

The Reality of Gilead

In the HBO series *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood introduces her audience to a dystopian world in which women's reproductive rights have been stripped away due to a decreasing birth rate around the world. In order to make every effort to increase the birthrate, handmaids (fertile women who are deemed as flawed or disobedient) endure sanctioned rape every month, orchestrated by men of high status (also known as Commanders) within Gilead. The HBO series focuses on one handmaid named Offred, whose real name is June Osborne, and her struggle to survive—both mentally and physically—while separated from her family. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of the female struggle in society through the female body by weaving motifs throughout the series, which translate into the real world and demonstrate how being a woman and enjoying one's body as a woman is unnecessarily complicated by a patriarchal society.

At its foundation, Gilead, which is the regressive society that America has become, determines a woman's worth based on what clothing she wears and, effectively, her physical appearance. On numerous occasions, handmaids don clothing that represents a higher social status than they're allowed and it allows them to escape dangerous situations. For instance, Moira and June try to escape the Red Center, where they are training to become handmaids, and Moira puts on brown clothes that belong to an Aunt (Season 01: Episode 04). When they escape the center, they go to the subway station to distance themselves from anyone who might recognize them, but they're stopped before they can board (01:04). The only reason that Moira is able to get away and avoid becoming a handmaid is that she is wearing the clothes of an Aunt and June is not. The series demonstrates how women are constantly judged based on arbitrary

factors that have no real connection to who they are as people. Moira being taken for an Aunt is significant because a woman becomes a handmaid only when she is considered disobedient or flawed, therefore, handmaids wearing their typical red robes are stigmatized. However, a simple change of color changes how handmaids are viewed and treated: suddenly, their flaws or past indiscretions no longer matter because of their appearance. Moira, being a “gender traitor” in the series (or a lesbian outside of the series) is a perfect example of this because she was forced to become a handmaid based on her sexual orientation. When she wears red clothing, the people of Gilead know to see her as flawed and deserving of becoming a handmaid without knowing anything about her as a person. This all changes when she wears a different color of the robe and her sexual orientation no longer determines how people treat her because she has changed her appearance. The appearance of women often determines how people will perceive them in reality, judging them based on arbitrary factors similar to the series.

Gilead forces handmaids to wear the color red to distinguish them from the econo-people, aunts, and wives, which symbolizes the paradox of menstruation and bleeding. Given that Gilead was founded to combat a decreasing fertility rate and population by any means necessary, fertility has been made into an invaluable resource. Therefore, menstruation is viewed favorably because it represents the chance to increase the population and produce children. However, menstruation also suggests that a handmaid (or fertile woman within Gilead) is not pregnant. Furthermore, Handmaids are treated differently depending on whether or not they have menstruated after “the Ceremony,” which is the ritualistic, government-sanctioned rape every month. For instance, Offred notices that both Serena (the Commander’s wife) and the martha are treating her exceptionally well (Season 01: Episode 03). The martha cooks an extravagant

breakfast for her and Serena is uncharacteristically-polite to Offred (01:03). Eventually, Offred inquires about everyone's peculiar behavior and the martha responds, "you haven't asked for you napkins yet this month" (01:03). Later on in the episode, Offred menstruates and tells Serena, who reacts by locking Offred in her room for thirteen days (01:03). Even though Gilead values fertility and menstruation is an extension of that, society does not accept menstruation as it pertains to a woman's body, only valuing it on the basis of fertility and childbearing. When Offred menstruates and thus takes part in a natural cycle over which she has no control, she is punished for the natural state of her body, despite that natural state being of value in other ways. The series demonstrates the reality of how women's bodies are often valued in the ways that they benefit others, such as in Gilead with fertility, and yet aren't fully accepted when the conversation extends to every aspect of a woman, not limited only to the aspects that please others. In this way, despite the repercussions, menstruating is an act of rebellion because it represents the lack of fulfilling a fertile woman's duty in Gilead. Thus, when June (Offred) escapes the Waterford household after she becomes pregnant with Nick's child, she cuts her hair and burns her clothes so that she will be unrecognizable as a handmaid (Season 02: Episode 01). Once she finishes cutting her hair and burning all of what tied her to the identity of Offred, she realizes that she still has a tracker in her ear from the Red Center and uses scissors to gruesomely extract the tracker, bleeding profusely (02:01). This scene is intentionally made difficult to watch because the camera focuses on the pain on June's face, from teary, twitching eyes to quivering lips. The camera focuses on the pain that she forces herself to endure for liberation from Gilead to demonstrate her resolve to free herself from being a handmaid. This scene makes clear that no amount of pain that ends in her liberation is more unbearable than the pain she has endured in

suffering silently and lacking control of her own body. June isn't the only character who suffers from Gilead's policies and resents them to the point where she ultimately rebels; other handmaids feel the same way and are driven to the same length.

As the series evolves, the handmaids develop a group identity, attached to their red clothing, that contradicts the stigmatizing purpose of their red clothing. At the end of the first season, Offred even comments that "they should never have given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army" (Season 01: Episode 10). The handmaids transform the negativity surrounding their red robes into a way to unify and feel connected to one another because they understand each other's struggles. Mayday, a group of rebelling handmaids who want to destroy Gilead, ultimately arises out of common suffering and the unification with which Gilead unwittingly provides the handmaids. At one point, Offred voices this unity and power that comes from the handmaid uniform, telling Commander Waterford that "red is [her] color" when he objectifies her (Season 01: Episode 06). Inadvertently, Gilead, in trying to drain handmaids of their individuality and stigmatize them, gave the handmaids a source of pride in forcing them to wear a specific color. Though their living conditions are inhumane, they can commiserate with one another and develop some semblance of a community—both of which are facilitated through the red robes that handmaids are forced to wear. The extremity to which Gilead enforces the suppression of handmaids drives them to realize the injustice within the society to the point of forming a rebellion.

Repeatedly, women are only valued based on their fertility, and handmaids are routinely abused until the point at which it will interfere with their fertility. Throughout the series, it's made clear that a woman's only contribution to society is her fertility. Even the wives, who are

the women of the highest social status, aren't able to read, write, or have a say in Gilead. Serena typifies how Gilead treats women regardless of social status when she, after having acted nothing but loyal toward it and even helping found it, read in front of a meeting of commanders (Season 02: Episode 13). She implores the men to recognize that their society is founded on the desire to increase childbirth without offering young girls the chance to have a life worth living and, instead of heeding her words, the commanders amputate part of her pinky finger to serve as punishment for her crime of reading (Season 02: Episode 13). Thus, it's clear that a woman's social status has no bearing on how she is treated, proving that a woman is never safe in Gilead, regardless of her position, simply because she is a woman. Gilead has espoused this message so fervently that citizens, whether male, female, fertile, or infertile, have internalized this dynamic of women being inferior and only useful to a society based on their natural, unchangeable abilities. Serena, an infertile woman, is a prime example of how women internalize this belief about their supposed "worthless" because she has started smoking—an act for which any fertile woman would be punished (Season 02: Episode 12). In fact, the only reason that Aunt Lydia even suggests that Serena quit smoking is to ensure the health of the child to whom Offred gave birth, further proving that women are only valued based on their fertility (02:12). When they can't fulfill their prescribed, societal role, women become unimportant and are constantly reminded of that by the treatment they receive, even when fertile because they still aren't valued at the same level at which both men and an increasing birth are valued.

So long as fertile women can engage in sexual intercourse and bear children, they can be abused into submission without issue. This is shown early on in the series, when one of June's friends, Janine, is unwieldy and disrespectful to aunts at the Red Center, leading them to remove

one of her eyes (Season 01: Episode 01). June asks Moira about what happened to Janine and Moira replies, “if my right eye offends thee, pluck it out” (01:01). Handmaids are objectified to such a degree that they’re reduced to fertile incubators, all the other parts of their bodies a privilege to a fertile, disobedient woman. Gilead constantly reminds handmaids that their basic human abilities aren’t necessary to procreate and, therefore, they are dehumanized and devalued simply because they don’t need to fulfill any roles besides the one that is required of a handmaid or econo-woman in Gilead. Furthermore, all purposes for which a woman can live, other than bearing children, aren’t important because they don’t benefit society or fill the only role a biological male can’t possibly fulfill. As previously mentioned, Offred and Moira try to escape the Red Center at the beginning of the series, and, when they are caught, Offred is returned to the Red Center and her feet are whipped (Season 01: Episode 04). Although this abusive act can be considered just another punishment, this scene is symbolic of how deeply women are disregarded as human beings with independence and agency. The aunts at the Red Center whip Offred’s feet to demonstrate how little they consider her a human because they are taking away one of her most basic abilities as a person. The fact that fellow women, the aunts, partake in the abuse of handmaids (as in Offred’s case) proves how pervasive the idea is that a woman’s value lies in her willingness to participate in society, and, only then, will she be accepted. Overall, it becomes clear throughout the series that women (and more specifically, handmaids) are constantly abused and valued based on their fertility because birth is the one role a man within Gilead cannot fulfill.

Women exist in Gilead to provide pleasure for men through food, sex, and domestic duties because men require the presence of a woman’s uterus regardless, therefore, men of Gilead should benefit from the female presence. Moreover, men only value the aspects of the

female body that provide them pleasure, dismissing every other aspect that serves another purpose. The men of Gilead have developed a social structure in which women are constantly subordinate and serving men in some way. Therefore, even when a woman is not fertile or fulfilling her “biological destiny,” men find ways to include women in society so that they please men (Season 01: Episode 05). The highest position a woman can have in Gilead is always subservient to a man’s position. For instance, the wives of commanders, who are the women of highest status and typically infertile, are subordinate to their husbands—so much so that they don’t have their title beyond “wife” or their husband’s last name. Furthermore, the cooks or maids of every high-status household, which are typically led by commanders, are women called “marthas.” These positions are never fulfilled by men, reinforcing that Gilead was designed to insure that, regardless of a woman’s fertility, she could contribute to society in a way that would please men. Gilead goes so far to ensure that women are always positioned to pleasure men that even the act of sexual intercourse is made into “the Ceremony,” or government-sanctioned male pleasure. “The Ceremony” is only designed to impregnate handmaids and, coincidentally, provide only men with pleasure in the process with no regard for the pleasure of women, even wives. The HBO series emphasizes how a woman’s only role in Gilead is to provide a man with pleasure, specifically focusing on child-bearing. When a woman does happen to fulfill the main role of a woman within Gilead, she is constantly reminded that that is her only source of value. Women of Gilead only need to fulfill the traditional, prescribed role of giving birth and increasing the population; beyond that, women aren’t necessary to a functioning state and, therefore, are used to serve auxiliary purposes prescribed by those in power within Gilead: men.

Regardless of a woman's status or use within Gilead, she is always threatened with the possibility of worse conditions. For instance, when June escapes with Nick's help, she relies on strangers to smuggle her from place to place until one man arrives to pick her up and he backs out at the last second until June is able to convince him otherwise (Season 02: Episode 03). The next day, the family leaves for church and, when they don't return, June tries to escape on a plane out of Gilead until she is caught and told that the family who helped her was torn apart: the father was hung, the mother was forced to become a handmaid, and the son was relocated to another household (Season 02: Episode 04). This is the first time the audience is introduced to the econo-people in the series because this scene cements the reality that women are scrutinized every moment of their lives, constantly having to perform at a certain level of obedience and loyalty to avoid punishment or worse conditions. Econo-women become handmaids when they are disobedient and handmaids are sent to the Colonies when they are disobedient—the Colonies being a radioactive wasteland where people are sent to be punished with a slow, painful, and inevitable death. When a woman is disobedient, it hurts her and those around her. June is pregnant when she escapes, therefore, she can't be harmed. However, the econo-family who hides her from the police can be punished both for their disobedience and for June's, which is why the family is destroyed: Gilead knows that killing the man who helped June would put her through mental anguish far worse than any physical punishment they could enact on her while pregnant. Gilead isn't the only source of abuse that handmaids have to endure; women of higher status than handmaids also abuse them for their own personal interests. For example, when it becomes possible that Offred is pregnant, Serena throws her against the bathtub for failing to be receptive to the possibility of having a child in the Waterford household and then promptly asks

her to take a pregnancy test (Season 01: Episode 10). Serena makes a statement to show that she has no regard for Offred's safety and only values her as far as her childbearing abilities extend. It's clear that she wants Offred to feel inferior by abusing the woman who might be pregnant with her child and reaffirms the power dynamic between Serena, as the wife, and Offred as the handmaid. This scene demonstrates the extent to which Serena has internalized her uselessness as an infertile woman in Gilead to the point where raising a child becomes her obsession and only purpose; harming Offred secures Serena's status as, at the very least, higher than a handmaid. Women are never safe within Gilead because they aren't valued the same as men, therefore, women are taught to always fear worse conditions—the fear of death and abuse causing women to be submissive in a regressive, torturous society.

The HBO series develops an oppressive environment, in which women have no autonomy and are treated as less than human, in order to emphasize what it truly means to be a woman. Gilead is founded on extreme policies to strip women of their basic human rights to clarify what it means to be a woman so that the definition of embracing one's identity as a female could translate into the real world. Offred exemplifies this when she exercises bodily autonomy in the only way that she can as a handmaid without severe repercussions: she has consensual sex with Nick, the driver (Season 01:08). After having been raped by him to get pregnant and please Serena, Offred returns to Nick's room later on in the night and has sex with him (01:08). She discusses the incident saying, "I could say these are acts of rebellion... a 'fuck you' to the patriarchy, but those are excuses. I'm here because it feels good and I don't want to be alone" (01:08). Rather than being preoccupied with the need to rebel against the patriarchy and participate in every disobedient activity solely to act out against Gilead, Offred has sex with Nick

simply because of her desire to do so. Instead, she enjoys sex without the desire to get pregnant for the sake of enjoying her body in ways Gilead will not allow. Gilead controls every aspect of her life and rationalizes the natural tendency to dismiss any part of the female anatomy that doesn't expressly lend to male pleasure by making fertility into a resource (and, by extension, fertile women). However, for all of the protection that commodification offers fertile women, it only protects that which can benefit men. The series argues that being a woman means enjoying every aspect of one's body beyond the value that society may assign it, solely for the purpose of enjoying one's body.

The Handmaid's Tale HBO series focuses on the oppression of women within Gilead, from being judged solely on appearance to existing solely for male pleasure. Women are only valued based on their fertility and are consistently abused to remind them of their value (or lack thereof) in society. Whether or not a woman is fertile, she is always given roles that provide men with secondary pleasures even if she can't provide a child. Overall, women are not allowed agency and are punished whenever they exercise or try to gain any independence whatsoever. Gilead is built into such an oppressive society that, when a woman is disobedient in any way, it is made clear what it means to be a woman in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale* HBO series: enjoying every aspect of the female body, regardless of how the patriarchy or any social structure outside of the female pleasure values it.

Works Cited

Miller, Bruce, and Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 2018. Hulu, hulu.com.

(I've attached a comic for your amusement. I found it on social media and felt that it applied almost too well to the thesis and topic of my essay.)



"Can you give me a hand moving these?"