



**“Nothing changes instantaneously” A Critical Analysis of speculative fiction
in the *Handmaid’s Tale* Television Series (2017-2025)**

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Abstract

The Handmaid’s Tale, launched on television in 2017, was based on the 1985 best seller by Margaret Atwood. Atwood has said that speculative fiction predicts a future that “could really happen”, much how Orwell used speculative fiction in 1948 in his dystopian *1984* to predict the future of totalitarian regimes and surveillance.

This critical analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series begins with its depiction of a severe global infertility crisis, which leads to an erosion of women’s rights. This essay compares this speculative fiction to real life events in the past and the present, including events from the recent past that inspired *The Handmaid’s Tale*: a real life decline in birth rates in America; the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 and inauguration in January 2017; protests following Trump’s election (where women wore the symbolic red robes and white bonnets as seen in a *Handmaid’s Tale*); and the overturning in 2022 of an important piece of legislation, *Roe V. Wade*, which led to banning of women in certain states from having abortions. Essentially, women’s rights, and in particular their right to an abortion, have been eroded in this time period. A quote from *The Handmaids Tale* states that “nothing changes instantaneously”. This notion is represented in both fiction and in real life America. This critical analysis of *The Handmaids Tale* examines this speculative fiction in comparison to real life events in America from 2017 to 2025, the regression of women’s rights and how this could shape the future.

Keywords: *Roe V Wade, women’s rights, America, speculative fiction, dystopia, television, adaptation, reproductive rights, Gilead.*



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Margaret Atwood has always claimed that the contents of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* “all have their precedents in some of the darkest chapters in world history” (Margaret Atwood on the real-life events that inspired *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* 2019). All of the events covered in *The Handmaid's Tale* have occurred elsewhere in history. This article aims to explore the role of *The Handmaid's Tale* in reflecting both past and present events related to women's rights.

It seeks to provide a critical analysis of speculative fiction as portrayed in the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in comparison to real-life events in the United States. The argument within this article is that “nothing changes instantaneously”, that the slow removal of women's rights happened through small changes as portrayed in the early series of the *Handmaid's Tale*. This process is then compared to the changes in the United States and American legislation that have occurred from 2017-2025. Indeed, a key piece of legislation that has eroded the rights of women is the overturning of Roe V Wade in 2022. The beginning of this article explains the methodologies used to examine the series, comprising examination of the writing and cinematography of certain scenes within the series in comparison to changes in real-life events and realities affecting American women since 2017.

Methodologies

To begin the article, it is first important to explain the methodologies used to analyse the text of both the television series and real-world events. These were developed using Braun and Clarke's (2017: 297-298) thematic analysis, with a focus on the rights of women and changes that have happened within society. This process entailed grouping together scenes, episodes, writing and comparing these with real events including changes in legislation and women's rights to access certain services such as abortion.

The methods of thematic analysis are supported by feminist theory from Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that social systems are designed to label women as the “other” in comparison to masculine identities, with language and the role of women deliberately designed to be oppressive. The whole social hierarchy in Gilead is designed to be oppressive towards women, from the handmaids to the aunts. In this sense women become second class citizens. The use of language as an oppressive tool is reinforced by the feminist theories of Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) and in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of*



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the Performative (2021) which claim that gender is a performance that is repeated and that, indeed, language and speech reinforce the oppression and the supremacy of the patriarchy (Spadolini 2024).

This exploration is accompanied by semiotic analysis, which examines notions of the signified and the signifier in the text. It is first important to gain an understanding that semiotic analysis works through examining the connotation and denotation of images (Saussure 2011: xxx). The denotation is the surface interpretation and initial understanding of an image, and connotation is what is established from a more underlying meaning of the footage. This method is utilised to differentiate between the signifier and the signified (Starzynski 2021: 81) and is used in this study to investigate scenes and episodes in *The Handmaid's Tale* and to interpret their wider meaning.

Atwood has said that the rule she set herself when writing *The Handmaid's Tale* was that nothing would go into the book that did not have a precedent somewhere in history. Since it is not clear whether the same rule has been followed for the television series, there are grounds to apply semiotic analysis to compare *The Handmaid's Tale* book to the series, and then to real-life events. This process assesses how the impact and effect of change on women's lives as recorded in written form can be reflected via television.

The Handmaid's Tale

The examination of *The Handmaid's Tale* will begin with consideration of scenes from the first season of the TV series.

We first meet the characters June and Luke as they are driving with Hannah through the wilderness, running in absolute terror; the audience not knowing what or who is hunting them. June (Elizabeth Moss) is hiding under a cover as the camera moves into a close up of her, with her face reflecting abject terror. The extreme close up shot gives the audience the impression that *The Handmaid's Tale* is being told from her perspective. We see Hannah being ripped from the terrified June's arms, and she is then subdued (Morano 2017). The audience immediately understand that June's child has been taken from her. Here, it is said that Atwood was referring to Hitler's snatching of children from Poland to boost the Aryan Race in WWII, which is emulated in Gilead with the theft of children from women labelled as impure who are made into handmaids. These children are given to commanders.



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We immediately cut to June in Gilead, standing in the light of the window. The first lines she utters are in the form of an internal monologue: “It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself given a cutting edge”. This is a metaphor referring to suicide and has different denotations and connotations for the text. This has dual meaning in terms of the internal escapes through self-harm, and suicide to which it refers. The quote within the first episode mimics almost directly the second chapter of Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*. This claim is supported by a variety of evidence as Lester, for example, states that after the original Roe V Wade decision in 1973 (Lester 1995:119), suicide rates decreased for women of all ages between 1974-1983, which could of course have been affected by many factors.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that abortion does not lead to long term negative mental health effects such as suicide (Londoño Tobón et al 2023), but that shortly after abortion is denied women experience heightened anxiety and lower self-esteem than those who were granted abortion. In both *The Handmaid’s Tale* book and television series the former handmaid of Mr Waterford killed herself after Serena discovered her affair with the commander and Ofglen killed herself (although this differed in the television series). Suicides are commonplace in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Echoing de Beauvoir’s argument, Ofglen was deemed responsible for the indiscretion, the responsibility and role of “other” assigned to a woman of lower social standing than Mr Waterford who was higher up in the “social hierarchy”. The first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale* gives us an idea of the oppression faced by the handmaids and all those who were not wives or commanders. This is reflected in the following few lines:

“My name is Offred. I had another name but it’s forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now”.

As stated earlier, we learn at the beginning of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that the audience immediately learns that Offred has had her child taken. We know her name is Offred, although we are yet to know its meaning. The naming involves her taking the name of her commander under whom she is living and reflects her place in the power and dynamics of Gilead, namely that she is a powerless prisoner in Gilead (Girard 2025). She is the handmaid of Fred Waterford so is given the name “Of” “Fred”, as she is perceived to be his property. This reinforces the research of de Beauvoir, since she is the “other”, the second-class citizen whose role is



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secondary to that of Commander Waterford. Similarly, Butler states that the role of gender is performed and conveyed as oppression through speech, with the oppression occurring two-fold through language and the fact that June is labelled “Offred” while at the same time her use of the name June is forbidden. The oppression comes from the absence of using what constitutes her “real” name. This fact was adopted by Margaret Atwood in portraying that handmaids, like cattle, breed children, who are then taken away from them. Atwood yet again looked to Hitler’s Germany where children from occupied territories who had traits of Aryan children were kept by the Nazi regime.

The narrative then cuts to Offred/June being taken to the Rachel and Leah Centre/Red Centre to be trained as a Handmaid. This reminds women that they are merely tools of the state; essentially, they are viewed as birthing vessels for the next generation of the higher classes. The use of the “Red Centre” to re-educate women and reinforce that women’s primary role is that of a handmaid to a commander can be compared to Butler’s postulation that women become oppressed through the use of social systems. The social system in the Red Centre bears remarkable similarities to the surveillance in Foucault’s Panopticon, since the handmaids are constantly watched by aunts or other handmaids. They can report and monitor each other in a system that is designed to indoctrinate and non-compliance results in torture or “non-essential” birthing body parts being removed. This causes the handmaids to internalise the Panoptic Gaze (Hamid and Qazi 2024). The notion of watching is used in language, with those who watch from the shadows being referred to as the “Eyes”. As works of speculative fiction, parallels can be drawn between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949); for example, the Rachel and Leah Centre can be compared to *The Ministry of Love* where Winston Smith is tortured and re-educated on what is and what is not true. The same is true of the Rachel and Leah Centre where women are tortured to teach them their place in the new oppressive society. In the oppressive patriarchal state of Gilead, handmaids are lectured in the Red Centre and labelled as impure or stigmatised women:

“They were dirty women. They were sluts. But you are special girls. Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a Biblical purpose”

The language is deliberately provocative; it highlights the role of these women as the “other”, reinforcing that they are second class citizens. The language is used to oppress and shun



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these women. In the beginnings of Gilead, we see oppression and a return to what are perceived as Victorian values that view women who take husbands away from their wives as adulterers. Because June is married to Luke, who is divorced, their marriage is thought to be adulterous. The whole ethos behind Gilead is that the fertility of these stigmatised women can be put to good use in serving a new superior Commander; hence, they are given the name of their commanders and subordinated to them using the prefix “Of”. This marks a return to what can be perceived as traditional Old Testament values.

The beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale* confirms Gilead's total authority, with Gilead having won the war in America. The totalitarian and theonomic government has taken full control in the aftermath of the civil war. In this world there is a newly established order of social power. The governing patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* is devoted to a Christian sect which twists an old testament story of Bilhah who is mentioned in the book of Genesis. Bilhah is the handmaid of Rachel who is married to Jacob. Since Rachel was unable to have any children, she gave Bilhah, her handmaid, to Jacob. Bilhah gave birth to two sons who Rachel claimed as her own. Further accounts claim that Bilhah is a concubine. However, the first season is interwoven with reflections of how the power of Gilead was established. In *Season One, Episode Two “Birth Day”*, in one of the first scenes to develop the growing power struggle against women, we see June rushing into hospital with her child (Morano 2017). In close up we see June with baby Hannah just after she is born. The audience sees this in extreme close up and it appears to be the normal birth of a baby in a hospital. However, soon after, in medium shot, we see the hospital nursery, where newborn babies are kept, except there are no babies in the nursery. This drives home the fertility issue that leads to the rise of Gilead. The tension of this situation builds, as we see the room abandoned and learn that some children have gone to intensive care and others are “with God”. This is starkly contrasted to the scene where Janine gives birth to her baby and it is immediately taken by Mrs Putnam. This is then contrasted with June's experience when delivering Hannah, where she wakes up with Hannah missing and another distraught mother holding her in her arms. The officers have to check identification tags to see if they match. These multiple narratives show the distinctively different societies before and after Gilead. Throughout the seasons there are numerous echoes of babies being taken away from their birth parents to be with those perceived to be their parents under Gilead laws; for example, in Season Three, the



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relationship between Serena and Nichole, which in Season Five is echoed by the treatment of Serena and baby Noah. A real life example of this happening in the United Kingdom is given by Fazackerly (2025) in the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, in her description of a mother, days after giving birth, having to challenge the courts' emergency order to take the child away from her. Although the circumstances do differ slightly, this example brings into question the power of the state, especially as the number of such cases has increased by 20% over the past 10 years. Whereas Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1999), argues that the source of female maternity is a performance achieved by a repetition of acts, the characters of June and Janine both contradict this narrative as these women are not naturalised in Gilead to be mothers. Although they bear children, their socialised role is to give these children to the wives or commanders, while concurrently an innate part of their maternal nature makes them seek to continue to be mothers, which contradicts the social hierarchy and acts as a source of both their repression and liberation.

Season One, Episode Three "Late" (Morano 2017) shows us in a flashback June being fired and how women's bank accounts are being frozen. Women can no longer own property. As referred to repeatedly in this article "nothing changes instantaneously". The episode "Late" begins with one small step showing June and Moria in the pre-Gilead world. June's card is refused for payment and the Barista says "Fucking Sluts, get out of here". The language used to refer to women, as argued by de Beauvoir, solidifies their status, and this is at first merely done through the derogatory language; however, it is now being supported by the stripping away of women's rights in a "drip, drip, drip" -like fashion. In medium shot we see both June and Moria being surprised in the coffee shop by the refusal of payment. As Morrison states:

"... Let us be reminded that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third. The move toward a final solution is not a jump. It takes one step, then another, then another. Something, perhaps, like this: (1) Construct an internal enemy, as both focus and diversion. (2) Isolate and demonize that enemy by unleashing and protecting the utterance of overt and coded name-calling and verbal abuse. Employ ad hominem attacks as legitimate charges against that enemy. (3) Enlist and create sources and distributors of information who are willing to reinforce the demonizing process because it is profitable, because it grants power and because it works. (4) Palisade all art forms; monitor, discredit or expel those that challenge or destabilize processes of demonization and deification. (5) Subvert and malign



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all representatives of and sympathizers with this constructed enemy. (6) Solicit, from among the enemy, collaborators who agree with and can sanitize the dispossession process. (7) Pathologize the enemy in scholarly and popular mediums; recycle, for example, scientific racism and the myths of racial superiority in order to naturalize the pathology. (8) Criminalize the enemy. Then prepare, budget for and rationalize the building of holding arenas for the enemy – especially its males and absolutely its children. (9) Reward mindlessness and apathy with monumentalized entertainments and with little pleasures, tiny seductions, a few minutes on television, a few lines in the press, a little pseudo-success, the illusion of power and influence, a little fun, a little style, a little consequence. (10) Maintain, at all costs, silence.” (Morrison 1995:385-394)

This is an important quote from Toni Morrison that emphasises the general nature of oppression, that it is gradual, incremental building of oppression and that small incremental steps can lead to horrendous outcomes. It also shows us how past events, as described by Morrison, reflect very much the ideology of Gilead of constructing an internal enemy; for example, the handmaids, due to their lower status, can be viewed as the internal enemy. This is the same internalisation of the enemy as being sent to the Colonies. In addition to the overt and coded name-calling and verbal abuse, there is differentiation of the class system of superiority in Gilead; for instance, the differentiation between Commanders, Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Jezebels, and Eyes. The coded name-calling and differentiation of roles reinforce the steps towards oppression. The steps begin with refusing to give women money, firing them from their jobs, as reinforced in Season One, Episode Three. What is established very quickly within three scenes in Episode Three is how the ostracization of women is internalised. This happens gradually but we see how attitudes towards women are changing and that they are quickly stripped of power. The steps to removal and erosion of rights do not happen instantaneously, but through one step, then another, then another. This supports Butler’s argument (2021) regarding the performative nature of gender through repeated performance by the handmaids, aunts and even wives whose role is to serve a lower purpose and class than the men within society.

This scenario is further highlighted through current affairs in America and the views of US Vice President JD Vance (Wilson 2024). The slow erosion of rights is reflected in Vance’s criticism of a teachers union president for not having “her own children”. According to Assistant Professor Bjork-James:



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“Vance represents a new articulation of right wing politics that is bridging the Christian right and a tech-influenced hypermasculine conservatism...He appeals to evangelicals with the message that we find happiness by fulfilling traditional gender roles, which is a cornerstone of white evangelical Christianity...What they share is the view that women shouldn't be in paid work: they should be in the home and rearing children. But the public line isn't 'we hate women', it's 'women will be happier if they stay at home'”. (ibid)

Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a startling study of right-wing Christian politics that certainly reflects some current views held in Congress. The views of Gilead, which are inspired of course by the Christian Old Testament, are being reinforced by the rise of views that represent a reduction in women's rights. The most stark example of this is the overturning of Roe V Wade in 2022, whereby the USA revoked the constitutional right to seek a safe abortion. This brought abortion decisions under the jurisdiction of individual states instead of being matters of constitutional law. This is reinforced by a comment from Justice Samuel Alito, an associate justice of the US Supreme Court, who stated that “they need not even have an exception for incest or rape” (Coen-Sanchez et al 2022: 194). Through Justice Alto's comments and cases where women's rights to abortions have been denied, even though they were subject to rape, we see that the slow steps towards a Gilead society are certainly in place. The overturning of Roe V Wade has eroded women's rights and reduced their bodily autonomy. This argument is reinforced by Davis (2004: 422) who stated that there were 65,000 rape-related pregnancies in US states after the banning of abortion. While this article discusses how Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* for a future that could be possible, much like Orwell's *1984*, are we already there? If there are already 65,000 rape-related pregnancies, is this not the same culture that was touted in Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*? Under a different guise, where a rape is not referred to in a religious term, as a “ceremony”. Could the overturning of this vital piece of legislation be a step towards the erosion of women's rights that has brought the United States closer to Gilead?

This loss of women's autonomy over their bodies has been even further supported under the Trump administration. Trump has signalled his disregard for women's safety by pardoning anti-abortion activists that had been convicted of blockading abortion clinic entrances, describing it as “a great honour to sign this”. Among the people pardoned were those involved in the 2020



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invasion and blockade of a Washington clinic (Associated Press 2025). Trump's action sends a very clear signal: that much like in *The Handmaid's Tale* women's autonomy over their own bodies is being denied. A comparable event happens in *Season 4, Episode 4 "Milk"* (2021) when Janine visits an abortion clinic to get an abortion. However, this is a crisis pregnancy centre. The nurse asks her if she is religious, at which point Janine questions why that makes any difference. Janine is then told lies about how an abortion is performed to make her terrified of getting an abortion, while the nurse also tries to pressure her into keeping the child due to the pro-life agenda adopted by many crisis pregnancy centres. Later in the episode Janine visits a different clinic where she meets a doctor who tells Janine that she is bound by law to tell Janine the dangers of abortion, but that a lot of the things she was told are not true and she gives Janine the pills to cause an abortion. In the United States, the most active forms of anti-abortion activism are conducted through crisis pregnancy centres where women are given a variety of alternatives to having an abortion (Kissling 2023).

The *Handmaid's Tale* book and TV series are both forms of speculative fiction that highlight real life events through which authorities in the United States attempt to control the autonomy of women. Much of Atwood's book focuses on the handmaids being hunted down and treated like witches, and how they react with little rebellion. In *Season One, Episode Three* (Morano 2017), June and Moria hold placards and march for their rights whilst Blondie's "Heart of Glass" plays in the background, in the presence of armed police officers. Such protests for women's rights can be compared to real-life events. Prior to the overturning of *Roe V Wade*, 17 states had already introduced abortion bans by 2019. The various restrictions included the methods of abortion and banning of abortion after a certain point (Tabuyo-Santaclara 2024: 135-151). Other states tabled bans that would be triggered once the Supreme Court overturned *Roe V Wade*, including Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee.

The day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as President in January 2017, the streets were filled with women marching in protest at the President's threats, including threats towards the reproductive rights of women. The fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* made its debut on television only a few months later, in April, added additional tension to the situation by reinforcing the dystopian picture of how America was becoming closer to Gilead. In expressing their concerns regarding the threat to their reproductive rights, women in US states wore the red



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cloaks and white bonnets of the handmaids. In June 2017, in Ohio, many women wore these outfits while silently protesting against Senate Bill 145, through which Ohio's Republicans proposed to end abortions ("Handmaid's Tale" protest at US Ohio abortion bill 2017).

According to *Amazon*, the most read book of 2017 was *The Handmaid's Tale* (Begley 2017). Meanwhile, there were also protests in countries other than the United States in response to threats to abortion rights. For example, in February 2018, Croatian women's rights activists wore handmaids' outfits to demand action by their legislature to protect women's and girls' rights. Later in the year, in Dublin, many women donned red and white in what became a successful attempt to overturn the Republic of Ireland's abortion ban.

While there is also criticism of the *Handmaid's Tale* series and how it diverges from Atwood's original book, it should be noted that Atwood was heavily involved in the making of the TV series and that Bruce Miller consulted Atwood over every change from the novel in its adaptation for television (Sail 2023: 525). The book does diverge from the television adaptation in a number of ways. For example, in the novel we learn of Offred's story through flashbacks, whereas in the television adaptation we learn about the wider society of Gilead through flashbacks from multiple members of the cast. In addition, the character of Offred is more mysterious in the novel as her name is never revealed and neither is the name of her daughter. Miller viewed Offred's claiming of her name, June, in the television series as a step towards self-assertion, in line with the reclamation of womanhood that was attempted by the *MeToo* Movement. In the TV series Ofglen, Moira, and, in particular, Janine have a more important role than in the book, with Janine presented as a symbol of resistance and strength, even though she is broken by the system of Gilead (ibid: 529). The television series presents more women as showing resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead, whereas in the book, this trait is primarily presented by the character Offred.

The later seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale* are built upon hope and go beyond the contents of the novel, which is reflected in societal action including the repeal in 2024 of Arizona's abortion ban and followed Ohio voters' approval in 2023 of a citizen-initiated amendment that enshrined the legal right to reproductive freedom (Honderich 2024; Tebben 2025). Similarly, at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, June is able to liberate Boston from Gilead and kill the commanders and Janine is also reunited with her daughter Charlotte, to whom she



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gave birth in Gilead. This marks the transition from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Testaments* (Atwood 2019) wherein the role of Aunt Lydia becomes instrumental and Gilead is dismantled. *The Handmaid's Tale* television series can be seen as more of a precursor to *The Testaments* than Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* book, in which the Epilogue tells the readers that, in fact, a tape recording, discovered many years after Gilead had come to an end, told of its demise. The ending is left more mysterious in the original *Handmaid's Tale* novel; we do not know how the Gileadean regime ended, merely that it did.

Conclusion

Overall, this through examination of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals clear connections between what Atwood wrote in 1985 and what is happening within contemporary society. It also reveals how the iconography of *The Handmaid's Tale* has been used symbolically by women when protesting for women's rights. It further reveals similarities between the erosion of women's rights that was shown gradually in *The Handmaid's Tale* and what is happening in contemporary American society. What perhaps has been most interestingly revealed through this analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a work of speculative fiction is the slow and creeping way in which women are gradually stripped of their power, one step after another. This article reflects that both the novel and the television series attempt to present a message of hope that these oppressed women can reclaim their power, perhaps in a more enigmatic way through the novel and more directly through the rebellious actions of June in the later seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale*.



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