice.

In the television series, the viewers also witness Aunt Lydia’s brainwashing techniques. Just like in the novel, humiliation is a big part of the Handmaids’ indoctrination at the Red Centre. A similar scene of degradation occurs when Janine explains she has been gang raped:

*Aunt Lydia:* And who let them on? Whose fault was it?

*Janine:* I don’t know.

*Aunt Lydia:* Whose fault was it, girls?

*Girls:* Her fault! Her fault! Her fault! ...

*Aunt Lydia:* And why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

*Girls:* Teach her a lesson!<sup>34</sup>

When Offred does not cooperate at first and glances with a shocked expression at Aunt Lydia and Moira, another Aunt behind her – incidentally played by Margaret Atwood herself – slaps her in the face. For “if psychological avenues are unsuccessful, the Aunts use physical violence to control the women in their charge” (Callaway, 2008, 53). Still, in the novel as in the series, Aunt Lydia believes she is helping those women, as she says to them: “I’m doing my best ... I’m trying to give you the best chance you can have ... Don’t think it’s easy for me either” (*THT*, 65). The television series reproduced that since Aunt Lydia says in season two “Don’t think it's easy for me either. I’m doing my best. You are a fallen woman; I am trying to give you the best chance you can have”<sup>35</sup>. The screenwriter of the television series Bruce Miller said about Aunt Lydia in an interview:

She is incredibly tough on them. I don't think she would use the word "cruel." I think she takes her job very, very seriously. She is going to make sure these girls don't get killed by the wives once they're assigned, so she's going to make sure that they're obedient. She believes that this is the way to save the world. She believes she's doing God's work. It's duty. I don't think she's particularly happy about the violent side of it. She doesn't really take very much pleasure in it. As you move along, you see that she cares about the success of these girls so much. (Renfro, 2017)

Nevertheless, while she could want the best for her Handmaids, Aunt Lydia is one of the characters in the television series who really drags Offred down and tries to turn her into someone she is not, even suppressing her sense of self. What the television series does that the novel does not, and what emphasizes the fact that Aunt Lydia is responsible for Offred’s loss of sense of self, is the direct interaction between both characters. While in the novel we only hear of Aunt Lydia’s brainwashing techniques through memories of Offred’s time at the Red Centre, the series really shows how Aunt Lydia demeans and hurts Offred. As an article on the major changes from page to screen explains, while “Offred rarely sees Aunt Lydia in the book ... Aunt Lydia is a much more prominent character on the show. Although she does appear in Offred's flashbacks to the Red Center, as she does in the book, Offred sees her on

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<sup>34</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 27’04”.

<sup>35</sup> “Other Women.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 38’08”.

many more occasions” (Renfro & Ahlgrim, 2019). Plus, as Offred is more rebellious in the series, she talks back more often, and this causes her to be victim of more violence. Mostly, Aunt Lydia uses her cattle prod and torture to make Offred co-operate and to silence her. For instance, when Offred admits to not having reported Ofglen for being a gender traitor, Aunt Lydia tells her, while menacing her with the cattle prod, to remember her scriptures that say, “blessed are the meek”. With that, Offred answers with an expression of defiance, “And blessed are those who suffer for the cause of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. I remember.”<sup>36</sup> Aunt Lydia then hits Offred with her taser and electrifies her neck, symbolising her power to silence Offred. With the help of violence, Aunt Lydia thus tries to turn Offred’s rebellious self into a docile Handmaid. This last interaction in the television series is inspired of a passage in the novel in which Offred thinks, “*blessed are the meek ... I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too ... Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted*” (THT, 100). However, there is no interaction between Offred and Aunt Lydia in Atwood’s work, as this occurs in Offred’s head. Hence, the television series’ way of highlighting that the brutality Offred is facing makes her lose her agency is by making Aunt Lydia more present and violent in Offred’s life. The best illustration of the impact of Aunt Lydia on Offred’s sense of self in the series is when she is recaptured and brought back to the Red Centre after she has tried to escape Gilead begin season two. One of the dialogues they have at her recapture explicitly shows that, although Offred had regained her former self by escaping, Aunt Lydia forces her to let go of that to become the meek Handmaid once again. As she is pregnant, in a white gown and chained up next to a bed in a spacious space, Aunt Lydia comes to visit her:

*Aunt Lydia:* I see you’ve eaten well, Offred. Third day in a row.

*Offred:* It’s June. You know my fucking name.

*Aunt Lydia:* The Waterfords have kindly agreed to a trial run, as it were, and if you’re a very very good girl you might even be invited to stay. You see, June will be chained in this room until she gives birth. And then June will be executed. Offred, has an opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

In the series, compared to the novel, Aunt Lydia really puts June’s persona back into place – in the past where she belongs – and tries to make Offred behave. She is menacing the

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<sup>36</sup> “Late.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 31’00”.

<sup>37</sup> “Other Women.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 02’30”.

protagonist's former self but welcoming the Handmaid's persona with open arms. Furthermore, Howell explains that in this episode when she is recaptured,

we see her re-education, reindoctrination by Aunt Lydia ... who sows seeds of guilt and self-doubt by showing her the hanged body of the man who tried to help her and relates how his family, like June's own, has been torn apart, his wife now a Handmaid, their little boy given away. A finely tuned piece of cruelty, it's aimed at eroding June's sense of self. (2019, 9)

Moreover, after having told her how her escape has caused suffering to the family who helped her, Aunt Lydia says to Offred: "June did this; June ran away, June consorted with terrorists, not Offred. Offred was kidnapped, Offred is free from blame. Offred does not have to bear June's guilt"<sup>38</sup>. Forcing Offred to give up on her former self, to abandon the guilty June, Offred then loses her sense of self and stays completely silent in her voice-over, as explained in chapter three. For "when threats and intimidation failed to extinguish Offred's inner life – the life of June – guilt does" (Howell, 2019, 9), and Aunt Lydia knows that too well.

## **4.2. Serena Joy's love-hate relationship with Offred**

In Atwood's dystopia, one of Aunt Lydia's quotes seems to warn Handmaids against the Wives of the Commanders:

It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You 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 ... You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable -. (*THT*, 56)

Offred learns about the hatred of the Wives the hard way in the Waterford household, with the character of Serena Joy. As Callaway explains, "the domestic hierarchy, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Wives, operates on mutual dislike ... The Handmaids are personal affronts to the Wives; they are continual reminders of the Wives' failures to conceive" (2008, 54-55). Serena is thus jealous of Offred for being younger and fruitful and for being the one who is going to carry her child. Offred too feels antipathy throughout the novel for Serena "for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child" (*THT*, 170). Despite their hatred for each

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<sup>38</sup> "Other Women." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 41'18".

other, “both Wife and Handmaid/Mistress are required to co-habit the house and must collaborate in the procreative mission of the household” (Callaway, 2008, 56). However, this cohabitation in the Waterford household is very hazardous, as everyday Offred is subjected to Serena’s anger and despise. In her past, Serena publicly fought for Gilead to see the light of day, so that women could live by traditional roles once again, “but the reality of being a Wife in Gilead is much different than she envisioned”, so “controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration with a system she once supported” (Callaway, 2008, 57). Therefore, Serena does not cease to remind Offred of her inferior position, as Offred says, “she wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so” (*THT*, 23). Furthermore, Serena does not treat her as a human being: “she’ll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I’m a piece of furniture” (*THT*, 89). Worse, she sometimes ignores Offred’s very existence: “She doesn’t turn her head. She doesn’t acknowledge my presence in any way, although she knows I’m there” (*THT*, 56) and avoids speaking to her (*THT*, 23). Of course, those daily reminders do not enable Offred to feel valued, on the contrary. Serena’s loathing also does not help Offred to think of herself as anything else than a “two-legged womb” (*THT*, 146), as she describes during the Ceremony: “my arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product” (*THT*, 104). Hence, Serena’s behaviour around Offred keeps the latter in her Handmaid position and makes her lose all her self-esteem. Additionally, she makes Offred feel as a pariah: “there is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her” (*THT*, 106). And when talking about Handmaids to other Wives the day Janine gave birth, Serena Joy says, “Little whores, all of them, but still, you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?” (*THT*, 125). Her words and conduct with Offred thus keeps her in her inferior position and destroys her sense of self. Still, Offred feels bad for Serena Joy in some way. As Callaway suggests, “her participation in the Ceremony requires her to watch her husband having sexual intercourse with another woman ... This disparity leaves Offred wondering, ‘Which of us is it worse for, her or me?’” (2008, 57). Moreover, Offred says she “also felt guilty about her” (*THT*, 170) for being an intruder and taking her husband from her.

In the television series adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Serena is still one of the characters who damages Offred’s sense of self through her loathing. However, the cinematic

adaptation “reveals Serena Joy to be a character of great complexity” (Shoemaker, 2017) compared to Atwood’s work where Serena Joy simply seems to hate Offred. In the series it is more intricate, due to a few alterations of her character. The tensions between Serena and Offred consequently remind us of a love-hate relationship, shifting between admiration and solidarity to loathing and humiliation, “fluctuating between hating and helping each other” (Florczak, 2018, 52). Hence, the relationship between the two characters is “by far the most complex relationship in the Hulu series” (Florczak, 2018, 51). First, one of the reasons for this new relationship dynamic is because the screenwriters have decided to portray Serena as much younger than in the book. Bruce Miller justifies this change in an interview:

The element that was missing for me was the direct competition between the two women, because with an older Serena Joy, she wants something so badly that she felt like she should have had in the past, but she's past that point now ... I felt that it was a more active dynamic if Serena Joy felt like [Offred] was usurping her role not only as the reproductive object of the house but gradually taking away the wifely duties, the intimate duties, the romantic, sexual duties ... but then something I didn't expect to happen is that Yvonne and Elizabeth are close [in age]. You get that little vibe once in a while that in another situation they could be friends. It is the creepiest thing. (Renfro, 2017)

Changing Serena’s age thus changed the whole dynamic and tension between her character and Offred’s, as it brings an unexpected jealousy and rivalry. In fact, “Serena and Offred become emphasized as rivals for the heterosexual love or lust of the Commander” (Florczak, 2018, 51) and, because they almost have the same age, “Serena is forced to act as a mother figure but also a sort of sister-wife to Offred” (Florczak, 2018, 52). Since it is a television series, Serena is also given more screen-time and the interaction between Wife and Handmaid is multiplied. However, they do not interact in the same way as in the novel, in which they both try to avoid each other. In the television series, Offred and Serena’s dialogues are more likely to explode. This is explained by the fact that, Serena being Offred’s age, Offred feels more betrayed by the way she is treating her, as they could have had the same upbringing and Serena could be in Offred’s place. A second change that modified their relationship is that “you at some point find out Serena Joy is not sterile” (Renfro, 2017), so Offred is not only a usurper in Serena’s house, but she is depriving her of a pregnancy as well. Bruce Miller further explains that Serena and Offred’s proximity in age “makes it almost harder for both of them because they have someone in the house who's [similar]. You're even lonelier because you have that person who's there, but the relationship is completely intractable” (Renfro,

2017). During a lunch with other Handmaids, where Serena serves food as if she is organising her kid's birthday party, the following dialogue takes place when Offred addresses the other Handmaids seated at the table:

*Offred:* Does anyone remember the name of that place on Boylston? They had great brunch ... It was amazing, food was great ...

*Serena:* Magnolias.

*Offred:* Yeah, yeah that's right.

*Serena:* They had the most amazing banana pancakes. Who knows, maybe we were there at the same time.<sup>39</sup>

With this kind of dialogue, the viewer understands that Serena and Offred could have been friends in another life. Another variation in Serena's character that altered their relationship is the fact that "Serena Joy is a very unpredictable character — in that one minute, she's practically embracing Offred and seems so grateful and devoted to her, and then she turns on a dime" (Renfro 2017). In fact, while sometimes Serena seems to hate the Handmaid who she sees as an intruder, at other times she is kind to her and protects from harm, as if Offred were her child. In the following image, Serena comes to the rescue of Offred who has just been hit and electrocuted by Aunt Lydia:



FIGURE 22: "LATE." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 3, HULU, 2017. 32'29".

And when erroneously thinking that Offred is pregnant, Serena smiles at her, kisses her hands and tells her, "You're my miracle. My beautiful miracle"<sup>40</sup>. Still, at other times, Serena stops at nothing to show her dominance and remind Offred of her inferior's Handmaid position.

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<sup>39</sup> "First Blood." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 26'35".

<sup>40</sup> "Late." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 47'04".

Through violence, physical intimidation as she is “quite tall” and Offred “is more small” (Renfro, 2017), and isolation, Serena makes sure that Offred is not able to rebel. After Offred says to Serena that she is not pregnant in the same episode as Serena’s sweet words, the latter becomes furious and utterly changes her behaviour towards the protagonist. Taking Offred brutally to her room by her wrist, she throws her on the floor and screams at her to stay in her room. She towers over Offred who is hunched up on the floor, in the corner of the frame, intimidating her into compliance.



FIGURE 23: “LATE.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 3, HULU, 2017. 48’26”.

In addition to violence, intimidation and incarceration, Serena also makes use of humiliation to damage Offred’s bold self. When Eden, Nick’s assigned wife, comes in and asks Serena if she needs help with anything, Serena answers while looking at Offred: “Aren’t you sweet. I wish Offred were as pleasant. It is so important to understand one’s place in a household, wouldn’t you agree?”<sup>41</sup>. Serena then takes one of her knitting needles and purposely drops it on the ground. As Eden is leaning to take it, Serena halts her: “No, no. You are a married woman of faith. The Handmaid will do it”<sup>42</sup>. Once Offred has picked it up, Serena offers Eden to try it herself, persisting the humiliation even further. Besides Serena’s instability regarding Offred, the television series gives us a more developed storyline of her life before and during Gilead, when Offred is not in the picture. This gives the viewers more information on her and makes them pity Serena as she is also oppressed in the theocratic regime. Shoemaker argues that “it’s a series that takes the time to make sure someone like Serena Joy is both a victim of

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<sup>41</sup> “First Blood”. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 52’11”.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 52’35”.

the system and responsible for its existence; someone who can be both pitied and condemned” (2017). As two persecuted women in a same household, Offred and Serena occasionally find moments of complicity and solidarity – but again, because Serena is hierarchically superior to the Handmaid, this only takes place when she chooses to allow it. When in the second season, Fred is injured and has to stay at the hospital, Serena gladly takes over his work in his office and offers an unexpected partnership to Offred because she was an editor before Gilead. While we see images of Serena and Offred working together, Offred explains in her voice-over: “we do our work in the evening. She writes, I read. This is the new normal, and an offense to God. In another life maybe we could have been colleagues, and in this one, we’re heretics”<sup>43</sup>. They seem comfortable with each other, almost forgetting what world they live on. They even exchange a casual conversation:

*Offred*: Do you miss working?

*Serena*: It’s a small sacrifice to make to be welcomed back into God’s grace. I do truly detest knitting, to be frank.<sup>44</sup>

This small confession from Serena shows how much their masks have fallen off during the time they have worked together, and it makes Offred genuinely smile. At that moment Serena even helps Offred get her sense of self back, as she is allowed to read and write like she did in the past at work. Working together brings Serena and Offred closer and when Fred summons them both in his office the day he learns about their illegal doings without his consent, Serena tells Offred before entering: “Let me handle this”<sup>45</sup>. But Fred is furious to have been disobeyed by his Wife, and flogs Serena with his belt as punishment, before Offred’s eyes. After filming Serena being beaten, the camera then focuses on a close-up of Offred’s face, flinching at each strike as if she is being flogged herself.

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<sup>43</sup> “Women’s work.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 1’25”.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 02’02”.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 34’34”.



FIGURE 24: "WOMEN'S WORK." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 40'15".

Her reaction and the glances they share during their altercation with Fred clearly show Serena and Offred's solidarity and empathy with each other. It is even more obvious when Offred goes to Serena's room that night, knocks and asks her "Mrs Waterford, do you need anything? ... Can I do anything for you? Serena?"<sup>46</sup>. However, Serena answers coldly and tells her to go back to her room with a condescending tone, before crying silently. To repeat a quotation from Callaway's work, just like in the novel "controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration with a system she once supported" (2008, 57). Subsequently, Serena in the television series is a very complex character, different from Atwood's novel, who can humiliate and harm Offred at times, and who can grant her some freedom and hope of female solidarity at other times. Still, in the long run, I believe Serena Joy is more responsible for ripping Offred of her sense of self than truly being solidary with her. First of course because of her violence towards Offred and the fact that she pushed Fred to rape Offred with her at the end of the second season, despite Offred's screams<sup>47</sup>. And secondly for constantly putting Offred back in her place of Handmaid and reminding her who is in power. An illustration of this is when Serena gives a child's music box to Offred. Offred's reflection in the mirror of the box (see figure 25), plainly shows how trapped the protagonist is because of Serena. Later, Offred also says in her voice-over, "The perfect gift. A girl trapped in a box. She only dances when someone else opens the lid. When someone winds her up"<sup>48</sup>. As Florczak suggests, "Serena exercises her power and reminds Offred of

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<sup>46</sup> "Women's work." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 40'15".

<sup>47</sup> "The Last Ceremony." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 27'02".

<sup>48</sup> "Jezebel's." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 47'25".

her lack of agency with the metaphorical meaning behind the gift of the music box” (2018, 52).



FIGURE 25: “JEZEBEL’S”. *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 46’55”.

In an interview, Yvonne Strahovski, the actress playing Serena Joy, describes her character’s relationship with Offred as complex and tensed:

In a lot of ways, she despises Offred. There are so many reasons for this. She’s forced to watch her husband have sex with this woman, so there’s jealousy and envy there. She can see Offred is a smart woman and she uses that to her advantage. At the same time, Offred talks back a lot ... Serena is incredibly lonely; she has no one to really relate to and in a weird way, she has this need to try and communicate with Offred woman to woman. Yet, they’re so pitted against each other in this society. Though they have these moments of coming together, it could never work out. (Feldman, 2018)

Serena Joy, both in Atwood’s novel and the adaptation into a television series, is therefore responsible for Offred’s loss of sense of self. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two women is much more complex in the series and represented through visuals, and that is why Serena Joy in the adaptation causes the protagonist additional pain and humiliation, preventing Offred from regaining her agency.

### **4.3. Fred Waterford’s obsession with Offred’s fertility**

Fred Waterford, Offred’s Commander from whom she takes her name, is one of the characters of the novel and the television series who does not help Offred retrieve a sense of self for several reasons. The very first and obvious reason is that in both media, she belongs to him as a Handmaid. Her given name by Gilead is a constant reminder that she is nothing but

his, as Butler explains: “she is the designated property of a specific commander ... thus summarising her role as a handmaid, and revealing that her owner is named Fred” (2010, 43).

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Commander treats Offred as less than a human being when in public; instead, he treats her like an object he owns. Offred is reminded of her inferior position to him at every Ceremony:

He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red ... He manages to appear puzzled, as if he can’t quite remember how we all got in here. As if we are something he inherited, like a Victorian pump organ, and he hasn’t figured out what to do with us. What we are worth. (*THT*, 97)

In his eyes, Offred also feels objectified, owned: “He’s stroking my body now ... He stops at the foot ... where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle-brand. It means ownership” (*THT*, 266). Offred knows that her Commander is in power, and that in order to stay alive, she has to obey him. So, when Fred asks of her to come to his study for a secret meeting, she goes to him because she has no other choice. While she understands that she could benefit from this situation, she nonetheless admits: “the fact is I’m terrified ... I think I will cry” (*THT*, 147). Still, time after time she goes to these illicit meetings and finds some advantages in it. As Callaway suggests,

In his private space she is afforded more freedom as she reads magazines from the past, plays Scrabble, and uses hand lotion. Since reading and writing are strictly forbidden activities for women this experience is exhilarating ... Her activities are socially deviant, but they are still controlled by the Commander— subject to his whims and desires. (2008, 45)

Offred thus has no choice but to be swept along by the Commander, whatever he asks of her. But what is essential to underline is that the protagonist is not herself when she meets with Fred. As Hansot suggests, “the continuous task of Offred’s present is to know how to enact just such an impoverished self as she fantasized for the Commander ... the process of performing it is exhausting” (1994, 62). Offred says it herself when she has sex with him: “the trouble is that I can’t be, with him, any different from the way I usually am with him ... Fake it ... Let’s get this over with or you’ll be here all night” (*THT*, 267). This last extract shows that she does not want to have intimate relations with her Commander and that she must fake pleasure – she has to be someone she is not in his company. The mask she must carry with him is still the Handmaid’s persona, obeying her Commander to the letter. Fred is described by Miner as Offred’s “Gileadean ‘sugar-daddy’—powerful, distant, in control of

her future” (1991, 26), and Offred knows that her life depends on him. She thinks during one of the Ceremonies: “if he were to falter, fail or die, what would become of us?” (*THT*, 99). As Miner explains, “the Commander has control over Offred’s life; she knows as much, and knows she must remain in his good graces” (1991, 31). While Offred finds some satisfaction in her meetings with the Commander, as “this is freedom, an eyeblink of it” (*THT*, 149), she still does not feel valued with him. She has to remind herself of that sometimes: “for him, I must remember, I am only a whim” (*THT*, 168), “the fact is that I’m his mistress” (*THT*, 172). Moreover, when Offred is not reminded that she is only Fred’s property, she is also sexually objectified by the Commander. Offred explains this in a few passages, especially during their time at Jezebel’s: “He pulls down one of my straps, slides his hand in among the feathers, but it’s no good, I lie there like a dead bird” (*THT*, 267). In this last extract, we are once again witnessing the protagonist’s disembodiment caused by her Commander who uses her for physical contact: “then he says, ‘I want you to kiss me ... as if you meant it’” (*THT*, 149). When the Commander brings her to Jezebel’s, Offred again enjoys a glimpse of freedom and feels like she is walking into the past. However, “the ‘past’ called up by the Commander, the past that brings delight into his voice, is one in which women are on display for men, and are dependent upon men” (Miner, 1991, 29). Additionally, as Steuber argues, by “attending a place like Jezebel’s [the Commander] further exercise[s] his place in the kinship system ... [he] affirms his place in society as an owner of women” (2012, 22). In fact, Offred describes how it feels to enter this place as a woman at the arm of Fred: “he is showing me off, to them, and they understand that ... they review my breasts, my legs, as if there’s no reason why they shouldn’t” (*THT*, 248). The Commander’s character thus prevents Offred from retaining or retrieving a sense of self, as she is only used and treated by him as a belonging that brings him forbidden sexual pleasure. And although sometimes the Commander may seem gentle with her, wanting to make her life bearable, he behaves in a very paternal manner with her, revealing a perfect example of benevolent sexism. The Commander’s sexism and superiority thus strips Offred from a sense of self despite the moments of freedom this relationship brings as she cannot be herself with him or refuse his sexual advances.

The Hulu cinematographic adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* also makes of Commander Waterford a male character who feels superior and is sexist in his behaviour with Offred. His added obsession in the series for the protagonist, however, amplifies Offred’s loss of sense of self around him as she is treated as inferior and as his sex object. The reason

therefore is that the Commander's character underwent some light changes from page to screen. The first change being that he is younger in the series than in the novel and "he's also ... more powerful on the show" (Renfro & Ahlgrim, 2019). Therefore, he needs to assert this power on the women around him more. Furthermore, "the heterosexual romantic relationship between Offred and the Commander ... is also more fully explored within the Hulu series" (Florczak, 2018, 47). As a result, Fred and Offred are given more screen time together, and we can see their relationship evolve along the seasons. Besides, in the series the Commander seems almost obsessed with Offred, while in the novel he just seems to lack female company as "his wife didn't understand him" (*THT*, 166). This dissertation analyses those changes in his character to observe how that impacts Offred's sense of self.

First, whereas Offred in Atwood's work describes the Commander by saying "his hair is grey" (*THT*, 67), Fred has brown hair in the series and seems to be Serena's age; maybe even Offred's age. Although in the novel, the Commander is "physically, in addition to ideologically ... repulsive to Offred" (Florczak, 2018, 48), the actor playing the Commander in the series, Joseph Fiennes, is much younger than the character in the novel and is also physically attractive as he "is a stereotypically attractive actor and has played a variety of roles in which he is marketed as being extremely desirable to women" (Florczak, 2018, 48). Accordingly, the dynamic of their relationship is altered. Despite Florczak's argument that because of this change "their relationship becomes sexier, where it is originally intended to be perverse" (2018, 48) I believe that at every scene between Offred and her Commander, the viewer can feel how afraid she is of him and can see the mask she is forced to wear. From her point of view, and because the viewer identifies with her, this relationship has nothing sexy, but is instead sickening. This is furthermore showed by how Offred reacts after first kissing the Commander. Whereas in Atwood's novel, Offred just reacts to the kiss by thinking "this is one of the most bizarre things that's happened to me, ever" (*THT*, 154), Offred in the adaptation is disgusted by the Commander's touch. After Offred kisses the Commander because he asks it of her, in exchange for being allowed in his study with him, the camera films the protagonist's face in extreme close-up to show how she brushes her teeth frantically and has a disgusted look in her eyes.



FIGURE 26: “A WOMAN’S PLACE”. *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 6, HULU, 2017. 25’58”.

Offred is sickened by the kiss she shared with the Commander, to the point where she tries to brush him out of his mouth and winds up bleeding. In fact, the camera then films the bathroom sink with Offred’s blood draining away. Together with the ominous music in the background, the scene with the kiss that Offred and the Commander shared has nothing sexy but is rather terrifying. At every one of the Commander’s touches, Offred has to fake liking it, but ends up sickened and feels that her body has been invaded or intruded. As a result, she loses control over her own body in his presence, as he has the power to do anything he wants with her, and that makes her lose her sense of self.

Second, the Commander in the television series needs to assert his power on women in his household even more than in the novel. This dissertation focuses on Offred, but even Serena suffers from Fred’s position of power. In an interview on his character Commander Waterford, the actor Joseph Fiennes explains,

he is surrounded by powerful women, namely his Wife Serena and June, who are intellectually much more advanced than him, and I think he’s aware of [these] fallibilities ... I think it all is about his inadequacies and how he uses the women around him almost as emotional punchbags in order to kind of feel more powerful. (Licuria, 2020)

His character in fact likes to remind Offred who is in power. He says to her at one point in his office “am I boring you? ... Being in here is a privilege”<sup>49</sup> before requiring her to kiss him to be forgiven. Moreover, the Commander is fully in control of the situation, and hence of

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<sup>49</sup> “A Woman’s Place.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 22’20”.

Offred, when they are in his office. Although being with the Commander gives Offred some kind of escape from her dull life as a Handmaid, Fred controls to what extent she benefits from the situation. Allowing Offred to play Scrabble and chat next to the fireplace with him actually “stems from the degree to which wit plays a pleasurable role in flirtation” (ScreenPrism, 2018). Furthermore, when the Commander gives Offred something to read, “the type of reading material Fred actually gives Offred – a beauty magazine – is a clue to just how much mental activity he wants from her ... He encourages Offred to express herself, but by that he means to perform his image of the flirtatious ‘bad girl’” (ScreenPrism, 2018). Therefore, the only character in this relationship who really finds the situation exciting is Fred, who delights in seeing a woman at his mercy. He additionally often reminds her that she is only his property as a Handmaid. An illustration thereof is when he strokes Offred’s ear tag before having sex with her at Jezebel’s.



FIGURE 27: “JEZEBEL’S.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 8, HULU, 2017. 32’55”.

Another change in the Commander’s power from page to screen that impacts Offred’s sense of self, is that in the television series adaptation he seems to be more responsible for Offred’s suffering as a sex slave in Gilead than his character in Atwood’s novel. In fact, through flashbacks in the series, we understand that both Serena and Fred helped to create the theocratic regime. And whereas the Commander in the novel seems oblivious to the Handmaids’ situation, since Offred says “it wasn’t the first time he gave evidence of being truly ignorant of the real conditions under which we lived” (*THT*, 167), the Commander in the series seems utterly aware of what he and the other men in power are purposely doing to

women. After explaining to Offred that they have taken care of Ofglen's 'little' problem by clitoridectomy, he says very calmly: "We only wanted to make the world better ... Better never means better for everyone, it always means worse for some"<sup>50</sup>. With that, he proves and fully acknowledges that he is conscient of the pain he inflicts upon women, to create his own little utopia. This is very reminiscent of a term Atwood created, called 'ustopia', or in Atwood's words "a world ... combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 2011, 66). Although for Offred the Republic of Gilead is a nightmare, a dystopian world, for men like the Commander Waterford it is a utopia, a better place. The Commander knows that without Gilead, he would not be able to assert such power over his Wife and Offred; therefore, he needs this regime for his own benefit. His superiority and his conscious harming of Offred in the television series thanks to his power makes the Commander thus even more hurtful to Offred's well-being.

Third, the Commander seems obsessed with Offred in the Hulu series, in a way that he is not in the novel. In Atwood's work, the Commander meets with his Handmaid because he wants company, he wants to be listened to and he has lost that bond with his Wife. In the series, the Commander is additionally fascinated with Offred's fertility. The actor who plays Fred Waterford reveals in an interview that to him, Offred "is the epitome of fertility ... and I think subconsciously he's attracted to that ... He can't have [kids] with his wife ... And also, that lack of fertility, which actually is not her fault, it's the Commander's fault, that brings the disconnect in their relationship" (Higham-Grady, 2019). Consequently, in the men's mind, Handmaids are more desirable as they are fruitful, while the Wives are believed to be barren. The men of Gilead, and especially the Commanders, "have put the handmaids into this category of sex object, while they have desexualised the Wives ... the society is so obsessed with reproduction that many men appear to see only fertility itself as attractive" (ScreenPrism, 2018). As a result, similarly to the novel, Offred becomes despite herself her Commander's sex object. Because she fears for her life and she understands that he is in control, she cannot refuse his advances. She even says to Nick in the series "You know I had to go with him last

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<sup>50</sup> "Faithful." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 5, Hulu, 2017. 33'54".

night, right? You know I didn't have a choice, I don't have any choice"<sup>51</sup>. Besides, this passion the Commander maintains in his relations with her is based on her position as a fertile Handmaid. This means that Offred cannot be herself with her Commander, very similarly to Atwood's novel. Offred thus has to wear the Handmaid's mask in his presence, threatening her sense of self. As a video essay suggests, when they have sex in Jezebel's, the Commander

tells Offred, 'You don't have to be quiet here. You can be free.' The irony of course is that she's not enjoying this at all and is hardly holding herself back from expressing pleasure. Meanwhile when she expresses any true aspects of herself, this displeases him because it destroys the illusion that she is a plaything who only wants to worship and amuse him. So, in their relationship we see all the hallmarks of what it means to view someone as a "sex object" and how limiting that truly is. (ScreenPrism, 2018)

Hence, in the Commander's company, Offred has to wear the Handmaid's mask, as it is only her inferior position and her fertility that appeals to him. By treating her like a sex object and controlling her, Offred loses her agency and sense of self in his presence.

The representation of the Commander's harmful influence on Offred's agency and sense of self is in some way similar in the novel and the television series, as in both the Commander reminds Offred that he is in control and owns her, and he treats her like a sex object. Nevertheless, the perverting and sickening side of their relationship is emphasized in the adaptation through close-ups on Offred's face when she is touched by the Commander or when she has to be someone she is not to please him. The viewer thus understands even more in the series how difficult it is for Offred to survive these meetings with the Commander. Whereas in the novel Offred says "I am happier than I was before" (*THT*, 172), thanks to her meetings with the Commander, the television series shows through visuals of Offred's face that she has to endure those moments and that she takes no pleasure in it. This relationship does not help her retrieve a sense of self in any way, whether it is in the novel or in the television series. In fact, the Commander keeps her in an inferior position in which she has no control, and in that way, he prevents her from regaining her agency and her bold self.

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<sup>51</sup> "Jezebel's." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 42'39".

## Chapter five: June's emancipation on screen

The previous chapters analysed how the identity crisis of the main character was represented in both Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its adaptation in a Hulu television series by researching Offred's use of the Handmaid's mask and the three characters preventing her from retrieving a sense of self. Throughout both the novel and the adaptation thereof, there is a palpable tension between the protagonist's former self, June, and her Gilead-constructed self as Offred. Despite all the obstacles and pain she encounters in the regime, Offred wants to retrieve her agency and rebellious voice which are linked to her past name and identity. In fact, "for Offred, her name acts as a mediate between her past and present identities ... Her analogy of her name as a precious treasure that she has to hide exhibits her attachment to her past identity and her rejection of her recently made identity" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, 167). Victimized by the regime of Gilead, the goal of the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to survive. With her words "I intend to get out of here" (*THT*, 144) Offred in fact demonstrates her will to stay alive and escape Gilead one day. Nevertheless, one of the research questions of this dissertation is whether the main character manages to regain her agency and her bold former self at the end of her narrative, or if she stays stuck in her public Handmaid's persona by fear of pain. This chapter therefore discusses the road to retrieve Offred's sense of self and the way it is represented in Atwood's novel and the adaptation. Moreover, this dissertation researches how the new waves of feminism impacted Offred's story in Miller's recent adaptation.

### 5.1. Retrieving a rebellious sense of self

It is clear that Offred, whether it is in the novel or in the series, longs to be her former bold self again and "she fantasizes about being called by her own name" (Templin, 1993, 149). The protagonist tries to linger onto her former identity as June: "I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (*THT*, 108). She thus "treasures her 'real' name, associating it with her self-hood and individuality" (Templin, 1993, 149), things she lacks as a Handmaid. For her own sanity, not letting go of her past self is a necessity, as was discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation. However, her longing to retrieve her former agency does not guarantee that she can hold on to it until the end. This section researches whether the main character of the novel and the television series succeeds in regaining her agency and if so, how she manages it.

### 5.1.1. Offred's lost struggle in Atwood's novel

As Patricia F. Goldblatt suggests in her work on *Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists*, "Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive" (1999, 275). So as to retrieve her former self's agency, her rebellious voice and her individuality, Offred thus struggles through the whole novel of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As Goldblatt additionally explains, Atwood's "stories deal with the transformation of female characters from ingenues to insightful women" (1999, 275). The readers of Offred's tale are thus witnesses to her battle to regain her identity. Although the novel starts with a very innocent and ignorant protagonist, Offred eventually grows more and more aware of her surroundings. Feuer in fact believes that

the novel is in a second sense a reconstruction of a reconstruction, a memoir of Offred's rebuilding of a self all but obliterated by the pain of her experience ... She must create, or recreate, herself after having been 'erased' as a person. (1997, 90)

After experiencing so much humiliation, pain, and indoctrination from Gilead, and having to suppress her sense of self at times to disembodiment and survive, Offred has to reclaim her voice and will to be herself once again. As Kuźnicki argues, "for Offred, true survival means not only the preservation of her identity, but also creating it anew, which turns to be a constant, never-ending process" (2017, 36). In order to retrieve her former bold self, Offred thus struggles throughout Atwood's whole novel.

Despite Offred's lack of action before Gilead in the novel, there are some passages where she finds it in herself to rebel or defy the regime as a Handmaid, and in that way reclaim her agency. Before the creation of the theocratic regime, Offred explains how she, and other women, decided to ignore what was happening around them: "we lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (*THT*, 66). Furthermore, Offred "didn't go on any of the marches" (*THT*, 189), as Luke easily convinced her not to and she would fight with her mother about feminism, saying "let's not get into an argument about nothing" (*THT*, 131). Nevertheless, Offred became step by step aware of the destructive agenda of patriarchy on women during her time in Gilead and understood that she had been wrong to take her rights for granted before. Consequently, stuck in her position as a victim in Gilead's regime, Offred sometimes suddenly feels the need to rebel to regain her

agency. In Atwood's novel, the main character mainly rebels in her head, just like other of Atwood's heroines who "do not lash out openly" (Goldblatt, 1999, 278). Through her rebellious discourse and thoughts and by taking control of the narrative and language, Offred manages to defy the regime in her own way. As Kuźnicki argues, "Offred's growing self-awareness is thus reflected in her speaking voice" (2017, 35). The protagonist often fantasizes about revolting. For instance, when her Commander walks under Offred's window, she says: "I don't feel like being kind ... If I could spit, out of the window, or throw something, the cushion for instance, I might be able to hit him" (*THT*, 67). This act of rebellion is not purely imagined, as she adds a bit later in the same chapter: "Moirra and I, with paper bags filled with water. Water bombs, they were called. Leaning out my dorm window, dropping them on the heads of the boys below" (*THT*, 67). Spitting on Fred from her window would thus remind her how it was to be the mischievous June. Offred longs to go back to her old self, and "not being kind" with her Commander would be one way of doing that. Moreover, Offred enjoys making bold comments in her head, as she says about Serena Joy, "I often amuse myself this way, with small mean-minded bitter jokes about her; but not for long ... What I coveted was the shears" (*THT*, 161). In this last sentence, the protagonist implies that she wants to take the shears to commit a crime, but again, Offred's resisting of Gilead only occurs inside her head. The only times where Offred openly acts rebelliously are times where she cannot be caught or seen. She says "I walk ... through the night house. I am out of place. This is entirely illegal ... I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active, is it a tense?" (*THT*, 108). Plus, whenever she has an opportunity to disobey, she contains herself: "I would like to steal something from this room ... It would make me feel that I have power. But such feeling would be an illusion, and too risky" (*THT*, 90). Offred also does not dare do something that will be noticed: "what should I take? Something that will not be missed" (*THT*, 109). Still, as Weiss argues, "Offred herself exercises power (mainly sexual) over Fred, Serena Joy ... and others" (2009, 121). In fact, Offred takes advantage of her Commander's interest in her to ask for things for her own benefit. She says about her first meeting with the Commander: "there must be something he wants from me. To want is to have a weakness ... If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear" (*THT*, 146). Because of the power she has over Fred, she also feels more powerful regarding Serena Joy, as she realizes "I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it ... I enjoyed it a lot" (*THT*, 171). Besides, Offred knows that her position as a Handmaid, a woman that cannot be touched except for Ceremony nights, makes her desirable to other men. Taking control over her body,

she likes to tease men and thus holds some power over them: “As we walk away I know they’re watching ... I move my hips a little ... I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there” (*THT*, 32). Goldblatt suggests when discussing Atwood’s protagonists, including Offred, that “these women become manipulators rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated” (1999, 281). Beside her rebellious thoughts and her passive defiance of the regime, Offred’s manipulation of the Commander is her only way to have some control over her situation. Still, according to Laflen, although “Offred’s actions often seem ‘passive,’ taken in the context of Gilead, Offred’s actions are locally resistant and help her to assert her own sense of identity in opposition to the one allowed to her by Gilead” (2007, 95). The protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale* further finds ways to rebel and to reclaim her identity by taking control of the narrative. Refusing to be silenced, Offred disobeys the regime by mentally re-enacting the past and resisting in her discourse. She finds comfort in the thought that “if this is a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending” (*THT*, 49). And as she repeats her former name to herself “June regenerates her creative energy. She is the grammatical subject and narrative agent of the tale, whereas Gilead reduced her position to that of (grammatical) object and patient” (Staels, 1995, 234). As Howells suggests, “Offred silently adapts Gilead’s patriarchal script as she tells a revisionary narrative of her own which is by turns sceptical, defiant, and determinedly hopeful” (Howells, 1998, 40). Storytelling is for Offred both a way to defy the regime and try to regain her voice and agency as her former self. In fact, Moosavinia & Yousefi argue that by doing so

she tries to resolve the caused inconsistencies in her sense of identity by giving an account of herself to a ‘you’ that she does not exactly identify in the course of the novel. In the face of a government that seeks to obliterate her identity, she ‘come[s] into being as a reflexive subject’ by initiating giving an account of herself. (2018, 169)

By reassembling the pieces of the puzzle of her past, together with narrating her life as a Handmaid in Gilead, Offred thus reconstructs herself and her identity. Many scholars have labelled this narrating of her life in Gilead as a rebellious act. But, although Offred does tell her tale through recordings,

some of Atwood’s critics argue that agency is not possible ... that Offred’s identity is too seriously compromised by her position as a Handmaid, and that she identifies with this position despite her memories of her former life — evidence of which is that she does not include her name in the record. (Laflen, 2007, 94)

Notwithstanding her rebellious thoughts, Atwood's novel depicts a protagonist that eventually gives up on her former identity and agency and is mainly passive throughout the story. Kuźnicki suggests that even Offred's

name implies some passivity too: she, herself, is "afraid" (to play on a word that sounds like "Offred") – afraid to rally against the Revolution, to reveal herself to Ofglen, to spy on behalf of the Mayday group, to attempt escape, to commit suicide. Sometimes this passivity manifests itself in the projected denial of her real name and acceptance of her present situation. (2017, 36)

While at some point in the novel we are hopeful for Offred as she gets interested in Mayday and is defiant in her discourse, the ending of Atwood's novel gives us a character that stays in the tradition of failing dystopian protagonists, as "at the end ... she lose[s] this vitality and succumb[s] to fatigue and indifference" (Howells, 1998, 41). According to Weiss, who analysed the protagonists of the dystopian tradition to compare them to Offred, the main character of *The Handmaid's Tale*, like others before her, "wants at the end ... to be comfortable again – to be free from harm more than free of oppression" (2009, 132). Little by little, we consequently witness Offred losing her agency: "why fight?" (*THT*, 237). While at first Offred seems to take advantage of her agreement with the Commander to learn about what is going on in Gilead, she eventually admits "Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know" (*THT*, 205). Again, the protagonist decides to ignore, like she did before Gilead. When Ofglen confronts her on that, Offred thinks "I scarcely take the trouble to sound regretful, so lazy have I become" (*THT*, 283). Offred is conscious that she gave up, as is clear from what she thinks of Moira after seeing her working at Jezebel's, having abandoned all hope to rebel and escape. Offred thinks, "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin ... I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (*THT*, 261). The protagonist in fact does not even try to hide it anymore, she acknowledges "I'm a coward" (*THT*, 110). The end of the novel marks Offred's total loss of self in my view.

When focusing on Offred's struggle to retrieve her sense of self and identity in *The Handmaid's Tale*, scholars have interpreted the end of the novel in different ways. Some believe that Offred's escape from Gilead and the recordings telling her tale are elements proving she rebelled against the theocratic regime and succeeded in keeping her sense of self. In fact, Kuźnicki argues that "in the end, the desire to express herself freely and preserve her identity fully prevails" (2017, 36). In a similar way, Howells suggests that Offred's "voice

and her story relayed through the edited transcript of her cassette tapes remain as testimony to the survival of the human spirit” (1998, 36). However, other critics interpreted the end of Atwood’s novel as the heroine’s failure to preserve her former self and rebellious voice in Gilead. While Stillman & Johnson have suggested that “Offred does try to retain some sense of herself as a distinct individual differentiated from others” (1994, 73), in the end they make a case that “the Handmaid ultimately fails to maintain her identity ... to structure a sense of self, to connect with others, and to act” (1994, 74, 75). Weiss also claims that “Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires”, because instead of rebelling, “she prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination” (2009, 138). Although I do agree that Offred tries to resist Gilead throughout the novel, I believe that in the end, the main character has lost her sense of self and her agency by choosing to be passive to anything that might happen to her. Hypothetically being saved by Nick who orchestrated Offred’s escape, Callaway still thinks the end of the novel is disconcerting:

This becomes her final and most powerful act of resistance. It is, however, problematic. Though Nick helps her escape, love is not necessarily triumphant ... Offred's resistance and escape are also problematic at the political level ... her escape is motivated by self-preservation rather than a desire to affect social change or solicit public outcry against Gilead ... Offred is truly complicit in her own oppression. (2008, 46)

Just before being taken by the van, she readily admits that she has given up: “there’s no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished” (*THT*, 305). Offred furthermore says when entering the van, “I have given myself over into the hands of strangers” (*THT*, 307), acknowledging that she has lost all control over her self and allows others to decide on her fate. Only then, she says, “I’ve been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance” (*THT*, 305). But those regrets are pointless, as she had numerous chances to act and never did. As Weiss puts it, Offred “engages in what is at this point fairly easy bravado” (2009, 137). Goldblatt argues that this is a tendency in Atwood’s novels, as “although often consumed with thoughts of suicide ... Atwood's heroines never succumb. Instead they consciously assassinate their former identities” (1999, 280). Moreover, Goldblatt suggests that heroines like Offred “turn their misery inward, accepting responsibility that not society and its expectations but they themselves are weak, unworthy, and have therefore failed” (1999, 278). Despite trying to save

her sense of self through her past and language, and trying to rebel, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s novel eventually thus fails at reclaiming her identity and agency, as "she resigns herself to the strangers through submitting to what happens to her and not gaining control over her destiny" (Gayret, 2019, 120). In the end, Offred does not let her rebellious former self take over in Atwood's novel, because she is too afraid to die or be harmed. She thus stays in her Gilead-constructed role by comfort and "accepts Gilead's protective embrace" (Weiss, 2009, 133).

The protagonist's struggle throughout the novel to regain her former agency, going from deliberate ignorance to defiant thoughts and finally failing to rebel and reclaiming her past self, can be summarized by Offred's evolution in the Basic Victim Positions. As a reminder, the Basic Victim Positions imagined by Margaret Atwood are:

One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.

Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.

Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

Four: To be a creative non-victim. (Dopp, 1994, 43)

Starting with her passive behaviour at the start of Gilead, Atwood's novel portrays a protagonist in Position Two, accepting her fate by justifying it because of her biology. But Offred "is a fully developed character complete with inconsistencies of thought and feeling and the constant potential for change" (Foley, 1990, 54) and she consequently approaches the four positions by struggling to reclaim her agency throughout the novel. According to Michael Foley, Offred's arrival in Position Three is marked by her rebellious thoughts that were described earlier on in this chapter, as well as the statement 'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum' that she repeats nearly as a prayer. As Malak suggests, at that point "her double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor" (2001, 8). By manipulating and holding power over other characters, and having an illegal love affair with Nick, Foley additionally believes that Offred "moves by fits and starts towards the bold creative action of Position Four" (1990, 55) and that only at the end "it is the Position Two attitude that wins out just before the rescue" (1990, 56). Nevertheless, numerous scholars disagree with him, saying that Atwood

depicts “a character trapped in Position Two” (Dopp, 1994, 43). In fact, Dopp is one of the critics seeing Offred as a limited character. He believes that “the passivity of the handmaid ... is quite constant ... In the end, she lacks as much awareness and resolve as in the beginning” (1994, 45). In my opinion, both Dopp and Foley have interpreted Offred’s struggle at extremes. I believe that Offred is a complex character in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as she evolves from willing ignorance in Position Two to gaining awareness and fighting for a sense of self in Position Three. However, I do not believe Offred reaches Position Four, as eventually, she renounces her former identity and gives up her agency to survive. As a result, the protagonist falls again in Position Two of the Basic Victim Positions and is not able to resist Gilead or to reclaim her former identity. At the end of Atwood’s novel, I argue just like Gayret that “Offred is ensnared in position two, taking no overt action against Gilead to liberate herself from oppression, surrendering to the strict conditions of Gilead, and hiding behind compliance as a condition of physical survival” (2019, 118). In the novel, the protagonist has thus lost her battle to regain her agency, as she stays stuck in her Gilead-constructed Handmaid persona and forgets about her former identity as June.

### **5.1.2. A space for hope on screen**

The Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in a television series, in contrast to the novel, portrays a more assertive and publicly active and rebellious protagonist. This choice of alteration is explained by the fact that a passive main character would not have given the series as much success as an active one, as is explained in chapter one of this dissertation. The screenwriters have thus opted for a more hopeful story:

at the core, the driving mechanism, which overrides the obvious brutality of the show, is about how even in the most hostile environments the human spirit still seeks ways to survive, find light, love and purpose ... *The Handmaid’s Tale* is truly a testament to human resiliency ... despite all the brutality, in their scarlet red, the handmaids continually show us that no matter how hard the boot comes down, you cannot stomp out the spark of rebellion and humanity. (Feldman, 2018)

Similarly to the novel, Offred’s character evolves in the series from a scared and passively defiant Handmaid to an actively rebellious troublemaker. However, whereas Atwood’s Offred eventually gives up at the end of the novel, Bruce Miller’s Offred in Hulu becomes bolder and bolder, symbolizing her retrieval of her former rebellious self as June:

The arc of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's journey from not being one of those people who protests and rebels ... to step in forward as the leader of a rebellion. We experienced her transformation through camera and sound, slow-motion, her opinionated inner voice, music, and specific framing and blocking, all of which helps us to see her reach her breaking point and understand why there is no other way. (ScreenPrism, 2017)

In the same way as Atwood's Offred, the main character of the Hulu series at first only defies the regime in her head and keeps being that Gilead-constructed Handmaid persona in public. She is in fact often sarcastic in her voice-over when she is addressing someone, for example in episode one of the first season when she passes Nick when leaving the house to go shopping:

*Nick: Going shopping?*

*Offred: No Nick I'm gonna knock back a few at the Oyster House bar, you want to come along? Yes.*<sup>52</sup>

Offred also has mischievous thoughts sometimes, although she does not carry them out, just like in the novel. When Serena takes Offred to help her in the garden, Offred asks herself if the Eyes are coming for her, and she says in her voice-over "There are things I could do. How hard would I have to press those shears into her neck before seeing blood?"<sup>53</sup>. Later, while Serena tells Offred as a warning that "some women can't handle the requirements of their positions, they can't do what needs to be done"<sup>54</sup>, the point of view shot shows how her gaze wanders again on the shears behind Serena (see figure 28). The viewer therefore understands that "while speaking words of calm and obedience she's contemplating bloody murder of her captors" (ScreenPrism, 2017).

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<sup>52</sup> "Offred." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 10'54".

<sup>53</sup> "Faithful." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 5, Hulu, 2017. 8'15".

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 46'16".



FIGURE 28: “FAITHFUL.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 5, HULU, 2017. 46’20”.

Consequently, like the main character of Atwood’s novel, Offred in the Hulu series at first seems defiant, but only in her thoughts. Even when Ofglen tries to rally Offred to the rebellion, Offred refuses:

*Ofglen*: There’s a way to help them. You can join us.

*Offred*: What do you mean us?

*Ofglen*: There’s a network.

*Offred*: I don’t know, I’m not that kind of person.

*Ofglen*: No one is until they have to be.<sup>55</sup>

Effectively, Offred finally realizes she has to resist the regime when her shopping partner is taken by the Eyes, as she says in her voice-over: “Now I’m awake to the world. I was asleep before, that’s how we let it happen”<sup>56</sup>. Little by little, “contrasts between her facial expressions and her words start to reveal the increasing falseness and daring of her dialogue” (ScreenPrism, 2017). The first time she openly rebels, while she never does in the novel, is when she is being interrogated about Ofglen by Aunt Lydia and a Guardian. Although at first Offred says in her voice-over “I want to keep on living. I’ll do anything, resign my body freely to the uses of others, I’ll sacrifice, I’ll repent, I’ll abdicate, I’ll renoun—”<sup>57</sup>, she finally talks back to Aunt Lydia with defiance despite being electrocuted for her arrogance:

*Aunt Lydia*: But you knew what she was?

*Offred*: I knew she was gay.

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<sup>55</sup> “Birth Day.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 2, Hulu, 2017. 05’44”.

<sup>56</sup> “Late.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 02’17”.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 26’22”.

*Aunt Lydia:* That word is not to be used ... Remember your scripture: “blessed are the meek.”

*Offred:* “And blessed are those who suffer for the cause of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” I remember.<sup>58</sup>

In that way, “the HULU series ... maintains a focus on talking back and breaking silence as key issue for its female-centred narrative” (Howell, 2019, 8). Following this incident, we witness Offred’s struggle to regain her agency and rebellious voice as June throughout season one. From having an illicit conversation with the Mexican delegates asking for help and denouncing Gilead’s violence in episode six, to carving a message in her closet for the next Offred, the protagonist’s assertiveness grows stronger, together with her sense of self. And when, just like in the novel, she realizes her best friend Moira has lost her sense of self and any hope of escaping, Offred does not simply complain about it in her narrative like she does in the novel. In the television series, Offred is the one being heroic and inciting Moira to rebel by getting a package out of Jezebel’s in episode nine:

*Moira:* So you’re a spy now?

*Offred:* Not a good one, I can’t seem to get out of the fucking room.

*Moira:* Good, ‘cause this is fucking ridiculous. Risking your life because Alma said to? ... It could be anything, a bomb, anthrax, what do you know?

*Offred:* I hope it is. Hey, you could get it for me.

*Moira:* Hey, no, that is crazy ... In case you haven’t noticed I’m a prisoner and a whore ... No, it’s Ruby now ... Go home, and do what they say ...

*Offred:* Moira, do not – do not let them grind you down. You keep your fucking shit together, you fight.<sup>59</sup>

As a result, at the end of the episode, Offred is given the package that Moira managed to smuggle out of Jezebel’s. Besides being herself rebellious, Offred encourages others to defy the regime as well in the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When, in episode ten of the first season, the Handmaids are ordered to stone Janine to death, Offred steps into the circle, drops her stone and apologizes to Aunt Lydia, implicating she will not do what she is asked. With the use of slow-motion when she lets go of the stone, the focus of the camera on her hand and the music building up in the background, the television series “emphasize[s] the gravity of her defiance” (ScreenPrism, 2017) against Gilead.

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<sup>58</sup> “Late.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 29’56”.

<sup>59</sup> “The Bridge.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 9, Hulu, 2017. 29’48”.



FIGURE 29: “NIGHT.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 10, HULU, 2017. 48’38”.

Following her refusal to stone Janine, all the other Handmaids around her disobey as well and, sent back home, the Handmaids all leave together on the song “Feeling Good” by Nina Simona, expressing “how good it feels to start a revolution” (ScreenPrism, 2017). And while the end of season one is the same as the novel, as Offred is giving herself over to the hands of strangers and does not know where she is taken, the television series shows how even at the very end the protagonist still resists. When taken out of the house, Offred looks at Serena Joy and Fred with an expression of defiance and a satisfied smile as she refuses to answer to their questions and leaves their house.



FIGURE 30: “NIGHT.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 10, HULU, 2017. 57’05”.

Besides, the music at the end of the episode shows that Offred has kept her sense of self as June. As is explained in a video essay, “the very last song over the season finale and credits, Tom Petty’s American Girl ... alludes to Offred’s unbreakable spirit. June’s inner world has finally been expressed and the hope of rebellion is alive” (ScreenPrism, 2017). Offred’s identity conflict and struggle to keep a sense of self still continues in the second season of the Hulu series, expanding the story of Atwood’s novel. After being punished by Aunt Lydia for

refusing to stone Janine, and then escaping thanks to Nick, the series makes us think begin season two that Offred's battle to reclaim her former self as June is won, as she retrieves control over her identity by cutting off her red tag on her ear and saying: "My name is June Osborne. I'm from Brooklyn, Massachusetts. I'm 34 years old. I stand 5'3" in bare feet. I weigh 120 pounds. I have viable ovaries. I'm five weeks pregnant. I am free"<sup>60</sup>. From that moment on, June is openly defiant and does not even try to hide her bold self anymore. That can be seen in the way she interacts with Aunt Lydia once she is recaptured: she affirms that her name is June, not Offred, and looks down on her.



FIGURE 31: "OTHER WOMEN." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 4, HULU, 2017. 03'18".

Offred's situation complicates itself afterwards, as Aunt Lydia tells her how those who helped her escape faced terrible repercussions and Offred feels overwhelming guilt. Losing all sense of self at that moment, as explained in chapter three, June goes completely missing in the protagonist's voice-over. However, because the series focuses on making Offred's story hopeful, the main character eventually regains her sense of self and her agency at the end of the second season. Therefore, the season ends with a confident June, choosing to stay in Gilead to save her daughter Hannah, by using her identity as a Handmaid.

In the series, the main character thus manages to be her sarcastic and rebellious self again, June, while in Atwood's novel she fails and stays in her victim-position as Offred. In that way, "Miller's adaptation differs from Atwood's original novel, as it makes room within June's story for hope and resistance" (Hershman, 2018, 57). Apart from Offred's hopeful

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<sup>60</sup> "June." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 54'16".

story, as she regains her agency and former self as June, the television series also gives the viewer hope in the way they altered Luke, Moira and Emily's storylines to make them safely take refuge in Canada. As Hershman suggests "Miller gives each character an ending with far more finality, but also uses their stories to promote resilience, grit, and hope ... [and] inspires audience members to resist the unjust and remain hopeful that the future can change for the better" (2018, 58). Hulu series' adaptation of Atwood's novel into a more hopeful story also altered Offred's character, as contrary to the novel, she reclaims her former identity and is much more openly rebellious. Subsequently, the television series breaks from the tradition of complicit and failing protagonists in the dystopian tradition that Weiss writes about in his article: "like the dystopian protagonists who provided the models for her characterization, Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires" (2009, 138). In contrast, to make her story full of hope and resistance, Offred is really made heroic on screen. As a result, "through her rebellious narrative acts, she retains her identity and her sense of hope" (Hershman, 2019, 61).

### **5.1.3. Love as a way to retrieve a sense of self**

The fact that Offred in the television series manages to keep a hold onto her agency and her former bold self as June, while in the novel Offred fails to do so, can be explained by the many little alterations from page to screen made by the Hulu screenwriters. However, I argue that the main changes that give Offred more hope in the series than in the novel are done in her relationships with her loved ones. In fact, I believe that motherhood and her love affair with Nick help Offred to retrieve a sense of self in the series, whereas those do not suffice in the novel. The representation of her battle to be her former bold self again, through her relationships with her daughters and Nick is hence researched in this part of the chapter.

#### **5.1.3.1. Motherhood as hope factor**

Sarah R. Morrison in her paper on *Mothering Desire*, argues that in Atwood's novel "complicated and tension-fraught mother-daughter bonds shape the whole, highlighting the female protagonists' need for proper mothering" (2000, 329). Beyond that, I believe that motherhood is for the main character a source of hope, especially in the Hulu television series. Offred's bond with her daughter in fact encourages her to survive in Gilead and to retrieve her agency, as it is "not until she has been deprived of everything, including her daughter, [that] Offred [can] commence the process of maturation" (Feldman Kolodziejuk,

2020, 75). Offred's bond with her mother being complicated in both the novel and the series without alteration that impacts her struggle to retrieve a sense of self once she is a victim in Gilead, their relationship is not being studied in this dissertation.

In the novel of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred sometimes thinks of her daughter in her re-enactings of the past and often wonders "do I exist for her?" (*THT*, 74). Her memories of her and the protagonist's "intense desire for reunion with her eight-year-old daughter illustrates the intensity and the initially uncomplicated nature of the mother-child bond" (Morrison, 2000, 329). However, in Atwood's novel, Offred often gives the impression she wants to forget about her daughter because the memory of her only brings pain. She thus represses her recollections, although the "suppressed memories of her daughter repeatedly find their way to Offred's conscious mind" (Feldman Kolodziejuk, 2020, 77). Moreover, at one point, she even wants to think of her daughter as dead: "it's easier to think of her as dead. I don't have to hope then, or make a wasted effort" (*THT*, 74). By taking her daughter away from her, Offred feels like they have "killed her" (*THT*, 49). According to Ewelina Feldman Kolodziejuk, who wrote a paper on the *Intergenerational Transmission of Womanhood*,

The symbolic death of her daughter is supposed to help Offred pre-empt the pain ... because having a daughter abducted inevitably shatters the mother's world. Offred cannot let herself go mad with worry, let alone rage, because sanity is the only aspect of her life she can retain from her pre-Gilead past ... To survive the atrocities inflicted by the Gileadean regime, Offred must forsake the memory of her daughter ... [as] a defence mechanism. (2020, 77)

Symbolizing her desire to forget about her daughter, the protagonist of Atwood's novel never reveals the name of her child. However, by failing to remember her daughter, Offred fails to keep a hold onto her mother self and has no hope of seeing her again. This hopeless situation she puts herself in does not encourage her to defy Gilead or to escape. Even when she is given a picture of her daughter by Serena Joy, Offred does not want the memories of her to come back: "better she'd brought me nothing" (*THT*, 240). Again, the reason therefore is that thinking of her child threatens her sanity, she says "I have been obliterated for her ... I can't bear it, to have been erased like that" (*THT*, 240). The main character in the novel thus deliberately distances herself from her daughter, and at the same time loses the hope and courage it could have given her to defy the regime. Furthermore, "if Offred is to survive, she must forsake her maternal role, both past and prospective" (Feldman Kolodziejuk, 2020, 77), and therefore forget about her self as mother. Feldman Kolodziejuk also argues that "the price

she must pay for distancing herself from the memory of loss is the subsequent detachment from her body and suicidal ideation” (2020, 78). Forgetting about her daughter consequently makes Offred lose her sense of self and her agency in the novel of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The screenwriters of the television series altered Offred’s bond with her daughter, making her more a source of hope and the spark of her rebelliousness than merely a source of pain. Whereas the protagonist in Atwood’s novel tries to forget about her child, and in the process loses her sense of self, Offred in the Hulu series holds onto the memories of her daughter and does everything she can to see her again. Proving that she will not let go of her daughter and at the same time of her agency, Offred reveals in the first episode: “I intend to survive, for her. Her name is Hannah”<sup>61</sup>. Besides, when Serena brings Offred to see her daughter from the car without being able to speak to her, in order to threaten her into compliance, Offred’s hating of Gilead and Serena only intensifies, just like her will to rebel. Not holding herself in anymore, Offred at that moment repeatedly insults Serena: “You are a goddamn motherfucking monster! Fucking heartless ... Fuck you, Serena”<sup>62</sup>. Seeing her daughter thus only drives Offred to rebel in the series, contrary to the novel. In fact, when Offred finally meets in secret with Hannah, she vouches to try to see her again, because Hannah is mad at her for abandoning her:

*Hannah:* Did you try to find me?

*Offred:* I did. I tried so hard, Daddy did too.

*Hannah:* Why didn’t you try harder? ... Mommy, am I ever gonna see you again.

*Offred:* You know what, I’m gonna try.<sup>63</sup>

Plus, the screenwriters made a major alteration from page to screen, as Offred learns she is pregnant of Nick’s child in the last episode of season one. Motherhood therefore becomes an important theme in the television series. However, because as a Handmaid Offred belongs to Serena and Fred Waterford, they become her daughter’s legal parents and call her Nichole. Besides Hannah, her new-born daughter also gives Offred more courage to resist in Gilead. When, because of guilt, Offred has lost all hope and sense of self at the beginning of season two, it is finally her unborn child who saves her, as Offred promises her not to let her grow up

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<sup>61</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2017. 55’35”.

<sup>62</sup> “Night.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 26’36”.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 43’48”.

in this place. Following this, she plans an escape to get her to safety in the last episode of season two. However, in the end, Offred keeps her promise to Hannah by deciding to stay in Gilead to save her, although she could have escaped with Emily and Nichole. The determination to reunite with Hannah makes Offred stronger than ever, as she shows a defiant face at the very end of the episode:



FIGURE 32: “THE WORD.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 13, HULU, 2017. 1H 01’53”.

While motherhood in Atwood’s novel mainly brings painful memories to Offred and does not give her any hope, as she tries to forget about her daughter, the protagonist of the television series in contrast thus fights for her daughters Hannah and Nichole. This alteration from page to screen increased Offred’s rebelliousness and hope for the future.

#### 5.1.3.2. Nick’s invigorating love

One of the alterations in the adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to a television series that explains Offred’s newfound hope and will to rebel is her relationship with Nick, her Commander’s driver. In both Atwood’s novel and the Hulu series, Offred first has sex with Nick because Serena Joy asks her to in order to have more chances to get pregnant. But, in both media, she finally goes back to Nick on her own. Without anyone’s knowledge, the two thus start an illicit love affair. However, the impact this relationship has on Offred differs from page to screen.

In the novel of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred needs this relationship with Nick: “I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely” (*THT*, 280), as “being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside” (*THT*, 281), it is an escape from reality. Her relationship with Nick also allows Offred to reconcile with her former self,

because she says, “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known” (*THT*, 282). As Moosavinia & Yousefi argue, “this relationship helps her retrieve her identity and she feels empowered as not only she is transgressing the state ideology on sexuality, but she is also making a choice” (2018, 172). However, because of her love affair with Nick, Offred settles in Gilead, as she acknowledges “the fact is I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (*THT*, 283). Subsequently, a major part of the debate on Offred’s heroism in Atwood’s novel “focuses on her love affair with Nick” (Weiss, 2009, 122). Some scholars interpret this affair as a rebellious act, as “in a world that outlaws passionate love, Offred’s relationship with Nick is a subversive one simply by its very nature, leaving aside the question of whether he is a member of Mayday or an eye” (Weiss, 2009, 122). Feuer furthermore suggests that “it is through Offred’s affair with Nick ... that her re-created self desires and rebels” (1997, 86). Nevertheless, other critics disagree and see it as an escape for Offred, or something that drains her “of any rebelliousness she might have” (Weiss, 2009, 123), since “after Offred begins her affair with Nick, she loses all interest in Mayday and in the possibility of escape” (Miner, 1991, 35). Subsequently, although Offred’s relationship with Nick allows her to keep some sense of self because she can tell him her real name, she loses her agency and hope to escape and rebel with him. Furthermore, to repeat a quote from Morrison, Nick “is presented as the heroine’s potential protector, a candidate for the role of hero. With few options, Offred is ... ‘essentially passive and in need of rescue by a man’” (2000, 321). Consequently, this love affair in Atwood’s novel makes Offred accept her situation in Gilead and “expose[s] the dangerously seductive elements of women’s romantic fiction by showing how their heroines are paralyzed or trapped by the old plots” (Morrison, 2000, 332).

The love affair between Nick and Offred in the television series is represented in a quite different manner, as their relationship “in the Hulu series develops far beyond that in the novel; [Nick] becomes a crucial confidant and her main support” (Florczak, 2020, 46). The two characters in fact share something more than just a relationship to escape the harsh reality of Gilead, or to feel valued. While in the novel Nick and Offred seem to be together for physical contact only, since Offred says “he seems indifferent to most of what I have to say, alive only to the possibilities of my body” (*THT*, 282), Nick in the television series genuinely cares for Offred. Long before they have sex, Nick often worries about Offred’s well-being. After Offred is beaten by Aunt Lydia for talking back during her interrogation on Ofglen,

Nick comes to see her in her bedroom to check on her and bring some ice, although they have not begun a love affair yet. He even tells her, “I should have just driven away with you”<sup>64</sup>, because he knew a black van was waiting for her at home and he feels guilty for her pain. Later in the first season, Nick sympathizes with Offred saying “I’m sorry this is happening to you”<sup>65</sup>. Once Serena asks of them to have sex, like in the novel, Offred and Nick’s relationship bloom as they continue to see each other secretly and flirt whenever they can. Whereas in the novel Offred admits that “neither of us says the word *love*, not once” (*THT*, 282), Nick and Offred in the television series end up loving each other, and they do not refrain from saying it:

*Offred*: I can’t lose you, do you hear me?  
*Nick*: I love you.<sup>66</sup>

As a result, “in the Hulu series, Nick becomes not only Offred’s lover but also her partner. He is a source of solace and support, whereas in the novel he is more of a stand-in for Offred’s desire to assert some form of control over her life” (Florczak, 2020, 47). Offred’s relationship with Nick is in fact a safe bubble in which she can express her emotions and be listened to and encouraged. She relies on Nick to invigorate because with him, Offred recharges her batteries and finds the hope and the strength to rebel.



FIGURE 33: “THE LAST CEREMONY.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 2, EPISODE 10, HULU, 2017. 50’31”.

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<sup>64</sup> “Late.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 39’15”.

<sup>65</sup> “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 1, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 21’02”.

<sup>66</sup> “First Blood.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 6, Hulu, 2017. 36’05”.

Subsequently, Offred's love affair with Nick in the television series does not strip Offred of her rebelliousness. On the contrary, she is the one to thrusts Nick to resist as well. Nick being an Eye, there would be no benefit for him to defy the regime, and he urges Offred not to go against Gilead at first: "there's no point trying to be tough or brave ... everybody breaks"<sup>67</sup>. However, Offred eventually confronts him: "Fuck, is this it? Is this enough for you this bullshit life? Is this what you want? You want to polish his car and once in a while just try to get a Handmaid pregnant? Is that enough for you?"<sup>68</sup>. Nick's love for Offred eventually makes him resist the regime as well, as he helps her escape several times. In the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's relationship with Nick thus reinvigorates her, since he is "her partner and provid[es] Offred with what appears to be genuine solidarity" (Florczak, 2020, 47). From their love affair, Offred draws hope and strength to reclaim her former identity and to defy Gilead.

## 5.2. Adapting with the twenty-first century feminist waves

As Offred herself suggests in Atwood's novel, "context is all" (*THT*, 154) and, as such, the context of the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* in a television series greatly impacts the story and can explain some alterations from page to screen. The representation of Offred's identity conflict having been observed, one of the reasons behind the changes making Offred's story more hopeful and making the protagonist more assertive on screen is according to me the modern context. To be precise, I believe that adapting *The Handmaid's Tale* during new waves of feminism altered Offred's story and justifies the differences with the novel.

Whereas Atwood's novel is "a product of 1980's feminism and women's rights issues ... the re-adaptation of June's story and the creation of Miller's television series is the timely result of modern feminism" (Hershman, 2018, 59). The screenwriters' choice to modernize the story by adding smartphones, apps like Uber and Tinder, or by diversifying the cast does not end there, as they also made the series echo modern gender issues. Movements trying to break the silence around sexual violence, such as #MeToo or #TimesUp are now known worldwide thanks to social media, and aspects of the Hulu television series are reminiscent of

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<sup>67</sup> "Late." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 3, Hulu, 2017. 21'27".

<sup>68</sup> "Jezebel's." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 43'47".

that. As Hershman argues, the “survivors of sexual oppression ... have found support and the courage to resist by telling their stories” (2018, 59) just like Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Furthermore, Miller’s adaptation of Offred’s story shows us that “there is also room for hope, a chance to fight back, and a way to recreate an after” (Hershman, 2018, 59). One element in the television series is especially resonant to modern movements denouncing sexual harassment and breaking the silence by telling the stories of victims, and that is the secret package that Offred is asked to hide for Mayday. As Howell suggests, this package is

potentially devastating to Gilead ... [and] it’s a clear a nod to the power of #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. The feeling of relief and release which attends June’s reading of these accounts by multiple women who, like her, have also been forced into slavery and deprived of their children ... confirms the way the series resonates with such social media movements – and against the voicelessness of those who have no secure means to bear witness ... they voice hope for the future. (2019, 8-9)

In that way, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* shows us that there is a way to resist and that not only recognizing this oppression but sharing personal narratives of oppression is a large step in the direction of resistance and justice” (Hershman, 2018, 65). This is why, not surprisingly, the screenwriters of the television series have emphasized Offred’s identity conflict and focused on her story as a victim in Gilead.

Besides the reference to contemporary movements, the television series also adapts Offred’s story in a way that better fits in the twenty-first century feminist waves. By adding female solidarity on screen that is, according to me, absent from Atwood’s novel, the series better reflects the new waves of feminism of today. In fact, “the latest movements in feminism may consider resorting to new forms of utopianism and, accordingly, of solidarity, in order to restore sorority as the (e)merging power for women to fight, rather than serve, patriarchy” (Machado-Jiménez, 2018, 45). Also, to remain faithful to Atwood’s way of telling Offred’s story from a female point of view, the adaptation makes it a point of honour to film *The Handmaid’s Tale* through the female gaze.

### **5.2.1. Emergence of female solidarity**

Because Miller’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is adapted in the current feminist waves focused on breaking silence, inclusion, intersectionality and female solidarity, for instance in the #MeToo movement, it is impossible not to change the way women interact with each

other on screen. While Atwood's novel depicts little to no female solidarity, the Hulu television series contrariwise portrays how female unity can help fight the patriarchy.

The Republic of Gilead, both in the novel and the series of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is very effective in its way of suppressing female solidarity. Callaway explains how "the patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women" and accordingly "successfully destroy[s] female solidarity" (2008, 49). Subsequently, "the result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women" (Callaway, 2008, 49). Furthermore, Gilead enforces surveillance and distrust between women, especially Handmaids, as they "are encouraged to watch over other Handmaids, to question them and to report on them" (Machado-Jiménez, 2018, 59). This wariness of other women results in "distrustfulness between female individuals, thus zipping their mouths and dragging them into deep loneliness and isolation" (Gayret, 2019, 113).

Still, some passages of the novel show that female solidarity can exist. The protagonist occasionally has illegal conversations with other Handmaids; she explains, "sometimes you can find things out, on Birth Days" (*THT*, 134) and recounts how "the woman next to me says, low in my ear, 'Are you looking for anyone?'" (*THT*, 134). But all in all, despite those occasions to create female unity, critics such as Stillman & Johnson argue that "Offred shows herself to be self-absorbed, focused on her own happiness or survival, and unconcerned with women as a group" (1994, 81). Morrison as well finds that Offred has "complicated, often ambivalent feelings toward women in general" (2000, 330). While Ofglen offers Offred to join Mayday, the latter is eventually satisfied that Ofglen is gone so that she will not have to help others and risk her life anymore. Plus, beside Ofglen, Offred does not really speak to any woman and does not share their burden. In the novel, the little amount of female solidarity that exists during events is thus silent, discreet, passive and explains how scholars have suggested that there is an "absence of female unity in the novel" (Gayret, 2019, 115) or in other words "there is multitude, but no union; ... there is sorority, but no solidarity" (Machado-Jiménez, 2018, 59).

The screenwriters of *The Handmaid's Tale* have utterly changed that aspect of the story in the television series. As Florczak clarifies, "in the Hulu series, it is no longer about subtle solidarity but rather loud and open action" (2020, 53). When Janine is sentenced to be

stoned to death by her fellow Handmaids, all of them drop their stones and openly defy the regime by disobeying Aunt Lydia's direct order. Marching home together on Nina Simone's song "Feeling good", this scene portrays female solidarity and unity in all its splendour.



FIGURE 34: "NIGHT." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 10, HULU, 2017. 51'43".

Plus, Offred's relationship with women is much improved in the series, as she genuinely cares about them. Within the context of new waves of feminism, "the female solidarity between Offred and the other Handmaids is very welcome in sf television" (Koistinen & Samola 350). In the adaptation, Offred often worries for Ofglen/Emily and asks how she is doing, she is always the first to help Janine when she gets overwhelmed in Gilead, and she interacts with other Handmaids whenever she can. Although in the novel "the Handmaids 'despise' the cowering Janine because they fear degenerating into such a state" (Morrison, 2000, 330), Offred is never far from her at events to show support: calming her at the Red Centre when she loses her mind, helping and consoling her at the birth of her daughter, and finally convincing her not to jump off a bridge with her new-born at the end of season one. In fact, when Janine threatens to commit suicide with the Putnam's daughter, the Aunts call upon Offred to come and calm her. In an example of solidarity between women, Offred tries to convince Janine that things are going to get better and that Handmaids are all in this together:

*Offred:* Janine, change is coming. There is hope. All of this, it's all going to be over one day. And everything is gonna go back to normal. And we are gonna go out, we're gonna go out drinking, you and me.

*Janine:* And Moira? ... And Alma?

*Offred: Yeah.*<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, Offred often interacts with other Handmaids. An illustration thereof is the illicit exchange of their true names whispered around the shop, under the oblivious eyes of the Guardians, in the second season. This rebellious act is initiated by Offred herself, as she first tells her name to Brianna, who then tells hers to Alma and their names continuously spread around with a crescendo music in the background symbolizing their increasing hope and feeling of solidarity<sup>70</sup>. Additionally, in contrast to the novel, the television series makes use of the division of women in different sororities with uniforms to show female solidarity. In Offred's voice-over, after having discovered what the Latin inscription in her closet means, and after a flashback of female solidarity at the Red Centre, Offred says, "there was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She is dead. She is alive. She is me. We are Handmaids. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches*"<sup>71</sup>. As a video essay points out, at that moment,

while Offred walks in slow motion, and behind her the other handmaids enter the frame and fall in step, [it is] as if she's their leader. With her bold voiceover, Offred reclaims the handmade title. To her being a handmaid now means being part of a community of women so strong that even the most inhuman conditioning won't stop them from being kind to each other. (ScreenPrism, 2017)

Because the message of the previous Offred in her closet gave the protagonist hope and a feeling of not being alone, she is determined to do the same once that message has been removed. Therefore, she carves with the key to her music box "You are not alone"<sup>72</sup> on the wall. Also, later on in the series, after illegally smuggling a package of letters written by Handmaids, Offred says in her voice-over: "It's their own fault, they should never have given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army"<sup>73</sup>. In the television series, the bond between Handmaids is thus stronger, creating that female solidarity that is missing from Atwood's novel and that eventually leads to a rebellion. However, it is true that "we don't really see that kind of bonding happening much across class lines – higher-class women willingly participate

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<sup>69</sup> "The Bridge." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 9, Hulu, 2017. 38'54".

<sup>70</sup> "After." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 7, Hulu, 2017. 45'07".

<sup>71</sup> "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 4, Hulu, 2017. 50'47".

<sup>72</sup> "Jezebel's." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 8, Hulu, 2017. 47'50".

<sup>73</sup> "Night." *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 10, Hulu, 2017. 06'08".

in the oppression of the lower-class women for their own benefit” (Screenprism, 2018). Still, the female unity that the screenwriters added in the television series between Handmaids, and Marthas occasionally, helps Offred to regain her agency and to have the strength to rebel. Florczak even argues that “women’s solidarity is emphasized only when it is suited to the new depiction of active, resistance-fighter Offred” (2020, 53). Without this alteration from page to screen, Offred would probably have had less support from the other Handmaids to dare resist the regime.

### **5.2.2. The female gaze**

Another way for the adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to answer to the context of the twenty-first century feminist waves, is by making sure that Offred’s female point of view in her story is respected in the change of form from page to screen. Whereas the film adaptation of Atwood’s novel has been filmed through a male gaze, focusing on the Commander’s character and “silenc[ing] the voice of the Handmaid” (Howell, 2019, 5), the television series does Offred justice by telling her story from her point of view and especially through a female gaze. That is truly necessary as the original story in the novel is directly narrated by Offred herself, like a testimony, through cassettes. To keep this female point of view, the female gaze technique is essential.

The female gaze, as is explained by Iris Brey, author of “Le regard féminin: une révolution à l’écran”, in an interview, is defined as a shared experience with the female protagonist on screen. She clarifies that it is not necessarily a question of identification with the protagonist, but rather a question of being in her body and feel and experience what she is going through. The female gaze is, according to her, also thinking of how a movie or series can include the viewers in the story (Tuailon, 2020). According to Iris Brey, in order to pass the test of the female gaze, a cinematographic work must answer those criteria:

- 1 / Il faut que le personnage principal s’identifie en tant que femme.
- 2/ Que l’histoire soit racontée de son point de vue.
- 3/ Que son histoire remette en question l’ordre patriarcal.
- 4/ Que grâce à la mise en scène, le spectateur ou la spectatrice ressente l’expérience féminine.
- 5/ Si les corps sont érotisés, le geste doit être conscientisé.
- 6/ Le plaisir des spectateurs ne découle pas d’une pulsion scopique. (Tuailon, 2020)

The television series passes the female gaze test, as the protagonist is a female, and the story is told from her point of view in a dystopian world in which she has to fight the patriarchal regime of Gilead. Moreover, the audio-visual techniques used by the cinematographers brings the viewer to experience what Offred goes through with her. Beside using the voice-over to understand Offred's thoughts, Director Morano and Cinematographer Watkinson explain in an interview how they managed to make us feel what the characters of the series feel:

Trying to put yourself in someone's head — how do you visualize that? One of the ways I always thought we'd visualize that was by putting the camera physically closer to her for her close-ups, be on a wider lens because ... it makes the audience close the person in much more uncomfortable way ... We adopted a particular lens for Offred because being a POV-type show, we wanted to be inside Offred's head and make the viewer feel like every nuance Elizabeth made we'd be capturing. They'd be close enough to feel every movement. (O'Falt, 2017)

Additionally, Puschak in a video essay reveals how “the shallow depth of field extreme close-ups are an effective way to get the audience to identify with Offred” (2017). Furthermore, the camera often focuses on what Offred sees, as a way to give the viewer her point of view. During one of the Ceremonies, when the Commander suddenly touches Offred's leg, she panics and looks at Serena to see if she notices. To make us experience her fear through her, the camera films Serena as if we were looking at her from Offred's eyes, in other words we see her upside down, above us.



FIGURE 35: “FAITHFUL.” *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 5, HULU, 2017. 28’55”.

The cinematographic and audio-visual techniques of the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* thus “allows us to witness women growing strong, rebelling and expressing themselves ... [and] help us connect emotionally to this nightmare, to feel what these women feel in a world that treats them as less than human” (ScreenPrism, 2017). Contrary to the novel, the series

does not only focus on the protagonist's story, but also gives the point of view of other characters. In the first and second season, we follow the storylines of Moira, Emily, Serena, Luke and Nick. The pluralized focalisation of the series does not mean, however, that their storylines are not filmed through a female gaze, on the contrary. In fact, we see things through Serena's eyes when we are given her point of view. As she walks down the stairs, the viewer sees the Commander below as Serena Joy would see him, partially hidden by the ceiling.



FIGURE 36: "A WOMAN'S PLACE." *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, SEASON 1, EPISODE 6, HULU, 2017. 06'35".

Concisely, with the use of female gaze in the adaptation of Atwood's novel "we're not taking the point of view of the oppressors, nor do we find the violence exciting or fascinating. We're very much in the women's experience" (The Take, 2018). Furthermore, due to the filming of the series with a female gaze, Offred's identity conflict and resistance in Gilead has been emphasized on screen. That is why Offred's struggle to regain her former sense of self and her agency is more easily observable in the television series than in Atwood's novel.

## **Conclusion: remodelling Offred's crisis of selves to induce hope**

The present dissertation aimed to study how the identity conflict of *The Handmaid's Tale's* protagonist present in Margaret Atwood's novel written in 1985 is reworked in the adaptation thereof in the 2017 television series by Hulu. Miller's cinematographic adaptation alters Offred's story in some ways and, as a result, emphasizes the main character's identity crisis between her former self known as June and her forced identity as a Handmaid. This differentiation between the personas of Offred and June, her present and former selves, being relatively new, the subject had not yet been observed by other scholars in Atwood's novel. Subsequently, the purpose of this research was to determine how Offred's struggle between loss of self and reclaiming her agency is represented in both media.

The first and second chapter of the present study help create a basis for this research. First, explaining the differences between the novel of *The Handmaid's Tale* and its adaptations in a movie in 1990 and a television series in 2017, plus analysing the audio-visual techniques the Hulu series uses, allows us to understand how to examine the adaptation and the alterations that were made without condemning them for not being faithful to the original work. Additionally, it reveals that to study the protagonist's identity conflict, the television series is a better primary source than the 1990 movie, as the latter does not give any access to Offred's thoughts or emotions whereas the series does. Second, observing the protagonist in the novel and the series uncovers that there is a tension between her two personas, that is to say her Gilead-constructed self as the meek Handmaid Offred, and her former bold self June. Clarifying how the difference between the two selves can be observed is crucial to be able to analyse its representation in the novel and the series afterwards. The review of the audio-visual techniques the Hulu television series uses, such as voice-over, music, framing, and a close-up on facial expressions, helps identifying the differences in the depiction of Offred and June's personas on screen.

In the third chapter dedicated to the protagonist's use of the Handmaid's mask, we have seen that her persona as the meek Offred can help her preserve herself from the atrocities of Gilead, but can also provide a way to manipulate the people around her at her advantage. In the novel, this self-preservation is represented by Offred burying her former name and agency in order to save them for later. In contrast, Offred in the television series is determined to keep her memories of her loved ones alive and also reveals her true name in the very first

episode of the series. However, by wearing the Handmaid's mask to preserve herself, Offred also threatens to lose her sense of self by finally embracing a meek persona. The research then demonstrates that Offred loses her sense of self at times when she has to disembodiment to escape situations in which she is being harmed, for instance the monthly Ceremony where the Commander and his Wife rape her. The television series accentuates Offred's disembodiment in season two, by letting the Handmaid's persona completely take over when the protagonist is crushed by guilt, making the bold June utterly silent in her voice-over and facial expressions. Whilst the main character sometimes struggles to find a balance between wearing the Handmaid's mask for her protection and completely inhabiting it and annihilating her sense of self, she also uses her persona as the obedient and innocent Handmaid to her advantage. In fact, Offred can benefit from her Handmaid's mask to manipulate the Commander during their secret meetings. Whereas in the novel Offred's exploitation of her Handmaid persona is essentially represented in the way she bargains with the Commander and has to be someone she is not him, the television series adds to that by making use of facial close-ups to show when Offred is being false and manipulative by playing a role. By making Offred hold onto her former name and memories more than in the novel, and by emphasizing the difficulty to find a balance between impersonating the obedient Handmaid publicly and preserving a sense of self interiorly, the television series complexifies the protagonist's identity conflict on screen.

The study of Offred's relationship with Aunt Lydia, Serena Joy and Commander Waterford in chapter four furthermore reveals how in both media these characters prevent the protagonist from retrieving a sense of self or from regaining her agency and rebel. To further complicate the relationships Offred has with those characters, the television series makes them much more present on screen than they were in the novel. With their added screen time, the interactions between them and Offred are multiplied and the fact that the protagonist loses her sense of self in the presence of Aunt Lydia, Serena and Fred is yet more represented. The research demonstrates that Aunt Lydia's violence and brainwashing is increased on screen, to the point where she utterly destroys Offred's sense of self in the second season, whereas in the novel Aunt Lydia is mainly present in Offred's memories of the Red Centre. Then, the screenwriters have decided to make Serena's character more complex by changing her age among other things, at the same time inserting a love-hate relationship between Offred and Serena that is absent in the novel. Their relationship on screen also includes a power game in

which Serena often triumphs by putting Offred back in her place as an inferior Handmaid, at the same time shattering her agency. What concerns Offred's relationship with her Commander, the television series represents it in a more sickening way as the protagonist seems disgusted by his touch. The fact that she cannot refuse his advances is obvious in her helpless facial expressions as well. Whereas in the novel Offred almost likes her nights with the Commander as it takes her mind off things, in the series the main character has to endure his obsession with her whether she likes it or not. Additionally, the fact that she has to wear her Handmaid's mask with him and be used as a sex object, in both media, does not help Offred regain a sense of self or feel valued as a human being.

This research dissertation has moreover demonstrated in chapter five that Offred succeeds in regaining her former bold self and her agency in the television series, while Offred in Atwood's dystopia fails to do so. In the novel, Offred stays in her Gilead-constructed identity by comfort and willingly abandons her sense of self as June. As Gayret concludes on Offred's behaviour at the end of the novel, rather than "regaining a sense of self, she guarantees physical survival by bearing on an inferior identity ... She physically survives, yet she is still mentally and spiritually malnourished and her self images crumple away" (2019, 119). The television series, however, depicts Offred's struggle to reclaim her former self as June in a different way, as in the end she manages to reconnect with her rebellious persona. As a result, the Hulu series makes Offred's story more hopeful on screen than it is on page, and the adaptation also "serves as a cautionary tale and as a call to action for our current society" (Hershman, 2018, 63).

Several explanations may be put forward to account for Offred's success in reclaiming her agency and her former sense of self in the television series, in contrast to the novel. First, Miller's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* granted Offred's character more loving relationships giving her the support she needs to resist in Gilead. Specifically, motherhood and Offred's love affair with Nick both help the protagonist to retrieve a sense of self. In fact, it is in her love for others that Offred slowly reappropriates her agency and awareness of who she is and eventually regains the strength and the will to go against the authoritarian regime. Besides, Offred in the Hulu series seems ready to risk her life for her daughters, Hannah and Nichole, as she willingly chooses to stay behind to save Hannah at the end of the second season while she could have escaped the violent regime. Second, the context in which *The Handmaid's Tale* is being adapted into a television series is different from the context in

which Margaret Atwood wrote her novel. Whereas Atwood's novel was written during the second wave of feminism, Offred's story has been adapted by reflecting the gender issues of the twenty-first century feminist waves. By modernizing the story, the screenwriters have for instance added female solidarity which is lacking in Atwood's novel. This alternation from page to screen benefits Offred's character, as from her relationships with other female characters, Offred gains strength, hope and the feeling of not being alone in her struggle. The screenwriters' choice to modernize *The Handmaid's Tale* also explains the need for a more assertive and resistant protagonist, since the current feminist movements empower women to fight against the patriarchy and Offred's character gives the viewers hope. Third, the reception of the series can also account for Offred's achievement to reclaim her identity and rebel on screen. It is highly probable that a failing protagonist would not have given the series as much success as an actively resistant heroine. Because television series are so mainstream, and a product of Hollywood, the screenwriter idealizes Offred's character by making her more rebellious and assertive on screen. While the series does complexify Offred's identity conflict through visuals, it also in some ways simplifies her character by rapidly turning her into a hero. In Atwood's novel, one may argue that Offred's character, even though she has flaws and gives up at the end of her narrative, is more realistic as she very humanly fears for her life. Also, since the Hulu series extends Offred's story, it answers to all the readers questions and doubts on Offred's mysterious past and future after Gilead, as well as other characters' storylines. The speculative aspect of Atwood's story is hence decreased, as everything seems to be answered in the series and Gilead increasingly resembles our society. This need to render Offred's character more heroic on screen and to solve all the unanswered parts of the novel in a hopeful way may be seen as the television series' limitations compared to the novel.

In addition, the study of the modern adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* revealed how the cinematographers made use of the female gaze to translate Offred's story on screen. Accordingly, since the focus is put on sharing the female protagonist's experience in Gilead, the series emphasizes Offred's struggle to regain her agency. The importance of the female gaze to translate Offred's story from page to screen is especially noticeable when Miller's television series is compared to the previous cinematographic adaptation by Wilson and Schlöndorff in 1990 that uses a male gaze in its reworking of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As critics have said about the movie, the adaptation silences Offred's voice and focuses on making her

story a Hollywoodian thriller. As a result, “in contrast to Atwood’s narrative, which is entirely concerned with ... female experience of totalitarian control, developing the story’s generic potential as an erotic thriller meant privileging a male perspective” (Howell, 2019, 5). The story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is thus portrayed from a male gaze in the movie adaptation, losing the female focus. The present study has shown that the television series pays tribute to Offred’s survival story in an authoritarian world by using the female gaze. This female perspective in the series, absent in the movie, helps convey the identity tension that Offred experiences.

Nonetheless, I acknowledge this research is solely based on the first two seasons of the Hulu series, and not on the third season and the upcoming fourth season. Future research should further develop and confirm the initial findings by analysing Offred’s crisis of selves in the following seasons. Observing the protagonist’s behaviour in the entirety of the television series may influence the results that were found in this study. Moreover, I am aware that the comparative analysis takes the second season of the Hulu series into account while only the first season is parallel to Margaret Atwood’s novel. I thus analysed the main character’s identity crisis not only in the adaptation of the novel from page to screen, but also in the rest of her storyline invented by the screenwriters. This probably has had an influence on my findings as well. In addition, reception studies on the novel of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the television series might prove an important area for future research, as this dissertation suggested that the series’ reception was partly responsible for the changes in Offred’s character from page to screen. Besides, further work is certainly required to analyse how the series evolves with the resurgence of misogynistic politics in the Trumpian context and with gender movements such as #MeToo. Further research may also study the impact of twenty-first century feminist waves on Hulu’s adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, since the study conducted in the fifth chapter constitutes but a first step to analyse its influence on Offred’s story and character.

While the television series does show the limitations of its genre by representing Offred’s character as an idealized assertive hero on screen, the adaptation also seeks to motivate people to actively resist the current patriarchal system leading us to a future resembling that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Adapting Atwood’s novel according to the current gender and political contexts invites the viewer not only to witness Offred’s battle in Gilead, but additionally to follow her lead by fighting for gender equality and women’s rights in our society.

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