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Writing in the Digital Age

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 The Handmaid's Tale: Series Trailer • A Hulu Original

Our bodies are not our own. This is the message that America has sent us as women. Controversies surrounding the cultural issue of abortion have only worsened in the current political climate of our country: with women's right to bodily autonomy under attack. As we take massive strides back in progress, if only one thing could be surmised from *Roe v. Wade's* rescindance, it's that freedom is fragile. More than anything, this is the thought that scares me. How the life of the unborn is worth more than the born; how according to lawmakers, society as a majority would readily foresake a born woman for her unborn child. For many, the television series *the Handmaid's Tale* represents just this fear: the revocation of women's freedom. Introduced through the lens of the protagonist Offred, Gilead is a society in which there exists a massive fertility crisis, with the majority of women unable to conceive. In an effort to protect the lineage of the population, the few women who were fertile were forcibly rounded up to become handmaids. With this newfound role as handmaids, these women would have the responsibility

of participating in ritualistic sex with the husbands of upper-class and infertile wives, the purpose being to bear them a “biological” child. If successful, the handmaids would remain safe, with the child raised as their posted family’s own. With no choice but to comply with this new regime, Offred sets about a silent resistance to her position. With observed truths of American history applied in her acclaimed television series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, writer Margaret Atwood explores the exaggerated potential for a dystopian world that has outlawed the practice of abortion.

The handmaids are nothing more than vessels serving a sick purpose for compulsory procreation. Quite literally speaking, they are only worth as much as their functioning reproductive systems, with Offred, the protagonist of *the Handmaid’s Tale*, serving as the principal example. Assigned to the house of a commander and his wife as a “surrogate,” Offred assumes a new identity as the property of the former. In an article titled “Why The Handmaid’s Tale is so relevant today,” published by the BBC and written by Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, Armstrong notes the literality of Offred’s belonging to the commander: “As a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, [Offred] must routinely submit to ritualistic sex with her commander, Fred. Her name derives from the term ‘of Fred’” (Armstrong). Offred’s entire identity is reworked to shape the role that she plays for the commander. As was the case with the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, women undergo systemic oppression of their freedom because of external entitlement: the belief of others that their right to a woman’s body is greater than her own right to autonomy. Now all of this said, some may ask, what about the babies themselves? In an article titled, “I INVENTED GILEAD. THE SUPREME COURT IS MAKING IT REAL,” narrated by Atwood herself, she writes: “When does a fertilized human egg become a full human being or person?... any such judgment depends on a religious belief—namely, the belief in souls. Not everyone

shares such a belief. But all, it appears, now risk being subjected to laws by those who do” (Atwood). The grounds against abortion in terms of religious beliefs further reinforce the idea that women don’t deserve control over their own bodies. This too, in a nation that claims to have a separation of church and state, especially in regard to politics, is incredibly concerning, especially when those religious beliefs fail to take into account the condition of the woman. Taking control over women’s identities in forcing them into motherhood under the guise of greater purpose and religious responsibility, the realities of women in Gilead draw closer to the beliefs existent in the real world.

As women’s reproductive rights are being stripped away in the real world, ugly truths are uncovered through the lens of Gilead. As Offred recalls a time before the events of *the Handmaid’s Tale*, it’s revealed that the thoughts of the world before weren’t all too different from the realities of her current world: “They are taught to fear each other and mindlessly speak certain phrases the society before was not free from the ideas and values displayed in Gilead, but they were incubated in the discourse” (Fredrick Pettersson in an Essay excerpt from Linneaus University). Essentially, the main difference between the Gillead pre-story and the one present was action. It wasn’t as if people had only suddenly begun to view women as a tool for reproduction, but the opposite; they had been thinking of them in that way all along. As such, the only difference between the two time periods was the transformation of their thoughts into reality. In the same way, pro-lifers in the United States have always wanted to outlaw abortion, which they were finally successful in doing as of late with *Roe v. Wade*. “Haunted by the *Handmaid’s Tale*,” an article by Margaret Atwood, discusses the realities of Gilead and its roots in the real world: “I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time... I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted

inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behavior.” In Atwood’s work, it’s evident how her claim holds true. The world itself is run by a corrupt system with children of the lower classes given and claimed as the upper class’ own, not to mention the stripping of rights for women. *The Handmaid’s Tale* bridges the gap between the hypothetical yet truth-grounded world of Gilead and the United States through its relations of pre-existing ideals pushed onto others to restrict their rights under a certain belief system and the roots that it finds in reality through a world comprised of terrible actions that have occurred in the past.

It’s fair to say that *the Handmaid’s Tale* is a depressing depiction of an imagined dystopian future of women’s rights, or even a blown out-of-proportion misinterpretation of it. To argue that the entire show is baseless, however, is an entirely different case. In an article published by the Atlantic titled “Trump’s America Is Not The Handmaid’s Tale,” writer Cathy Young expresses her disagreement with fans of the novel and show alike who she claims are quick to assume the worst: “In the worst-case scenario, many American women, especially those unable to afford out-of-state travel, will lose access to abortion... As a pro-choice feminist, I deplore the recent push to restrict women’s reproductive freedom. But is it a step toward a society that bars nearly all women from non-domestic pursuits and practice forced surrogate motherhood via monthly rape? No” (Young). Young argues that the horrifying events in *the Handmaid’s Tale* are not entirely a reality for the future, namely that they are an exaggeration. It’s important to note though that her article was published in 2019, before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. That said, she brings up a fair point about the show, yes, it is an exaggeration. But is it meant to be a realistic prediction for the future? No, it’s an imagined world. Although the show has many and increasing ties to reality, it is very likely not everything in it will become a reality. In other words, while valid, Young’s claim against the realities of the book ignores the fact that it

is firstly, based on a combination of real tragedies that have happened, and secondly, not meant to be a true prediction of the real world.

Margaret Atwood's creation of Gilead in *the Handmaid's Tale* and its dystopian interpretation of abortion through haunting and increasingly relevant parallels to the modern age successfully portrays the controversial subject of abortion. It discusses the process of others in trying to control women's bodies and manifest their personal ideologies concerning unborn life into reality. Drawing parallels to the real world and the overturn of Roe v. Wade, almost forty years after its publication, it discusses how the worlds before the shift in politics were the same, their only difference being the actualization of beliefs into society. While *the Handmaid's Tale* might be considered a stretch from reality, the truth and fear that drive it should not be discredited.

Works Cited

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“Why The Handmaid’s Tale is so relevant today,” is an article written by Jennifer Keishin Armstrong under the BBC. Armstrong is an established writer, with her work having been published by sites such as BBC Culture, New York magazine, Billboard. She currently writes for the Peabody Finds newsletter as well as her own newsletter, Culture Trip; with both sharing a commonality in her discussions of pop culture and politics. Her article on the Handmaid’s Tale was published on the 25th of April 2018, only a few years before the present. It discusses the show in terms of Atwood’s inspiration for it and its relevancy to the modern world and world since the books publication in 1985 and the show adaptation that would follow in 2017.

Atwood, M. (2022) *I invented Gilead. The Supreme Court is making it real.*, *The Atlantic*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/supreme-court-roe-handmaids-tale-abortion-margaret-atwood/629833/> (Accessed: 11 October 2023).

On the 13th of May 2022, an article on the Handmaiden’s Tale and its relevancy to modern times was published by the Atlantic, written by the creator herself, Margaret Atwood, titled: “I invented Gilead. The Supreme Court is Making it real.” In the article, Atwood discusses the rights of women in relation to the history of America and the Constitution. She notes that women had not been included in it at all when Roe v. Wade

was subject to overturn because the right to an abortion had not been mentioned either. The article serves as a warning for the future as women's rights come under attack and her novel draws closer to reality.

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