Offred Versus June: The Purpose of the Protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale *has recently made its way back into popular culture and media. This is a consequence of the streaming service* Hulu *launching a web television series based on the novel. The protagonist, Offred, plays a crucial role in both tellings of the story, but that role shifts depending on the medium. Within the novel, Offred lacks the characteristics of a hero, demonstrating complacency in her tortured position. Meanwhile, the Offred of the* Hulu *series is a rebel, an empowered woman who refuses oppression. These intentional portrayals of Offred speak to the inevitable distinctions between visual and written storytelling.*

As screen adaptations of books continue to flourish, it is no surprise that Margaret Atwood's politically charged novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has become an award-winning *Hulu* exclusive series. The series, which shares the name of its inspiration, was an instant hit among viewers who praised its relevancy to today's political and social issues, especially those surrounding women's rights. The dystopian plot of the show and novel are essentially the same; Offred shares her day-to-day life as a handmaid in the nation of Gilead. Gilead, which was formerly the United States, is undergoing a fertility crisis, forcing them to adopt polyamorous relationships modeled after the bible story of Rachel and Jacob. As a handmaid, Offred is forced to carry a child for a powerful family in Gilead. The nature of this dystopian ritual is a paradox, for handmaids are exalted for their fertility but slaves to a system with particularly cruel and unusual punishments.

However, one could certainly say the Offred that lives between the pages of Atwood's novel and the Offred that is brought to life on screen by actress Elisabeth Moss are two different characters. Within the 1985 novel, Offred's resistance towards the government is very subtle, leaving her status as a hero debatable. On screen, Offred is shown as a rebel, overtly committing transgressions against the Republic of Gilead. This stark contrast leads one to question why Atwood's original Offred acts the way she does and how these actions contribute to the themes of the novel as a whole. While she is the main character of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is not its hero. She carries potential for heroism, as amplified and utilized in the *Hulu* series by the same name, but ultimately, Atwood choses to keep her indifferent and complicit, which both strengthens the realism and warning within the novel. Further, Offred's complacency highlights the grueling nature of dystopias and their ability to strip an individual of identity due to totalitarian rule.

The debate over Offred's heroism within *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a new one. For as long as the book has been in print, scholars have argued over Offred's role in her own story and what that implies about the rest of the novel's messages. When analyzing the textual evidence, it is clear she is not the story's hero. The first place a reader can see this is Offred's complicity in the Republic of Gilead. This society thrives on the oppression of women. Offred lives in this world not reading, not writing, and not making her own choices because its leaders have an overly conservative outlook on the role of women. While it can be agreed that Offred's values do not necessarily match those of

Gilead's, she still voluntarily acts according to those values. Looking at her position as a handmaid, Offred does not feel as if she was forced into this position. She describes the Ceremony by saying it is far from "making love"; however, she reflects, "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood 94). Although all her options contained unfavorable consequences, Offred recognizes she was still able to choose a different fate. It is true that her chances of survival are highest as a handmaid, but in making herself one, Offred willingly gives up the rights to her body and her identity, a consequence that is common in dystopian novels.

By choosing to be a handmaid, Offred "fails to maintain her identity . . . because in Gilead even apparent forms of resistance or attempts to create, maintain, or grasp an identity frequently turn into complicity with the regime" (Stillman and Johnson 75). Understanding this helps deconstruct the obvious counterargument that Offred participates in transgressions against Gilead, particularly by having a relationship with Nick. While this relationship is illegal and Offred risks her life by pursuing it, the very existence of it has Offred fulfilling Gilead's expectations of her as a woman. She enters the relationship to satisfy her desire to be touched, which "directly enmesh[es] her into the system of sex, power, and corruption that characterizes the actual workings of Gilead and powerfully construct her as a being who defines herself by her body" (Stillman and Johnson 76). This exemplifies the dystopia's control over Offred. It is built to put her in a box she cannot escape. Instead of strengthening her sense of self, this relationship buries Offred's motivation to escape. She decides, "I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (Atwood 271). It is here the true colors of Offred's illegal relationship show themselves; it is not a rebellious act, but rather one of desperation, showing that Offred, like the rest of her society, is satisfied by a few compensations. Her environment is successfully working to melt her personal goal of freedom by making her one with its corruption.

Although these actions can clearly classify Offred as less than heroic, it is also often argued that Offred is incapable of rebelling. The restraints of her position force her into a victim role she is unable to shake. Along these lines, scholars have claimed that as a victim, the fact that Offred's story exists is resistance enough; "The handmaid's voice breaks silence, for she is heard. [They] can finally neither

appropriate nor invalidate her voice" (Jones 11). Offred's position as a handmaid forces her into a life of silence. The totalitarian government censors her from expressing criticism of their rule. Figures, such as Aunt Lydia, work to reshape her mind and doubt her identity, leading some to believe "her individual speech produces a profusion of words and desires that are not allowed . . . . She revives the capacity for individual and spiritual emotional life" (Staels 49). This interpretation is important to consider. Offred's narration is a significant tool used by Atwood to deliver the story with a more humanizing touch as opposed to having an omniscient, outside narrator. The survival of her story allows her to exist, yet the survival of her story reveals "that Offred has played a role in her own oppression, whether or not she can do anything about it" because as with most dystopias, the continuation of the undesirable society comes from a failure to act (Weiss 122).

Memories narrated by Offred of the time before the coup illustrate how complicity and complacency have always been a part of her identity. Although it can be argued that Offred's "memory of the past brings back to life the excluded pole in Gilead, such as the existence of love and humanity," more prominently the memories display how Offred favors inaction (Staels 49). Her inaction in the time before diminishes her claim to victimhood because this is what ultimately led to the existence of Gilead. Throughout the entirety of the novel, Offred overtly comments on her political and social indifference concerning her rights. Profound but chilling, Offred notes,

> We lived by ignoring . . . . There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men . . . . We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. (56-57)

It cannot be an accident how closely this quote mirrors the famous German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller's response concerning the Nazi's rise to power. Addressing the cowardice of bystanders, Neimöller warned:

> First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew. Then they

came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

The connection between the two sends a powerful message to the reader. It is possible Atwood wants her audience to see the reality of choosing to ignore major societal issues like pollution of the environment and discrimination. Incidentally, both of these contribute to the fall of the United States in this novel: pollution causing the fertility crisis and inequality of women leading to their purely domestic lives.

Offred's attitude towards the persecution of others prior to the coup directly impacts where she ends up. Some have gone as far as to say Offred "is more like a 'good German' than a freedom fighter" (Greene 311). Mimicking the creation of Nazi Germany, Gilead was birthed out of many people sharing Offred's view: If the issue does not directly involve me, I can ignore it, and it will go away. The problem with this logic, of course, is that the issue does not go away – it only grows.

This fault of Offred is highlighted by the juxtaposition between she and the other women in her life, specifically Moira and her mother. Where Offred "lacks courage [and] is too apolitical to take a stand as her right are being abolished," the audience sees Moira and her mother taking a strong stance against the patriarchal society (Weiss 134). Focusing on Moira, her resistance and awareness are easily noted. She not only is brave enough to attempt an escape, but she also is able to maintain her wit and humor after being condemned to Jezebel's. Before Gilead, Offred remembers Moira addressing the dominating nature of men in the context of sex; "the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even-steven transaction" (Atwood 172). As a response to this, Offred mocks Moira and trivializes the issue she was trying to comment on. Similarly, when Offred recalls her mother, an active feminist, her tone is not one of admiration or interest. In fact, she thinks critically of her mother remembering, "They ignored me, and I resented them. My mother and her rowdy friends. I didn't see why she had to dress that way . . . or to swear so much" (180). It is evident that Offred has lived her whole life uninterested in taking a stance on anything. Choosing to only be concerned with her personal life, Offred fails to see how these issues directly affect her ability to live the life she holds so dearly. In writing Offred this way, Atwood hammers home the nature of dystopian societies. Atwood is choosing to focus on the average person's response to oppression rather than making Offred the savior of the situation.

There is evidence to support that Offred can recognize the mistakes of her past and regrets not acting sooner, but ultimately, these feelings are not enough to motivate her to change her ways. Instead, Offred often resorts to denial or romanticizes that someone else will act on her behalf. During her conversation with Moira at Jezebel's, Offred is disappointed that Moira's attitude towards Gilead reflects her own: "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (249).

Comments like this drive home the complacency of Offred. She continues to wait for change to come about without contributing because "knowing that she herself cannot commit such unlikely heroics, Offred also fails to think about undertaking the single, specific actions that could aid resistance to Gilead (both before and after the coup)" (Stillman and Johnson 80). Further, as the novel draws to a close, Offred gives into this reality. She acknowledges what she has become, and no longer works to fight it. Following the death of Ofglen, she laments, "everything I've resisted, comes flooding in . . . . I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject." Most disturbingly, she adds, "I feel, for the first time, their true power" (286). In this Atwood creates another undeniably famous parallel; this time to well-known dystopian novel, *1984*. Offred's surrender of herself to the regime mirrors Winston's final moments of "re-education," resulting in his love for Big Brother. Similarly, Offred has been broken to the point where she resigns her ability to fight back. The government's presence at this point is too overwhelming, highlighting how dystopias function on their people's hopelessness.

As a reader, one must wonder what Atwood's purpose was in centering her novel around such a weak protagonist. For in the end, albeit Offred does presumably escape, in more ways than one, Gilead has won the battle of Offred's will. Before getting in the van, Offred is fully willing to continue her life as a handmaid, resigning her body to the use of Gilead and her relationship with Nick. Offred is not a hero and not legitimately a victim; she is just an average person, which is exactly who she is supposed to be. The weaknesses of Offred reflect the weaknesses of the average person. It is unlikely that the audience of the novel would survive any better than Offred does, which highlights the cautionary part of this cautionary tale. It has been written that "our own cowardice or selfishness

does not excuse Offred's; instead, her cowardice and complicity convict us all, because we share it" (Stillman and Johnson 137). This is what makes Offred and her world so real; it is grounded in history and the most common faults among all humans.

Likewise, her lack of rebellion is a characteristic of the dystopian genre, for "Dystopian regimes are then kept in place by the acquiescence of a complacent citizenry that accepts and may even enjoy its comforting oppression. The common image of a dystopian society is that it is the exact opposite of a utopia; in the latter, people are generally happy, while in the former, they are miserable" (Weiss 134). Offred is no more than an example of how dystopian regimes keep their power. While dystopias are characterized by the misery of their people and utopias the happiness of their people, "the two genres mirror each other in many ways, particularly in that most residents of dystopias are happy or at the very least satisfied, and the (supposed) rebels are anomalies in their societies" (Wiess 134). Arguably, Atwood does not want to write the story of an anomaly. The story of the rebel is often one where good triumphs over evil, but the overall message can appear weak. The fear evoked from the reader that they will become Offred, a woman trapped in hero-less situation, is far more motivating than believing every seemingly doomed society has a secret, unstoppable rebel in its midst.

It can be said, then, that Offred's purpose is that of a "reverse role model." Readers are meant to criticize her actions and hopefully be inspired not to follow them. The book thrives on Offred's indifference because the reader is inside her head. She paints her world bleakly, sharing the injustices of her society. Her narrated thoughts are not only extraoardinarly detailed, but they are the strongest things characterizing Offred since she so rarely speaks. This, of course, leads to the discussion of why an on-screen Offred departs so much from novel Offred. While all types of story-telling are built on the same concepts, visual story-telling and written story-telling are very different beasts.

That being said, visually, Offred must be a hero. The most obvious reasoning being that a rebellious protagonist is inherently more interesting to watch. Undoubtedly, the stakes in Atwood's novel are high, but they do not necessarily rely on heavy action from any of the characters. Conflict and tension are created from the paranoia inside Offred's head. For example, when Offred's Commander, the man whose child she must carry, asks her to break several rules by playing Scrabble with him, Offred's narration lasts for pages; whereas, on screen, there is less time dedicated to this act

simply because Offred does not need to describe the Commander, his office, and the way she is feeling. The dystopia is shown through set and acting. The many elements of production work to create its tone, mood, and appearance. Although the *Hulu* series does utilize voiceover to share some of Offred's inner thoughts, the show is not reliant on it, relying more on physical movement, vocal inflection, and facials to communicate Offred's state of mind. These techniques are privileges only granted to visual-storytelling. In this case, showing Offred as a hero has more effect than leaving her complicit. Where the novel forces the audience to confront their complacency, the show forces the audience to admire a strong woman who speaks out against injustice.

The *Hulu* series makes Offred easy to admire. Right from the start, they establish the strength in her character by directly departing from the novel. At the end of the first episode, the viewer learns that Offred's real name is "June," a name that is used in the novel, but is never confirmed as Offred's true identity. June declares her name while staring right at the viewer (Moss). This scene frames the tone for the rest of the season. Already, in the very beginnings of the show, June is defeating an obstacle Offred could never overcome — holding on to an identity that is completely her own, unshaped by her life in Gilead. Furthermore, June acts in situations a closer reader knows Offred would never participate in. Later in the season, June openly rebels against Aunt Lydia during a ritualized event much like the book's Salvaging, an event where the handmaids are ordered to stone a rapist to death. In this scene, Aunt Lydia commands the handmaids to stone Janine to death because of a crime she has committed. June refuses and inspires the rest of the handmaids to follow suit. She acts fearlessly (Moss). This attitude contradicts a timid Offred who upon hearing of Ofglen's suicide thinks, "I'll say anything they like, I'll incriminate anyone. . . . I'll confess to any crime, I'll end up hanging from a hook on the Wall" (Atwood 285). While the context of the world remains the same, the way June interacts with it is starkly different.

Alongside the need for more action, it is possible the *Hulu* series cashes in on Offred's potential to be a hero to enhance the show's attempt to be relevant in today's political and social climate. In order to play up its renewed relevancy, the show utilizes modern day technology and concepts, such as smartphones and Uber, in June's flashbacks. It takes Atwood's dystopian world and puts it in today's terms. Today, for lack of better phrasing, the strong woman is "in." With social movements like the

Women's March and the #MeToo movement, the portrayal of women in media has become more important than ever. Despite what an indifferent Offred teaches the audience in the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it very well could not translate to screen. Given the time and the medium for retelling this story, it is far more resonant for the audience to see a rebellious June. Atwood's original themes and messages remain the same; they are just reframed through a protagonist that takes action and inspires the audience to do the same.

Being that Offred is the story's narrator and sole voice, it is crucial to examine her role in the larger themes the novel addresses. No matter the lens, historical, feminist, or political, Offred's interpretation of the dystopian world around her impacts any literary analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As mentioned above, Offred is the narrator; she is the story's protagonist, but she is not its hero. After closely examining the text, it is clear to see that Offred's potential for heroism is never reached within the pages of Atwood's novel. Despite her ability to narrator her story to the reader, Offred's complicity and complacency within Gilead, and before Gilead, proves her to be playing a part in her own oppression. She plays this part to the point that she can barely be considered a victim, especially when compared to the resistance of her mother, Moira, and Ofglen.

As the story is retold via *Hulu*, the character of Offred is in many ways reformed. To reiterate, *Hulu*'s Offred is rebellious and not easily silenced. This Offred is better known as June, and her characterization inspires viewers to rally behind her in her fight to change Gilead. Meanwhile, Atwood's Offred forces readers to confront their own sense of indifference and ignorance when it comes to politics and their basic rights. This evolution of Offred's character and the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* forces one to consider the role of the story as time passes and old issues show themselves with new faces. Although these two versions of Offred contradict one another, neither are wrong. It can be argued that Offred's purpose is to explore dystopian literary tradition and teach the audience about awareness. The novel Offred demonstrates the consequences of choosing to ignore our surroundings while on-screen Offred shows us the rewards of becoming aware. Regardless of the tactics, both the original medium and the renewed medium successfully work to spread Atwood's commentary and cautionary tale. They use a dystopian environment to elicit responses from two different minded characters. Simultaneously, as the story continues to spread, interpretations of

Offred will always continue to emerge and evolve.

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