

TELEVISION AND GRAPHIC-NOVEL REVIEWS

The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu, 2017)

Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* should be recognised as an almost unparalleled triumph for television. Few other adaptations can be said to not only remain as faithful to the original text as this adaptation does, but to build on the original in such a way as to draw in the uninitiated and reward the novel's fans simultaneously. Based as it is upon Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, which is one of the cornerstones of modern feminist literature, one might understandably be wary of any attempt to adapt such a formidable text. Relying heavily on the internal monologue of Offred, a woman living in a dystopian US (rechristened 'Gilead') in which the few fertile women who remain in a dwindling population are forced into pregnancy against their will, the novel stresses the loneliness and isolation of her not-so-brave new world. It is a gripping read, and any visual adaptations hoping to depict such isolation and mundanity adequately, without losing the novel's sense of urgency and horror, would, inevitably, need to be handled with care and consideration.

In light of this, the novel's history of successful adaptations should come as a pleasant surprise. Not only has it been adapted for radio and stage, but *The Handmaid's Tale* was also made into a film in 1990 starring Natasha Richardson. While it has taken longer to get to the small screen, it has been worth the wait. Thanks to the season's generous ten-episode arc, there is more than enough time to cover the events of the 300-odd pages, while leaving plenty of room to expand on Gilead and the wider world. The focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* is still Offred, played by self-described feminist Elisabeth Moss, whose quiet determination admirably carries the role. However, the show also takes advantage of the possibilities of multiple perspectives, used to great effect in series like *The Wire* (2002-08) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-present). This is not, however, at the expense of Offred's internal world; instead, the narrative is interspersed with explorations of the various characters who make up her lived existence. Individuals who are seen only through the narrator's point of view in Atwood's text are here given their own story arcs independent of Offred, such as her slimy master, Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) and her best friend, Moira (Samira Wiley). This is a fascinating addition for the novel's fans. What's more, while the external world is shrouded in mystery in the novel, the geopolitics are here brought to the fore; Gilead has become a land of impenetrable borders, as seen in its many policed checkpoints. The state's

extreme propaganda is highlighted, in particular via the glimpses the viewer is afforded of international relations, such as when the handmaids are paraded about to foreign diplomats as pioneers who have volunteered their fertility to ensure Gilead's longevity.

In such a climate of fear and paranoia, it is fascinating to see the tension between the enforced placidity of Offred's daily life (which entails shopping, going for walks with fellow handmaids, and little else) and the undercurrent of violence that occasionally breaks through in the form of stoning and ritualised monthly rape at the hands of her Commander. Perhaps this is why Offred's scenes often have the quality of a Vermeer painting, hinting at things unsaid in the silences between these moments of violence. This is thanks in no small part to the handmaids' anachronistic garb (red robes and white caps, not unlike those found in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting), and to the show's beautiful evocations of bright sunlight. Handmaids (the few remaining fertile women assigned to high-ranking men, to ensure their lineage continues) are not even permitted to have reading material and are expected simply to remain healthy in order to ensure their fertility — any other activities or sources of potential fulfilment are considered unnecessary, even sinful. Echoes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-paper' (1892) or indeed Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) can certainly be found here. Moss's voice-over undercuts this stillness: as we observe the handmaids dutifully food shopping for their Commanders' families, walking around the town in twos to ensure everyone is always being watched, we also hear about the violation of Offred's human rights, the events that separated her from her husband and daughter, and the numerous strategies enacted to dehumanise her. In addition to this direct narration, the show also uses flashbacks to highlight the political and social unrest which led to the formation of Gilead; we learn, for example, of the creation of laws criminalising the employment of women, and the religious cults preaching that a woman's duty is, above all, motherhood.

The series has been hailed as extremely prescient due to the recent movements in the United States to reduce reproductive freedoms for women. However, the sad fact is that the horrors of Gilead are echoed worldwide. Closer to home, there are strong parallels between Gilead's forced breeding programme and the Irish history of the Magdalene Laundries, in which unmarried pregnant women and girls had their children forcibly taken from them and sold to wealthy families. There are also clear historical links between the series and nineteenth-century slavery narratives, particularly Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), with its particular focus on the separation of mothers and children, the

underground action of groups of rebels, and attempts to find safety in Canada. Indeed, the series makes use of a range of motifs found in slave narratives, such as the slave woman who chooses to throw herself off a bridge rather than submit herself to further degradation. The gothic elements of *The Handmaid's Tale* are especially apparent in these moments, in which we see America's bleak history repeating itself.

As this suggests, anyone intending to follow the series should be prepared for traumatic scenes of physical and sexual violence. However, for anyone who does so, it quickly becomes clear that these scenes, disturbing as they are, are crucial to our understanding of Gilead. In the very first episode, to give a particularly gruesome example, the local handmaids are gathered together and instructed to stone a rapist to death. Despite her initial misgivings, even Offred joins in. While such a scene may appear monstrous and alien to many viewers, it ultimately highlights how Western society demonises the dark, hulking stranger, while ignoring the all-too-pervasive dangers of domestic violence. After all, the handmaids are regularly raped at the hands of the men who themselves have orchestrated this stoning. Almost equally disturbing is seeing individuals who are in positions of power over the handmaids acting out of a horrifically misplaced sense of care, not least of whom is 'Aunt' Lydia (Ann Dowd), the woman tasked with indoctrinating Offred and others in their new roles. We see her shed a tear when the handmaids have their newborn babies taken away from them, yet she thinks nothing of using a cattle prod to keep them in line. A belief that their oversight is genuinely in the best interests of the handmaids is a grotesque demonstration of the paternalism found throughout extremist societies.

Considering how progressive *The Handmaid's Tale* is in many respects, it may feel like nit-picking to point out its shortcomings, of which admittedly there aren't many. There is, however, something a little problematic about seeing Offred, a white American, desperately trying to convince the Mexican ambassador (who is herself a woman of colour) that she is a slave. In a narrative firmly rooted in the conventions of American slavery literature, such a sentiment might hold more weight if the protagonist was similarly African American. One wonders if the decision to depict the protagonist as a straight, white, cis woman was perhaps a slight misstep. Surrounded as Offred is by LGBTQ+ individuals and women and men of colour, including her own husband, daughter, and best friend, *The Handmaid's Tale* cannot be accused of ignoring issues regarding inclusivity and intersectionality. However, having the audience's avatar and guide to this world be both white and heteronormative seems like something of a hand-holding device to ensure

identification with the central character, something I would hope a modern and receptive audience would not require. Similarly, while *The Handmaid's Tale* should be lauded for its examination of intersectional issues, its portrayal of these very issues can occasionally be problematic. In a society in which women are treated solely as human incubators, it is unsurprising that Gilead is extremely hostile towards lesbians (here they are termed 'gender traitors'). Yet, even in light of this, the brutality involved in the show's one depiction of a lesbian relationship is possibly misguided. The focus is almost exclusively on the rueful and violent consequences for these two women — one is brutally executed, and the other has her genitals mutilated and is never seen again — resulting in yet another example of the all-too-prevalent 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' found throughout Western media.¹

Such criticisms aside, news that *The Handmaid's Tale* has been renewed for a second season should be welcomed; while it will be interesting to see where it goes without source material (Season One ended at the novel's denouement), the input of Atwood as producer should hopefully ensure that it doesn't go too far wrong. As Season One has left its characters and the world they inhabit poised on the brink of wider-scale rebellion, it is interesting to consider how Season Two may provide Offred with the opportunity to take a more active role in the resistance. Only time will tell what's in store, and until then, *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

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¹ This trope is also referred to as 'Bury Your Gays'. See *TV Tropes* <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>> [accessed 3 September 2017].