

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

FERNANDA NUNES MENEGOTTO

**FROM OFFRED TO JUNE OSBORNE: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, DYSTOPIAN
TELEVISION AND LITERARY ADAPTATION**

PORTO ALEGRE

2020

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Dissertação de Mestrado submetida ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras, com ênfase em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Elaine Barros Indrusiak

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BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Claudio Vescia Zanini

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

Camila Augusta Pires de Figueiredo

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)

Eduardo Marks de Marques

Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel)

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*“Ancestress: the burning witch,
her mouth covered by leather
to strangle words.*

*A word after a word
after a word is power.”*

(Margaret Atwood, “*Spelling*”)

RESUMO

Esta dissertação analisa a adaptação seriada homônima (Hulu, 2017-) do romance *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), de Margaret Atwood, para responder a duas questões norteadoras: primeiro, de que maneira as protagonistas de cada obra (a de Atwood e a do Hulu) se relacionam com uma tradição de distopias literárias mais ampla e segundo, se compreender o formato serial da televisão estadunidense contemporânea pode ajudar a explicar as escolhas feitas na adaptação quanto à caracterização da protagonista. Embora o romance de Atwood tenha sido objeto constante de escrutínio acadêmico desde sua publicação, sua adaptação representa um objeto potencialmente rico para o estudo de duas tendências contemporâneas que ainda não foram suficientemente exploradas: a distopia televisiva e a adaptação de obras literárias para o formato serial favorecido na televisão dos Estados Unidos, o qual foi descrito por Jason Mittell como um modelo potencialmente “infinito” de contar histórias e que, assim, é muito diferente das “adaptações clássicas” britânicas para as quais os estudos de adaptação se voltaram quando estudaram a televisão. A partir das contribuições de estudiosos da adaptação que discutem a especial relevância de condicionantes do contexto-alvo para as escolhas feitas por aqueles que adaptam obras anteriores, esta dissertação examina a *The Handmaid's Tale* do Hulu frente a um corpus que busca descrever as características da televisão seriada estadunidense. Neste trabalho, a Offred do Hulu é comparada à sua equivalente no romance de Atwood, mas a intenção não é simplesmente encontrar semelhanças e diferenças, e sim buscar interpretá-las a partir de um entendimento mais amplo do contexto televisivo para o qual a adaptação foi concebida. Nesse sentido, espera-se que esta pesquisa contribua não apenas para o debate sobre o romance de Atwood e sua celebrada adaptação, mas também para uma discussão mais ampla quanto ao impacto do formato seriado no processo de adaptação de formas mais autônomas, como o romance, bem como quanto ao efeito do cruzamento entre distopia e televisão – especialmente considerando-se a centralidade do melodrama na segunda, conforme explorado por Linda Williams – nas características da primeira.

Palavras-chave: O Conto da Aia. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Distopia. Televisão distópica. Televisão seriada. Adaptação.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes Hulu's 2017 homonymous serial adaptation to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in order to address two guiding questions: first, how the protagonists of each work (Atwood's and Hulu's) relate to a wider tradition of literary dystopias and, second, whether understanding the serial format of contemporary American television can help explain the choices made in the adaptation regarding the protagonist's characterization. While Atwood's novel has been the object of constant academic scrutiny since its publication, its adaptation presents a potentially rich object for the study of two contemporary trends that have been left mostly unexplored: dystopian television and the adaptation of literary works to the serial televisual format preferred in the United States, which has been described by Jason Mittell as a potentially "infinite" model of storytelling and is, thus, very different from the British "classic adaptations" to which adaptation studies have turned when exploring television. Following the contributions of adaptation scholars who discuss the particular relevance of target-context conditioners for the choices made by adapters of previous works, this thesis examines Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* against a corpus of writing that attempts to describe the characteristics of U.S. serial television storytelling. In this work, Hulu's Offred is compared to her counterpart in Atwood's novel, but the intention is not simply to find similarities and differences, but to try to interpret these based on a wider understanding of the televisual context for which the adaptation was conceived. In this sense, the research conducted here will hopefully contribute not only to the debate regarding Atwood's novel and its celebrated adaptation, but also to a larger discussion encompassing how the serial format impacts the process of adaptation of more self-contained forms, such as that of the novel, and of how the intermingling of dystopia and television—especially considering the centrality of melodrama in the latter, as explored by Linda Williams—impacts the characteristics of the former.

Keywords: The Handmaid's Tale. Dystopia. Dystopian television. Serial television. Adaptation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	11
1 RATIONALE AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW	20
1.1 The adaptation debate	20
1.2 American television storytelling: episodes, seasons, and the infinite model.....	29
1.3 The dystopia: mood and warning.....	45
1.3.1 The protagonist of dystopian writing: Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell.....	53
1.3.2 <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : Margaret Atwood's dystopian writing.....	57
1.3.3 Dystopian television	64
2 MARGARET ATWOOD'S <i>THE HANDMAID'S TALE</i>: OFFRED AND STORYTELLING	69
2.1 Offred's narration and the disordered chronology of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : America, Gilead, Nunavit	75
2.1.1 Offred in the time before.....	77
2.1.2 Offred in Gilead	88
2.1.3 Offred's tale as a historical artifact: Nunavit, 2195	99
2.2 The implied author and the narrator: the role of narrative inconsistencies in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	102
2.2.1 Offred's <i>reconstructions</i> : narration and the limits of language and memory	107
2.2.2 "It's a way of keeping her alive": the vital importance of storytelling.....	116
3 HULU'S <i>THE HANDMAID'S TALE</i>: JUNE OSBORNE AND OVERT INSUBORDINATION	119
3.1 Offred and June Osborne: what is in a name?	119
3.2 June and narration	122
3.3 June Osborne's tale of insubordination	128
3.3.1 June in the time before: a tale told in flashbacks	132
3.3.2 June in Gilead: a journey into bravery	140
3.4 <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> , American television narrative	153
3.5 June Osborne and the dystopian tradition.....	170
FINAL CONSIDERATIONS	175
REFERENCES	181

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1 - June's first and last appearances as Offred in the pilot episode ("Offred", S01E01).....	130
Image 2 - Emily and June smile as Emily drives the stolen car ("Faithful", S01E05).....	143
Image 3 - An emotional June cries after talking to the Mexican ambassador ("A Woman's Place", S01E06).....	144
Image 4 - June at Jezebel's in "Jezebels" (S01E08) and "The Bridge" (S01E09)	148
Image 5 - Luke's face changes as he assimilates his emotions after getting June's message ("The Other Side", S01E07).....	150
Image 6 - June and Moira close "The Bridge" (S01E09) triumphantly	151

INTRODUCTION

On January 21, 2017, when the first Women’s March took place—likely the largest one-day political demonstration in U.S. history (CHENOWETH; PRESSMAN, 2017)—, phrases such as “Make Margaret Atwood fiction again”, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* is not an instruction manual” and “Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum” were found on many of the posters that flooded the streets of U.S. cities—and some cities elsewhere—that day (LEVINE, 2017). In the United States, the red uniform wore by the titular Handmaids in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel was often adopted in 2017 as women protested legislative sessions that proposed outlawing abortion (HAUSER, 2017). In the U.S., abortion is a right guaranteed only by a 1973 Supreme Court decision that declared it would be unconstitutional for states to criminalize the practice. But the use of the uniform as a form of protest crossed borders: it soon came to symbolize, for instance, Latin American women’s fight for reproductive rights in countries such as Argentina (CARMO, 2018) and Brazil (MARQUES, 2018). Suddenly, the narrative Atwood had written more than thirty years before seemed to become very urgent for many people—and especially many women—around the world.

Atwood published her first book, the poetry collection *Double Persephone*, in 1961, when she was only twenty-one. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, soon followed in 1969. Her prolific writing career and the popularity of her novels have since turned her into a Canadian celebrity—even though she disputes the idea of being known as one (MACPHERSON, 2010). Despite her popularity, Atwood has not always been so widely read or known in the specific reality of Brazil. Back in 2000, when she won her first Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*, published that same year, a short article appeared in Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* discussing Atwood’s “abandonment” in Brazil as her local publisher shut down its fiction division. At the time, editor Ary Benclowicz declared that Atwood had never sold well in the country (AUTORA..., 2000). Publishing house Rocco was responsible for republishing plenty of Atwood’s work, including *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 2006, but it had been out of print in the country when it became a sensation in early 2017. Later that year, a new edition was released and since then it has barely ever left the bestsellers list; following that success, other novels by the author, such as *Alias Grace* (1996), the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) and *The Penelopiad* (2005) were also given new editions. From an author who, according to her local publisher, had never sold very well in the country, Atwood became a very well-established

name in Brazil as the 2010s approached their ending. 2017 was not, however, a randomly good year for Atwood: it was the year when Hulu released its successful serial adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The influence film (or, in this case, television) adaptations have on the publishing market is not a new phenomenon. In his 1957 book *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone, often credited as the pioneering name in adaptation studies, already discussed the matter:

Just as one line of influence runs from New York publishing house to Hollywood studio, another line may be observed running the other way. Margaret Farrand Thorp reports that when *David Copperfield* appeared on local screens, the demand for the book was so great that the Cleveland Public Library ordered 132 new copies; that the film premier of *The Good Earth* boosted sales of that book to 3,000 per week; and that more copies of *Wuthering Heights* have been sold since the novel was screened than in all the previous ninety-two years of its existence. Jerry Wald confirms this pattern by pointing out, more precisely, that after the film's appearance, the Pocket Book edition of *Wuthering Heights* sold 700,000 copies; various editions of *Pride and Prejudice* reached a third of a million copies; and sales for *Lost Horizon* reached 1,400,000 (BLUESTONE, 1961, p. 4).

Elaine Indrusiak's research (2013, p. 107) goes even further in analyzing the impact that Peter Jackson's trilogy of films (2001-2003) adapting J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* had in the Brazilian cultural scenario, suggesting that their effect went beyond Tolkien and Jackson, helping to "consolidate young adult fantasy literature as a high-profile niche dissociated from children's books". Not only did the films establish Tolkien's name in Brazil, where it did not carry the kind of popularity and relevance it had in the English-speaking world, but they also affected the publishing industry in a larger way.

Such a phenomenon involves more than selling more copies, however, as it often also means attracting a plethora of new readers to a literary text, and among these readers there will inevitably be those who were in contact with the adaptation first, and only later with the adapted text. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon (2013) states that experiencing an adaptation *as adaptation* involves having the adapted text as part of our "horizon of expectation"; on the other hand, she highlights that once we get in touch with the adaptation, it can change the way we look at the adapted work as well. Furthermore, we have a different and diametrically opposed possibility: that the adaptation might be responsible for creating interest in the adapted work, "thereby challenging the authority of any notion of priority. Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically" (p. xv). We could think, then, that these readers arrive at the adapted

text with a different “horizon of expectation”, one which involves the adaptation and the adapter’s interpretations and choices.

Although I would not suggest that Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has had an impact as significant as Peter Jackson’s films—neither in Brazil nor elsewhere—, the impact of the series, taken on its own merit, is undeniable. According to data released by Amazon, in 2017 Atwood’s novel sold twenty-two times the number of copies it did the previous year (2017: THIS YEAR..., 2017). At the same time, the following year, 2018, was remarkable for what Alexandra Alter of *The New York Times* refers to as “feminist dystopian fiction”: works published between late 2017 and 2018 which are bound together because they are “female-centered [...] futuristic works that raise uncomfortable questions about pervasive gender inequality, misogyny and violence against women, the erosion of reproductive rights and the extreme consequences of institutionalized sexism” (ALTER, 2018). A different study would be necessary to firmly determine whether the success of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* helped to establish the scenario in which at least six new female-centered dystopias that tackle similar themes, such as reproductive rights and gender inequality, were published by anglophone authors, or if the series’ success can be explained by a “readiness to reception” (HUTCHEON, 2013, p. 143) that encompasses all of these works equally.

What we can establish, however, is that dystopia is currently in vogue. Luisa Geisler at *Quatro cinco um* (2019-2020) analyzes the success of dystopian fiction in the Brazilian context specifically, suggesting that 2018 and 2019 saw an intense production of such narratives, outside the country as well as inside its borders—but the growth, she says, is not really a new tendency, especially if one considers the commercial success of young adult dystopias such as Suzanne Collins’s trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) and their subsequent film adaptations. If we look closely, we notice that ever since they first appeared, dystopias never really went away—they simply changed in order to accommodate new fears and new tendencies, and authors who take a historical look at the genre, as Jill Lepore and Yvonne Shiau both did in 2017, demonstrate how. That they both did so in the same year seems significant—the dystopia might have never really gone away, but the end of the past decade was, as the title of Lepore’s article suggests, a new “golden age” for dystopian fiction (for better or worse). Such a “golden age” was not limited to literature, and works discussed as examples of this wave include feature films such as *Blade Runner 2049*, the 2017 sequel to *Blade Runner* (1982), itself an adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), BBC’s *Years*

and Years (2019), HBO's *Westworld* (2016-), Netflix's original film *Bird Box* (2018) and series *Altered Carbon* (2018-2020) and *3%* (2016-2020), Prime Video's *Electric Dreams* (2017), and Channel 4/Netflix's *Black Mirror* (2011-2019) (cf. RODRÍGUEZ, 2018; STURGES, 2019; KINDLEY, 2018; MALONEY, 2019). It was in this context that my interest in dystopia and its characteristics grew. Dystopia is a quite fertile genre, and it seems to have grown exponentially in the last few years. While literary dystopias have been often examined in the past, this apparent new trend of television dystopias remains mostly unexplored. This thesis will partially address this gap, as it will analyze one important example of this trend, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

More than a television dystopia, however, the series is also an adaptation of a former well-established literary dystopia, Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same title. Thus, this thesis will be organized around three different axes: dystopia, television, and adaptation. When it comes to dystopia, I will describe what kind of narrative the term entails, since, as shown above, it is used in a quite expansive way. This discussion will be, however, centered around three specific literary works: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924). These novels have been selected in part due to Atwood's own interest in all of them, especially Orwell's. When it comes to television, I will situate Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* in the larger contemporary American televisual context. Lastly, adaptation will be discussed here since I analyze the television series as compared to the source novel—not to detract one or the other, but to better understand the relationship that the adaptation creates with the adapted text. My objects of study, thus, are both Atwood's novel and the television series it inspired. Within both, this analysis will focus on the main character, a woman named Offred.

The Handmaid's Tale takes place in an imagined future for the United States of America, a future in which the country becomes a heavily militarized theocratic state following a coup d'état. In this scenario, a group of fundamentalist Christians overthrows the American government after assassinating the president and congressmen and women. The Constitution and other laws are suspended, and all Americans must subsequently live according to this group's skewed interpretations of the Bible (other religions, including different manifestations of Christianity itself, are prohibited). "Americans", indeed, is a word that can no longer describe them, for the group changes the name of the country, now known as the Republic of Gilead. Some of the changes in this society apply specifically to women, who can no longer hold jobs,

own money or property, read, write and access and share knowledge. The whole of society, however, is stratified. For women, they can either be divided by their function within the domestic space or, alternatively, they can be deemed unassimilable, given the status of “unwomen” and either sent away to faraway lands referred to as the “Colonies” or forced into prostitution in brothels that operate beyond strict Gileadean laws, but with the tacit approval of many members of its powerful elite. Assimilated women, on the other hand, can be Wives, Econowives, Marthas, or Handmaids: respectively, they are women who are married to Gilead’s ruling class (the Commanders of the Faithful), women married to the common men, women who work as housemaids for Gilead’s ruling class, and, finally, a “special” class of women: based on the Biblical story of Jacob and Rachel—who, unable to conceive, offers her maid Bilhah to her husband Jacob as a surrogate—, Handmaids serve as surrogate mothers for the Wives who are unable to conceive, a common occurrence in Gilead (in Gilead, the responsibility is always the woman’s, who can be either fertile or infertile; male infertility is never considered). Handmaids, who are considered sinners, but who are fertile, are especially dehumanized because they are stripped of their most basic identities. Handmaids are supposed to relinquish their names and histories: they can only be referred to by a patronymic (“Offred”, for instance, signifies that she belongs to a man named Fred). The patronymics change as Handmaids change houses and are given to new Commanders. The process of indoctrination Handmaids must undergo before they are ready to be sent to a household is conducted by the Aunts, a class of Gileadean women who have some privileges, such as being allowed to read and write.

The Handmaid’s Tale not only has a Handmaid as its protagonist, but also as its narrator. Because she is not supposed to have a history and an identity under the regime, her insistence in telling her story has often been understood as an act of resistance. In the critical reception of the novel, Offred has been read as a plethora of different things: as someone complicit with the horrors of the regime, as a passive victim, as a heroic protagonist¹. Those who emphasize her

¹ In this thesis, whenever the terms “hero” or “heroic” are used to describe Offred, they should be understood following the general, rather than the more specific, definition of it. According to the Oxford dictionary, the first meaning of the word “hero” is simply “A person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities”; within that definition, in 1.2, the Dictionary alludes to the implications of the term when thought of in the context of Greek mythology: “(in mythology and folklore) a person of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one whose exploits were the subject of ancient Greek myths” (HERO..., 2020). In his dissertation, Luiz Felipe Espinelly (2016) reflects on what he understands as the antiheroic qualities of the protagonists centralized in the dystopias produced in postmodernity, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* included. This discussion is particularly relevant because, according to Espinelly and his rationale, which explores the origins and transformations of the hero, the history of heroes reflects the history of humanity itself, as a process of

heroic characteristics, however, tend to link this heroism to her act of storytelling, and not to her actions during the time of the story that is narrated. However, the television show characterizes Offred slightly differently—Atwood herself, who serves as a producer, has suggested that Hulu’s Offred is made much more active than her own ever was (VINEYARD, 2017), a perception that has also been shared by some of the television critics who have analyzed the series, a notable example being *The New Yorker*’s Emily Nussbaum (2017), who is an important source for my discussion.

I hypothesize that Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* transforms the more passive and victimized protagonists of the dystopian literary tradition in important ways. However, this transformation should not be read as stemming from “misadaptation” or “infidelity”, for I hypothesize that it has been determined by the format, medium and context for which the series was conceived. Hulu’s Offred is both more active and victorious than Atwood’s Offred, as well as Zamyatin’s D-503, Huxley’s Bernard Marx or John the Savage, and Orwell’s Winston Smith. While it is not really possible to pin down a single reason for the choices made in the adaptation, one of the most essential aspects of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s very existence is that it was conceived as a serialized television narrative in the late 2010s. This is a format that demands long-time engagement from the viewer, often spanning not only months within a single year, but also several years². I hypothesize that this demand for Offred’s story to endlessly continue over time, an important characteristic of American commercial television, could contribute to explain why she, as a protagonist, can no longer occupy the role of passive witness facing an indestructible authoritarian regime. My research questions, thus, were: first, how the two Offreds (Atwood’s and Hulu’s) relate to the wider tradition of dystopian fiction that inspired

degradation and loss of connection with the gods. If the traditional hero is a semi-divine creature with superior features that serves as a positive but unachievable model for humans, Espinelly suggests that, reflecting the deep transformations that came along with the processes of modernity and postmodernity, in the dystopias appearing in the second half of the twentieth century what we have are antiheroes whose concern is survival, which serves as metaphor for our condition in postmodernity. In that sense, heroes and antiheroes are contextualized and historicized in such a way that it would hardly make sense to discuss Offred as a hero. Many readings of Offred, however, present the character admiringly, particularly due to her significant achievement of narrating her own story, quite “outstanding” in the context of Gilead. It is in that sense, then, that the word “heroic” should be taken when used in my thesis.

² Of course, this notion does not apply to the “limited series” or “miniseries” that has also been an important format in U.S. television since the 1970s (cf. WILLIAMS, 2018), for they are, evidently, limited in length. An important difference is their “predetermined end” (ibid), which, as I will explore later in the thesis, is something that American serials usually do not possess, for they are intended to last as long as they generate good viewing numbers. This last model of storytelling, which Jason Mittell (2015) describes as potentially infinite, will be the one explored here, as opposed to what Linda Williams (2018) refers to as the “standalone serial” model of the miniseries.

The Handmaid's Tale, the novel; second, in what ways an understanding of the serial format of American television can help explain the choices made in the adaptation.

In this thesis, I will, for the most part, focus on the first season of the television show, since it covers the basic timeline of the novel nearly in its entirety, leaving out only the epilogue, or “Historical Notes” (as we shall see in chapter two, this epilogue is very significant). Some of the events taking place during the second and third seasons of the show³ will be briefly mentioned when deemed necessary to illuminate or complicate the discussion, but the bulk of the analysis will rely on the material directly adapted from the novel. I make this choice as someone who is aware that the events encompassed in the first season of the show will continue to gain new possible interpretations as the series progresses, so much so that a few considerations concerning seasons two and three will be brought up. As discussed by Jason Mittell in his study of television seriality, “this is the challenge of trying to analyze meaning in a serial text: it changes as you watch it, or how it means shapes what it means” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 345)—seriality itself allows certain aspects of the narrative to be emphasized over and over again, or, on the other hand, for certain events to be revisited and revised. For Mittell, questions that involve meaning in serial texts

require us to reframe what we mean by “interpretation” itself as a serial endeavor—always in flux, replete with gaps and ellipses, inclusive of endless contexts and paratexts, and frustrating in its incompleteness. Writing serial criticism requires the critic to accept such potential shifts and open-ended contingency as part of the terrain, giving up the certainty that is typically asserted in academic arguments (MITTELL, 2015, p. 349).

It is, ultimately, a humbling endeavor, for it demands beforehand the acceptance of one’s own limitations and the possibility that one’s study might be challenged, questioned, and transformed by future academics not only due to differences in academic and theoretical background, but also due to the very nature of the object of study.

Chapter one details the theories and discussions that have informed the examination proposed here. It explores separately the different areas that are mobilized by my research, which will be connected in chapter three, where I analyze the Hulu adaptation of Atwood’s novel. In section 1.1, I discuss adaptations and why I believe that the field of adaptation studies has not adequately addressed television adaptations. As I argue in the next subsection following

³ As of 2020, Hulu had released three complete seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with a fourth season set to premiere in 2021.

the previous work of television scholars, these adaptations should be understood separately from film adaptations, since serial storytelling is different from the more self-contained form of film. The characteristics of serial television are thus explored in section 1.2. Section 1.3 stands separately from the two previous sections, exploring the concepts of utopia, dystopia, the existence of a literary dystopian tradition and how *The Handmaid's Tale* relates to it. Subsection 1.3.1 discusses the protagonists of dystopian writing, while the following subsection deals more specifically with the critical reception of Atwood's text and of its protagonist, Offred. Closing off the chapter, subsection 1.3.3 connects the discussion of dystopia with the discussion about television, examining television dystopias as a larger phenomenon of which Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is part.

Chapter two is dedicated to my analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and, more specifically, of Offred's role as a character and as a narrator. I explore Offred's role in the two distinctive moments of her story: the time before Gilead (subsection 2.1.1), and in Gilead, as a Handmaid (subsection 2.1.2). The way Offred is discussed by the Cambridge academics in the Historical Notes is explored in subsection 2.1.3. I propose that an important trait of Offred's characterization in both of these very different moments of her life is her continued inaction, but that her narration explores her growing consciousness about her own role in allowing for Gilead to come into existence. Furthermore, this self-awareness ultimately leads to an important action on her part: the telling of her own story. We should thus pay attention to the texture of her narration, as explored in section 2.2. I contrast Offred's storytelling with the epilogue of the novel, taking place hundreds of years later, and propose that the contrast in tone between Offred and the academics whose voices are heard in the epilogue are part of Atwood's larger dystopian project, as further explored in subsection 2.2.2.

Chapter three explores the televisual adaptation of Atwood's novel. In section 3.1, I discuss the different approaches taken by Atwood and Bruce Miller when it comes to the protagonist's characterization based on the names she is given in each work. Based on the central relevance narration has in Atwood's work, section 3.2 explores the notion of audiovisual narration and the difference it makes when one chooses to move beyond a character's restricted point of view. In section 3.3, I analyze the characterization of television Offred (whose real name is June Osborne) in the time before (subsection 3.3.1) and in Gilead (3.3.2) and suggest that, in both temporalities, she is modified in important ways when compared with the Offred in the novel, particularly in that she becomes a much more active character in the television

series. In section 3.4, I analyze this Offred/June against a theoretical background that explores the habits of storytelling in American television, particularly regarding the centrality of the notions of seriality and melodrama in television. In the final section, 3.5, I engage in a comparative contrasting of the Offred in the television series and the literary dystopian tradition that indirectly inspired it by more directly inspiring the novel that it adapts. I suggest that the series reworks the dystopian tradition in important ways: while dystopias in general usually engage with the notion of hope, the hope in the dystopian tradition, in Atwood's novel and in the adaptation have different grounds, which I explore in the closing section of my discussion.

1 RATIONALE AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

1.1 The adaptation debate

The relationship between cinema and literature has always been a close one, and literary works continue to be important sources for films to adapt. Researcher Stephen Follows, for instance, looks at a twenty-year period of domestic (U.S. and Canada) box office numbers, from 1994 to 2013, and concludes that fifty-one percent of the two thousand highest-grossing films⁴ of that period were adaptations, and twenty-five percent of scripts derived from fiction—novels and short stories (FOLLOWS, 2014). While this data is limited, since it revolves around (American-centered) box office numbers and, as a result, inevitably ends up limiting itself to Hollywood productions, the influence American cinema has across the globe is undeniable, as is its sizable yearly production. Thus, though limited, the data cited above is still significant for us to discuss literature’s continued influence on cinema.

It did not take long for this close relationship to become a topic of investigation and discussion. Patrick Cattrysse (2014, p. 21) cites, for example, authors discussing it as early as 1909. It was also early on that negative evaluations of film adaptations appeared—a famous example is Virginia Woolf’s 1926 essay “The Cinema”. Though Woolf does not see cinema itself negatively, emphasizing the new possibilities of expression it could potentially offer, her view of adaptations is not as positive: while discussing an unidentified film version of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877), Woolf describes cinema as “prey” in relation to its “unfortunate victim”, literature, with “disastrous” results deriving from an “unnatural” alliance between the two art forms—cinema, when it comes to its appropriation of literary works, is described as a “parasite” (p. 382). And if cinema was then still a nascent art full of possibilities, Woolf saw as essential that it should establish itself in complete independence from literature. In the nearly one hundred years that have passed since Woolf wrote her essay, cinema has established itself as an art form that never abandoned its—according to Woolf at least—“parasitic” relationship with literature; on the contrary, as the data discussed before shows, several celebrated films derive directly from pre-existent works. Over time, the relationship between film and literature cemented itself in its own field of research, now usually referred to as “adaptation studies”.

⁴ The list of two thousand films was composed based on each year’s one hundred highest-grossing films.

The field of adaptation studies is usually said to have begun with George Bluestone's influential book *Novels into Film*, first published in 1957. Cattrysse (2014) disputes such affirmations, pointing out that beyond the anglophone context there were discussions happening in Germany, France and Russia decades before Bluestone published his book. Nevertheless, *Novels into Film* became a seminal work in the field and contributed to shape the early understanding of adaptation in many ways. Bluestone's book-length study of the relationship between novels and films is concerned primarily with emphasizing differences between the two media: visual images he associates with "percepts" and mental images with "concepts", thus suggesting that these media are apprehended differently (BLUESTONE, 1961, p. 1). Because of these different processes, Bluestone proposes that novel and film are "overtly compatible, secretly hostile" (p. 2). And if the media are different, he suggests that so are the audiences, whose demands impact the works produced for each. It is an approach that concerns itself primarily with the *separation* of the arts, that presents possible limitations in both literature and film (as well as possible limitations in making the transition between the two) and that suggests that transformations are inevitable when there is a change in medium. For Kamilla Elliott (2003, p. 128), Bluestone, a "separatist", is aligned with those scholars of the film camp who emphasize that film should be "faithful to its own semiotic system—to cinematic signs, conventions, audiences and genres". On the other hand, Elliott suggests that critics speaking from the literary camp often privilege the concept of fidelity to the literary source, since for them adaptation seems to be a "falling off from the book", an "inferior reproduction", or a "pedagogical hook to lure lackluster students", among other negative evaluations of the practice (ELLIOTT, 2003, p. 128).

Since 1957, when Bluestone's study first appeared, his positions and ideas have been both celebrated and contested. An important transformation within the field has been the effort to reshape the novel-into-film concept into a wider idea of *adaptation*. Linda Hutcheon (2013), for instance, does not refer only to novels and films in her influential *A Theory of Adaptation*, but rather attempts to theorize adaptation as a larger phenomenon, looking at transpositions from *telling* to *showing* mode (and vice-versa), from *showing* to *showing* mode, from *interacting* to *telling* or *showing* mode (and vice-versa) instead; phenomena as varied as videogames inspiring books and theme-park rides inspiring films could, thus, potentially appear under the same adaptation umbrella. Julie Sanders (2006) discusses various works that establish relationships with literary sources, but also myth, fairytale, and folklore, as well as historical

facts, for example. Thomas Leitch (2007) develops a taxonomy that deals with intertextual practice as a larger phenomenon, beginning with the most celebratory adaptations, which “impute to their sources powers beyond their own” (p. 96), and finishing with allusions, a feature that, he proposes, every film contains. Irina Rajewsky (2005) does not discuss *adaptation* exclusively but understands it as an example of “medial transposition” (p. 57), itself only a part of the larger phenomenon of intermediality. She uses “intermediality” to designate “a crossing of borders between media”—thus, as a different phenomenon from *intramediality* and *transmediality* (p. 56). More recently, Eckart Voigts (2017) has taken the discussion of adaptation even further, looking at new intertextual forms that have surfaced as technology advanced—such as memes or mashups, among other manifestations—and discussing how these practices demonstrate our impulse to adapt and appropriate and how they challenge current theorizations and definitions. Examples like these show that the field continues to expand as new voices appear questioning its frontiers, and they demonstrate that there is much left to be explored beyond novel-to-film models.

However, if the theorization of adaptations has been expanding to include (or at least question the potential adaptive status of) phenomena far distant from novel-to-film transpositions, novels and films continue to constitute the core of the analyses that are developed under adaptations studies. Television adaptations are, thus, still an underdeveloped subfield in adaptation studies; Sarah Cardwell (2007c), one of the few names who have consistently dedicated attention to it, claims that adaptation scholars tend to overlook television. Cardwell insists that television adaptations should be explored independently from film adaptations, since they are of different natures—a claim that is often made by television scholars, as it will be explored in section 1.2. In 2008, Leitch listed a series of researchers who, even if working within the “based-on-the-literary-text model”, did so “in ways that challenge its foundational assumptions” (p. 65). One of the fifteen issues listed concerned television, as the scholars involved in its study could potentially ask in what ways adaptations made for television rather than film “challenge assumptions about the formal and institutional differences between verbal and audio-visual texts that might be overlooked in discussions that restricted themselves to literature and cinema” (p. 67). Leitch offers Cardwell as his single example, however, and it remains a difficulty to find other researchers who concern themselves with television adaptation.

Such a gap might have something to do with views like those expressed by Leitch himself in two different occasions. He states, for example, in defending cinema, that it is a fallacy to say that film “usurps its audience’s imagination” (2003, p. 159); in order to do so, however, he suggests that

perhaps dismayed that television has killed the novel-reading tastes of a generation of students who lack the patience to appreciate psychological fiction or to wait for a slow payoff, commentators like [Brian] McFarlane have often concluded more generally that “because of its high iconicity, the cinema has left no scope for the imaginative activity necessary to the reader’s visualization of what he reads” (LEITCH, 2003, p. 160, emphasis mine).

The dismissal of television as a whole reappears later on, now on an aesthetic level, when Leitch suggests that the 1995 BBC adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is, “like all television”, “still illustrated radio but more vigorously illustrated” (2007, p. 176). In—correctly—defending one medium, Leitch ends up dismissing another one in its entirety.

Nevertheless, Leitch does examine some examples of television adaptation when discussing what he refers to as “Traditions of Quality”, where he places BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice*. The term follows François Truffaut’s opposition between a “Tradition of Quality” in cinema, entailing literary respect to the source-text, and the cinema of the *auteur*. While the BBC “Tradition of Quality” is not the only one explored by Leitch, it is the one that involves television, thus it will be the one emphasized here. For the scholar, the “quality” that is attached to these adaptations derives both from the careful, rich and celebratory reconstruction of the historical aspect and from their “fetish with fidelity” (p. 174), meaning that they use as much dialogue taken straight from the novel as possible, constituting, in the end, of audiovisual productions which are actually “dialogue with visuals obligato” (p. 172). Perhaps more productive for the discussion proposed in this thesis is Leitch’ brief emphasis of serialized adaptations as demanding a different sort of structure, as each *Pride and Prejudice* episode tells a “relatively self-contained story even as the first five whet the appetite for more” (p. 176). Here, we can already see an incipient discussion about serial television’s specificities when it comes to storytelling.

Cardwell reads this kind of television, which Leitch describes as forming one “Tradition of Quality”, as a specific genre within the field of television adaptations. It is exactly this kind of television that she explores in her own analysis, as she emphasizes that the discussion about

television adaptation tends to revolve around this genre: “the prolific ‘classic serials’: relatively faithful adaptations of classic, mostly nineteenth-century, works of literature” (CARDWELL, 2007c, p. 181). When it comes to American television, which operates following a different model, however, studies are more difficult to find. But television adaptations of literature are a widespread phenomenon in American commercial television, and one of them, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), is described as a “global blockbuster” by television scholar Amanda Lotz (2018, p. 141), so its level of penetration is considerable. If we ignore these television productions, we leave an entire practice of adaptation uncovered. If adaptation scholars have been questioning the field’s presumed founding text—Bluestone’s book—based on its narrow scope, the narrowness of the *novel-into-film* model seems to go even further, then, than it is often recognized.

The narrowness of scope is not the only part of Bluestone’s text that has been disputed throughout the years. Leitch, for instance, deems his approach “categorical and essentialist” (2003, p. 149), suggesting that Bluestone was the first to promulgate a central “fallacy” in adaptation studies, one that states that “differences between literary and cinematic texts are rooted in essential properties of their respective media” (p. 150). The same impetus, for Leitch, is central to Seymour Chatman’s famous claim that films cannot be descriptive or invite aesthetic contemplation. One of the features that Chatman (1980) analyzes is the way *description* works in a literary text, which, he explains, is different from *narrative proper*, since the *story* is frozen. According to Chatman, such freezing of time does not happen in a film, and thus he suggests that films cannot describe because action never truly stops. Leitch does not question the fact that novels and films have historically adopted different ways of storytelling, but the hasty assumption that *essential properties* of the different media are to explain them, suggesting instead that Chatman’s arguments could be applied “*not to essential properties of novels and films, but to specific reading habits* that are grounded in the history of fashion, taste, and analysis rather than in any specific technical properties of novels and films” (LEITCH, 2003, p. 152, emphasis mine).

Chatman nevertheless offers interesting ideas in the article contested by Leitch; if his generalizations may be questioned, he still points to *common features* of the two media that, as stated by Leitch in the citation reproduced above, represent “specific reading habits”. Chatman’s discussion of point of view is especially interesting for my thesis. If it is possible for the camera to identify with a specific character’s point of view, making the audience see

what he or she sees, Chatman also discusses what he refers to as the “interest point of view” (1980, p. 134). In this case, the camera does not adopt the character’s point of view, it is the character that looks towards it. But her movements, the expressive emotions in her face, “incite us to share her emotional point of view; we empathize with her” (p. 134). As stated by Hutcheon (2013, p. 54), the camera is usually employed as something akin to a “moving third-person narrator”. Instead of reducing what the viewer can see in an actual limited perspective, aspects such as “camera angle, focal length, music, *mise-en-scène*, performance, or costume” can be used to convey point of view (HUTCHEON, 2013, p. 55). In a show like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is an important feature: by representing onscreen both the oppressed and those who oppress them as seen from the outside, the series uses different cues, such as voice-overs, music and extreme close-ups, to take audiences closer to some characters rather than others. This will be further explored in chapter three.

It becomes clear, then, that since the publication of Bluestone’s book adaptation scholars have taken the discussion on different paths, challenging and questioning each other and expanding the field (cf. ELLIOT, 2014). However, even if the field has been taken on several different directions, adaptation scholars tend to agree when it comes to the importance of doing away with the notion of “fidelity”. Robert Stam, for instance—credited by Leitch (2008, p. 63) as a scholar who was particularly successful in reorienting the field “decisively from the fidelity discourse universally attacked by theorists as far back as George Bluestone”—, questions such a notion on the basis that it is “essentialist” to assume that a work contains an “essence” that can be transposed (STAM, 2000, p. 57). Stam suggests what he considers to be a better way of understanding and analyzing adaptations, based both on Mikhail Bakhtin’s proposition that every text is a “differentiated unity of the epoch’s entire culture” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 3 apud STAM, 2000, p. 65) and on Gérard Genette’s discussion of *hyper* and *hypotextuality* in his 1982 book *Palimpsests*, according to which the hypertext “transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends” the hypotext (STAM, 2000, p. 65). In this view, adapted text and adaptation must be further contextualized to be understood:

The source novel, in this sense, can be seen as a situated utterance produced in one medium and in one historical context, then transformed into another equally situated utterance that is produced in a different context and in a different medium. The source text forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting film text can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform. The film adaptation of a novel performs these transformations according to the protocols of a distinct medium, absorbing and altering the genres and intertexts available through the grids of ambient discourses and ideologies, and as mediated by a series of filters: studio style,

ideological fashion, political constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, economic advantage or disadvantage, and evolving technology (STAM, 2000, p. 68-69).

Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality—which builds on her own studies of Bakhtin (KRISTEVA, 1986)—has been particularly productive for adaptation scholars such as Julie Sanders (2006). Sanders sees *adaptation*—or a “sustained engagement with a single text or source” (p. 4)—and *appropriation*—the same sustained engagement, but often adopting “a posture of critique, even assault” (ibid)—as different expressions of intertextuality. In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, she looks at filmic adaptations and appropriations, but also suggests that these phenomena happen within *literature itself*, offering William Shakespeare as a notable example. The scholar seeks to question our value systems and the notion of a supposed originality that canonical literary texts allegedly possess. Her book ultimately insists that we must rethink adaptations and appropriations, which should be understood as possibilities for “creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts which have inspired them, enriching rather than ‘robbing’ them” (p. 41). As she points out, structuralists and poststructuralists back in the 1960s and 1970s already talked of a “rewriting impulse” *within* literature (p. 2). Also important at the time was a destabilization of “the authority of the original text” (SANDERS, 2006, p. 3), which one can find in influential texts within literary studies, such as Roland Barthes's 1967 “Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault's 1969 “What is an Author”. Yet adaptation studies often still overvalue, decades later, such notions of originality and authority (LEITCH, 2003) rather than the “endless and exciting” possibilities highlighted by Sanders (2006, p. 40).

In this largely accepted intertextual context, a point of contention within the field of adaptation is whether comparatist approaches are useful for its study and, if so, what uses they could have. Maria Cristina Ribas (2014), for instance, adopts an intertextual view of adaptation, but still suggests that comparative analysis is welcomed—as long as its modern strand is the one adopted: a comparative analysis that does not treat one part as *dependent* on the other, and that does not hierarchize these parts. Ribas points to adaptation functioning as a *supplement*, an *addition* to the source-text, thus distancing adaptation from ideas of fidelity or mimetic reproduction (p. 123). For her, if reading is understood as a process that has no end for its resignifications, it makes no sense to think that adaptations can “corrupt” former texts. I find Ribas's approach much more productive than Cardwell's (2007a), who makes the case for a noncomparative approach and suggests that comparatist approaches by now are useful mostly

for other purposes such as comparing different *media* and understanding their specificities. I agree with Cardwell that it is important to place an adaptation within its other contexts, such as the generic (its affiliation with a larger genre), the authorial (a specific work within an author's oeuvre), and, in the specific case of television adaptations, the larger televisual background. She also correctly suggests that one should consider the aesthetic concerns of the adaptation on its own merit. But all of these suggestions can still be realized within a comparative analysis: Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, has emphasized its own status as an adaptation from its first teasers and trailers⁵, and it also contributed to the novel's new or revived popularization. The relationship, thus, is too symbiotic to be ignored.

None of this means that the analyst should not pay attention to his or her own bias, especially as someone with a background in literary studies. For Leitch (2008, p. 64), when disciplines and textbooks refer to the field as "literature on screen", there is an underlining assumption that adaptation is to be studied primarily through the prism of literature—which is, indeed, what usually happens in the field. Leitch proposes a way of understanding adaptation that does away with notions of authority and canonicity that have been so pervasive:

For half a century and more adaptation study has drastically limited its horizons by its insistence on treating source texts as canonical authoritative discourse or readerly works rather than internally persuasive discourse or writerly texts, refusing in consequence to learn what one might have expected to be the primary lesson of film adaptation: that texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it. The whole process of film adaptation offers an obvious practical demonstration of the necessity of rewriting that many commentators have ignored because of their devotion to literature (LEITCH, 2007, p. 12-13).

He also suggests that the opposite strategy of overvaluing the filmic auteur—as in the case of Alfred Hitchcock versus Daphne du Maurier, in which the former is the "more canonical" out of the two (p. 13)—is just as unproductive. He chooses instead to understand adaptation in Barthesian lines, following to notion of the *writerly text*, which sees each reader as a rewriter. Leitch is making the point, then, that the discussion should go beyond the mere *understanding* of texts, but also involve considering, comparing, criticizing—*engaging* with texts. This is a notion that is also apparent in approaches such as Sanders's, previously explored, as well Hutcheon's.

⁵ The Super Bowl teaser trailer released on February 3, 2017 can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMrDTDEmS4c>, and the first full trailer, released on March 23, 2017, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Vwsr6Ef3_E. Accessed Feb. 17, 2020.

Hutcheon's approach (2013) to adaptation both discards the centrality of literature—as stated before in this thesis, her model includes adaptations that, in fact, do not involve literary texts at all—and emphasizes at all times that to adapt is to engage in a process of *creation*. In this scenario, the adapted text is understood as “something to be interpreted and recreated” (p. 84); an adapter, furthermore, can have all kinds of reasons to adapt, including “the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or call it into question” (p. 7). Furthermore, an adapter, just like the work he or she adapts, exists in a *context*—in a specific locale, during a specific moment in history, entailing a society and culture (p. xvi). Hutcheon also opens space for the authors—the adapters—to appear in the analysis, and proposes that the existence of different adaptations of the same source-text suggests that authorial intentions (“political, aesthetic, and autobiographical”) can be useful for their interpretation (p. 107). If they can be recovered, as they often can through interviews, for example, there is no reason not to do so; for Hutcheon, “adaptation teaches that if we cannot talk about the creative process, we cannot fully understand the urge to adapt and therefore perhaps the very process of adaptation” (*ibid.*). If it is true that literary theory “killed” the author with Barthes—and this was an important contribution at the time, enlarging the possibilities of interpretation—, it is also true that adaptation itself—with its many adapters, coming from different places, with different intentions and interpretations—greatly contributes to this openness. Regardless of the insistent discussions about fidelity, after all, all kinds of adaptations have been and continue to be produced.

So far, this section has centralized the ideas presented by Thomas Leitch, Linda Hutcheon, and Robert Stam, among a few others. Patrick Cattrysse (2014), however, directs criticism to all three, as well as the Anglo-Saxon approaches in general. In his book *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*, Cattrysse lays the bases of a research program for adaptation studies that intends to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. His project is also an attempt to offer a methodologically and scientifically coherent theory, because, as he puts it, “some adaptation commentators do not take theory seriously” (p. 28); examples are Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, as well as Leitch's praise of her “jargon-free” approach, or Stam's and James Naremore's dismissal of the narratological approaches of Bluestone and Chatman. As it happens in literary studies, adaptation studies are ripe within contention. Here, however, since I am not theorizing adaptation itself, I prefer to consider whatever is useful for the analysis of my particular object of study. Cattrysse's argument for corpus-based research, for instance, is

particularly convincing in discussing the problematic aspects of commentators jumping to “hasty generalizations about what adaptation ‘is’” (p. 133) or “does” (p. 134), without specifying what corpus serves as foundation for such strong affirmations. Thus, I do not suggest in this thesis that my findings should be generalized to all television adaptations. The analysis conducted here is only one small step in the long journey that the study of television adaptations still needs to make.

Cattrysse’s program is particularly interesting for this research, however, due to its target-oriented characteristic, which is multifold. Firstly, because the investigation departs from “the adaptation as and end product”; secondly, “it postulates that the adaptation process is teleological, i.e. that it is determined by both source (con)text and target (con)text conditioners, and that in terms of final decision-making, the latter may be more important than the former” (CATTRYSSSE, 2014, p. 12). Another relevant aspect of his program is that it understands adaptation as existing within a larger system, thus his approach is “trans-individual, systemic, and corpus-based” (p. 51). Although my research is, indeed, an “*ad hoc* case study” (p. 51), which he mostly advises against, it is one that is not looking for a “glorification of the genius Auteur” (p. 51), but that, rather, starts from the assumption that target conditioners are essential for the analysis of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an adaptation. Furthermore, Cattrysse explains that his approach “analyses the way the end product came into being” (p. 230), and he once again reminds us that this approach assumes that the target context is prioritized in the actual process of decision-making. While my thesis focuses on the relationship between Atwood’s novel and the Hulu television series, the analysis of the adaptation will also be informed by an exploration of American television as a larger system. In this way, the research proposed here goes beyond simple comparison between source novel and adaptation, and it is to television studies that I turn in the following section.

1.2 American television storytelling: episodes, seasons, and the infinite model

Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* was first announced in April 2016, and its first three episodes were released in April 2017, a year in which at least 487 original shows aired in American television (KOBBLIN, 2018). In 2015, John Landgraf, chairman of U.S. cable channel FX Network, first used the term *peak TV* to refer to a landscape in which more scripted television content was being produced than ever before by a vast array of channels and streaming services (PASKIN, 2015). As the years progressed, the numbers kept increasing.

Around the same time, the television landscape was radically transformed by the internet and the nascent possibility of streaming audiovisual content.

Researcher Amanda Lotz has been chronicling this transformed landscape in U.S. television for several years: she terms the appearance of original programming on cable channels a *transformation* and the internet a *revolution*. Lotz suggests that the 1996-1997 television season can be understood as the end of an era when American television programs gathered “a large and diverse mass audience” (2018, p. 3); it was the first time that original programming produced for cable channels gained significant notice. Over the years, both new broadcast and cable channels appeared to challenge the dominance of the “Big Three” broadcast networks: ABC, CBS and NBC. As more content was being produced, the audience’s attention became more divided, thus each channel needed to develop its own specific identity. In this increasingly competitive scenario, the notion of distinction becomes important—if initially distinctive programming was considered unlikely to find success, it soon became “a key strategy” in television (LOTZ, 2018, p. 35). In the United States, television is inherently *commercial*, as it is funded by sponsors and advertisers and treated primarily as a medium for entertainment (CASEY et al., 2008), thus, decisions are made following commercial interests.

Within the commercial model of American television, Lotz makes a distinction between advertiser and subscriber-based channels: broadcast channels (for a long time, the only channels available) gathered revenue by selling advertisement space during commercial breaks, which meant that they were preoccupied with attracting large and diverse audiences. The same logic was true for advertiser-based cable channels. Subscription-based channels, however, could follow a different logic, and HBO is cited by Lotz as a significant example. In a channel with no advertisements, it was important to keep subscribers interested in *paying* for the service. In this sense, generating “buzz” becomes a significant strategy, and for Lotz “one of the best ways to generate buzz is to be different” (LOTZ, 2018, p. 41). She emphasizes that HBO’s success as a producer of original content demonstrated that “it wasn’t the medium of television that had a narrow palette of creative possibility and that a sizable segment of the U.S. audience hungered for more ambitious storytelling” (p. 47)—but this was not reserved to the U.S. alone, since distinctiveness proved popular around the world. Unconventional programming had been attempted before by broadcast channels, but Lotz suggests that the business model that shaped broadcast television made it more difficult for whatever was unconventional to succeed. When distinction becomes an important feature, however, the medium starts to rely on different

strategies for its storytelling, following competing logics: a logic of repetition—of genres, formulas, or themes—and a logic of distinction; these strategies cannot be too strictly divided as pertaining exclusively to cable, streaming or broadcast productions, although the logic of distinction is still more commonly found on premium cable channels and streaming (MEIMARIDIS, 2017). However, they are all in dialogue with each other in that all are, ultimately, commercial—regardless of whether the intention is to deliver audiences to advertisers or to ensure that subscribers remain interested in paying for a service.

Traditional television is organized around the practice of *scheduling*, or distributing the content throughout the week with the goal of attracting as many viewers as possible and taking them away from the competition. According to Lotz, the practice of scheduling was related to the initial limitations of broadcasting technologies, which only allowed for one program to air at a time. In this scenario, “immediacy” or “liveness” (2018, p. 128) were important characteristics of the medium. Technologies such as the DVR, which allowed audiences to record live television to watch later, began to change that logic—but it was the internet that truly revolutionized it, freeing television from the logic of the schedule. In this scenario, Netflix, which became fully dedicated to streaming in 2010 and would later become something akin to a “global network” (LOTZ, 2018, p. 117), was different from television channels in that it was not creating a schedule, but “building a library” of content available globally and on demand (LOTZ, 2018, p. 145). Furthermore, this content would not necessarily be watched on a television, but on any screen connected to the internet. For Lotz, however, original content produced for streaming services is still understood as television—so much so, we could add, that it is routinely nominated for awards by the Television Academy, for example—because of its format: full-length episodes which are organized over several seasons, which represented the format of storytelling that amassed the most viewers in the early days of streaming. In this scenario, *The Handmaid’s Tale*—a series originally produced for streaming—can be understood as television as well, and, in this thesis, its narrative will be understood as a *television narrative*.

For several decades, the study of television narratives as a larger and specific phenomenon was relatively uncommon. For Jason Mittell (2006, p. 30), this significant gap is related to the fact that the field of television studies emerged “from the twin paradigm of mass communications and cultural studies, both of which tend to foreground social impacts over aesthetic analysis”. In a similar vein, Kristin Thompson (2003) states that while individual television programs have been the subject of academic investigations, these analyses tend to

focus on issues regarding representation (of women or minorities, for example)—thus, they emphasize the *content* of television. Back in 2003, Thompson suggested that the medium had, for the most part, not been studied on aesthetic and formal terms both due to a dismissal of the medium as a whole by scholars and to the enduring and overarching power of the concept of the *televisual flow* in the field of television studies. According to Thompson, “flow most basically means the scheduling of programs and the advertising breaks within and between them considered as a continuum. [...] The result is intended to keep the viewer tuned to a single station” (THOMPSON, 2003, p. 6). Flow can also be applied to the experience of an actual viewer in front of the television, for whom advertisement breaks would not consist in actual interruptions, but a continuation of their television-watching experience, a notion that can be attributed to Raymond Williams’s influential 1974 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*⁶. Robyn Warhol (2014, p. 145) highlights that the flow was identified by Williams in “the days before the invention of remote controls”, but she emphasizes that the auto-play model that is used by Netflix (and, we should add, by other streaming services) is similar to the flow discussed back in the 1970s. This helps to demonstrate that the flow continues to be an important concept in the study of television.

Thompson, however, fundamentally disagrees with the understanding of television that emerges from centralizing the concept of a flow. She disagrees with the proposal that the viewer does not perceive commercial breaks as interruptions, stating that empirical research has demonstrated otherwise; furthermore, she highlights that, from a formal point of view, television programs present cues that point to the separation between the program itself and the content of commercial breaks. Lotz, unlike Thompson, accepts the idea of a “flow” being applied to television. The flow model in Lotz’s analysis is the one described by Bernard Miège, for whom it produces a “schedule rather than particular creative goods” (LOTZ, 2017). However, even if this notion is applicable to U.S. television, Lotz states that internet distribution enables a break from it, and a different model must be applied. She suggests that streaming is much more closely connected to Miège’s *publishing model*—while the *flow* and *written press*

⁶ Williams’ discussion of the “flow” appears in the fourth chapter of his book, in which he proposes that, in commercial television, most programs are *planned* with the sequence of the flow—including, and centralizing, advertisement breaks—already in mind. Decades later, Graeme Turner, in a 2016 introduction to the Brazilian edition of *Television*, highlights that this approach was deeply transformative for the field, and that Williams’ discussion of his first encounter with American television in a hotel room in Miami became one of the most cited passages in television studies. But Turner also states that, since then, it has been both challenged and even outgrown with the emergence of new platforms that have altered television’s textual forms, as Williams himself had predicted would happen in his (less often cited) closing chapter.

are characterized by “the continuity, regularity, and the ritual of consuming their goods”, the publishing model is defined by “a series of distinct purchases” (LOTZ, 2017). Though not a perfect fit, since in subscription-based streaming services it is not a specific product that is purchased, but access to an entire library, it helps to demonstrate how internet distribution further disrupts the usual narrative around television studies.

In a scenario in which serials made for streaming are now understood as television because of their formal properties at the same time that these services do away with the practice of scheduling, which is central if one is to consider the televisual flow, analyses such as Thompson’s seem much more relevant. Her approach towards television is concerned with analyzing formal aspects of television storytelling, rather than either adopting the idea of the flow or focusing on the content of individual episodes or series. But Thompson is not a lone voice in this approach: in 2015, Mittell pointed out that one of the things that his book-length exploration of television narratives does is chronicle a shift in the field. He states that between 2001, when he first started questioning the different strategies of television storytelling, and 2015, when he published *Complex TV*, the field “has broadened its account of formal and aesthetic dimensions of television storytelling” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 4). Thompson is listed as one of the examples in this broadening of the field of television studies taking place in the past two decades. This expansion in the field is explored by Letícia Capanema (2017), who, while conceding that the extension of the formal study of television storytelling is not comparable to that dedicated to either literature or film, highlights that throughout the years there have been researchers who have dedicated themselves to its study. She then divides these approaches in three different categories.

The first of the approaches includes those scholars who investigate the ways in which television storytelling is interconnected with other formats, such as the radio, theater, or film. However, Capanema emphasizes that while television might have appropriated aspects of other narrative systems, “the televisual narrative can hardly be confused with those narratives which it has appropriated” for, generally speaking, “we know how to distinguish it even from its closest sibling” film (2017, p. 39, my translation⁷). Hence the second approach, concerned with identifying the specific aspects of television. For Capanema, this tendency appears in the work of important scholars such as Horace Newcomb (1985), with his notion of a “cumulative

⁷ From the Portuguese: “Ainda que constituída, em parte, de apropriações de outros sistemas narrativos, a narrativa televisual dificilmente pode ser confundida com aquelas das quais se apropriou. Na maioria dos casos, sabemos distingui-la até de sua irmã mais próxima – a narrativa fílmica.”

narrative”, Jane Feuer (1986), who identifies different formats for television storytelling, such as the episodic series and the continuing serial drama, or Sarah Kozloff (1992), who analyzes how the practice of scheduling affects story and discourse. These scholars are also presented by Mittell (2015) as important early contributors to the study of television narratives, but in ways that he felt were insufficient to adequately answer the questions raised by what he calls “the successful narrative innovations” appearing in shows such as *24* (Fox, 2001-2010). Importantly, these studies (published between the late eighties and early nineties) predate the cable “transformation” and internet “revolution” explored by Lotz, which resulted in the rise—though not necessarily dominance—of *distinctive* programming. A third approach explored by Capanema is the one taken by scholars who centralize the notion of seriality a primordial element in television, and reflect about the different ways in which it is adopted: through independent episodes, through more closely interconnected chapters or through something that lies in between the two. These scholars often highlight, as Newcomb and Feuer had done before, that the different forms are often *combined* in televisual fiction. This notion of a combination of forms is particularly important in Mittell’s discussion of the “complex television” that, for him, characterizes contemporary seriality.

Capanema places Thompson’s book-length approach to the study of television (2003) simultaneously in the first and second categories: it both explores television’s adoption of the storytelling norms of classical Hollywood and the ways in which seriality distinguishes television from film. The examination of television storytelling proposed by Thompson is done primarily using a terminology she had formerly applied to the study of film, specifically the films of classical Hollywood. “Classical Hollywood”, in her work, refers to “a stable set of norms of storytelling that were formulated during the early years of the cinema, primarily in the period from about 1909 to 1917”, which remained “largely intact” up until the 1960s, and which Thompson believes continue to be widespread across Hollywood storytelling, if sometimes challenged or stretched (THOMPSON, 2003, p. 19). In Thompson’s approach, then, television storytelling is understood in the same terms of film, and, more specifically, films that she describes as “unified, easily comprehensible, entertaining” (p. 19). Thompson mentions, for instance, the importance of unity and clarity in both forms of storytelling: these characteristics appear from specific choices such as deriving the action from the traits of the characters, which are given to them in definitive sets and will not change throughout the story, establishing a “goal-oriented protagonist” (p. 22) whose goals provide the narrative impetus

and define the action, and laying down a basic conflict between the goals of the protagonist and those of a villain. Yet Thompson recognizes that television has its specificities. She mentions as important characteristics of the medium when compared with film: the time frame is stricter; there is a necessity of creating internal cliffhangers to make space for ad breaks and at the end of episodes and seasons; budgets are usually smaller and of a different sort (distributed from hour to hour); censorship is stricter; a large amount of content needs to be produced for a single series each year; scripts are usually team endeavors. It is important to note that some of the characteristics that Thompson describes are not necessarily true of television that is not produced for broadcast or ad-supported channels, such as a stricter censorship or the structural relevance of commercial breaks. Of course, she was writing in the early 2000s, when the cable transformation of television described by Lotz was in its infancy, and the streaming revolution had not yet begun.

Also important is the fact that Thompson recognizes that the norms of classical Hollywood might not be appropriate to describe *all* television as she proposes the notion of an “art TV” (2003, p. 108). This form, however, is also intricately connected to film and film theory: she derives this concept from the notion of the “art film” as a “middle ground between commercial films and pure experimental cinema” (p. 107-108). Here, to describe the potential characteristics of such an “art television”, she relies on previous film theory, specifically David Bordwell’s writing on “art cinema”, in which he sees five major traits: “a loosening of causality, a greater emphasis on psychological or anecdotal realism, violations of classical clarity of space and time, explicit authorial comment, and ambiguity” (THOMPSON, 2003, p. 110). For her, these traits are apparent, in different ways, in radically different programs (which include British and American productions, all made for broadcast channels), although she considers the phenomenon to be rare. Interestingly, writing in 2003, Thompson suggested that with the expansion of cable and with their interest in reaching audience niches, new instances of “art television” were bound to appear.

However, Mittell (2015, p. 18) signals an important problem with Thompson’s approach: it is too tied to film storytelling, which is “self-contained” while “ongoing continuity and seriality are core features” of a television series. Importantly, for the scholar this continuity comes with both new challenges and new possibilities: commonly mentioned are “extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variation [which] are simply unavailable options within a two-hour film” (MITTELL, 2006, p. 31). Character depth and continuing storylines

are also mentioned by other more recent scholars, such as Porter et al. (2002, p. 23), but a similar point also appears as early as Newcomb's 1974 *TV: The Most Popular Art*, in which he stated that television could offer "a far greater sense of density" than film and radio (NEWCOMB, 1974, p. 256 apud CAPANEMA, 2017, p. 40). Mittell recognizes that cinema surely has influenced television in several of its aspects, such as visual style. One could argue, however, that certainly literature has influenced film storytelling as well, yet film studies have been developing a terminology and a theory of their own for decades. What Mittell has been constantly emphasizing in his studies about television narratives is that film and television present structures that are fundamentally different, and thus they should not be treated identically. One of the most important differences between the two media has to do with television's most basic structure—episodes and seasons—, which is much more "constrained" than film (MITTELL, 2007, p. 165), especially when, beyond the demand for episodes distributed over seasons, it demands advertisement breaks to be accommodated.

Once one moves from ad-supported channels (either broadcast or cable) to subscription-based channels and services, the rigidity becomes less significant, but it does not disappear. Lotz (2007) reminds us that in a channel such as HBO, for instance, there is a more flexible schedule, with shortened seasons (thus, less content needs to be produced, and expenses—both economic and creative—are reduced) and advertisement-free programs, which "allowed creators to develop episodes at a length determined by the story rather than according to the strict [...] format of broadcast" (p. 218). The possibilities are so vast that Castellano and Meimaridis (2016) mention the pilot episode of HBO's *Vinyl* (2016), with a duration of 113 minutes, as a notoriously different example. It is *notorious*, however, because it is still uncommon. Thompson, for instance, who recognizes that there is a structural flexibility in HBO programs such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), states that the act-structure that has defined television writing is not fully abandoned or even "radically altered" in them (2003, p. 51):

Such divisions of programs into acts, whether rigidly or flexibly proportioned, are not simply arbitrary. They give an episode a sense of structure, much as the balanced movements of a classical concerto do. They provide the spectator with a sense of progress and guarantee the introduction of dramatic new premises or obstacles at intervals. They allow for the rising and falling action that many writers refer to as crucial to good plots (THOMPSON, 2003, p. 54-55).

If we look at *The Handmaid's Tale*, as is the case of most shows, a basic duration time is followed throughout the seasons: this is an hour-long program. But its shortest episodes so far have lasted 45 minutes, and its longest 65 minutes. This is a clear example of length determined by the story—yet the writers have, so far, always structured the episodes around the idea that they should last close to an hour. Furthermore, Michael Newman (2006) states that television writers work under different conditions when compared to those who work in film, theater and literature: they are “under an obligation constantly to arouse and rearouse our interest” (p. 20). Thus follows the logic of the distribution of storytelling in broadcast television dramas that Newman discusses: it goes from *beats*—the (usually very short) scenes within each episode—to *episodes*—usually containing four acts of similar length—to longer, episode-crossing *arcs* forming the “acts”—usually three—of each season. For Newman, television writers “beat out” the story with “a strong rhetorical force, giving us reasons to care about characters and to want to know more” (p. 20). This is true of individual episodes, to ensure that we keep watching them, but also of the longer run of the seasons.

There are important differences, however, between the prime-time dramas of broadcast television which Newman analyzes and the shorter television seasons that initially appeared mostly on cable channels (and now on streaming platforms), which are discussed by Sean O’Sullivan (2010). Newman, for instance, discusses the usual organization of broadcast seasons (generally twenty-four episodes long), having at least five distinct periods during which new episodes or reruns are aired. O’Sullivan (2010), on the other hand, looks at seasons which are thirteen episodes long and that, for him, act as a new *unit of meaning* (beginning with HBO’s *The Sopranos* in 1999). These seasons air week after week with no interruptions (thus, with no distinct periods, as it happens in broadcast), and throughout a shorter period within the year. O’Sullivan highlights, then, that television of this kind “operates from season to season—runs of episodes marked off by significant gaps. With each season separated from the next by several, or many, months, the promise of continuation is almost always in abeyance, vulnerable to cancellation or creative exhaustion” (p. 60). His analysis connects the meaningful seasons of serialized television to poetry, as both forms are “broken on purpose”: an “array of parts” (p. 59), a “discourse of segmentivity—parts, size, form—wrapped in the language of new and old, of the discovered and the familiar, defining itself through the logic of gapping and spacing” (p. 62). The episodes of a shorter, uninterrupted season are the parts which form the larger unity, as the verses of a poem do; and, like a poem, a season is “broken” in meaningful—not random—

ways. Analyzing the first season of the *The Sopranos*, O’Sullivan divides it in meaningful shorter units, as if they were stanzas. Due to the length of the seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (ten to thirteen episodes) and the pattern of its airing (weekly, with no interruptions), O’Sullivan’s model represents an important tool for my analysis.

As it has been pointed out before in this thesis, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a serial narrative produced for streaming—thus, it does not air during a specific time slot in a schedule and, while Hulu has a cheaper subscription plan that contains advertisements, this is not the viewing experience of *every* Hulu user. Furthermore, Hulu, unlike Netflix, is not an international service, thus *The Handmaid’s Tale* airs on different platforms across the globe: in Brazil, for example, it aired weekly in a cable channel with commercial breaks, and later became available for the subscribers of different streaming services (without advertisements). This variety makes it more difficult to pinpoint *the* Hulu strategy, unlike ad-supported channels, subscription-based cable television or global streaming services like Netflix. Researchers such as Castellano and Meimaridis (2016) have connected Netflix’s practices, including in terms of storytelling, to those of “premium” American cable channels such as HBO and Showtime, although emphasizing that an important difference lies in Netflix’s attempt to repurpose the idea of a “pilot” episode⁸ when the service suggests that the entire first season of a given Netflix series should be considered as a pilot instead. Kathryn VanArendonk (2019, p. 65-66), in discussing the nature of the television episode, recognizes that, in some series produced for streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, the episode “as a meaningful formal device” now looks “less insistent and less essential”. She does not link such changes exclusively to streaming, however, and suggests that such a tendency is also apparent in an HBO series like *Game of Thrones*. Yet even in recognizing important structural changes in television form, VanArendonk proposes that such changes are coming “slowly and unevenly”, and thus the episode as a structural feature cannot be dismissed, since it is closely connected to television’s “most fundamental structure” (p. 66).

Scholars who theorize the narratives that are being produced by streaming platforms often focus on the binge-watching model that Netflix sustains as it releases complete seasons on a single day. Two examples are Warhol’s 2014 approach to Netflix early originals such as

⁸ For Mittell (2015, p. 56), the pilot episode, an “unusual entity” within the run of a series, represents the beginning of a commercial television program and offers “an encapsulation of what a series might be like on an ongoing basis, while providing an exceptional degree of narrative exposition to orient viewers within an often complex storyworld”; its function is “to teach us how to watch the series and, in doing so, to make us want to keep watching.”

House of Cards (2013-2018), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) and the *Arrested Development* revival (2013-), and Angela Corrêa's thesis (2019) exploring *Sense8* (2015-2018), *3%* (2016-2020) and *Dark* (2017-2020). If Newman's 2006 analysis of prime-time drama serials emphasizes that "recapping is a ubiquitous feature of television in all genres" (p. 18), both of these approaches to Netflix originals point to the reduced role of recapping in these shows: Warhol, for instance, highlights that *House of Cards* did away with recapping altogether—not only rejecting the usual *previously on* sections, but also in that "the dialogue also includes very little of the expository conversation", even in between seasons which were separated by a long gap in time (2014, p. 149). Corrêa's study also identifies this trend in other productions, and she also finds a decline in the practice of adding suspenseful hooks within the episodes. However, this could also be a characteristic of television airing in subscriber-based channels, which have no advertisement breaks. Furthermore, Warhol suggests that the binge model leads to some formal experimentation, perhaps never more so than in the a-chronological fourth season of *Arrested Development*, and Corrêa suggests that Netflix might be slowly changing its strategy under the binge model, for diegetic recapping was more prominent in the earlier *Sense8* than in the latter *Dark*. Both the new *Arrested Development* and *Dark* could potentially represent, however, outliers in Netflix's colossal catalogue. Thus, more systematic studies—or a larger number of case studies—are still necessary. Because *The Handmaid's Tale* more closely follows the pattern of distribution of the short cable seasons discussed by O'Sullivan (2010), however, my analysis will rely on theorizations about television in general, for so far the explorations of streaming productions have mostly rested on questions regarding the impact of the binge model, which is not applicable here.

The detailed and lengthy analysis of televisual narratives proposed by Mittell (2015) will be an important source for this study. He uses the term *complex TV* to discuss the ways in which "mainstream commercial American television" has changed in the past two decades, leading to a new model of storytelling (2015, p. 4). What he understands as "narrative complexity", which refers specifically to television in his studies, is a new model of storytelling emerging in the 1990s that "*redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*" (p. 18, emphasis in the original). This redefinition means that there is usually no plot closure within episodes, and ongoing stories are foregrounded; basically, it is assumed that "a series⁹ is

⁹ The use of the word "series" can posit a terminological problem. According to Warhol (2014, p. 145), "in U.S. usage a television 'series' is a set of programs linked by branding, cast, setting, genre and production, typically aired weekly for the first run, and—when successful—renewed beyond a single season, or programming year. A

a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode” (ibid). For Mittell, it is crucial to understand the importance of seriality in American prime time television, meaning that these stories are organized in weekly installments which are distributed across larger seasonal units that usually encompass between ten and twenty-four episodes; between these installments there are productive *gaps*, in which audiences can think about what they have watched and imagine what might come next. A very basic definition of serial storytelling in television would be that “*a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time*” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 10).

Happening *over time* is thus an essential characteristic of seriality, according to Mittell’s view. Other scholars, such as Milly Buonanno (2019), also emphasizing the centrality of time in seriality, suggest that the binge model implemented by Netflix (and subsequently by many other streaming platforms) represents an important—and often ignored—rupture with former serial narratives. Buonanno argues that seriality, as it has been conceived and experienced historically, involves repeated and enforced interruptions which suspend viewing (reading, listening) at regular intervals. Thus, for Buonanno, formal properties in themselves—such as distributing the narrative across many individual episodes—are not enough to define seriality. In this sense, however, Hulu’s strategy with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is released in weekly installments, is closer to traditional seriality, and traditional television, than it is to what now seems to be the prevailing approach taken by streaming platforms for the release of original content. We could think of this show, then, as a serial even in the most conventional definition, regardless of where it is released.

O’Sullivan (2019) is interested in the ways in which seriality shapes storytelling, regardless of medium, and he explores the six elements that he understands as relevant for the makers of serial narratives to use. They are distributed across two axes: Discursive Connections and Variations of Scope. The elements under the first axis—*iteration*, *multiplicity* and *momentum*—are “patterns and connections [that] allow us to understand the local gap-dynamics of a serial, and particularly its degree of interest in representing itself as a clear sequence of

‘serial’ is a series that incorporates a larger story-arc across installments. All television serials are series, but not all series are serials”. Usually, then, these scholars differentiate between “episodic” and “serial” narratives. British scholars such as Raymond Williams (1974) use “series” and “serial” to mean different things: the “series” is akin to the “episodic”, while the “serial” has the same meaning in both views. In this thesis, as I am discussing primarily American television, I will be using the term “series” in the sense described by Warhol. Under both understandings, however, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an example of *serial* television.

related objects” (p. 52). *Iteration* points to repetition, generating recognition of the narrative as serialized, *multiplicity* has a relationship with the expansive characteristic of the serial narrative (for example, through the many storylines which television episodes are usually made of), and *momentum* is related to the dynamics established between one installment and the next, to make us want to keep reading/watching (such as the choice to end episodes or seasons in cliffhangers). The last three elements—*world-building*, *personnel* and *design*—are those connected with the possibility of gradually introducing the world, the characters and formal characteristics that seriality offers; as O’Sullivan puts it, “serial narratives are positioned, more than any other publication method, to gradually map out, fill in, and then re-expand a diegetic universe” (p. 57). Here, we could think of Mittell’s exploration of the politics in *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020): an early stance taken by a member of the U.S. military, which initially might seem antiwar in a “dissenting view against American military action that was [...] never [found] on mainstream television” (2015, p. 342), is progressively depoliticized as the show advances, and the radical message is reframed in an individual level—as revenge for the loss of loved one resulting from an individual act of monstrosity—, rather than as a deeper criticism of American militarism. Meaning in seriality, thus, can change drastically as the narrative unfolds.

O’Sullivan’s propositions regarding seriality encompass all kinds of serial narratives, and his examples range from Dickens’ novels to podcasts. This is a different approach to that taken by VanArendonk (2019), who understand the television episode as a “meaningful formal device” (2019, p. 65) that is “nestled deep in the most fundamental structure of how a TV show works and what makes it distinct from other forms of fiction” (p. 66). Even the most serialized television narratives, for VanArendonk, could be understood in the way that *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) titles its episodes—*the one where so and so happens*—because “an episode’s constituent pieces have the power to speak more meaningfully to each other than they do to continuing plotlines in subsequent weeks” (p. 67). She suggests that the episode is always one-of-many, but it does not *disappear* as part of the larger whole. O’Sullivan (2010, p. 60) also states that the common analogy established between television episodes and the chapters of a novel is not productive, as a chapter “typically emphasizes one narrative cluster rather than the juxtaposition of several”. But rather than looking at television storytelling as an exclusive mode, O’Sullivan understands and studies seriality as a larger phenomenon: if chapters are not a good analogue for episodes, the nineteenth-century serialized novels might be. Whether one agrees with VanArendonk that the television episode is different from other forms of seriality, or with

O’Sullivan, is less important here than the understanding that narrative seriality and episodic structure (no matter how “serial” the narrative) cannot be ignored in the study of a series like *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

If the episode is not an invisible structure in television, neither is its storytelling. Writing in 2003, Thompson suggests that on television, like in classical Hollywood, storytelling techniques are not supposed to be noticeable, which goes along with the previously mentioned idea that both of these forms of storytelling are “unified, easily comprehensible [and] entertaining” (p. 19). VanArendonk (2017), on the other hand, cites what we could describe as the *non-unified*, often *incomprehensible* or *unentertaining* character of much “prestige” television as a *problem*, signaling a significant transformation in at least some of the stories produced for the medium. As for invisible storytelling techniques, Mittell (2015, p. 43-44) states that many television series do the opposite. He argues that sometimes a show will make use of a *narrative special effect* when a program pushes “the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the narration’s construction”—for him, however, caring about this *construction* makes us also care about the *story* being told as well. These special effects are now “signaled with much more subtlety or delay; these shows are constructed without fear of temporary confusion for viewers” (MITTELL, 2006, p. 37). This notion seems to be further reinforced by analyses of television which consider that something as attention-calling as narrative unreliability has become, for the audience, *a natural interpretive strategy* (BUTTER, 2017).

Importantly, Mittell considers these narrative “special effects” as another way to create viewer engagement—an important demand for television narratives, which can be achieved in different ways. One of them is characterization, which is particularly important for my analysis. For Mittell, long-form storytelling demands, as “a crucial variable” (2015, p. 129), attachment with the individuals presented in the storyworld, for this attachment ensures that the audience *cares* about the characters and what happens to them. In this sense, a problem can arise because

viewers usually assume that the core cast of characters will be a stable foundation throughout a series run, and it is quite exceptional when main characters depart a series unless it is for their own spin-off. For stories with life-or-death stakes, this knowledge colors our narrative experiences, as we assume a degree of character safety that runs counter to threats and dangers within the storyworld (MITTELL, 2015, p. 123).

If a widely popular series such as *Game of Thrones* became notorious for killing several main characters throughout its course, establishing that no one was safe, it became *notorious* for doing so—generally speaking, this is still uncommon. The possible problem that can arise from the assumption regarding the safety of a series’ core cast needs to be understood in the context of what Mittell refers to as the “‘infinite model’ of storytelling” (2015, p. 33), meaning that successful shows usually do not end before audiences give up on them, and stories might be dragged for years to fulfill their interest in watching. For a series such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, with a very clear main character whose actions could potentially have her killed by a regime that, as we know from the outset, is not hesitant to eliminate those who do not fit in or follow its strict dogma, this can become problematic.

Our engagement with a television series does not solely rely on characters, however. Mittell emphasizes the importance of what he calls “serial melodrama” in most U.S. television shows. Following Linda Williams, he understands melodrama not as a *genre* but as a *mode*, as “an approach to emotion, storytelling, and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms” (2015, p. 233). For Casey et al. (2008, p. 170), it is more productive to think of melodrama as a *style* rather than a genre, for “so common are the characteristics of melodrama on television, [...] that it might even be argued that contemporary television is almost exclusively melodramatic”. Casey et. al., however, associate the style of melodrama with the notion of “exaggeration” at the same time in which they recognize that the melodramatic style extends far beyond the realm of soap operas (or prime-time soaps) that are more commonly associated with it (cf. FEUER, 1984; ANG, 1985; ANG, 2010, discussing the traits as well as potentialities of the most popular examples of so-called prime-time soaps in U.S. television, *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) and *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989), both of which reached massive viewing numbers in the 1980s. In a later essay, Feuer (2005, p. 27-28) directly opposes what she refers to as “prime-time melodrama” and “quality drama”, although she argues that the word “quality” in this context indicates a generic distinction rather than a value judgment). Mittell (2015, p. 245), on the other hand, highlights that Williams’ understanding of melodrama, which encompasses narratives with no “emotional and stylistic excess” directly opposes well-established critical distinctions—in his view, she does so in productive ways.

The approach taken by Williams is particularly emphatic in its proposal that while the melodrama is commonly understood through the lenses of *excess*—excessive emotion, excessive colors, excessive music, for example—excess is not mandatory for melodrama,

though it can be one way of expressing it. For Williams, this mode is so pervasive that it has become “basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment” (2012, p. 526), and what it demands, rather than excess, is that a work uses “strong affect combined with moral legibility to create a felt good” (p. 529). Importantly, it is not *good* but *felt good*, for if we look closely, we realize “the flaws of a morality doomed to worship a flawed past and an only felt good” (p. 540)—even so, we are asked to share it nonetheless for the storytelling to do its work. Williams has further expanded her discussion of melodrama in serial storytelling, emphasizing how the “a’bundance of world [...] and time” available in a serial works with the melodramatic mode (WILLIAMS, 2018). She suggests that melodrama, “most fundamentally, wants us to care for its protagonists” (ibid) and the sheer amount of time we spend with them in serial narratives mobilizes this caring; furthermore, because suspense is so important for melodrama, seriality and its constitutional gaps further mobilize us. Long-form seriality, then, which entails many hours spent watching a single series, plus the structuring gaps between episodes, creates an emotional engagement between viewer and fictional characters.

If the structure itself can further melodrama (WILLIAMS, 2018), the melodrama, in the sense proposed by Williams—as a moral legibility that creates a “felt good”—, could be understood as a demand for successful television since “television fiction only succeeds if we care about the drama” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 244). Mittell’s analysis does return to the idea of melodramatic excess that Williams considers inessential for the mode as he highlights the prominence of Robyn Warhol’s “good-cry techniques” (WARHOL, 2003) in a complex television narrative such as *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), for example. Although not necessary for the melodrama, these “techniques” are common, and Mittell argues that making emotion “overtly visible” through “highly emotive acting and cinematic styles” plus “emotionally excessive music cues”, focalizing “emotionally vulnerable characters”, emphasizing “close calls and last-minute reversals”, making characters “act against established type at critical moments of emotional payoff”, balancing “moments of tragedy and joy, suffering and triumph” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 249) are all characteristics of *Lost*’s storytelling—and, I would suggest, of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Even if the melodrama does not *demand* excess, it *can* contain it, and in the Hulu adaptation of Atwood’s novel, it does.

Viewer engagement in television is also connected to the specific form of serial storytelling: since they have structuring gaps between episodes, these narratives create in the audience a desire for the next installment, and it is the “anticipatory hypothesizing” inspired by

this desire that “sustains us through the structured gaps” (MITTELL, 2015, p. 172). Thus, these stories need to find a balance between plausibility and unpredictability, which is an important factor to keep the audience interested as the stories progress. As Mittell himself points out, with new forms of consuming television serials—whether on DVD bundles or perhaps through streaming libraries—these gaps might become less relevant. But the narratives he is interested in are still organized around individual episodes that structure larger seasons that structure the series a whole. Thus, the audience’s “anticipatory hypothesizing” remains a relevant aspect to keep viewers interested and engaged—even if, instead of making them tune in every week, many serial narratives now want them to binge-watch up to the end.

1.3 The dystopia: mood and warning

Once the first episodes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* were released and the series became a frequent topic of conversation, it was common for Margaret Atwood to be described as a “prophet of dystopia”, as Rebecca Mead did on *The New Yorker* (MEAD, 2017). Since then, however, Atwood has been very vocal about *not* being a prophet (ALLARDICE, 2018). In fact, while researchers of dystopia might disagree about many things, they tend to agree on one topic: dystopias are not interested in predicting the future; instead, they explore tendencies perceived by an author in his or her own present.

Before the dystopia, however, there was the utopia. The word *utopia* was famously coined by Thomas More to designate the fictional island presented in his 1516 book of the same name. Researchers of utopia such as Fátima Vieira (2010) and Dunja Mohr (2005) usually point out that even though the neologism was coined by More in the sixteenth century, it is now used to refer to texts that are much older because More was, in fact, working on a tradition that traversed many centuries, a relevant example being Plato’s *The Republic*. The utopia as More conceived it, however, resulted more specifically from “a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future” (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 4). According to Vieira, such a logic was closely connected to a new knowledge about *otherness*, due to the navigations; when there was so much of the world about which Europe knew so little, the possibility of imagining new places with different (and better) forms of organization became significant.

The term utopia has come to be defined following different criteria, depending on whether “content, form or function is emphasized” and whether we take a “broad view” of the

idea of the utopia or look at it as a literary genre (MOHR, 2005, p. 12). In Lyman Tower Sargent's discussion of utopias, *utopianism* is understood as a larger phenomenon with different facets, all of which are connected in that they reflect a "social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (1994, p. 3). Utopianism, then, goes beyond the realm of literature, and those who work at defining the concept of utopia usually consider, even if their focus *is* literature, its different facets.

According to Vieira, for instance, one can think of the word as referring to a good place (thus, based on the content of the society in question), to a more narrow literary form (following the grounds laid down in More's *Utopia*), to the kind of impact it creates on a reader (an urge to act), and as a *feeling* of discontent connected to a desire for something better, which would then include all texts that are bound by an idea of *hope*, "the principal energy of utopia" (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 7). Mohr (2005, p. 16) highlights that the twentieth century saw the emergence of new understandings of utopia that both attempted to do away with the "essentialism" and "universalism" of pre-defining what a good society is and moved the utopia beyond the limits of a strict literary genre. She refers to approaches such as Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1954-1959), for instance, for whom "all human actions and desires, the definition of human nature and the human subject as such, are directed at improving the human condition, and history is thus driven by utopian intentions" (MOHR, 2005, p. 16). The utopia, thus, is a concept that extrapolates a literary understanding and tradition and that has even been considered an essential aspect of humanity itself. However, since this thesis is concerned with analyzing a literary text and its relationship with a tradition of former literary texts, the discussion here will be limited to the expression of these concepts in literature.

When one thinks of utopia as a literary genre, particularly following the format established by More, Vieira proposes that it follows a more or less rigid narrative structure that involves a journey to an unknown place, a guided tour taken by the traveler, the exposition of an alternative society and its organization, and the return of the traveler, who spreads the word about a different—and better—model of social and political organization. The navigations inspired a generation of writers to imagine different, improved societies existing elsewhere. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment and new scientific discoveries inspired an *euchronian* turn within the genre, especially in France: utopias were now set not in far-away places, but in the future. Vieira (2010, p. 10) describes euchronists as seeing history "as a process of infinite

improvement”—thus, improved societies did not have to be imaginary or set in distant places but were part of a future humanity had yet to fulfill. As French writers envisaged the future itself as a possible utopia, British writers came up with another development in utopian writing: the satirical utopias, in which it was utopian thinking itself that became the target of criticism. According to Vieira, this is what it means when one talks of an *anti-utopia*. These approaches coexisted, but a tradition that was truly utopian in spirit flourished for centuries nonetheless, adjusting to new transformations in intellectual thinking and technology—including visions that were, in fact, *pre-technological* utopian states.

In the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, according to Mohr (2005), the utopia was transformed: for the most part, it either presented negative projective visions through dystopia or, alternatively, it expressed enthusiasm about technology and its possible future advancements through science fiction. Mohr emphasizes, however, that the utopia itself did not disappear, but, instead, it was adopted by writers who applied new concerns to it, one of them being the status of women, with women writers (especially from the 1970s onwards) often juxtaposing utopias and dystopias in the same texts as they recognized that “utopia can no longer address or even wants to provide a blueprint for everyone or for society at large” (p. 27). Even if truly utopian writing did not disappear, however, authors such as Erich Fromm (1977) and Gregory Clays (2010) suggest that the experience of World War I was transformative for utopian literature. It was in 1868 that John Stuart Mill first used the word *dystopia* during a parliamentary speech, but it was only in the twentieth century, following the two World Wars, that the concept truly flourished, through the writings of authors such as Yevgeny Zamyatin (with *We* in 1924), Aldous Huxley (with *Brave New World* in 1932) and George Orwell (with *Nineteen Eighteen-Four* in 1949). Vieira explains that literary dystopias are both connected and distant from literary utopias, as they use similar devices—for instance, the dystopia follows the euchronia in projecting an imagined future—while the projection is radically different, for the dystopia is “essentially pessimistic” (2010, p. 17).

Texts such as Zamyatin’s, Huxley’s, and Orwell’s, which Mohr (2005) considers as representative of what she refers to as the *classical dystopia*, are a direct product of the twentieth century. For Mohr, both utopian and dystopian writing point to the present, but while the utopia does so by creating *difference* between present reality and the fictional society represented, which arouses the utopian desire, dystopia thrives as it explores *similarities* between present and projected future and, as a result, it appalls readers through this recognition. Their objective,

however, is similar: “sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change” (MOHR, 2005, p. 28). Yet the means for such a desired change are different: if Vieira suggests that utopian texts are bound by a feeling of *hope*, Fromm considers George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its other dystopian counterparts to be “the expression of a mood” and “a warning”—a mood of “near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it” (1977, p. 313).

Examining utopias, Vieira suggests that it is common for utopists to present an underlying distrust of the individual, and it is for that reason that we “frequently find a rigid set of laws at the heart of utopian societies” (2010, p. 7). Such ideas of *distrust*, *force* and *repression* that Vieira sees as important within utopias are inherently connected to Margaret Atwood’s own understanding—as a reader and writer, and not a scholar—of utopia and dystopia or, as she likes to call it, “ustopia”—in her view, every utopia contains a dystopia, and every dystopia contains a utopia (2015, location 82). Atwood (2009a) further suggests that if we find in a utopia a desire for extreme order, dystopia is its mirrored image, where such a desire is taken to extremes that are “inhumane and lunatic” (p. 108). Such an understanding appears in her own dystopian writing, as exemplified by the Commander’s famous justification to Offred about how a society such as Gilead’s came to be planned:

You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better.
Better? I say, in a small voice. How can he think this is better?
Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some (THT, p. 222¹⁰).

For other scholars, however, trying to refashion utopias and dystopias as a single idea such as the *ustopia* would not make sense. Gregory Claeys (2010), for instance, insists that distinctions need to be made. Claeys states that it is a misunderstanding to assume that utopianism demands *perfection*—thus leading to the punishment of whatever (or whomever) does not fit in—rather than simply a desire for improvement. For the scholar, it is true that whether a society is understood as dystopian or utopian depends on one’s perspective, but he contends that this does not imply that the existence of dystopia as something specific should be

¹⁰ All citations of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—the novel—will be henceforth made using the shortened form “THT”. The source cited is the 2017 Vintage edition (in the list of references, ATWOOD, 2017).

dismissed; for him, furthermore, it is also important to differentiate dystopia from anti-utopia, and to demarcate the frontiers between dystopia and science fiction. He understands dystopias as “feasible negative visions of social and political development, cast primarily in fictional form” (2010, p. 109); in these texts, there are no “utterly unrealistic features”, and they are based on “the extrapolation of some existing trend” (ibid). In his understanding, the notion of feasibility is particularly important to demarcate the border between dystopia and science fiction. If Claeys cites H. G. Wells as an important author in this discussion, for example, he insists that much of Wells’ writing goes beyond the dystopia, because while they are all extrapolations of present trends, they are not plausible enough. Claeys thus centralizes the work of Huxley and Orwell, as well as Zamyatin, who might have served as an inspiration for both (openly for Orwell, not so much for Huxley, though Orwell himself did not believe in Huxley’s claim to have read *We* only after he had already written *Brave New World*).

According to Claeys’s analysis, the societies presented in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* work differently: no brutality is necessary in the former, since everyone is tamed by both science and the *soma*; punishment, fear and torture are the *modus operandi* in the latter. Claeys suggests that Huxley is more concerned with science and technology being used to make servitude attractive to humans, while Orwell’s chief concern was the worship of power itself and its corruptive potential. Yet both works are closely interconnected in that

their common theme is the quasi-omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding and normally exacting complete obedience from its citizens, challenged occasionally but usually ineffectually by vestigial individualism or systemic flaws, and relying upon scientific and technological advances to ensure social control (CLAEYS, 2010, p. 109).

Other authors are not as strict in their definitions of dystopia as Claeys. His narrow definition explicitly excludes much of the work by Wells, for example, such as *The Time Machine* (1895), because its vision of the future is deemed too unfeasible. For Peter Fitting (2010, p. 139), however, the time machine is nothing more than a means of transportation: “the novel is not about the impact of technology, although it certainly could be called a dystopia—it is a vision of the future in which class division and conflict have led to a degraded society”. While Claeys makes more categorical distinctions—for instance, within Wells’s oeuvre, *The Time Machine* is science fiction, while *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is dystopian—Fitting presents science fiction as intersecting with the (much older) tradition of utopia in its “ability to reflect or express our hopes and fears about the future, and more specifically link

those hopes and fears to science and technology” (2010, p. 138). This interconnectedness between utopia, dystopia and science fiction also appears in the critical work of other researchers.

Renata Pires de Souza (2014) directly contests such a strict definition of dystopia as the one presented by Claeys. At the same time, Souza seeks to understand what a dystopia is, after all. Her literature review offers three possible definitions: a literary genre always encompassing totalitarian regimes and no extrapolations of what is possible; a sub-genre of science fiction; or a broader genre that may encompass other sub-genres, such as apocalypse and post-apocalypse. Souza’s most interesting contribution is that she questions the assumption that the dystopia is a genre, “since it is difficult to recognize a formal rigor in it” (2014, p. 49). She states that in her research she could not find any source that offered such formal rigor, and my own research furthers this statement. But Souza argues that when Claeys attempts to restrict the dystopia as specifically as he does, he leaves no space for plenty of works that have been—and continue to be—described under the same name: dystopia. She, then, shares her own understanding of it: “thinking specifically about Atwood’s fiction [the *MaddAddam* trilogy], I recognize something in between a form and an impulse, it is precisely this effect that here I decided to refer to as *mood*” (p. 50).

The word *mood* had also been used by Fromm (1977) in his discussion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which he considered to express a mood of despair about the future. Importantly, Fromm looks at Orwell’s writing as an expression of both this mood *and* a warning that humanity must act in order not to lose its most human qualities; perhaps, then, dystopia is ultimately related to humanity’s own actions going wrong, so that we can be warned in the first place. This seems to be the line of reasoning that Souza takes when she states that one complication in the field is that apocalyptic fiction is often confused with dystopia, and that even though the two “may well intersect, [...] they are certainly not the same thing, because there are dystopias with no apocalyptic results as well as apocalyptic narratives with no previous dystopian societies” (2014, p. 48). Thus, the most productive definition seems to be Fromm’s, which links a *mood* and a *warning* as essential aspects of the dystopia. Over time, just as it happened with the utopia, one could say that this *mood* gained new characteristics and the *warning* came to involve different aspects.

For both Mohr (2005) and Baccolini and Moylan (2003), however, there is an important distinction between the *classic dystopias* of early twentieth century and other forms of

dystopian writing that appeared subsequently. According to Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, if the early twentieth century gave rise to the *classical dystopia* (exemplified primarily through Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell), the 1960s and 1970s opened space for the *critical utopia*. This new form was “shaped by ecological, feminist and New Left thought” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 2), all of which inspired writers to rework the utopian tradition by rejecting the notion of utopia as a universal “blueprint while preserving it as dream” (MOYLAN, 1986, p. 10-11 apud BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 2). The 1980s, however, with the rise of conservatism and fundamentalism, saw a new return to the negative visions of the beginning of the century. At first, this turn took place with cyberpunk, which developed a “negative if nihilistic imaginary” (p. 2). By the significant year of 1984, however, something “more clearly dystopian” (p. 3) appeared—the *critical dystopia*.

Baccolini and Moylan define critical dystopias as texts that, while offering negative visions, still maintain the utopian dream as a possibility. Thus, the critical dystopia is essentially different from the classical dystopia, which usually does not contain hope within their pages; these dystopias, then, “maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 7). Classical dystopias have very definitive closures: they end with the inevitable subjugation of the individual. Critical dystopias, on the other hand, maintain the possibility of hope because they evade such closure through “ambiguous, open endings” that keep the utopian impulse alive also *within* the work itself (ibid). In this sense, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is understood as a work that, exemplifying the revived dystopian writing of the 1980s, “directly drew on the classical dystopian narrative even as it interrogated its limits and suggested new directions” (p. 3). Baccolini and Moylan establish, then, that Atwood’s writing is in close connection with the “classic” dystopian writing of the first half of the twentieth century, but, at the same time, that it explores such a tradition with a critical eye.

In Mohr’s discussion, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is understood as an example of what she refers to as *transgressive utopian dystopias*, or “dystopias that contain a utopian subtext transgressive of binaries” (2005, p. 50). In this view, the classical dystopia is always resistant to the idea of change, and thus it precludes the notion of progress as a possibility. Mohr suggests that the only desire the protagonist of such novels has is to escape, and he ends up fulfilling one of three possible endings: he might escape to a place beyond the dystopian state, he might disappear into the underground resistance, or he might directly confront the state of affairs,

which leads to death—by suicide or execution—and ultimate defeat. For Mohr, however, transgressive utopian dystopias present utopia and dystopia as part of a *continuum* that appears within a single text, rather than as a binary opposition. Mohr highlights that when Baccolini examines what the latter refers to as feminist dystopias, she proposes that these texts usually present a utopian seed that could potentially lead to a better society. Mohr, on the other hand, suggests that the novels that she reads as “transgressive utopian dystopias”, which intersect with Baccolini’s classification, present the utopia not as a possible and better *future*, but as radically different *nows* which only come into existence through alternative ways of looking at the present. Mohr then suggests that, in Atwood’s novel, it is the act of narration that “becomes the utopian subtext” (p. 230), while conceding that the work “lacks distinct utopian projects and subthemes” (ibid) and remains closely connected with the classical dystopias of the past.

As the last few pages have hopefully demonstrated, the dystopian field is broad and ever evolving. Although I point to some works that have been considered dystopias so that we may grasp what kind of narratives the concept tends to apply to, the goal here is not to define what is and is not dystopia, whether we can call it a genre and, if it is a genre, what its mandatory characteristics are. My intention here is simply to situate Atwood’s novel in a broader context that allows us to better understand her work, although this contextualization is in no way exhaustive. In the following subsection, I will discuss the protagonists in dystopian writing, but will limit myself to *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The reasons for this choice are twofold. First, because this triad of novels is recurrently described as the very core of dystopian writing (for examples among the references of this thesis, see FROMM, 1977; MALAK, 1987; GULICK, 1991; FEUER, 1997; FERNS, 1999; WEISS, 2009; VIEIRA, 2010). The other reason is Atwood herself, for she has, on different occasions, openly discussed the influence of the two Anglophone novels in her own writing.

In Atwood’s introduction to the 2007 edition of *Brave New World*, she suggests that both Huxley and Orwell, presenting different forms of totalitarianism, “cast a shadow over our futures” (p. vii) and that, in the decades following their publication, they took turns in appearing as the most prescient of the two. The model she most closely relied on, however, was Orwell’s, particularly in the way he chose to end *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which she has suggested is extremely significant but has sometimes been ignored (ATWOOD, 2009b). Orwell has often been accused of being a pessimist, leaving the reader with a final image of nothing but the “boot stamping on a human face—forever” that O’Brien describes to Winston (ORWELL, 1977, p.

267). But Atwood believes *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s ending is more complicated than that: yes, when we last see Winston his final thought is that “he loved Big Brother” (p. 298), but that is not the end of *the novel*. The end of the novel is an appendix titled “The Principles of Newspeak”, which, as Atwood aptly reminds us, is written both in standard English and in the past tense: it could only mean, then, that at some point in the future the regime—and Newspeak, and doublethink—ended. For her, this shows us that Orwell ultimately had more faith in humanity and its possibilities than many would believe. This structural choice is mirrored very closely in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Having established the relevance of *We*, *Brave New World* and (most importantly for Atwood) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for dystopian writing, in the next subsection I will narrow the focus on what has been said about their protagonists—D-503 in *We*, Bernard Marx and John the Savage in *Brave New World*, and Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

1.3.1 The protagonist of dystopian writing: Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell

As discussed in the previous subsection, scholars who dedicate themselves to the study of utopia and dystopia tend to agree about the canonical status of three modern dystopias that have influenced generations of subsequent writers (VIEIRA, 2010). However, the significant differences between these three texts are also often noted. Briefly, we could mention some of them: *We* is narrated by a diarist who registers his own experiences, while *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have external narrators; the societies presented in *We* and *Brave New World* are old enough that their protagonists do not remember a different way of life (though in Huxley's novel we have the Savage, who lives in an alternative society, he and his ways are marginalized), while *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Winston still retains some diffuse, fading memories from the time before; in *Brave New World*, social control is executed through pleasure, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it requires torture and violence—*We* could perhaps be said to lie somewhere in the middle, as D-503 initially seems at ease in his dystopian reality, like someone in the World State, yet the One State does resort to violence (a brain operation) to deal with its dissidents. The three novels are connected in that they all explore nightmarish futuristic images in which technology is used by those in power to submerge individuality and any form of dissidence in both action and thought, exerting, ultimately, total control of the population.

The classic dystopian protagonist can be understood as someone being pitted in a contest he can never win. While some form of rebellion appears in all three novels, Chris Ferns (1999, p. 125-126) suggests that “there is a curious inevitability to the process whereby the individual takes on the might of the monolithic State, and is ultimately destroyed by it—an inevitability which perhaps stems from the terms in which the confrontation is set up”. For those individuals who abide by the rules, the real threat is a complete loss of any sense of individuality (FROMM, 1977) or identity (FEUER, 1997). Some scholars cite two-dimensional characters as one of the staples of dystopia. Although this characteristic is often cited in negative evaluations, some suggest that it is, in fact, a necessity of the genre: for Carvalho (2011), the dystopia must valorize the *world* that surrounds the character and not the character himself, and both Huxley and Orwell—correctly, in his view—knew how to do so, even if Orwell gives Winston some complexity with his “intellectual curiosity” and “poetic sensibility” (CARVALHO, 2011, p. 84). Both Amin Malak (1987) and Angela Gulick (1991) suggest that the dystopian atmosphere cannot present assertive characters in order not to offer any “consoling hope” (MALAK, 1987, p. 11), which would appear “if we had a string of strong and confident heroes on which to pin our dreams” (GULICK, 1991, p. 13).

The discussion of the notion of hope—and its presence or absence in dystopian writing—has been an important one in the study of dystopias. Vieira (2010, p. 17), for instance, suggests that dystopias *must* leave room for hope, otherwise they do not achieve the goal of generating a positive reaction in the desire for “social improvement”. When it comes to dystopias, we can think of different grounds for hope: *within* and *outside* the pages of the novel (or the duration of the film, television show and so forth). Typically, the hope of a classical dystopia lies in its desire to reach the reader who exists outside of the novel and, through the *warning* in form of fictional writing (FROMM, 1977), fulfill its *didactic purpose* (VIEIRA, 2010): to avoid that such negative developments in the future of humanity come into being. Researchers such as Mohr (2005) and Baccolini and Moylan (2003) emphasize the resistance to change that can be perceived in classical dystopias, and the latter two scholars highlight that if there is any hope in works such as *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it certainly lies outside of the actual texts.

In the work of activist and writer Rebecca Solnit, there is an important distinction to be made between the notions of *hope* and *optimism*:

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting (SOLNIT, 2016, p. 12).

The hope Solnit discusses, she emphasizes, “is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine” (p. 11), but a belief in the *possibility* of transformation: there can be no action without hope preceding it, and thus hopelessness is a stifling force. A similar notion is explored by Sargent (1994) in a discussion that is limited to utopias and dystopias:

The corollary is that if people's expectations are positive, if they believe that they can or will improve their lives, they are more likely to do so than if their expectations are negative. If they believe that life cannot get better, or that it is certain to get worse, they will not seek improvement of their condition, and it is likely that even their most dire predictions will be fulfilled. Faith in or hope for the future breeds effort (SARGENT, 1994, p. 27).

If we think of dystopias as an effort on the writer's part to achieve a transformative effect on his or her readers, then we can connect such writings to the hope—as the belief in the possibility of transformation—described by Solnit. For Sargent (1994, p. 26), the dystopian warning necessarily implies “that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible” (p. 26). However, this hope lies in an extratextual level. But Atwood seems to read her own novel, as well as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which served as an important inspiration, against the grain. Her discussion of Orwell's writing (ATWOOD, 2009b) makes it clear that she sees the final glimmer of hope that the essay on Newspeak represents as an essential aspect, so much so that she did something similar in her own novel. This glimmer of hope, however, does not lie on “strong, confident heroes” (GULICK, 1991, p. 13) but in a larger awakening of humanity. As explored by Claeys (2010), Winston Smith constantly thinks that the possibility of a rebellion could be found only in the proles, because they had not been corrupted by power (unlike the elites), though they are completely stifled throughout the entire course of Winston's journey, who concludes it thinking that he loved Big Brother. The appendix, perhaps, leaves space for his hopeful belief on the proles, although the ending is ultimately too ambiguous and unclear to take it as a certainty. Atwood's interpretation of the hopeful subtext present in Orwell's Appendix might go against the grain of critical readings, but the argument she makes is a strong one: why write an appendix about Newspeak in the past tense using standard English, if not to

suggest that it became a historical artifact? Perhaps it is more productive to say that dystopias (classical or otherwise) are not necessarily devoid of hope, but that such hope should not be placed on a character who might guide us out of totalitarianism or martyrize his or herself, for it is social improvement that is, ultimately, demanded.

The lack of individual bravery typical of classical dystopias has often been signaled as an important characteristic of the three novels discussed here. Carvalho (2011) points out that Bernard Marx, while not sharing the ideas prevailing in the society he belongs to, does not have the courage to react and is extremely afraid of exile. Winston Smith, on the other hand, is someone looking for a leader to guide him. Claeys (2010, p. 123) describes Winston as “anti-heroic” and his attempt at rebellion “clumsy”. Allan Weiss (2009, p. 4) affirms that it is a “misconception” to look at these men (and at D-503) as “heroic but doomed revolutionaries, dedicated warriors for freedom who are crushed by systems they cannot defeat”, as their ultimate complicity with the practices of the regimes they live under make them “anything but heroic”. Weiss also presents a negative reading of the form of rebellion that can be found in these novels, further described by Ferns (1999, p. 121) as manifesting “more in the sexual than the political realm—and then most often in the form of the reassertion of more traditional sexual values.”

There is little to no collective action taken in either of the three novels. Significantly, for Ferns (1999, p. 126), in *We* “resistance is shown as coming closest to success. It is hardly coincidental that it is the only one where resistance is shown as collective and organized, rather than merely an individual gesture of defiance”. Even the sexual and romantic relationships that defy the laws of the State in each novel fail in the end: Winston and his lover Julia betray each other, Bernard and John cede to the “everyone belongs to everyone else” motto of the World State (though John’s horror at this realization leads to his suicide, which could be understood as a refusal to be tamed, it is a form of defeat nonetheless), I-330 is sentenced to death and D-503 is submitted to a brain operation to send him back into obedience, leading him to betray the rebel movement. Ultimately, these protagonists and their attempts at rebellion are defeated as they “abandon their half-hearted, often libido-engendered rebellions and choose freedom from pain and hardship instead” (WEISS, 2009, p. 5).

Atwood’s Offred, on the other hand, does not share the fate of these protagonists: she manages to escape Gilead alive and to remain so at least long enough to record her own story in a series of old tapes. It is to Offred and the tapes that we turn to in the following subsection.

1.3.2 *The Handmaid's Tale*: Margaret Atwood's dystopian writing

Since *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985, there have been several interpretations regarding an issue that has never been settled: whether its narrator and protagonist, Offred, is purely a victim who never escapes her victimization, a complicit participant in the horrors of the totalitarian regime, or a heroic protagonist. This discussion has often been accompanied by exercises of contrasting and comparing Atwood's novel with a larger dystopian tradition. The persistence of this debate can be better understood if we think of two statements made by Heidi Macpherson (2010) in *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood*: when discussing *Bodily Harm* (1981), the novel that preceded *The Handmaid's Tale*, she affirms that its protagonist, following an Atwoodian tradition, is a flawed heroine with a “tantalizingly unclear” ending (p. 75); when discussing *Cat's Eye* (1988), which followed *Handmaid's*, the critic suggests that the novel raises many questions, but offers few answers—“another familiar Atwoodian motif” (p. 94). Similarly, Coral Ann Howells (1996, p. 10) suggests that Atwood's novels refuse “to invoke any final authority as their open endings resist conclusiveness, offering instead hesitation, absence or silence while hovering on the verge of new possibilities”.

Furthermore, exploring how closely Atwood's novel follows a previous dystopian tradition can be understood as an enduring question for critics because while Atwood enjoys working with different genres, she “always infuses those genres with a political slant that offsets the ‘conventions’ and boundaries that the genres initially suggest” (MACPHERSON, 2010, p. 46). Critics often mention Atwood's female protagonist and narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* as an obvious and striking difference when it comes to the dystopian tradition. This is an important aspect of her novel: though Atwood has never hidden the fact that Orwell was a particularly important inspiration for her, she nonetheless does mention that he, like the authors of other classic dystopias, wrote from a masculine point of view in which women appeared either as “sexless automatons” or as “rebels” who defied the sexual norms of their respective regimes, “tempting” the male protagonist (ATWOOD, 2009b, p. 363). Turning these gender relations around by placing the woman's experience and subjectivity at the center, Atwood, thus, “offsets conventions”. While dystopias are inherently political, having a woman at the center does indeed “infuse [it] with a political slant”—or an *extra* political slant—, that of feminism: although Atwood correctly affirms that simply having a female protagonist does not

make a novel feminist, she, also correctly, recognizes that it does so for those who believe women should be voiceless (2009b, p. 363). Bringing a woman's voice to a male-dominated tradition is, thus, political in new ways.

Like the dystopias that inspired it, Atwood's novel, though set in the future, is, in fact, a reflection of the time when it was written. Lisa Jadwin (2009) highlights that Gilead reflects the conservativeness of the 1980s; though Atwood sets her novel in the United States, the phenomenon was not limited to America, and Jadwin suggests that the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia also went through "conservative 'revolutions'" (p. 26). In the United States, the 1980s saw the election of President Ronald Reagan, who won with the support of evangelicals who called themselves the "Moral Majority" and promoted an agenda that attacked abortion, homosexuality, the (defeated) project to pass an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and everything else that they interpreted as part of "an 'antifamily' agenda" (JADWIN, 2009, p. 28). Jadwin emphasizes, however, that Atwood's critique in the novel also encompassed some branches of feminism that appeared as the women's movement gained support throughout the 1970s—critics often mention Offred's famous lines dedicated to her mother as reflective of the dangers of some feminist discourses: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (THT, p. 137). The novel has also been read as a critique of second-wave feminism's many internal divisions (CALLAWAY, 2008)—in interviews, Atwood has stated that the word "feminist" has become "one of the all-purpose words" that includes radically different stances (HOWELLS, 1996, p. 19), and this is likely an important reason why she resists being defined as a feminist writer even though her writing invariably brings gender to the fore.

The Handmaid's Tale, though set in the United States, can also be contextualized as Canadian literature—it is one of the rare Atwoodian novels set outside her home country. In many ways, her dystopia reflects the views of the United States that she explores in her controversial non-fiction book *Survival* (1972), in which she claims that the notion of survival is "the persistent cultural obsession of Canadian literature" (ATWOOD, 2012, location 356). In her 2003 Introduction to the book, Atwood refers to the United States as Canada's "huge aggressive neighbour to the south" (2012, location 327), and her thesis in the book suggests that the national symbol of the U.S. is the Frontier, or "a line that is always expanding, taking in or 'conquering' ever-fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space,

Poverty or The Regions of the Mind); it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society” (location 922).

Hutcheon (1988, p. 5) highlights the significant participation of women writers in Canadian literature and suggests that the position of women writers across the world is similar to that of English-speaking Canadian authors: “in both cases there is a necessary self-defining challenging of the dominant traditions (male; British/American)”. These processes of domination are important themes for Atwood, whose protagonists tend to be Canadian women. But Hutcheon also emphasizes that these processes are not explored in a simplistic manner by Atwood, since what she also explores in her writing is their own complicity in these structures. Offred—though not a Canadian—can be better understood in this framework, for throughout the novel she is forced to realize how her previous life of political inertia was also part of the problem that ultimately led to Gilead’s existence. Furthermore, Mohr (2005, p. 243) connects Offred to Atwood’s specifically Canadian views in that she too is, before anything else, a survivor who fails conventional heroism.

Another important aspect of Atwood’s writing is the way it centralizes language and its possibilities and limitations. For Hutcheon, her heroines are all “highly imaginative; their creative processes, however extreme or comic, also in a sense mirror that of the novelist herself, which in turn mirrors our own as readers” (1998, p. 152). Furthermore, she emphasizes that Atwood is acutely aware that creation always entails responsibility, because to be able to create is also a form of power. Unsurprisingly, then, language and creation are important themes in the discussion regarding Offred’s status as heroine, victim, complicit agent, or something in between.

Most negative of all readings might be Jamie Dopp’s (1994), for whom the issue is not only Offred but the novel itself. Dopp suggests that Atwood’s text offers the reader no possibility of resistance, only “a position of abjection that shares in the fatalistic passivity of the protagonist” (p. 1). For the critic, there is nothing in the novel to sustain the belief that any form of resistance is either real or possible within Gilead, and not only does Offred abandon any notion of defiance by the end, but whoever tries it (Moirra, Ofglen, Offred’s mother) is destroyed. Furthermore, the Historical Notes would reinforce this idea by presenting a future world where Gilead no longer exists, but misogyny is rampant. For Dopp, the trouble with “essentializing” history like this is that it “undermines the possibility of a constructive response” (p. 3), and this construction goes against “a grass-roots political truth: if no one

believes things can be changed then no one will be motivated to seek change” (p. 1). This discussion is similar to Solnit’s previously mentioned exploration of hope (2016), which intends to foster in her readers the notion that hope is an imperative for political activism, and that change has historically been both possible and real.

Other critics, however, condemn Offred without condemning the novel. For Stephanie Hammer (1990), while Offred could justify her inaction by showing us that every woman who tried to directly oppose the regime was destroyed, this reticent behavior of hers actually dates from the time *before* Gilead, when she could have chosen to act and be politically engaged had she wanted to. In Hammer’s reading, however, this is part of the *warning* aspect of the dystopia, for Atwood uses the empathy we might feel for Offred against us, “suggesting that her protagonist (and thus we too, in so far as we resemble her) acts or fails to act based on a dangerous amalgamation of gender assumptions which have governed women’s behavior for centuries and which have guaranteed their oppression by men” (p. 44). In this sense, her relationship with Nick and particularly her choice of romanticizing it are particularly “disturbing” (p. 42). A similar view is also supported by the previously cited Weiss, who examines Atwood’s novel against a larger dystopian tradition:

Offred’s attitudes and behaviour are therefore not merely personal failings, and she certainly does not represent Atwood’s ideal in how to respond to totalitarianism. As the dystopian tradition makes clear, Offred embodies quite the opposite. Like the dystopian protagonists who provided the models for her characterization, Offred is guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires. She prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment (2009, p. 7).

Weiss, like Hammer, sees the attachment with Nick in a negative light. So does Madonne Miner (1991), for whom the language of the novel treats the men in Offred’s life (her husband, Nick and the Commander) as interchangeable, as they all share important traces of personality and background with one another. Thus, for Miner, even though readers often see the romance aspect of the novel as revolutionary within that context, she believes that the novel “insists upon love’s limitations, rather than upon its latitudes” (p. 165). S. C. Neuman (2006) sees this relationship as a “relapse into willed ignorance” (p. 864)—in terms of Offred’s own struggle for survival—but reads the character in a more nuanced way. Neuman suggests that Offred refuses to be a victim when she decides that she will survive Gilead, but that this desire demands a degree of complicity. However, Neuman reinforces that throughout the novel Offred

goes from someone who chooses to be ignorant to someone who actively seeks knowledge, and that the commentary she makes as narrator “shows her as having gained political awareness and as reassessing her earlier more individualist positions” (p. 861). This reassessment sometimes includes a recognition that her mother, whom she had often resented in the time before, had been right in some respects.

For Peter Stillman and S. Anne Johnson (1994, p. 79), however, the mother is absolved by history—by Gilead coming into existence—but not “by a growth in the consciousness of her daughter’s generation”. While they concede that Offred’s account exists “against Gilead’s re-writing of history”, they for the most part dismiss it on the grounds that “it is not clear what is gained from one person’s knowing some ‘true’ historical facts” (p. 75). Not only do they claim that romance is a paralyzing force in the narrative, as other critics do, but they also present an unusual hypothesis about the nature of Offred’s narrative: while critics usually agree that its existence suggests that Mayday managed to take Offred to a safe space (and that Nick was not lying when he told her that the men who came to take her away were part of the rebellious group), Stillman and Johnson propose that Nick might have been a member of the secret police (an Eye) who gave her away for the organization to extract information in order to punish the Commander’s transgressions. In their view, Offred is Atwood’s negative example for the reader: how *not* to act, what *not* to do.

In a middle ground, Ferns (1990, p. 131) reads Offred as someone who does not do more than her dystopian predecessors to directly challenge authority: “at best, she is a witness to the challenges of others—her mother’s, her friend Moira’s, her companion Ofglen’s, all of which end in varieties of defeat”. Yet Ferns suggests that she is also different from them in that she never *concedes* defeat, and her resistance lies in her remaining consciousness, which the State cannot, by the end of the novel, penetrate. This is an important difference between Atwood and her sources of inspiration: “where the dystopian dissidents of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell seek refuge from the State’s authority in the womb-like security of the past, Atwood presents liberation as a process of going forward, into the unknown” (p. 134).

For the critics who see Offred as heroic, it is storytelling that gives her such status, rather than her actions in the time narrated. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (2003), for instance, proposes that if it is possible to read Offred as failing in the time that is narrated, she becomes heroic through the act of *telling*. For Lawlor, Offred is afraid of making choices throughout the whole narrative and her movement is one that goes back and forth between “furtive risk taking and

fearful pulling back” (p. 86). By the end of the novel, however, she fully commits to the choice of trusting Nick, and, furthermore, it is this choice that finally leads her into “solidarity with a wider group” (p. 89), through Mayday, and ultimately allows her to record her narrative. Michael Foley (1990) sees Offred as a complex character that is full of “inconsistencies of thought and feeling” (p. 55): her relationship with Nick, for example, is both subversive and somewhat repressive, in that the joy she gets from it leads her to a renewed state of political inertia. Even so, her choices—including the paralyzing relationship—lead to “a breakout into the creative [...] act of telling her story”, and Offred triumphs both through “love and the power of words” (p. 57). Lucy Freibert (1988, p. 288) sees the romance in a particularly positive light, suggesting that in choosing it, Offred comes to her “real breakthrough to her courageous self”, which “serves to release Offred to sexual abandon and freedom to record her tale”.

Howells (1996) also sees storytelling as a possibility of resistance. Offred often uses the word *reconstruction* in her narrative in order to refer to the ways in which language, with all its possibilities, is still limited when it comes to rendering actual lived experience, but for Howells the account is a reconstruction on a second level as well: the reconstruction of her individuality. The critic highlights that if Pieixoto accuses Offred of only paying attention to what was unimportant (not providing the kind of information regarding the internal workings of the regime or about her Commander’s identity and the work he did that the professor wishes he had access to), the reader might feel otherwise, “for Atwood highlights perspective rather than knowledge or truth as the main feature of any historical narrative” (p. 146). Important for this reading is the fact that the largest part of the novel is made of Offred’s account.

David Hogsette (1997) suggests that Offred is gradually educated to the possibilities that language offers. But he also emphasizes that in order for this act of communication to be completed, the reader must do his or her part—he turns to the Historical Notes in order to explore what he refers to as an example of how *not* to read the novel. Professor Pieixoto, one of the academics who uncovered, arranged and prepared Offred’s oral narrative for publication, “is blinded by his intellectualizing and fails to comprehend Offred’s isolation, her subjugation, and the heroic significance of the risk she took in attempting to record her thoughts and feelings” (p. 272). In this reading, Pieixoto intellectually objectifies Offred’s account, and the novel suggests that we, readers, should try to empathize with her instead, since her process of political maturing is not without suffering, and neither is the experience of sharing what she has learned, but she trudges on anyway. Similarly, Hilde Staels (1995) suggests that with her

narration Offred breaks with the law of the theocracy, since it emphasizes a degree of individuality that she is not supposed to have in Gilead. Yet Pieixoto, like Gilead, is incapable of understanding the true power of language that is highlighted in Offred's account:

They exclude from their horizon of perception the act of telling as a re-articulation of reality, as an effort to give expression to inner sensations, or hope and faith in change. They aim at a reconstruction of the historical facts of a patriarchal history. They express more concern for the historical author of the tale and for the position assigned to her above ground, rather than for the unique narrating voice of 'someone' who speaks from within the periphery, and who draws strength from her marginalized position (STAELS, 1995, p. 464).

Because storytelling is an essential aspect of the novel, the possibilities and limitations of language have been a recurrent topic of discussion when it comes to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gulick (1991, p. 113) emphasizes the role ambiguity has in the novel, suggesting that many of its aspects have more than one purpose: "Sexuality demonstrates both power and weakness; motherhood, maternal nurturing and rejection; journeys demonstrate movement and entrapment; mirrors, discovery and distortion; flowers represent life and sterility, the senses, gratification and denial". In this sense, the novel forces us to remember that we are reading a text and that a text cannot be separated from its teller; when Offred offers us multiple interpretations of what has happened (her first encounter with Nick) and of what might have happened (Luke's fate after they were separated), she is not "deceiving" us, but merely "trying to create a reality using an insufficient tool, language" (GULICK, 1991, p. 134). For Feuer (1997, p. 91) such ambiguity is cherished in the text, which is constructed on a "distrust of certainty" that directly opposes the regime's attempt of total control: "multiple meanings reveal alternate possibilities, and Offred's willingness to risk the alternatives appears in her narrative's last lines".

The celebration of the *multiple* (multiple perspectives, multiple versions of reality) in Offred's account is one of the features that Mohr (2005, p. 231) sees as "transgressive". These choices that Offred makes can be understood as a form of conscious resistance; this is especially true when one considers that, as explored by Kimberly Canton (2007), an oppressed person needs to speak in the language of the oppressor's discourse if they want to be heard. For Lorene Birden (2002), Offred uses the tool that is used to victimize her—discourse—to counter the regime that seeks to control her. Offred mixes past, present, and scenarios that are merely hypothetical, as well as her reconstructions (or false narrations, in Birden's words), seamlessly

transitioning from reality to memory to fantasy, because this way she can achieve “momentary control” (BIRDEN, 2002, p. 135). For Karen Stein (1991-92, p. 275), Offred’s narration places her in many different roles—“lover, author, speaking self”; this is in direct contrast with Gilead’s social organization which officially allows her to have a single role. Along with her “revisions and reconstructions”, this choice suggests that “if there are many versions, the tale can never achieve closure” (ibid). As explored in the previous section, this evading of closure is an important characteristic of the critical dystopias proposed by Baccolini and Moylan (2003) and the transgressive utopian dystopias introduced by Mohr (2005).

Arnold Davidson (2000) considers the Historical Notes to be the most pessimistic part of the novel, since the professors at the Symposium are completely incapable of understanding Offred’s text and her defying act of storytelling. It is important to remember, however, that the novel both relegates Pieixoto and the academics to the margins of the text (HOWELLS, 1996) and that Atwood structures it in a way which ensures that first-time readers will always be first engrossed by Offred’s storytelling efforts and only later will be in contact with the professor’s sexism and objectifying discourse (MORRISON, 2000). Rather than “essentializing history”, as Dopp (1994) suggests she does, in this view Atwood seems to be expanding the scope of her *warning* with her choice of epilogue.

1.3.3 Dystopian television

As I have briefly discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, finding Internet, newspaper or magazine articles recommending different dystopian television series is not a difficult task, particularly after the popularity achieved by series such as the *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Black Mirror*. The variety is wide: from extraterrestrial wars to meditations on the ways we use technology; from the Axis powers winning World War II to zombie apocalypses or pandemics; from android revolutions to the reality of wealth inequality taken to an extreme; from the rise of fascism in the twenty-first century to the inexplicable disappearance of two percent of the population. All these narratives, among others, have been discussed as examples of dystopian television by several commentators¹¹. It is, of course, debatable whether all are indeed dystopias, since definitions of the term vary significantly.

¹¹ The television shows mentioned here are, respectively, *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2004-2009), *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-2014; Netflix, 2016-2019), *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-2019), *The Walking*

While it can be difficult to decide whether each television series that has been deemed dystopian is, indeed, a dystopia, it seems safe to affirm that we have been witnessing, for some years now, a growing interest in television that explores negative visions for the future of humanity, and it was in this context that Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* premiered in 2017. Evan Kindley (2018) suggests that while dystopia has thrived in literature and film, it had for many years been mostly absent from television:

Dystopia, as a genre, poses specific problems for television. Dystopian narratives tend to be tonally flat: Their first priority is to assert how intolerable things are, and this precludes too much scenic variety or comic relief. Then, too, they're rarely character-oriented and don't lend themselves to the kind of lively ensemble casts that TV shows usually feature. The typical dystopian protagonist (think Winston Smith in *1984*) is a kind of witness, a recorder of suffering, but not particularly complex or interesting. Trickiest of all is finding a way to tell an ongoing serialized story set in a dystopian world that's not unremittingly depressing or, worse, didactic. Dystopias rarely have happy endings, but they do have endings: They're a species of morality play, which means that sooner or later they need to deliver a moral. The idea of spending weeks or years exploring a dystopian world is unappealing on its face, not only because these worlds are bleak but because, after a while, you get the point already.

A similar point is made by Devon Maloney (2018) when she states that “the genre’s most affecting stories have always been highly concentrated, discrete doses of horror. Drag on too long, finding new ways to keep the misery going, and you can lose viewers simply because you’ve depressed them too much”. In this context, she praises Netflix’s Brazilian series *3%* because “there’s always hope or relief to be found somewhere in [its] narrative web”, unlike, in her opinion, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Black Mirror*.

There are fundamental differences between *Black Mirror* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, as the former is an anthology series—for Kindley (2018), this format has been the most “hospitable” to dystopia on television. While an anthology series is still long-form, it is of a different sort, because stories change every season—or even every episode, in *Black Mirror*’s case. The second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* has often been criticized for doing exactly what Kindley and Maloney suggest as problematic for long-form dystopia¹², and the

Dead (AMC, 2010-), *Z Nation* (Syfy, 2014-2018), *The Last Ship* (TNT, 2014-2018), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), *3%* (Netflix, 2016-2020), *Years and Years* (BBC/HBO, 2019) and *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-2017).

¹² Throughout 2018, several critics and commentators across media outlets referred to the series as “torture porn” and “misery porn”, wrote articles to declare they were officially abandoning the series due to the repeated violence and torture depicted in it or, at the very least, wrote to ponder whether it remained worthwhile watching so many hours of violence and torture against women. The debate is briefly summarized (although takes on the subject are multitudinous) in an article by *Huffington Post*’s Emma Gray under the title “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Is The Most Brutal Show On TV. Why Can’t I Stop Watching?”. Available at [huffpost.com/entry/the-handmaids-tale-is-the-most-brutal-show-on-tv-why-cant-i-stop-watching_n_5afb663ae4b0779345d3dd06](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-handmaids-tale-is-the-most-brutal-show-on-tv-why-cant-i-stop-watching_n_5afb663ae4b0779345d3dd06). Accessed Jul. 30, 2020.

writing team has seemingly responded to such criticism: before the third season premiered, the show's creator, Bruce Miller, assured audiences that the main character would "win more" in the upcoming episodes (TURCHIANO, 2019).

Despite the popularity that dystopia seems to have achieved on television in the past few years, academic writing about it is still sparse, and usually privileges *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Black Mirror*, likely the most popular examples, as case studies. Gabriela Sanseverino (2018) is one exception, but her analysis of what she refers to as apocalyptic futures emphasizes scenarios of alien invasion or zombification, thus, by the definition I am currently working with, they might lie outside the dystopian realm. Her point, however, is that no matter how unrealistic some of these apocalyptic scenarios might be, these stories are still useful for the discussion about conflicts that are latent in our own society: for example, watching extraterrestrial invasions can lead audiences to wonder if our future might depend on another race saving us, and watching zombie apocalypses can lead to a reflection about economic recession and mass layoffs. Regardless of the cause of future disturbances, for Sanseverino they are all interconnected in reflecting contemporary preoccupations and offering possible answers—but sometimes, according to this view, they do so metaphorically.

For the most part, however, the few articles tackling television dystopia available dedicate themselves to case studies. Juliana Lopes (2018), Luiz Siqueira (2018) and Joe Conway (2019), for example, examine different *Black Mirror* episodes and analyze how they reflect dystopian ideas. These analyses reinforce, as important characteristics, the exacerbation of current trends perceived in our own society, as well as the extremely negative presentation of technology in these futures. *Black Mirror's* use of technology—specifically in the case of episode "Fifteen Million Merits" (season one, episode two, 2011)—is for Conway (2019, p. 251) an example of speculative fiction's "long history" of critique towards "dispossessed life, land, and labor". Although extrapolations in technology tend to be an important part of most dystopias, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is, in that sense, far away from the tradition, and according to Atwood herself (2019, p. 418), the Hulu adaptation maintained her rule of not including in Gilead anything that had not yet happened some time in history, somewhere in the world. But the same exploration of "dispossessed life" is present and centralized in both works.

When I was writing the proposal for this research in early 2018, I could not yet find academic writing about Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*; however, in the past two and a half years, it became a popular topic of examination, and journal *Communication, Culture & Critique* even

proposed a forum of discussion exclusively about the series, which was published in 2018. Such a forum explored, through a series of short pieces, several aspects of the series, including how it handled sexuality and race, its use of violence, its visual style and its online fandom, among other topics¹³. Beyond the limits of the forum, others have also taken the series as an object of study.

Olivia Hershman (2018) suggests that hope and resistance are more prominent in the adaptation than in Atwood's novel. Alane Silva (2018) also proposes a comparative analysis, focusing on the amplified role Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, is given in the adaptation as she eventually tries to change some of Gilead's rules and is severely punished for doing so. Nathallie Rêgo and Sinara Branco (2018) centralize Janine, another Handmaid, and another character that is transformed in the adaptation: they suggest that Atwood's Janine is a "persona non grata" (p. 41) among other Handmaids, while the show's Janine is presented firstly as a strong, defiant woman and, later, as someone who we are supposed to feel pity for as her story is amplified. Aline Silva, Renata Gomes and Sarah Linhares (2019) suggest that the women on the show are slowly "empowered", reflecting the history of feminism itself; they do not consider Offred to be a hero or an activist, however, but a representation of what they consider a "*real* woman" facing a horrible condition (p. 261)—her fear, along with her opinions and desires, are deemed important for the viewer to create empathy. Heather Hendershot (2018) explores, on the one hand, internal aspects of the show—for instance, its interest in "female solidarity" (p. 16) and the way it "condemns the betrayal of women by women" (p. 17), including through Offred herself, as the series allows Luke's former wife to become a materialized character for the viewer, even if only briefly. On the other hand, Hendershot is also interested in how the series, especially in its second season, which was conceived under the Trump administration, posits itself as an allegory for the current circumstances of the United States, exploring plots that are in direct dialogue with real-life policies. Her reading of the series is particularly interesting when it points out that "the entire series rests on [...] wrenching moments of ups and downs, of hopes forged and crushed", and that "against all odds, season 1 nonetheless ends on a hopeful note" (p. 23), a hope that is often achieved due to collective action.

¹³ The short pieces mentioned here are, respectively, Julia Himberg's "The Lavender Menace Returns: Reading Gender & Sexuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*", Aisha Phoenix's "From Text to Screen: Erasing Racialized Difference in *The Handmaid's Tale*", Brenda Weber's "Torture Porn in Dystopic Feminism", Julia Leyda's "Hook and Eye" and Kristen J Warner's "JunexNick: The Quietest Ship in the Handmaid Fandom". Available at <https://academic.oup.com/ccc/issue/11/1>. Accessed Jul. 17, 2020.

Following Hendershot's illuminating reading of the television series, I turn, in the next two chapters, to my own discussion of Atwood's Offred and her counterpart June Osborne in the Hulu adaptation, in order to compare and contrast both—to each other as well as to the dystopian tradition that first inspired Atwood.

2 MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: OFFRED AND STORYTELLING

As it has been previously discussed in this thesis, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is also concerned with the telling of Offred's tale and, thus, language, memory, and creativity are thematized and problematized in the narrative. The novel is divided in fifteen sections and forty-six chapters, plus an epilogue—or perhaps an appendix, since Atwood has declared that she was inspired by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—, with the title “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*”. Seen in the table of contents, at first this epilogue might seem like a paratext added by Margaret Atwood, *historical author* of the novel, who lies outside the narrative. As we have seen, however, these Notes, while not part of *Offred's tale*, are part of *the novel*: they are a transcript of a fictional presentation at an academic symposium taking place in 2195. In this presentation, a fictional Cambridge professor, James Darcy Pieixoto, discusses the nature of the text that preceded it. In the Notes, the reader finds out that the written narrative he or she had been previously reading was, in fact, put on paper by Pieixoto and his colleague Professor Wade. Offred's manuscript did not come into existence by hand, but through the use of her voice: hers was an oral narrative recorded in approximately thirty unnumbered cassette tapes. The two professors not only transcribed Offred's oral narrative, but also arranged the distribution of the text, a process that Pieixoto admits was “based on some guesswork [...] pending further research” (THT, p. 314). Furthermore, he reveals that the tapes were found where the city of Bangor, in the American state of Maine (at the frontier with Canada), used to be located, and that the city was a prominent stop in the “Underground Femaleroad” that is mentioned by Offred's friend Moira in chapter thirty-eight. This fictional Femaleroad was, within the storyworld, an organization similar to the historical Underground Railroad of the 19th Century, which collaborated to remove enslaved persons from American slave states into free states and Canada through the use of secret roads and safe houses.

The information revealed to the reader in the Historical Notes is transformative in two ways: firstly, we find out that the woman's voice, which appeared to be directed towards us with no interference, is mediated by two (male and misogynistic) twenty-second-century professors; secondly, we realize that Offred's present-tense narration is, in fact, told in retrospective. Offred narrates her day-to-day activities at the Commander's house in the present tense, but her narration is an “‘artistic’ mixture of past, present, and hypothetical scenarios”

(BIRDEN, 2002, p. 133). Her narration often revisits her memories from the “time before” (the time before Gilead came to be) and from the period she spent in the Red Centre, where future Handmaids were sent to be indoctrinated. Thus, the narrative clearly distinguishes a “present” (the Commander’s house) and a past (America, the Red Centre). Once the novel reveals that Offred was probably narrating from the Femaleroad—thus, *after* she was taken away from the Commander’s house, which represents the last event in her narration—, everything that is narrated must be understood as the narrator’s past, reconstructed from memory.

In a text-based narrative, according to Scheffel, Weixler and Werner (2014), there are always three levels of temporal reference, each of them with its own temporality. First, there is *story time*, which both frames events, characters and the action and, at the same time, is defined by these elements. It is “based on verbal evocation and interplay with other elements of the narrated world” and “serves as reference parameter when it comes to defining the relation between the chronological order of ‘story’ and ‘discourse’” (ibid). Usually, time within the fictional world passes as it does in the external world, but it is important to analyze this aspect so that one can understand what kind of deformations discourse is operating in a given narrative. Secondly, there is *discourse time*, or the time—whether in minutes/hours or, as it is usually measured in written texts, pages—it takes for the narrator to profess his or her discourse (if measured in actual time referents, this time always depends on the act of *reading*, which can vary greatly, and thus for Gérard Genette¹⁴ this can be understood rather as a *pseudo-time*). Here, Genette is interested in the relationship between the levels of temporality in terms of *order, duration and frequency*: “the first relates to the order of events; the second concerns how long events or scenes last; and the third concerns how often an event occurs” (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, p. 53). Finally, there is *narrating time*, “the time of the narrating act which describes the spatiotemporal position of the narrative voice” (SCHEFFEL; WEIXLER; WERNER, 2014). Genette suggests four categories of narrating time: *subsequent* (the past-tense narrative), *prior* (a predictive narrative), *simultaneous* (when the narrative act happens simultaneously with the action) and *interpolated* (the narration happens between the moments of action).

If one were to apply Genette’s categories regarding narrating time (which have been both challenged and expanded throughout the years, as Scheffel, Weixler and Werner (2014) demonstrate) to Offred’s narration, the vast majority of it would appear to be *simultaneous* to

¹⁴ The work by Genette referred to both by Scheffel, Weixler and Werner and by Bridgeman is *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, originally published in French as part of *Figures III* (1972).

her existence at the Commander's house, with a series of analepses to the "time before" and to the Red Centre. This would represent a basic structure of the novel—but it is not thoroughly followed through. Chapter one is narrated using the past tense; it is also narrated in the first-person plural: "We slept into what had once been the gymnasium" (THT, p. 13), reads her first sentence; Offred describes the Red Centre not in her own voice, but in a collective voice of the Handmaids, placing herself as one-of-many. In chapter two, she begins using I and present-tense narration: "When the window is partly open—it only opens partly—the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this" (p. 17). This is the way she proceeds to tell her story, most of the time, unless she signals that she is revisiting a memory, as she does a few pages later:

Once, though, I heard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn't debase herself like that. Nobody asking you, Cora said. Anyways, what could you do, supposing? Go to the Colonies, Rita said. They have the choice. With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? said Cora. Catch you (p. 20).

Even this basic structure according to which her present-tense narration begins at a specific day five weeks after arriving at the Commander's house is sometimes complicated, however. Her discourse is—as it usually is in literature—not uninterrupted but permeated by several ellipses. From the ending of section two, with Offred watching the dead men hanged on the Wall for their crimes, and the beginning of section three, which takes place in her room at night, it is clear that time passes unaccounted for in her narration. Some of the events taking place at the Commander's house *after* week five, such as her first illicit encounters with both the Commander and with Nick, are very clearly told subsequently (though still in the present tense), and, furthermore, she singles them out, explicitly stating their status as "reconstructions". Beyond these narrative complications, there are the Historical Notes, which make it explicit that, indeed, *all* of the narration is happening *subsequently* to everything that has happened in the Commander's house, even if the largest part of it makes us believe otherwise.

What happens in *The Handmaid's Tale* once the reader has reached the ending of the novel can be described as a case of narrative unreliability under the understanding of Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi (2015), for whom a narrator's reliability or unreliability is always a *hypothesis* on the reader's part, and deeming a narrator unreliable is one of the many alternatives a reader might apply in order to make sense of inconsistencies he or she perceives

in the narrator's discourse. Such an inference is "always hypothetical, revisable, debatable" (p. 403), and readers might "change their minds about a mediator's reliability on receiving, at some juncture, new information that presses for a retrospective review and reformation of the happening or the discourse about it or both" (p. 419). This is what they refer to as "the dynamics of (un)reliability" (p. 419), because the process of hypothesizing is not static, it continues as the narrative goes on: it is, repeating the word they used, dynamic.

Some critics, such as Staels (1995), propose that Offred is narrating from a stop in the Underground Femaleroad. Even the professors within the novel need to find an explanation for the existence of Offred's tale, considering that it would be very unlikely that she would have had access to recording devices in the Commander's house: for Pieixoto, "there is a certain reflective quality about the narrative that would to my mind rule out synchronicity" (THT, p. 315). This is a hypothesis he forms in order to deal with the perceived inconsistency between the narration and the material aspects of Offred's life. But Morrison (2000, p. 322) correctly points out that what would be Offred's *actual* present (or the narrating time) never really makes it into the narrative, and "Atwood instead chooses to reinforce at every turn the uncertainty of the next day, next hour, next minute within the Commander's house, heightening the Handmaid's anxiety and our suspense". Offred insists that the narrative, though not only a story—it is, after all, her real life, meaning that she does not have "control over the ending" or the comforting knowledge that there *is* an ending to it, to be followed by another life, a real life (THT, p. 49)—is also "a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along" (ibid). This could be understood as unreliable information on her part. We might consider Offred unreliable in order to retain *Atwood's* reliability:

Averting blame for inconsistencies means transferring it and them elsewhere—to the perspective of an unreliable mediator, to a suitable frame of existence, to the work's genetic process, to a genre, to a function, or to some other (e.g., figurative) explanatory principle. Any such transfer will leave the author intact, in control, authoritative, indeed reliable, as the authorial power is by definition (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 431).

Sternberg and Yacobi suggest that the hypothesis of unreliability can be connected with other hypotheses the reader might come up with in order to make sense of narrative inconsistencies; for instance, these inconsistencies can be thought of as serving a larger aesthetic purpose. The discussion of Offred's possible unreliability as a narrator will be further explored in section 2.2.

For now, we must remember that what is narrated cannot be separated from the narrator—or, as Gulick (1991, p. 132) puts it, “in Atwood’s writing, it appears that the story is inseparable from the storyteller. The ‘truth’ of Offred’s tale cannot be distinguished from Offred herself, for we are dependent upon her for every detail of her story”. This characteristic, of course, is not limited to Atwood’s writing, for a narrator represents “the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made” (MARGOLIN, 2014). But Uri Margolin states that “some narrators are more marked and individuated than others” (ibid); Offred is an example of an overt narrator who every now and then addresses her narratee directly—for example, in saying that she is “coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out” (THT, p. 280)—and oftentimes even discusses her own process of narration. For Margolin, addresses to the narratee project “an ongoing communicative exchange (telling) in addition to what is being narrated (told). Such address is part of the rhetorical strategy employed by the narrator, and embodies his/her communicative intentions”. Thus, Offred not only narrates, but makes her presence be felt as a teller. For Hutcheon (1988, p. 9-10), “Atwood uses and abuses the conventions of both novelistic language and narrative in her fiction to question any naïve notions of both modernist formalism (art in autonomous artifice) and realist transparency (art as if a reflection of the world)”. In the specific case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we have a narrator who constantly “anguishes over the status of her narrative” (HUTCHEON, 1989, 17): wondering whether it is or is not a story, deciding that if she is telling it, she must be telling it to someone else, reflecting on the impossibility of rendering certain things in narrative form, such as “the way love feels” (THT, p. 275). And yet, as emphasized by Howells (1996, p. 143), “despite the difficulties, Offred tries to write her loving desire in her confessional narrative towards the end”. In this context, her attempts to describe what she finds so difficult to put in language become even more significant.

It is also important to remember that Offred’s oral storytelling is prepared for publication, and indeed organized in a tentative chronological order, by professors Pieixoto and Wade, who exercise an editorial function—for Margolin (2014), the editor becomes “the global narrator, since all the embedded [discourse is] basically quoted by him”; we must then see “the text as a whole constituting a two-level narrative”. Whatever Offred’s intentions and storytelling techniques are, they are, ultimately, mediated by the two professors, and we have

no way of accessing an unmediated version of her recordings. Thus, even if aware of the text's inescapable limitations, we can only analyze Offred's voice and storytelling act as mediated by the two scholars. While this might make it problematic to work with Offred's narrative, it is intentionally so—though we do not know it at first, their intervention becomes part of the texture of the novel, even if we cannot have, in the end, any clues about its extent.

The novel (as organized by Pieixoto and Wade) is divided in fifteen sections, seven of them titled "Night" and the others describing Offred's various yet extremely limited activities in Gilead: Shopping, Waiting Room, Nap, Household, Birth Day, Soul Scrolls, Jezebel's, Salvaging. Offred describes nighttime as the time that is *hers* to do as she wishes, as long as she is quiet (THT, p. 47). The night sections are dedicated to Offred's consciousness, when she delves into her memories and her personal, individual, disagreeing views of her life in Gilead. Thus, Offred slowly constructs for the reader her own interpretation of the two worlds she has inhabited, and of the in-between (the Red Centre). Offred mixes past and present in her narrative, sometimes in disruptive ways, as she does during the first Ceremony: "We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It's a Saturday morning, it's September, we still have a car. Other people have had to sell theirs. My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (THT, p. 94). Here, she seamlessly integrates a memory into her description of her "present", waiting for the Ceremony to happen, and employs the historical present to narrate her failed attempt at escaping the soon-to-be Gilead with Luke and their daughter, perhaps to add a sense of urgency to the memory. In fact, George Yule (1998, p. 60) states that the historical present is "usually described as a way of making storytelling events more vivid. The impression of 'more vivid' may actually be another way of talking about something as less remote in experience despite its remoteness in time". Such a memory, which ends with the entire family being captured (and possibly Luke's death) may be, for Offred, less *remote in experience* than her life at the Commander's house, especially during Ceremony days—of the Ceremony, she tells the reader few pages later, "one detaches oneself" (THT, p. 106).

Offred's narration, thus, is complexly crafted and nuanced in many ways. In the next section, I discuss the complex timeline of Offred's narration and of the novel as a whole, with its two different levels. Furthermore, Offred's behaviors—as a *character* of her narrative, which she simultaneously is—in America and Gilead, as well as her views of America and Gilead, will be explored.

2.1 Offred's narration and the disordered chronology of *The Handmaid's Tale: America, Gilead, Nunavit*

Upon a first reading, the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to establish two temporalities, one treated as Offred's present (five weeks into her stay in the Commander's house) and one as Offred's past—her memories both of the time before Gilead and of her time at the Red Centre, along with sporadic reminiscences to events taking place in the prior five weeks at the Commander's house. As it has been established as well, the ending section of *the novel* (not of Offred's tale) provides to the reader new and transformative information regarding the nature of Offred's narrative; such information strongly indicates that the entirety of Offred's narration occurs in retrospect, distanced in both space and time from the Commander's house. Thus, the overall scheme of the narrative could be organized as follows:

(non-Gilead) The Symposium taking place in 2195 > **(Gilead)** The Underground Femaleroad from where Offred presumably narrates (this location in both time and space, however, never makes it into the narrative) > The Commander's house > Her previous postings (both are indirectly mentioned by Offred in a conversation with Serena Joy (THT, p. 24-25), only one referred to in any specific detail (p. 67): "The [Commander] before this was bald, so I suppose he's an improvement.") > The Red Centre > **(non-Gilead, America)** The time before.

The time before appears through a series of memories which represent snippets into Offred's previous life. These memories include small moments from her childhood (Offred and her mother in the park), adolescence (Offred and her mother in the presence of other activists, friends of her mother's), young adulthood (Offred and her friend Moira in a series of flashbacks to their college years) and, especially, adulthood (Offred and her husband Luke, before they were married—Luke was still married to someone else—, Offred and Luke as a married couple, sometimes in the presence of either her mother or Moira, Offred and Luke as expecting parents and, finally, as parents of an unnamed daughter). These memories are interwoven in the narrative out of order, following thematic linkages instead. The narration of Offred's "present" circumstances begins five weeks into her stay at the current posting and end with her stepping into the black van which might belong either to Gilead's secret police (the Eyes) or the rebellious group Mayday.

In the next subsections, I analyze Offred's characterization both in the memories and in her "present" at the Commander's house. According to Uri Margolin, characters

are not open to direct perception by us, and can be known only through textual descriptions or inferences based on those descriptions. In fact, they *are* these complexes of descriptions, not having any independent worldly existence. And in order to find out what properties a given character possesses or what claims about him are true, there is only one route to follow: examine the originating text, what is explicitly stated in it and what can be inferred from it according to standard procedures (MARGOLIN, 2007, p. 68).

There are a series of properties, according to Margolin, that a character can possess, which can be distributed across several dimensions: "physical; behavioral (action-related) and communicative; and mental, with the latter being further subdivided into perceptual, emotive, volitional, and cognitive" (p. 73). These properties are always limited in more ways than one: for instance, "though we assume in our game of make-believe that non-actual individuals are as complete in their world as we are in ours, only a limited subset of their properties can ever be specified" (ibid). Furthermore, Margolin describes characters as usually being "temporally limited" and "discontinuous, in that not every minute or even year of their lives is presented in the text" (p. 68).

One important aspect to remember when we discuss Offred as a character is that she is also the narrator who provides us with the overwhelming majority of the information the novel carries about her, with only a very limited amount of extra contextual data being provided, in the end, by Pieixoto and Wade's research. Thus, it is Offred who selects what information she will share with her reader (or, in fact, her *listener*) and how the information will be conveyed. There is a significant time compression in her representation of the "time before", since it goes back to her infancy, thus there are likely reasons for why she chooses to give scenic treatment to very few of these events. These representations are further complicated due to the fact that one's memory is never as reliable as one would like, and, on a second degree, that Pieixoto and Wade were the ones responsible for organizing the distribution of the text: we can never be sure, then, as to the extent that linkages established between one event and the next were provided by Offred herself rather than by the professors' organization. One must work, however, with what is in the text, and this I do in the following subsections, exploring Offred in the time before, Offred in Gilead and Offred, now seen from the outside, as discussed by the professors in the Symposium.

2.1.1 Offred in the time before

The narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* begins when Offred is already Offred—she is already in the Commander's household and is, thus, "Of Fred". She had arrived at that household, her third and final posting, five weeks prior, she explains on chapter three (THT, p. 22). But chapter one is about the in-between: the time she spent in the Red Centre. Narrated in the past tense, this chapter (and the novel) begins with Offred describing the space that had once been a school gymnasium. Offred remembers high school dances and being a teenaged American girl. It is only after establishing these memories that she delves into what the place became, with the many beds, the Aunts with cattle prods and the guards who had to stay outside of the building while they—the Handmaids, though we do not know that yet—could not leave. We learn that the women, though they were not supposed to hold on to their former names, exchanged them in whispers from bed to bed: Offred mentions Alma, Janine, Dolores and Moira, all of them appearing later in the novel in minor or major roles, and she mentions June, who never makes an appearance, which has led many readers to suppose that this might be Offred's real name, though this hypothesis is never fully corroborated.

The first chapter, though not exactly a specific memory of Offred's, has her remembering an entire culture, a way of life that no longer exists. From the very beginning, she is characterized as someone who is between two very different worlds, one in which she would watch high school competitions or go to dances in a gymnasium, and one in which there are women with cattle prods and men with guns around. Like Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Offred has known two different realities; but unlike Winston, she has much clearer memories of what came before, as she was an adult when her reality radically changed. Winston, on the other hand, must anxiously ask a much older man, a stranger, whether he would rather go back to the way things were, whether it was better before or after the Revolution, a question that soon no one would be able to answer, but "in effect, it was already unanswerable even now, since the few scattered survivors were incapable of comparing one age with another" (ORWELL, 1977, p. 93). The cases of *We* and *Brave New World* are different, for they are set much further in the future, and while John the Savage is also in between worlds, there is no time distance between these two worlds for him, we merely accompany his horror as he goes from the Reservation to England, but the alternative (the Reservation) still exists—John, however, is marginalized in both places. There is an important difference between Offred and her predecessors: for Ferns (1999, p. 132), Huxley and Orwell's writing show "the individual

in society [which] serves to heighten the sense of his helplessness and vulnerability”, and while Zamyatin, like Atwood, shows the State through the perspective of one character, D-503’s narration is always permeated by the State’s discourse. But Ferns suggests that this is not true of Offred’s discourse, since she has taken a side from the beginning, and it is not the State’s. This does not mean that the time before, or life in America, is painted too positively: a dystopia is, after all, a nightmarish mirror of the society in which it was imagined.

Offred’s memories of the time before tend to highlight her private relationships rather than the bigger contextual scenario in which she lived. This context does appear, especially as the novel progresses, but even so these scenarios remind her first and foremost of the people who were closest to her: her husband Luke, her unnamed daughter, her mother, her best friend Moira. Luke’s first appearance in the narrative is in a sudden, short memory; as Offred states that Marthas and Handmaids were not supposed to fraternize, she remembers him:

Fraternize means to *behave like a brother*. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to *behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic (THT, p. 21).

We do not know yet that Luke was her husband, though it is already clear that these two characters had a close relationship, where one teased the other. Like much in Atwood’s novel, however, this first glimpse of Offred’s husband has a tinge of ambiguity to it. Miner (1991) proposes that the text presents the men in the narrative as somewhat interchangeable, pointing out that Luke, the Commander and Professor Pieixoto all share the knowledge of an old language which Offred does not (and cannot) participate in. The Latin that Luke knows and Offred does not is the very first aspect of his that she shares. Furthermore, his knowledge is used to show her that while there is a word to describe *behaving like a brother*, there is no such word to describe *behaving like a sister*. He might have meant nothing else with this piece of trivia. Yet the Luke we see in Offred’s memories enjoyed teasing her, and especially her feminist mother, with little remarks that could be interpreted as misogynistic:

He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn’t a superstition and he wasn’t being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren’t. But mostly he said it when my mother was there. He liked to tease her (THT, p. 73).

He also teased by “pretending to be macho” (p. 131); the teasing went back and forth, however, as Offred’s mother would say, in his presence, that “a man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (p. 130-131). Luke, at the same time, participates in Offred’s sweet memories, representing companionship: she remembers walking down fancy streets with him, discussing the children they would have and how they would play in the garden (p. 33), she remembers lying in bed with him when she was pregnant (p. 113), she remembers giving birth, with him by her side, his breath “coming out in wonder” (p. 136). Yet for all his comforting ways, when he once again attempts to comfort her when she—like all women—loses her job and has her money confiscated and transferred to him, Offred becomes suspicious: “I thought, already he’s starting to patronize me. Then I thought, already you’re starting to get paranoid” (p. 188). That same night, she tells us, he wanted to have sex and could not understand why she did not, once again making her feel suspicious of his real feelings towards her situation: “He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it all. Maybe he even likes it” (p. 191-192). Later on, it is him who tells her she should not go to the marches to protest, that she had to think about her family, about him and their daughter. The Offred who narrates declares herself to be “unworthy, unjust, untrue” (p. 192) for thinking, at the time, he was enjoying watching her lose her independence and her status as citizen. Yet she cannot know for sure, as she narrates, after all the years that have passed, whether he did or did not enjoy it.

When Offred imagines different—and mutually exclusive—scenarios to explain what might have happened to Luke after they were separated when trying to flee the country, she states that she believes he is dead, that he was killed right there; that she believes he is alive, imprisoned, submitted to torture; that she believes he is alive, that they never caught him, that there must be a resistance (since there were always so many criminals shown on television), that Luke found these rebels, that any day now he will have a message for her. She states, regarding Luke: “This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything” (p. 116). When it comes to Luke, as it is usual with Atwood, there is no definitive answer. He might have enjoyed, a little bit, that Offred became his, rather than the two being each other’s. He might also, at the same time, have felt for her loss, while still unable to truly empathize with the dread she felt in that scenario. Offred, of course, narrates after spending several years without seeing him. We learn on chapter nine that Handmaids spent two years in a posting (p. 63), and this is Offred’s third one—other than the two previous postings, she also spent time at the Red Centre, and we do not know how far into the future she is when

she records her tale on the tapes. Offred has had, thus, plenty of empty time to obsess over certain things, and her last memories with Luke are one of them.

We should not ignore, however, that the narrative reinforces subtle connections between this man, Luke—the man Offred is probably thinking about when she tells the Commander that what Gilead had overlooked in its social design was “falling in love” (p. 232)—with the Commander himself. We must wonder why Offred and the Commander, in their illicit night out, visit the exact same hotel (now a brothel) where Offred and Luke, then a married man, used to meet when they were having an affair. Why the exact same words are used when the Commander states that he had “an appreciation for the old things” (THT, p. 166) and when Offred points out that Luke “liked old things himself” (p. 182). Why Luke’s first appearance in the narrative is of him schooling her on the meaning of *fraternizing*, and ultimately on language itself being, rather than a neutral tool, a reflection of a patriarchal society. Like Luke, the Commander must also school Offred on certain meanings; she must bring the phrase *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, which she cannot even imagine how to pronounce, to him. The phrase that had connected her to the previous Offred is explained with a simple “you know how schoolboys are” (p. 196); because the former Offred could not have been a schoolboy, she could only have heard it from the Commander himself, the narrator realizes. Realizes, but keeps using the phrase, nonetheless. Even when she tries to detach herself from it, Offred soon concludes that it “will never do” to try to convince herself that fighting is of no use (p. 237).

Such ambivalence makes Offred’s choices even more significant. *Nolite* might have originated with the Commander, but he could not have known that the former Offred would find a way to carve those words into the cupboard in the Handmaid’s room, hidden for the next one to find it. And she could not have known that there would be someone else, or that someone else would choose to explore the cupboard—yet she, like the current Offred who narrates the tale, must have believed that “there’s always someone else” (p. 49). It is the same act of hope that leads our Offred to, despite all the pain it brings her, insist on telling her story. Similarly, Offred realizes in increasingly clear ways that Luke was flawed, like she was; that he was to some extent a product of his time, like she was; that they were both, in the end, to blame, along with an entire nation of complacent people, for Gilead. That he, in some ways, had more to do with the Commander than with herself—Atwood’s choice of giving them similar traits disturbs us because it humanizes the Commander and complexifies Luke to an uncomfortable degree. But this is what makes the criticism of our own society, distortedly yet recognizably mirrored

by Gilead, so poignant. The Commander is a powerful figure in this bizarre society when Luke is probably either dead or imprisoned—they are decidedly not the same. But the Commander can be fun, and boyish, and even warm; Offred reminds herself that “he is not an unkind man; that, under other circumstances, I even like him” (p. 266). Luke, on the other hand, can be just as misogynistic, though in apparent jest, in order to tease her mother; but sometimes his flaws appear in subtler ways, such as his complete incapacity to realize that promising his wife he will always *take care of her* (p. 188) can only comfort to a certain extent once her entire surrounding culture demands complete submissiveness from her. This does not come from a place of cruelty, but the novel shows us that one need not be cruel to support, even if unconsciously, the cruelty of others or systems that are dehumanizing to others.

This ambiguity becomes even more important when one thinks of Offred’s troubled relationship with her mother, who had her as a single parent at the age of thirty-seven. The mother, never named, is presented as an activist of the women’s movement; in a video, old footage, that the Handmaids are forced to watch at the Red Centre, Offred recognizes her mother holding a banner where the words “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT” can be read, and, behind her, there are other signs with the phrases “FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?” (p. 129-130). Take Back the Night is a real non-profit organization that, beginning in the 1960s, held several demonstrations to protest sexual violence. In the 1970s, the group also engaged in anti-pornography demonstrations; in the novel, Offred reminisces about a time when she, then a young girl, attended one of these demonstrations with her mother, where several women and a few men threw books and magazines in a bonfire. Offred was young enough that she could not understand the picture she accidentally saw of a naked woman hanging from the ceiling by a chain crossed around her wrists—it made her think of Tarzan instead—, and that her mother had to tell the others to not let her see the content of the magazines. Young Offred was upset because her mother had told her they were going to the park to feed the ducks, but the real reason why they were there was the demonstration. Offred, a young girl, felt neglected and betrayed. As a teenager, she would often find her mother busy with other activities, such as “the porn riots, or was it the abortion riots, they were close together” (p. 189). She remembers that she would mostly stay out of the way of her mother and the loud, ever-changing friends who ignored her as she “resented them” (p. 190). Likely part of the reason for the resentment came from wanting, but not getting, “a

life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment” with her mother (ibid). She wanted, perhaps, the kind of life that other children, her schoolmates, had with their families (and might even complain about).

The mother’s first appearance, however, is the memory in the park. The remembrance of this moment happens during the night, Offred’s “time out” (p. 47). She uses this private time to go “somewhere good” (ibid). She revisits a memory with Moira, in college, discussing their academic work: Moira, herself involved in a feminist collective, was writing about date rape. Feminist writer Rebecca Solnit (2017) explains that it was Susan Brownmiller, author of the seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, who coined the term in 1975; for Solnit, this is an example of new (feminist) understandings requiring new language to describe them. The term permeated discussions in college campuses, where this form of sexual violence was particularly prevalent. Offred, however, makes fun of Moira’s paper: “Date rape, I said. You’re so trendy. It sounds like some kind of dessert. *Date Rapé*” (THT, p. 47). She is not necessarily making fun of the issue itself, but of Moira’s choice of topic, which she likely perceives as unoriginal in the context of college-campus life, where many others would be discussing the same thing; nevertheless, Offred’s choice is to laugh. But it is just as important to remember that this memory is her *somewhere good*: somewhere good where she could *laugh* at her friend because she thought discussions about rape were all over the place. Remembering Moira reminds her, in turn, of her mother and the bonfire; she had resented her mother for the lie at the time, yet this memory is where she also goes to during the night, her time of the day to choose somewhere good to revisit. At the time, Offred wanted to move away from the women to get closer to the ducks, but the fire drew her back: “Their faces were happy, ecstatic almost. Fire can do that. Even my mother’s face, usually pale, thinnish, looked ruddy and cheerful, like a Christmas card” (p. 48).

Although Offred presents herself as someone who was politically apathetic in the time before Gilead, it would be a stretch to see her as an active anti-feminist or even as a “backlash”, which her mother accuses her of being (THT, p. 131). In fact, at least insofar as we have access to her past (of course, through her own filtered memories), Offred does little to antagonize her mother other than, apparently, settling down in a nuclear family, husband and child. The mother watches Luke making dinner and accuses them both, but especially her daughter, of not being appreciative enough: “Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?” (p. 131). An

exaggeration of fact, perhaps, but not of sentiment: if Luke is to some extent a product of his time, he is also a reflection of changing tides, although he tries to dismiss his active participation in house chores as merely a “hobby”. Moreover, Offred is a working mother, she has a job she enjoys and a life outside the home: her friendship with Moira lasts after the wedding, the birth of her daughter, after Moira becomes more involved in the feminist collective.

Offred’s enduring admiration of Moira is constantly felt in her narration. When she discovers the hidden message in the cupboard, she imagines the former Offred looking like Moira (p. 62). Because Moira managed to escape the Red Centre by tricking the Aunts, she became a fantasy for the other Handmaids: “she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked” (p. 143)—she was free, when the others were entrapped and, more than entrapped, already “losing the taste for freedom” (ibid). Moira was the one who took care of fellow Handmaid Janine when the latter began losing touch with reality at the Red Centre. Moira is a constant voice in Offred’s mind, calling her “chickenshit” (p. 244) or “idiot” (p. 245) when Offred herself believes she is behaving like one. If she were Moira, she thinks, she would know how to tear apart her small electric fan and turn it into a weapon (p. 180). In this scenario, Offred’s realization that Moira had accepted her fate at Jezebel’s, forced into prostitution, is particularly painful: “I don’t want her to be like me. [...] I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack” (p. 261). Though Offred might have teased Moira about her ways and beliefs every now and then, she also admired her. Furthermore, and importantly, Moira was someone she associated with her mother, using, for example, expressions that the mother used (p. 183). Moira admired Offred’s mother, Offred tells us, but so did Offred, sometimes:

I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once (p. 132).

The problem Offred has with her mother is clearly not her activism, for she did not have a problem with Moira’s own. Her issue seems to be more that she often felt like her mother was absent, or disappointed in whom her daughter had become. Offred was not, it seems, part of an active *backlash* against her mother’s generation. In her influential work *Backlash*, Susan Faludi suggests that the American media of the mid-1980’s worked actively on an agenda, which

claimed that the country had by then raised a “younger ‘postfeminist generation’ that supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (2006, p. 11). For Faludi, the idea that circulated in 1980s media was that women were unhappier than ever, and that surely it was “all that equality” brought by feminism that was to blame (p. 2). This “equality”, Faludi suggests, did not truly exist outside of discourse, as numbers and statistics made clear—but the American media would lead one to believe otherwise, with the constant discussions of how equality was making women the unhappiest they had ever been. Offred, however, does not engage in such remarks and exercises, other than quieting down before the back-and-forth between her mother and Luke and suggesting (to the mother, not Luke) that they should not be wasting their time fighting about “nothing” (THT, p. 131). She seems to be “postfeminist” only in the sense described by Andi Zeisler (2016, location 1612), as part of a narrative that “assures women that feminism has granted them the power and the freedom to be whatever they want to be”; thus, in her complacency about the country’s political life and in her apathy towards the larger social context in which she was inserted.

Offred’s issue seems to be ultimately much more with her mother as an individual than her mother as an activist. Morrison (2000, p. 316) suggests that Atwood’s text is connected with a larger tradition of writing by women in the nineteenth century described by Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989): in this tradition, “a strong antagonism” to the figure of the mother can be found. For both Hirsch and Morrison, many modernist and postmodernist texts attempt to centralize the mother-daughter relationship in order to “displace the narrative of heterosexual romance”, but this is done unsuccessfully insofar as the mother remains the “dreaded other” for the daughter (HIRSCH, 1989, p. 136 apud MORRISON, 2000, p. 316). Morrison, then, proposes that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an example of a novel that manages to unite the romance plot and an exploration of “motherhood, mothering, and the bond between women” and, in doing so, is successful in moving beyond romance as it *exploits* rather than attacks the romance plot (p. 317). We can compare Offred’s stances about her mother and Luke in the same chapter, chapter twenty-eight, which at last explores how America turned into Gilead. She says about her mother:

You were a wanted child, God knows, she would say at other moments [...]. She would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn’t turned out entirely as she’d expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn’t do badly by one another, we did as well as most.
I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this (THT, p. 190).

When thinking about her mother, after all the years without seeing her, Offred concludes that the relationship between the two was, in fact, not that different from most people's relationships with their parents. She might have expected, as a young girl, a different life with her mother, which would be more like the lives of others, but in the end she realizes that she had it: that she, like every other child, could never be exactly what a parent wanted; that her mother, like every other parent, could not be exactly what she wanted. The fact that she declares that she wishes she could tell her mother she *finally* knew it shows that she learned something about her mother, and about her relationship with her mother, in her absence. Furthermore, for her mother, unlike for Luke, there is a definitive answer about what happened: in chapter thirty-nine, Moira tells Offred that she saw the mother in a video about life in the Colonies. When it comes to Luke, however, there is no such certainty, either about his fate or about how she feels towards him:

He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his.
Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But that is what happened.
So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you (p. 191-192).

For Morrison, this lack of resolution is equally true for all of Offred's relationships with men—especially, in her analysis, those with the Commander and Nick, with whom Offred “tries to impose a romance plot” (2000, p. 315). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, she argues, “the most marked sign of growth or development on the part of Offred is her changed view of her mother and her reassessment of their relationship” (MORRISON, 2000, p. 323). The closure that Atwood gives to this plot while neglecting the romantic one “suggests this is where the most profound meaning [of the novel] is to be found” (ibid).

In the complex web of thoughts that is Offred's mind put on tape, a similar ambiguity to that felt about her mother can be seen in the way she feels about America—about the larger context in which she grew up that ended up being supplanted by an authoritarian theocracy. “I want her back”, she says about her mother; “I want everything back, the way it was”, she says about her former life (THT, p. 132). Compared to her circumstances in Gilead, the life she had in America was almost utopic. Yet Offred is also aware of how flawed the society she lived in was, and she is especially aware of its dangers for women:

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night (p. 34).

Gilead's powerful elite is extremely aware of how dangerous our society can be to women, in a plethora of ways, and this is used by the regime in order to make their own design appealing: thus, says Aunt Lydia to the Handmaids at the Red Centre, the new regime might have reduced their *freedom to*, but, in exchange, it gave them *freedom from*. Ironically, there is no actual freedom from the threat of sexual violence in Gilead; perhaps from strangers on the street, but the entire credo of the regime is based on the idea that the country can be repopulated by the systematic rape of fertile women who are unworthy of anything else because they are sinners. Offred claims that the concept of rape does not cover what happens to her every month during the Ceremony because she had *some choice* (p. 105). But if saying yes to the Ceremony is her only chance of actual survival, this is not a real choice, and this cannot be understood as consent. The Commander, her rapist, adopts a similar discourse, simultaneously distilling misogynistic ideas and highlighting very real social problems in America that are starkly marked by gender divisions:

Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. [...] This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paycheques. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers (p. 231).

The Commander is not incorrect in pointing out the *human misery* involved in women starving or submitting themselves to unnecessary surgical procedures to fulfill an ever-changing, ever-expanding set of unrealistic beauty standards. In fact, in *The Beauty Myth*, which would be published a few years after Atwood's novel in 1991 and is often considered to be one of the inaugural texts of feminism's third wave, Naomi Wolf explores such a scenario, suggesting that such images of female beauty were used to control women socially, politically and even economically after second-wave feminism had contributed for the arrival of a new, liberated generation of women. But to suggest that in Gilead every woman had her own man,

as if this were somehow a solution, is both myopic and absurd. For Wolf (2010, p. 49), “the myth is political and not sexual [...]. Low female self-esteem may have a sexual value to some individual men, but it has a financial value to all of society. Women’s poor physical self-image today is far less a result of sexual competition than of the needs of the marketplace”. The myth, for Wolf, exists and is sustained primarily for economic reasons—to make sure that women, as a large group, remain undervalued, underpaid and under control.

Furthermore, the Commander also correctly highlights that, because “money was the only measure of worth” under our economic system, motherhood (but *not* fatherhood, we should notice) is often treated as a burden. His discussion adopts, however, many of the “myths of the backlash” that Faludi (2006, p. 19-20) explores as the “fundamental arguments” supporting the great 1980s case against the women’s movement: he appeals, for instance, to the idea of a “man shortage” (FALUDI, 2006, p. 25) leaving plenty of women unmarried and thus, unhappy—the alleged “great female depression” (p. 50)—or, on the other hand, to the notion of “daycare demons” (p. 56) destroying children who were abandoned by their working mothers. Rather than imagining a radical reform of the system that sought to correct inequality and injustice, his utopic project—for he does believe he was trying to make the world better (THT, p. 222)—adopts the same underlining rhetoric of the backlash: that the woman’s place is in the home and that motherhood is a woman’s “biological destiny” (p. 131); taking such logic to an extreme, under Gilead women are prohibited from every activity other than to bear children (Handmaids), care for them (Wives), care for the house (Marthas) or, if unable to fit into the space of the home, enforced prostitution to fulfill men’s sexual desires (Jezebel’s) or, ultimately, exile and death (Unwomen).

While the Commander’s approach to these issues is obviously atrocious and his analysis is built on ideas that are at the very least statistically questionable (for Faludi, they are simply untrue), the issues are, indeed, issues. And as Offred herself admits when she discusses the prevalence of gender-based violence in the time before, these urgent issues were often ignored (p. 66). Her surroundings were filled with acts of extreme violence practiced by men against women which Offred would only read about in the newspapers, and then ignore because they did not affect her personally. By recognizing her willed ignorance in the time that preceded the coup, Offred recognizes that “nothing changes instantaneously” (ibid)—what happened to America would only be a surprise to those who had not been paying attention; the state that society was in was not being hidden, it was just that putting on a set of blinders and pretending

not to see was both easier and more comfortable, because being truly politically engaged demands plenty of work. Atwood's 1981 novel *Bodily Harm*, which preceded *The Handmaid's Tale*, follows a Canadian journalist who, upon visiting a Caribbean island to do lifestyle reporting, finds herself in the middle of a civil war. Though not a dystopia and offering no futuristic vision for Canada's *aggressive southern neighbor*, *Bodily Harm* is still intricately connected to the themes that Atwood writes about in her following novel, most of all because it centralizes a woman who attempts to detach herself from a larger political existence, but ultimately realizes that "she is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 280). These words could also describe Offred's growing consciousness facing both America and Gilead, and Macpherson (2010, p. 74) describes *Bodily Harm* as a product of Atwood's "growing politicization" and of her involvement with human rights activism.

The reality presented by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, like the voice of the woman she chooses to narrate its transformation, is multifaceted and complex. Yet the novel does not suggest that staying on the fence when it comes to the issues presented is the correct way of proceeding, even if the side to be taken is inevitably going to be imperfect. Because such imperfection seems inescapable, the choices are made difficult. But this difficulty does not deny the fact that no one is ever exempt of anything, as *Bodily Harm's* Rennie finally understands in a prison cell in the Caribbean. To live by ignoring, as Offred and her peers did, is no way out. Not only Offred but an entire nation becomes so apathetic that, when the Constitution is suspended, people simply did not know how to react, and expected the television to tell them what to do next (p. 183). Once the women lose all their possessions, there are, finally, marches, but they were less numerous than one might have expected, Offred tells us. Even more, by then it was too late, because power had already been seized. In this vision of America, it was already too late for action, and Offred at last realizes her own role in what happened—but the fact that she arrives at such a conclusion as she narrates demonstrates how far she has come from whom she used to be before Gilead.

2.1.2 Offred in Gilead

As an author, Margaret Atwood has always had a significant interest in exploring her home country, Canada, and what it means to be Canadian. David Staines (2006, p. 43) proposes that she initially set out to "forge an identity as a Canadian writer, something almost unique in the Canadian scene", and Eleanora Rao (2006, p. 143) looks at her later fiction, beginning in

the early 1990s, as a “postnationalist phase”, problematizing the idea of a national Canadian identity and the exclusions and oppressions which national discourses entail. Most of Atwood’s novels are set in Canada and have Canadians as protagonists. Significantly, however, her dystopias *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the later *Oryx and Crake* (2003) are set in imagined future versions of the United States rather than her home country. It seems to have left a great impression on Atwood, who took her postgraduate studies in Massachusetts, to learn from her professor Perry Miller (one of the two people to whom *Handmaid’s* is dedicated) that, contrary to what she had learnt growing up, the Puritans left England not in search of religious tolerance, but only the freedom to practice their own religion without allowing others to do the same (ATWOOD, 2009a). This Puritan origin of America, with the religious persecution and witch trials it brought along, was an important aspect of the rationale behind Atwood’s choice of design for a possible dystopian future for the country; according to her, “nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren’t there already” (ATWOOD, 2018).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Gilead appears *in substitution* for America: it suspends its two-hundred-year-old Constitution, its political system, its national symbols, even its name, and it does so without facing significant resistance, even though the United States are known as a particularly patriotic country. Eric Hobsbawm, exploring how national traditions are invented, suggests that once secession had been left behind, the United States had a basic issue to solve: it had to assimilate a “heterogeneous mass [...] of people who were Americans not by birth but by immigration. Americans had to be made. The invented traditions of the U.S.A in this period were primarily designed to achieve this object” (1983, p. 279). Immigrants were encouraged to share in the rituals that celebrated the nation—Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day—, made into national holidays, and the educational system in particular was “transformed into a machine for political socialization by such devices as the worship of the American flag, which, as a daily ritual in the country’s schools, spread from the 1880s onwards” (HOBBSAWM, 1983, p. 280)—and, in fact, remains a reality in the vast majority of American states. All this Gilead must substitute with its own religious credo, for which several new ceremonies, rituals and public demonstrations are designed. Atwood believes this would be possible because for her

the deep foundation of the United States—so went my thinking—was not the comparatively recent 18th-century Enlightenment structures of the Republic, with their talk of equality and their separation of Church and State, but the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England—with its marked bias against

women—which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself (ATWOOD, 2018).

For Atwood, then, it appears that the “one Nation under God” section of the Pledge of Allegiance would resonate more forcefully than the subsequent “with liberty and justice for all”—especially in a period of social chaos, as she puts it, in which, according to Offred’s narration, people were to be found “looking for some direction” (THT, p. 183). In this dystopian scenario built over Puritan roots, Handmaids are demanded to make a sacrifice that is required of no one else, involving a private violation that is very specific to women; thus, the Aunts at the Red Centre—their indoctrinators—are particularly emphatic when trying to instill in them the idea of a harmonic state of cooperation between all women:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we’ll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task (THT, p. 171-172).

In his book *Imagined Communities*, which sets out to explore nationality (or, in his terms, *nation-ness*) and nationalism, Benedict Anderson proposes that a nation is an *imagined political community*: imagined, because no member knows every other member, even though all imagine themselves as existing collectively in communion; imagined as a community, “because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (ANDERSON, 1991, p. 7). In Gilead, Aunt Lydia insists that their *community* will be much better for future generations, once their goals are truly achieved—women, for instance, will never need to accumulate functions again: the task of being a wife and mother will be left for the Wives; the task of keeping the house in order will be left for the Marthas; the task of bearing children will be left for the Handmaids (no word is said, in the official discourse, of the “Econowives”, the poorer women who are made to wear colorful stripes representing their accumulated tasks—a possibility that Handmaids might likely prefer). There is a particular emphasis, in her discourse, on the notion of a “deep, horizontal

comradeship”, to use Anderson’s words, when she insists that Gilead’s vision for the future involves “women united for a common end”.

When Offred is required to participate in one of Gilead’s many rituals, the Birth Day, she, despite herself, is unable to resist the feeling of *camaraderie* with the other Handmaids and, as the birth takes place, Offred no longer uses “I”, but “we”: “Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy” (THT, p. 136). But the Offred who narrates is also painfully aware of how she is being manipulated by the regime, which ultimately makes the Handmaids who have *not* conceived a baby for the nation experience a deep feeling of failure in an attempt to make them more willing to sacrifice their lot for the greater good. This self-awareness on her part when she examines the narrated events demonstrates that, as it is explored by Ferns (1999, p. 132), “there is no battle between competing discourses to be fought out within her mind”. Offred’s *we* is never the same as D-503’s *we*, who truly believes that he is barely an “I” rather than simply an insignificant portion of a “we”, so much so that he declares he will record not “what I think” but what “we think” (ZAMYATIN, 2007, p. 4). D-503 is tormented throughout the novel by the notion that he has developed a soul or, in his own words, a sickness. It is painful, for him, to go through the process of rejecting the official discourse and committing to I-330 and the resistance. While Offred is candid about the regime’s success in manipulating her during the Birth Day, those feelings that grow inside her do not last. Furthermore, the superficial camaraderie between all women that Aunt Lydia would like them to form as Handmaids, Wives and Marthas remain disunited, does not exist at all, as we can see in Offred’s imaginings of the Wives having conversation during the Birth Day:

Such a, so well behaved, not surly like some of them, do their job and that’s that. More like a daughter to you, as you might say. One of the family. Comfortable matronly chuckles. That’s all dear, you can go back to your room.
And after she’s gone: Little whores, all of them, but still, you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls? That from the Commander’s Wife (THT, p. 125).

Still, Offred herself admits, when she first introduces the reader to Serena Joy, her Commander’s wife, that she was disappointed when she realized how distantly Serena would treat her. Offred tells the reader that she wanted Serena to be, for her, “an older sister, a motherly figure” (p. 26). She tells us that she longs for the kind of silly conversation that she had despised in the time before—it is clear that, if given a chance, she would like to bond with the house’s two Marthas, Rita and Cora. Offred’s loneliness is extreme and, as she puts it, there is no one

in the household for her to love—importantly, she declares that “it’s lack of love we die from” (p. 113).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that she would, once in the house, attempt to “impose a romance plot” with the Commander or Nick, as Morrison (2000, p. 315) suggests she does. To claim that Offred might have tried to impose a romantic narrative with the Commander is a more controversial point than stating that she does so with Nick—and, indeed, her narration treats the two figures differently—, but she undeniably has complex feelings about the former, which she is also candid about. Perhaps no other moment is so significant as when he takes her to Jezebel’s and expects her to have sex with him in one of the hotel rooms—it is the first time they engage in any kind of sexual activity outside of the monthly Ceremony, which for Offred is neither rape nor copulating “because [the latter] would imply two people and only one is involved” (p. 105); in these moments, Offred chooses to detach her mind from the “lower part of [her] body” (p. 104), as if nothing was actually happening to *her*. Once in the hotel room, she declares to the reader that she would prefer not to lie down next to him in bed, that she would rather have Serena there as well, that she would rather play Scrabble as they did in his office. Yet she forces herself to remember that “he is not an unkind man” (p. 266). She reminds herself that *he is no monster*, and, indeed, he does not seem like one, especially not in the way she portrays him. But her situation is also his doing, he is a man in power and not just any man forced into this bizarre system which might be worse for women, especially for some women like Offred or her mother or Moira, but is also not easy on Luke, the men who end up on the wall and perhaps even Nick, whose true status is ultimately unknown, but whom Mohr (2005, p. 251) describes as a man that “initially functions as a Handmaid/prostitute”. Supposing Nick to be officially powerless, despite all his whistling and winking, could *he* say no to Serena Joy’s proposal to impregnate Offred and still survive? The narrative never provides a definitive answer.

The Commander is, in Offred’s portrait of him, more ridiculous than fear-inducing or aversive; often he seems almost sad or pathetic in his desires and childish behaviors. Offred knows that she “ought to feel hatred for this man” (THT, p. 68), and yet she does not, and neither does she pretend to. She finds different metaphors to describe what he looks like, none of them monstrous, as he often appears, in her narration, to be confused, embarrassed, maybe bored, somewhat fragile in the way he needs, *please*, for someone to give him a glass of water before he can commence the Bible-reading that precedes the Ceremony—and this reading is

something else she does not think he is particularly good at. Before the Ceremony, he looks like a “semi-retired man”, a “midwestern bank president”, a “vodka ad”, a “shoemaker in an old fairytale book”, he “manages to appear puzzled” (p. 97-98). Once she goes to his office for the first time, before she knows what he wants is to play Scrabble, he looks “puzzled” once again, he is in a “studied pose”, he smiles and “the smile is not sinister or predatory”, he looks “embarrassed, *sheepish*” when he finally tells her what he wants (p. 147-148). Before she leaves, they open the door slightly to check whether there is anyone outside, and for Offred “this is like being on a date” (ibid).

As their illicit meetings in his office continue—and the activities expand to include him watching her read old women’s magazines, discussions about Latin and him asking her opinion of Gilead—this relationship becomes even more nuanced. Offred highlights that there is a “sadness” in him as he shows her the old magazine, telling her there was no one else he could share it with; it was “too banal to be true” that he, too, should say that his wife could not understand him (p. 166). She is self-aware, but “stupidly enough”, she is happier as his mistress than she was before (p. 172). But she never forgets that she must be guarded with him, in her behaviors and especially in the way she speaks: he asks for her opinion, but she knows that she is safer as long as she claims to have none. As he shares *his* opinions about the many ways in which Gilead is much better for women than America was—for now they were allowed to fulfill their “biological destinies” in peace (p. 232)—, Offred’s narration is entirely jumbled. It goes from the Women’s Prayvaganza (a group wedding), another of Gilead’s many rituals, to her discussions with the Commander, to Aunt Lydia’s indoctrination at the Red Centre. As the Commander claims that they simply returned human life to nature’s norm, Offred’s narration goes back to the Prayvaganza, where former nuns are forced to become Handmaids and teenagers are given to Gilead’s adult soldiers as wives, as a gift to thank them for their services. There is not much direct judgment on Offred’s part here, but the mere concatenation of events speaks for itself.

Ultimately, however, the lasting image of the Commander is the one in the hotel room at Jezebel’s: the “little belly” that “sadly” lies under his shirt; the look on his face, “dismayed and no doubt disappointed” when she agrees that maybe they should turn off the lights; him looking “smaller, older, like something being dried” (p. 266-267). Critics often analyze the figure of the Commander—or the Commanders in general—against a larger dystopian background: for Ferns (1999, p. 132-133), unlike Mustapha Mond, a “suave” man, or O’Brien,

a “brutal” one, the Commander tends to be ridiculous. For Malak (1997, p. 12), the figure of the Commander is “more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool”; Malak also emphasizes that he too is caught, like the women he oppresses, in the dichotomy between individual desires and social necessities—he tells Offred, for instance, that he finds the Ceremony too “impersonal” (THT, p. 171). Feuer (1997) describes the Commander as an “unknowing victim of the society he has helped to create, robbed of his choices in the process of robbing others of theirs” (p. 87), and links authority figures such as O’Brien, Mustapha Mond and the Benefactor not to the Commanders, but to Aunt Lydia, as they are all figures responsible for offering the protagonists the choice between happiness or freedom, which become mutually exclusive. That the Commander too is, in the end, a victim of the system he himself supports, is something that does not escape Offred as she narrates the first Ceremony: “This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty” (THT, p. 105).

However, Offred remains self-aware when it comes to the Commander. Following their first Scrabble session, the one that she describes as being almost like a date, she delves into another childhood memory, not of something that she had experienced, but that she had seen on the television: it was a documentary about World War Two, and one of the interviewees was a woman who used to be the mistress of a concentration camp supervisor. The woman has said that her lover was not a monster, and Offred completes her thought process for the reader: “he was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, off key, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak. How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone, at all” (p. 155). It is such an easy temptation to do this, she says, so that we can keep on living with ourselves. Once again, it is not ignorance on her part that we witness, but *ignoring*, by choice, all sorts of horrors for one’s own survival.

When it comes to Nick, her views about what she is doing are perhaps less confused (although not without nuance), but the relationship is still a challenging one for the reader to interpret. Nick and Offred barely ever talk and the reader gets to know about him even less than about the Commander or Luke. As we are first introduced to him, what Offred highlights is that, while he is low rank, he is also “too casual”, “not servile enough” (p. 27). Offred abides by the rules as he ignores them, whistling and winking. When the first Ceremony is completed, it is the first time she admits that she desires Nick, at the same time that she justifies herself to

Luke, as she will often do, since her marriage never really ended. Though she has not seen Luke in years by the time she is sent to the Commander's house, that relationship never had any closure and Offred, in this aspect too, is in a state of suspension.

Offred only goes to Nick because Serena Joy tells her to; since her time as "Of Fred" was coming to an end and this was her third posting, she would soon become discardable to Gilead, and thus Serena suggests that they should try a pregnancy from another man. Importantly, as much as Offred might have desired Nick before they had sex, it does not happen due to any courageous impulse on her part, but only because of Serena's arrangement. Once Offred gets there, the narration offers little to help the reader understand Nick better, as their conversation is either blunt to the point of being "brutal" (p. 273) or merely a performance, emulating the dialogues of old movies. But while Nick tells her that they should agree on "no romance"—which, Offred explains, means "don't risk yourself for me, if it should come to that" (p. 274)—, this is something that, as everything indicates, he himself does not follow through by the end of the novel as he arranges for her to escape. Furthermore, while the first time might have been arranged by Serena, Offred chooses to go back to him repeatedly. Once there, she shares with him (but not us) her name, something which she had previously said she kept as a "treasure" (p. 94). He did not talk much, she says, and neither of them ever said the word love, because "it would be tempting fate; it would be romance, bad luck" (p. 282). But Offred, by the time she narrates, does say it: she tells the reader she has to write and re-write different versions of what happened the first time because "the way love feels is always only approximate" (p. 275), not translatable in language. It finally becomes romance, it seems, when Nick tells her to trust him and go with the men who came to get her—we do not know her fate, but we *do* know she gets to record her story and immortalize her voice for the future.

It would be impossible to see this relationship outside of the paradoxical functions it has in the novel, since it simultaneously takes Offred outside of Gilead's rule *and* leads her back to a state of passivity towards that same reality, leading her to definitively shut down Ofglen's attempts to get her involved in Mayday. Yet, despite all the passivity, the shame, the relief rather than regret she experiences when she realizes that Ofglen is losing hope in her, it is also this relationship that offers her, as pointed out by Foley (1990), the best chance of escaping Gilead's control, which allows her to tell her story—for so many critics, her most heroic action. Some critics, like Weiss (2009), see this relationship through the same lenses that are used to analyze Winston and Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, D-503 and I-330 in *We*, and Bernard, John

and Lenina in *Brave New World*. These men enter “half-hearted, often libido-engendered rebellions” (WEISS, 2009, p. 5) which they ultimately abandon. Julia and I-330 are both part of the rebellious groups existing in each novel—a real rebellion in I-330’s case, to which she remains loyal up until her end, a false one in Julia’s, who was not particularly interested in any resistance movement before Winston; the romantic involvement of the male protagonists of both narratives also lead them to rebel on a political level, beyond the realm of the sexual. Weiss suggests that

dystopian heroes become involved in such relationships for other than purely political reasons. While the act itself may be subversive, it does not involve or lead to any real challenge to the State. Indeed, it may have the opposite effect, reinforcing a character’s fatalism (as in the case of Winston Smith) or romanticism (as in the cases of Bernard Marx and John). As for Offred, there is evidence that her affair is conducted with the tacit approval of at least one of her superiors, Serena Joy, so that she can become pregnant at last (WEISS, 2009, p. 6).

I think it is misguided, however, to look at what happens to Offred as a continuation of the tradition without any modulation. Atwoodian scholars such as Howells and Macpherson usually emphasize that Atwood often takes on the challenge of adopting certain genres, but her stance towards them is always transformative, and this is what happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision”, Adrienne Rich suggests that the woman writer cannot do away with what she perceives as a masculine literary tradition, but must invest herself in an act of “re-visioning” it:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh (RICH, 1972, p. 18).

Rich suggests that the woman writer must know “the writing of the past” not in order to “pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (p. 19). Atwood has addressed, in her discussions about her own writing, the masculine point of view of most dystopias, where women are present only to tempt the male protagonist (ATWOOD, 2009b), a logic that she undoes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Offred’s experiences in Gilead are not so easily comparable

to those of Winston, D-503, Bernard and John, because the Gileadean dystopia puts her biological sex and her body's biological functions at the very center. As highlighted by Mohr (2005, p. 36), while women dystopian writers do use "the stock conventions" of the genre, these writers usually "refocus these to expose their interrelation with questions of gender hierarchy, biological reproduction and women's rights; in short, with sexual politics".

Offred does not believe herself to be rebellious because of her relationship with Nick—on the contrary, she knows that the seriousness she appends to the relationship might be no more than a rhetorical device used for her own benefit, to justify what she is doing and her renewed refusal to engage with Mayday. Nick does not invite her into rebellion, either—we do not truly know, and neither does Offred, whether he is part of Mayday or an Eye. Instead, Offred is invited into Mayday by someone else, a fellow woman and Handmaid. Most important of all, however, is the situation she finds herself in; neither Winston, nor D-503, nor Bernard or John are in the exact same shoes she is. In the world of Oceania pleasure is banished, while in the worlds of the One State and the World State it is encouraged, as long as it does not entail personal and emotional attachments. Both strategies are certainly dehumanizing. But Gilead, while denying Offred *both* forms of attachment, directly exploits her body and its biological functions in a way that makes of her something akin to a breeding animal. The primary site of the dystopia for her, as a Handmaid, is her own body. The same is not true for every oppressed person in Gilead, but Atwood chooses to give voice to a Handmaid, and not to anyone else. By recognizing that she has desires and feelings that are her own and acting upon them, Offred reinstates her status as human. True, that does not make a revolutionary of her, but it cannot be so easily dismissed either, especially because Atwood chooses to finish the narrative in a way that, while denying the romance plot its conventional happy ending, does most explicitly not end in mutual betrayal, execution, lobotomy, suicide, or exile, as it happens with Winston and Julia, I-330, D-530, John, and Bernard, respectively. Instead, the action is cut short "on the verge of new possibilities" (HOWELLS, 1996, p. 10), neither confirmed nor denied—but it also ends with Offred taking the next step: narrating.

Apart from the relationship with Nick, Offred does not take much more action against either Gilead's rules or her superiors; mostly, what she does is witness the attempts of others. In her narration, what Offred often does is contradict Gilead's use of alleged Biblical texts, which she knows to be altered—similar enough to the actual text to appear true, but adding or removing whatever is not convenient: "*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom*

of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (THT, p. 100). She never contradicts it out loud because even if she dared to, it would be her voice against Gilead’s, as none of them could have access to a Bible—that, too, would be a sin. Such retrospective corrections of Gilead’s lies perfectly exemplify Offred’s form of rebellion: it lies not in her actions in Gilead, but in her act of recording her story for posterity or for others who might hear her and be inspired by her growing consciousness of her past wrongs and the possibilities language offers to those who are brave enough to take it and use it. Offred is not brave enough to contradict the Aunts when they deliberately alter what for them is supposed to be a sacred text; she also finds it safer to say that she has “no opinion” about Gilead when the Commander asks her. But to take such actions completely by herself would probably simply have her sent to the Colonies to clean up toxic waste or executed and hanged on the Wall for public display—they would be yet another example of unsuccessful individual gestures of rebellion, so common in the dystopian tradition, rather than collective action.

Yet Offred, when given the chance by Ofglen to actively participate in Mayday, is, for the most part, ambivalent. Tentatively, after learning about the resistance, she attempts to know more than she did before; realizing that she has at least some power to bargain with the Commander because he would prefer her life to be bearable (so she does not commit suicide like his former Handmaid did), she tells him that she would like to know what is going on. But her affair with Nick and the comfort she takes in it lead her back to absolute inaction. According to Macpherson (2010, p. 87), “for Offred, knowledge that a resistance movement is out there is enough—she does not pursue direct contact with it. To some extent, she even resists it, especially once she falls in love with Nick and stops giving Ofglen the information she wants”.

Offred’s lack of direct action against the regime, her relief once Ofglen loses hope in her participation in Mayday, and her choice of reading her relationship with Nick as ultimately romantic are elements in the narrative that support Macpherson’s proposal that “Atwood characterizes Offred in this way in order to reinforce her non-heroic status, her everywoman position, her failure and her fears. Yet despite her passivity, Offred continues with her story and imagines a future audience” (2010, p. 87). The idea that Offred represents an *everywoman* is a constant within the reception of the novel, as Offred is neither particularly courageous nor noble in her own presentation of herself in the time narrated. This does not mean, however, that we must understand her in a purely negative way: her rejection of Gilead’s credo, her resilience,

her unceasing will to survive, her slight manipulations of the Commander to gather information, her sexual reawakening and, above all, her commitment to sharing her individual story and her acknowledgement of her own role in allowing a society such as Gilead are significant, and meaningful, features of her characterization as a woman enduring the horrors of a dystopian reality in Gilead.

2.1.3 Offred's tale as a historical artifact: Nunavit, 2195

As it has been stated before in this thesis, *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with a section titled "Historical Notes", composed of a single chapter, "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*", which, at first sight, might look like an author's paratext rather than part of the novel. When the reader gets to the text, however, it soon becomes clear that the Historical Notes are also part of the storyworld, though not of *Offred's* narrative: they are a transcript of a fictional lecture delivered during a Symposium on Gileadean Studies taking place in 2195, very far into the future. It is not completely clear where the Symposium takes place, since "The University of Denay, Nunavit" is also a fictional creation, but Howells (1996, p. 145-146) indicates that this world is clearly post-Gilead and might be post-Canada (as we know it) as well. Howells situates the Symposium in Arctic Canada, pointing out that the Dené are a group of First Nations people living in Alberta, while Nunavut is the name of an area in the Arctic "which [would] become in the last year of the twentieth century the first aboriginal self-governing territory in Canada" (Nunavut is now, in 2020, the newest Canadian territory, populated by a vast majority of Indigenous Canadians). Howells also points to the names of the local professors, Maryann Crescent Moon and Johnny Running Dog, as indicating that they are Native Persons.

Although "Denay Nunavit" points to specifically Canadian groups and (imagined or, now, concretized) territories, Howells highlights that it is also a pun: *to deny none of it*, "a piece of authorial advice to the reader to believe Offred's story, no matter what interpretations or misinterpretations might be offered in the Historical Notes" (1996, p. 146). Furthermore, Davidson (2000, p. 26) highlights that professor Crescent Moon is part of a Department of Caucasian Anthropology, which "reverses the usual hierarchies—who is studied, who studies", but that what we also see is that hierarchies themselves are still in place in the institutions that have always embodied them. This is further complicated by the fact that although Crescent Moon is the Chair at the Symposium, it soon becomes clear that this does not mean that the future in 2195 is a more egalitarian one: the real voice to be listened to here is not hers, but

Pieixoto's, a male professor from the (European) University of Cambridge. Furthermore, his sexist and xenophobic discourse goes uncontested by the audience, who often laughs and applauds as he speaks. In this context, "Denay Nunavit" is also partially an authorial tip for readers, facing "misinterpretations [that] are offered in what turns out to be a ferocious satiric thrust at male academic historians" (HOWELLS, 1996, p. 146). As it has been discussed before in section 1.3.2, Pieixoto's discourse can be understood as an example of *how not to read* Offred's tale, as he is completely incapable of empathizing with her plight and dismisses the value of the tale, which he considers to be filled with unimportant details and lacking relevant information for historical research (cf. HOGSETTE, 1997; STAELS, 1995; MORRISON, 2000; GULICK, 1991; HOWELLS, 1996).

In Pieixoto's discourse, Offred, Maryann Crescent Moon and everyone involved in the efforts to remove Handmaids—enslaved women—from Gilead must be subject to sexist remarks, packaged as "jokes". The female professor, his colleague, must endure being referred to as "the charming Arctic Chair", to be (literally) compared to a piece of meat—the "Arctic Char"—on a plate, both of which are to be "enjoyed" (THT, p. 312). *The Handmaid's Tale*, we find out, the title that his colleague professor Wade appended to the manuscript, was only partially a reference to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; Pieixoto declares he was sure "all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*" (p. 313). This puerile remark, which reminds the reader of the Commander's schoolboy years laughing at nonsense Latin-sounding phrases such as "*pimus pistis pants*" (p. 197), is received, according to the transcript, with both *laughter* and *applause*. The Underground Femaleroad is referred to by the professor as being "dubbed by some of our historical wags 'The Underground Frailroad'" (p. 313).

In the same paragraph in which he complains about the lack of personal identifiers in Offred's text, Pieixoto reminds his audience that this Handmaid who recorded her experiences "was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (p. 317). He is only interested, in fact, in the most basic human aspect of this narrator—who she was—insofar as it might help in authenticating the "item", for which he insists he must "hesitate to use the word *document*" (p. 313). Instead of appreciating the richness of detail provided by Offred about what it felt like to be a Handmaid in Gilead, the historian laments that she did not have "the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (p. 322) or that they could not have access to the Commander's computer rather than this gap-filled "item" instead. Of

Nick's motivations to get Offred out of Gilead—if that was what happened—Pieixoto offers his own guesswork. It might have been that he was in jeopardy once Ofglen's connection with Mayday was discovered, for Offred would be interrogated and might implicate him (his affair with a Handmaid being illegal). Pieixoto suggests that Nick could have “assassinated her himself, which might have been the wiser course, but the human heart remains a factor, and, as we know, both of them thought she might be pregnant by him” (p. 323). Rather than accepting as a valid possibility that Nick might have felt any sort of emotional attachment to Offred, however, Pieixoto wonders “what male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?” (ibid). Nothing in the text actually disproves this suggestion—other than perhaps Nick's apparent dismissal of Gilead's self-serious rituals—because we know very little of Nick, and Offred, in her narration, reveals that she too knew very little about him. But we are also led to wonder what status would be obtained by impregnating a Handmaid, an illegal act that could never be recognized without being criminalized. Most dismaying of all is his suggestion that to have Offred killed might have been the wisest choice. It is, after all, a completely dehumanizing discourse towards Offred, just as Gilead's credo and social system are.

As Pieixoto wonders about the fate of the narrator, he conjectures that the reason why she never made her story public (if she managed to fully escape Gilead) might have been her fear of retaliation against either Luke, had he been alive, or her daughter, whom she knew to be alive, “for the Gileadean regime was not above such measures” (p. 323), not even against a child. It is of this reality that the professor says they must *not censure but understand*. As many critics have suggested, the contrasting of Offred's narration and Pieixoto's lecture deauthorizes *Pieixoto*, the educated specialist from a most reputable university, rather than Offred, since in the text it is Pieixoto who occupies the margins rather than the center and whose views are secondary to those of the Handmaid. In doing so, Atwood, who is no stranger to academia, makes us, the academics who read her novel, ask ourselves whether we too might not have a role in turning a blind eye to the horrors perpetrated around us and, even more, might actively contribute to “the dehumanization of society” (DAVIDSON, 2000, p. 22-23). Rather than suggesting there will never be an escape from sexism, racism, and xenophobia, Atwood seems to be asking the reader to be even more attentive to his or her surroundings. After all, Atwood is not a prophet, and dystopia is not really about the future. Pieixoto is in the novel for the same reason the Sons of Jacob are: to ask us to reexamine our society.

A particularly important aspect of this *warning* by Atwood, which is composed of both the Handmaid's narration and the Academic symposium, has to do with the ways in which the novel is organized, which only in its last pages reveals to us the true nature of the tale as a retrospective narrative. It is to these aspects that I turn in the next section, which explores the narrative inconsistencies that this late disclosure of central information creates, as well as the possible reasons for that creative choice on Atwood's part.

2.2 The implied author and the narrator: the role of narrative inconsistencies in *The Handmaid's Tale*

As I have established in the previous sections, there is an important distance between what Offred's narrative voice establishes as the present and the (presumed) narrating time. While her narration makes the reader believe that she is telling this story in her head as she goes along (THT, p. 49), the narrative is, in reality, not providing access to her consciousness. This is not to say that Offred is necessarily lying—she might be referring, when she narrates this specific section from memory, to her act of narrativizing her experiences in her own mind as she, in fact, goes along; the narrativization itself, then, would also be a memory that she recollects. But as the reader does not yet possess all the information regarding the nature of her narration at this point, initially it appears that Offred refers to the narrative that the reader is reading. This hypothesis is important, and it does not become irrelevant once the reader gets to the Historical Notes and understands that Atwood has given Offred's narration a materiality within the storyworld. Meir Sternberg (1978) highlights that a literary text is necessarily apprehended *over time*, as its signs cannot appear simultaneously, only subsequently. For Sternberg, if it is true that the work can only be comprehended in its entirety once the reader reaches the end, it is also true that the reader, as he or she reads, will continually construct new hypotheses about the work based on the information available at any specific time. These hypotheses might have to be subsequently corrected or discarded as the reading process continues, but they are not rendered irrelevant:

even ultimately rejected hypotheses form an integral part of the meaning, structure, and whole reading experience of the work if it can be demonstrated, as it very often can, that the reader was meant to reach a certain erroneous hypothesis at this or that point. The meaning of a literary work, on all its levels, is not confined to the fully warrantable conclusions we reach at the terminus, but is made up of the sum-total of expectations and effects, trial and error included, produced throughout the eventful, tortuous journey (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 70-71).

By the end of the novel, the reader is presented with new information regarding Offred's narration. But the force of Offred's present-tense narration is so strong that professor Pieixoto himself feels the need to discuss the nature of the narrative and attempts to make sense of her narrating style, suggesting that it has a "certain reflective quality", which would rule out synchronicity (THT, p. 315). However, Morrison (2000, p. 321) correctly points out that "almost no isolated portions of Offred's narrative read like an after-the-fact account delivered by someone who is looking back upon an ordeal she has survived". While Offred's narration is ripe with details about either life in Gilead or life in America, nothing about the Femaleroad (if that is where she is narrating from, as we are led to believe she might be) ever makes it into the text. Morrison suggests that the clash between the narrator's present and the narrator's voice does create an inconsistency, but in her reading Atwood "is merely willing to implicate her heroine and incur narrative inconsistencies in order to exploit to the fullest the power of the romance plot" (ibid); in her reading, it is this romance plot that provides the "linear impetus" (p. 319) in Offred's story and makes the reader expect some sort of closure.

While Sternberg and Yacobi's discussion of narrative (un)reliability (2015) is not a source for Morrison's analysis, essential ideas that she refers to, such as *narrative inconsistencies* and *suspense*, are also central in their thesis, which offers an interesting framework for the interpretation of Offred's narrative voice and Atwood's creative choices in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Firstly, we should clarify what we refer to by mentioning Margaret Atwood, and the differences between the historical author, the implied author, and the narrator. According to Wolf Schmid (2014), the term implied author was first introduced by Wayne Booth in 1961's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as part of his conceptualization of unreliable narrators. The implied author "refers to the author-image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found in the text" (SCHMID, 2014)—the *reader* constructs such an implied author based on textual signs, but this concept does not have a "pragmatic role in the narrative work" (ibid), unlike the narrator, who speaks and has a voice. The choice of narrated elements and how they are combined, as well as evaluations about them, are thus not to be attributed to the author, but to the narrator (who, on an extra-textual level, is obviously an author's creation); the narrator is, evidently, the one who *narrates*, and the implied author must, evidently, be *implied*. Schmid defines the implied author as "one of the correlates of the indexical signs in a text that a recipient,

depending on his or her conception of the work's intention, may interpret as referring to the author of that text. These signs mark out a specific world-view and aesthetic standpoint". Importantly, this is not an *intentional creation* of the historical author, neither is it the historical author. It has no voice, but only a "virtual existence" and depends on *the reader*. The concept is particularly relevant because it allows for the narrator to have an *origin* and for textual norms to be analyzed without the need to bring the historical author, the author-as-a-person, into the discussion. For Schmid, then, "it helps us describe the layered process by which meaning is generated".

When Sternberg and Yacobi state that when a reader averts blame for inconsistencies, "transferring it and them elsewhere" (for example, to an unreliable narrator) in order to "leave the author intact, in control, authoritative, indeed reliable, as the authorial power is by definition" (2015, p. 431), it is to the implied author that they are referring—the implied author is the one the saving procedure works to save, as the historical author can, and often is, "sacrificed" to explain oddities in the text. In fact, the very first of their mechanisms of integration—the mechanisms a reader can apply in order to make sense of narrative inconsistencies—is the *genetic* one, which concerns the genesis of the text and might include mistakes and confusions on the historical author's part. Under such a framework, a possible explanation for the inconsistencies in Offred's discourse would be, as it is suggested by Glenn Deer (2001, p. 95), that "it is as if Atwood's skill as storyteller continually intrudes, possessing her narrative creation". Morrison (2000), on the other hand, suggests that there is a *functional* explanation for such inconsistencies. Her hypothesis is that Atwood fully commits to the romance plot so that by the end, after we have been made to feel engrossed by it,

we are brought to question the validity and significance of the heroine's attachment to an unfulfilled—and perhaps empty—fantasy. But Atwood is counting on, even encouraging our attachment to the form. She does not require us to relinquish the romance plot; rather, in denying closure and minimizing the significance of the hero, she suggests that its validity lies elsewhere (MORRISON, 2000, p. 323).

I believe, however, that these inconsistencies can be made sense of *internally* as a case of *narrative unreliability with a goal*, and, for this, Sternberg and Yacobi's framework of analysis is particularly helpful. Morrison (2000, p. 322) suggests that "Offred, in her furtive recording of her painful experiences, would have had to be, as some critics have concluded, quite the conscious, controlled artist to achieve such an effect" of suspense and anxiety about events which are, in fact, recollections on her part; the critic discards this possibility of reading

as she suggests that *Atwood* is willing to create narrative inconstancies in order to secure our engagement with the romance plot. But, throughout the course of the novel, we are given enough evidence that Offred is, indeed, quite skilled as a narrator and storyteller, and we can, in fact, attribute this perceived inconsistency to the work of the narrator herself, for which there is an underlying goal that she attempts to achieve in her willingness to sacrifice her own reliability.

In Sternberg and Yacobi's approach to narrative (un)reliability, such a notion is to be thought of as one *strategy for interpretation* among others, as a way for us, readers, to solve textual tensions. We *infer* that a narrator is unreliable in order to eliminate "tensions, incongruities, contradictions and other infelicities the work may show by attributing them to a source of transmission" (YACOBI, 1981, p. 119). The hypothesis of unreliability (or, otherwise, reliability) should be understood in the context of what the scholars refer to as *integration*, or our mind's search for coherence and order. Sternberg and Yacobi explain that upon facing inconsistencies, the reader can apply a series of *mechanisms of integration* in order to explain them away: *a) the genetic mechanism*, referring to the production of the text, as exemplified by mistakes on the historical author's part, issues regarding the publication and release of the text, etc.; *b) the generic mechanism*, related to the fact that an entirely unique discourse does not exist, and, thus, applying this mechanism means attributing the issues to a "certain type of discourse that regularly accommodates (neutralizes, settles, exploits, even celebrates) the problem" (p. 405); *c) the functional mechanism*, which refers to the perceived "aesthetic, thematic, and persuasive goals" of a specific work (p. 407); *d) the existential mechanism*, under which oddities are explained referring to the "unusual (e.g., supernatural) ontology posited by the text" (p. 408); *e) the perspectival mechanism*, under which issues are explained by their attribution to a source of transmission (a narrator or reflector), who can be read as either reliable or unreliable; *f) the figurative mechanism*, under which the reader understands an oddity as metaphorical or figurative, rather than literal.

In Offred's discourse, I suggest, the inconsistent aspect of her narrative can be understood as a case of *unreliability* (thus, the perspectival mechanism is applied) with a *functional*—in this case, persuasive—goal on her part, which relates to an overall goal of *the novel itself*. Important here is the reminder that under this model a reader does not *identify* unreliability, but *infers* it:

‘identify’ entails the truth, factuality, objectivity of what is identified as unreliable, and it accordingly postulates a single correct reading—by ‘us’ due performers—in line with the author’s intention and execution. This objectivism stands diametrically opposed to constructivism and far outreaches in text-basedness the standard model of implied communication (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 434).

Thus, what is presented here is a hypothesis of one reading among many, which, in the following pages, I argue can be sustained based on a series of textual factors. Under this model, unreliability is not a static characteristic of a narrator, but something we, readers and critics, ascribe to a narrator in order to make sense of a discourse that, in the larger framework of the novel, is perceived as presenting inconsistencies.

Greta Olson (2003) proposes a distinction between different types of unreliability, ranging from fallibility to untrustworthiness, which are of diverse natures. Fallible narrators present misconceptions and biases in their interpretations of their surroundings, but in their case “external circumstances appear to cause the narrator’s misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics. Readers may justify the failings of fallible narrators [...] on the basis of circumstances that impede them rather than on their intellectual or ethical deficiencies” (p. 102). Examples provided by Olson are the misguided perceptions of someone who might lack knowledge and life experience to interpret what they see, such as a child, or someone who cannot adequately judge a situation due to a lack of or incomplete information. Untrustworthy narrators, on the other hand, are unreliable because of their internal traits or interests—they are “dispositionally” motivated, unlike those who are fallible, or “situationally” unreliable (p. 102). When we consider a narrator to be fallible, we understand that, under different circumstances (had they had the knowledge and experience they lack, for example), they might have been reliable. When we consider a narrator untrustworthy, we believe that a different narrator, under the same circumstances, could be reliable. In this sense, Offred’s unreliable discourse could be understood as dispositionally, rather than situationally, motivated, for she commits it with a personal rhetorical interest. However, since the reader of the novel cannot know that experiencing-I and narrating-I are separated in time and space before reading Pieixoto’s address at the Symposium, the notion that “what the [untrustworthy] narrator says will be greeted by skepticism” (OLSON, 2003, p. 102) does not apply—or at least not for a first-time reader.

In Offred’s narration, we are led to think of Sternberg’s discussion of primacy and recency effects in literature, and of the lasting influence of first impressions. Sternberg builds on the discussions collected in *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion*, in which several psychologists explore how different organizations in verbal messages influence their impact on

audiences and, more specifically, the impact of their opening and concluding portions (primacy and recency effect, respectively). For this discussion, two important characteristics of the verbal medium are highlighted: “the discreteness of its units, and their successive and irreversible progression” (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 96). As the highly controlled text progresses, then, the reader can only know what the artist wants him or her to know, and thus “can easily be prevented from suspecting, for the time judged necessary for the primacy effect to take a strong hold on his mind, that conflicting information lies ahead” (ibid). So powerful is the primacy effect that “even if the reader retrospectively realizes that he has been tricked, it is usually too late for him to get out of the psychological trap” (p. 97). In this sense, it is equally relevant that the reader is prevented from suspecting Offred throughout her entire narration, as the information about the nature of her narrative is only provided in the last fifteen pages of the novel. Once we get to the final pages, we are, ideally, already too engaged in Offred’s emotive and urgent account to reevaluate it as possibly crossing any ethical lines in manipulating us: this is the work done by the primacy effect.

2.2.1 Offred’s *reconstructions*: narration and the limits of language and memory

I have mentioned earlier in this thesis that Offred is a self-conscious narrator who often discusses her own process of narration as well as her narrative choices. In this sense, perhaps the most significant passages of the narrative are those in which she explicitly describes her narration as a “reconstruction”—her first illicit encounter with the Commander in his office and her first illicit encounter with Nick in his rooms. She tells three different versions of her furtive encounter with Nick, stating that she made a scene up (p. 273) or that “it didn’t happen that way” (p. 275). At first, Offred attempts to make use of what Miner (1991, p. 163) refers to as “the language of Harlequin romances”—she uses mostly metaphorical language, with phrases such as “a man made of darkness” and “I’m alive in my skin” (THT, p. 273), and highlights the natural elements such as lightning and water. In a second version, which starts off “awkward and clumsy” (ibid), the pair adopts the formulaic flirtatious dialogues of old movies. At last, once again Offred appeals to the idea of a reconstruction: “I’m not sure how it happened. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (THT, p. 275). Here, Offred thematizes two important discussions permeating the narrative: the limits of both language and memory. Of the limits of language and narration, Offred states as she first proposes that her narrative is a “reconstruction”:

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; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many (p. 144).

For Lorene Birden (2002, p. 135), these reconstructions thematize the complicated relationship between language and power, and she suggests that Offred's "false narrations" are instances of "momentary control" over the male figures—those who have more power than she does. If on the one hand such a strategy could potentially hinder Offred's reliability, on the other, since she is upfront about it, Birden understands this choice as more suitable than a straightforward narrative to problematize the connection between language and power. Because Offred constantly highlights the *telling*, she also emphasizes herself as *the teller*, which could "counter the possible accusation of falseness" (BIRDEN, 2002, p. 137)—and this, too, is a form of control. Furthermore, for Angela Gulick (1991, p. 134), these reconstructions problematize the relationship between "truth" and language, suggesting that something as "complex and multiple" as reality cannot be "captured by a few words". Gulick also highlights that, by the end of the novel, when Pieixoto reveals new information that allows us to understand that the narration was likely reconstructed by Offred from memory, we understand that "Offred is depending upon her memory, a memory that could be distorted by the passage of time and by the drama of the events that have taken place in her life" (1991, p. 130).

Throughout her narration, in fact, Offred often presents her memory as something entirely gapped, with much she cannot fully remember: the way she used to look like before Gilead (p. 153), the faces of her husband and daughter (p. 203), the last time she had seen her mother (p. 264), what the streets used to look like in the time before (p. 175, 176). All these instances, however, are set in that part of the fabula that the reader understands from early on as preceding the present of what appears to be a (mostly) simultaneous narration beginning five weeks into her posting at the Commander's house. As is clear by now, however, her entire narration is recreated from memory, and yet the period that Offred presents as her "present" situation is filled with vivid and richly described detail. This is a way of emotionally engaging the reader in her narration, as she is earnest about her limitations to remember the time before even in some of its most basic and remarkable qualities, like the faces of the people she loves. By the time we get to the end of the novel and realize how much work she has put in creating such vividly described scenarios, this earnestness—which she purposefully limits in scope to

manipulate the reader—should, ideally, not make us feel betrayed, but appreciative of her efforts; if, per her own admittance, *everything is a reconstruction*, then there is no reason for us to feel cheated. What we should do, then, is attempt to empathize with Offred’s functional goal in manipulating us, which is to engage us through the creation of a clash between our hopes and our fears about the narrative future, to quote Sternberg’s (1978, p. 65) words regarding *The Odyssey*.

In Sternberg’s theory of narrativity, there are three “generic master roles”—suspense, surprise and curiosity—, which create different dynamics between the telling and what is told and “govern (at will assimilate, ‘narrativize’) all other elements and patterns found in discourse at large” (1992, p. 472). These universals Sternberg succinctly explains as such: *suspense*, “the dynamics of propection”, relates to our uncertainty about the narrative future (2006, p. 129), which, as he further explores it, is “naturally opaque” (1992, p. 527); *curiosity*, “the dynamics of retrospection”, relates to a lack of information about the narrative past that continually engages us in our movement forward (2006, p. 129-130); *surprise*, “the dynamics of recognition”, is also related to the narrative past, but, unlike the former two, is not characterized by anticipation. Instead, surprise is “forced on us by the belated disclosure of a gap in continuity and knowledge, so as to impel a repatterning of all that has intervened” (2006, p. 130). These three master effects represent the different ways in which the “dynamic interplay between the told and the telling, the represented and the communicative event-sequence” can play out (STERNBERG, 2006, p. 129). For Sternberg, it is in this interplay that the notion of narrativity itself lives.

Suspense and curiosity are different forms of creating and manipulating *narrative interest*, impelling the reader forward in the reading. Sternberg (1978, p. 45) insists that regardless of the author’s objectives with the fictional work, “whether purely aesthetic or extraaesthetic”, they can only be achieved if the reader’s interest is first secured and then subsequently maintained by the work. This position is mirrored by Atwood herself, who has discussed, in slightly different terms, the centrality that the creation of narrative interest has in her writing and in the way she thinks not only of her novels, but of novels in general. As important as the themes approached in them are, the novelist, in Atwood’s conception, always needs to be acutely aware of the inner workings of the text itself: “A novel, in order to be

successful, *has first to hold the attention of the reader*” (INGERSOLL, 1992, p. 111¹⁵ apud HOWELLS, 1996, p. 7-8, emphasis mine). Suspense and curiosity can be exploited to secure the reader’s continued attention and interest; according to Sternberg (1978, p. 65), both are “characterized by expectant restlessness and tentative hypotheses that derive from a lack of information”. But these forms of creating and sustaining narrative interest are of different natures, and while suspense concerns itself with the narrative future, with all of its opaqueness, curiosity, on the other hand, relates to informational gaps regarding the narrative past, and, as such, it is related to “a time when struggles have already been resolved, and as such it often involves an interest in the information for its own sake” (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 65).

In Atwood’s novel, we have a predomination of suspense, which naturally arises due to the opaqueness of the future, although an important line of curiosity is opened and exploited since the sujet begins when Offred is already in Gilead, leaving for much later the discussion of how the United States became a theocracy. As a narrator, Offred directly exploits the natural arising of suspense when she chooses to employ the historical present as her mode of narration, emphasizing the unknowability of a future that is, in reality, already her past. We readers, however, cannot know that because she does not allow us to know it. Offred is a narrator who is both “restricted” and “self-conscious”, following Sternberg’s typology (1978). When it comes to types of narration, he proposes two extreme poles and two important modes that lie in between. In one extreme, we have the diary, in which the choices of organization and suppression made by the narrator—the diarist—have “powerful quasi-mimetic motivations” (p. 278). In the other extreme, we have the omniscient narrator that has “purely aesthetic motivations” (ibid). In between them, two important models: first, there is the self-conscious restricted (thus, non-omniscient) narrator; second, there is the use of a vessel or reflector, with the narrator choosing to represent all of the action as filtered through the perceptions of a single character.

This typology, which is important for Sternberg’s discussion of a work’s temporal structure and the motivations behind it, takes under consideration three aspects of point of view: the range of knowledge the narrator has, how the narrator uses this knowledge, and his awareness (or lack thereof) of facing an audience/reader. The Offred who narrates has restricted information and knowledge regarding her surroundings and the other characters—she is no

¹⁵ The words are Atwood’s, collected as part of Earl E. Ingersoll’s selection of her interviews in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (London: Virago, 1992).

omniscient narrator. However, the Offred who narrates *does* know more than she lets on as the novel progresses, and this suppression on her part is connected with her self-consciousness, for even if Offred cannot know whether her tapes will ever be listened to by anyone, she records them with the expectation that they will. We can think, then, of what Sternberg affirms regarding restricted narrators: “not being omniscient, the narrating self can hardly be blamed for not being omniconnunicative, but he definitely can for not being [...] as fully communicative as he could” (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 280). Offred’s narrating self attempts to recreate her perspective as experiencing self (from which she is separated in both time and space) without allowing any external influence of her later self. The use of historical present further emphasizes this attempt, for throughout the narrative she tries to eliminate the distance between the two selves, as if she were, indeed, narrating *as* she experiences.

Offred’s narration treats questions for which she already has answers by the time she narrates as gaps in her knowledge. She constantly wonders, for example, about the fates of those she loved in the time before: she declares early on that she knows her daughter is alive (THT, p. 49), but she does not know what happened to either her mother, Luke or Moira (after her friend’s successful escape from the Red Centre). By the end of the narrative, however, she has learned about the fates of both her mother and Moira, as she meets her friend once again at Jezebel’s and is then told, by her, about what happened to the mother, who was sent to the Colonies. When she narrates, thus, these questions no longer haunt her because she has been given answers. When it comes to Luke, on the other hand, his fate is a “permanent gap”, for which “no single, fully explicit and authoritative answer is made by the text from beginning to end” (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 50)—it is likely that Offred never hears of him again. Similarly, no “authoritative answer” is given by the text regarding Offred’s fate and, thus, we never have any definitive answer to Offred’s many *perhapses* when she first introduces us to Nick:

Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette.
Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do.
Perhaps he is an Eye (THT, p. 28).

One consequence of this choice is that, although most critical readings tend to present the very existence of Offred’s recordings, found in a prominent stop in the Underground Femaleroad, as evidence that she did escape and that Nick was, indeed, working with Mayday, Stillman and Johnson (1994) are allowed by the text to go against the grain in suggesting that

the narration is a result of an operation held by the Eyes in order to extricate information regarding the unlawful behavior of the Commander. That the tapes were found in former Bangor, Maine, indicates otherwise, but nonetheless the informational gap regarding Offred's fate cannot be filled "fully and definitely", only "partially and tentatively" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 50). For Morrison (2000), maintaining this gap regarding either Nick, Luke and the Commander is Atwood's way of ensuring that the romance plot has no conventional ending; we only learn about the fates of the women in Offred's life, and it is only her relationship with the mother that she reassesses in any significant way by the end of the narrative. This hypothesis of reading relies on Atwood's goal-oriented communication. But Offred too might be understood as having functional reasons for her choices in narrating.

Offred treats Moira and Luke equally throughout most of the narrative, up until the time when she sees her friend again at the brothel. She even uses a similar phrasal construction to discuss them. As she looks at the men hanged on the Wall, doctors who had once assisted women in terminating unwanted pregnancies, Offred tells the reader that she is, in part, relieved when she looks at them, because "none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't" (THT, p. 43). She must remind herself to refer to Luke in the present tense because she does not know whether he is dead or alive—but her first instinct after so many years is to automatically think of him in the past tense. Something similar happens when she discusses Moira. We first hear about Moira as Offred wonders whether she is still alive (p. 35). Many pages later, Offred must once again remind herself to refer to people whose fates she does not know in the present tense: "She was still my oldest friend. Is." (p. 181). The difference between Moira and Luke is that the narrator has seen Moira during her time as Offred, unlike Luke, whom she never sees again, and whose fate remains mysterious.

Similarly, from the first introduction of Ofglen (Offred's fellow Handmaid and shopping partner) in the narrative, the narrator makes us wonder about her nature: whether she is being forced by the regime to do her part, like Offred is, or whether she is a true believer (p. 29). We only find out that Ofglen is not a true believer and is, in fact, part of the resistance, halfway through the novel (p. 176). Up to that point, each interaction Offred has with her partner is presented as potentially dangerous. Before the narrative ends, Offred finds out that the Ofglen she knew had been substituted for another, and from this new Ofglen she discovers that the former one committed suicide. The suicide came after the former Ofglen disrupted one of Gilead's many rituals, the Particicution—the execution of a sinner or criminal by collective

hand. At the end of the novel, Handmaids are supposed to murder a man who allegedly raped two Handmaids, one of them pregnant. But Ofglen tells Offred that this was not true, that he was only a fellow rebel, a member of Mayday, and Ofglen takes it into her own hands to kill him as quickly and swiftly as possible to make him suffer less. Through this act of kindness, Ofglen ended up revealing herself, and, knowing that, chose suicide rather than torture as her fate. Offred knows that, had her partner been caught, she would have to talk about her. Yet Ofglen chose not to talk, taking her own life instead, which Offred knows she should be grateful for (p. 298). She knows, by the time when she narrates, how loyal Ofglen was. Nonetheless, it takes the reader a long time to find this out—Offred chooses to emphasize the anxiety she had once felt about her partner instead.

Though Offred sometimes discusses the limitation of language and of putting lived experience into narration, her narrative is not only concerned with the limits, but also with the possibilities that language, even if imperfectly, offers. As she plays Scrabble with the Commander for the first time, the way she describes letters and words makes them seem almost sensuous:

Larynx, I spell. Valance. Quince. Zygote. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. Limp, I spell. Gorge. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious (THT, p. 149).

Although there are languages—like Latin—that she does not know, as she does not seem to know much about etymology, she seems nonetheless comfortable with language and is a lover of words. It appears so, for example, when she discusses the many meanings of a word like *chair*: “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh” (p. 120). Furthermore, we know that she is college-educated, and every now and then she casually mentions her knowledge in perhaps unexpected areas such as introductory psychology (p. 79), old cave inscriptions (p. 123), Tibetan prayer wheels (p. 177) or several “things [she’d] once read about but had never seen” (p. 164)—we know, then, that she is a reader in many different areas of interest. In the time before, in fact, her job directly involved books, since she worked in a library: she digitalized physical copies into electronic files, and

often, she tells us, instead of discarding the old books as she was supposed to, she took them home with her.

Throughout her narration, she lets on that she is no stranger to the best ways of manipulating language to achieve a certain desired effect. As she asks one of the Marthas about the former Offred, she states: “Who was the woman who stayed in that room? I said. Before me? If I’d asked it differently, if I’d said, Was there a woman who stayed in that room before me? I might not have got anywhere” (p. 63). It works, if only partially: Rita confirms to her that there had been a woman before—more than one, in fact—, although she does not explain what Offred wants to know next, which is why the former Offred had not worked out. Later, as she narrates the Particicution, Offred interprets Aunt Lydia’s rhetoric devices for the reader:

“Today’s Salvaging is now concluded,” Aunt Lydia announces into the mike. “But ...”
We turn to her, listen to her, watch her. *She has always known how to space her pauses. A ripple runs over us, a stir.* Something else, perhaps, is going to happen.
“But you may stand up, and form a circle.” (p. 289, emphasis mine).

Offred, too, it seems, knows how to *space her pauses*, and never is this more explicit than in her *reconstruction* about the first Scrabble session with the Commander. She begins the narration of the night with its very end: “I want you to kiss me, said the Commander. Well, of course something came before that. Such requests never come flying out of the blue” (p. 145). After such a bombastic introduction to what had taken place during the much anticipated first illicit trip to his office, Offred’s narration goes back in time, to hours before the encounter. It is only pages later that she finally returns to the scene and introduces the context of the request for a kiss. Here, she explicitly toys with the reader’s curiosity—as we have seen, one of the ways to create narrative interest. Offred further demonstrates her skills as a storyteller by recounting or imagining entire conversations that did not include her, often detailing other people’s states of mind: it is the case of a real exchange between Aunt Lydia and fellow Handmaid Janine (p. 138-142) and of an imagined conversation between the Wives, condescendingly discussing their Handmaids (p. 125).

The “retrospective quality” mentioned by Pieixoto during his lecture is mostly absent from Offred’s narration, except for the sequences she highlights as reconstructions, thus calling attention to them. But she does seem to slip up in her control of the use of historical present near the end as she gets to “a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well” (p. 280). Here that the narrator states: “it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough:

wasn't once enough for me at the time?" (p. 279). She now distances herself from that time, which becomes *at the time*. Nevertheless, because her control remains so significant, this fragment might not call as much attention to itself for a first-time reader. This way, she fully engages her reader in the suspense regarding her future. Why she does it seems evident as she continues in the same paragraph: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (p. 279). As she tells her story, she establishes an act of communication, and, as she states early on, "you don't tell a story only to yourself" (p. 49). As she keeps telling it, she keeps on believing that there is someone else who will hear it, someone else who will care.

It would be difficult, however, to determine that Offred's use of historical present is purely a rhetorical device on her part. If we cannot know for sure where the recordings were made, the fact that they were uncovered in an important stop of the Underground Femaleroad in Maine leaves us with the suggestion that her tapes were made in a moment and place filled with uncertainty regarding her situation and her future. Even if Offred managed to escape Gilead and record the tapes in exile, which would then have been brought back at some later time, her newfound consciousness about her "regular" American society from the time before leading to a place like Gilead without facing significant resistance would likely leave her on her toes about similar scenarios taking place elsewhere. Thus, when she expresses anxiety regarding Luke or Moira, for instance, it can be difficult to determine to what extent the suspense created is an expression of her attempt to merge the voices of her experiencing self (the Offred from some time before, at the Commander's house) and her narrating self (likely, but not definitely, waiting in Maine) or, rather, an expression of her state of anxiety *as* she attempts to escape (or, alternatively, live as a refugee). In this sense, she creates—intentionally or unintentionally, but likely *both* intentionally and unintentionally—narrative interest and, hopefully, a shared sense of anxiety in her reader.

By ending the novel with Pieixoto's lecture, Atwood further reinforces, rather than resolves, the reader's anxiety regarding Offred's future. If the Historical Notes inform us that she was able to record her tale at some point, they also inform us, indirectly, that well into the twenty-second century the world does not seem to have learnt that much from watching Gilead come into existence, if the professor's jokes and comments—and the audience's response to them—are to be taken as an indication. In that sense, if we continue to side with Offred, we are

led to think that she and other Gileadean escapees might never have felt truly safe anywhere else in the world, and the suspense about her future is reinforced by the curiosity Pieixoto's lecture raises concerning the years between her report and his manipulation of it.

2.2.2 “It’s a way of keeping her alive”: the vital importance of storytelling

We can better understand Offred's motivations if we look more attentively at chapter thirty-eight, when she meets Moira at Jezebel's and hears the story of her friend's failed escape, capture and enforced prostitution. She tells this story in great detail, but she does so in quotation, as if she was merely reproducing what Moira had said to her. In fact, Offred lets the reader know that she “filled it out” for her friend as much possible, because their time was scarce and Moira only “gave the outlines” (THT, p. 255). She is also candid about her inability to “remember exactly” (ibid)—which would probably be true of the entire story she tells, not only Moira's, since it is fully told in retrospect. But she nonetheless does reconstruct Moira's entire narration, which lasts for seven pages, from the outlines given to her and from a failing memory, and delivers it in her own representation of Moira's voice, so unlike her own, because this was “a way of keeping her alive” (p. 256). Storytelling, then, and dedication to such an endeavor, is presented as something *vital*: even if she never meets Moira again—if no one meets Moira again—her friend's voice will be immortalized, *alive*, in Offred's narrative. Throughout her narration, then, Offred can be understood as attempting to keep herself alive even if Gilead manages to catch and kill her in the end.

In the essay “A Short History of Silence” (2017), Rebecca Solnit presents silence as the historical condition of women in many different spheres: in society's public life, in law, in religion, in culture, in private relationships. For Solnit, new understandings demand new language, and expressions such as “date rape” or “sexual harassment” appeared to cover new grounds in the understanding of gender-based and sexual violence, for example. To think of women's history, then, is to think of a history of both *silence* and then *silence breaking*. Solnit proposes that

liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories. A free person tells her own story. A valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place.

Violence against women is often against our voices and our stories. It is a refusal of our voices, and of what a voice means: the right to self-determination, to participation,

to consent and dissent, to live and participate, to interpret and narrate (SOLNIT, 2017, location 251).

In Gilead, the condition of women, and especially of Handmaids, is one of silencing taken to the extreme. The prohibition of Handmaids' self-determination is so absurd that these women cannot even share their names out loud. Voice, words, and language are carefully policed. For Solnit, it is partially through voice, words, and language that society can be transformed, because "when words break through unspeakability, what was tolerated by a society sometimes becomes intolerable. [...] Stories bring home the trouble and make it unavoidable" (2017, location 264). Often, they might not be enough in themselves, but they are a necessary first step for what was once tolerated to finally be articulated as intolerable. This is what Offred's tale does, and as it survived for so many years into the twenty-second century, she partially achieves her objective of keeping Moira and herself *alive*. But Atwood highlights, with the Historical Notes, that this objective was achieved only partially, and in terribly insufficient ways.

To repeat Solnit's words once again, a voice entails "the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent and dissent, to live and participate, to interpret and narrate" (2017, location 251). What is noticeable in professor Pieixoto's speech is that he, too, attempts to silence Offred's voice, in which he does not truly allow her to *interpret* her own situation, to *self-determine* herself, because he imposes his own misogynistic views of her, her tale and her society over her voice. Atwood, however, juxtaposes these voices in a clever way, as explored by Morrison (2000, p. 323): "the Historical Notes depend upon Offred's personal account, which stands prior to and independent of the Historical Notes; the reverse is not true". The information given by Pieixoto at the end of the novel, and especially his tone, is not sufficient to have the reader side with him rather than Offred. Atwood chooses a narrator with significant control of her storytelling efforts as the voice to analyze the imagined storyworld of Gilead in an attempt to ensure that readers will empathize with *Offred*, listen to *Offred*—imperfect as she is, and never denies being—and understand how troublesome the distinguished professor's words are.

In a new introduction to the 2017 edition of the novel, Atwood suggests that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be understood in the framework of "the literature of witness": "Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: every recorded story

implies a future reader” (ATWOOD, 2017, p. xiv). The reading audience at the end of the novel, however, though “free to read”, is not “as empathetic as one might wish” (ibid). Atwood includes this epilogue in the novel as an example of how *not* to read Offred’s tale (HOGSETTE, 1997). It is an example of the dangers of indifference and lack of empathy, of imposing between us and those who have endured utmost terrors both distance and detachment. It is a *warning* to the reader, from the beginning to the very last page, that there are subtler tendencies we must be alert to in our own present. Returning to Solnit, “a valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place” (2017, location 251). If the future of 2195 is very clearly different from both our reality and especially from Gilead, how different is it really if it keeps on denying the value of a Handmaid’s account?

To close off the discussion regarding Atwood’s Offred, I would like to return to Dunja Mohr (2005) and her discussion of the surpassing of binary thinking, for Mohr states that Offred is “everywoman, anti-heroine and passive victim *as well as* defiant, rebellious narrator” (p. 260, emphasis mine). But Mohr also highlights that “the novel lacks any suggestion of where—beyond survival—this poetic discourse leads Offred” (ibid). It is not necessarily that the narration could not lead anywhere, but that the novel simply does not explore it. In fact, when it explores it, I would suggest, it does so with Pieixoto’s and Wade’s terrible reading of it. Offred’s act of communication does not fully achieve its end within the novel, then. But there is another act of communication taking place, and it is the most vital one: the one between author and reader, which insists that we can do better—better than Pieixoto, who misreads, while we are given the tools to do otherwise, and better than the society in 2195, which did not collectively improve, while we still can.

3 HULU'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: JUNE OSBORNE AND OVERT INSUBORDINATION

3.1 Offred and June Osborne: what is in a name?

I have argued before in this thesis that Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an adaptation that emphasizes its status as such—not only does it maintain the same title chosen by Margaret Atwood, which immediately identifies the adapted text for those who know it, but, as the show was first introduced to audiences through teasers and trailers, these often included Atwood's name. Furthermore, Atwood serves as a producer for the series, and its creator and showrunner, Bruce Miller, has stated that she is somewhat involved in the making of it: she always receives outlines for each season and scripts to read, as a producer, and he brings many of his ideas to her for them to discuss (REID, 2020). This does not mean that the show is not what every adaptation is at their core: the result of a process of both interpretation and creation (HUTCHEON, 2013). And while an overt adaptation such as this one is in a close relationship—a “sustained engagement” (SANDERS, 2006, p. 4)—with a specific and signaled source text that evidently precedes it in time, the two works should not be hierarchized: if adapted text must necessarily precede the adaptation in time, this does not mean that the text that is adapted is to be held as the standard according to which the adaptation is to be valued.

As highlighted by Hutcheon (2013) and Stam (2000), adaptations do not exist in a vacuum, but in intricate larger contexts which, indeed, in Cattrysse's methodology of corpus-based research (2014, p. 230), take precedence in “the actual and final decision making process”. Furthermore, adaptations are often a case of “medial transposition” (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 57), existing between two different media and configuring “a crossing of borders” between them (p. 46). If Leitch (2003, p. 149) warns us about “categorical and essentialist” approaches to different media in adaptation studies that assume that differences between adapted text and adaptation are to be explained by *essential properties* of each medium, he does nonetheless point to the recognition of “specific reading habits” (p. 152) related to them. In this sense, this chapter, which analyzes the protagonist of the adaptation, heavily relies on scholarship about U.S. television storytelling, particularly following Cattrysse's understanding of target-context conditioners as being potentially more important for those who make the final decisions regarding the adaptation process.

Before delving into such discussions, however, I would like to highlight how one small—yet significant—choice taken in the adaptation helps to demonstrate how interpretive and creative the practice of adaptation can be even as it enlists the author of the adapted text as a producer and consultant and even as it highlights itself as an adaptation. What I centralize here is the issue of the protagonist’s name, for, if I am suggesting that Atwood and the Hulu team take different approaches to her characterization, the name plays an important role.

I have stated before in this thesis that “Offred” is not a real name, but one example of the form of denomination that Gilead imposes on Handmaids to signal their status as non-persons, as official breeders that belong to the system. The patronymic *Offred*, then, communicates that this woman is currently under the possession of a man named Fred; once she leaves his house, she will be called by a different patronymic (in the third season of the television series, for example, the character changes households, and is thus subsequently known by all as “Ofjoseph”). The issue regarding the name is addressed several times in *Offred*’s narration. Initially, she reveals that “Offred” is not her real name, and rationalizes that such a fact is of no importance; regardless of how much she tries to convince herself that her former name does not matter, however, deep down she knows that telling herself that is to tell a lie:

I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark (THT, p. 94).

If the patronymic marks her status as a non-person, her former name, which was taken from her like so much else, signals everything she once had but lost. Later in the narrative, after the first Ceremony depicted in the novel takes place, she makes such a connection: “I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (p. 108). As the narrative progresses, she attempts to make herself forget about her former name—and by extension her former self—, but of course no such thing happens, and she does eventually reveal her real name to Nick, who will then appeal to it in the final section of her story, as he urges her to trust him that Mayday has come to take her away. What she never does

is share her name with the reader, who has no other option but to refer to her simply as “Offred”, the patronymic that represents absolute dehumanization.

As stated before in chapter two, over the years many critics and readers have deduced that Offred’s real name is June, for it closes off a list of names that she refers to in chapter one as being passed around silently by the Handmaids at the Red Centre. “June” follows “Alma”, “Janine”, “Dolores” and “Moira”, all of which—unlike “June”—reappear as major or minor characters in the narrative. According to Atwood’s 2017 introduction to the novel, that was never her original thought, and she states that her rationalizing behind the choice to never provide the protagonist’s real name was that “so many people throughout history have had their names changed or have simply disappeared from view” (p. xi). This, of course, does not unauthorize any critical reading, and neither does she desire to do so; perhaps Atwood, who likes her ambiguous, open endings so much, simply addressed the issue in the way she did because she had no inclination to offer a final answer to such a question. Either way, even if one believes that the question *can* be answered and the name is indeed June, the answer is not clear and definitive, but only tentative.

The adaptation chooses to address the issue differently—it takes the whole pilot episode, but the Offred who narrates in voice-over shares her real name with the viewer in a definitive way as the episode comes to an end. If initially she insists that her name is now Offred and that her former name is simply forbidden, by the end it all changes; this happens after she finds out that Moira is supposedly dead, that her shopping partner Ofglen is not a real believer and could be a friend in such a lonesome place, and that—according to Ofglen, at least—she should be careful because there is an Eye in the Commander’s house. According to Hendershot (2018), we can *visualize* the change that has taken place within June, because she is now looking at her surroundings and the people around her:

To be afraid is not the same as to be happy, but it *is* a sign of being alive. To look for danger is an activity, a way not to be simply in a situation (Offred’s identical days of entrapment) but to be in a story. To be in a story is to have motivations, to consider that if there are friends (Ofglen) and villains (an eye), then something new and unpredictable could happen. There could be more to life than naming objects in a room and hoping your monthly period does not arrive (HENDERSHOT, 2018, p. 14-15).

Hendershot states that the pilot episode, while filled with backstory, is not actually driven by a plot, but by “character building” (p. 14), and this is in consonance with Mittell’s (2015) discussion about pilot episodes as atypical in terms of storytelling due to the enormous

amount of exposition they must contain to situate the viewer in the storyworld. The way *The Handmaid's Tale's* pilot is structured, when it finally places June in “a story” (HENDERSHOT, 2018, p. 15), opens up the path for more conventionally plotted episodes (which will be further explored in section 3.4).

The viewer of the adaptation, then, is invited to call June by her real name, unlike the reader of the novel, who is forced to participate in Gilead's horror by adopting the dehumanizing patronymic. As the show progresses, June also gains a last name: in episode seven, “The Other Side”, it is revealed that she is “June Osborne”; significantly, she does not share her husband's last name (Bankole), which is revealed in episode six, “A Woman's Place”. This is presented as a defiant stance in the patriarchal culture that preceded Gilead's inception. In the first episode of the second season (“June”), both a clerk from her daughter's school and a hospital nurse insist on calling her “Mrs. Bankole”, despite her insistence that her name is not Bankole, but Osborne. By giving Offred a confirmed former name—which she will reinforce in emotional scenes throughout the series, as I will explore later—and a last name, and by making it a topic of conversation within the series, the adaptation commits both the act of interpretation—in taking the hypothesis that Offred's name is June as fact—and the act of creation, as the name is one of the steps taken to transform Offred in important ways, which will be further explored as this chapter progresses.

3.2 June and narration

In the previous chapter, I have discussed at length that one important characteristic of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that this dystopia is transformed by its final chapter, when we discover that the novel is, to use Margolin's (2014) term, a narrative that has two levels. This revelation demands that the reader reassesses what he or she read in the previous pages, and I suggest that one can understand Offred as an unreliable narrator who uses rhetorical tools to emphasize suspense and engage her listener in her narration. Connected to this idea, another important aspect is that the character-narrator of Atwood's novel is a self-conscious narrator, constantly engaging in discussions about her own storytelling. A literary narrator, as I have previously explored, is “the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates” (MARGOLIN, 2014). Thus, an important characteristic of the text that precedes the Historical Notes is that all of it derives

from someone, and that someone—even with the intervention of professors Pieixoto and Wade—is Offred.

The existence or inexistence of a filmic narrator has been an important topic of debate for narratologists that move beyond literary studies, as well as for film theorists, and this discussion has provided varying answers for such a conundrum. Markus Kuhn and Johann Schmidt (2014) state that “instead of a single, language-based narrator, the concept of a more complex ‘visual’ or ‘audiovisual narrative instance’ was introduced” by some theorists as “mediating the paradigms of overtly cinematographic devices (elements relating to camera, editing, sound) and the *mise-en-scène* (arranging and composing the scene in front of the camera)”.

While many theorists apply to the notion of a “narrative instance” in audiovisual narration, the nature of such an instance is not the same of the literary narrator. In *How to Read a Film*, James Monaco (2013) affirms that both film and the novel tell stories “*from the perspective of a narrator*, who often interposes a resonant level of irony between the story and the observer” (p. 52, emphasis mine). But he posits that novel and film have distinct “driving tensions”: in the novel, between “the materials of the story (plot, character, setting, theme, and so forth) and the narration of it in language”—thus, “between the tale and the teller”—, and, in film, is takes place between “the materials of the story and the objective nature of the image” (p. 54). Furthermore, he proposes that in film “the persona of the narrator is so much weaker” (ibid). Monaco highlights the 1947 film *Lady in the Lake*—as others, such as Kuhn and Schmidt (2014) and Hutcheon (2013), also do—as the highly uncommon example of an attempt to create a visual analogue to the literary first-person narrator, as the viewer can only see what the focalizing character sees, and the character can only be seen through the use of mirrors, for example. This difficulty (and, likely, disinterest) in literally limiting what we see to what a character sees leads to the previously mentioned “interest point of view” discussed by Chatman (1980). For the scholar, rather than seeing what the characters see, we are often invited to share their “emotional point of view” (p. 134) when they look at the camera and we can see their emotions reflected in their faces.

But an audiovisual work can use, and often does use, its auditory track to present to the viewer a sort of narrative *voice*. Aside from visual narration (which involves camera, editing and *mise-en-scène*), “various verbal narratives are employed on the extradiegetic level (in the form of various voice-overs, intertitles, and text captions)” (KUHNS; SCHMIDT, 2014).

Marcelo Bulhões (2009) adopts the idea of the narrator as the enunciator of discourse, which does not demand a distinct voice, as it can *appear* to be invisible without actually being so—because there is always a mediating instance that “makes choices, operates and deliberates over the narrative universe that is seen and heard on the screen” (p. 50, my translation¹⁶). Bulhões proposes that, in fact, an audiovisual work can have two narrating instances: one is the narration of the character-narrator, a narrative voice that, when applied, is *explicit* and rests on the verbal sphere; the other, “properly cinematic” (p. 52), is represented by the camera (or rather, as Kuhn and Schmidt insist on, on the choices made in the visual and auditory tracks). These two narrating instances can even be in disaccord with one another, since they have different natures (and the first, in fact, does not need to exist at all).

Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* consistently employs June’s voice in voice-over as one narrating instance. But we, viewers, see much more than she sees: not only are we not limited to her literal field of vision, for we see *her* rather than what she sees, the series, beginning in episode three, takes significant departures from her life and her experiences either in or before Gilead. In the third episode of season one, we are privy to what happens to June’s shopping partner Ofglen (whose real name in the series is Emily) after it is discovered that she was having an affair with her household’s Martha. We witness Emily’s imprisonment, trial, and punishment, but June does not. She will only find out—in no detail—what has happened to Emily two episodes later, through the Commander. In episode six, we are invited into Serena Joy and the Commander’s past, as a series of flashbacks show them as a couple in America and explore the influential role that both had in planning the cruel system Gilead adopts. In episode seven, we only see June-as-Offred for a few seconds, for it is completely centered around Luke’s life after their failed attempt to cross the border to Canada. June had found out in the previous episode that Luke was alive, which was new information for the viewer as well—but only the viewer gets the privilege of witnessing how he survived and escaped to Canada to live as a refugee. The flashbacks in episode eight show us more about Nick’s previous life and that he got involved in Gilead before it came into being, something that June will only learn in season three. Throughout the episodes, we see glimpses of Gilead’s life beyond June: we see Serena interacting with the Commander, we watch Moira as she escapes Jezebel’s and ends up reuniting with Luke in Canada, we see how Nick spends the nights when he takes June and the

¹⁶ From the Portuguese: “Em uma justa medida conceitual, o narrador da ficção midiática audiovisual é, como em toda manifestação inscrita no fenômeno da narratividade, uma instância que realiza escolhas, opera e delibera sobre o universo narrativo que se vê e que se ouve na tela”.

Commander to the brothel, we are offered snippets of the lives of fellow Handmaids such as Janine and Emily.

The perspectives we share, then, even in the first season, which is mostly guided by Atwood's novel, are multifold. In "Late", the first episode that deviates from June's perspective, we get a short voice-over narration from June in its first minute, though what we *see* is Emily under arrest. If initially June explains what she knows about Emily's disappearance, which is not much, throughout the rest of the episode her narration does not address her former shopping partner's situation again. What happens to Emily after that, which *we* are invited to witness, is not accompanied by any voice-over narration. The flashbacks from Serena's or Nick's past are equally devoid of June's voice, and so is "The Other Side", an episode limited, in its entirety, to Luke and his story of survival—even the flashbacks, which involve June, are from his perspective. The reasoning behind this expansion in perspective can be understood as being twofold. As explored by Mittell (2015, p. 33), commercial American television storytelling usually operates based on an "infinite model"¹⁷, meaning that as long as a series is attracting enough viewers, it is likely to keep being produced; thus, a successful series will be on air for at least a few years. Furthermore, Mittell suggests that serials tend to rely on ensemble casts. While specific episodes might limit themselves to the perspective of a single character and stick to it exclusively, normally the perspectives adopted "expand over the course of a series for both practical and production reasons (as it is too inefficient to require an actor to be present for every scene) and to encourage connections with a wider range of characters" (p. 129). As a ten-hour long first season, *The Handmaid's Tale* already moves beyond June's experiences, which are significantly limited in Gilead due to the very nature of the regime and of her place in it.

I have mentioned in section 1.2 that television scholars often emphasize that "extended character depth" (MITTELL, 2006, p. 31) and "heavy emphasis on character development" (PORTER et al., 2002, p. 23) are very important characteristics of serial television storytelling

¹⁷ In an informal survey presented in a *Vanity Fair* article, Maureen Ryan (2020) states that, out of a comprehensive list of scripted English-language original series premiering between 2016 and 2018 on Netflix, Amazon and Hulu (excluding limited series), less than a third had made (or would make) past the mark of three seasons. Ryan's article explores what might be lost, in terms of storytelling, by this transition—in streaming services at least—to increasingly shorter runs. She suggests that the approach taken by "powerful, algorithm-driven companies" to hold on to their subscribers "turns the traditional TV model on its head"—according to anonymous industry insiders, "if a given show gets whacked, and that firm's data tells them a similar (cheaper) show is likely to appeal to the fans of the axed program—and that other show might lure new subscribers too—in their view, everybody wins". If showrunners were often asked by traditional networks to go beyond their plans in elongating storytelling considerably, streaming services might be giving them another problem: the *lack* of time to fully develop their projects. However, Ryan sets *The Handmaid's Tale*—as a "high-profile program" (as of 2020, the only streaming drama to win the most coveted prize at the Emmys)—outside of such a conundrum.

that distance it from the more self-contained form of film. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this emphasis on character depth is true not only of June's, but of other regular characters in the series—especially the women, with some commentators such as Hunter Hargraves (2018, p. 190) noting that male characters are “denied the rich complexity of characters like Tony Soprano or Walter White, symptomatic of the male protagonists of contemporary quality television” in a conscious effort to exclude the male point of view. Female characters such as Serena Joy or Janine, on the other hand, are mentioned by critics as being amplified and further complicated in the Hulu series (cf. SILVA, 2018, RÊGO; BRANCO, 2018). While the central figure of the series is the titular Handmaid, as in the novel, the adaptation, in expanding the perspective, allows for a more detailed portrait of life under Gilead (and this becomes especially true as the seasons progress, leaving Atwood's original material behind).

Mittell differentiates between what he refers to as “centrifugal complexity”, in which “the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld” (2015, p. 222), with no unique center, and “centripetal complexity”, in which “narrative movement pulls actions and characters inward toward a gravitational center, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action” (p. 223). While *The Handmaid's Tale* does have a clear narrative center—June—, and it does rely more clearly on the second model out of the two, as episodes and seasons progress it increasingly mingles it with the first model, providing more detailed backstories for secondary characters such as Emily (“Unwomen”, S02E02) and even Aunt Lydia (“Unfit”, S03E08), as well as introducing new characters that play similar roles to those we already know—the Commander, the Wife, the Martha—, but differently. One of the advantages of this “centrifugal” exploration for the overall story that the television series wants to tell, which includes the notion of defeating the totalitarian state, is that the Gilead we see as the narrative “spreads characters” across the storyworld allows us to have a more concrete glimpse of how such a regime might fall, as we can then see how it is permeated with deep cracks that, in Atwood's novel, seem too superficial to have an impact (even if, as we find out in the Historical Notes, they did have it).

For the storyworld to expand as much as it does, however, we need to leave our narrative center behind. Although June can move much more freely than Offred, especially as seasons progress, her alternatives remain restricted, and for this reason the series occasionally leaves her limited perspective behind. This narrative choice has important consequences. As I have argued in the previous chapter, it is not irrelevant that Atwood chooses to give Offred and no

one else a voice in the novel: it is significant that this is a personal account, that Offred is a self-reflexive narrator, and that we only find out about the true nature of her narration at the end of the novel. It matters that Atwood plays such a game with the reader and infuses the last pages of the novel with transformative and somewhat conflicting information regarding Offred's narration. And it matters that the novel ends the way it does, with the academic symposium and the troublesome voice of the professor.

In a 2019 interview, showrunner Bruce Miller appealed to the novel and its epilogue in order to respond to the prevalent criticism regarding how June remains alive despite her increasingly risky behavior: "the premise of the show is the same as the premise of the book. That this is a recorded memoir that was, you know, found at some point in the future. This story only exists as long as June was alive to live it and write it down" (BRADLEY, 2019). While it is still possible, then, that we might see, at the end of the series, the academic symposium taking place in Nunavit in the year 2195, the parallel established between the voices of Offred and Professor Pieixoto would be transformed due to the nature of the previous narrative, which has left June behind so often as seasons progress and, for the viewer, does not seem as dependent on her storytelling as the novel does.

In its third season, the series has included a nod to Offred's oral storytelling. Early in the season, June is sent to a new posting at Commander Lawrence's house, where she has much more freedom than she did at the Waterfords—Commander Lawrence, in fact, had made arrangements for Emily and June to escape from Gilead at the end of season two, though June chose to stay behind to look for her daughter ("The Word", S02E13). In the Lawrences' basement, June finds a series of old cassette mixtapes and a tape recorder, and she uses it to record a message to Luke, which is taken to him by Serena Joy ("Unknown Caller", S03E05). Such a nod could potentially represent a finished reference to the adapted material or, on the other hand, signal the possibility that June might still record her tale at some point, independently from everything we viewers have already witnessed. In this sense, the notions of "infinite" storytelling and of criticism as a serial endeavor that Mittell (2015) highlights are especially important. For now, we simply cannot know, only guess, for even if Miller has stated that his adaptation is based on the same found-text premise of the novel, there is no guarantee *within the text* that the plan will be followed by the end of the series.

3.3 June Osborne's tale of insubordination

Like the novel that inspired it, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is built on a structure that centers the protagonist's posting at the Commander's house as the narrative present and relies on a series of analepses to explore how Gilead came into existence. Most episodes, beginning with the pilot, employ flashbacks as a constant narrative tool. Colin Watkinson, who worked as cinematographer throughout the first season, explained that, formally, Gilead and the flashbacks were conceived and filmed differently, and he and Reed Morano, who directed the first three episodes and laid out much of the visual code that would be followed by fellow directors, developed different styles for filming *The Handmaid's Tale*: the present in Gilead would be "rigid and clinical and stark and graphic and symmetrical", with "formal, symmetrical compositions with characters isolated in the frame"; the flashbacks to the time before would represent a stark contrast, "romantic, vérité, handheld style, where the characters share the frame with each other more often" (MARCKS, 2017).

Even though they are filmed in clearly distinguishable styles, however, the flashbacks to the time before are not excessively marked as such for the viewer—as Watkinson puts it, he and Morano wanted no "special processes or gimmicks" to signal their existence (MARCKS, 2017). Thus, they are quite seamlessly integrated into the episodes. This is true even of flashbacks which are not flashing back to America, but to different points in June's life already in Gilead, such as the Red Centre or her memory of arriving at the Waterford household two months prior to the point in time defined as the present in the pilot episode. For Watkinson, these flashbacks were a "middle-ground" between the two styles, making use of "slightly more desaturated look" (MARCKS, 2017). These "ungimmicky" flashbacks, especially the early-Gilead ones, ask the viewer to pay attention to the different (though usually interconnected) storylines taking place within a single episode and featuring the same characters, often even wearing the same costumes. Episode four, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum", for instance, almost exclusively flashes back to early-Gilead when June, already looking exactly like she does as Offred, attempts to escape the Red Centre with Moira. "Conventional television" has often employed flashbacks or dream/fantasy sequences in their storytelling, according to Mittell (2015), but they usually do so by "maximizing their obviousness by explicitly signaling them as differentiations from the norm" (p. 49). In complex television, he argues, these variations are much more common and much more subtle—temporary confusion, for example, is not feared by storytellers, but invited and even rewarded as viewers master "each program's internal

conventions of complex narration” (p. 50). In this scenario, the flashback structure of *The Handmaid’s Tale* can, in fact, be understood as commonplace rather than a marked novelty.

The amount of flashback material taking place in the pilot episode of the series, which takes the viewer to a variety of different moments in time, is significant. Mittell (2015, p. 56) explains that the pilot episode teaches a viewer how to watch the series it inaugurates; it both provides a first image of what a series will look like as it progresses and, at the same time, it is “exceptional” in the overwhelming amount of exposition it brings to the script. “Offred”, the pilot episode of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, does plenty of work. First, it introduces the viewer to a whole new reality, that of Gilead, flashing back to the Red Centre to display some of its rituals of indoctrination, as well as Aunt Lydia telling the Handmaids about the low fertility rates and environmental issues that Gilead uses as justifications for the system in place. It also contains two of Gilead’s important rituals taking place in the narrative present, a Ceremony and a Particution. Beyond that, the flashbacks show us who June was before the coup: we see her with Moira both in college and when she finds out about her pregnancy; we also see her as a mother and wife, although these scenes are almost purely visual and still relatively unclear.

At the same time, though the pilot episode is centered on June’s perspective, it already introduces to the viewer a plethora of characters “via shorthand”, as put by Mittell (2015, p. 56). There are *Luke* and *Hannah*, her husband and daughter of whom she was separated by the regime. There is *Moira*, her best friend who is allegedly dead—at least according to *Janine*, a fellow Handmaid who represents the scary alternative of allowing oneself to lose one’s mind under the totalitarian regime. There are the members of the Household, *Commander Waterford* and *Serena Joy* (who, we find out, is not happy as she is kept outside of important business meetings), as well as the sour *Martha Rita* and the mysterious driver *Nick*. There is the cruelty of *Aunt Lydia*. And there is *Ofglen*, of whom June feels suspicious before they reveal to each other that none of them is a pious believer. The amount of exposition is overwhelming, the cast of characters is large, and the inner workings of Gilead are all new, for this is an imaginary vision for a country that no longer exists in that reality.

Importantly, the pilot episode already lays down solid bases for our understanding of the series’ protagonist. The novel begins with Offred as someone in between two realities, that of school dances and sports competitions and that where a former high school gymnasium is surrounded with cattle prods and guns—she is already a Handmaid in Gilead. The series’ first scene, however, is the failed attempt to escape to Canada with her husband and daughter. In an

action-packed sequence, June and Hannah attempt to escape the guards and, in true melodramatic form, it initially appears that they are going to make it, only for them to get caught in the last minute—an example of the “close calls and last-minute reversals” that Warhol (2003, p. 47) attributes to “sentimental narratives” and Mittell (2015) adopts to describe the American serial. To begin the series with June’s attempt at escaping means emphasizing, early on, that she did not stand by idly as the transformation of America into Gilead took place. This idea will be further reinforced in the flashbacks of the third episode, when we see her in the front line of a protest that is dispersed by machine gun shots and bombs—a long way from the Offred who, in the novel, took Luke’s advice when he suggested that she should not go to any of the marches.

The pilot episode establishes for June a clear objective that will continue to guide many of her choices: not merely to survive and keep her sanity, but to find her daughter. In a conversation at the Red Centre, Moira promises June that they will find Hannah, and exhorts her to keep her head down if she wants the chance to do so. As the first episode ends, June’s voice-over informs us: “Someone is watching. Here. Someone is always watching. Nothing can change. It all has to *look* the same. Because I intend to survive. For her. Her name is Hannah. My husband was Luke. My name is June” (“Offred”, S01E01). Her final appearance in the episode mirrors her first appearance as Offred, in two scenes in which, visually, little happens: June quietly sits at a window bench, drenched in natural light. But if the June of the first scene looks down, as a good Handmaid is trained to do, the June that closes the episode finally looks up defiantly as she shares her real name. June’s defiance is explicitly connected with her desire to survive, but here it is no longer survival for its own sake: instead, she is always thinking of her daughter and plans to get her back. Such an objective, however, does not put her on a clear path ahead, but one in which she has plenty of detours to make.

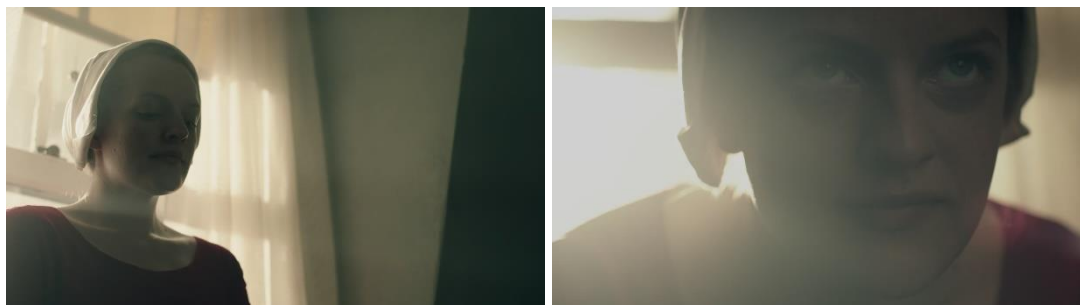


Image 1 - June’s first and last appearances as Offred in the pilot episode (“Offred”, S01E01)

Throughout the seasons, the narrative is pulled on two different directions regarding June. In Kristin Thompson's model of television analysis, tied to what she refers to as the norms of classical film storytelling, she makes an important observation that, insofar as *The Handmaid's Tale* is concerned, is relevant: "the main character in a classical Hollywood film desires something, and that desire provides the forward impetus for the narrative. We can call this figure the goal-oriented protagonist" (2003, p. 22). On the one hand, June is given a goal: to find her daughter and reunite with her family. This line is reinforced once she is sure that both Luke and Hannah are alive. For Emily Nussbaum (2017), this goal of June's alters the stakes of the narrative: in the novel, Nussbaum suggests, it is "painful for [Offred] to remember her daughter, but her drive isn't to find her family; it's to stay sane". The infinite model of commercial television storytelling leaves its mark on the series, however: "a television show, especially one that intends to run many seasons, can't bore. And so, inevitably, the stakes are raised" (NUSSBAUM, 2017); for Nussbaum, part of this scenario of raised stakes is related to the protagonist's "more overt goal" of finding her family. Nussbaum's critical stance towards the series is mostly negative, but it is not necessary to adopt the same tone while adopting her valuable insight. It is sufficient to think about the usual habits of television storytelling as simply affecting the adaptation and changing the storytelling.

In her discussion of U.S. serial television, Linda Williams (2018) aptly points out that "neither the season nor the serial's single episode mirrors the Hollywood format of strong beginnings, slightly meandering middles, and definitive ends". In this sense, she suggests that serial melodrama is rarely focused on the completion of a specific hero's goals; the serial "often explores the longest, rather than the shortest, distance between two plot points", since serial storytelling is predicated on the existence of plenty of time. One narrative pull, then, is June's desire to reunite with her family and save Hannah; when she makes a decision that is likely to have her executed at the end of season one, it is to Hannah that she turns in her voice-over narration, stating that she tried to make things better *for her*. In this sense, her potentially final detour from the road towards saving her daughter is rationalized as part of her larger goal, because, as she had stated in the pilot, her intent was to survive *for her*, too. As the season progresses, after June learns that Hannah's father is alive somewhere and that the oppressed persons in Gilead *do* have allies in important places, she seems to realize that her survival might be less important, even for Hannah, than to try to "make things better" ("Night", S01E10). When she has the chance to explain to Luke, in the tape she records in season three, about her

affair with Nick and her second child's paternity ("Unknown Caller", S03E05), she does so appealing, once again, to Hannah: "I'm doing what I need to, to survive. You should, too. No, you... You have to. You have to for Hannah. It's all for her, Luke".

If June's goal is to save Hannah, American serial storytelling tends to postpone resolution, for its logic of production is based on the notion that, as long as audiences are interested, the story must go on. Thus, the narrative both reinforces this goal several times throughout the season *and* makes her go through plenty of action that is not related to her primary goal at all. In the following sections of this chapter, I will analyze how this happens. Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 are dedicated to the analysis of June Osborne as a character both in the time before, when she was June, and in Gilead, when she is Offred. In section 3.4, I will further discuss the adaptation as an *American television serial narrative*, in an attempt to understand to what extent the choices made by Bruce Miller and his team of writers regarding June's characterization can be explained by thinking of typical storytelling modes of television writing.

3.3.1 June in the time before: a tale told in flashbacks

"Offred", the pilot episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, contains many expositional flashbacks. As the 57-minute episode progresses, it flashes back to a series of different moments in time. One of them is June's arrival at the Red Centre. This section is interrupted by a flashback-within-the-flashback, in which, after seeing Moira at the Centre, June remembers the two of them in college. In the flashback, they discuss June's paper on campus sexual assault, to which Moira jokingly replies asking: "for or against?". It is a direct inversion from the scene in the novel, when Moira tells Offred that *she* is writing a paper on date rape and Offred responds that "it sounds like some kind of dessert" (THT, p. 47). As the lengthy sequence involving several "beats" at the Red Centre continues, important aspects of the narrative are established. While June is scared and silent, Janine mocks Gilead's discourse and is severely punished for doing so—with a cattle prod and, offscreen, with the loss of an eye. Furthermore, Janine is established as a terrifying foil for June, the horrible alternative of allowing oneself to lose one's mind under Gilead's rule. Later, June and Moira talk to each other from their beds and this is when June's main goal is first established, as Moira promises her that they will find Hannah.

As the season progresses, the amount of flashback material within a single episode becomes smaller, and they tend to be centered on a single plot line within the episode. In episode two, they tell the story of Hannah's birth and of her kidnapping by one of the many grieving

mothers who had lost their newborn babies. Episode three shows the mass layoffs of working women, as well as the new laws prohibiting them from owning property or having money in their name. Episode four flashes back not to the time before, but to June and Moira's attempt at escaping the Red Centre, successful for Moira but not for June. Episode five, the last one centering June's experiences, tells the story of how Luke came into her life and of how they became lovers. Episodes six to eight are dedicated to the flashbacks of other people (respectively, Serena, Luke and Nick), episode nine does not contain flashbacks, and episode ten, closing the season, contains a single flashback sequence in its first minutes; in two beats, it details a bit further June's arrival at the Red Centre, which was also part of the pilot.

In the first of the two beats, the one that opens the episode, although June does not yet know anything concrete about her future, she learns that she is now expected to keep her head down and to always be apologetic. This is when she first learns to use the phrase "I'm sorry, Aunt Lydia", which will be powerfully mirrored later in the episode as every single Handmaid, led by June, refuses to participate in the state-mandated stoning of Janine—as each of them drops their stone to the ground, they repeat the phrase, now transformed by their gesture of defiance. This type of storytelling technique is an example of what VanArendonk (2019, p. 67) is referring to when she suggests that "an episode's constituent pieces have the power to speak more meaningfully to each other than they do to continuing plotlines in subsequent weeks", even in the most serialized narratives. If June's tentative rebellion had been building over throughout the season, when it finally takes its most dramatic expression, it is directly related to—and takes much of its significance from—an element within the same episode.

A similar pattern is followed in that, usually, there is an easily distinguishable connection between the flashbacks and the central storyline taking place in the present of the narrative. In the following pages, I will focus exclusively on what the flashbacks *show* to the viewer, regardless of overall storytelling habits in television. The flashbacks are important not only to establish *June*, but also the important people in her life: Moira, Luke and Hannah. Episodes three, five and seven are the most important ones when it comes to adapting Luke to the screen, as well as June's relationship with him. In episode three, we see him reacting to the news that June had been fired and to the changes in women's condition that precede Gilead and succeed the alleged terrorist attacks that, so far, have only been mentioned in passing. Moira is the one responsible for laying down the details regarding the new law which determined that women could no longer own property, and she explains to June that Luke would then be

responsible for the money that used to be June's. As the three talk, they make many jokes, but there is an underlying tone of resentment:

JUNE: Hey, you have all my money now, so congratulations [laughter].
 LUKE: Come on, you know I'll take care of you.
 MOIRA, laughing: Christ.
 JUNE: That's not what he's saying.
 LUKE: Why, what's wrong?
 JUNE: Nothing, it's just that—it sounds a little patronizing.
 MOIRA: So fucking patronizing!
 LUKE: Let's go. Bring it on. I wanna hear why I shouldn't take care of my wife.
 MOIRA: *My* wife? She doesn't belong to you.
 JUNE: That's right.
 MOIRA: No, no, no. She isn't your property and she doesn't need you to take care of her. See, that's where all of this comes from. You want to take care of us 'cause we're weak, right? 'Cause we're *less than*.
 LUKE, with sarcasm: That's exactly... It's exactly what I'm saying.
 MOIRA: I'll take care of your money. I'll take care of your body. You really got a fucking problem, you know that?
 LUKE: Should I just go in the kitchen and cut my dick off?
 MOIRA: No, you should do that. And while you do it, take a video of it, 'cause the girls down at the collective will love watching that shit.
 JUNE: They'll love it.
 LUKE: It's not for the collective. It's for you. You know that ("Late", S01E03).

Moira affirms twice that *he* is the problem, but they both, and June as well, laugh about the whole exchange, which ends with Luke offering to walk Moira to the subway station. Moira also tells them both that her women's collective is organizing a march against the new law, and while Luke does not attend it, never in the episode does he tell June that she should not go, as his counterpart in the novel does. Later, at night, June and Luke lay in bed together and he embraces and physically comforts her—in complete silence, she looks worried, but so does he, for we are invited to watch both of their expressions closely. This Luke does not want to have sex that same night, and this June does not share any internal thoughts of hers regarding that moment in her voice-over narration—a moment which, in the novel, is filled with ambivalence as Offred states that “something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll” (THT, p. 191).

This constant state of wondering on Offred's part does not make it into the adaptation. The June in the time before is never asked by her husband to accept the arrival of Gilead quietly. This June, then, does attend one of the marches and, as a result, has to run away from machine-gun shots and bombs. While these marches do not prevent Gilead's realization, this June does not seem to believe that to be uninvolved is her best choice. Although we will witness a transformation in this June-as-Offred as the series progresses, from a character who declares

that everything “has to look the same” (“Offred”, S01E01) if she intends to survive to a character who openly leads fellow Handmaids into rebellion against one of Gilead’s most cruel and violent rituals, the narrative establishes early on that the seeds for such rebellion were already to be found in her, even before Gilead.

In the novel, Moira is, for Offred, someone who has all the qualities she would like to have—ironically, after Jezebel’s they switch places, since Moira seems resigned to her fate and Offred ends up regaining her voice and telling their stories. Though Moira’s ending is particularly painful for her, the Offred who narrates, who knows her friend’s fate, does nonetheless present to the reader an image of a Moira that is fierce and rebellious. The June in the adaptation, however, does not feel the desperate need for Moira to fill this heroic role because her Moira does not represent everything that she is not brave enough to be. Moira tries to fight the coup that is to come, but so does she. And Moira tries to escape the Red Centre, but so does she. Moira is more irreverent than she is; episode four begins with Moira carving a message into the walls of a bathroom stall at the Red Centre—“Aunt Lydia sux”—, and June asks her not to do it because she thinks that the penalty for writing, the loss of a hand, is not worth it. But Moira remains firm, stating that it *is* worth it, because some girl who will find herself there when they are gone will then know that she is not alone (“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”, S01E04).

June finally understands what Moira was doing when she spends thirteen days locked in her room under Serena Joy’s orders and finds some words carved in the wardrobe—the “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” left by the former Offred. As it happens in the novel, sharing those words with the Commander means discovering that the former Offred had learnt them from him, and this leads to an opening for her to ask about what had happened to her. This, in turn, leads to the realization that he would “prefer” that his new Handmaid did not find her life in his house “unbearable”, for the Waterfords had already lost a Handmaid to suicide (“Nolite...”, S01E04). It is irrelevant whether, for the Commander, such a preference has to do with any humanity left in him or merely with how a second suicide would reflect on his household and his position. What matters is that this knowledge gives June some power over him, and she uses it immediately in order to be freed from her confinement. The June who narrates is grateful to the former Offred and for the writing on the wall: “There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She’s dead. She’s alive. She is me. We are Handmaids” (ibid). The June at the Red Centre asking Moira not to risk losing a hand just to

carve a childish phrase on the wall is transformed by the end of the episode, then, and the transformation will be taken one step further on episode eight, “Jezebels”, when she writes her own message on the wardrobe wall: “you are not alone”.

But episode four reminds us that even if June’s rebellious spirit is growing, the seeds were already there before. Moira manages to escape the Red Centre while June does not, but the planning and the execution of the escape is *theirs*, not only Moira’s—as they kidnap an Aunt and steal her clothes so that Moira can disguise herself, June is directly involved in the heavy work. As June decides to stay behind so Moira can escape, she is severely punished, but the episode (and the escape plot) still ends in a positive note, for this experience leads her to a new understanding regarding Handmaid solidarity. As she lays in bed with her bandaged feet covered in blood, the other Handmaids, one after the other, leave part of their food for June, who could not walk and attend the meal. This flashback is intercalated with the scene in which she finally leaves the house after two weeks, her face flooded by relief as she steps outside. June and her partner walk in silence and are joined by many other pairs of Handmaids as June walks ahead of them. The episode ends with them walking towards the camera, and June’s voice-over stating: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches”. Nussbaum (2017) refers to this sequence as a “go-girl moment” that also represents an “unsettling change” from her reading of Atwood’s novel as a work that is “never inspiring, not explicitly”, for Offred is “a witness, not a heroine”. Offred, I argue, is not just a witness—she takes an important step in the process of silence-breaking when she records her story and those of other women around her. But such moments of female solidarity within Gilead do not make into her narration; she openly expresses her dislike towards fellow Handmaids such as Janine and seems almost annoyed at Ofglen’s insistence at getting her to collaborate with Mayday once the affair with Nick begins.

June is different, and in this context it is no surprise that the first season of the series completely removes the mother character from the narrative, aside from a brief mention during one of the flashbacks in episode seven. June’s narration mentions her father in passing in episode two, long before the mother—and her illegal activity helping people with no desire to have children—is ever alluded to. June’s relationship with her mother will only be fleshed out in “Baggage”, the third episode of the second season, after June’s credentials as courageous challenger of Gilead’s rule have been well established. In “Baggage”, furthermore, even though the mother questions her daughter’s choice to marry at such a young age and “play house” when their country is living such turbulent times, she does equally question whether her daughter is

fulfilled as a book editor who spends all her days reading what others have written. Here, the mother affirms that she had made great sacrifices in the hope that her daughter would do something with her life other than “settling”; June responds, like the Offred in the novel, that she is not her mother’s “justification for existence” (“Baggage”, S02E03).

It is in this episode that June’s voice-over narration declares, like the Offred in the novel does, that the two of them “didn’t do badly by one another” and expresses a desire to share this realization with her mother (“Baggage”, S02E03; THT, p. 190). The way it resonates is different, however, because this perception of hers does not feel as something that had been a long time coming, since we only learn anything at all about this relationship in this episode, and though the mother will have a few other appearances, the story of her somewhat contentious relationship with her daughter is introduced and resolved here—at least so far. Perhaps June’s more important gesture is her choice later in the season to name her second baby, born in Gilead, “Holly”, like her mother (“Holly”, S02E11). Even so, when she has the chance to take the baby out of the country, she adopts the name Serena had chosen, “Nichole”, in a sign of gratitude since the Wife let the baby go (“The Word”, S02E13).

Offred’s famous words to her mother about the “women’s culture” that, ironically, Gilead had created, come up in the third episode of season three, “Useful”. This happens after June has not only found out about a network of rebellious Marthas, who had collaborated to take her newborn baby out of Gilead, but has also chosen five new women to work for the resistance. The words June directs to her mother, used in this context, lose much of their ironic quality, for if this *women’s culture* is not what her mother had meant, in this scenario it has been established that several women are willing to take great risks to fight back, exactly as the mother had suggested that her daughter *should* be doing in “Baggage”, and as June herself has been doing for some time now. At the Red Centre, the Aunt Lydia from the novel suggested that Gilead wanted “women united for a common end” (THT, p. 171). The series dramatizes this notion, just not in the way that Aunt Lydia had meant. This solidarity does not encompass *every* woman in Gilead, but it does involve several women, of different social strata, including, up to an extent, some of the Wives—women who are much more powerful, in Gilead’s reality, than many of the lower-rank men, though they too face many gender-based prohibitions. In Hendershot’s critical reading of the series, for example, the writing seems to be “so intent [...] on fostering a notion of female solidarity that it even takes some trouble to show that the

Commander's wife might be worthy of empathy" (2018, p. 16)—a choice, in her opinion, that has negative implications.

If the mother does question her daughter's life choices, their conflicted relationship is less solidly based on a collision between a woman's rights activist and her postfeminist daughter, because season one spent time establishing June as someone who writes papers on sexual assault rather than laughing at the "trendiness" of the topic, someone who directly confronts her husband when he sounds condescending and misogynistic, someone who takes as much action as Moira does once their rights are eroded and once they finally find out, to their horror, what a Ceremony is and how it works. Also important is the fact that the mother only appears in the narrative in the second season, after the tone of the series had been established and its reception had been shaped. The mother's role is also extremely limited, and it is mostly Moira who serves, even if in jest, as the one who antagonizes Luke throughout the flashbacks featured in the first season. But any residual antagonism is completely eroded once Moira crosses the border to Canada and is reunited with Luke in an emotional scene in which she finds out that Luke had included her in his list of family members, asking to be notified in case she crossed the border to Canada ("Night", S01E10).

In episode seven, the narrative details how Luke not only survived the gunshots that June had heard but also managed to cross the border to Canada. At the end of the episode, we see him three years later, already more or less settled in "Little America", a community of American refugees in Toronto. As explored by Olivia Hershman (2018, p. 57), introducing Luke's escape and survival into the narrative provides "glimpses of the hope and freedom" that are further reinforced by Moira's escape and her reunion with Luke. This is especially true in that the news about both of their escapes eventually reach June. If Luke's subsequent actions in Canada throughout seasons two and three do little to fulfill June's wish that he saves Hannah—for his possibilities are extremely limited—the series does nonetheless keep the hope alive, even if an implausible one, that the family might come together again. For this to be desirable for audiences, the screenplays continually deemphasize the questionable behaviors that the Luke from the time before might have indulged in, and the narrative explicitly removes the subtle patterns of connection between himself and the Commander: yes, they both enter adulterous relationships with June, but any similarities end there. If episode five introduces the information that Luke was married when he and June got together, it also informs that after the first time June asked him to leave his wife, and he complied. Furthermore, June does tell the

viewer that it was him who told her about the origin of the word “Mayday”, but he is not a Latin speaker, and neither does he emphasize the impossibility, in the English language, of *behaving like a sister*. He has no interest in “old things”. There are no further connections between the two characters.

Luke’s characterization in the series can perhaps be better understood if we consider Linda Williams’ discussion of the melodramatic mode of storytelling constituting *the* mainstream in “all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment”, American television included (2012, p. 526). As previously explored, for Williams the melodrama is built on both affect and moral legibility: good needs not, and often does not, trump evil, but good and evil must be *recognizable*; she emphasizes that the melodrama creates a notion of *felt good*, which is *felt* and not just *good* because the perceived “good” might, in fact, be extremely flawed—yet, in the fictional framework of that particular story, the shared feeling of a *felt good* needs to be recognized. The melodrama, Williams argues, has as one of its essential qualities “the need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home ‘space of innocence’”, because without such a belief it is not possible to support the notion that “moral good is possible”, which would defeat the melodramatic construction (p. 525).

As I have explored throughout this thesis, it is usually agreed that the authors of dystopias extrapolate the perceived realities that surround them. While the comparison between the reality that gave rise to such imagined horrors and the dystopian world tends to vouch in favor of the former—which is obviously less horrible in comparison—, such a notion of a “felt good” is not truly possible, for it is exactly *that reality* that leads to such a horrific state of affairs. Atwood’s novel is particularly emphatic, with its ironic epilogue, that to return to where America had been before the coup is no real solution; at best, it is only a palliative. Offred herself, while expressing the desire to return to her past life, recognizes its problems, and this is part of her growing consciousness not only about herself but about the wider reality around her. Characters that are made—and remain—ambiguous in her narration, such as Luke and the Commander, are part of the inconclusive nature of the narrative: Luke for seeming like he is a bigger part of the problem than Offred would like to admit, the Commander for his perception of the very real social issues in the time before to which Offred herself was not paying attention. In the melodramatic mode, however, this ambiguity is either destroyed or at least softened. June recognizes that she—and fellow Americans—had been “asleep”, that they did not pay attention to the warning signs (“Late”, S01E03), but her personal interrogation of herself does not take

place; it does not have to take place, because the issues with Luke are not there, her inertia is not there, her conflicted relationship with her mother is largely absent, limited to a single episode. Instead, her life with Luke is drawn much more clearly as not only a “felt good”, but as what the narrative posits without nuance as simply *good*. Keeping both Luke and Hannah alive keeps the possibility of this “felt good” to feel good once again.

3.3.2 June in Gilead: a journey into bravery

In Atwood’s novel, the last day that is narrated by Offred involves two rituals happening subsequently, a Salvaging and a Particution. Both represent forms of public execution, but they are of different natures. Both men and women can be “salvaged”, but the ritual is always segregated, and Offred explains that Women’s Salvagings are rare, for women are “so well behaved” (THT, p. 285). Even so, she had attended one before and knew what was expected of her; as another Handmaid—a stranger to Offred—is hanged, every other woman must touch the rope in unison “to show [their] unity with the Salvagers and [their] consent, and [their] complicity in the death of this woman” (p. 288). She is not ready, however, for a Particution, in which Handmaids are demanded to execute an alleged criminal with their own bare hands. She knows the rules to it and had “heard rumors” (p. 290) about the practice, but seems almost unable to believe, even in Gilead, that the rumors were true. Once the time comes for her to act, to kill, she is too stunned to play the role expected of her. Though she feels anger rising in her after Aunt Lydia claims that the man is allegedly a rapist and that his victim was a pregnant Handmaid whose baby died, Offred takes a step back once it occurs to her, as she looks at his nearly unrecognizable face, that this man was not Luke, but it could have been, and it could have been Nick too—under Gilead’s law, they are both sinners and they are both criminals, after all. She can only watch in horror as Ofglen knocks the man dead with three deadly strikes (Ofglen later explains that the man was not a rapist, but a fellow member of Mayday, so what she did was help him die as quickly as possible).

In the series, the Particution happens early in the narrative—in the pilot episode—, without a Women’s Salvaging to precede it. In the extremely brutal sequence of the execution, June is an active participant and, in fact, the first woman to hit the man; she continues to do so until there is blood in her face and in her hands. Her anger is presented as misplaced, however, for it is right before the Handmaids are asked to murder the man that Janine shares with her the news that Moira is allegedly dead; her reaction seems to be, above all else, to the news of the

loss of her friend. June does not yet consider that Gilead could just as easily attribute such a crime to her own husband, had they wanted to. Having the brutal Particution so early in the narrative is a significant choice taken by the adapters. Hutcheon (2013, p. 11), while suggesting that a narrative's fabula can be "transmediated", states that the fabula can change in the process of adaptation, sometimes radically, and in different ways; according to her, ordering is the most obvious and common way in which the fabula is transformed. Furthermore, Stam (2000, p. 73) highlights that the sequence of narratives can change "with clear ideological overtones", as exemplified by John Ford's 1940 adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which, in Stam's view, transitions from "a spiraling descent into oppression into an ascent into New Deal benevolence and good order".

In the story told in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, separating the Particution from the Salvaging and placing one at the earliest episode and the other at the end of the season allows the viewer to understand how much June has changed from the woman she was in her early days at the Waterford house. Over the course of the season, June realizes that she is not alone: women such as Emily and Alma reveal themselves to be rebels, Luke and Hannah are alive, June finds out that there are people willing to help in high places such as the Mexican embassy. In the tenth episode, she gets her Mayday package and finds in them the stories of many oppressed women who, despite Gilead's severe prohibitions, managed to commit the act of writing and of storytelling. By then she also knows that the Commander can be manipulated, and, because of him, who takes her to Jezebel's, that Gilead's strict façade sometimes crumbles, and rules can be bent. Perhaps most important of all, however, if we once again think about VanArendonk's suggestion that the elements of a specific episode always speak more powerfully to one another than to the other episodes, is the new Ofglen. As they walk to the Salvaging, Ofglen complains about June being late, eager not to defy Gilead in any way, not even in tardiness. This Ofglen had, in episode five, told June that she considered her life as a Handmaid much better than her former life as a homeless person struggling with drug addiction. This is the woman who, unprovoked by others, first speaks out against what is being asked of the Handmaids. June follows her lead in refusing to stone Janine to death and is then followed by the other Handmaids.

To think about June's journey from the woman she was in the Particution to the woman she became at the Salvaging is to think about the importance of altered chronology, but also about how new additions to the story, as well as the expansion of the role of minor

characters, impacts the narrative. The new Ofglen is an example, but most important of all is making the woman to be executed a character that the viewer has known since the pilot, when in the novel the woman is a stranger. Because the woman to be executed is someone the viewer was asked to empathize with throughout the episodes, it becomes more difficult to think of the ritual as just another role that June has to play if she wants to survive. To make Janine known, and a sufferer, like June but even more violated, is part of the “moral legibility” that Williams (2012) describes as essential to the melodramatic mode.

Another important aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* that is radically transformed by such alterations—altered chronology and additional original material—is Offred's affair with Nick, which I have established as ambiguous due to the conflicting roles it has in Offred's journey. In the adaptation, though June recognizes that her continued interest in the affair is no “act of rebellion” and that to say that would mean looking for “excuses” rather than accepting the truth that she is there because “it feels good”, (“Jezebels”, S01E08), the affair never makes her less interested in rebelling and *she* is the one who seeks Mayday when Emily tells her about it. When Nick suggests that they should stop seeing one another because of the danger, June directly confronts him, exasperated at the thought that he could think his life under Gilead's strict rules was enough. This tone of confrontation is a constant in June's relationship with him.

The Offred in the novel admits that every time she knocked on his door it was “a beggar's knock” and that every time she was invited in she experienced this “as the most incredible benevolence and luck”—in her usual self-awareness, she finishes the delivery of this information about herself candidly: “I told you it was bad” (THT, p. 280). If June admits that her motivations are in no way political or rebellious but related to her own individual desires (which in themselves are not *insignificant*), the series never allows her to display such submissiveness. Just as June had directly confronted Luke's unintentional condescension in the time before, so does she confront Nick's empty statements about his wishes for a different life, which he is unable to verbalize. During the time when June is made prisoner by Serena Joy in the fourth episode, Nick witnesses her desperate, frustrated cries in the back of the car as he drives her home from a doctor's appointment; after she calms down, one of these exchanges takes place:

NICK: Look, I'm sorry this is happening to you. I wish—

JUNE: You wish what? [silence] What do you wish? [silence] (“Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum”, S01E04).

If it is true that Atwood directly exploits the romance plot, it occupies a large portion of the novel only if one considers that the Commander could potentially be the one to fulfill this line of development. If the adaptation opens this possibility in episode two, when June first goes to his office to play Scrabble, it is soon closed in episode five, when the Commander is depicted as the villainous man that he will be for the rest of the season—significantly, this happens in the same episode in which June’s affair begins and which, in the flashbacks, tells the story of how June and Luke became a couple. June and Luke’s budding relationship is directly opposed to June and Nick having sex under Serena’s command—awkwardly, silently, with Serena in the room looking the other way. It is this moment, in fact, which is explicitly referred to as a rape in season three, that ends up leading to Serena’s arrest in Canada (“Mayday”, S03E13). Luke serves, then, as a direct counterpoint to June’s life under the Gileadean regime, for it represents her former freedom to choose, to move as she pleased, to privacy.

Yet the final act of the episode changes the tone. In the adaptation, June’s shopping partner Ofglen/Emily is significantly expanded: more than a Mayday collaborator, this Ofglen gains a backstory and further developments connected to it. Emily becomes a Handmaid because she was married to, and had a child with, another woman—in Gilead’s language, she is a *gender traitor*. She is pardoned of her later sins in Gilead (having an affair with a Martha) because she is fertile, and her penalty is to be submitted to genital mutilation. In episode five, Emily (now Ofsteven) reappears transformed into a lifeless, fading version of her former self. But her last appearance in the season, later in the same episode, gives her a new breath of life: not only does she share her real name with June (who is too afraid to do the same), but she impetuously steals a car and eventually runs over a Guardian. The sequence is gory, but framed as triumphant—if bittersweet—, as the camera shows the transformation of the expression on her face, from confusion to a smile, while we witness the same process happening with June. The soundtrack to this sequence further reinforces this action as a small triumph of Emily’s.



Image 2 - Emily and June smile as Emily drives the stolen car (“Faithful”, S01E05)

June's voice-over narration later that night cements a positive reading of the scene, even after she saw Emily being taken away to an unknown future by the guards: "They didn't get everything. There was something inside her they couldn't take away. She looked invincible"—invincible being the word Luke first used to describe June when they met ("Faithful", S01E05). This rationalization is what leads June to return to Nick's room, now a choice of her own. As the affair continues, it is with him that June first shares her real name in the following episode ("A Woman's Place"). This act of sharing is partly inspired by her desperation; she is horrified that she had told the Mexican ambassador that she was "happy" as a Handmaid and that she had chosen such a life. When he tries to calm her down while still calling her "Offred", she asks him to stop calling her that. This sequence with Nick is important because this is the first time that June (unlike the Offred in the novel) states out loud that she is raped every month. This is the first step for her to muster the courage to repeat the same truth to the ambassador the following morning. Her pleadings do not achieve any concrete results with the ambassador, who seems moved, but not enough to suspend negotiations with Gilead (which include trading *for Handmaids*). But her assistant, when he is left alone with June for a few minutes, tells her that her husband is alive and that he could take a note to him. Her act of courage is thus rewarded, but the courage only surfaces because she allows herself to *feel* her pain, and the two scenes explored above rely heavily on the notion of making her emotions *overtly visible*, which Warhol (2003) considers an important characteristic of what she refers to as "sentimental narratives" and which Mittell (2015) reads as a feature of many television narratives.

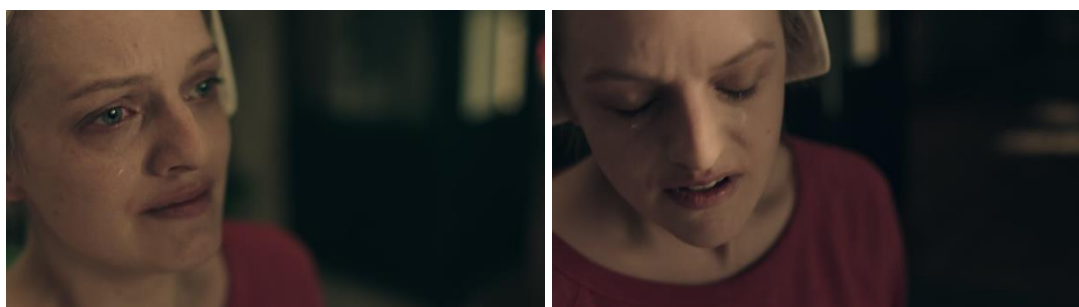


Image 3 - An emotional June cries after talking to the Mexican ambassador ("A Woman's Place", S01E06)

In direct opposition to either Luke or Nick is Commander Waterford. In the previous chapter, I have established that, in the novel, the Commander is usually read less like a

menacing figure and more like either a victim of the system that he helped to design or as someone who becomes ludicrous for Offred as she gets to know him better. The adaptation takes a different approach to the character, especially from episode five onwards. June is first invited to the Commander's office in the second episode, and as she goes downstairs, at night, in the dark, she tells us in her voice-over narration that this made her "think of the girl in the horror movie who goes down into the basement when the light is out" ("Birth Day", S01E02). What the entire sequence emphasizes is her trepidation: we can hear her deep breaths, the screeching sounds the door makes as she opens it, his voice coming through the dark. The night, however, is completely surprising for her, because he is friendly—what we witness in him, to disorienting effect, is mostly a quiet friendliness. Episode five changes this perception abruptly. As he sits in the darkest corner of the office, he talks to June about Gilead allowing her (and every other woman) to fulfill their "biological destinies in peace" ("Faithful", S01E05). Here June, who has become more comfortable in his presence, confronts him, especially his statement that love "was nothing more than lust"—she defies him by responding that maybe that was true for him, but it was not for her. This is her first direct confrontation of his ideas, and he notices it. He now reminds her of his power and of her expected submission:

COMMANDER: Remember Ofglen who used to live next door? Ofglen had urges that led her to do unnatural things. I'm sure to her it felt like love. In cases such as these, the punishment is death, but, out of respect for her position, we let her live. We're not without compassion.

JUNE: What did you do to her?

COMMANDER: We helped her. We saved her. We had a doctor take care of the problem. It's such a small problem, truth be told. Every love story is a tragedy if you wait long enough.

The audience already knew what had happened to Ofglen/Emily, but June did not, and neither were we explicitly aware of his actual knowledge and approval of this specific act of cruelty. After he reveals this information to June, her revulsion is physical: as she remembers him stating that "better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some", she has to run to a sink to vomit, a movement that the camera allows us to watch in its entirety in a single take. In the novel, when the Commander tells Offred that he would prefer her life to be bearable, she uses this knowledge to ask for information about the overall situation in Gilead. The Commander in the novel does state that now women could "fulfill their biological destinies in peace" (THT, p. 231), unlike in the time before, and Offred does suggest that they had overlooked love in their system, to which he replies that "those years were just an anomaly,

historically speaking” (p. 232). But he does not seem to do it only to antagonize her, and neither does the discussion make Offred viscerally disgusted, leading her to throw up. Obviously, the Commander is complicit with this regime which murders its opponents and those who do not follow its dogma, but he does not talk about it with Offred, and she paints their exchange as a conversation in which the two participate as he looks at her “with his candid boy’s eyes” (p. 232).

Physical reactions of disgust from June are, however, the norm in the adaptation, and another one takes place in episode six, when the Commander demands that she kisses him for the first time. The dynamics of power shift here: he reminds her that being in his office “is a privilege” (“A Woman’s Place”, S01E06) and that she should never appear bored while there. She gets up to leave but stops herself halfway through. The camera, close to her face, reveals her disgust and anger before she turns back around to tell him that she is sorry. He uses this obvious weakness to manipulate her, running his hands over her body as she tries not to show any emotion but is unable not to recoil slightly from his touch, and asking her to kiss him *like she means it*—all of it with dramatic music playing in the background once again. As he dismisses her after the kiss, there is an abrupt transition from her watery eyes to her teeth: she is violently brushing them until she spits blood on the sink, which the camera lingers on before she starts it all over again with the same energy.

Episodes eight and nine see June’s relationship with the Commander become sexual beyond the ritualistic Ceremony. As the Commander shaves her legs, dresses her up in a sparkly party dress, holds a mirror for her to put on make-up, and later parades her around the bar and takes her up to a room, we continuously witness June’s distress and discomfort—often apparent in her eyes—both towards the unexpected situation and towards his body touching hers. Before they have sex for the first time, what we see is only her face, in close-up, as a single tear rolls down her cheek (“Jezebels”, S01E08); in the next episode, we watch the two having sex mostly through the either detached or, alternatively, distressed expression on her face, once again filmed in close-up. The show does not allow him to be truly ridiculous in either of these sequences, even though he does seem like a giddy adolescent for half of episode nine, when it is June who suggests that they should go back to the brothel. But instead of having Moira tell June that she had “had him” and that “he’s the pits” (THT, p. 255)—which Ferns (1990, p. 133) singles out as a demonstration that “he is conspicuously lacking in the sexual vitality of the Old Testament patriarchs, being both probably sterile (as even his wife concedes) and sexually

inept”—what we have is him suggestively telling June that he knows her friend as he puts his arm around Moira’s bare shoulders. “I thought you’d welcome this little reunion”, he says suggestively, “aren’t you friends?”; she responds quickly and incisively: “Not that kind of friend” (“The Bridge”, S01E09). The disgust is also there, but it is mainly his cruelty that is highlighted a few minutes later: as June cries copiously after she has to say goodbye to Moira once again, he looks profoundly annoyed and simply tells her to “pull herself together”.

The melodrama that has become so imbricate in all forms of moving-picture entertainment does not demand *excess*, but it is permeated by “high emotion and sensation” (WILLIAMS, 2018), or “strong affect” (WILLIAMS, 2012, p. 529). Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* frequently relies on high emotion for its storytelling. Williams emphasizes that the melodrama has “pronounced victims and villains” (2018), and that the “pathos of the suffering victim turned into righteous action is part of the alchemy of melodrama’s cultural power” (2012, p. 527). As I have discussed in the last few pages, the series, in its first season, often positions Commander Waterford as the villainous figure within the narrative. The series does sometimes highlight the powerlessness that even the Commanders find themselves in when facing the totalitarian state, such as in episode ten, when Commander Putnam (Janine’s Commander) undergoes surgical removal of his hand once it becomes known by all that he was having an affair with his Handmaid. For the June who is just beginning to learn how to navigate Gilead, however, the system gains a face, Fred Waterford’s: it is in June’s relationship with him that she can be her most active and reactive self this early on. Though June does sometimes challenge the authority of the state directly, those are moments in which she necessarily needs to be backed by others, since, as explored in the literature review about dystopian writing, a single individual acting alone can be easily crushed by a power that is much stronger than he or she could ever be. If Waterford gains in villainous traces, June gains in traces of the suffering victim, as her emotions are often on display in scenes where she interacts with Luke, Nick, Serena Joy and Moira. Nussbaum (2017) describes Atwood’s Offred as “often ashamed and numb [...] even a little cold”—this is something that Offred herself rationalizes as she narrates: “There’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (THT, p. 17). But it would not do to describe June as “numb” or “cold”, for the series delves in her emotions, which are, increasingly, strongly felt and dramatized for the viewer.

I have established that episode six is important in June’s development because it is the first time she recognizes out loud that Gilead sanctions a ritualized form of rape, to which she

is the victim, and she finally verbalizes her horror without containment. To recognize such a reality to herself, to verbalize her anger to Nick, and to muster up the courage to share her real name with someone else in Gilead are important steps for her to finally ask for the ambassador's help. As she allows herself to dive deeper in her suffering during her plea to the ambassador, the camera gets closer and closer to her face—exploring Elisabeth Moss's expressive features and particularly her eyes—in one of the many extreme close-ups that have become part of the series' visual identity. Warhol (2003, p. 43) suggests that one of the ways film can make emotion visible is through the “excruciating close-up”, and Julia Leyda's analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2018, p. 180) suggests that the close-up “allows the viewer to observe at an intimate proximity the spectacle of another human face as it registers the play of emotions with the subtlest expressions, while at the same time serving as a kind of mirror, encouraging identification”. This visual staple of the series, then, is often combined with emotive dialogue to create the “high emotion” described by Williams (2018) as an essential feature of melodrama.

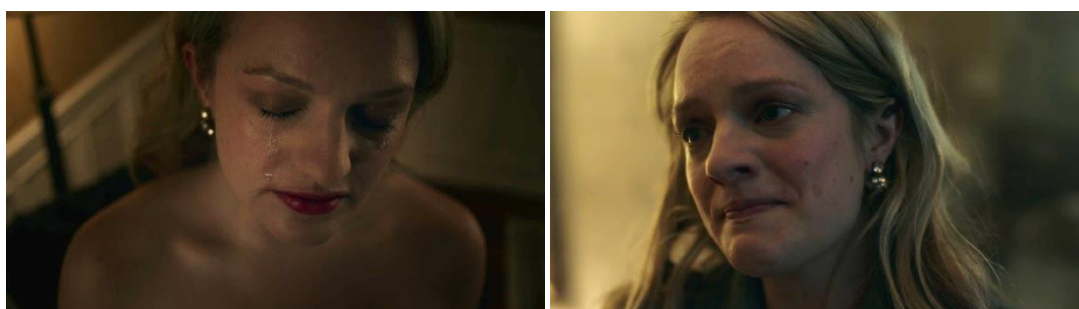


Image 4 - June at Jezebel's in “Jezebels” (S01E08) and “The Bridge” (S01E09)

What this sequence also highlights is, once again, what Warhol (2003, p. 47) describes as “last-minute reversals, for better or for worse”, for June's courageous step falls on unsympathetic ears; the ambassador, while “sorry”, rationalizes her choice to trade with Gilead for Handmaids, explaining that her hometown had not seen the birth of a living child in six years. However—literally in the last minute of the episode—, once the ambassador leaves the room, her assistant reveals to June (calling her by her real name) that Luke is alive. June's speech act might not have given her the result she expected, but it did give her a small victory nonetheless, for knowing that Luke is alive and safe allows for hope of a different life and without hope, as we have seen, there is no action. The following episode, which centralizes Luke and wraps up with him getting June's message after three years of silence, once again

makes the use of overtly visible emotions: an extreme close-up shot of Luke's face as he slowly processes that June is alive allows the audience to share in his feelings as he smiles through tears and alternates between crying and smiling with joy. It would be difficult to sustain that the series follows the tendency Warhol describes in "sentimental" narratives of eliciting the "good cry" from the audience "*much more often* [...] by scenes of triumph than by scenes of sadness" (2003, p. 45, my emphasis)—but sequences such as this demonstrate that this feature is another one that the series incorporates in its storytelling.

Music plays an important role in this closing moment. Throughout the series, the use of pre-existing songs to accompany the end credits of each episode usually rests on an equilibrium between empowering and ironic. This characteristic is explored by Jen Chaney regarding the use of Simple Minds' "Don't You (Forget About Me)" in episode two. Creating an intertext with *The Breakfast Club* (1985), the song invokes, for the viewer familiar with the film, its final image, with John Bender's "antiestablishment fist in the air" (CHANEY, 2017). Chaney suggests that the intertext goes further: like the kids in the film, June

did what her authority figure asked of her in that simultaneously innocent and illicit meeting: She played Scrabble and kept him company. But because of the Commander's willingness to share his plans to travel to D.C., she feels like this relationship could be used to her advantage as part of the resistance. Like the teens in that John Hughes movie, she feels like she's a step ahead of the man and the system holding her captive (CHANEY, 2017).

This victorious feeling is cut short abruptly, however, once June reaches the gate to find an unknown woman waiting for her. When June asks her what had happened to Ofglen, the new woman simply tells her that she *is* Ofglen, which, of course, she is; Handmaids are valuable yet disposable, and whatever identity they are allowed to have is only temporary—this ending is a "jarring reminder that what's happening on this series is very far removed from the world of '80s teen movies" (CHANEY, 2017). As the end credits roll and the song starts playing from the beginning once again, it gains a different meaning: don't you, June, forget about me, the former Ofglen, who asked you to collaborate with the resistance, regardless of what might have happened to me. Episode seven closes off with something that the series had not yet used: a love song, in the context of a love scene, for June's short note to Luke told him that she loved him and, in the closing shot of the episode, he responds in wonder, looking up with teary eyes. The song chosen is not without irony, for the speaker in Cigarettes After Sex's "Nothing's Gonna Hurt You Baby" states that nothing will hurt his lover as long as they are together and

that nothing will separate them, which in no way applies to Luke’s present situation. To the series’ music supervisor Michael Perlmutter however, “there’s a little bit of melancholy in [the moment], but it’s definitely hopeful. You feel that bond between them now. You feel like they’re talking to each other” (FERNANDEZ, 2017)—the scene *is* constructed very candidly, without detachment and irony, speaking more to their emotional connection and faith in one another than to any possible ironic counterpoints.



Image 5 - Luke’s face changes as he assimilates his emotions after getting June’s message (“The Other Side”, S01E07)

Another interesting choice in the adaptation is the sequence at Jezebel’s, when June finds Moira again. In episode eight, the first one featuring the brothel, she—like the Offred in the novel—finds there a resigned Moira, but the dialogue is different: June insists that the two of them would find a way out of there, and when Moira suggests that it is impossible, June insists that it is not, for now she knows that Luke got out. June does not attempt any further convincing when Moira reminds her that Luke’s situation was different from theirs, but episode nine changes that. Realizing that rules can be bent within Gilead impacts June, along with everything else she spent season one learning. When June meets with Moira once again in episode nine and tries to enlist her help to complete her mission, Moira resists the idea:

JUNE: Moira, I thought you were dead. I thought they killed you. I thought they strung you up somewhere. To rot. It tore me apart. But I didn’t give up like a coward.

MOIRA: You think what you want.

JUNE: I think you’re a liar. Because you said we would find Hannah.

MOIRA: You will find her.

JUNE: No. *We* will. *That’s* what you said. When all of this was over, you—you promised. You fucking pinky swore. Or don’t you remember? Moira, do not—do not let them grind you down. You keep your fucking shit together. You fight!

MOIRA: I was doing all right until I saw you again (“The Bridge”, S01E09).

As Moira leaves, the same orchestral music that had played when they were separated at the subway station in episode four plays over the scene, and the camera goes in for another extreme close-up of June's face as she breaks down in a full-body cry. June is crushed: her attempt at helping Mayday did not work, she was unable to complete the mission, and Moira seemed fully resigned to her fate. Once again, however, the series makes use "last-minute reversals", as well as the counterbalancing of "grief and suffering" (WARHOL, 2003, p. 49), for the episode ends with two wide smiles, June's and Moira's. June's desperate plea to her friend was effective in the end: Moira got the package for June and it got to her friend's hands through an ally. The last seconds of the episode establish that Moira returned to her former defiant self, dismantling the toilet to get ahold of a sharp tool, as she had in episode four, and stealing a car. Though the audience will find out in the following episode that Moira got to Canada, June will only hear about it in the last third of season two ("Smart Power", S02E09), once again providing her with much-needed hope. The moment of triumph becomes even more significant because it is juxtaposed with the moments (of which there are many) of suffering.



Image 6 - June and Moira close "The Bridge" (S01E09) triumphantly

Throughout the first season, we witness June growing into an increasingly courageous—and rebellious—self. She ends it walking alone, in slow-motion, in front of fellow Handmaids to the (extradiegetic) sound of Nina Simone's "Feeling Good"—a visual manifestation of June's voice-over narration early in the episode, when she suggests that those in power should not have given the women uniforms if they did not want them to become an army ("Night", S01E10). Earlier in the episode, Serena Joy had taken her to see Hannah from afar, as a reminder: June's daughter would be protected as long as she did not do anything stupid to the baby she was carrying, which would be given to Serena. Once the reality of Hannah being alive fully materializes for June, it is likely that she realizes she might never reunite with her daughter

as she wishes, but her daughter is nonetheless *there*, in Gilead, just as she is: she is a girl in Gilead who could, one day, also be asked to kill someone by stoning or, alternatively, be the victim of such a cruelty herself. After seeing her daughter, June inspires the Handmaids to rebel. As she looks through the window waiting for her punishment, she is a changed woman, for whom mere survival is not enough: “I ought to be terrified. But I feel... serene. And there is a kind of hope, it seems, even in futility. I tried to make things better for Hannah. Change the world, even just a little bit” (“Night”, S01E10).

If June is the one who leads the other Handmaids to rebellion, however, it is equally important to emphasize that the rebellion works because it is *collective*. In episode three, when June is being questioned by the Eyes regarding the extent of her knowledge about Emily’s transgressions, she directly confronts Aunt Lydia. When the Eye asks her why she had not reported that her shopping partner was a lesbian, June responds that she did not do it because Emily was her friend, to which Aunt Lydia responds, hitting her face with the cattle prod: “Remember your scriptures. Blessed are the meek”. As Aunt Lydia backs away, June tells her out loud: “And blessed are those who suffer for the cause of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. I remember” (“Late”, S01E03). This causes her to be violently beaten and punished with the prod, and the violence only stops when Serena Joy interferes. This June is in direct contrast with the one in the pilot episode, who, during a flashback to the Red Centre, watches quietly as Aunt Lydia uses “blessed are the meek” before giving Janine an electric shock; only in her voice-narration does June challenge it. The careful selection of Biblical passages (and, in the novel, the frequent creation of sayings attributed to Bible) without allowing the ones who are oppressed by it to actually read the book is one of Gilead’s many ways of manipulating discourse. The Offred in the novel is equally attuned to such manipulations, and, in her narration, she often responds and corrects Aunt Lydia’s distorted discourse (cf. THT, p. 55, p. 74, p. 100), but she never directly confronts it, not out loud, not during the time narrated. June is less contained and more impulsive. Here, however, with June completely alone in her transgression, it does not achieve anything substantial. This is why, in an interview, Bruce Miller states that she *evolves* past this point in her development to become smarter; to quote the Bible to Aunt Lydia is, in Miller’s words, to simply “lose her temper” (BRADLEY, 2019). Though it is a form of resistance, it is an inept one, for it does not have any actual effects.

3.4 *The Handmaid's Tale*, American television narrative

If the mainstream form of television storytelling operates according to a melodramatic mode which creates a moral legibility deriving from a notion of “felt good” that audiences are invited to participate in (WILLIAMS, 2012), it certainly does not depend on heroic protagonists to do its work. Mittell’s chapter on television characters in *Complex TV* has a long subsection dedicated to exploring the “Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men” (2015, p. 142) that many celebrated television productions of the past two decades have invited audiences to participate in. The scholar explores an important question that comes along with the recent popularity of antiheroes on television: why we, as audiences, would want to subject ourselves to these long exchanges with such horrible men. He proposes, then, that an important feature of these narratives is the idea of “relative morality”, which positions the troublesome behavior of the antihero against a background populated by *even more* troublesome characters, and this, in turn, helps to “highlight the antihero’s more redeeming qualities” (p. 143). Furthermore, as we come to know these characters in more depth—and long-form television is particularly productive in this sense—, this knowledge creates an allegiance between ourselves and the character, who we “come to regard [...] as an ally in our journey through the storyworld” (p. 144).

The analysis proposed by Mittell posits *Breaking Bad*’s (AMC, 2008-2013) Walter White as an exceptional case among the many hideous men that television has explored since the successful run of *The Sopranos*. In his view, this is a special case because the storytelling is based on a tremendous degree of character change that is mirrored by the series’ very title: *to break bad*, he explains, is “an American southern idiom for someone losing his or her moral compass” (p. 151). Mittell emphasizes, however, that it is this gradual change from a very distinct starting point that guarantees the attachment of viewers; when Walt’s story begins, his decisions seem “driven less by questionable morality than by a desperate situation—he makes a series of bad choices that lead to his eventual moral dissolution, but he starts by evoking pathetic pity rather than the charismatic confidence of most other antiheroes” (2015, p. 153). Furthermore, Mittell emphasizes that our alignment with Walt is not without complications, and as the series progresses the narrative might force it to swing to his side-kick Jesse, for example. Importantly, even as it keeps Walter at the center, the series remains a “highly moral tale, in which actions have consequences, and thus we expect it is unlikely that Walt emerges from this story as a victorious hero” (p. 162). The series might be challenging in that it leaves viewers “in an uncomfortable situation” (p. 158) facing Walt, but moral legibility is still there.

In the third season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, June kills a man, shoots a Guardian without pause, does nothing to prevent the suicide of a mentally ill Wife (who had always been critical of Gilead and had done nothing but try to help her) and, with her increasingly selfish behavior, contributes to the execution of two women as disempowered as herself. Due to these narrative choices, critic Liz Shannon Miller has suggested that the writers should allow June to go “full *Breaking Bad*” in season four (MILLER, 2019). For Miller, Walt and June are similarly positioned in that Walt initially has a “very compelling reason” for his questionable choices, as does June under Gilead. The piece makes the case for June to be allowed to *break bad* like Walter does, however, exactly because, in Miller’s view, despite the detours taken in June’s course (causing fellow oppressed women to die and suffer for nothing, for example) some moments in the narrative “go so far as to canonize her”.

Season three ends with a successful plan of June’s (that comes to fruition with the help of many others, most of them women) to rescue several children from Gilead. However successful, the plan demands a sacrifice from her: she is shot when she decides to take the risk of distracting the guards for the others to escape safely. As she is carried, immobilized, by fellow Handmaids, her voice-over narration alludes directly to the Book of Exodus (3:7-8): “And the Lord said: I have seen my people in bondage, and I have heard their cry. I know their sorrows. And I am come to deliver them from the hand of evil men and to lead my people out of that sorrowful place to a land flowing with milk and honey” (“Mayday”, S03E13). Not only do the closing images of the season present June as self-sacrificing, but her narration goes as far as directly connecting her to God and Moses. If we think of O’Sullivan’s (2010) proposal that the short television season is a meaningful structure in itself, we will notice that a pattern emerges throughout the three seasons, one that is in close connection with Warhol’s (2003, p. 49) notion of “grief and suffering” and “joy and triumph” necessarily taking turns in the sentimental narrative. As it has been previously mentioned in this thesis, season two often criticized for its brutality, which some viewers and commentators considered excessive. But that season too ends triumphantly (if, as also put by Warhol, “bittersweet”—as it is bound to be in the context of Gilead), as a network of Marthas selflessly risk themselves to get June and her baby out of Gilead. The seasons are filled with immense suffering, but such suffering is not relentless: instead, it makes every victory more triumphant, every risk more significant.

Episodes two and three of season one are primarily episodes of *grief*. If in episode two June learns about Mayday and decides to work with the resistance by sharing information about

the Commander with Emily, the episode ends with her finding out that Emily has been replaced by a different Ofglen. Episode three ends with June getting her period and being severely punished by Serena for something beyond her control: she is left under arrest in her room. The final image of the episode is Emily, caught in a horrified scream, as she learns that she had been submitted to genital mutilation. The tone changes in the following three episodes: though filled with horrific imagery, they all end in (bittersweet) moments of *joy*: June learns that she has some power by manipulating the Commander in episode four, she has the courage to defy Gilead's belief system in choosing to have sex with Nick in episode five, she finds out that Luke is alive in episode six. Episode seven, which tells Luke's story, for the first—and so far the only—time completely distances the viewer from June's life under Gilead, and functions as what O'Sullivan refers to as a “jarring interruption” in the season (2010, p. 71). The hope this episode of survival and escape provides both June and the viewer with is important, for the final “tercet” of the season is also its most hopeful: episode eight ends with June decidedly stating, in her voice-over narration, that she will no longer allow herself to be someone who accepts her own entrapment, episode nine ends with Moira's smile as she attempts to escape after concluding June's Mayday mission, and episode ten features the collective refusal of Handmaids to accept Gilead's demand that they stone Janine to death—which June, in the final moments of the episode, defines as an attempt to make the world better for her daughter.

The final images of episode ten (and, consequently, of the season), which see June leaving the Waterford house and stepping into a black van, are accompanied by her voice-over narration repeating Offred's famously ambiguous last words from the novel: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. I've given myself over into the hands of strangers. I have no choice. It can't be helped. And so I step up into the darkness within, or else the light” (“Night”, S01E10). But the final words are further qualified by what follows the final fade to black of the season. Annette Davison (2014) proposes the concept of the “music postface” to describe the practice of ending each television episode with a different choice of pre-existing music rather than the same repeated score, a relatively uncommon strategy that begins with *The Sopranos*. Davison connects this strategy to Mittell's idea of complexity, since it transforms a historically static formal element of television—the end credits—into something that is always changeable, and which demands viewer interpretation. This practice is adopted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the final episode of the first season uses Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' 1976 song “American Girl” as its music postface. The song talks about an

anonymous girl who believes that there is more to life than her current circumstances, and that she would pursue that notion even if she had to die trying. The intertext the song creates with June, an *American girl* herself, is evident. A viewer could potentially associate the upbeat rhythm of the song, however, to its former (and famous) use in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), playing in a scene in which a young woman happily sings along to Tom Petty in her car immediately before being caught by serial killer Buffalo Bill. In this sense, the choice of song creates a plethora of possible interpretations that can vary from viewer to viewer, and the season that ends is thus complexified.

For a long time, the medium of television was dismissed by many scholars and “regarded with fear, hostility and suspicion by various commentators and critics” (CASEY et al., 2008, p. 70). It is thus unsurprising that notions of a special “golden age” of television and of “quality television” would appear and be popularized within the field of television studies, even though there is no critical consensus regarding what exactly these concepts mean and what kind of productions they are to be applied to (CAPANEMA, 2017). Scholars such as Mittell (2015) and Arlindo Machado (apud CAPANEMA, 2017) point to the problematic aspects of a term such as “quality television”, especially when conceptualized as it is in R. J. Thompson’s famous *Television’s Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (1997)¹⁸. According to its critics, Thompson emphasizes that such television is different from the “regular” one and associates it to storytellers coming from other fields, such as literature, cinema or theater. Cardwell (2007b) offers an interesting approach to the term in suggesting that “quality television” need not—indeed, should not—be understood in terms of valuation, but rather as a *genre*. She distinguishes between *quality*, a term implying that a television show adopts a series of specific markers, and *good* television, which depends on the experience of the viewer, as “it can only be discovered through the exercise of critical judgment” (p. 31). Cardwell’s discussion is part of larger project in which she makes the case for the direct engagement of television scholars with the often avoided discussion regarding what makes a television series good or bad, a discussion that is part of the field of television aesthetics that she subscribes to (cf. CARDWELL, 2013). I am less interested here in the issue of *good* or *bad* television than in her discussion of quality *as a genre* which, as such, carries a series of generic markers.

¹⁸ Capanema (2017) explains that Thompson discusses a timeline of two different “golden ages” of television (from 1947 to 1960 and, later, a more diffuse period beginning in the 1980s).

The notion of “quality” in American television, as discussed by Cardwell, is ample: formally, it involves “high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognized and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music”; these markers, however, go beyond offering a “glossiness” to the production in a quality program, for it is important that they lead to “a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way” (CARDWELL, 2007b, p. 26). In terms of content, quality productions explore “‘serious’ themes, rather than representing the superficial events of life” and tend to offer “reflections on contemporary society” (ibid)—interpersonal relationships and the events of everyday life are not absent from these programs, but they are presented as part of a larger context, and characters are understood as “social and political actors, as players within a larger scheme, not just as emotional individuals” (p. 27).

In this sense, *The Handmaid’s Tale* foregrounds many markers of “quality”. Its visual style and original score, for example, are celebrated features that have been discussed—by the creative minds behind it and critics alike—as intricately connected with the themes of the series. Examples are many: for cinematographer Colin Watkinson, the rigid and symmetrical aspect of the scenes taking place in Gilead are supposed to reflect the nature of a totalitarian society (MARCKS, 2017); for composer Adam Taylor, the score reflects, as seasons progress, a journey from despair to hope (GROBAR, 2019); one critic states that the choice to film the Ceremonies with the camera focusing “solely on [June’s] face, stripped of its humanity, her eyes unblinking, her head jamming rhythmically into the crotch of [her] rapist’s wife, is a distinctly political and feminist act” (HANDLER, 2017), while another highlights that the many close-up shots of June’s face are part of the series’ “radical feminist aesthetic” which forces the audience to share her “abject fear and despair at close range” (PETERSEN, 2017). Another critic suggests that the aesthetic design of the series might be part of its political commitment: “the series must find ways to ‘hook’ the viewer, to draw her into the character’s world: it coerces viewers to watch its horrors and rewards them with its aesthetic accomplishments” (LEYDA, 2018). In terms of content, due to the dystopian nature of the series, it is evidently in direct dialogue with larger issues of contemporary society and presents, no matter how *emotional* the individuals depicted, every one of them as part of a larger social and political context, as Cardwell suggests that productions centering “serious” themes do.

However, Cardwell's discussion can be too vague, especially when it moves to a discussion of content: how do we define what "serious" themes are, and why does she place the word "serious" in quotes? Would the events of the "everyday life" of a woman living under a patriarchal system not posit her, too, as a "social and political actor", for instance? While the discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* could certainly place it under the notion of "quality" when its visual aspect, its production values, its acting, etc. are taken under consideration, I find it much more productive to think of the similarities between it and other American television productions, as a *general phenomenon*, than to try to differentiate what is or is not "quality"—even if, following Cardwell, we frame the term simply as a generic distinction—for such a *genre* still places these "quality" productions within the realm of the televisual. A more interesting analytical term might be Kristin Thompson's "art television", which she considers to be very rare in applying its much more specific five major traits: "a loosening of causality, a greater emphasis on psychological or anecdotal realism, violations of classical clarity of space and time, explicit authorial comment, and ambiguity" (THOMPSON, 2003, p. 110). In this sense, *The Handmaid's Tale* would fall short—but so would Cardwell's examples of "quality", such as the acclaimed political drama *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006). In terms of structure, despite the challenging *content*, Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* remains much closer to the more traditional forms of television storytelling. This is not a problem, but it does mean that if we analyze it as part of a larger tradition of American television storytelling, the analysis can be more fruitful.

Even so, there are some particularities that distinguish *The Handmaid's Tale* from the anterior form of serialized television storytelling which cable channels and streaming services followed: the broadcast drama. In analyzing them, Newman (2006) states that their "beats" tend to be very short, usually lasting no more than two minutes, and that it "it is exceedingly rare to see long, drawn-out beats on prime-time television" (p. 17). Broadcast networks are unlikely to approve scenes that are longer than two and a half minutes, for "they believe that the audience's attention is unlikely to be sustained for much longer than that" (ibid). An analysis of the individual beats of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that, while the majority of them do stay under the two-and-a-half-minute mark, there are also many which are much longer. Thus, while most episodes last longer than the forty minutes of a broadcast drama, they all have an average of twenty beats, making the rhythm of individual episodes slower than the "fast-paced" stories of the average prime-time series (NEWMAN, 2006, p. 17).

Another interesting aspect is related to the way in which individual episodes present their plots. Newman highlights that each episode in a prime-time drama has several plots, since most television dramas have ensemble casts: “Major plots (‘A plots’ in teleplay jargon) involving a main character have at least six beats, often more. An episode usually has two or more A plots and several B or C plots with a smaller number of beats each” (p. 18). Thompson (2003, p. 31) uses slightly different terms to discuss a similar idea: “the main storyline is the A plot, and the subsidiary line is the B plot (with C, D, and so on, for any additional plotlines)”. Thompson points out that, lacking consistent studies of the formal characteristics of television storytelling, she turned to the study of manuals of screenwriting, which employ the notion of an A/B/C plot structure, and centralize the importance of multiple plots. It soon becomes noticeable that the terms are not applied consistently: Thompson suggests that there is *a* main storyline (the A plot), while Newman discusses the “two or more” A plots in each episode, for example. Importantly, the internal structure of each television series varies, although as a rule they tend to feature many different plots involving different characters: some series have a clear narrative center (June, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*), while others centralize an entire ensemble cast (*Lost*, for example).

Regardless of the specific terminology applied, what I would like to highlight is that television episodes tend to have multiple plot lines, a primary one (or primary *ones*) involving the main character (or main *characters*) plus smaller, additional stories. Furthermore, Mittell’s (2015) discussion of the “complex TV” mode posits that it reworks the forms of the episodic series under the influence of serial narration—the narrative is understood as cumulative, but the episodes are not invisible structures. In serial storytelling, plot lines often cross episodes—this is what Newman (2006) refers to as an arc—and, thus, are not resolved within a single episode. For example, in episode six June learns that Luke is alive, and the episode ends immediately after this shocking revelation takes place. Only in the following episode Luke receives her message, asking him to save Hannah. However, there is no resolution after this plot line is introduced, for Hannah remains in Gilead and Luke does not take any immediate action to change that. The separation of this family and the possibility of their reunion in the future is an ongoing, likely series-long, arc. But the arc regarding Luke’s escape is introduced in episode six and concluded in episode seven, even though Luke, now in Canada, will be a recurring character in the following seasons.

As it is characteristic of a serial, many of the narrative threads that each episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces are part of ongoing storylines that are not resolved and settled within a single episode: for instance, in episode three June learns that Janine is having an affair with her Commander. This will be further explored in episodes nine and ten. In episode eight, we learn that Nick works as an informant for Commander Pryce behind Fred's back. This is not part of an arc of its own, but it will have further implications in episodes six and seven of the following season. In episode nine, June exhorts Moira to not be resigned about her situation in Gilead, and by the end of the episode, we witness Moira trying to escape once again. Only in episode ten we learn that the attempt was successful as she arrives in Canada—but June will only learn about this in episode nine of season two. Moira too becomes a recurring character in the following seasons, and her situation as a refugee is an ongoing plot line. Newman (2006, p. 24) highlights that in prime-time serials, the main storylines of each episode are “largely self-contained”, and thus “many an arc is strung along episode after episode with a few lines of dialogue or a scene or two that just barely pushes it forward”. This also happens in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with Serena and Fred's relationship or with June's romance plot, for example. None of this means that the individual episode as a significant structure, as discussed by VanArendonk (2019), is not evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

If we think of O'Sullivan's (2010) discussion about the short television season (thirteen episodes airing weekly without longer interruptions) as a significant *unit* of storytelling, we could describe the arc of each season of *The Handmaid's Tale* in simple lines:

Season	Season Arc
<p>Season 1</p> <p>Three distinct moments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loss and despair (episodes 1-3); • growing hope (4-6); • courage and action (8-10). 	<p>June's journey from a woman whose only desire is to survive and find her daughter to a rebel who realizes that more important than merely seeing her daughter again is making the world a better place for her. Through the characters around her, June realizes that Gilead's strict façade is often circumvented by individual desires: Commander Waterford, mirrored by many other Commanders, desires his Handmaids and constantly cheats on his wife; Serena Joy will defy any rule if it means that she can have her desired baby; Nick, allegedly an Eye, ignores every rule he is supposed to enforce so he can be with June. Furthermore, the news of Luke's escape provide her with much needed hope, while Emily's uncrushable spirit inspires her to be “invincible”—it is this impetuosity, in its turn, that will lead June to reawaken Moira's rebelliousness, which drives her to Canada.</p>

<p>Season 2</p> <p>Four distinct moments, followed by a turn of events in the season finale setting the tone for season three:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the escape plot (1-3); ● psychological breakdown (4-5); ● a taste of power (6-9); ● loss and acceptance (10-12); ● turning collective mourning into collective action (13). 	<p>After her inspiring act of rebellion, Gilead will do everything to get June—who is protected by her pregnancy—to break. If for a short while they succeed, this does not last. The season is an exploration of the resilience of the human spirit—including a traumatized Moira in Canada and a continually tortured Emily in the Colonies—and of the power of collective action, even if, under an authoritarian regime, it is often met with violent repression. It is also about sacrifice: June understands that to save herself is not as important as saving her children; if she was initially willing to leave without Hannah, the season finale establishes that she will sacrifice herself for her daughter. Similarly, if Serena was willing to do anything for a baby, she chooses to voluntarily let Nichole go for a chance at a better life.</p>
<p>Season 3</p> <p>Three distinct moments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● resistance and growing strength (1-4); ● loss and despair (Nichole/Hannah) (5-9); ● regained purpose: saving children from Gilead (10-13). 	<p>Season three is a story about insurrection. Unable to leave for Canada with Hannah, June decides, after being helped by the collective action of the Marthas, that she will collaborate with the resistance in any way she can. This involves learning from previous losses and past mistakes—of which there are many—, self-sacrifice and a ruthlessness that demands a lot of cold blood. After being forced to participate in a cruel campaign to bring Nichole back and witnessing just how unceremoniously Gilead discards of “sinners” in order to protect and enforce its credo that puts reproduction as the highest and most saintly of goals only for the children that result from it to be violently punished for their “sins”, too, June decides that she will fight back by taking from Gilead what it took from her: children. As the refugees in Canada try to learn to live with their traumas, those who benefit from positions of power in Gilead begin to meet with consequences for their actions: Fred, Serena, Commander Lawrence, Nick, Aunt Lydia.</p>

The way in which these arcs are presented, however, is not direct: they follow the pattern of serial television which relies on different narrative branches and several more self-contained, episodic storylines, often presenting a form of closure within the episode itself—functioning, thus, as their own individual entity, although one could hardly argue that these episodes can be watched independently. Furthermore, most episodes contain different plots. Season one episodes usually have three different plots, one of them developing in the flashbacks. Because June is the clear center throughout the first season, however, she often features as a central piece of all major plots, as they tend to flesh out in more detail her relationship with different characters. In seasons two and three, which leave Atwood’s novel behind, this changes: while A plots are given to June, B and C plots either do not involve her directly or do not involve her

at all. The episodic structure of the first three seasons (excluding the pilot episode, which, as explored before, tends to be an unusual element in a series' run) is explored in the table below:

Episode	A plot	B plot	C plot	D plot
S01E02: Birth Day	June plays Scrabble with the Commander; she decides to trust Ofglen with the information she gets from him; she learns that Ofglen has been replaced.	Janine having a baby. It is a healthy girl, but Janine cannot mother her.	Flashbacks: June gives birth to Hannah, a healthy child. Hannah is kidnapped but recovered before any harm is done.	-
S01E03: Late	Serena believes June to be pregnant and becomes exceedingly kind. When June gets her period, Serena punishes her.	Ofglen (Emily) is imprisoned for her affair with a Martha. The Martha is executed; Ofglen is kept alive but is mutilated.	Flashbacks: June and Moira are fired from their jobs and have their money confiscated. It is the beginning of Gilead.	Janine tells June about her affair with Commander Putnam. She believes the two of them will be together.
S01E04: Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum	June under arrest in her room for two weeks. She manipulates Fred and he frees her from her room.	Flashbacks: June and Moira attempt to escape from the Red Centre. Moira gets away, but June is captured.	Serena feels excluded from the important decisions in Gilead. She tries to help Fred, but he shuts her down.	-
S01E05: Faithful	Serena suggests that June should try to get pregnant by Nick, behind Fred's back. June decides to continue seeing Nick without Serena knowing.	Emily returns an apathetic woman. She steals a car and runs over a Guard. She is taken away to an unknown future.	Flashbacks: June meets Luke, and their affair begins. She asks him to leave his wife and he agrees.	-
S01E06: A Woman's Place	A trade delegation from Mexico visits Gilead; June asks for help, but to no avail; the ambassador's assistant tells her that Luke is alive.	Serena is led to question her restricted role in Gilead. Privately, she resents it; externally, she supports it.	Flashbacks: Serena was a politically active woman in the time before and helped to design the system in place in Gilead.	-
S01E07: The Other Side	Luke is rescued by a group of people who leave for Canada. Three years later, he gets a message from June.	Flashbacks: Luke tries to escape with June and Hannah, but they are eventually caught.	-	-
S01E08: Jezebels	The Commander takes June to a brothel, where she meets an apathetic Moira. June decides to fight back.	We watch Nick watching June and Fred. He tries to end the affair but is confronted.	Flashbacks: Nick is recruited by the Sons of Jacob long before the coup by Pryce, now the higher-up Commander.	-

S01E09: The Bridge	June offers to help Mayday; unable to complete her mission, she asks for Moira's help. Moira does it; a package is given to June.	Janine is moved to another posting. She kidnaps her baby and intends to jump off a bridge. June convinces her to let the baby go. Janine jumps but survives.	Serena and Mrs. Putnam deal with their husbands' infidelities. Serena seems decided to confront Fred but cannot find him.	June gives Nick the cold shoulder; he enquires after her and resistance plans in motion at Jezebel's but finds nothing.
S01E10: Night	June finds personal testimonies by Gileadean women in the Mayday package. Serena takes her to see Hannah as a form of manipulation. June leads other Handmaids into rebellion. She is taken away in a black van.	Serena finds out that June is pregnant. She tells Fred that the baby is not his (June promises him that it is when she asks him to protect her children).	Moira crosses the border to Canada. Moira and Luke reunite.	Commander Putnam is punished for his infidelity. Fred seems worried about himself. Janine, meant to be executed, survives.
S02E01: June	Aunt Lydia devises a series of methods to torture the insubordinate handmaids. June escapes with Mayday and Nick's help.	Flashbacks: the day of the three coordinated strikes that preceded the coup. June and Luke were thinking of a second baby.	-	-
S02E02: Unwomen	June must come to terms with the difficulty involved in her escape. She waits at the former newsroom of the Boston Globe.	Colonies: Emily is still alive. She poisons a newcomer to death: a former wife, now an "unwoman". By the end of the episode, Janine arrives.	Flashbacks: Emily decides to leave the U.S. with her wife and child due to rampant homophobia. She is separated from them and kept in soon-to-be Gilead.	-
S02E03: Baggage	June leaves the newsroom; she accepts that she must leave Hannah behind and boards a plane but is caught in the last minute.	Canada: Moira now lives with Luke and works with refugees. Privately, she struggles with the new life.	Flashbacks: June's relationship with her activist mother, who was sent to the Colonies.	-
S02E04: Other Women	June returns to the Waterford household and is forced by Aunt Lydia to abandon her rebellious ways.	A cold war between a defiant June and Serena, mediated by both Aunt Lydia and Fred.	Flashbacks: June felt guilty after Luke and his former wife separated.	Fred asks for permission to negotiate with Canada on Gilead's name.
S02E05: Seeds	June acts as a pious Handmaid and burns some of the Mayday letters; the rest is rescued by Nick. June ignores a growing bleeding.	Nick shares his worries about June with Serena, and she, indirectly, persuades Fred to separate the two of	Colonies: Janine and Emily have strikingly different stances towards their situation. They fight about it but are	Fred and the Commanders work to inaugurate a new Red Centre in time.

	In the hospital, she promises her unborn baby they will leave Gilead.	them. Nick is given a teen wife, Eden.	eventually reconciled.	
S02E06: First Blood	Serena and June try to create a harmonious environment for the baby. When June tries to see Hannah again, Serena denies it and resumes her old ways. Fred tries to calm both down.	June persuades Nick to consummate the wedding with Eden, who thinks he is a gender traitor. He does so but asks Pryce to move him from the Waterfords and protect June.	Flashbacks: Serena as a public speaker; Fred helped <i>her</i> . During a visit to a university, she is shot. Later, Fred avenges her by killing the shooter's partner.	At the inauguration of Fred's new Red Centre—which happens in time—, Ofglen detonates a bomb.
S02E07: After	Commander Cushing's new (and strict) methods terrorize the streets. He demands the truth about June's disappearance and Serena and Nick conspire to destitute him of his power using Fred, who is at the hospital.	Canada: the news about the bombing gets to Little America. Moira worries about her fiancée from before. She learns about her fiancée's death.	Flashbacks: Moira was once a surrogate mother for a couple. That was how she met the fiancée, her doctor during the pregnancy.	Colonies: After the bombing, Janine and Emily are taken from the Colonies and sent back to Massachusetts.
S02E08: Women's Work	Fred back home. June and Serena act behind his back to save the Putnam baby through illegal means. Fred punishes Serena, and a defeated June apologizes to him.	The Putnams allow Janine to see her dying baby. The baby is saved not by medical assistance, but by human warmth: a reconnection with Janine.	Eden is unable to connect with Nick. She finds the Mayday letters in his things, and he lashes out at her.	-
S02E09: Smart Power	Serena tells June she will leave the house as soon as the baby is born. June seems resigned. When Nick brings news from Luke and Moira, she decides to keep fighting.	Serena unwillingly accompanies Fred on a business trip to Canada. She meets an American, Tuello; he gives her an opportunity to stay, but she returns to Gilead.	Canada: Nick gives the Mayday letters to Luke. They are published; the Canadians decide to close the door to Gilead. The Waterfords are sent home.	Eden gets closer to Isaac, the young Guardian who stays at the Waterford house in Fred's absence.
S02E10: The Last Ceremony	June's Birth Day. The birth does not happen. Serena and Fred rape June to induce labor. Guilty, Fred arranges for June to see Hannah in an empty house; she ends up alone in the middle of nowhere.	Eden and Isaac kiss and are seen by Nick. She is heartbroken when she realizes that he does not care. She suspects about the affair.	Emily's new Commander dies during the ceremony and she will be reassigned to yet another household.	Nick watches Fred gloat to his peers about the baby. He gets the chance to cut the gloating short with the news of the delayed birth.
S02E11: Holly	June finds a car and decides to run away. She hides from the	Flashbacks: June flashes back to different moments.	-	-

	Waterfords as they look for her. Unable to open the garage door, she feels contractions and uses a gun to let others know where she is. She gives birth alone.	In three of them, she remembers thinking her mother would not come for Hannah's birth, but she comes.		
S02E12: Postpartum	The baby is taken to the Waterfords and June is taken to the Red Centre before Aunt Lydia convinces Fred to take her back. Serena is unhappy. In mourning for Eden, she and June reconnect.	Eden and Isaac disappear. They are found together, sentenced to death, and executed.	Emily is taken to a new household, Joseph Lawrence's. He is very peculiar, and he and his wife have a troubled marriage.	Knowing that the baby is not really his, Fred continues to enjoy his power plays with Nick.
S02E13: The Word	The women at the Waterford house are shaken by Eden's death. June convinces Serena to speak for Gilead's girls. Serena is punished. Rita and the Martha network will take June out of Gilead; Serena agrees. June sends the baby but stays behind.	Emily attacks Aunt Lydia. Commander Lawrence works with the rebels to get Emily out of Gilead (with June and the baby).	After having a moment with the baby, Nick challenges Fred's authority and keeps him hostage so June has time to escape.	-
S03E01: Night	Lawrence takes June to Hannah, but she is caught. June is sent to a new posting at Lawrence's house.	Fred wants to go back to the way things were. Serena does not. She burns the house down. They go their separate ways.	Emily crosses the border to Canada with Nichole. She is taken as a refugee and meets with Luke and Moira.	-
S03E02: Mary and Martha	The Lawrence house as part of an underground resistance. June participates in one of their missions, with catastrophic results, but gains two new allies: the Martha Beth and Mrs. Lawrence.	Canada: Luke unable to connect with Nichole, upset with Emily for not contacting her family. In the end, Luke connects with the baby and Emily calls her wife.	June's new shopping partner, the pious Ofmatthew, is introduced. June dislikes her.	Aunt Lydia has survived Emily's attack, but seems emotionally unstable.
S03E03: Useful	An ambiguous Lawrence makes June choose five women, who would go to the Colonies, to become Marthas.	Serena spends time with her mother. The mother tries to convince her to go back to Fred. June tries to convince her	Nick is now a Commander. He will be moved to Chicago, where there is a war between Gilead and	-

	She chooses strategic members for the resistance.	to repeat her former insubordination. Serena ignores Fred.	the remaining Americans.	
S03E04: God Bless the Child	Around both Waterfords again, June tries to manipulate them for her own needs. A video is brought to them: they have identified Nichole with Luke in Canada.	Canada: Emily visits her wife and son and tries to reconnect with them.	Flashbacks: June and Luke baptize Hannah. June was the only one who really wanted it. Canada: In the closing scene, Luke and Moira baptize Nichole.	Aunt Lydia is now a pariah; Janine is nice to her. When Janine suggests to the Putnams that she could be their Handmaid again, an unstable Aunt Lydia violently punishes her.
S03E05: Unknown Caller	June arranges a visit with Nichole and Luke in Canada for the Waterfords to say goodbye. Serena promises everyone will remain where they are, but later June is forced to record a campaign to bring Nichole back.	Fred includes Serena in the discussions about Nichole. She just wants to say goodbye. Given another chance to stay in Canada by Tuello, she refuses, but brings home a cellphone from him	Mrs. Lawrence tells June about the mixtapes Lawrence used to make for her. June finds a tape recorder and records a message for Luke. The Lawrences, like June and Luke, also reconnect through the old tapes.	Ofmatthew reveals that she is pregnant with her fourth baby. She seems unhappy. She and June seem to be on new terms.
S03E06: Household	The Waterfords and June go to D.C., where they talk about Nichole to the Swiss, appointed by Canada as a neutral party. The Swiss ignore June and Nick's requests and decide to continue the discussions.	Serena still distant from Fred. They begin to reconnect after Mrs. Winslow tells her that her book saved her marriage. Fred might have a new opportunity in D.C.	Nick talks to the Swiss on June's request, but they do not accept his testimony: he is untrustworthy. Nick goes to the front.	-
S03E07: Under His Eye	Hannah's Martha tells June where to find her. June and Mrs. Lawrence go together but are unsuccessful. Mrs. Lawrence breaks down. The Mackenzies' Martha is hanged.	Canada: Emily and Moira bond over their traumatic experiences in Gilead. They protest the negotiations with Gilead and are arrested.	Winslow suggests that maintaining Nichole in Canada would give them more leverage to negotiate, but Fred promises Serena that his priority is Nichole. They reconnect.	June and Ofmatthew become friendlier, but the latter reveals that it was she who denounced the Mackenzies' Martha.
S03E08: Unfit	June enlists all her friends to break Ofmatthew down. Ofmatthew attacks a guard and steals a gun; she is shot.	Aunt Lydia decides to move June from the Lawrence household.	Flashbacks: Aunt Lydia gets involved in the lives of a student and his single mother. The relationship is friendly until Lydia intervenes for the mother to lose custody.	Lawrence asks June to spend more time with an ill Mrs. Lawrence. June suggests that Gilead is killing his wife and he should let her out.

S03E09: Heroic	June is forced to stand by Ofmatthew's hospital bed until she has a baby. June seems to be on the brink of losing her sanity but finds a new purpose: to take children out of Gilead.	Janine suffers due to a new wound in her eye socket after Ofmatthew's attack. Aunt Lydia admonishes her against her vanity. In the end, Aunt Lydia brings her an eyepatch as a gift.	-	-
S03E10: Witness	Winslow and the Waterfords are back, introducing stricter rules. They ensure that the Ceremony at the Lawrences happens, to Mrs. Lawrence's despair. Lawrence decides to help with June's plan.	Beth and Alma spread the word about June's plan to rescue children. Dozens say yes.	Serena complains to Fred about the postponement of Nichole's return. She tells him about Tuello and suggests they should contact him.	-
S03E11: Liars	52 women will help with June's plan. She goes to Jezebel's to negotiate for a plane. There, Winslow tries to rape her. She kills him. The Marthas get rid of the body; Lawrence gives her a gun.	Serena and Fred go on a road trip to meet with Tuello, who makes them cross the border to Canada. They are arrested for their crimes against humanity.	-	-
S03E12: Sacrifice	June gets her plane. Mrs. Lawrence's mental instability almost puts the plan at risk. She commits suicide—June finds her alive but chooses to let her die. She lies to Lawrence. Given back his power, he promises to help June.	Canada: Serena reveals to Fred that she planned for his arrest so she could be with Nichole. Moira and Luke come see them. Tuello protects Serena.	-	-
03E13: Mayday	The day to leave arrives. The children and Rita land safely in Canada while June, Janine and many others make a sacrifice and stay behind. June is shot.	Canada: Fred testifies against Serena, who would be soon released, and reveals that she forced Nick to impregnate June. She is arrested for June's rape.	-	-

The rhythm of individual episodes is often slow, featuring many beats longer than the two minutes mentioned by Newman (2006), but if we look at how episodes progress, his notion of *arousing and re-arousing interest* becomes apparent as new plots and new centers of interest are introduced each week. This notion is also intricately connected with the way the series uses one of Warhol's (2003) important markers of sentimental narratives: the balance of *grief and joy, suffering and triumph*. This need for such a balance means that, even under the horrible life conditions in Gilead that guarantee the *grief* and the *suffering*, circumstances need to, every now and then, either turn on June's favor or, alternatively, work out for those she cares about, so that the series can guarantee the *joy* and *triumph*.

For these patterns to be present, however, June cannot be the witness to the failure of others' attempts to defy Gilead that Offred is, for this would lead to little narrative action. As explored by Hendershot (2018), once the pilot episode introduces to June the notion that there is an Eye in her house and she begins to *look* attentively at her surroundings, June enters *a story*. Her *story* grows further as episodes progress: she must then choose whether she will trust Ofglen or not, whether she will seek Mayday or not, whether she will ask for help from the Mexicans or not, whether she will tell Aunt Lydia that she is sorry because she has learnt to keep her head down or because she will refuse to do so. Meanwhile, audience interest is re-aroused each week. It is also re-aroused because for every loss of June's, there is a win, and vice-versa: she finds out important information to share with Ofglen about the Commander, but Ofglen is gone; she is severely punished by Serena, but sets herself free because she learns that the Commander can be manipulated; she finds out about Ofglen's genital mutilation, but nonetheless chooses to pursue her own desires; the Mexican ambassador refuses to help her, but she finds out that Luke is alive; Moira has become apathetic, but June has not; June fails to complete her Mayday mission, but Moira does it for her. Grief and joy, suffering and triumph.

The features of "sentimental narratives" that Warhol traces and that Mittell connects to television storytelling in his "Serial Melodrama" chapter of *Complex TV* are not *demand*ed under Williams's discussion of the melodramatic as the mainstream mode of storytelling. In many ways, the traces discussed by Warhol can be connected to the notion of "excess" that Williams considers inessential to melodrama (if a possible manifestation of it). Nonetheless, other television scholars, such as Casey et. al. (2008, p. 170), working with the notion of melodrama as excess, still suggest that "so common are the characteristics of melodrama on television, however, that it might even be argued that contemporary television is almost

exclusively melodramatic”. In this sense, while these characteristics might not be applicable to *all* television, they seem to be applicable to much—or even most—television storytelling, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not an exception.

One could argue that the very dystopian setting that is the basis of Atwood’s novel would in itself allow for the recognition of virtue and villainy that is so important and essential to melodrama, according to Williams (2012). But Atwood works hard to complicate both notions, humanizing the Commander, the face of Gilead to Offred (Serena Joy is barely a presence), and making Offred an inadvertent part of the problem, both due to her inaction in the time before and her complicity in Gilead. The inaction, however, is not only Offred’s, but of the entire nation. While Offred would certainly like to go back to the way things were—and evidently Gilead is, for most, much worse than the way things were—the ending in Nunavit forces readers to ask ourselves whether simply going back to a “time before” would be enough, or if the restored ways of the time before would eventually lead to another Gilead. In that sense, Atwood also complicates another essential characteristic of melodrama explored by Williams: the shared notion of *felt good* posited by the work, “the need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home ‘space of innocence’” in order to “support the belief that moral good is possible” (p. 525).

In the television adaptation, however, these characteristics are more fully realized. June *is* good, for even when she is complicit or when she is selfish—as she often is in season three—we must remember that serial storytelling is built over time, and these detours on her path will only make her selfless sacrifices by the end of each season more significant. The Commander *is* cruel, and even if the series makes him appear sympathetic on rare occasions, his ultimate cruelty prevails: in the beginning of season three, for instance, he protects June when he did not have to, especially because she took from him the child that is lawfully his; but as the season progresses, he organizes a cruel campaign to bring the baby back from Canada, and demands that June participates actively (but always silently) in it. If June concedes that she and fellow U.S. citizens had been “asleep” to the coup that was taking place right under their noses, the series also shows us that she at least tried to fight it and, as far as we know, she did so with her husband’s support.

In the ninth episode of season two, the letters that June’s Mayday mission had her (and Moira) get from Jezebel’s in season one play an important role. They are taken to Canada by Nick, who accompanies the Commander in a business trip. While in Canada, Nick manages to

give the letters to Luke, who manages to get them published, and the effect they have is devastating for the Commander's plans: the Canadian authorities close the door to the idea of doing business with Gilead once again. As Luke and the other U.S. refugees in Toronto celebrate their victory, they spontaneously sing "America the Beautiful", a patriotic and celebratory hymn for the country they lost, and that no longer exists. Even if it *was* America that gave rise to Gilead in this fictional scenario—for Atwood (2018), the very deep foundations of the country explain its existence—, the series seems to establish Gilead as no more than a detour in America's righteous path, the path that needs to be recuperated, the "space of innocence" that melodrama demands. In Williams' discussion of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), she states:

we recognize the good that could be because, throughout the series, we have learned to recognize the good that has presumably been lost. This is the good home that Baltimore may never really have been but that melodrama must posit as its lost good. Ultimately, not to believe in this space of innocence, is not to love Baltimore, the love of which, in this series, is an unquestioned good—the good that melodrama invests in its victims (WILLIAMS, 2012, p. 538).

If we exchange "Baltimore" for "the United States", the excerpt could perfectly describe Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The choice to blend dystopia and melodrama—as the mainstream mode of storytelling in American television—, thus, radically transforms the dystopian project.

3.5 June Osborne and the dystopian tradition

If the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* insists on making June a rebellious leader who learns to make sacrifices for a larger cause, it also insists that she, as an individual, is not enough. Thus, if the pilot episode signals a moment of awakening for her, her development will make way for her to step into solidarity with a larger group—Mayday—and, especially, with other women. Hendershot (2018, p. 16) describes the ten-episode run of the first season as June finding "herself by finding other women with whom to connect and by resisting a system that depends upon women's distrusting other women"; for Hendershot, the big moment of collective triumph is the refusal of the Handmaids to kill a fellow human being by stoning in episode ten. This moment is interesting because it emphasizes both how June changes her surroundings and how she is transformed by them. If June is the one who first drops her stone in a gesture that will be repeated by every other Handmaid in there, it is the new Ofglen who is the first to question the ritual out loud, which gains in significance as one remembers that this is the woman

who had stated, five episodes before, that she found her life much better under Gilead than in the time before.

According to Williams (2012, p. 537), long-form seriality offers different ways of exploring melodrama, and “what cannot be achieved in a movie is the mega-melodramatic temporal extension of serial television—something that is not easily encapsulated in a single moment”. While this is arguably still early in the series’ run—for this is the first season—, the series already makes use of the significant gaps in time that the week-to-week model of airing episodes entails. The *moral legibility* of the aborted stoning sequence was already crystalline not only due to the nature of the violence, but specially because the victim here is not a random man and alleged rapist, as in the pilot, but a character whose tremendous suffering we have been watching for ten episodes. But it is further reinforced by the new Ofglen’s horror at what is being asked of her even when she had accepted everything else as a price she was willing to pay for what it gave her in return.

In the novel, Atwood took to new directions the dystopian writing which had inspired her. She challenged it by writing a female protagonist, by markedly separating rebellion from sexuality, by refusing to have a romantic affair end in betrayal, by eschewing the ending which ultimately crushes the individual protagonist, and by insisting that storytelling *counts for something*, even if it is not *enough*. Atwood’s juxtaposition of Offred’s narration and Pieixoto’s lecture, however, brings into relief once again the same point that the previous dystopian writing made time and again: that we need deeper change if we want to avoid such horrific futures. Here, I return to Fátima Vieira’s discussion about the dystopia as a form that, at its core, is particularly didactic: “images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens” (2010, p. 17). Importantly, however, dystopian writing highlights to the reader that even if citizens—such as the reader herself—are asked to take responsibility, it is ultimately not individual change that is centralized, but collective improvement:

all human beings have (and will always have) flaws, and so social improvement—rather than individual improvement—is the only way to ensure social and political happiness; on the other hand, the readers are to understand that the depicted future is not a reality but only a possibility that they have to learn to avoid. If dystopias provoke despair on the part of the readers, it is because their writers want their readers to take them as a serious menace [...]. Their true vocation is to make man realize that, since it is impossible for him to build an ideal society, then he must be committed to the construction of a better one (VIEIRA, 2010, p. 17).

The classical dystopia is not about the defeat of the system imagined by the author, for these systems are meant merely as a warning of how far our troublesome circumstances could potentially go without collective improvement—a didactic extrapolation, not a prediction. The didacticism of the classical dystopia, then, is meant to make readers aware of their surroundings before it is too late. Even if Atwood makes a strong case for reading the “Principles of Newspeak” annex of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a demonstration of faith in the resilience of the human spirit on Orwell’s part, that novel most pointedly does not depict the ways to achieve a future in which Newspeak becomes merely a past item to be studied. Atwood’s own novel, ending with the Symposium on Gileadean Studies taking place in 2195, does not do that either, even though she gives Offred a resilience that Orwell does not allow Winston Smith to possess. Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, however, does engage with the notion of defeating an authoritarian regime. It distances itself from the classical dystopia not only due to the protagonist it builds over the seasons, but also due to the overall story it tells, which increasingly becomes a story of organized resistance, or, as Hendershot (2018, p. 23) puts it, of the “the triumph of collective action”.

For Vieira (2010, p. 17), a dystopia that does not accommodate the notion of hope is a dystopia that fails. The notion of hope is equally important for Hendershot’s analysis of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and she argues that while “hope alone is not enough to sustain anyone [...], it is a place to start—a means of not rolling over easily, as Atwood puts it. Belief in justice does not inherently enable justice, but lack of belief in justice is immobilizing” (2018, p. 23). In Sargent’s discussion of utopianism, dystopia is understood as one of its many manifestations; if dystopias are meant as *warnings*, the scholar concludes, then they “imply that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible” (p. 26). This is the “*positive message*” (p. 27, my emphasis) that can be found in the dystopia. For Sargent, such a positive message can fulfill, as the more overtly positive images created by the utopias do, the notion that “faith in or hope for the future breeds effort. Effort is more likely to produce positive results than no effort. Apathy produces only more apathy” (SARGENT, 1994, p. 27). The major difference when we think of the dystopian tradition of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell and of Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, then, is *where* such hope lies: for the writer of a classical dystopia, it lies in the belief that humanity could improve and impede the realization of such a terrible vision for our future; in the show,

it lies in the possibility of collective action defeating an extremely oppressive state of affairs—collective action that, here, is often (though not always) led by June.

These are ultimately very different narratives, for if one of them insists that resistance is possible and can transform the dystopian circumstances, the “mood of near despair about the future of man” (FROMM, 1961, p. 313) of the classical dystopia is inevitably transformed. Atwood herself, for theorists such as Baccolini and Moylan (2003) and Mohr (2005), challenges the dystopian tradition; for either, Atwood’s text leaves the possibility of hope (in Baccolini and Moylan’s words) or of a utopian subtext (in Mohr’s) alive, either due to Offred’s open ending or due to Offred’s storytelling. However, Atwood’s epilogue challenges what she herself had challenged. The transcript of the fictional Symposium leads readers to a focus that is twofold: it is simultaneously *on* Offred—in her failed attempt at communication, since Pieixoto and the academics do not read her text empathetically—and *away* from her, as we realize that Offred’s internal transformation is not mirrored by society at large, hence a twenty-second century society that seems to be on the path to some new form of Gilead. In this sense, the novel reworks the dystopian tradition while still maintaining, as the dystopian tradition did, that individual awakening and action is not enough.

Serial television storytelling relies on the attachment of audiences to an ongoing cast of characters and, thus, its focus is necessarily more individualized: as explored by Mittell (2015, p. 126), “creatively, most programs are so defined by their core characters and their web of relationships that replacing them becomes a challenge without losing what drew fans into the series”. Cardwell (2007b), for instance, emphasizes that “quality” television posits individual characters, as well as their interpersonal relationships, as players within larger sociopolitical contexts. But we can turn her statement around to affirm something that would be equally true: that even “quality” television productions, which explore larger sociopolitical contexts, do so starting from the individual lives of emotional beings. Once again, Mittell (2015, p. 244) reminds us that “television fiction only succeeds if we care about the drama”, and serial television, through the great amount of time it can span, “fosters a deeply felt emotional engagement with the television characters and their dramatic scenarios”. Part of our engagement, according to Newman (2006), has to do with how serials work at arousing and re-arousing our interest continually. Thus, if at the center of *The Handmaid’s Tale* we have June, we need her to *act* for this continued *interest*, for our continued *caring about the drama* to exist week after week, year after year.

Because the series is still ongoing, its relationship with the dystopian tradition can still change, perhaps radically. For now, however, it is hard to visualize for the series the kind of ending posited by the tradition, for it has already established that June has impacted many of the people who surround her positively: she has made Moira and Emily once again believe that they should not *let the bastards grind them down*—which has driven both to Canada—, she has convinced Serena Joy that Gilead is no place to raise a young girl, she has been taking care of Janine, she has saved dozens of innocent children. We are thus led to believe that even if June ends up executed and hanged on the Wall, her legacy would hardly be lost. To take so many children—Gilead’s most prized “possessions” and theoretically its very reason for existing—away from the dystopian horror is an enormous blow against its system. She did not do it on her own, but it was her plan, a plan that she made sure would work as she enlisted others’ help and as she sacrificed for it. The victory is collective, but individual action is valorized.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When I began the investigation explored in this thesis, I had two guiding research questions: firstly, I wanted to explore how the Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the June Osborne in Hulu's adaptation of the novel related to an older tradition of dystopian writing that served as inspiration for Atwood. Secondly, I set out to explore to what extent the storytelling habits of American serial television could help explain the choices made in the adaptation regarding the protagonist's characterization. My hypothesis was that the June in the Hulu adaptation did not repeat the characterization of the victimized protagonists of the literary dystopian tradition. Importantly, the dystopian tradition on which I based my hypothesis was composed of only three novels: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I also hypothesized that the characterization of Hulu's Offred/June could be explained, at least to some extent, by the format and medium to which the novel was adapted: American serial television.

The research I conducted revealed that, while the three novels above are central in most discussions about dystopian writing—sometimes referred to as the “classical dystopias” (cf. BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, MOHR, 2005)—, the dystopian terrain is wide and varied. Atwood's own writing in *The Handmaid's Tale* is sometimes listed among other novels which have reworked the dystopian tradition as settled by these classical dystopias. Even so, theorists also tend to emphasize that in this novel, Atwood's writing remains closer to the earlier novels than do her counterparts writing in the 1980s, be it in the framework of “critical dystopias” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003) or “transgressive utopian dystopias” (MOHR, 2005).

Analyzing the novel against this background, we can perceive similarities and differences. Atwood's Offred is no self-sacrificing protagonist seeking to dismantle Gilead's system, choosing her own safety and survival first. Like the protagonists of classical dystopias, the most transgressive action Offred engages in (in her case, as long as we consider the time narrated) lies in her illicit affair—thus, in the realm of sexual transgression—and, even so, there is a passivity in the way she herself describes this affair. But Offred also *narrates*, insisting, until the end, on the identity that she was supposed to have relinquished as a Handmaid—she does not allow Gilead's discourse to truly penetrate her consciousness. As I have argued throughout this thesis, there is much that Atwood does that challenges and transforms the classical dystopias that inspired her: having a woman as the protagonist and putting issues

directly related to gender at the center, dissociating sexual transgression (with Nick) from political transgression (with Ofglen), providing no closure for the illicit romantic affair—which, while denying the romance plot its regular happy ending, also explicitly denies that it should end in mutual betrayal. This open ending regarding the romance is reflected by the open ending of the narrative as a whole: we never truly know what happens to Offred after she tells her story. But what we *do* know is that, by the end, Gilead has not been able to claim her: she insists on her story and on her right to tell it, and continually challenges Gilead's credo. Likely, this happens sometime after she leaves the Commander and Serena's house. Unlike the protagonists of classical dystopias, then, Offred is not ultimately crushed.

However, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* remains close to the classical dystopias, I argue, in the way it explores the notion of hope. For Baccolini and Moylan (2003), hope in the classical dystopia lies only outside of the pages (if at all). For me, if we think of dystopias as didactic warnings, hope necessarily lies beyond the pages of the novels, for one would not engage in producing a warning without believing that such a warning could yield an effect—even if the hope is faint. In this sense, I think of a novel as, among other things, an *act of communication*, following Sternberg and Yacobi (2015). Even within the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, Atwood does not completely deny hope: we are informed that Offred recorded her tale, likely while hiding in a safe place in the Underground Femaleroad. But this hope that exists in the novel is curtailed by the juxtaposition of Offred's narration and Professor Pieixoto's misogynistic and alarmingly unempathetic reading of the tale in the twenty-second century. In the end, this choice of Atwood's brings her novel closer to the classical dystopias again, for the most significant hope, after we read Pieixoto's discourse, still lies outside of the pages of the novel, in the act of communication between author and reader.

Analyzing the adaptation, I concluded that the first season of the series has, as a central arc, June Osborne's transformation from someone whose only desire is her personal survival and the recovery of her daughter into a rebel who defies Gilead to help and protect others. Season two, on the other hand, is dedicated to exploring the power of collective action, while season three connects these two threads by turning June into an important leader of the resistance. This way, June originates plenty of narrative action, rather than mostly witnessing the actions of others, as is the case with the Offred in the novel. I believe this stems, however, not from a necessity of making the protagonists of serial television into heroes—for, as explored by Mittell (2015), antiheroes have been on the rise in American television—, but from the

necessity in serial television of arousing and rearousing our interest to assure that we keep coming back to the narrative.

Although June's characterization is not without nuance, however, she is more self-sacrificing than selfish. In the dystopian reality of Gilead, villains and victims are easily recognizable, but I argue that Atwood tries to blur these distinctions slightly in a conscious effort to further reinforce the *warning* aspect of her dystopia. Following Mittell's and Williams' argument about the prevalence of the melodramatic mode of storytelling in all forms of entertainment, including American television, I perceived that although characterization in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is not simplistic, good and evil are more clearly distinguished. Furthermore, as argued by Williams, melodrama demands that we are able to "locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home 'space of innocence'" which then allows us to believe that "moral good is possible" (WILLIAMS, 2012, p. 525). In that sense, I argue that Luke's characterization, for example, is softened, for we need to hope that he and June can recuperate, together, not only their family but the *good* America that has been lost. A mere desire to survive is not enough: June's deepest desire, which she allows herself to feel, is to reunite with her family.

Importantly, June allows herself to feel her despair, her pain, her enormous suffering, while the Offred who narrates Atwood's novel has been referred to as somewhat cold; she is someone who, in her own words, "detaches oneself" (THT, p. 106). Although this famous line from the novel has been used more than once in June's voice-over narration ("The Last Ceremony", S02E10, "Liars", S03E11), the second of these ("Liars") precedes a moment in which June decides that she has had enough: about to be raped by yet another man, Commander Winslow, June reacts and ends up killing him. Allowing herself to feel deeply leads June to act, and this *feeling* is further reinforced by the tone of the series, which follows the "good cry techniques" described by Robyn Warhol (2003) closely.

If we are to believe that "moral good is possible", then we need to see clearly both what was lost and must be recuperated—the harmony of the good people in the Bankole-Osborne family—and something that leads us to believe that this can somehow be achieved. As the series progresses, the story continually grows into one of insurrection. The notion of hope, then, does not rely solely on the act of communication between an emitter and the viewer, as a warning, but exists within the diegetic world itself: the hope not only of escaping (as Luke, Moira, Emily and Rita manage to do) but of imploding the tyrannical regime from the inside. By following

the refugee community in Canada, the series emphasizes time and again that mere escape is not enough, just as, increasingly, the audience is led to believe that the fight is not impossible. While June is not able to fight it alone, she often inspires and exhorts others to do it with her.

If this is ultimately a different story from the one told in Atwood's novel, I do not believe that the *warning* aspect of the dystopia is lost because of it. In late 2020, for instance, as *The Handmaid's Tale* was once again brought to the center of the U.S. news cycle—in the context of Donald Trump's nomination of a third judge in four years for the Supreme Court—it was suggested that the centrality of this fictional story in the discourse surrounding the nomination was “telling” of “how powerful *The Handmaid's Tale* is as a symbol of what that future might look like” (GRADY, 2020). It continues to haunt people, then, as the horrific imagined futures of dystopias ought to do in their desire to achieve an effect.

As I have pointed out in the Introduction to this thesis, I do not believe that it is possible to single out *one* explanation for the choices made in an adaptation. Here, I chose to explore Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* against a rationale regarding American serial television storytelling, believing this to be an essential aspect of the adaptation, following many adaptation theorists, particularly Cattrysse (2014). But this choice leaves many lines open for possible studies of the same object. One of them has to do with television dystopias more generally, since I have argued, following several other commentators, that this genre has been growing in popularity in the past few years. In 2018, for instance, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*—which Mohr (2005) also lists as a classical dystopia—was adapted by HBO as a telefilm, while NBC's streaming service Peacock made *Brave New World* into a series in 2020. Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* could, then, be examined along with other television dystopias, adaptations or not. Alternatively, leaving the dystopian aspect behind, the series could also be examined in the context of television adaptations conceived for the “infinite model” of storytelling of U.S. serial television (MITTELL, 2015), since these adaptations have been so neglected in adaptation studies, as I have argued extensively in this thesis.

One could also think beyond the realm of television, considering the series more exclusively in terms of dystopia. Atwood's novel was published in 1985; the adaptation was released in 2017. It could be interesting to explore how the transformations of the notion of dystopia through the publication and reception of new dystopian works might have impacted the process of adaptation, particularly following the editorial phenomenon represented by the many young adult dystopias appearing after the turn of the millennium, with a commercial

success that was sometimes repeated in Hollywood. Describing the trend of what she refers to as the betrayed youth of the new millennium, Shiao (2017) suggests that Suzanne Collins's widely popular young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* marks an important transition: after Katniss Everdeen, she suggests, it is no longer enough for an individual to escape the dystopia (as we hope Offred does by the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*); this chosen individual must learn new tactics that, in gory action sequences, will finally bring tyranny down. While these texts envision negative scenarios, as dystopias always do, Shiao suggests that they now tend to offer "a brief, shining belief that such a world can be fixed". U.S. television is inherently commercial and is understood primarily as a medium for entertainment (CASEY et. al., 2008). If commercial interests guide the choices made in American television, then one could hardly ignore the massive commercial success that Katniss Everdeen represented both in sales and box-office numbers.

When I wrote my research proposal, and as I conducted much of my research, *The Handmaid's Tale* was a standalone novel. In November 2018, however, Margaret Atwood announced that she would be releasing a sequel to the 1985 novel in September 2019, thirty-four years after the publication of Offred's story. *The Testaments*, which takes place fifteen years after the events depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, never explicitly alludes to Offred—but the implications are there, not particularly disguised. It would be interesting to think of how this new sequel challenges some of the critical readings of the original novel. I find this aspect interesting particularly in the framework of seriality; as I highlighted in the Introduction, Jason Mittell (2015, p. 329) argues that exploring meaning in serial texts "requires the critic to accept such potential shifts and open-ended contingency as part of the terrain, giving up the certainty that is typically asserted in academic arguments". Of course, no one knew, for thirty-three years, that Atwood's novel would be followed by a sequel. Once she published it, however, "potential shifts" became a part of the game. Furthermore, exploring both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* could also potentially be fruitful against an examination of the historical transformations of dystopia. But it could also be fruitful in the framework of transmedia storytelling, as we are led to wonder how separately Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hulu's adaptation (which, as I argue in this thesis, transforms it in significant ways) and *The Testaments* stand. For instance, we can consider that Offred's daughter has no name in the original novel, and that it is never confirmed whether Offred was pregnant as she suspected when she embarked on the black van in chapter forty-six. In that sense, what does it mean that

The Testaments is narrated by a Gileadean young woman named Agnes—the name given by Gilead to June’s daughter on the show—and a Canadian teenager, initially known as Daisy, who finds out that her real identity is that of “baby Nichole”—the name of June’s second baby, smuggled to Canada in the finale of the second season?

Because television adaptations and television dystopias have not yet been sufficiently explored, there is much about Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* left open for examination. I hope, however, that my thesis has been able to address, if partially and still insufficiently, these gaps. As the last few pages have hopefully demonstrated, however, there is much left to be explored, and I believe that this object deserves to be carefully examined.

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