

“UNDER HIS EYE” – A COMPARISON OF MARGARET ATWOOD’S NOVEL *THE  
HANDMAID’S TALE* AND THE TELEVISION SERIES ADAPTATION

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to compare and contrast Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* with its television series adaptation. The object of the study is to examine the kind of differences that can be found when comparing the two works, and what could be the reasons behind these differences. The tools used to conduct the analysis were feminist theories as well as multimodal discourse analysis.

The data for the study consists of the original novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and the first season of the television series adaptation by Hulu Network. The data was delimited to consist of only the first season of the series as it is the only season that is based on the novel.

The findings presented in the study showcase that while being mostly faithful to the novel, the television series adaptation does present a more feminist version of the original story. The depiction of the protagonist is deemed as more feminist in the television series.

## Tiivistelmä

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on verrata toisiinsa Margaret Atwoodin romaania *The Handmaid's Tale* (suom. *Orjattaresi*) ja sen televisiosovitusta. Tutkielmassa etsitään eroavaisuuksia näiden kahden teoksen välillä ja oletettuja syitä, joita näille eroavaisuuksille voidaan löytää. Analyysissa on käytetty apuna feministisiä teorioita sekä multimodaalista diskurssianalyysia.

Tutkimusmateriaalina käytettiin Margaret Atwoodin kirjoittamaa alkuperäistä romaania, *The Handmaid's Tale* sekä televisiosarjan ensimmäistä kautta. Ensimmäinen kausi on valittu, koska se on ainoa kausi, joka kokonaisuudessaan perustuu Atwoodin romaaniin.

Tutkimustuloksista voidaan päätellä sarjan suurimmilta osin seuraavan romaanin juonta ja teemaa mutta esittävän feministisemmän version alkuperäisestä tarinasta. Tämä feminististä teoriaa tukeva esitys on nähtävissä esimerkiksi televisiosarjassa päähenkilön, Offredin, kuvauksessa.

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## 1. Introduction

The works of great authors have been a limitless resource for adaptations ranging from theater stage to the silver screen. Fiction or non-fiction, the art of adapting a written work has fascinated generations of media producers and captivated audiences all over the world. Cultural works can both alter the way the world is perceived and offer a new perspective on it. Everyone consumes cultural material in some form, therefore sometimes the greatest means to affect the minds of the people is to create a work that will provoke or present new ideas of existing phenomena. In the United States of America, this kind of work was recently released in the form of a television adaptation for the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, originally written by Margaret Atwood. The theme of the novel has been discussed widely, sometimes being described as a feminist political novel and sometimes as a nationalist anthem. However, the television series has been created amidst president Donald Trump's presidential campaign and inauguration. The feminist movement has been on the rise against Trump, and thus, it can be argued that the television series has a profound feminist statement. Still, Margaret Atwood has affirmed that she has no authority over the television series and has no desire to interfere with the creative process, as she is fully content with the way the series has turned out (Brown). The events in the novel might seem very distant and almost absurd for some, yet similar things are happening all over the world and have happened in history, thus one might perceive the novel and the television series as a critique of the world as it is or a warning sign of times yet to come.

The quote found in the title of the thesis, "under his eye", refers to the greetings used in the Republic of Gilead, a fictional dystopian state where the story takes place. The citizens of the republic are compelled to use different kind of greetings that emphasize the strength of the newly found regime. These greetings include "under his eye", "blessed be the fruit" and "may the lord open". As Gilead is an overtly religious regime, all the greetings have a religious tone to them, but when examined, include also a reminder. Language is used as a tool for oppressing the citizens, and in "under his eye", the message is clear; one is being watched and one's actions are monitored by some higher power, both God and the regime. Also, in this instance, the "his" refers to the patriarchal power structures of the republic, as men are the leaders and essentially, the ones watching and controlling the citizens.

The aim of the thesis is to focus on the differences between the novel and its adaptation, and prove that the television series relies more on the ideas of feminism than the original novel does. This thesis will examine Offred, the main protagonist of both the novel and the television adaptation. The character will be described according to both, the novel and the television series,

and further analyzed utilizing multimodal discourse analysis and feminist theory. The theme of the novel and the television series will also be examined, as the television series is described to be far more political in nature, especially emphasizing the feminist movement that has been very much topical in the United States. Furthermore, adaptation theory is presented to clarify the inevitable changes that happen when adapting a novel to a television series.

## 2. Materials

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and acclaimed Canadian author whose career consists of writing, illustrating, and teaching in both creative writing and the English language. Her first work was published in 1961, in a form of a poetry pamphlet in a small press edition magazine. Since then she has published more than 40 books, her works ranging from short fiction to poetry, and from graphic novels to children's books. Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and was raised in Northern Ontario, Quebec, and in Toronto (Biography). There is a difference in the Canadian and American political atmospheres, thus, the author's inspiration for writing political works might derive from growing close to these two political climates. This difference has been strongly visible during her life and Canada's past as a former colony might have impacted her views on political issues. Her works have often been viewed as having political undertones or even being indisputably political. For instance, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been deemed as a strongly feminist work by many who have watched the television series. However, regarding the novel Atwood herself has stated that:

[f]irst, is *The Handmaid's Tale* a feminist novel? If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. 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. In that sense, many books are 'feminist'. (Atwood)

The author has not wanted to attach any specific political labels to her novel, stating that she has meant for her creation to be more than a feminist statement and rather make people think about different power structures and how people operate within those structures (Oppenheim).

The novel itself acts as the primary source for the thesis, as it is the original work and it was first published in 1985, its length being 311 pages. *The Handmaid's Tale* has also been adapted to a movie, an opera and some other adaptations, which will not be relevant for this thesis. The television series is produced by the American entertainment company Hulu television network and it aired for the first time in the United States of America in April 2017. The series is still ongoing and is currently running on two seasons and altogether 23 episodes. The first season consists of ten episodes and the running time of each episode varies between 45-60 minutes (*The Handmaid's Tale*, Hulu).

The first season of the series is adapted from the novel; thus, the materials for this study include only the first season. Furthermore, the first season sets the tone for the rest of the series as well as introduces the theme and the characters to the audience. Some of the changes that have been made to the first season of the television series will be described later in the analysis and concern mostly the depiction of Offred when compared to the novel. The second season introduces a new plotline, which starts where the novel ends, thus it will not be included in the materials of the thesis.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the imaginary republic of Gilead, which is ruled by a totalitarian regime. The republic is established on the ruins of what was formerly known as the United States of America, the president has been killed and there is a new regime. The new laws in the republic rely heavily on old traditional values and rules, derived mostly from the teachings found from the Bible. The regime consists of men called Commanders, who have the most power in the society. Gilead's strict hierarchy presents Commanders as rulers, their wives as the second highest in the hierarchy and after them, different kinds of servants from secret police to handmaids. Women are labeled in different categories which determine what kind of rights they have over the other women, and what kind of status they have in the society. One of the most prominent expectations set by the traditional values in Gilead states that the Commanders need to have children and continue their lineage. If the couple is not able to reproduce, the servants called handmaids are used to bear the Commander's children. These handmaids are given a household where the husbands force themselves on them until the handmaid becomes pregnant, carries and gives birth to the child. The handmaid is expected to continue her service as long as necessary, in order to satisfy the assigned household. The handmaids are usually women in their best reproductive age who have proven to be fertile and submit to their fate as being handmaids. The women are trained for this purpose with most brutal ways by women of higher status, Aunts. In the case of failing to comply to the orders or fulfil their duties as handmaids they are sent to the Colonies, where they will work until they die. Furthermore, if a woman proves to be infertile, they are deemed useless and sent to the Colonies (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*).

The protagonist of the story is a handmaid called Offred, who was once an independent woman living with her husband and daughter before the times of Gilead. Offred is assigned to the family of Commander Waterford and his wife Serena Joy. The story unfolds as Offred struggles to follow the rules of the household and act according to the laws of the republic. Her greatest challenge being forgetting her former life and allowing herself to be treated as property, essentially as a childbearing machine (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*).

### 3. Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis will be based on feminist criticism and post-feminist theory. The theories will support the thesis in defining the point of view from which the characters will be examined from. The reason for choosing these theories is the argument that the same kind of themes and ideological statements cannot be found from *The Handmaid's Tale*, as there is in the television adaptation. Multimodal discourse analysis is the methodological framework which is utilized to analyze the novel and the television series. Adaptation theory is used to understand the mechanics of the adaptation industry and what kind of changes are inevitable when adapting a novel to a television series.

#### 3.1. Feminist criticism and post-feminist theory

Feminist criticism is based on the ideology of feminism. Feminism can be defined as an ideology that aims to recognize and dismantle the power structures that can be found in the society and recognize its harmful effects. The idea of feminism has been around for several decades and there can be found different kinds of waves that have defined the ideology differently, but the origins of feminist literary criticism lie in the 1960's women's movement in the United States of America (Barry, 16). The beginnings of feminist approaches to research lie in the alleged sexism in research community. (Trier-Biekniek, 22). Bringing the importance of women's voices to the forefront is a way for feminist researchers to challenge patriarchal foundations that can be found in society as well as creating situational knowledge. Situational knowledge allows us to recognize our own privilege in society as well as understand the lives and experiences of women that are different from our own. Trier-Biekniek specifies that feminist analysis creates a voice for marginalized women and thus, makes the research enhanced by her point of view (23). Furthermore, Trier-Biekniek states that "identity cannot be ignored in feminist research because part of conducting feminist research is understanding where and how the standpoint of women has been neglected" (23).

Trier-Bieniek identifies feminist movements to first, second, and third waves. It has been discussed if there is a fourth wave of feminism that is appearing amid social media and the growing use of technology. This wave takes into account these aforementioned factors as well as advocates the idea of individual responsibility to make their surroundings a better place for everyone and to stop focusing on the self so excessively. Nevertheless, this wave is yet to be recognized fully by scholars (Trier-Bieniek, 22). Third wave feminism has brought attention to the fact that feminism should also include other than white women, which post-feminist thinking usually aims for. Furthermore, third wave feminists prefer to allow feminists to make their own definition about the term 'feminism' without making strict lines within the use of the term (20). The term that has been



taken into use is ‘intersectional feminism’, which aims to include all women to the term ‘feminism’ without excluding a person due to their physical or social qualities.

Feminist criticism is one of the methods that feminism utilizes to unveil the cultural factors that affect how women are expected to act and how they are perceived in society. It can be used to analyze different kinds of cultural products such as books or movies. Our culture consists of these kinds of works that take part in structuring and shaping how the world is perceived. In the book *Beginning Theory, an introduction to literary and cultural theory*, Peter Barry states that “[t]his movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and coherence” (116). Thus, it is important to be able to analyze and discover the underlying messages our culture is sending us about a person’s position in the world and how that affects their life. Formerly books were the source of finding representation and identifying oneself and often these representations depicted men and women in a very traditional and restricted way. Women were most often defined as household mothers with no need for education, who were being supported by their husbands. The men were depicted as being the sole providers for the family and being the head of the family.

The importance of studying popular culture through feminist theory is emphasized by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek in her book *Feminist Theory and Popular Culture*. Trier-Bieniek states that “[t]he juxtaposition of feminist theory and popular culture has an inevitable impact on the consumption of culture mainly because popular culture has the power to put up a mirror to our lives and show connections between media, socialization and identity” (14). Thus, studying popular culture provides us with means of understanding the world and helps to unmask the power structures and underlying meanings within those structures. Trier-Bieniek defines popular culture as the images, narratives and ideas that can be found often in contemporary culture (14). Moreover, popular culture can be defined as something that is easily consumable and attainable material.

### 3.2. Multimodal discourse analysis

Discourse analysis does not focus on language as an abstract system but focuses on what kind of meanings are derived from the use of language (Johnstone, 3). Thus, different kinds of discourse can be found almost anywhere whether it is expressing feelings, communicating information or any other kind of social action, which aims to use language as a means of transferring a message. Johnstone defines discourse analysis as a methodology that can be used in multiple different ways to answer questions ranging from linguistics to more interdisciplinary issues (4). In this thesis,

discourse analysis is understood as a methodology that helps in revealing social roles, identities and what kind of discourses are found in cultural items, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*. As the works that are used as materials in this thesis are a written work (novel) and a media work (television series), discourse analysis needs to be delineated further. Thus, multimodal discourse analysis is applied. Carey Jewitt defines multimodal discourse analysis in *Interactions, Images and Texts: A Reader in Multimodality* as a perspective which can expand to all the ways people use to communicate, including non-verbal communication, such as gestures or gaze. Additionally, multimodality includes, writing, image and other kinds of media (Norris and Maier, 127). Multimodality refers to the two different materials analyzed in the thesis and their distinctive features. In written works, discourse is realized by the negotiation of the meanings a reader gives to the read words and the writers intention on what are meant with these words. In media, such as television series, this negotiation is more complicated, since the work utilizes multiple different kind of means to convey a message, such as facial expressions, use of colors, music etc. Additionally, the viewer brings their own history and learned communicational factors into understanding a discourse, which makes the interpretation of every discourse slightly different depending on the consumer of the work.

### 3.3. Adaptation theory

In her book *Adaptation revisited: television and the classic novel* Sarah Cardwell defines the term cultural adaptation as being “a film or television program which is explicitly based on a book” (2). Cardwell states that at best, adaptations can aid in the survival of the original work and spark new interest towards it as well as (13). Furthermore, Cardwell observes the fact that it is common for discussions about an adapted work to lead to concentrating more on the fidelity of the adaptation to its original, than the actual adaptation. Comparisons are made and the adapted work in question is criticized not as a work of its own, but a new version of the old (Cardwell, 9). Yet, this is usually not the case in versions, they are to be evaluated as their own art form, especially when the form of the text has changed significantly from the original. The difference between an adaptation and a version is that, an adaptation is usually viewed as a work that follows the original more closely, whereas the version might take some liberties in rendering the original work (Cardwell, 20). Consequently, *The Handmaid's Tale* television series could be deemed an adaptation as it primarily follows the structure of the novel. On the other hand, some liberties have been made in, for instance, the depiction of the characters, but not to such an extent that the story of the novel would change.

There are different starting points from which an adaptation can be approached. The traditional comparative approach focuses on the process of adapting a work and considers this process to be an essential defining feature of the adaptation. This is regarded to be a common approach, where the end-product is viewed in comparison to its origin, the adaptation should not be viewed solely as a work of its own (Cardwell, 11). However, George Bluestone has argued that “it is insufficiently recognized that the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture” (Cardwell, 12). According to this view, it is not necessary to acknowledge the original work when criticizing or analyzing an adaptation, since the two different media cannot be sufficiently compared to each other. Thus, in this instance, *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a novel should be separated from its television adaptation, since the difference in media is so significant.

As this thesis aims to compare the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the television series adaptation, it is necessary to lean more on the traditional comparative approach which considers the original work in contrast to the adaptation. Thus, the analysis can be drawn from the novel in relation to the television adaptation. The novel has been adapted to different media before but those are not significant in relation to this thesis, so they will be disregarded.

#### 4. Analysis

In this section, firstly the alleged political themes found in the novel and the television series adaptation will be examined. The notion that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a nationalist work rather than a feminist one will be studied. The television series has been adapted from the novel but how faithful has the adaptation been to the original work and what kind of reasons could be behind the possible changes. These allegations will be examined in relation to the protagonist, Offred. Her depiction in the novel and the television series will be analyzed. The analysis of Offred will start with the examination of her name. Offred's name is one of the most pivotal aspects in the novel, as her being forced to change her name and it not being revealed in the entire novel defines the notion of her being treated like an object and emphasizes the importance of one's name in relation to their sense of self and authority over their own fate. The analysis of her will continue with the description of some essential scenes in both the novel and the television series: her training to be a handmaid in the Red Center and her actions in 'The Salvaging' scene. Offred's depiction in these scenes in the adaptation differ from how she acts in the novel, the scenes will be described and analyzed.

##### 4.1. Overall theme and political views

In the article *The Missionary Position, Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, Sandra Tomc argues that while the novel has been widely interpreted as having a distinct feminist statement, the author herself has not intended for that to be the central political theme to be derived from the novel. The definition of *The Handmaid's Tale* being a feminist novel has been widely accepted especially after the release of the television series in 2017, although the theme of the novel can be argued to differ from that of the television series.

The aspect of nationalism is, as Tomc claims, found in the novel as Atwood describing the characters in the terms of juxtaposing traditional feminine features with Canada and traditional masculine features with the United States of America. She showcases the position of Canada under the cultural and political shadow of the United States being a prominent feature in the text (74). The rather nationalist viewpoint that Atwood is claimed to take would also be more fitting to the decade the novel is written in, as well as Atwood's own experiences of growing up Canadian. Thus, Tomc argues the novel to be a nationalist, political statement rather than a feminist one. Furthermore, what is deemed as traditional feminism has been an already established ideology during the writing of the novel but has been a far less discussed matter, for instance in the media, as it is nowadays. Still, the novel showcases a seemingly far more traditional feminist ideology, than that of post-feminism, that has been gaining momentum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even if Atwood had intended to describe victimized womanhood, the fact that in the novel the protagonist is waiting for a man to rescue her goes against the feminist ideas and rather falls into the trap of traditionally viewed female stereotypes: a woman needing a man to save her from her misery. This need is depicted in the novel where Offred longs for a rescuer: “This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word shatter. I want to be with someone” (103). Tomc states “[i]t is her belief in the fairytale narrative of the damsel rescued by her prince that both encourages Offred’s self-protectiveness and saves her from capitulation” (78). Tomc emphasizes the notion that the novel aims for ideas that are not considered to be feminist but rather enforcing the traditional roles imposed on women by society. Furthermore, Offred is often depicted as longing for conventionally stereotypical feminine items during her time in Gilead: “[o]ne of them is wearing open-toed sandals, the toenails painted pink. I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon...” (The Handmaid’s Tale, 29). The novel can also be argued to enforce some harmful stereotypes linked to traditional masculinity, such as depicting the men in it to be mostly interested in women through their own lust for power and showing little emotion while subjugating them. Men are the victims of women’s bodies, helpless beings commanded by their own lust: “[i]t’s my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body’s, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims” (The Handmaid’s Tale, 81). Furthermore, Tomc states “Atwood’s critics have, as I’ve said, condemned her endorsement of popular romance both for its gender conservatism and for its commercialism” (82). Both are themes that can be found in Offred’s storyline as well as the overall theme of the novel. Also, in the article it is indicated that Atwood relies heavily on women’s traditional plot structures to create *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Tomc,78). The heavily gendered world of Gilead linked to the storyline of Offred as a damsel in distress -type of character seems to partly debunk the argument of *The Handmaid’s Tale* being a feminist novel.

The television series can be described as having a feminist stance enforced throughout the series. The political climate in the United States as well as the Me Too movement have both undoubtedly inspired the creation of the television series. Furthermore, the times have changed from 1985, when the novel was written, so the series has been updated to mirror the modern society. Some alterations have been made to the television series, for instance the ages of some of the characters. Mrs. Waterford, Serena Joy, is depicted in the books as being an old woman but, in the series, she is closer to her thirties, the same age as the protagonist Offred. These alterations might have been made without a specific agenda, but for instance, the behavior of the protagonist Offred is different from the novel. This is described more in detail in the analysis section of the character.

The message the series wants to send about the position of women and how the issues should be handled are seen in the protagonist's behavior.

#### 4.2. Offred

Offred is the main protagonist in the story. Thus, the novel as well as the television series, follows her story as a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. The novel is written from Offred's perspective, as is the adaptation, but the adaptation also focuses on the other characters and expands their stories further.

Offred lives in two different worlds which are depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the world before the rise of Gilead, and the world under the rule of the Republic of Gilead. In the world before the new regime, Offred was an independent woman working as a book editor, living with his husband Luke and their daughter Hannah. She is depicted as a white woman in her early thirties, which is an age suitable for a handmaid, who is expected to bear children for the Commanders. Offred and her family is depicted fleeing Gilead in the beginning of the story but are captured and Offred is taken to become a handmaid, a servant for the Republic.

##### 4.2.1. Offred's name

We learned to lipread, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (The Handmaid's Tale, 4)

An important part of the novel is not revealing Offred's real name. It is never explicitly stated in the novel, although it has been deduced by the fans of the novel to be one of the names in the quote above: June. This is the only name of the multiple ones mentioned before that does not come up again in the novel series, hence the idea that this is Offred's real name, although Atwood herself has not confirmed it to be her intention but welcomes the fans to use it if they will (Atwood). Atwood herself has stated that she does not reveal Offred's real name due to historical reasons: many people have had to change their names or disappear completely after being chased or oppressed in some way (Atwood). The handmaid's real names are an important factor that make Offred and the other handmaids individuals and is a part of the world that was before Gilead, that the Commanders do not want the handmaids to remember.

A story is like a letter. *Dear you*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the

chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. (The Handmaid's Tale, 40)

There is an immense power in one's name, in it lies the history of the individual, their identity can be strongly attached to it and it serves a purpose in giving a person a sense of self and separate oneself from the rest. Thus, when you take away a person's name, you do not only take away their sense of self, you also strip them from a sense of belonging, a sense of being an individual. This is potentially a powerful way to subdue a person and take away their will to retaliate against the subjugator. Once the handmaids' own names are replaced by their assigned new names, their identity becomes strongly tied to their commanders and their sole purpose becomes to serve those commanders, to bear them children.

The handmaids are not allowed to use their birth names; instead they are marked as property of the commanders by the names they are given. In this case Offred comes from the name of Commander Fred Waterford, Offred's owner in the novel and the television series. The possessive form 'of Fred' becomes the name that the handmaid is always compelled to use in Gilead and others should address the handmaid by this given name. All the other handmaids have similar names, for instance 'Ofglen' and 'Ofwarren'. The name 'Offred' could be also interpreted to remind the reader of an important theme that is found from the novel: blood. Red is a color that is showcased in the clothes of the handmaids to signify the menstrual blood that is flowing when a woman is fertile and the blood that is spilled when the handmaid is giving birth. Red is also an easy color to spot if the handmaid would try to flee from their subjugators. Margaret Atwood herself has stated that Offred's name is a play on the word 'offered', this emphasized the fact that the handmaid sacrificed their life for the greater good, for providing the Republic of Gilead and their commander offspring (Atwood).

In the first episode of the television series, Offred reminisces her former life, stating "I had another name, but it's forbidden now" (5:20). However, in the end of the first episode, she reveals the names of her family members; her husband Luke and her daughter Hannah – and finally, her own name: June (The Handmaid's Tale ep 1. 53:28). As stated earlier in the thesis, Atwood has no power over the television series so this might have been a decision made by the producers of the series to make it easier for the viewers to recognize the character when they are shown clips of Offred's former life. Her husband, Luke, for instance does not refer to her as Offred as that is not her real name but the name imposed on her by her owners in Gilead. However, in the novel, not giving away Offred's actual name is a powerful tool that suggests Offred's past to be meaningless and confirms her status as an object, a tool for her owners to use as they please.

#### 4.2.2. Offred's rebellion in the Red Center

The depiction of Offred in the adaptation is to some extent similar to her depiction in the novel, but there are some differences in the way Offred's struggles and her reactions to them are presented. In the television series, Offred seems to be more active to oppose the rules of Gilead and be more fearless in doing so than in the novel. Her rebellion in the television series illustrates her being a stronger character, a once independent woman who does not accept her fate without a fight. However, in the novel, she is presented as being more of a bystander, an observer of the things happening around her and who is fearful to take action against her subjugators. Also, she is depicted as seeking and needing help from others more than in the television series adaptation.

In chapter 13 in the novel, Offred has been taken to the Red Center. The Red Center is a place where the potential handmaids are trained by Aunts to serve their masters most efficiently. The scenes set in the Red Center are used to emphasize the kind of brainwashing and violence is used on the handmaids for them to become obedient servants. Aunts are the ones responsible for the handmaids until they are assigned to their Commanders and are the second most powerful women in Gilead after the wives of the Commanders. The future handmaids are taking part in a ritual called 'Testifying', where the handmaids are expected to confess their sins in front of the others and repent them. A woman called Janine is confessing to being gang-raped at the age of fourteen and having an abortion, while the other handmaids are forced to yell at her that it was her fault that she was raped, as she led the men to believe she wanted them and God allowed the rape to happen to teach her a lesson on chastity. In the novel, Offred is depicted as obeying the Aunts and chanting alongside the other handmaids. She is acknowledging the fact that what she is doing is wrong but is too scared to go against the will of the Aunts. Furthermore, she is consoled by the fact that her friend, Moira, is taking part in the ritual as well, stating: "[it] makes me feel safer, that Moira is here" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 71). Her need of having a friend to turn to during the 'Testifying' is emphasized.

In the adaptation, Offred is presented as a more independent and defiant character. The 'Testifying' scene starts with Janine telling her story and Aunt Lydia pressuring her to confess for the rapes were her fault. Aunt Lydia is one of the highest-ranking Aunts and is presented the most of all the Aunts in the novel or the adaptation. Aunt Lydia proceeds to pressure Janine to confess being guilty of leading the men to rape her and Offred is shown with a horrified look on her face. Then, Aunt Lydia asks: "Whose fault was it, girls?" followed by the other handmaids chanting "her fault, her fault..." and pointing a finger at Janine (*The Handmaid's Tale*, ep. 1. 26:14). Offred continues to stare in horror, when an Aunt steps from behind her and slaps her in the face, as her friend Moira sitting next to her whispers "Go on, do it". Offred is still hesitant to obey even after



being slapped by one of the Aunts but as Aunt Lydia approaches her, she starts to chant and point her finger at Janine as well. In this scene, Offred is presented as being appalled by the things happening around her, but still defiant towards doing what she feels is wrong and might hurt others. She shows courage in not immediately joining the others in the ritual, which she is not doing in the novel.

#### 4.2.3. Offred's rage during 'The Salvaging'

The Salvaging is a type of ritual in Gilead where people are executed for crimes against the rules of the Republic. The name 'salvaging' derives from the idea that the ones executed are being saved, 'salvaged'. The possible crimes include adultery or acting against the Commanders wishes. Execution of women are set up by the Aunts and are public events, the men are executed also in a public space but other than that, there is no information since women are not allowed to enter the event. However, in some cases, men are taken to the handmaids for them to beat them to death if they have been convicted of, for instance, rape. This act is called 'participation', a word-play of 'participation' and 'execution'.

In the first episode of the adaptation, Offred is told that her dear friend from before the times of Gilead has been sent to the Colonies and has died there. The news of her friend's passing make her cry and she is seemingly deeply disturbed after hearing it. As she hears the news, the Participation starts and Aunt Lydia is having a speech, directing the handmaids on what to do next and telling them about the man's alleged crime, raping a handmaid while she was pregnant and simultaneously killing the baby. Offred joins the other handmaids in a circle, seemingly upset and angry about her friend's fate. The execution starts when Aunt Lydia blows a whistle and Offred is the first one to kick the man to the ground, other handmaids proceeding after her to kick and abuse the man. As Aunt Lydia blows the whistle again, the man has been killed by the handmaids (*The Handmaid's Tale*, ep 1. 45:28).

However, in the novel, the scene has a different tone to it. Offred is depicted as being hesitant about the whole situation, stating: "I don't want to be at the front, or at the back either. I'm not sure what's coming, though I sense it won't be anything I want to see up close" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 278). She is then pushed to the front of the circle by another handmaid, Ofglen. Offred is shocked by the man's alleged crime and feels anger, even bloodlust, towards him but still can't help but think that this man could as well be his husband Luke and is unable to attack the man. Offred states: "I know that whatever he's done, I can't touch him" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 279). Instead, Ofglen is the one who attacks the man first, followed by the other handmaids. This scene is

at the end of the novel but appears already in the first episode of the television series. Including the scene in the first episode might have been a conscious choice from the script writers to add shock value to the pilot episode and to emphasize the horror of Gilead to the viewer. Offred is depicted in the adaptation as an active woman and not as a horrified bystander watching the execution happen around her. This is important, as portraying her as an inactive, scared bystander would not show off her anger and will to take revenge on the man, not only for allegedly raping the other handmaid, but perhaps primarily for the death of her friend. She is shown as the one taking action and releasing all the anger she feels over her friend's death on the man, even if the situation itself is horrifying to her.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a pivotal part of Canadian literature, it has been translated to multiple languages, and is used in educational purposes around the world since it was first published in 1985. After the television adaptation airing in 2017, it has gained even more recognition even among the younger generation. The theme of the novel revolves around a handmaid called Offred struggling to survive under a new regime. The leaders constitute of men who have made the laws in the Republic of Gilead in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

The thesis utilized feminist criticism and post-feminist theory to reveal what kind of feminist ideas can be found in the story of Offred, as well as examine the possible ways Offred is portrayed differently in the television series. Thus, the argument that the television series is more feminist is examined through the protagonist, Offred. Multimodal discourse analysis was used to analyze the original work and the television series, supported by adaptation theory.

It can be argued, that Atwood's Canadian background has influenced her writing since Canadian cultural and political landscape has been affected by the country's close contact to the United States. Sandra Tomc claims in her article that the nationalist standpoint is present in the way Atwood juxtaposes Canada and the United States with linking Canada to feminine features and the United States to masculine features. Thus, Canada can be viewed as the weaker being in the shadow of a bigger cultural and political oppressor, the United States. This claim might be the reason for the alleged nationalist angle apparent in the novel. However, the novel also comments on women's position and gender equality in the society. *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a woman deprived of her freedom and autonomy, as she is forced to live under the rule of a totalitarian government ruled by men. Thus, it can be argued that both the nationalist and feminist standpoints are present in the novel although Atwood herself has stated that she does not want to constrict the novel into one ideology. However, while examining the novel in relation to the television series adaptation, the feminist viewpoint seems to be emphasized in the adaptation. The political landscape and the emergence of the Me Too movement might be behind the sudden supply for different kind of works centering around the theme of feminism.

Some of the differences between the television series adaptation and the novel can be partly explained by the differences in medium. Offred's name is revealed in the television series, which is never done in the novel. This might be a narrative-based decision, since while the novel includes only the perspective of Offred, the adaptation offers the viewers multiple stories as well as the story of Offred's family trying to find her after being kidnapped. This might be difficult without using

Offred's actual name, since her family naturally does not know the name her owners have given her. However, this is an important change since in the novel, one of the most pivotal plot points is minimalizing Offred's humanity. This is emphasized with her being deprived of her real name and depicted as an object. While the decision to let the viewer know Offred's real name is understandable, it can be argued that an important part of the original story is lost in the adaptation due to this change.

Offred is depicted in the novel as being more of a dependent character, who seeks for help from others and is mostly presented as being vulnerable and somewhat scared in her actions. On the contrary, in the television series she is much more vigilant, eager to solve her problems actively herself and she is expressing anger towards her oppressors. Offred can be described as a heroic character in the television series, she struggles to regain her independence but is still shown actively seeking it. This difference in her depiction can be argued to be the influence of wanting to present Offred as a more feminist character than she is in the original work. The world of Gilead is supposed to shock the viewer into the realization of the dangerous consequences that can follow if such a totalitarian regime with so conservatively religious rulers are in power, and Offred as the protagonist needs to be shown as the courageous heroine fighting this power. Presenting Offred as a passive character might not be as relatable and would not create the effect of a strong woman wanting to fight against her oppressors; she would not be as relatable to the modern woman if she was not as courageous as she is. This braveness is present in the two scenes of the television series chosen for analysis, which were then contrasted to the same scenes depicted in the novel. The two scenes selected from the novel and the television series have some significant differences in how Offred is portrayed. However, the differences can not be explained by purely productional issues, since both scenes could have also been filmed while being faithful to the original work. This suggests, that the changes were made in order to convey a distinct message to the viewer.

In this thesis, the premise was to study if the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* can be considered more feminist than the original novel. By considering the examples given, it can be argued that the television series has been made to fit more into the feminist ideology than the novel has perhaps tried to convey. The depiction of Offred's character has been the center point in the study and differences were found in her representation. The factors affecting the adaptation might be purely linked to television productions and difference in media, or the fact that the original work has been written in 1985, which is from many sociocultural aspects a different time from now. Still, the political climate and the Me Too movement have very strongly impacted the theme of the television series. Further research could have been made by perhaps increasing the number of

scenes to study. Also, the differences in the representation of other characters than Offred could have been studied and contrasted to the novel, perhaps while considering more the political structure of the Republic of Gilead and bringing in some further ideas of what kind of patriarchal or religiously inspired power structures can be found there. Furthermore, while this study was made, Margaret Atwood revealed that she is writing a sequel to the novel, which would make it possible to compare and analyze the two works. An interesting topic could also be to first study the political climate of 1985 and that of 2018, and then drawing conclusions on how those might have affected the original work, as well as the sequel.

Studying cultural works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, is important as the media acts as a mirror to our social and cultural environments. Being critical about the messages behind the media and studying the messages it sends us is increasingly important since, in the technological age we are living in, the influence of media is growing all the time. Accessing information is easier than ever and different ideas can be spread in various ways in an instant. Oftentimes, the agenda might be hidden in the work and by analysis the work further, the agenda can be unveiled. The influence of cultural works cannot be undermined, and in the wake of the Me Too movement, many works have taken a feminist approach and started to take a more political tone. As a novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* has stirred conversation since it's publishing and introduced controversial ideas in the form of a dystopia. Now, when it has been adapted to a television series, it causes more discussion around important topics such as women's rights.

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