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Where Does the Gileadverse Go?

Adaptation and Transmediality in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Abstract

The 'negative capability' and openness of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985) represents an ideal starting point for the building of a transmedia universe. Atwood explains that the expansion of a 'Gileadverse' started as a bottom-up process after fans eventually convinced the author to write the 2019 sequel The Testaments. Besides, an aggressive marketing campaign to promote the eponymous MGM-Hulu TV series represents a top-down effort to further expand the transmedia universe of Gilead, and Handmaids have become a worldwide popular source of inspiration for voicing political dissent. Both the TV series and The Testaments present a systematic expansion in terms of storyline and character development; as a result, the main character of Atwood's novel has been transformed into an unstoppable heroine of the Gileadverse, and her legacy is finally capable of pushing the Gilead regime to its demise. The article analyzes how The Handmaid's Tale has been adapted in recent years, focusing on the ways the storyline has been transformed and updated in relation to the different media employed. Special attention is given to the significance of the choice made by Atwood to embrace transmedia storytelling as a narrative model capable of supporting a continuous interaction between the Gileadverse and the real world of its audience.

Keywords: *transmedia storytelling, Margaret Atwood, Canadian literature, American TV series, adaptation studies*

Margaret Atwood's classic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has recently had an explosive surge in popularity in terms of book sales thanks to multiple retellings of the tragic story of Offred, the main character of the novel, and the dystopian world in which she is forced to live. As a matter of fact, a few months before the first season of the eponymous TV series adaptation was broadcast on the streaming platform Hulu, *The Guardian* reported that the novel had already reached the first position on the Amazon bestseller list, pointing out that its renewed commercial success seemed to be a direct consequence of the outcome of the 2016 US

presidential elections.¹ The adaptability of Offred's story to current political times might be directly related to a rule faithfully followed by Atwood and often quoted by critics as well as the author herself:

If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real. 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. (Atwood 2017 [1985], x)²

Generally speaking, interest in Atwood's novel has never really waned, as attested by the several adaptations produced over the years (movie, radio drama, ballet as well as opera and theatrical adaptations [Blake 2017]). However, since 2017, the author's active involvement into adapting, updating, and further expanding the world of Gilead has exponentially increased. In relation to the above-mentioned TV series, created by Bruce Miller and produced by MGM and Hulu (which is currently in its third season, and with a fourth season already announced),³ Atwood is involved in the project as a “consulting producer” (Robinson 2019, 10). Meanwhile, the 2017 audiobook adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale (Special Edition)* includes a few more ‘pages’ at the end of the novel, and in 2019 Atwood also published a sequel, *The Testaments* (co-winner of the 2019 Booker Prize [Marshall and Alter 2019]), with MGM and Hulu already announcing a new TV series based on this literary sequel (Malbon 2019).

¹ In the same period, another classic dystopian novel, George Orwell's *1984* (itself a source of inspiration for *The Handmaid's Tale*), was third on the same list after senior White House official Kellyanne Conway referred to a statement by White House press secretary Sean Spicer as “alternative facts” in relation to the number of attendees at Donald Trump's inauguration event as 45th President of the United States. See Reuters in Havana 2017 and *Guardian* staff 2017.

² At the end of the same introduction, Atwood explicitly suggests that the 2016 American elections have made *The Handmaid's Tale* relevant again:

In the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. [...] In this divisive climate [...] someone, somewhere—many, I would guess—are writing down what is happening as they themselves are experiencing it. Or they will remember, and record later, if they can. Will their messages be suppressed and hidden? Will they be found, centuries later, in an old house, behind a wall? Let us hope it doesn't come to that. I trust it will not. (Atwood 2017 [1985], xiv-xv)

³ The production of Season Four of the TV series was temporarily suspended in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Andreeva 2020).

The ability of *The Handmaid's Tale* to fuel the imagination of the fanbase seems to be one of the main reasons for the recent development of a transmedia narrative⁴ based on the Republic of Gilead and its Handmaids.⁵ However, while Renée Nault's 2019 graphic novel adaptation is quite faithful in terms of transcodification from the original novel, in other recent developments of the Gileadverse, such as the TV series and *The Testaments*, the unraveling and expansion of the original storyline moves toward radically changing important aspects of the story and its characters.

This essay focuses on how *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted in recent years, analyzing the remodeling and updating of the storyline in relation to the different media employed. More specifically, the paper will examine how the Gileadverse is narratively transformed into a transmedia universe in the eponymous TV series and in the novel *The Testaments*, and it will reflect on the significance of such a choice with the goal of better understanding the development of a transmedia production.

1. *The Handmaid's Tale* as transmedia storytelling

Over the last few years, the dystopian universe of Gilead has mainly developed in three different directions: first of all, as an aggressive top-down advertising campaign (Jenkins and Deuze 2008) made by MGM and Hulu to expand the transmedia universe of Gilead which featured, for example, walking Handmaids at the 2017 Los Angeles Times Festival of Books (Plant 2017), or graffiti in the women's restrooms of the 2016 New York Comic Con with the famous cry for resistance "nolite te bastardes carborundorum"⁶ (McNally 2016). Moreover, the Gileadverse expanded as a bottom-up process, since, as stated by Atwood herself, the insistent requests from the fans for explanations about aspects of the original novel convinced her to write a sequel.⁷ The fans also actively contributed to the development of the story, for example suggesting that June could be Offred's real name. Finally, the dystopian universe of Gilead became a source of inspiration for voicing political dissent, as in the case of the protesters who wore the iconic

⁴ Jenkins (2007) defines transmedia storytelling as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience."

⁵ In a world severely affected by very low fertility rates, Handmaids are a relatively small group of fertile women whose only purpose is to serve the Gilead Regime by breeding children.

⁶ In Atwood's 1985 novel, the phrase is translated as "don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood 2017 [1985], 187).

⁷ "[B]efore the actual placing of words on pages, *The Testaments* was written partly in the minds of the readers of its predecessor, *The Handmaid's Tale*, who kept asking what happened after the end of that novel" (Atwood 2019, 417).

Handmaid clothes during the confirmation hearing of the US Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh in 2018 (Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018).⁸

In relation to the success of the TV series and the fact that Atwood's novel "[has] become the launching pad for so many global protests and movements" (Robinson 2019, 11), Atwood states that

[it] was unexpected. It's been an example of a work escaping from its frame—its box—and coming alive through the imaginations of its readers. I can't even say any more that it is 'my' *Handmaid's Tale*. It seems to have taken on a life of its own that is not under the control of its first creator (me) and its other creators [the makers of the MGM-Hulu TV series]. (Robinson 2019, 11)

Given the lack of information and general openness which surround the 1985 storyline, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* represents an ideal starting point for the building of a transmedia universe. Readapting the terminology first adopted by the English Romantic poet John Keats in 1817, Long (2007) redefines the idea of 'negative capability' in relation to transmedia storytelling: "negative capability is the art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of 'uncertainty, Mystery, or doubt' in the audience" (Long 2007, 53). He further explains that,

[t]he trick, of course, is to use [negative capability] as a lure to bring audiences back when those gaps are filled in, and then provide a tale good enough—and riddled with enough new gaps—to keep them coming back for more. This is the aspect of negative capability that is key to transmedia storytelling: how to provide hooks for the storyteller to return to later for another gripping tale. (Long 2007, 59)

Apart from the fact that Keats' idea of 'negative capability' did not originally represent an attempt at explaining a device to keep the audience hooked to a story,⁹ it is true that, as pointed out by Long, the success of a transmedia product is often due to the thirst for answers and solutions from an audience addicted to the idea of knowing as much as possible about a storyworld and its characters. However, this might actually represent the opposite of Keats' 'negative capability,' since transmedia storytelling often seems to take for granted the 'negative incapability' of its audience. In fact, it is quite common to find a top-down approach to the development of transmedia products in which narrative gaps are created and then filled for the

⁸ The figure of the Handmaid was used for political protest also in other countries in the world, for example in Italy in 2018 during a demonstration against the enactment of an anti-abortion law (Phelan 2018).

⁹ For a broader analysis of the philosophical and aesthetic aspects of Keats' 'negative capability' see Li 2009.

audience, who frequently ends up cataloging a larger and larger amount of information in order to classify, retain and often share a vast encyclopedic knowledge about that transmedia universe.

It is possible to argue that the whole transmedia expansion of the Gileadverse is based on an attempt at answering questions related to the 1985 novel, starting from the 2017 audiobook adaptation, which represents an extended version of Atwood's original novel. In this new version of *The Handmaid's Tale* (which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been printed in any form), the final section of the book, the "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," received an important update with the addition of a brand new Q&A session right after the talk given by the fictional character Professor James Darcy Pieixoto (Atwood 2017). This Q&A session, which lasts about fifteen minutes, represents, as explained by Gerry Canavan,

an opportunity for some timely Trump jokes—including the revelation that a chain of tawdry Jezebel's¹⁰ strip clubs eventually became a nationwide chain located mostly at hotels and golf courses—and some revision of the original assumptions of the novel (including a question about iPads that locates Gilead in *our* near-future, as opposed to a 1980s near-future). There are even some questions that ambitiously retcon the original novel, George-Lucas-style: one of the questioners suggests that Offred may appear overly passive in the novel because she is deliberately covering up her clandestine Resistance activities both before and after her capture, seeking to protect people still at risk [...] while another exchange shifts the cause of the rise of Gilead from a science fictional concurrence of political and environmental crises to a much more mundane, frighteningly ordinary slide into fascism through the mission creep of the surveillance state. (Canavan 2018)¹¹

In addition, Pieixoto repeatedly suggests the possibility of an imminent publication of more materials related to *The Handmaid's Tale*, thus anticipating the publication of the novel *The Testaments* (Canavan 2018).

¹⁰ In the rigid class system of the Republic of Gilead, Jezebels and Unwomen are at the lowest levels of social ladder. The former group is usually composed of good-looking and educated women who are "unfit" for the Gilead regime and are forced to become sex workers in unofficial brothels for Commanders only. Unwomen are often either elderly women or political dissidents who are sentenced to death in the so-called Colonies, forced labor camps set in extremely polluted or radioactive areas (also Jezebels are eventually sent to death in the Colonies).

¹¹ As will be explained in the next pages, the retcon noticed by Canavan can also be considered a way to give more continuity to the character of Offred, who will eventually behave in a totally different way in the TV series adaptation.

2. The expansion of the Gileadverse through the TV series adaptation

The Handmaid's Tale, Chapter Twenty-Nine. Offred is in Commander¹² Waterford's office, and she finally finds the courage to ask him about the previous Handmaid. Once she discovers that the previous Offred committed suicide, Offred finally understands that the Commander is afraid that she also might try to kill herself, which might (partially) explain the reason for the secret meetings they are having in his office: "Things have changed. I have something on [Commander Waterford], now. What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. What I have on him is his guilt. At last" (Atwood 2017 [1985], 188). At the end of the chapter, the Commander asks Offred:

"What would you like?" he says, still with that lightness, as if it's a money transaction merely, and a minor one at that: candy, cigarettes.

[...]

"I would like..." I say. "I would like to know." It sounds indecisive, stupid even, I say it without thinking.

"Know what?" he says.

"Whatever there is to know," I say; but that's too flippant. "What's going on." (Atwood 2017 [1985], 188)

Offred voices the same craving for information that pushes readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* throughout the novel, hoping that her account will provide opportunities to learn more about the terrible dystopian world of Gilead and why the woman is forced to live as a Handmaid. Apart from the "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," the rest of Atwood's novel is told as a first-person narrative by an unreliable narrator. Not only is the narration undermined in terms of credibility by the fact that Pieixoto clearly states, in the "Historical Notes," that he and Professor Knotly Wade manipulated to a certain extent the content of the story, but it is Offred herself that repeatedly questions the possibility to tell any story in an objective way:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here—

[...]

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances [...]. (Atwood 2017 [1985], 134)

¹² As the highest-ranking members of the Gilead regime, Commanders are political and military leaders who have the privilege to be assigned Handmaids.

The Handmaid's Tale is a story about loneliness, told by an unnamed narrator who experiences the atrocities of an unknown and deeply unjust world in which she is raped once a month to provide babies for the political elite of a dystopian regime. It is also a cautionary tale, written in response to the resurgence of the evangelical right and conservative Republicans in the United States in the 1980s. Despite the fact that it portrays a dystopian world in which the Republic of Gilead has taken the place of the United States of America, *The Handmaid's Tale* is nevertheless written as a realistic novel which obtains its plausibility by referring exclusively to historical horrors, while at the same time remaining ambiguous in terms of plot development and descriptions of the most immediate settings thanks to the unreliable narrator. Readers are thus forced to follow the claustrophobic story of Offred, which is a story without a happy ending: although the last section of the novel seems to suggest that Offred might have escaped the horrors of Gilead, at least for long enough to record the cassette tapes that contain her story, the subsequent talk given by Professor Pieixoto, so full of male chauvinism, hints at the possibility that such a dystopian world is dangerously close to becoming a reality again in the future.

The TV series produced by Hulu and MGM works differently, since it is meant to become a commercial success which tries to follow Atwood's novel devotedly and at the same time make the story more relevant to a contemporary audience. The first season of the TV series mainly follows the storyline of the original novel, with some important differences which can be noticed from the very beginning of the first episode of the season. These changes are partially due to the adaptation process from a text-based to an audiovisual medium; more specifically, the changes can be linked to the choice of adapting the story from the first person narration employed in the 1985 novel to a third person narration that closely follows the main character, June (Offred's real name), while also enabling the audience to gain as clear a knowledge as possible of the world of Gilead and of what happens to the main character. Stemming from the original storyline, various flashbacks further expand on all the other main characters (as in the case of Luke, Moira, Janine, Ofglen/Emily, Aunt Lydia, and so on).

The first episode of the TV series ("Offred"), as already mentioned, while substantially adhering to the original plot of the novel, unfolds in a different way, which affects how the audience experiences the story. It starts with the attempted escape from Gilead of a woman (played by Elisabeth Moss) with her husband (O-T Fagbenle) and their daughter (Jordana Blake). The next scene shows the same woman, wearing Handmaid's clothes, in Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes)'s house:

Within these few minutes of screen time, two very different portrayals of the same woman place her between seemingly opposed images of time and space: between an escape scenario that could easily be set in present day (with landscape features, vehicles, and clothes familiar to the contemporary viewer) and a domestic scene from a more distant past (one that the viewer would imagine based on written and painted accounts of bygone times). Ironically, in the narrative universe of *The Handmaid's Tale*, this chronology is reversed: the failed escape turns out to be a flashback, and “present day” or, in other words, “a not too distant future,” is the time of Offred. (Rositzka 2019, 197)

The fact that the first scene of the first episode portrays June while she is still trying to escape from Gilead allows the audience to learn about who the main character was before she was forced to become Offred, depicting the world before Gilead as a starting point for the development of the story (and not vice versa as in the 1985 novel). Moreover, the reversed chronology to which Rositzka refers is only one example of a continuous interplay between the main storyline and a long series of flashbacks included in the pilot episode of the TV series. In fact, the ten flashbacks included in the whole episode, together with the fast pace with which the events in the main storyline unfold (Ceremony,¹³ Salvaging¹⁴) represent a quick introduction to the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with the pilot episode of the TV series already showing most of the content included in the 1985 book.

Other details are portrayed differently in the pilot episode. After the scene with June/Offred in the present time in her room, there is another flashback, this time related to the first encounter with Commander Waterford's Wife,¹⁵ Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski). In this scene, contrary to what happens in the novel, June/Offred also meets Commander Waterford for the first time. The whole scene is awkward, with the two characters continuously defying the official etiquette under the outraged eyes of Serena Joy:

SERENA JOY: [to Commander Waterford] This is the new one.

COMMANDER: (to Offred, too casual) Hello. (then, catching himself) Blessed be the fruit.

OFFRED: May the Lord open.

A beat. And then—

COMMANDER: I'm Commander Waterford. Fred Waterford.

OFFRED: I am Of-fred.

COMMANDER: Right. (and then) Well. Good.

The whole process is proscribed, unnatural. The Commander turns to leave, pauses—

¹³ A Ceremony is a highly ritualized event, held once a month, in which Handmaids are raped by their Commanders in order to get pregnant.

¹⁴ In the Republic of Gilead, Salvagings are public execution events. Handmaids are forced to attend them and sometimes also act as executioners.

¹⁵ Wives have a specific social role in Gilead: they are often (but not necessarily) infertile women who have the ‘privilege’ to be married to Commanders and raise the Handmaids’ children as their own.

COMMANDER (CONT'D): (brightly) Nice to meet you.
 Serena Joy REACTS with a glare—this isn't part of the ritual greeting. It is far too intimate. Offred turns the words, and the rules, over in her head. She doesn't know how to play it, what to say. She chooses—
 OFFRED: Thank you.
 The Commander leaves. (Chaiken 2015, 8-9)

This scene would sound quite implausible in the original novel, since it would probably be unnatural to have, in such a highly ceremonious world as Gilead, a Handmaid meeting with a new Commander and his Wife and having this kind of conversation. Not only is there the problem that nobody seems to be aware of what is supposed to be said and done in such a situation (which in Gilead would have probably been as highly ritualized as the Ceremony), but the awkward atmosphere in the scene seems already to suggest the start of a possible love affair between the Handmaid and the Commander, in a way that oversimplifies the complicated relationship between Offred and Fred Waterford in the novel. In Atwood's 1985 book, the two characters meet briefly and for the first time only in Chapter Nine:

There's someone standing in the hall, near the door to the room where I stay. The hall is dusky, this is a man, his back to me; he's looking into the room, dark against its light. I can see now, it's the Commander, he isn't supposed to be here. He hears me coming, turns, hesitates, walks forward. Towards me. He is violating custom, what do I do now? [...] But then he moves forward again, steps to the side to avoid touching me, inclines his head, is gone. (Atwood 2017 [1985], 49)

It will take several other chapters (and one Ceremony), in the novel, for Commander Waterford to break the ice and finally greet Offred with a "hello" (Atwood 2017 [1985], 137).

Other specific changes in the TV series adaptation of the story, for example the fact that Offred is already at the third outpost in the novel while in the TV series she is only at the second one, seem to point out that in the TV series everything is described as happening extremely fast, without the impression conveyed in the 1985 novel that Gilead is what the world was really meant to be, and that the Gileadean society is a stable reality, which implicitly means that things are not bound to change anytime soon.

The first episode of the TV series ends with the protagonist reaffirming the existence of her family by calling their names (Luke, Hannah) as well as revealing for the first time her own real name (June) to the audience. This means that, apart from the numerous flashbacks, the pilot episode is framed by a first scene which shows June in her last moments as a free person, and then the same episode ends with June reaffirming her freedom from Gilead by directly defying, on behalf of the audience, the prohibition to reveal her own real name.

There is a marked difference in terms of point-of-view character between the 1985 novel and the TV series. In the novel, the character's name is Offred (which is obviously a patronymic deriving from her Commander's name, Fred Waterford), and while it functions as the character's name (in the sense that it is possible for readers to identify a character through that name) it is still not her real name. This represents a conspicuous element of uncertainty in the novel, in addition to a more general indeterminacy related to the fact that readers can 'see' through that character, but on the other hand the character itself is never 'seen' by readers from the outside. Furthermore, the whole novel revolves around the idea of learning more about Offred, as in the case of the attempted escape from Gilead presented as the first scene in the pilot episode of the TV series, which in the novel is only fragmentarily described in three separate parts in Chapters Thirteen (Atwood 2017 [1985], 74-75), Fourteen (Atwood 2017 [1985], 84-86), and Eighteen (Atwood 2017 [1985], 104-106). While the book focuses on the dystopian present in which Offred lives, readers are trying to learn about her past (Who was the protagonist before she became Offred?) and her future (How will the story end?). However, in the novel even the present is confusing and unclear, both because the limited point of view does not allow readers to learn more about how the Gileadean regime works, and because Offred is an unreliable narrator in her conscious reorganization and editing of the events described (in addition to the editing performed by the fictional characters of Pieixoto and Wade).

On the other hand, the main character of the TV series is not Offred, but June. The continuous juxtaposition of past and present in the pilot episode does not enable the audience to experience the claustrophobic world of Gilead from Offred's point of view for an extended period of time, and even when that happens, June's sharp, caustic voiceover and her enraged stares at the camera never really allow the audience to forget that the woman on the screen wearing Handmaid's clothes is still June dressed up as Offred. The marked use of flashbacks, together with a fast summary of the main features of the world of Gilead as would be learned through a reading of the entire 1985 novel, make the pilot work as a primer through which the audience is introduced to the Gileadverse (even in the case they have never read the original novel before) in order to quickly learn the 'rules of the game.'

As a consequence, it is possible to state that the TV series represents a reboot of *The Handmaid's Tale* as part of a renovated transmedia universe constituted by the TV series, the real-world protests by political activists wearing Handmaid's clothes, and Atwood's sequel *The Testaments*. This new multiplatform universe becomes even more recognizable if one keeps in mind that it represents the starting point for the emergence of two new processes: a new expansion of the storyworld and a new character development. In terms of the latter, the June played by

Elisabeth Moss is portrayed from the very beginning as a continuously defiant character, with the voiceover speaking in a much more scathing and condemning mode than the resigned tone of the interior monologues generally found in the 1985 novel. Compared to the original Offred, a character that, according to Atwood, is portrayed as “an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than heroine), because I suppose I’m more interested in social history than in the biographies of the outstanding” (Swale 2012, 66), it becomes much easier for the MGM-Hulu audience to root for the ‘outstanding’ June of the TV series. This is an obvious advantage for the TV series since the story acquires the potential to expand indefinitely and the audience can experience the full development of a transmedia universe. In addition, the main characters do not die so easily as in the case of the original novel, but rather become heroes and leaders capable of fighting against the dystopian world in which they live. While this could be considered a mere flattening of the story for commercial needs, it actually creates more opportunities to depict the Gileadverse vividly and in detail, which means that it is possible to linger on each and every character of the story and develop parallel storylines specifically related to them. The evolution of the Gileadverse found in the TV series adaptation happens primarily through June herself, with at least two pivotal moments that finally transform her from a submissive character in the original novel (which can still be partially found in the first season of the TV series) to a heroine capable of openly defying Gilead as she does by the end of Season Three. The first crucial change happens in Episode Four of Season Two (“Other Women”): after trying to escape from Gilead, a pregnant Offred is caught back and ‘accepted’ again by the Waterfords as a Handmaid. During her escape, a truck driver, an Economan¹⁶ who was expected to take her to a private airplane bound for Canada, is discovered, executed, and his body is left hanging on the Wall.¹⁷ Aunt¹⁸ Lydia (Ann Dowd) decides to take Offred for a walk, and they approach the Wall:

AUNT LYDIA: I am trying to give you the best chance you can have. I believe you know him. He drove a bread delivery truck. The Wife will redeem herself by serving as a Handmaid. The boy will never see his mother again. He has been placed with new parents [...] Gilead has shown them mercy. They will have a chance at a better life. Of course, if you asked them, this would not have been the path they would have chosen. But you didn’t ask them, did you? You chose for them. Such a selfish girl. Who killed him? Answer me, please. Whose fault was it? Huh?

¹⁶ Economen and Econowives are lower status members of the Republic of Gilead.

¹⁷ The Wall is a place in Gilead where the bodies of executed people are put on display as a deterrent.

¹⁸ In the Gileadverse, Aunts are responsible for the training and supervising of Handmaids as well as overseeing births and administering punishments to women.

JUNE: My fault.

[...]

AUNT LYDIA: And why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Answer me. Offred.

JUNE: To teach me a lesson.

AUNT LYDIA: To teach June a lesson. 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. ("Other Women")

Aunt Lydia's words define for June/Offred who is June and who is Offred. June is the rebel capable of committing crimes and willing to do whatever is needed to achieve her goals—that is, reuniting with her daughter Hannah/Agnes and her husband Luke, and later with her second daughter Holly/Nichole, and getting revenge from Gilead. On the other hand, Offred represents a selfless and obedient vessel of babies whose only goal is to serve for the prosperity of the Commanders and the whole regime. Driven by massive guilt about what happened to the Economan and his family, the woman tries at first to behave as Offred, but she quickly manages to overcome the remorse in order to focus on the future of her newborn baby as well as the other babies of Gilead, thus turning even more completely into the subversive June.

Another important moment in June's storyline development can be found in Episode Nine of Season Three ("Heroic"). A Martha¹⁹ who was helping June arrange an illicit meeting with her daughter Hannah/Agnes is executed, and June soon discovers that another Handmaid, Ofmatthew, is responsible for snitching on her. June and the other Handmaids decide to bully Ofmatthew, and while having an emotional breakdown, Ofmatthew is shot by a guard. As a punishment, June is therefore forced to kneel down and pray for several weeks inside a hospital room where Ofmatthew is induced into a coma to carry her baby to full term. This ultimate form of torture drives June literally crazy, and she cuts her hand while assaulting Serena Joy during a visit to Ofmatthew's unborn baby. The doctor who is taking care of Ofmatthew and her baby stitches June's injured hand:

JUNE: You should know I was going to kill Serena. And [Ofmatthew]. And you, too.

DOCTOR: I warned them. I said, "You can't leave that girl in here, praying... for months on end." The brain atrophies in isolation and breeds despair. How long have you had suicidal thoughts?

JUNE: Homicidal.

DOCTOR: Doing any of the things that you said would put you on the Wall, and you know it. So... How long?

JUNE: I don't know. Since I realized I probably won't see my daughters again. ("Heroic")

¹⁹ Marthas are infertile women who serve as domestic servants in Commanders' houses.

Subsequently, after the baby is born and June finally leaves the hospital, the woman takes full control of her life again, and she devises a plan to let as many kids as possible escape from Gilead: “I’m gonna get out as many children as I can. I don’t really know how yet, but... I swear to you, I’m gonna get them out. Because Gilead should know how this feels” (“Heroic”). She even helps her new Commander, Joseph Lawrence (Bradley Whitford)—who in turn is going to help her organize the escape—by forcing him and his Wife (Julie Dretzin) into performing the Ceremony in order to stay with him rather than changing Commanders again.²⁰ As a result, in the final episodes of the Third Season of the TV series, June has become a completely different character from the one portrayed at the beginning of the TV series (let alone the Offred in Atwood’s original novel): she is brave, defiant, a leader among the other Handmaids as well as the Marthas, capable of overturning the Ceremony by forcing her Commander to have sex with her, and she is even able to obtain one of the biggest victories ever against the Gilead regime by allowing many children—the most precious resource of Gilead, in a world plagued by low natality—to cross the Canadian border.

3. *The Testaments*, or the last(?) chapter of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

With *The Testaments*, the Gileadverse becomes even larger. The story in Atwood’s 2019 novel is set about fifteen years after the events described in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and it is narrated through the diary entries (i.e. the testaments) of three point-of-view characters with whom the audience of the TV series is already familiar. One is Aunt Lydia, first presented in the 1985 novel where she is usually mentioned by Offred for her mottoes about the rules of conduct in Gilead and also for her intentionally misquoted lines from the Bible. In the TV series adaptation, this character is brought to new life, and, in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia becomes the mastermind behind a plot that will significantly affect the future of Gilead. The other point-of-view characters are Agnes Jemima, who is actually June’s firstborn Hannah, and June’s second daughter, Daisy/Nicole (Nichole in the TV series), who in the meantime has become a political weapon for Gilead after June managed to smuggle her into Canada in the TV series adaptation. In terms of development of the transmedia universe of Gilead, also *The Testaments* focuses on both character and world development. As for the former, June’s legacy is her two daughters (one of them grown up in Gilead, the other in Canada), while Aunt Lydia is not only directly connected to the TV series, but she also offers an advantageous point of view given that she symbolizes the historical memory of Gilead. Being an Aunt, she can read and write, which gives

²⁰ This ‘forced Ceremony’ is the result of a particularly vicious attempt by Commander Waterford to have June again as a Handmaid.

her the possibility to collect compromising files about every important figure in Gilead; in addition, she has access to the birth register stored in one of the few libraries left in Gilead, Ardua Hall library (also full of forbidden books), which means that she has the power to unveil the most hidden secrets of Gilead.

In *The Testaments*, Atwood chooses again to give voice to female characters who have the opportunity to write about a dystopian world from their own point of view, an empowering role which is in sharp contrast with their submissive position in the patriarchal Gileadean society. At the same time, Atwood's recent novel is a gripping story that manages to credibly follow the updated storyline of the TV series without any major internal inconsistencies or plot holes, while adding more memorable characters to an ever-expanding Gileadverse. By including characters such as Garth, on whom Daisy/Nicole has a crush, it is possible for example to imagine a parallel storyline that follows this character, a subplot that is briefly suggested in these few lines:

He told me he was from the Republic of Texas. They'd declared independence at the beginning of Gilead, and Gilead resented that; there had been a war, which had ended in a draw and a new border. (Atwood 2019, 199)

Or else, the detailed description offered by Hannah/Agnes Jemima of the Gilead cards she uses to play Solitaire (Atwood 2019, 158-159) can represent one more opportunity for the expansion of the Gileadverse (or at least a clever merchandising idea).

In the final part of the novel, it is suggested that the whole family of Hannah/Agnes Jemima and Daisy/Nicole might be reunited again in the future, thus hinting at the possibility that June, Luke (Hannah/Agnes Jemima's father) and Nick (Daisy/Nicole's father) are still alive. This detail indicates another important feature of the Gileadverse as developed in the TV series and *The Testaments* that differs from the original story included in the 1985 novel: the main characters tend not to die anymore. As superheroes, who always manage to survive no matter how life-threatening the situation is, the main characters of the Gileadverse are alive when their counterparts in *The Handmaid's Tale* are often dead (or they disappear from the story): this is what happens in the 1985 novel in the case of characters such as Luke, Moira, or Ofglen/Emily.²¹ Death (as well as the loneliness it generates) is a constant threat in the original novel, probably much more so than in the TV series, where only minor characters usually die (and, to a certain extent, this remains true also in the case of *The Testaments*).

²¹ Death is also the fate of Janine's baby in *The Handmaid's Tale*, since after its birth it is promptly labeled as a 'shredder,' or a baby that suffers from birth defects and will be "put somewhere, quickly, away" (Atwood 2017 [1985], 113). However, the baby survives in the TV series as Charlotte/Angela.

While this might sound like mere macabre statistics, it is actually a determining feature of the way the transmedia universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* is currently developing. Zeynep Tufekci wrote an article about how another major transmedia universe, the one evolved around George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, in the final season of its famous TV series adaptation *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss 2011-2019) failed its audience because the main characters no longer died:

The appeal of a show that routinely kills major characters signals a different kind of storytelling, where a single charismatic and/or powerful individual, along with his or her internal dynamics, doesn't carry the whole narrative and explanatory burden. Given the dearth of such narratives in fiction and in TV, this approach clearly resonated with a large fan base that latched on to the show.

In sociological storytelling, the characters have personal stories and agency, of course, but those are also greatly shaped by institutions and events around them. The incentives for characters' behavior come noticeably from these external forces, too, and even strongly influence their inner life. (Tufekci 2019)

It is impossible to deny the crucial role of Offred in the original novel. After all, *The Handmaid's Tale* is primarily her story. At the same time, it is the general interest of the readers in the entire fictional universe of Gilead which actually represents one of the major driving forces leading to the expansion of the storyline into a transmedia narrative. Like any capitalistic enterprise, a transmedia world needs continuous growth and expansion in order to survive; eventually, the choice to focus the transmedia narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* on irreplaceable characters might become a dead end for the story.

As Siobhan O'Flynn states in the Epilogue to *A Theory of Adaptation*, the need by a contemporary audience to be constantly stimulated (as well as the audience's 'negative incapability') might explain the reason, for Atwood, to reinvent the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* from a transmedia perspective:

The bind for traditional media producers is that even if there were a reliable template for multi-platform production, the repetition of any established or well-known model would be perceived as a failure to innovate. Within this context, innovation and change are givens in that industries are forced to respond to new platforms, technologies and new social networking phenomena and to an audience that is consistently described as suffering from attention deficit disorder. (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, 187-188)

In 2020, transmedia storytelling is becoming the norm rather than the exception, and in a time of 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006) not only does the ability to invent complex worlds and endless storylines through various media become essential, but also the fans' active participation as content creators is crucial in order for a transmedia product to be successful

("[I]f your production has not generated fan adaptations, what are you doing wrong?" [Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, 193]).

One might argue that contemporary active participation in transmedia content creation has become an equivalent of the questions asked by the 1985 readers of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As a matter of fact, 20th century readers (as well as previous ones) could only speculate on the meaning of literary works and the ambiguities that they contained, with limited opportunities to share their ideas with other readers. However, in 2020, proof of the existence of critical discussions about cultural products can be tangibly obtained through the creation of new multimedia content which is produced and disseminated by the audience itself. The transmedia products thus developed represent a continuous push for the success of such transmedia universe in the years ahead. A 'regular' TV series, no matter how many episodes and seasons it might have, cannot usually obtain the same global resonance of transmedia products without transforming itself into a transmedia universe (and this seems to be also true in the case of novels). Several TV series which had an enormous success in the last decades have often been forgotten rather quickly to the point of becoming nothing more than items on the back catalogs of streaming platforms. Atwood's decision to use the Hulu-MGM TV series as a new starting point for the development of a transmedia universe instead of writing a simple sequel to the 1985 novel represents the acknowledgment by the author of the efficacy of the new ways in which the landscape of cultural products is currently evolving and reconfiguring itself. This also means that, in order to keep the feminist and antipatriarchal message of *The Handmaid's Tale* still relevant and useful for protest movements around the world over the next years, it has to be sustained by a transmedia universe which constantly renews itself while keeping a high level of popularity, thus representing an active virtual space of confrontation and critical reflection on the world of the 21st century.

In conclusion, Atwood's reworking on *The Handmaid's Tale* through the TV series and *The Testaments* represents a conscious departure, for the author, from the literary status of the 1985 novel in order to 'get her hands dirty' by creating a new transmedia universe. This decision does not seem to be immediately related to the financial success of the whole operation, but rather to the use of a successful transmedia product (with a high level of involvement especially for new generations) as a platform for the wide circulation of a strong political message. If it is true that the political situation in the United States has become significantly more complex over the last years, then it makes sense to assume that an artist/political activist such as Margaret Atwood might want to experiment with a new narrative tool to share her art as well as her ideas, even if this can happen only by abandoning the complexity and richness of a literary text

and by addressing an audience potentially affected by ‘negative *incapability*.’ This might also explain the need to transform the character of June/Offred into a less ambiguous and more univocally positive one, the choice to reorganize the storyline by letting the main characters become virtually immortal like superheroes, and the idea of allowing a potentially unlimited expansion of the Gileadverse in order to support the creation of an infinite number of stories set in this transmedia universe. Finally, the development of a successful transmedia universe also implies the parallel growth of a virtual community of fans made of people who share their ideas thanks to their mutual interest in the Gileadverse. The hope is that the political fights of the main characters of the Gileadverse will also be embraced by the large community of fans in order to obtain positive effects on the real world and the current political situation.

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