

Bacheloroppgåve

The Composition of a Self

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HØGSKULEN
I VOLDA

“I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood, 1985, p. 78).

I will explore the correspondences between the ways in which the narrator and protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, composes the story she tells us, and the ways in which she is forced to compose herself in response to the demands of the society of Gilead in which she has been compelled to live. I will compare and contrast them with the ways in which her story is composed and she herself is shown to struggle to compose herself through the language of film in the first season of the television adaptation. The novel presents the story in a verbal language and is written as a first-person narrative; whereas the television series relies on both verbal, through dialog and voice-over, and visual language, and the camera is functioning as the narrator.

I want to clarify what the protagonist is trying to do. She says she must “compose herself”, but what does she mean by that? *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb compose as “to make by putting together elements: to make up, form, frame, fashion, construct, produce.” She wants to put herself together in order to be composed. To be “composed” has a different meaning: “Having one’s feelings or passions under control; calm and self-possessed, tranquil. The opposite of excited, distracted” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both novel and television series, show how the protagonist is composing her story as well as how she is being composed. Her composition contains different elements and the way she is putting them together as a story is essential for her in order to survive in Gilead. Her storytelling is to her, as to all human beings, fundamental in order to understand herself and also to give meaning to the life and the world she now lives in. Narratology appears as a useful approach in order to explore how this story and character is composed. We find narrative theory in both literature and filmmaking. Jakob Lothe demonstrates how narrative theory can be used when comparing and analysing literature and film in *Fiksjon og Film*, Universitetsforlaget 2003, and David Bordwell identifies how film narration is a “process by which the film prompts the viewer to construct the ongoing fabula on the basis of syuzhet, organization and stylistic patterning” (Bordwell, 2008, p. 9.). He is advocating an inferential model of narration where the narrative is a “representation that offers the occasion for inferential elaboration” (Bordwell, 2008, p. 9). When we witness a particular

action or event, we draw conclusions based on knowledge about earlier events and also, our own real life. Both models have relevance and offer terminology used in literature and filmmaking.

The Handmaid's Tale was first published in 1985 and quickly became a bestseller. Since then it has inspired many adaptations and has appeared on screen as a movie, in the opera, in the theater and on radio. In 2017 the adaptation as a television series was released.¹ Adaptations are told differently based on which media it is told through and Linda Hutcheon describes it like this:

With each mode, different things get adapted in different ways. As my example so far suggests, to tell a story, as in novels, short stories, and even historical accounts, is to describe, explain, summarize, expand; the narrator has a point of view and a great power to leap through time and space and sometimes to venture inside the minds of characters. To show a story, as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time (p. 13).

In the shift from book to screen our interaction with the story changes from imagining to viewing and it is hard to argue that one is “better” than the other. However, this is often the case as the urge to compare will always be present when two versions of the “same” story are presented. I will explore how the narrator’s character is composed and how it is presented in the two media, although not in order to judge one version as better or worse than the other. On the contrary I am interested in investigating how narration changes through different media both as a result of the options the media offers and of the constraints that regulate them.

To explore how the narrator’s story is composed and how she composes herself as a character I will apply the methodology of close-reading and narratological analysis. I will address the novel in its entirety and episode 1, 2 and 10 in season 1 of the television series. The first two episodes are chosen because the majority of the story told in the novel is concentrated here. Episode 10 concludes the first season and is relevant because of how the opening and ending of a story is of particular importance in narrative theory.

¹ Adaptations also offer a great opportunity to actualise important themes and modernise a story in order to make it relevant for audiences today. In the television series we find several examples of how the story is brought up to present time: Smartphones, Uber and Tinder being some of them.

This discussion relates to different aspects of composing a self and a story and is organised in three main sections. The first part is devoted to how the protagonist is composing a self, both as a result of how society attempts to remove her identity by the way it shapes and controls her; but also as a way to resist and rebel against the same society. In part two I will focus on the actual narration of the self in the novel and television series, and some of the narrative elements that are used. Characterization, space, focalisation and reliability will be addressed here, as well as some of the visual elements that are representative to the filmatic settings. The final part will explore how memory is used as an additional layer of her composition. Throughout all three sections, I will discuss specific aspects of the novel and the television series separately to highlight the particular techniques they employ, and then investigate how these aspects contribute to the distinctive composition of the character and story in each medium.

Composing the self in society

To most people the name is important in defining their identity; your surname says something about where you come from, and your first name often tells something about your parents. Did they choose to name you after someone in the family, did they go for a trendy name or did they try to find a name that would be unique to you? Loss of name can therefore be seen as a serious attack on one's identity. The Gilead society takes the handmaids' names away, renaming them as property. Our narrator is now the property of Fred, and is given the name "Offred". This name will change, if and when, she is being reassigned to a new household. The name is one of many sacrifices Gilead expects the handmaids to make, and Atwood states in the article "Hunted by the Handmaid's Tale" in *New York Times* (2012): "Within this name is concealed another possibility: "offered" denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice."

There is a clear distinction between the use of her name in the novel and in the television series and this also contributes to our perception of her as a character. In both cases we learn that she is called Offred but that she resists looking at herself as Offred. In the novel she says: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it's forbidden" (p. 96). This is the first time a name has been given to her in the story she is telling, and we get to learn it by her rejecting the name being hers. We do not get to know her real name although the way she values her name is stressed: "I keep the knowledge of this name hidden, some treasure I'll come back

and dig up one day” (p. 96). This can be seen as her small way of resisting what Gilead is doing to her, but she is also very conscious about the fact that this resistance must be kept hidden.

In the television series she utters a similar sentence: “My name is Offred. I used to have another name, but that name is forbidden now” (Ep.1, 5:26). At the end of the episode though, she states: “My name is June” (Ep.1, 53:30). The *mise-en-scène* also enforces how losing a name can be seen as a sacrifice expected from the handmaids (see figure 1). It shows her sitting in front of the window in her room, white curtains in back, and the shadows behind her resembling a cross, alluding to the crucifixion of Christ. The *mise-en-scène* thus invites us to imagine him and the sacrifice he made through giving his life. Although Christ was willing to sacrifice his life, the narrator does not seem to be willing to sacrifice life nor name. We can hear determination in her voice when she says: “I intend to survive” (Ep. 1, 52:30). This resolution is made even more clear when we get a close up of her face where she goes from looking down to raising her vision, and she states : “My name is June” (Ep. 1, 53:30). We get the impression that she is going to fight for her name.

As much as Offred’s real name in the book is not revealed, that has no practical consequences for us as readers in order to identify her as a character. She is the narrator of the story and always refers to herself as “me” and “I”. Margaret Atwood made a conscious decision not to give her a name in the novel. One of the reasons might be that she wanted her to be a universal character. For the same reason, I too, will keep her nameless.



Figure 1 The narrator in front of the window in her room (Ep. 1, 53:26)

To remain nameless in the television series would be a problem as well as a missed medium specific possibility. Whereas a film usually must make reductions and cuts in a novel due to time limitations, television series are not restricted by time in the same way and allows the development of a more intimate relationship between characters and audience:

In this way, television adaptations are able not only to retain more of the source's narrative, but also open out the details of the novel - it's intricacies of plot, mood, and atmosphere, to build characters and our relationship with them more incrementally and carefully, and to sustain a sense of contemplation (Cardwell 2007, p. 187).

Such a character and relationship would be hard to build without her "real" name. Her real name is also going to be essential to the evolving of the series. As producer Bruce Miller explains in an interview:

The closest relationship and the biggest conflict as I see it in the show is between June and Offred: Offred is pushing compliance while June is pushing rebellion, and trying to live even while you're trying to survive.

As well as taking the handmaids' names from them, Gilead is further streamlining them to fit into their role by providing them with uniforms. The narrator's red uniform is significant in more ways than one in defining her, and it also contributes to remove her identity. First of all, the uniform identifies her as part of a group rather than being an individual. History has shown how such a way of treating people makes it easier to commit cruel actions towards them. Hitler's treatment of Jews, before and during The Second World War, serves as a grim example. Secondly it is aiding the Gilead society in restricting the handmaids by covering both body and face. The gloves are limiting her tactile sense, the ankle long skirt limits her range and speed of movement and the white wings limit her vision. "The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (p. 20). The wings have a prominent position in both the novel and the television series. They come to symbolize the restricted view a handmaid has on the world, and it is only through this view we see her story. It serves as a reminder that this is a first-person narrative and that her point of view is a very subjective and limited one. The uniform signals how society attempts to compose her but her composition of the narrative and character works in opposition to this imposed masquerade.

The use of the uniform and the wings play such a significant role in the visual language of the television series that it needs to be addressed separately here. One of the series' trademarks is the use of extreme close-ups of the main character's face. The way the wings frame the face contributes to the powerful effect it has on the viewer. Not only do they frame her face, they are also consciously used to decide how much of her face to be seen. As we recently discussed, they *do* restrict her view of her surroundings - however they also offer an opportunity to keep secrets. The television series makes the most of this and the close-ups of her facial expressions reveal her real thoughts, creating an intimacy between her and the audience, out of sight from the rest of Gilead.

The many close-up shots are contrasted by bird's-eye shots. We often see this used when there is a gathering of handmaids and I will use an example to illustrate how the visual language pictures

the handmaids in their red uniforms as a group, more so than individuals. The scene is found in episode 1 where a large group of handmaids is gathering for the Salvaging (see figure 2), and starts with a bird's-eye shot over a landscape decorated by green trees. Among them we see unidentifiable red "dots", moving in from the sides, eventually gathering in pairs and forming two lines, slowly moving towards their designated area in the stadium (Ep. 1, 38:40). This technique highlights how they are conceived to be a group, and also emphasizes how insignificant and powerless the handmaids are in the Gilead society. It is also hard, not to associate such images with historical totalitarian regimes, like Nazi Germany.

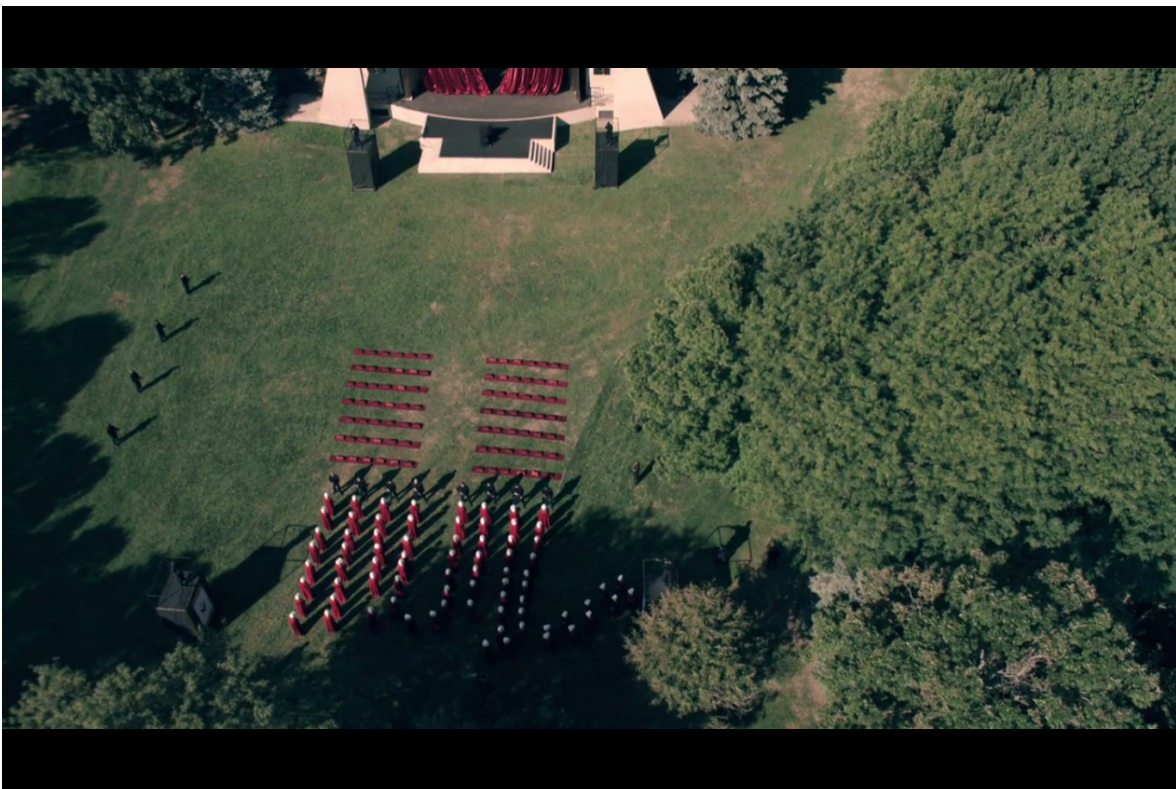


Figure 2 Bird's-eye shot of how the handmaid's are gathered for the Salvation (Ep. 1, 39:23)

The television series changes the symbolic effect of the uniforms in episode 10. Instead of being a symbol of Gilead's oppression it is changed into a symbol of resistance and solidarity, and shows how the main character seizes power over her own life. The main character is walking home from shopping stating: "It's their own fault. They should never have given us uniforms unless they wanted us to be an army" (05:50). Towards the end of the episode, we see them march home after the Salvaging accompanied by the soundtrack "Feeling good" by Nina

Simone. It subverts the intentions of Gilead and the uniform becomes part of her *own* composition, not theirs.

When it comes to language, we discover early on that women in Gilead are not allowed to read or write and it raises the question, why not? It suggests that the ability to use language has some kind of power that the men of Gilead are not willing to share with anyone else. In the book *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity* (2007) Jeanett Rodríguez and Ted Fortier describe how “memory is transmitted by a people in their historical, social, and political context” (p. 7). They claim that there are two distinct elements in tradition, namely tradition as a process and as a product. The same two elements can be found in cultural memory, illustrated by figure 3.

TABLE 1.1. Tradition: A what and how of transmitting cultural memory

TRADITIO		TRADITIUM
Process (Participle = Remembering)		Content (Noun = Remembrance)
WHO REMEMBERS?	HOW IS IT REMEMBERED	WHAT DOES IT EVOKE?
—a people	—in memory	—feelings, biases
—a society	—in celebration	—modes of action
—a culture	—orally	—forms of language
	—in writings	—aspirations
		—interpersonal relations
		—images, ideas, ideals

Figure 3 Screenshot of table 1.1 found on p.10 in Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity (2007)

They argue the importance of how memory functions as a survival mechanism when it is integrated in how group identity is formed. The values and knowledge of such an identity are

passed on from one generation to the other. “It is crucial to this argument that the content of memory is biased by the language of the people, and that it is through language that the memory imposes the essential feelings that transmit that emotionally based message.” (Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007). Gilead wants to stay in control of the language because it recognises the danger represented by people who remember the past.

On a personal level, language is essential to the narrator in terms of holding on to a sense of self. She is using language as a way to retain some control of her own life as well as a tool for mental exercise and often we find her thinking about words and what they mean:

I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use to compose myself (p. 122).

It is interesting how she uses “unconnected facts” in order to compose herself. It indicates that her former self has been shattered into unrecognisable fragments which she keeps trying to put back together. Not only is she herself fragmented, so is the story she tells. The actual book is divided into 15 main sections and forty-six chapters, plus “The Historical Notes”. Many of the chapters are exceedingly short, some barely more than a page. This way of sectioning the book works well in collaboration with the notion that the narrator is composing herself, and the story, from fragments which she attempts to put together into a meaningful whole. She is highly aware of this fact and even apologizes for it: “I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it” (p. 281).

The importance of language is further expressed through the secret meetings in the Commander’s office and the activity of playing scrabble. The office is filled with books. “No wonder we can’t come in here. It’s an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare” (p. 149). When he reveals that he wants to play scrabble with her she is utterly surprised but holds her composure: “I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. So that’s what’s in the forbidden room! Scrabble! I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair” (p. 150). The contrast between her inside and outside is striking and this meeting gives her the opportunity to test her composure in, what

to her must be, a scary situation. We learn that her inside has nothing to do with her outside and we sense an undercurrent of rebellion. Conventional thinking would suggest that word games do not first come to mind when a secret rendezvous is requested, but there is nothing conventional about Gilead. “Now of course it’s something different. Now it’s [scrabble] forbidden, for us. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife. Now it’s desirable” (p. 151).

The narrator’s desire and passion towards words and language are illustrated by how she describes the game. Noticing how the words she uses give a sensual, almost sexual sensation: she “finger the letters”, finds them “voluptuous”. They can be tasted, compared to candies with the cool taste of peppermint. She would like to put them into her mouth and taste them. Using the letters is a luxury and gives her the feeling of freedom (p. 151). How precious this feels is further highlighted when we look at the text itself. In the book we can see how the actual words stand out in the paragraph. They are not only written in italic, there is also extra space added on both sides of them to separate them even more from the rest of the text (figure 4).

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. *Humburg*, those were called. I would

Figure 4 Page 151 The Handmaid’s Tale

The same sensual atmosphere and passion towards words are present in the television series and is illustrated in episode 2. The scene opens with a medium shot of six bookshelves as we see her closing the door after entering the Commander’s office. As she walks further into the room we see how she secretly is eying the bookshelves, and the camera is projecting her view as it shows close ups of the books. Her face shows an expression of confusion and bewilderment when he brings out the scrabble. This confusion is also detected in her voice when he asks her if she has played scrabble before. The camera is focusing on the tiles when the Commander turns the first tile. We can then see how the narrator’s fingers are turning the next one, the movement is slow and deliberate and her fingers seem hesitant to let it go. The camera then shows a low-angle

close up of her face, almost as the tiles are personified with eyes looking up into her face. The camera switches between close-ups of the tiles and her face and we can see how her fingers caress them. The close-up of her face looking at the tiles shows a range of emotions and she seems to be drifting away into her own world. We can see how she is shown to compose her feelings again through a close-up of her face when she realizes that the Commander is watching her closely (see figure 5). The audio is adding to the sensual feel as we can hear airy, dreamlike music and a soft moan when she moves the tiles. The only other sound we can hear through the whole duration of their play, is the clicking of the tiles as they are being put down onto the board, drawing our attention to the language game even closer.

Gilead is relentless in its attempt to strip the narrator's identity away by removing her name and her language, as well as providing her with a uniform which identifies her. This game of scrabble with the Commander is her first opportunity to compete with Gilead on even grounds, and furthermore, it allows her to test her own composure. This composure is a result of how she must find new meaning in a world where everything she knows is taken away from her.



Figure 5 Realising how The Commander is watching her arrange the scrabble tiles (Ep. 2, 37:15)

Narrating the self

The narrator is using storytelling as a way to arrange her new world into recognisable elements thus creating meaning. The opening of a story and how it presents the characters greatly impacts how we interpret it. David Bordwell explains how our first impression shapes our understanding:

This is what psychologists call the primacy effect. The order of events governs how we understand them, and the first item has greater saliency. Likewise, a film's opening will set a benchmark against which we measure what happens later. The characters we first encounter, the point at which we enter the story action, and other elements will shape our inferences (Bordwell p. 17).

The openings of both the novel and the television series thus shape the way we perceive the story and how we understand the main character.

The novel opens with the narrator describing the gymnasium they used to sleep in during their training in the Red Center. We enter the story through a first-person narrator who is looking back at a situation. There is no direct characterization in this chapter, nor is there much action to help us establish the character of the narrator. Therefore, to learn about her we must look for indirect characterisation through the way she uses her language, her thoughts and her surroundings. Already in this first short chapter there is an emphasis on language, both by the way she uses it to describe her surroundings and because we learn that she is not allowed to use language freely. She tells us this in an indirect way. Talking to one another is forbidden in their prison, however they “learned to whisper, almost with no sound... We learned to lip-read” (p. 16). In addition we learn that she is educated, observant and intelligent by the way she uses a language rich in literary devices such as imagery, contrasts and similes: “We had flannelette sheets, like children's and army-issued blankets” (p. 16). “A palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums” (p. 15). The word *palimpsest* leaves us with an impression of there being an attempt of erasing the past, but it has failed, as we can still detect what is tried hidden. In her description she falls back into memories of her youth and her expectations for her future life: “We yearned for the future” (p. 15). In order to deal with her present situation she is looking

back to when she was young and had her whole life in front of her. Remembering the past will be crucial to her in order to compose herself.

In the television series we are invited into the action by the sounds of sirens followed by a trajectory shot of a blue Volvo on a country road. We cannot see the pursuers and the camera transports us into the car where we see, what we later learn to be, the narrator in the backseat. We see her holding a protective arm around her daughter, before the camera angle changes to allow us a view of the man driving the car. The car slides on the slippery surface of the road and ends up stuck in the ditch. The driver makes sure that both passengers are unhurt before he gives them directions of where to go, as he urges them to flee. He stays back when the woman and the girl run away. As they are running towards the thin forest we hear two gunshots. Ultimately the pursuers are catching them and the girl is taken from her mother's arms. The mother attempts fighting back but must let her go when she is hit in the head. As she falls unconscious, we see her being dragged along the forest floor and placed in the back of a black van.

We notice how the television screenwriters have decided to pick the run away attempt as our first encounter with the main character. I understand it to be important for the character development to present the main character in an "active state" as opposed to the purely observant character in the novel. Unlike the novel we immediately have a direct characterization as we literally can see her: she is a woman in her early thirties, with blond hair and blue eyes. From the opening of the novel we drew the conclusion that language would become an important theme, however this scene offers security and family as important themes in the television series. We see how the family is trying to remain in a state of security by escaping the forces trying to capture them. They are doing so in driving their supposedly safe family car. From a commercial point of view, a Volvo is branded as *the* safe family car. It serves as a symbol of safety for the family. The girl is holding on to a toy rabbit which could also be regarded as a "safety blanket" for her. We see how neither the Volvo, nor the rabbit, succeed in keeping them safe. The last *mise-en-scène* reinforces the importance of the Volvo as a symbol: We can see the blue Volvo in the dark, lit by the headlights of one of the other cars, abandoned and empty with the doors wide open. We see this scene from inside the van where the narrator has been placed and it concludes with the closing of the doors, leaving us in complete darkness. It appears we have been trapped together with the main character thus creating a bond between us.



Figure 6 The view of the Volvo from inside the van (Ep. 1, 4:30)

Both the television series and the novel open with a flashback to former times, representative for both the literary and visual style to come. They focus on important themes and introduce us to the main character. The television series flashback refers to a time where the character was still free and to some degree able to take action, whereas the novel takes us back to a time where she is already limited and controlled by Gilead. The novel introduces her through her thoughts, the television series through her actions. This sets up the character building for both media, one character physically active and literally “on the move”, the other one more passive and observing.

As already established, the story presented to us in the novel is through a first-person narrator who is also the protagonist. Most of the story takes place in her head through her memories of past life and reflections on her present, so when the book was adapted the television series producers had to decide how they would present this “inner world”. Hutcheon refers to David Lodge in *A Theory of Adaptation* and offers some insight on this:

In the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. Conflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible (see Lodge 1993: 196-200). In the process of dramatizing there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing on themes, characters and plot (p. 40).

The television series must present her inner world through action and dialog, and I think this is one of the reasons the narrator's character in the television series is developing as more outspoken and rebellious. Her inner world cannot be presented to the audience as an intimate conversation to herself like it is in the novel.

Most of the narrator's time is spent in solitude and she occupies her mind and time with storytelling to an imagined audience. "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it" (p. 51). We understand that belief is important here by the way it is repeated in the text, and she explains to us that if it is a story she is telling, she is in control of what happens and how the story ends. Additionally it creates awareness of the fact that it is a *story* and that it has been created for someone to read. "But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story to yourself. There is always someone else. Even if there is no one" (p. 51). Normally we do not think about how a story is travelling from the narrator to us as an audience, but *The Handmaid's Tale* makes it impossible to forget because the narrator keeps bringing it to our attention, and this repetition makes us believe it is important. Later she is justifying why her story might not be treating truth accurately by calling it a "reconstruction":

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction...

When I get out of here, If I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly as it was, because what you say can never be exact (p. 146).

She even admits that she is making things up: “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (p. 275). “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (p. 277). This implies that she sometimes makes things up and sometimes leaves them out and the definition of the word *compose* comes to mind again: “to make by putting elements together: to make up, form, frame, fashion, construct, produce” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). She is not so much constructing a self perhaps, as reconstructing herself from the pieces available to her. Her admittance also raises the question whether she is a reliable or unreliable narrator. We already know that her view is limited and subjective, so can we believe the story she is telling us? The answer might not be of any relevance, because to *her*, what matters is how the story serves its purpose in composing herself.

The openings of both the novel and the television series have given us a slightly different picture of the main character and also provided different motivations for her to survive. Where the novel *describes* her to compose and reconstruct her life through memories, the television series *shows* her composure and the way she composes herself. Although we can not detect a clear motivation for her survival in the opening by itself, the importance of narrating our own lives as a way to self-sustain is highlighted in the novel form. When we later on are provided with more information about her, it appears obvious that her narration is also crucial for keeping sane: “Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money” (p. 121). The rich, inner life which the main character experiences in the novel, is transcoded into action and speech in the television series, hence presenting a more active and outspoken character whose motivation is to get her daughter back.

We have earlier established that when there is a lack of direct characterization in a narrative, we must look for other options. Often the space surrounding characters can be revealing. Gaston Bachelard even claims that space creates identity (Lothe, 2003, p. 79) and this is especially interesting when we consider that in the novel, the narrator spends most of her time in her room. How does her room help us understand who she is? When she first describes it, she is listing the objects that she can see: “A chair, a table, a lamp” (p. 19). It comes across as a very objective and distanced description and indicates that she distances herself from it and what it represents to her, namely confinement. She is not in this room by her own choice. As already discussed, language is important and is a way for the narrator to take ownership and be in control and she uses this to

further distance herself from the room and her situation: “The door of the room - not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* - is not locked” (p. 20). She is in control of the possessive nouns that she uses. Later she decides that she needs a place to call her own: “My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time” (p. 62). From here on she relates herself to the activity the room offers. “I’m waiting, in my room, which right now is a waiting room. When I go to bed it’s a bedroom” (p. 62). “Waiting is also a space: It is where you wait. For me it's this room. I’m a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people” (p. 241-242). She is defined by the room as much as she defines the room. In many ways it functions like the cell of a monk or nun, intended for contemplation and when she has filled the room with many enough of her own thoughts, she redefines it as “hers”.

Does setting create identity the same way on the screen? Anyone who has watched *The Handmaid's Tale* would recognize Gilead from the settings. The creators of the series have put a great deal of effort into the presentation and composition. Executive producer of the three first episodes, Reed Morano, has set the standards for the visual style in the series. Morano explains that:

With this show, so much was from Offred’s experience, so the aesthetic was driven by that. The look is very symmetrical. Expressive. Composed and strict frames in Gilead. The flashbacks feel like fleeting memories. When you’re watching the show, it’s more of a punch in the gut if you feel like you can hold on to what the world was before. So I like the idea of making the flashbacks almost like pieces you’re putting together in your mind - hand-held, romantic, impressionistic (Vineyard, 2017).

A very clear illustration of how composed and symmetric Gilead is can be illustrated by the *mise-en-scène* after the ceremony in episode 1 (figure 7).



Figure 7 Illustrating symmetry in the composition (Ep. 1, 31:15)

We can see how the main character is perfectly positioned in the middle of the picture and the bed, framed by the bed canopy, the bedposts, the lamps and the chairs in the foreground. The leg of the table halves the circle of the carpet. The pattern of the carpet is perfectly geometrical, as is the pattern of the wallpaper. This illustrates how the Gilead society wants everything to fit into its position and in perfect order. It is perfectly beautiful to look at but the fact that everything is equally beautiful eventually gives us the impression that something is wrong, it is not natural. Gilead is rigid and controlling, and wants everything and everyone to fit perfectly into its pattern. I thus think that the “settings” of Gilead define and identify its members.

The flashbacks give an entirely different feel and we soon learn to distinguish between now and then only by looking at how it is presented. The flashbacks use a handheld camera and there is nothing that resembles the strictness of Gilead. We are instead brought into what appears a flimsy and unstable world, but it is also filled with smiles and human emotions. It invites us to compare this to Gilead, and the lack of humanity displayed there. In both the novel and the

television series the flashbacks offer variation and relief from the rather depressing settings of life lived in Gilead.

Past and present selves

Memories in the form of flashbacks are a major part of both novel and television series. We have already established the importance of cultural memory and why Gilead attempts to control this memory through language, but what about personal memory? Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier offer an explanation: “How we remember past events has a profound impact on what we do and how we will live” (p. 7). Furthermore, they consider narration to be one of the means through which memory is transmitted: “Narrative emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought. Its power resides in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity” (p. 7). In other words, how the narrator remembers the past has an influence on how she composes herself in her present situation. What memories are highlighted in her history, and how can we interpret them in relation to the way she is composing herself now? What seems to stand out is the way the memories are exploring her in former roles, when she was allowed to be a daughter, mother, wife and friend. Memories of Moira and her mother are the most frequent and can therefore be regarded as significant for her.

Moira is the narrator’s best friend from pre-Gilead and is the first person mentioned when she actively decides to go back in time through remembering. “But the night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good. Moira, sitting on the end of my bed” (p. 49). It seems clear that remembering Moira is a good thing. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator explains how she wished the story was showing her as “more active” (p. 281). Moira, and her own mother, appear to be her “active” role models and are always described as doing something in the memories. Her mother is a feminist, actively involved in marches and protests.² Moira is also politically aware and is described as impatient and vigorous. One time when they were about to go out for a beer, Moira could not even wait for the narrator to get off the bed to get her coat: “She got it herself and tossed it at me” (p. 50). She is “breezing into my room” (p. 67). Later we hear about a day when the narrator observes Nick and the Commander outside her window. “If I could spit, out the window, or throw something, the cushion for instance, I might be able to hit him” (p. 69).

² Feminism would be another interesting element that could further enlighten the notion of composing, but the limits of this paper prevent me from doing so.

This triggers a memory of how she and Moira were dropping water bombs on boys outside the dorm window: “It was Moira’s idea” (p. 70). These memories make clear that the narrator is focusing on how Moira was a person of action and it is further highlighted through the memories of her from the Red center where they were reunited after both being captured. Moira is not willing to accept her faith as a handmaid and attempts to escape twice. The first attempt fails, but her second is successful. This has a great impact on the narrator as well as all the other handmaids: “Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was now a loose woman” (p. 145). The choice of word here emphasizes how Moira herself is in control. The narrator corrects herself and says “she’d set *herself* loose” (my emphasis). From this we can draw the conclusion that Moira serves as both an inspiration and a source of strength, enabling her to endure her situation.

Compared to memories of her mother and Moira, her daughter rarely appears in the story and memories of her are painful. The pain can come from the association of being a mother. Being a mother is part of her past identity, but in Gilead motherhood is denied her, even though her whole function is to bear children. The part of her that used to be a mother does not exist anymore: “[I lie] and think about a girl who did not die when she was five, who still does exist, I hope, though not for me” (p. 76). Memories of her daughter could also be painful because of the way they make her remember that she failed to protect her. An essential part of being a mother is to be a protector and we can see how she remembers herself as such: “I remember the pictures of us I had once, me holding her, standard poses, mother and baby, locked in a frame, for safety” (p. 76). We see how they are “locked in a frame, for safety”. Later she remembers how she tried to protect her just before she was taken away from her: “Instead I curl myself around her, keeping my hand over her mouth. There’s breath and the knocking of my heart, like pounding, at the door of a house at night, where you thought you would be safe” (p. 87). She could not keep her safe and sees herself failing in her role of being a mother. To be able to think about how she used to be a mother requires strength. This strength is found in the memories of strong women from her past, her mother and Moira.

Memories of Luke are most often found combined with general memories of how “normal life” used to be and serves as a contrast to the life she is compelled to live now. In these memories there is a growing realisation that the life she used to live with him was a contributing factor to

how she ended up being a handmaid in Gilead. She was not able to stand up for herself or others after the changes. “There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. But they were smaller than you might have thought... I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile” (p. 191). As much as she admits she did not go to any of them, she justifies that by listening to Luke and his argument that it would be futile. They were actively working on ignoring the signs that were right in front of them. “We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (p. 68). Her memories remind her that as a handmaid, all her former roles have been denied her and that leaves her with limited resources in how to compose a whole person when so many parts are unavailable.

In the series, like in the novel, the plot is not chronological and her memories are presented as flashbacks. We find two kinds: one illustrating pre-Gilead time, and the other looks back at the narrator's time in the Red Center. Both serve to give information about events happening prior to the present situation and add to the character building. As we briefly mentioned in our discussion about the settings, the flashbacks to pre-Gilead life are easily recognised by the way they are filmed using a handheld camera. In the novel it is hard to find a clear pattern in when different events from the past are being brought up, whereas in the television series they seem to be logically connected to the situation the narrator is in. In episode 1 for instance, the first flashback after the opening of the episode is found when the narrator and Ofglen walk past a school and see young girls coming out. The camera focuses on the face of one of the girls who smiles at the narrator, then there is a cross cutting back to the narrator's face before we hear a faint laughter and we are brought back in time to a memory of the family on the beach. Hannah (the daughter's name in the television series) and Luke are playing in the water and the narrator is watching them. We could even say she is watching *over* them and in such a sense this flashback also reinforces the theme of security which was established in the opening scene. We find it plausible that the narrator starts thinking of her own daughter when she sees other girls about the same age. Similarly, the narrator’s question: “I wanna know what I did. To deserve this” (Ep. 1, 25:05), results in a flashback. The editing is used to answer, and a crosscut brings us back to the Red center and the scene which is known as “the slutshaming scene”. All the handmaids are sitting in a circle, surrounding Janine who must tell about the time she was raped by a gang of boys from her school. When Aunt Lydia asks whose fault it was, everyone, except the narrator, points at her and chants: “Her fault. Her fault” (Ep. 1, 26:20). We see how the narrator is slapped

across her face by someone (it is actually Margareth Atwood in a cameo appearance) for not participating in this chanting. Moira urges her to do it, so when Aunt Lydia asks why she was raped, we can see how she hesitantly joins in the chant: “To teach her a lesson, to teach her a lesson” (Ep. 1, 26:30).



Figure 8 Finding the right composure (Ep. 1, 26:30)

The camera reveals to us how she must compose herself in order to join in, and I interpret the look in her eyes to be a question: Is this the right composure? She is trying to work out what is demanded of her in the new settings. Both scenes demonstrate how flashbacks are used to provide information about the narrator's background and equally important; they are deliberately used to juxtapose past and present. The memories and flashbacks, together with storytelling and interactions with society, are constitutive elements of the narrator's composition.

Conclusion

The main character in *The Handmaid's Tale* has been composed through her interactions with the society she lives in, as well as through her storytelling and memories of her earlier life. In Gilead the narrator is most often defined by the limitations and restrictions the society enforces on her and in doing so have evoked a profound need to reclaim the identity that has been taken from her. She is doing this through narrating her story, and thus reclaims some power over her own life. Both novel and television series have emphasised the power found in language, both as a way for Gilead society to control its members, but perhaps even more so, through its liberating capacity when used by the narrator. Although reading and writing is forbidden, she records her story in order for it to be read by an audience. This expresses her belief in us as readers, and her story can be regarded as a testimony of all handmaids. In a similar way to how she uses language against Gilead, she is reversing the purpose of her uniform. Instead of letting herself be restricted by it, she wears it as a protection against Gilead's prying eyes, denying them access to her private thoughts. In the television series the uniform becomes a symbol of resistance, as it in the final episode of season one, presents herself and the rest of the handmaids in their uniforms as an army, prepared to fight the system.

Memories have had a significant impact on the composition, and been essential in recreating herself. Personal memories and how she remembers the past, influences her present. She has been denied all her previous roles and must look back at who she used to be in order to recreate and recompose herself. Her story unfolds through these memories and she discovers that, in light of her new situation, even the past needs reconstructing. "Women cannot live without roots, nor is it safe to forget where they have been" (Lawson, 1987). Her memories have further influenced the composition of the story, both as a relief from, and contrast to, the brute and numbing life lived in Gilead, and also by the way they juxtapose past and present.

The narrator's story and character have been composed in two different media. The television series uses settings and specific filming techniques, such as close-ups and bird's-view shots, in a symbolic way to highlight themes as well as deliberately create a tension between the narrator's inner life, and the composed outside that must be presented in order to survive in Gilead. The

mise-en-scènes are carefully composed and add both symbolic and aesthetic aspects to the story. The television series have used flashbacks and memories to compose a character “suited for the screen” by providing traits and motivations for the main character. These changes in the adapted story have resulted in a main character that is more rebellious and outspoken than in the novel. Although her televised story does not qualify to be called more “civilized”, we could say that her character is portrayed much more in the way she said she wished to portray herself in the novel: “I wish this story was different. I wish it were more civilized. I wished it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (p. 281).

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