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# A RESISTANCE IN RED: IDEOGRAPHS IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

JESSICA MARIE WOZNIAK

102 Pages

This thesis examines the first season of the television show *The Handmaid's Tale*, in order to better understand why the program has resonated in this historical moment to the extent that political activists use costumes from the show in their protests. I applied McGee's (1980) ideograph theory in combination with a feminist lens to identify and explore five prominent symbols in the show. One ideograph in particular, <the Handmaid's uniform>, is especially dynamic in that it transforms from a marker of oppression to one of solidarity. I argue that the ideographs, which are highly gendered and mainly visual in nature, give *The Handmaid's Tale* its power to transcend the screen and become a rallying cry for many women who see the Trump presidency as a threat to their rights.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaid, Resistance, Ideograph, Feminism

A RESISTANCE IN RED: IDEOGRAPHS IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

JESSICA MARIE WOZNIAK

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
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for the Degree of

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A RESISTANCE IN RED: IDEOGRAPHS IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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J. M. W.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the third episode of season one of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the main character, June, has a very bad day. It starts when her credit card is declined for lack of sufficient funds at a coffee shop and, to add insult to injury, the barista calls her a slut. Then, hours later, June is at work trying to contact the credit card company when men with machine guns enter her office. Something is amiss. Her boss calls a meeting, telling June and her female coworkers the law now requires that he fires all women. Except, he does not use the word fire – he says he is “letting them go.” He thinks it sounds less harsh. As June leaves work, her arms laden with her personal effects from her desk, she thanks one of the machine gun-toting men for holding the door. Much to June’s confusion, he responds, “under his eye” (Miller et al., 2017). Later on, viewers find out this is a new greeting used in Gilead that has dual meaning – both that God is watching over them and the Eyes, the secret security force, are too. Outside, these men are everywhere – one colleague remarks that they look like an army.

June goes home and drinks wine with her friend Moira, commiserating over the day’s events. Moira is much more heated about what just transpired than June and much darker about what is to come. Moira comments, “you know, they needed to do it this way. All the bank accounts and the jobs all at the same time. Can you imagine the airports otherwise? They don’t want us leaving, you can bet on that” (Miller et al., 2017). June is worried, too, but appears slightly more subdued. She jokes with her husband, who has just put their daughter to bed. Little does June know that the events of the day are a harbinger of worse times ahead. A major regime change in America had set the day’s happenings into motion; a new all-male group, the Sons of Jacob, aims to turn the country into a theocracy. These flashback scenes feel much like 2010s America. They do not depict a sci-fi world, where robots or aliens roam the earth, and everyone

flies around in drones. Instead, the references are plucked from our society: “Uber and salted-caramel ice are among the deprivations” not available in the new patriarchal society of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Reilly, 2017, n.p.). The flashbacks could seemingly occur on any day in any city in the United States. This contemporaneous quality lends an especially disturbing air to the other scenes in the show, which are set in present-day Gilead. Gilead is a new religious society where women have no control over their lives or their bodies. The name is a significant biblical reference and reveals important themes – it is the place where Jacob travels with his family, including his two wives and two handmaids, when his father-in-law forces him to leave (Wilkinson, 2018). The people who have devised this new patriarchal world which replaces the U.S. call themselves the Sons of Jacob. June explains that no one saw the takeover coming. She says, of her pre-Gilead naiveite: “I was asleep before.” As she walks along the street in in her new handmaid’s uniform, she adds:

That’s how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn’t wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution. We didn’t wake up then either. They said it would be temporary. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you’d be boiled to death before you knew it. (Miller et al., 2017)

Everything has changed in June’s life. Where she once was a woman with a job, a husband, and a daughter, in Gilead she is a handmaid, involuntarily held as a pregnancy surrogate for a powerful, well-connected family. June’s life, as portrayed in the television series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has become a flashpoint for many American women who see the show as emblematic of their deepest fears for what could emerge from the current political situation.

When *The Handmaid’s Tale* television show debuted on Hulu in April 2017, President Donald Trump had just taken office. Following a highly divisive election in which Trump won

the presidency but not the popular vote, Americans were adjusting to a new normal. Over the course of the campaign, Trump demonstrated a proclivity for treating women with disrespect and even disdain, especially those he saw as potential threats. Caught on tape by *Access Hollywood*, Trump boasted about his power over the women he pursued sexually, describing his aggressive interactions in vulgar, graphic terms. After this tape came to light, he was accused by several women of sexual misconduct, which he denied. Through these examples and more, Trump demonstrated to liberal American women that he would not be an advocate for them. To make matters worse in these women's minds, he chose Indiana Governor Mike Pence, a man known for his strong Evangelical Christian views and socially conservative leanings, as his running mate. To many American women, the election was an important moment, which "often felt like a referendum on gender progress: an opportunity to elevate a woman to the nation's top job and to repudiate a man whose remarkably boorish behavior toward women had assumed center stage during much of the campaign" (Flegenheimer & Barbaro, 2016, n.p.). The repudiation of that man did not come. In fact, the opposite happened. He became president.

Because the election felt so momentous, in the days following Trump's victory, a palpable sense of melancholy radiated through circles of liberal women. I felt it myself. Sometimes there was anger, too, and despair and outrage. People wondered, Trump's opponent Hillary Clinton chief among them, "How could sixty-two million people vote for someone they heard on tape bragging about repeated sexual assault?" (2017, p. 15). Those emotions were so pronounced that women craved an outlet into which they could channel their energies. The outlet came the day after Trump's inauguration when he was sworn in as President of the United States. On January 21, 2017, more than a million women around the world joined marches with a dual purpose – to support women and civil rights and denounce Trump's presidency. The Women's

March in Washington, DC, and its sister marches across the globe, “provided a balm for those eager to immerse themselves in a like-minded sea of citizens who shared their anxiety and disappointment after Democrat Clinton’s historic bid for the presidency ended in defeat” (Stein, Hendrix, & Hauslohner, 2017, n.p.). The marches unified women under a shared cause of activism and resistance. According to Clinton (2017), “resistance had become the watchword for everyone opposed to Trump and all the protests, large and small, spreading across the country” (p. 451). Resistance provided an antidote to the hopeless feelings that erupted in the aftermath of the election.

The allure of standing for something – by resisting Trump – gained popularity in the early months of 2017. The American Civil Liberties Union, for instance, invested a million dollars in a campaign called “People Power,” which sought to give Americans tools to defy Trump’s political agenda (Weigel, 2017). Newly created groups, like Indivisible, and long-existing ones, like Planned Parenthood, organized anti-Trump efforts, too, and in poured the donations (Sanders, 2017). As Clinton (2017) explains about the Women’s March, “our new President was a painful reminder of how far we still had to go. That’s why millions of women (and many supportive men) were pouring into the streets” (p. 14). At the same time, sales of *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel – along with other dystopian fiction – surged, as people drew a connection between President Trump and the authoritarian regime in the book (Alter, 2017). I read the novel during my sophomore year of high school and was not surprised when it, along with *1984*, climbed best-seller lists after the election (Mayer, 2017). The book is a pastiche that combines real life examples of the worst, most discriminatory anti-woman policies in the world. As the star of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Elisabeth Moss points out the story has “always been timely. It’s just that now there are actual things happening with women’s reproductive rights in

our own country that make me feel like this book is bleeding over into reality” (Reilly, 2017, n.p.). At a time when people needed an explanation for why the political situation seemed so frightening, *The Handmaid’s Tale* provided one.

Still, the adaptation of the book *The Handmaid’s Tale* into a television show was in the works long before Trump’s candidacy and subsequent election. According to showrunner Bruce Miller, the story “lent itself more to a TV series than to a novel, only because it was so rich and delicious that it begged to be explored further” (Reilly, 2017, n.p.). Regardless of the production schedule, the timing of the show was impeccable. In fact, “embellishments of the book’s minor details [spoke] to the series’ own uncanny foresight” (Reilly, 2017, n.p.). Miller insists that, while the series was shot during the presidential campaign, writers did not consciously make edits to the script with the political situation in mind. However, he does admit that the team had conversations about how characters like Serena Joy, one of the wives, would have reacted to Trump’s *Access Hollywood* tape. Moss explains that, as the filming coincided with the campaign and the election, “the show started to become a bit more personal – less of a hypothetical;” it became more than just entertainment (Reilly, 2017, n.p.). When the show aired in April 2017, Hulu released one episode per week to a wide audience on its streaming platform. Every Wednesday, viewers learned how the Sons of Jacob, a group of power-hungry men, used religious sentiment and a declining birthrate to masterfully divide and conquer the country. Between episodes, the audience watched President Trump exercising his new authority. In Gilead, viewers saw a world where men had complete control of women’s bodies. In real life, they saw Trump, standing in a room full of men, sign a bill that stopped federal funding to international groups that performed abortions or talked about them (“Trump’s order,” 2017). It was hard to tell sometimes what was fiction and what was a reality; the juxtaposition was jarring.

The show *The Handmaid's Tale* worked its way into the vernacular of the resistance. In the United States and beyond, the garment worn by the handmaids on the show – a floor-length, shapeless red cape and a white wide-brimmed hat that blocked peripheral vision – “emerged as one of the most powerful current feminist symbols of protest, in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women” (Beaumont & Holpuch, 2018, n.p.). From loud marches on the street to silent protests in courtrooms, the handmaid’s uniform transcended the screen to become an easily recognizable symbol of the resistance movement.

In this thesis, I will argue the television show *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a shorthand way for many United States women to explain the fears and anxieties they feel today. The show’s visual representations resonate with American women. Analogous with moments in the current political and cultural environment, the show provides a dark rhetorical example of a future in which women’s rights in the U.S. are severely curtailed. Because the handmaid’s clothing has transcended the screen and come to symbolize a real-life resistance to the current political regime, the text is worth exploring to determine why it has come to represent such anxieties and resistance.

In the next chapter of my thesis, I will conduct a review of literature to set the foundation for my research. First, I will explore dystopian narratives in film and television. Then, I will focus on academic work regarding *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, and finally, on research covering *The Handmaid's Tale* television show.

Following my literature review, I detail the methods I will use to conduct my analysis. I briefly explain rhetorical analysis and argue for why this method fits with what I want to accomplish. Next, I will explore both McGee’s (1980) ideograph and a feminist lens, noting key perspectives that I will apply. I will also introduce the specific parts of *The Handmaid's Tale* on

which I intend to focus, giving rationale for why I chose these pieces from the entire television series and how they will support my argument.

In chapter four, I will undertake a rhetorical analysis using McGee's (1980) ideograph and a feminist lens. In my analysis, I will explore why the television show *The Handmaid's Tale* resonates so strongly with many women, insofar as it functions as a shortcut to explain their present-day anxieties about the political environment.

Finally, in the last chapter of my thesis, I will reflect on my analysis to describe the overall significance of this text and how it functions as a part of cultural rhetoric in contemporary America. I will give recommendations for further work that could serve to broaden my research and contribute to a greater understanding of the current political moment, the fears Americans have about it, and what could be done to alleviate these concerns.

I remember watching *The Handmaid's Tale* on the couch, next to my sister, just months after Trump's inauguration. When June's credit card was declined, we turned and looked at each other. We just lived through a period of history that we previously thought unimaginable. Since Trump's election, we asked ourselves day in and day out what kind of America we lived in if Trump – a man with no political experience, no decorum, and no apparent desire to do much beyond torching the entire government just to say he did – could be elected president. The flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale* hit me especially hard. I recently returned from five years of teaching English in Eastern Europe, where I often talked to my students about how the United States, although not perfect, was making strides all the time to become a better place for all its citizens, not just the privileged few. Yet, here I was, back in America watching *The Handmaid's Tale* and feeling a sense of despair. The television program depicted a society where women's rights were taken away in an instant, and I sat wondering if the situation on screen was really as

far flung as it may have seemed had the show premiered a year earlier. The scenarios on television were entirely too possible, months after Trump's election. One only had to turn on the news and hear Trump calling white supremacist protests "very fine people" to know that the world was quite different than it had been during Barack Obama's presidency (Gray, 2017). Through my research, I seek to better understand the despair and anxiety of many women following the 2016 election, and why *The Handmaid's Tale* emerged at the right moment to make the show such a powerful symbol. It is important to point out, though, that given "53 percent of all white female voters picked Mr. Trump," the program certainly resonates with some women more than others (Rogers, 2016, n.p.). I think I will uncover that the show was, and is still, a vehicle that exemplifies liberal women's darkest fears about what could come next, if the forces that elected Trump continue to push the country in the same direction. By providing a strong rhetorical, albeit visual, example that is accessible to millions of Americans via a streaming platform, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a forum around which many women coalesce. It has become a buzzword to symbolize a resistance movement against Trump and the conservative, misogynist values which he represents. The program shows women viewers a worst-case scenario and, therefore, potentially propels them to challenge Trump's patriarchy.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will begin by investigating dystopian narratives in film and television. As *The Handmaid's Tale* falls into this category, it is crucial to review communication research in this domain, to understand past studies, find gaps, and situate my work in the space where there is more to be discovered. When I then turn my focus to *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will do the same thing. I will examine scholarship on the novel first, and then I will focus on the more recent work regarding the television series. This research will provide valuable background information on the text I will study. By progressing through relevant literature in this manner, I plan to lay a foundation for why *The Handmaid's Tale* television series serves as a shorthand for women that simultaneously describes both a bleak future and the path that must be taken to avoid it. The following section contains an in-depth look at the literature relevant to my topic, beginning with dystopian narratives.

### **Dystopian Narratives**

First, it is important to study dystopian narratives, as they provide commentary on the state of our society and where we are headed. Their bleak look into the future provides a warning about barreling full speed ahead, trusting technology without question, and pursuing progress for progress's sake. In this section, I will look specifically at dystopian stories on film and television, given that *The Handmaid's Tale* fits in this genre. Season one of the television show closely follows the plot of the novel, which is often classified with dystopian staples like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *It Can't Happen Here* (Alter, 2017). Goldberg (2019) argues that “the point of dystopias [is] to figure out where society might be going,” and *The Handmaid's Tale* does that, by providing a glimpse into the world where the patriarchy is in full force (n.p.). In the subsequent section, to understand *The Handmaid's Tale* better, I will review movies and shows

that offer social critiques and thus force viewers to think critically about the world and their place in it.

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* is commonly known as the first modern dystopic work, but those unfamiliar with it will recognize the category through novels like Aldous Huxley's 1932 book *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949, Ray Bradbury's 1953 text *Fahrenheit 451*, and Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* from 1962, which was made into a 1972 film by Stanley Kubrick. These works share the common characteristics of dystopian narratives. Sargent (2006) claims that they refer to "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (p. 15). In contrast to the dystopian stands the utopian, which Sargent describes, in standard usage, as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived" (p. 15). There are arguments over the demarcation between utopias and dystopias (Blaim & Gruszewska-Blaim, 2015; Claeys, 2013; Klonowska, 2018; Kumar, 1987, 1993). Nicieja (2008), for instance, sees Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* firmly situated in the utopian camp. However, the society portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* is more aptly considered a dystopia, as it "embodies unfreedom and exposure to the constantly capricious rule of a supremely powerful force, which may be human, natural, superhuman or utterly artificial" (Claeys, 2013, p. 17). The descriptors "dystopian" and "science fiction" are sometimes used interchangeably, although science fiction generally presents a future world where science and technology have significantly altered society. Science fiction is a "genre adept at considering what cannot be presently considered" (Adams, Rottinghaus, &

Wallace, 2016, p. 5729). *The Handmaid's Tale*, according to these descriptions, fits into both categorizations.

Dystopic narratives, as a genre, have generated substantial research. Given that I am studying a television show, the most significant texts for my purposes are television shows *The Walking Dead*, *Last Man on Earth*, *Firefly*, *Black Mirror*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. However, by widening out slightly, I found a few dystopic films that are worthy of exploring in this literature review, as research on them covers relevant topics or uses similar methods to my work. These films are *Blade Runner*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Quarantine*. In the subsequent sections, I will explore these dystopian texts from the big and small screen, first looking at the films and then the television shows.

### **Dystopian Narratives in Films**

The societies presented in films like *Blade Runner* and *Quarantine* do not depict contemporary life in the U.S. Instead, they demonstrate futuristic worlds far afield from today's society. Viewers of these movies must stretch their imagines to imagine how the world would have to evolve from the present-day to morph into those societies. As Lev (1998) explains:

the science fiction film, as a construction somewhat removed from everyday reality, is a privileged vehicle for the presentation of an ideology. Because it is less concerned than other genres with the surface structure of social reality, science fiction can pay more attention to the deep structure of what is and what ought to be. (p. 30)

Lev's exploration of ideology in *Blade Runner* demonstrates that the film's director, Ridley Scott, was liberal and, through his film, attempted to draw attention to issues like women's role in society, boundless rationalism, the intersection of humans and technology, and the embrace of the Other. This article is especially interesting to me as, similarly, I will explore how *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* presents progressive ideological points of view through the veil of a conservative society. While Gilead is much closer to today's world than the society portrayed in *Blade Runner*, Lev's (1998) research provides grounding for my study, in that it gives an example of another television show that presents an ideology.

Along the same vein, while *Blade Runner* presents a future society, one scholar sees it as also staying true to deeper historical roots. Gravett (1998) claims the film has a religious subtext and serves as a religious allegory. Through close textual analysis, Gravett demonstrates similarities between the film and biblical stories, as well as characters and their biblical counterparts. While religion in *The Handmaid's Tale* is infused throughout the society of Gilead and not a subtext, like in *Blade Runner*, the television show can also be seen as delivering an important message about the world. Interestingly, though, *The Handmaid's Tale* straddles the line between allegory and satire – the subject matter is too serious for satire, yet the story is too realistic to be considered a traditional allegory. In my analysis, I will attempt to uncover which factors make the show resonate so strongly with viewers. Perhaps the way the show blends satire with allegory is one reason. As I look at historical and contemporary parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and real life in my research, Gravett's (1998) work and close textual analysis could provide a model for me.

In the study of dystopian films, there is little in the way of rhetorical analysis, which is the space where I plan to work. I discovered one piece, a 2018 conference paper on *Blade Runner 2049* that uses rhetorical analysis to explore authenticity and generosity (Walker, 2018). Because the research looks at the interactions of humans and human-like robots, which function as the Other, it is not an exemplar work for what I will attempt. The Other in *The Handmaid's Tale* is real person, not a robot. A more relevant example is Brummett's (2013) analysis of the

dystopian films *Rec* and *Quarantine*. Through rhetorical homologies – drawn from Burke’s forms – Brummett explores how the movies communicate values to viewers. Similar to Lev (1998), Brummett explores how dystopian texts instill values into their audience, in turn serving to teach and persuade. As such, this study demonstrates the value of conducting a rhetorical analysis of visual media to uncover latent meanings.

Unlike *Blade Runner*, *Rec*, and *Quarantine*, the film *V for Vendetta* is set in a world that more closely resembles the one we live in today. By rhetorically analyzing discourse, figure, and ground, Ott (2010) determines how, as a multi-modal composition, the film “mobilize[s] viewers at a visceral level to reject a politics of apathy in favor of a politics of democratic struggle” (p. 39). By provoking an affective response, the text appeals especially to those who witnessed the presidency of George W. Bush and recognize similarities between events in the text and events they saw and experienced in their own lives. One important visual – the Guy Fawkes mask – that Ott (2010) does not explore in depth is taken up by other scholars (Koch, 2014; Kohns, 2013; Konzack, 2015). The mask, a caricature of Guy Fawkes’ face, originally appeared in the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. It gained mass appeal when it appeared in the film adaptation of the same story and then was appropriated first by the hacker-activist Internet group Anonymous and later by members of the Occupy Wall Street protest and today in various global resistance movements. For instance, the Guy Fawkes mask was recently used in protests in Hong Kong – before masks were banned entirely – and in Chile (“Chile is evading,” 2019; McGarry, 2019). Kohns (2013) and Koch (2014) argue that particular mask, heightened by its appearance in the film, has become a political icon that serves as a unifying device with widespread appeal. To Kohns, it “symbolizes the fight against the principle of representation in the name of identity” (p. 102) and demonstrates the connection between political protest and pop culture. The Guy

Fawkes mask is a particularly interesting example of an icon that manages to transcend the screen to find usefulness and purpose in political protest. It has become, according to McGarry (2019), “an anti-establishment trope wielded by ordinary people to register their dissatisfaction with the ideas and policies of the political elite” (n.p.). This widespread use over time of the mask as a symbol demonstrates the power of a dystopian film to impact its viewers in a way that bleeds over into people’s everyday lives. There are parallels to be drawn between the handmaid’s outfit from *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Guy Fawkes mask from *V for Vendetta* and research on the use of the mask informs my work.

### **Dystopian Narratives on Television**

Dystopian narratives tell a story about a future world and often cause the audience to wonder how society evolved to reach that point. When these narratives find a home on television, the episodic format of a series suspends the viewer’s disbelief over time. This allows the audience to ruminate on the story between episodes, leading to a different type of prolonged engagement. Prominent dystopian shows that have garnered scholars’ attention are *Battlestar Galactica*, *Firefly*, *Black Mirror*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Last Man on Earth*. While these stories are dystopian, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they differ in significant ways from the work I will study.

When looking for shows set in a realistic, contemporary world with human characters, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I find that of the five series, two – *Firefly* and *Battlestar Galactica* – are set in space. *Firefly* re-envisioned the classic Western tale of outlaws trying to survive, except the crew rides a spaceship, not horses, and it occurs after a galaxy-wide civil war. *Battlestar Galactica* is a struggle of humans versus technology that involves a crew on a spaceship, post-war, as the characters search for earth. Then, there is *The Walking Dead*, which features

survivors of a zombie apocalypse trying to form communities and stay alive. Another, *Black Mirror*, consists of stand-alone episodes, without storyline or character continuity, that explore the effects of technology on society. That leaves *The Last Man on Earth*. It is the closest in feel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the world resembles modern society with fewer people. The premise of the show is that a virus has decimated the world and now the few remaining inhabitants, who eventually find each other, must determine how to live together and repopulate the world.

Although there is valuable research on these shows, the programs do not depict worlds that closely resemble contemporary society like flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale* do. There is no Uber and no salted caramel ice cream. Still, I have reviewed research on these television shows to mine information on what has been done and how I can add to the body of work on dystopic programming.

While a show like *Battlestar Galactica* is set in a world far removed from today's, some scholars argue that it still presents useful lessons by depicting fears over current and future social relations. Chow-White, Deveau, and Adams (2015) and Nishime (2011) find flaws in depictions of race in the show, but also notice attempts by the producers of the text to imbue moral values in the audience. Even though the show depicts multispecies characters, Nishime (2011) remarks, "science fiction makes manifest our collective anxieties, transforming and projecting them onto monstrous and alien bodies" (p. 450). *The Handmaid's Tale* does not include monsters or aliens, but I will argue that it also lays bare our deeply held fears about a future world, in which we can see monsters in the humans around us. Along the same lines, Koski (2017) suggests that as a space-western "presented from a point of view outside what is considered the norm," *Firefly* "creates a dissonance within the audience" by revisiting a well-known genre with a futuristic twist (p. 156). It seems that if we do not resolve life's old problems, they will not disappear over

time, but only change form. Reading *Firefly* through a post-colonial lens, Koski posits that the show's creator remixes an ancient story to allow the audience to look at old problems in a new way. A parallel can also be drawn with *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the show uses a similar technique of bringing dated narratives to the fore. Other researchers focusing on texts set in far-off worlds study specific characters to draw connections to real life and glean meaning from the fictional representations (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Reed, 2017). For instance, Reed (2017) compares *The Walking Dead's* Michonne with Michelle Obama, discovering both depict black women who survive difficult, racist environments. Like *Battlestar Galactica*, this show also explores future social relations. While these pieces of research make significant contributions to the field of communication studies on dystopian television shows, they use different methodologies than I do and the texts they analyze are too unlike *The Handmaid's Tale* for there to be significant overlap. This makes the show, and my research, unique in the genre.

More in line with my work is research by Milford and Rowland (2012) and Martin (2018). These scholars explore how *Battlestar Galactica* and *Black Mirror*, respectively, function as allegories about contemporary politics and society, similar to Gravett's (1998) work on the film *Blade Runner*. Milford and Rowland (2012) argue that *Battlestar Galactica* functions as a situation ideological allegory which "used references to 9/11 and the responses to it in order to comment on and critique policies advocated by the Bush administration" (p. 542). During my analysis, I expect to discover veiled references to today's political atmosphere and accompanying quiet commentary on the behalf of the show's producer. These researchers, however, do not apply the feminist lens I will use. Looking in that direction, I can use Greene and Meyer's (2014) work on *The Walking Dead*, in which they undertake a feminist rhetorical critique of the show and demonstrate the reifying of traditional gender roles and "subtle sexism"

in the show (p. 72). The sexism in *The Handmaid's Tale* is certainly more overt, but this piece serves as a model for employing a feminist point of view. Interestingly, while *The Last Man on Earth* is the dystopian television show closest to a depiction of modern life, there is a lack of scholarly research on the show. There is, however, criticism in the popular press that points out it “found clever ways to tackle real issues and put a horrifying spin on them” (Moore, 2017, n.p). Perhaps the lens I apply to my study of *The Handmaid's Tale* could be used to study this show from a scholarly rhetorical perspective as well. Overall, the scholarship on these shows demonstrates that dystopian narratives provide important lessons about contemporary society that we must learn in order to avoid future devastation. However, none of these shows depict modern society as closely as *The Handmaid's Tale* and, despite having garnered small groups of fans, they have failed to gain broad, mainstream attention. Moreover, these programs depict dystopias in which the world is bad for everyone. In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a future when many men actually benefit from the new system; they might even consider Gilead a utopia rather than a dystopia. I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its realistic flashbacks, is well-placed to deliver the lessons of a dystopian narrative to a wide audience.

### **The Handmaid's Tale Novel and Margaret Atwood**

Unlike the dystopian texts I looked at in the previous sections, *The Handmaid's Tale* experiences broad recognition and cultural cache. Published in 1985, Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a staple of high school English classes in the United States and has become a play, opera, film, radio adaptation, and in 2017, a television show. It stands among the great dystopian novels listed at the beginning of this chapter – *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Clockwork Orange*. As Jadwin (2009) notes, the cultural issues that Atwood brings to light were top-of-mind in the 1980s when the book was published

and still hold relevance today. Atwood (1985) remarks in her “Note to the Reader” section of the novel, “The thing to remember is that there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* except the time and place. All of the things I have written about have been done before, more than once” (p. 316). As a precursor and a basis for the television show, Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid Tale* is source material for my work and continues to generate a significant body of research by scholars in numerous domains. In particular, communication scholars explore topics such as the message the book sends about reproductive rights and the important of women’s autonomy over their own bodies, as well as the way the structure of the novel – with its first-person narration and monologues – reinforces these messages. There is also work exploring the other adaptations of the book. In this initial section focusing on *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I will review relevant scholarly research on the book, as well as the 1990 film adaptation, as it applies to my study.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts a future world in which, in the midst of slowing birthrates, a fundamentalist religious right has seized control of the United States government, implemented martial law, and severely curtailed women’s rights. Now, the households of upper-class families consist of a man, who has ultimate control, his wife, who manages only household affairs, and a handmaid, who is raped by the man each month in a ritual that is meant to produce a child for the married couple. As Jadwin (2009) remarks, “by 1984, when Atwood began to shape *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the North American cultural climate had become markedly more conservative” and in other locations around the world, like Romania and China, women’s reproductive rights were restricted (p. 25). At the same time, feminists in the U.S. were involved in heated debates over abortion rights and gender essentialism.

Writing about *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, Fitch (2015) argues that the 2012 novel *Bumped* is an update on Atwood's work, and that the message about reproductive rights in *Bumped* resonates with "a generation of young women who consider themselves 'post-feminist' and regard *The Handmaid's Tale* as an outdated cautionary tale belonging in a distant past" (p. 1). Fitch's work pre-dates the television series version of *The Handmaid's Tale* and fails to foresee the popularity of the show. As I will explore in my analysis, the message still appeals to women today, evidenced by its viewership and renewal for a third season, the use of its costumes in protests against the current president and political establishment, and the discussion and comparisons the show has sparked in the media and online. While *Bumped* might appeal to a younger generation than the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in my analysis I will explore why the television show has its own staying power.

On the other side of the spectrum, Latimer (2009) argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* novel is still relevant today, given the teaching it provides on reproductive issues. Looking at the novel along with two films from 2007 – *Juno and Knocked Up* – Latimer believes "the novel's use of satire allows for an examination of reproductive politics beyond the dominant frameworks that not only supported reproductive debates in the 1980s, but continue to support them today" (p. 213). Moreover, Latimer (2009) claims the book teaches readers that abortion laws do not go far enough to protect women's autonomy over their bodies. The novel demonstrates how easy it can be for those in power to remove rights and freedom of choice when the circumstances are right. While this article, like Fitch's (2005), is also written before *The Handmaid's Tale* television show debuts, Latimer provides a framework that helps to understand why the show has resonated so strongly with today's viewers. These viewers may have seen the aforementioned movies and,

in today's political climate, are interested in exploring the social and material conditions that the films overlook.

Like the television show, the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated from the first-person point of view. In the show, we learn the main character's name is June but, in the book, she is only referred to as Offred – literally, “of Fred” – a name that denotes her status as property owned by the man of her household. Halsall (1999) posits the narrative style is a deliberate choice on the part of Atwood meant to “persuade a reader to sympathize with the feminist arguments presented” (p. 81). Through a rhetorical analysis, Halsall determines the text is an example of epideictic rhetoric, carefully employed to show that a future like Gilead is possible, given corruption and power abuses in North America taking place when the novel is written. Halsall's (1999) work provides an interesting frame with which to also view the television series. Leyda (2018) expresses a similar point of view later when writing about *The Handmaid's Tale* television program, suggesting that the monologues in Margaret Atwood's original book were redefined on television as extreme close-ups, meant to hook the reader by creating physical intimacy with June. Both these analyses take a similar methodological approach to the one I will employ, and thus are useful for background reading, although they do not apply the same lenses and theory I will.

Taking research on *The Handmaid's Tale* novel one step farther by adding another medium, Bignell (1993) compares the book with the 1990 film adaptation. Bignell argues that messages become lost in translation when the novel is given the Hollywood treatment; “the film tends to resolve ambiguity and provide the viewer with a stable position from which to understand it, whereas the novel exploits difficulties of how to read, to make us question the relationship between language and identity” (p. 8). A major difference between the film

adaptation and the television series is that the television series relies heavily on flashbacks to help situate the world of Gilead relatively close to modern life. It would be interesting to see if Bignell would read the television show in the same way as the film, or if the addition of flashbacks provides a more nuanced perspective.

### **The Handmaid's Tale Television Show**

Given *The Handmaid's Tale* is a new show, there has been little in-depth academic research to date. However, owing to the cultural significance of the program, the journal *Communication, Culture & Critique* included a forum focusing on the series in their 2018 issue "Media and the Extreme Right." As part of the forum, ten scholars contributed articles that explored topics from hashtag activism to the feminist gaze (Bayne, 2018; Maher, 2018). The fact that the well-respected journal *Communication, Culture & Critique* considers the show important enough to devote an entire section to it speaks to *The Handmaid's Tale's* worth as an object of study. Moreover, many of the articles in this section note the significance of *The Handmaid's Tale* to feminist concerns and/or critique the show using a feminist lens. Given that multiple scholars have highlighted the importance of viewing the show from this point of view, the use of a feminist perspective for my own analysis seems appropriate and useful for gleaning insights.

In *Communication, Culture & Critique's* special forum, some scholars see the show as a powerful rallying cry for the women's resistance in America, while others point out problems with its narrow characterization of minorities and its depictions of extreme violence (Bayne, 2018; Maher, 2018; Marghitu, & Johnson, 2018; Phoenix, 2018; Weber, 2018). These varying perspectives fit neatly within the premise of the journal's issue, which is to "examine the relationship between the extreme right and the media on a global scale, drawing from a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives in the fields of media studies and

communication” (Ouellette & Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4). *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a suitable text to unpack in this regard, as it encompasses “the politics of gender, race and right-wing political regimes,” and begs the questions: “What does watching a series about the oppression of women involve, and what kinds of resistance or collective activism to the politics of contemporary moment might *The Handmaid’s Tale* engender?” (Ouellette & Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 6). In this section, to set the stage for my analysis, I will explore articles from this issue, as well as a few other pieces of research on *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series that were not contained in this issue of *Communication, Culture & Critique*. The most relevant themes from the scholarly works I review are: the exploration of power relations within the show and their connections with the real world; the impact of graphic depiction of violence on the viewer; and the show and the main character, June, as unifying symbols for a feminist resistance in the current political regime.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* exemplifies power relations taken to the utmost degree of inequality. The handmaids are given little to no agency in their own lives and even the wives’ freedom has specific, strict limitations. As a show that depicts real-world social conditions in the past and present, albeit extreme ones, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not breezy, mindless, feel good television (Edford, 2018; Gibson, 2018; Marghita & Johnson, 2018; Moeggenburg & Solomon, 2018). Instead:

the audience is not offered the opportunity to escape their everyday realities, as one might expect a novel or television show to do. Rather, both versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale* were created to offer a discomfoting, if exaggerated, representation of the conditions that audiences deal with in the real world. (Moeggenburg & Solomon, 2018, p. 20)

Scholars look to the show to explore political tyranny and the power of the alt-right, the patriarchy in general, and the Christian patriarchy in particular (Brecke, 2018; Gibson, 2018;

Hargraves, 2018; Himberg, 2018; Klair, 2018; Leyda, 2018; Moeggenburg & Solomon, 2018; Weber, 2018). As far-right groups in the U.S. and abroad continue to gain attention and power today, some demonstrate a desire to do away with democratic values and move to theocracy as a way to right the world's wrongs (Gibson, 2018). This idea is pushed to its most radical in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it is not without precedent. Brecke (2018) compares the Christian patriarchy and the Quiverfull movement with the fictional realm of Gilead. Like in Gilead, "women in Christian Patriarchy and Quiverfull families live under behavioral restrictions that often limit their interactions to home and church life" (Brecke, 2018, p. 15). Bringing light to these dynamics is often uncomfortable. Viewers must examine the show with a critical eye, looking past the jarring, violence to derive meaning (Hargaves, 2018). The resonance of this discomfort is something I will explore more in depth in my analysis and these scholars set the stage.

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, many women in the U.S. have felt anxiety about the political situation and prospects for equality. In fact, more than just a feeling of anxiety, "for many women, the physical toll of the current administration is chipping away at their reproductive health" (Lewis, 2017, n.p.). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative that, although fictional, helps detail these worries about the present political climate (Edford, 2018). In the show, these fears are explored by placing the audience in a state of uneasiness. Weber (2018), calls it torture porn, and wonders why viewers have to see such an extreme depiction to become angry with the patriarchy and want to change it. She posits that perhaps the showrunner purposefully created torture porn to move audiences to action, given they are used to seeing graphic depictions of violence on their computers, phones, and television screens daily. While the series is highly dramatized, Gibson (2018) points out that the scenarios are not as far-fetched

as they may at first seem. In fact, as Atwood (1985) notes, there are historical precedents for most, if not all of the violence and injustice depicted. This includes the denial of people's individuality by refusing to honor given names and removing one's right to earn and manage one's own money. *The Handmaid's Tale* is important viewing for understanding our current system and the dangers ahead (Gibson, 2018). While Gibson's work is elucidatory, a hole exists in that the lens and method are not clearly stated. As I will explain further in my methods section, by conducting a rhetorical analysis using McGee's (1980) ideograph and a feminist lens, I will shed additional light on the topic.

Insofar as *The Handmaid's Tale* gives expression to anxieties, it thus acts as a unifying symbol for those who feel uneasy. Marghitu and Johnson (2018) claim, "*The Handmaid's Tale* emerged as the popular culture symbol of the new Anti-Trump/Pence feminist resistance, as fans linked the series' fictionalized dystopian society to the very real onslaught of women's reproductive rights in policymaking" (p. 184). The show airs at a time when women feel their reproductive rights are in danger. Marghitu and Johnson (2018) detail a few examples where images from the show have been used on social media with an accompanying commentary that suggests America could be heading down a similar path if the country does not recognize the misogynistic rhetoric coming from the White House. Klair (2018) sees *The Handmaid's Tale* as providing guidance for resistance during oppressive situations. Hendershot (2018), on the other hand, views the show as more of a cautionary story – from which to glean lessons – rather than a rallying cry. These articles lay the foundation for my research but, due to the confines of space and time of the special issue, do not dig deeply enough into the show to understand why it has become shorthand for resistance to the president and Republican establishment. My analysis uses the footholds provided to more deeply excavate hidden ideological messages in the show.

Perhaps one reason the show acts as a rallying cry and a unifier is that unlike the novel, the television version of *The Handmaid's Tale* features a main character who demonstrates more overt willpower and desire to resist than the same character in the novel (Trope, 2018). Trope claims the highlighting of June as a resistant character has to do with the medium and the conventions of the genre: “the Hulu version, abiding by Hollywood standards, gives us the girl power version” (p. 188). The phrase, “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,*” which is bad Latin for “don’t let the bastards grind you down,” is a particular rallying cry. After a scene on the show aired where June finds the words carved into the baseboard of her closet, the phrase began to be used by feminists online, including as a hashtag, as an act of resistance (Bayne, 2018). The meaning behind the phrase resonates with those who want to stand in solidarity in the current political environment. Through the intermixing of fiction and nonfiction, as well as private and public, *The Handmaid's Tale* reaches beyond television screens and has featured prominently in protest movements that have occurred since the show premiered. Moeggenburg and Solomon (2018) describe how the show has relevance in the #MeToo era and give examples of how the handmaid’s uniform has found use in protests including marches and disruptions of court proceedings. These scholars reveal important points about the power *The Handmaid's Tale* holds for its audience. However, they only scratch the surface. By providing myriad examples of where the text has appeared beyond the screen, these studies demonstrate that a more comprehensive, closer analysis is needed to weave all the threads together.

Researchers who examine *The Handmaid's Tale* television show often take a rhetorical approach. Given the medium, a visual rhetorical analysis of the show is particularly useful (Hendershot, 2018; Klair, 2018; Leyda, 2018; Moeggenburg & Solomon, 2018; Trope, 2018). I intend to follow the lead of these researchers and also employ a rhetorical approach. However,

my analysis will differ, in that I will apply McGee's (1980) ideograph and a feminist lens to explore the text. I would also like to build on Hendershot's (2018) work in viewing the show as an allegory that has analogies for our society. I expect to look more closely at why these connections cause the show to resonate so strongly with viewers and make the show a shorthand for a larger purpose.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I first explored communication research on dystopian narratives in television, then focused on relevant studies of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, and finally, the television show. By doing so, I have conducted a review of literature that sets the stage for my analysis. As a relatively new show, scholars are just beginning to build a body of research on *The Handmaid's Tale*. There is plenty of room to further expand. Much of the research occurs in the *Communication, Culture & Critique's* forum and only scratches the surface of possibilities for exploring the television show. The studies I reviewed do not go far enough – leaving plenty of room to outline a clear method and lens from which to analyze the text. There is a need to synthesize the existing research and look at it as a whole, drawing larger conclusions about why *The Handmaid's Tale* has captured the attention of its audience and transcended the screen, reaching even those who have never watched an episode.

In the following chapter, I will detail the methods I plan to use for conducting my research. Through my analysis, I will explore why *The Handmaid's Tale* lends itself to be such a useful shorthand for the fears and anxieties faced by American women as they encounter the patriarchy. I plan to look, in particular, at the show's flashbacks and examine why they resonate so strongly with audiences, given viewers have adopted the handmaid's uniforms for use in a larger resistance movement.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

In chapter two, I conducted a scholarly investigation into research on dystopian narratives in film and television to set the stage for where *The Handmaid's Tale* television show fits into the genre. Then, I explored communication research on the predecessor of the television show, *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. Finally, I focused on *The Handmaid's Tale* television show itself, to determine how much and what type of academic work has been done on the show and which stones have been left unturned. Through this review of literature, I created a foundation for my analysis into why *The Handmaid's Tale* television series is used as a point of reference by women to express their fear and anxieties after the 2016 United States presidential election.

In this chapter, I will detail the methods I will use to conduct my analysis and the specific parts of the text on which I will focus. By engaging in a rhetorical analysis of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* – paying special attention to the flashback scenes – I seek to discover the reasons why it resonates so strongly with women in America today. More specifically, this chapter will serve as a place for me to describe the particular methodology I will use. I will apply McGee's (1980) ideograph as my tool, alongside a feminist lens, which will allow me to examine the values of the ideographs. In the following explanation of my method, I will also describe how I will weave the two perspectives together, to produce a cohesive way of interrogating the text. This chapter is important because, having established a foundation of research around my topic, I will now establish my research process, before applying it to *The Handmaid's Tale* television show.

### **The Ideograph**

During my research, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis employing McGee's (1980) ideograph. The ideograph is rooted in rhetorical theory, as ideographs have the power to

influence through their use by the masses in popular discourse. Campbell (1996) calls rhetoric “the study of all the processes by which people influence each other through symbols, regardless of the intent of the source” (p. 9). In the theory of the ideograph, McGee (1980) argues that influence, or social control, is rhetorical in nature. The term ideograph is derived from ideology, or, “a pattern of beliefs that determine a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (Foss, 2009, p. 209). Following that notion, the ideograph theory can be considered a specific way of conducting an ideological analysis. According to Foss (2009), in an ideological analysis, “the critic looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests” (Foss, 2009, p. 209). An ideograph is “an ordinary language term found in political discourse” (McGee, 1980, p. 15). Ordinary language terms are common words and phrases used in everyday speech. In the case of my research, the artifact I will study is *The Handmaid's Tale*. By applying the ideograph theory to it, I will attempt to discern how the show functions and what meaning it has for American women at this moment in history.

McGee's (1980) theory explores both diachronic and synchronic structures. These structures “have the capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual's ‘reality’” (McGee, 1980, p. 5) An ideograph's synchronic structure is vertical, in that it undergoes change over time as its uses and meanings evolve. Often these changes in an ideograph are recorded, and most prominently traceable, through media like books, songs, movies, and television shows. The vertical structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as an ideograph, is significant. The text first emerged as a popular book, frequently used – and sometimes banned – in high school classes and then was revamped into a television show, (Hesse, 2017). McGee's synchronic ideograph can help determine how the text's meaning evolved as it became a television program, and then how the meaning again changed as it moved

through multiple seasons. However, in my analysis, I will focus mostly on *The Handmaid's Tale* as a diachronic ideograph.

Unlike the synchronic view of the ideograph, the diachronic nature is concerned with horizontality. It focuses on how an ideograph interacts in the present time with other ideographs. To explain this, McGee (1980) uses the example of <rule of law> conflicting with the “principle of <confidentiality>.” These clashing ideographs demonstrate our complicated human nature and the cognitive dissonance people feel when they interact in the world and try to reconcile their contradictory beliefs. When attempting to study and explain a society’s ideologies, McGee (1980) points out that both diachronic and synchronic structures must be considered. He says:

no present ideology can be divorced from past commitments if only because the very words used to express present dislocations have a history that establishes the category of their meanings. And no diachronic ideology can be divorced from the “here-and-now” if only because the entire *raison d’etre* consists in justifying the form and direction of collective behavior. (1980, p. 14)

In my analysis, I will focus mostly on the synchronic ideograph, recognizing how *The Handmaid's Tale* is especially reticent because of how it exists in concert with other ideographs at this historical moment.

Given that ideologies and ideographs are in the hands of humans, they change and shift in popular usage over time. They are also governed by their existence in a dynamic society. As McGee (1980) explains, “human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation” (p. 2). According to McGee’s (1980) theory of the ideograph, ideographs are used in common discourse and, through their presence in language, they manifest and become real. Moreover, they are always political. McGee explains,

since the clearest access to persuasion (and hence to ideology) is through the discourse used to produce it, I will suggest that ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of “ideographs” easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy. (p. 5)

The ideograph, then, is an excellent vehicle for analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale* to determine how the show has an effect on the public and, thus, why it has been used as a rallying cry for the resistance movement to the Trump presidency. The show is composed of ideographs that support McGee's (1980) theory that “the truth of symbolist constructs...appears to lie in our claim to see a legitimate social reality in a vocabulary of complex, high-order abstractions that refer to and invoke a sense of ‘the people’” (p. 15). Given its use in protest movements, I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* certainly has evoked a sense of unity and collectivity, and of being for “the people.”

This theory is a relevant way to study *The Handmaid's Tale* because the ideograph is not necessarily projected from the top down; it more often bubbles up from the masses into political discourse. The popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* in conversations about politics came from regular viewers of the show who found that it resonated for them, as it vividly illustrated their fears and anxieties. McGee (1980) argues that “ideology is transcendent, as much an influence on the belief and behavior of the ruler as on the ruled” (p. 5). In my analysis, I will look at the power of *The Handmaid's Tale* to move beyond being television show and into becoming a facet of the current political atmosphere. To situate this power to unify and bring attention to a cause, the ideograph is a useful manner of analysis. As McGee (1980) explains, an ideograph “is a high-

order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief into channels easily recognizable by a community as acceptable and laudable” (p. 15). By using this method, I will explore how *The Handmaid’s Tale* has become a slogan for unity among liberal women, in particular.

While McGee’s (1980) ideograph looks at single words, – “one-term sums of an orientation” – I will examine the single moments, such as particular actions and behaviors, and individual symbols contained in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (p. 7). These singular instances capture the same type of ideological meaning that McGee describes, albeit in a more visual manner. I look to scholars like Edwards and Winkler (1997) and Ballard (2016) as an example. They apply McGee’s (1980) ideograph to instances of visual rhetoric, achieving the same effect as those who use the ideograph to reveal the ideological potential of single words. Edwards and Winkler (1997) analyze how a photograph of a flag-raising at Iwo Jima, though its appropriation in editorial cartoons, “operates as an instance of depictive rhetoric that functions ideographically” (p. 289). These editorial cartoons are, in essence, parodies of the original photo; they alter the image’s ideological meaning by transforming it. Ballard, on the other hand, examines a newer form of parodies – through the technology of the video sharing site YouTube. He identifies “video ideograph(s)...that re-appropriate ideological elements of the original artifact to communicate a distinct rhetorical message via the medium of video” (p. 10). These three scholars provide examples of how to draw upon McGee’s (1980) methodology while analyzing a visual depiction as opposed to a term. Beyond these examples, the ideograph has rarely been applied to visuals, making my work a unique contribution to the field.

The ideograph, as a method, allows the researcher to give meaning to ideology by examining how that ideology is depicted through the use of a symbol. These symbols – in my case sometimes particular moments, actions, or behaviors – are “used to symbolize the line of argument the meanest sort of individual *would* pursue, if that individual had the dialectical skills of philosophers, as a defense of a personal stake in and commitment to the society” (McGee, 1980, p. 7). I will argue that by searing an image into the viewer’s mind, visual ideographs are incredibly powerful conveyers of meaning. Like Burke’s (1969) representative anecdote, ideographs offer meaning, to a degree, by functioning as synecdoche. They are a part that represents a whole. As Burke (1969) explains, “a given calculus must be supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate” (p. 60). Visuals that act as representative anecdotes or ideographs convey a message that reinforces a central meaning. Like the ideograph, “the anecdote is in a sense a summation, containing implicitly what the system that is develop from it contains explicitly” (Burke, 1969, p. 60). For example, the use of the handmaid’s costume by hundreds of women *en masse* marching during a protest creates an indelible image that is highly persuasive without saying a word. While this visual creates different feelings for everyone, following McGee’s (1980) theory, it has gained prominence to be commonly understood to symbolize resistance to the patriarchy of Trump’s presidency.

Through employing the ideograph theory, I will argue that people who use the show’s costumes as a symbol are looking to both galvanize support for a cause and to inflict fear upon U.S. political leaders who may be surprised to see a wave of protestors in red bearing down upon them. After all, “social control in its essence is control over consciousness” (McGee, 1980, p. 5). This control is wielded most strongly by popular discourse, and a streaming television show has the power to reach the masses. In my analysis, I will apply the concept of the ideograph to *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* as a way to explore how “a vocabulary of concepts...function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief” (McGee, 1980, p. 6). Moreover, I will look at how the show functions in connection with the current political situation. By that I mean I will look at what is happening in the United States, politically, and how that influences the ideograph. McGee (1980) says an ideograph is “always understood in its relation to another; it is defined tautologically by using other terms in its cluster” (p. 14). Ideographs function intertextually; the themes and symbols I find in the *The Handmaid's Tale* emerge in other places – everyday conversations, news stories, social media posts, protests – and carry their meaning farther. In my analysis, I will argue that as an ideograph, *The Handmaid's Tale* works to justify and explain the political situation, as well as to guide a response to Trump's presidency. I will make the point that the show is constructed of many ideographs grasped by the resistance movement.

### **Feminist Rhetoric**

While employing the ideograph theory, I will use a feminist lens as the perspective through which to view *The Handmaid's Tale* and its power as a symbol. Feminism is “an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (Gordon, 1979, p. 107). There are many different versions of feminism – feminisms is a better term. At the core of all of them, feminisms attempt to recognize and upend the patriarchy, “the constellation of values, ideas, and beliefs that reinforces male control over women” (Starhawk, 2003, p. 16). Feminist research centralizes women's experiences and brings awareness to their struggles within the hierarchical, historical system of domination by men. More than just generating awareness, “feminist scholarship is active. It promotes change to a nonsexist society in which self-actualization is possible. It calls into question the values of the system, the very act of which puts one in an activist position. It explores new forms and is advocating” (Dervin, 1987, p. 109).

Feminist scholars spotlight instances where the patriarchy is at work and how it subjugates women. By doing so, they attempt to bring about change in unequal systems and relationships. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a world where the patriarchy is strong. It is set in a society where men have all the power and women control nearly no aspects of their own lives – it is a dystopic nightmare for women but, for the men in the show who benefit from the system, it is more like a utopia. These men have shaped Gilead into a society where they have all the power and their control cannot be refuted. To the men in authority, Gilead made their corner of America great again. In my analysis, I will argue that this dark depiction of a world where the patriarchy prevails serves as a wake-up call for women and bands them together to work against forces that would like to see this type of a future prevail. Men who seem to want a Gilead-esque society have gained increased political capital and media attention since the 2016 election. I posit that, through the portrayal of an extreme, overt patriarchy, but one that seems possible, *The Handmaid's Tale* strikes fear in women and spurs them to action.

Looking at the show through a feminist lens will help expose historical patterns of domination of men over women and, allow me to gain an understanding of why the show resonates so strongly today. At the center of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the belief that women are only valued for their ability to reproduce, and therefore deserve to be treated more like animals than humans. In my analysis, I will explore why this idea is so anxiety-producing, especially in today's political environment. I will also look at why this has spurred a response to politics that mobilizes women around the show as a symbol for the resistance. Starhawk (1989) points out that “systems of domination are not prepared to cope with fearlessness, because acts of courage and resistance break the expected patterns” (p. 14). I will argue that the flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale* are so terrifying that they spur women into action. These women act

courageously because the future alternative world presented in the television show is incredibly dire and pushes them to fight for their rights, in order not to lose them.

While other scholars have applied a feminist lens to their explorations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, they have not combined that view with the ideograph. The ideograph and feminisms are well-suited to work together in my analysis and the combination assures I am not retreading ground of feminist scholars of the show. Through the ideograph methodology, I will uncover important symbols in *The Handmaid's Tale* and then, using a feminist lens, I will determine what value they have and why it matters for women. A critical tie between the ideograph and feminisms is the connection they have with politics. The feminist rallying cry of “the personal is political” closely dovetails with McGee’s (1980) idea that ideographs are always connected with political consciousness. Another reason the two align has to do with subjectivity. McGee (1980) says it is not possible to gain enough distance from an ideograph to understanding it in a fully objective manner. Similarly, third-wave feminists believe that self-reflexivity is crucial and that one cannot separate oneself from a lived experience (Lazar, 2007; Shugart, 2001; Sowards & Renegar, 2006). Instead, it is important to uncover and forefront one’s beliefs as a way to interrogate them. In my analysis, I plan to ask myself how and why I interpret *The Handmaid's Tale* in the way I do. This will be a process of self-reflexivity, which will entail exploring my own life experiences and determining the different ways in which I am privileged and how these influence my interpretation of the text. During my analysis, I will acknowledge that, as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman with an education, I hold a position of privilege in society. Understanding my privilege and the ideological nature of my interpretation is a critical component of my analysis. It will help me to discern why *The Handmaid's Tale* resonates with American women, but it also will make me aware that the text is not received by

everyone in the same way. I am also conscious that the text has issues with representation – it has been criticized for its portrayals of people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals – and, as a white woman, I need to employ intersectional feminism to avoid overlooking these problems (Chavez, 2019). By using feminisms and the ideograph in concert in my analysis, I will seek to recognize that my analysis is not universal – I cannot speak to everyone’s understanding of the text, but I can apply my own experiences and look at what I see and hear around me.

### **The Handmaid’s Tale as text**

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is a text ripe for investigation, given its popularity, attention in the media, and use of its costumes off-screen in political protests. The show helps to construct what Anderson (1991) calls “imagined communities.” These communities “refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). What is remarkable about *The Handmaid’s Tale*, though, is the communities may have started as imagined, but they become much more. In fact, they transcend the screen in a highly visible way. The bright red handmaids’ outfits are being used in political protests – on the street, in marches, in courthouses – demonstrating just how significant the show is to women who are filled with anxiety about the current state of politics. As described in *Wire*,

women dressed in red robes and blinkering white bonnets—the uniform of reproductive slavery in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel turned Hulu show, *The Handmaid’s Tale*—have become symbols of dissent across the internet and the world. The handmaids are ominous, silent, semi-faceless, and the most powerful protest costume since hacktivist collective Anonymous popularized wearing Fawkes’ smirking face over a decade ago.

And now, as Hulu's adaptation heads into its third season, they are everywhere. (Ellis, 2019, n.p.)

The women using these uniforms in protest and engaging with the show in active ways are more than an imagined community; they are a living, breathing community that has ripped the show from the television screen and brought it on to Main Street to serve their goals.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is more than escapist television – its symbols and meanings are actively used to advance social causes, which makes it critically worthy of study. Spigel and Curtin (2013) view television as a place where something is produced, a site for “transforming social relations and cultural affinities” not just where people go to escape (p. 11). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a prime example of this. It goes even farther than Spigel and Curtin (2013) imagine television could go. They claim:

the revolution may never be televised, but this is not because television is in itself incapable of imagining constructive social change. Rather, the revolution will not be televised because our reigning belief systems about television make it impossible for us to imagine the medium as a tool for anything but social and cultural depravity.” (Spigel & Curtin, 2013, p. 18)

With that in mind, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important text for study because it defies this way of thinking. Something about the show lends the text itself – and the handmaid's uniform – to be an incredibly useful symbol for a community of women who feel that it encapsulates their greatest fears about the current political moment. It is a rich text for investigation; I plan to mine it carefully to explore why it has the power to function in this manner.

In particular, the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the one that has captured my attention and that I will explore in my analysis, for a number of reasons. Specifically, I will focus

on the flashbacks in season one, as I believe the flashback scenes provoke the most despair in the viewer and drive women into action to challenge Trump's patriarchy. After all, the show premiered only months after Trump's inauguration, when anxieties about the United States' political future were running high. The flashbacks depict an America that seems ripped directly from the present day in any major U.S. city, which give it an especially realistic, ominous feel. The show's popularity, the media attention it garnished, and how quickly and copiously the handmaid's tale outfit jumped from the screen into street protests and in the courtroom makes it worthy of study. In particular, the juxtaposition of the first season with the political climate – during the start of Trump's presidency – made the show resonate particularly strongly with women. Simonton (2019) explains, “with fortuitous timing, *The Handmaid's Tale* appears to be riding the political wave and, sometimes, becoming part of it...even for bystanders who don't watch the show. *The Handmaid's Tale* has become both a fixture in popular culture and a political talking point” (n.p.).

Season one is when it all started. It is worthy of focus because it both builds the storyline for Gilead's beginnings as well as presents the initial flashbacks of June's world being overturned. These flashbacks are most jarring when watched for the first time. Because they look so much like our present times, the viewers can imagine themselves in the same coffeeshop as June was when her card was declined or being sneered at during a run through the city. While subsequent seasons of the show continue to draw viewership, they simply extend the story's plot by delving deeper into the workings of Gilead. They do not add unique insights to a cultural critique beyond what is depicted in season one. Moreover, later years have become more gratuitously violent. I think women watch the show in spite of the violence, not because of it. For these reasons, I have chosen not to include those seasons in my analysis. The first season alone

provides plenty of valuable material from which to mine ideographs. In my analysis, I plan to explore how the flashbacks in season one of *The Handmaid's Tale* can be interpreted to have such power over its audiences, leading the program to become what Feldman (2018) calls “truly one of the most important shows on television...everyone should be watching” (n.p.).

### **Conclusion**

As we all know, television often presents a false view of reality. And, “‘truth’ in politics,” McGee (1980) explains, “no matter how firmly we believe, is always an illusion” (p. 4). What is it then, about a fictional television show that feels as though it presents a real and true view of politics? In actuality, it seems to present such a horrifyingly probable view that it has terrified American women and spurred them into action. In my subsequent analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will undertake a close textual analysis of the show to try to pinpoint the answer to that question. Through employing McGee's (1980) ideograph, in combination with a feminist lens, I will seek to discover why the television show has become a reference point that women use to express the fear and anxieties they felt after the 2016 United States presidential election.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In the following chapter, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, using McGee's (1980) ideograph and applying a feminist lens. McGee describes an ideograph as "an ordinary language term found in political discourse" (p. 15). Because I am looking at a television show – highly visual by nature of the medium – I will not look at ordinary language terms used in the program but, instead, I will explore visual representations that appear frequently enough to become familiar to the viewer and imbued with meaning. Specifically, I will prioritize ideographs that are connected to gender. At their core, feminisms attempt to recognize and upend the patriarchy – the system where men exercise control over women. Given that I will apply a feminist perspective to my research, selecting gender-related ideographs allows me to undertake scholarship with a purpose, that is to notice instances where the patriarchy is operating and attempt to bring about change. Power relations between men and women are the central issues of *The Handmaid's Tale* – it is therefore fitting to highlight ideographs that have a strong connection to gender.

The five ideographs I uncovered in the text are: <the Handmaid's uniform>, <the Handmaid's ear tag>, <the hangings of dissidents>, <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*>, and <the Mayday movement>. These are the most important visual ideographs in the first season of the show, as they dovetail with *The Handmaid's Tale's* main themes. In this section I will analyze the four themes – return to tradition/religion, power disparity, oppression of women, and resistance – to determine their meanings, how they are articulated and how they frame the show's arguments, and the ways they influence the audience. Moreover, I will match the ideographs with their corresponding themes and explain how they fit together and to what effect. Some ideographs apply to multiple themes, as I will explain. The most prominent, persuasive

ideograph, <the Handmaid's uniform>, has cross-thematic reach and, not surprisingly, it is the ideograph that has transcended the screen and come to symbolize something larger than an entertaining television show for liberal American women resisting President Trump's agenda.

### **Return to Tradition/Religion**

Emily, a Handmaid referred to as Ofglen in Gilead, is marched into a courtroom, handcuffed, between two men wearing all black suits. Emily has a look of terror in her bright blue eyes. You cannot see her mouth, as a muzzle is strapped around her head and covers her face from the bottom of her nose to her throat. Divine light pours into a courtroom from above, where a judge and a jury of all men sit in a semi-circle. The men are gathered to pass judgement on a homosexual relationship – illegal in Gilead – between Emily and a “Martha.” Martha is the generic name given to female domestic workers in Gilead. The defendant for the state says the two women “stand charged with gender treachery, in violation of Romans, Chapter 1, Verse 26” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). In a matter of seconds, the trial is over. The judge proclaims, “in the name of God and His servants here on Earth, the accused are hereby found guilty” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). He gavels, sentencing the Martha, identified only by number, to “the Common Mercy of the State” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). Emily has a different fate. She deserves to suffer, declares the judge, but, as “God has seen fit to make you fruitful...by that we are bound” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). Emily is sentenced to “Redemption” which, in Gilead means she undergoes genital mutilation, leaving her able to carry a baby but not to experience sexual pleasure. Before this violation of her body, however, Emily must watch her lover hanged before her eyes.

Here we have a particularly poignant example of how society in *The Handmaid's Tale* is structured. The law is no longer what is in the United States Constitution – the U.S. is only made

up of two states now – but rather what is written in the Bible. Religion is not imbued throughout life; it *is* life. The example I described above illustrates one prominent theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the return to tradition/religion. Two ideographs I identified are connected to this theme: <the Handmaid's uniform> and <the hangings of dissidents>. The return to tradition/religion is important in Gilead because it allows the men in power, the Sons of Jacob – another biblical reference – to maintain their power. By emphasizing how godless the world has become and connecting that with societal problems, like an increased fertility rate, these leading men give justification for a reverting to a past world that suits their purposes – chiefly consolidating power amongst themselves. The entirety of Gilead is based on the premise that a return to tradition/religion will create a “better” society, where more children will be born. Later on, June sheds light on the subject: “better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some” (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). Over the course of the first season, it becomes clear that returning to religion and traditions is actually a return to the patriarchy. It makes a better society for most of the men, in particular those in power, but creates a life that is much worse for the women.

The ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> is highly recognizable throughout the show, as the Handmaids wear blood red outfits consisting of red shirts, bodices, and voluminous, floor-length skirts. For trips out of the house, they wear long, red cloaks with red hoods. On their heads, Handmaids wear white caps that covers their hair. When in public, they add white bonnets (“wings”) that obscure their peripheral vision and keep their faces hidden. Handmaids in the show are rarely depicted in anything else, although June is occasionally shown in her room in a long, tan nightdress. The clothing worn by the Handmaids can be classified as a uniform because it is required, and it visibly designates the Handmaids' position in society. As a symbol of the

handmaids, the red uniform represents, among other things, the theme of the return to tradition/religion, because the modest nature and concealing shapes of the clothing remind the audience of the dress of pious women, especially in the past, but also by some religious groups today. As McGee (1980) explains, “awareness of the way an ideograph can be meaningful *now* is controlled in large part by what it meant *then*” (p. 10-11). Historically, women in this type of clothing have been seen as religious, and as those who put their belief in God before their own vanity.

The Handmaid’s uniform, above all else, is extremely modest. It consists of many layers – including layered undergarments – and provides full coverage. Never is the shape of these women’s figures visible. The head coverings also indicate modesty and harken to the idea that a woman’s hair is seductive and should be pinned up and out of sight. What is not modest is the color of the uniforms but that, too, is purposeful: “the Handmaids wear long red dresses because they are, quite literally, the reproductive organs of the new country” (Jung, 2017, n.p.). In contrast with the blood red outfits are the stark white head coverings, which symbolize purity. The Handmaids, after all, are supposed to be pure vessels, carriers of the future of Gilead, not objects of lust. As a powerful ideograph, <the Handmaid’s uniform> has the “capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior” (McGee, 1980, p. 5). When Gileadeans see a Handmaid on the street, they behave a certain way, in accordance with what the clothing symbolizes. People avert their eyes, offer a religious platitude like “blessed be the fruit,” and do not engage the handmaids. The Handmaids’ sole contribution is to carry the society’s children, populating future Gilead.

The second ideograph tied to the theme of return to tradition/religion is <the hangings of dissidents>. In Gilead, anyone who is caught working against the regime is hanged, generally in

a highly visible location. Other citizens are hanged for rape, performing an abortion, and for being gay, all crimes equally punishable by death in Gilead. This ideograph <the hangings of dissidents> symbolizes, among other things, a return to the tradition of public capital punishment. The last public, state-sponsored hanging took place in the United States in August 1936 and was a major spectacle (“The last hanging,” 2001). Hangings in the U.S. are connected closely with racial violence: “the lesson of lynching was that whites could kill with impunity, particularly in times of political upheaval. Lynching was a tactical centerpiece of the terror of white supremacy, critical to maintaining it in rhetoric and reality” (Ward, 2018, n.p.). Similar is the purpose of public hangings in Gilead: to violently and visibly determine any would-be criminals or dissenters from the regime.

The hangings remind an American viewer of “witch” burnings, which happened most famously in this country in Salem, Massachusetts, during the late 1600s (Adams, 2008; Pavlac, 2009). During the mania, hundreds of people were accused of deviant behavior labeled as witchcraft and 20 – mostly women – were killed (Blumberg, 2007). The victims were, by and large, marginalized people, outcasts, or those who too vigorously criticized the “witch” trial process. Like the hangings in Gilead, the burnings in Salem were highly public, meant to deter other would-be miscreants and deniers from speaking up or acting inappropriately – and threatening those in power. In the end, though, in Salem, unlike in Gilead during the first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, people came to their senses; “the story of the trials has become synonymous with paranoia and injustice” (Blumberg, 2007, n.p.). Gilead’s hangings are a return to a tradition of those Salem days. The way Gilead leaders use hangings reflects the way those in power in Salem used “witch” burnings – as an instrument of fear and control.

These hangings also serve as a reminder to those with an inkling of power that they need to be careful how far they exercise it, lest they end up on the wall themselves. While the Wives have control over the Marthas and the Handmaids, and the Aunts impose their will on the Handmaids, they too can be hanged. Like in Salem, the tables can turn quickly with a simple accusation and the judge can become the judged. This is what makes the ideograph <the hangings of dissidents> especially potent. It exemplifies a system of normative values by which those in Gilead live – the “ideology is transcendent, as much an influence on the belief and behavior of the ruler as on the ruled” (McGee, 1980, p. 5). A belief in the rules of Gilead runs deep among the country’s citizens, and this acceptance allowed the system to begin and, for some time to self-perpetuate, not unlike the patriarchy.

What is particularly interesting, though, is that over time, the Handmaids become numb to the hangings. Early on in the establishment of Gilead, a scene depicts Moira and June walking through the city. The two have escaped the Red Center, after ambushing an Aunt. Moira is wearing her clothes, and she acts like she is escorting June somewhere on official business. It is the first time the two of them have been out of the Red Center since their capture, and they are shocked to see what the world has become. They react with horror when they see nearly 20 bodies hanging from a building in the center of the city. This scene sits in stark contrast with how June reacts to similar displays later in the show. For instance, in one episode, four Handmaids sit in a row on a concrete bench, their backs against a wall. Except, it is no ordinary wall. It is the wall where all the hangings in Gilead take place, in full view of all citizens, as a graphic, violent deterrent against violating the laws of the new society. A sight that was terrifying to June when she initially saw it has since been shockingly commonplace. Now, she sits on a bench with her fellow Handmaids after their shopping and chats with them like friends

gossiping on a park bench. Their nonchalance is astounding to the viewer, who knows what the wall symbolizes. Slowly the camera pans to the left and shows dead bodies being hoisted up the wall. As the second body is lifted, one Handmaid says, “We should go” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The viewer at first thinks she is referring to the horrific display next to her, until she casually adds, “It’s gonna pour” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The conversation ends, and the Handmaids walk home, taking no notice of the bodies that have begun to sway in the wind. The scene is seared into my mind, because it demonstrates how quickly something shocking becomes the norm.

While the hangings are gruesome displays of violence, the Handmaids are exposed to them so much that they become desensitized. This is illustrated especially clearly in a scene where the Handmaids have to scrub blood from the wall to hide evidence of the hangings before an international delegation arrives in Gilead. One of the Handmaids, Janine, says “Kinda looks weird without the dead bodies, doesn’t it? I guess you get used to thinks being one way” (Hauser, et al., 2017, n.p.). Those with some power might fear the hangings but, for the Handmaids who have little control, the repetitive displays of violence lose some of their bite over time. As McGee (1980) explains, “human beings are ‘conditioned,’ not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief (p. 6). Language effectively normalizes ideology. This is certainly true in Gilead, where the extreme violence goes unquestioned over time. The ideograph <the hangings of dissidents> serves as a potent reminder that citizens are no longer in a world where “innocent until proven guilty” exists. Instead, <the hangings of dissidents>, “warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognizable by a community as acceptable and

laudable (McGee, 1980, p. 15). In the old world, hangings were seen as a torturous, outdated form of punishment. However, in Gilead, they are used to assert the power of the rulers and scare potential rebels. As demonstrated in the scenes I described, the more time the Handmaids spend in Gilead, the more they acclimate, seeing the violence as a normal occurrence. The fact that they grow numb to it is one reason the theme of resistance also plays a prominent role in the show; I will explore that theme in depth later.

Most of the examples in the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* of the return to tradition/religion theme are underlined by the idea that a return to tradition/religion is really a strengthening of the patriarchy. For instance, June points out that “they,” meaning the Sons of Jacob, like the Marthas to make bread and do other domestic tasks that have nearly disappeared from everyday life in America today. This return to tradition is another way for the powerful to keep men in control, just like the Handmaid’s uniform and the hangings of dissidents. In theory, when women are concerned with making bread, knitting garments, tending gardening, doing the shopping, and raising the children, they will be too preoccupied to concern themselves with “men’s work” like writing and enacting laws, doling out justice, and engaging in political diplomacy. This is the patriarchy at work. What women were doing in pre-Gilead America – working like June, writing books and organizing politically like Serena Joy – threatened men. Women were taking over space, physically and metaphorically, that the Sons of Jacob thought was rightfully theirs, and the only way to gain back control was to return to a time when women’s chief pursuits were domestic in nature. These activities are far less dangerous to a man’s sense of self-worth.

An illustration of this occurs during a conversation between Serena Joy and her husband, Commander Waterford. Waterford is stressed about an interview an escaped Aunt gave to a

prominent media outlet. The Aunt has essentially smeared Gilead at a time when the leaders are doing their best to make it seem like the country is a bountiful, fertile utopia, not a violent police state. When Waterford tells Serena Joy what happened, she responds with a smart strategy for how to deal with the fallout. It is clear she had a successful professional career previously and is well versed in handling a media crisis. Waterford reacts tersely: “You don’t need to worry about this. I promise.” He adds, condescendingly, “We’ve got good men working on it” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). Serena Joy’s lip trembles as she responds, “Praised be” and then sits silently (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). Waterford could have felt that Serena Joy’s knowledge on the subject surpassed his own – as illustrated in one flashback where she coaches him through a speech – and this undermines his feeling of masculinity. Pre-Gilead, Waterford would have had to acquiesce to Serena Joy’s know-how. In the new society, though, he can simply patronize her and go about the rest of his day, knowing he and his fellow men are firmly in control and unthreatened by women.

One more relevant example on the theme of a return to tradition/religion, in connection with the patriarchy, occurs when Gilead is in its infancy. Fertile women have been rounded up and collected at the “Red Center” where they learn their new roles as Handmaids. The Aunts, led by Aunt Lydia, introduce the women to their position in society – often by extremely violent means. They also attempt to “re-educate” the women – whom they call “girls” – and inoculate them with the brand of pseudo-religion on which Gilead is based. At one point, Aunt Lydia shows the new Handmaids a slideshow and tells them how God created a beautiful world and humans did not treat it right. She projects pictures of pollution and devastation, telling the women that God punished everyone with rampant infertility to teach them the folly of their ways.

Aunt Lydia's narrative is that the founders of Gilead realized what was happening and were wise enough to restore society to its past glory and, in turn, fix the population decline.

Teaching the future Handmaids about the twisted version of the religion that the powerful have sanctioned is important because Gilead operates through the submission of its citizens to its core values. One of those core values is the belief in religion as justification for everything bad that women must endure. In turn, the patriarchy is reinforced and strengthened. After all, it is pointed out that the "ceremony" – rape – that Handmaids are forced to endure with the Commanders and the Wives, is supposedly rooted in a biblical story about Jacob and his wife, Rachel. When Rachel cannot give birth to children for Jacob, she offers her maid, Billah, and says "go in unto her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may have children by her" (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). This story is used as holy justification for raping the Handmaids. In one episode, we learn the plan was conceived by men who believed it would also appeal to the Wives who would not want their husbands having sex with other women. In the "ceremony," though, things are official, justified, and the Wives are complicit in the violence. In fact, they even participate, as the Handmaids lie between the Wives' knees. Because not all the Handmaids are convinced by these religious explanations, though, violence must also be used to keep Gilead functioning. The strength of this sinister method of control is in the combination of the two. It is a carrot and stick approach. If you believe in God, then your carrot is eventual salvation. If not, the stick is a literal cattle prod.

As illustrated particularly through the ideographs <the Handmaid's uniform> and <the hangings of dissidents>, the theme of returning to religion/tradition plays a major role in the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Upon closer inspection, though, Gilead's leaders have not returned to religion. In fact, in episode two, Ofglen and June walk past a beautiful cathedral that

is being demolished. The church has special meaning to June, as it was her father's parish and the place of her daughter's baptism. Ofglen remarks that they did the same to St. Patrick's in New York – "Blew it up and dumped every stone in the Hudson River. They fucking erased it," she says (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The Sons of Jacob have neither reverence nor nostalgia for religion of yore; it undermines their new, carefully curated version of "truth." As June points out, the Aunts often tell the Handmaids "blessed are the meek," but "they always left out the part about inheriting the earth" (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The leaders of Gilead have created a new religion and are eager to demolish any remnants of religious icons and paper over old scripture that clashes with it. They have cherry picked the parts of previous religions that they like and distorted the rest to provide crucial justification for the ultimate goal of Gilead – keeping men in absolute power. The return to tradition/religion in Gilead is, in fact, a return to the time of an ironclad patriarchy.

### **Power Disparity**

In the first episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the audience is immediately initiated to the violence of the new republic of Gilead. June and her husband, Luke, attempt to escape to Canada with their daughter, Hannah, but after their car slides off the road, Luke sends June and Hannah off to try to save themselves. As the episode unfolds, we watch the mother and daughter scramble frantically through the forest before being captured by a group of men dressed in black, toting high-powered guns. June is separated from Hannah, and we next see her at the Red Center, where she joins other future Handmaids as they become "re-educated" in the laws of the new society of Gilead. Here is where the violence ramps up, and the viewer is introduced to another prominent theme in the show, power disparity. As the Aunts teach these women to obey the laws of Gilead, they exercise their power through torturous methods meant to inflict pain and serve as

an example to others. For instance, when the women first arrive, Aunt Lydia lectures them on their new role: “Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a biblical purpose...you girls will serve the leaders of the faithful and their barren wives. You will bear children for them” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Janine snickers and comments under her breath, “The fuck? Welcome to the friggin’ loony bin, right?” (Miller et al., n.p.). Aunt Lydia asks her to stand, and when Janine refuses, she is told “Blessed are the meek, dear,” then she is shocked with a taser and dragged out of the room. With this exchange, June quickly learns what those who have been there awhile already know – to survive, she must obey the Aunts, who exercise their power over the Handmaids with impunity. That message is reinforced to the other Handmaids the same evening, when Janine returns to the group whimpering. For her disobedience, Janine has had an eye removed. Moira tells June, “we’re breeding stock. You don’t need eyes for that” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The Aunts use this form of punishment because it does not affect the Handmaids’ fertility, but quickly teaches them – and the women around them – who is in control in this new world.

The theme of power disparity is evident throughout season one of *The Handmaid’s Tale* evidenced in both of these overt, extreme acts of violence and smaller, more subtle interactions between characters of different statuses. I will focus on three ideographs that illustrate this theme: <the Handmaid’s uniform>, <the hangings of dissidents>, and <the Handmaid’s ear tag>. Each serve as a visual reminder that certain people in the series – women, especially the Handmaids – have little to no power to make their own decisions and enact any change in the society. Together, they make the point that the patriarchy in Gilead is not only thriving, but absolute, and anyone who questions it will be forcefully silenced.

The ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> is a visible marker of the Handmaids status in society. Though the outfits were described in Atwood's book, they have a stronger impact in the visual medium of television. It is impossible for both the viewer and the citizens of Gilead to ignore the Handmaids as they complete their daily errands around town. Multiple times in season one, the show capitalizes on this arresting image by portraying a large group of Handmaids marching down the street, two-by-two.

The Handmaids are not the only ones who wear uniforms in Gilead. In fact, all the women, including the Wives, Marthas, and Aunts, have their own outfits to identify their place on the social ladder. I choose to privilege <the Handmaid's uniform> as the most prominent ideograph of this group, but each of the groups' respective clothing signifies the theme of power disparity. All the women are dressed conservatively – in dresses and skirts, never pants – keeping with Gilead's religious bent, but differences in color, material, and attention to detail, illustrate the women's positions. The Aunts wear “heavy-duty wool in an olive-brown color...to convey that they were still powerful women in Gilead” (Jung, 2017, n.p.). They are not, of course, more powerful than the men, but they do have the most authority over the Handmaids and, to an extent, the Wives as well.

The Wives are dressed in shades of blue, and they have outfits with subtle intricate touches on their necklines, collars, sleeves, and shoulders that indicate their clothing took more time and costs more money. While the Aunts are dressed in boxy garments, the Wives wear more formfitting clothing that harkens to the dress of *The Stepford Wives*, a novel and subsequent movie about robot housewives in the suburbs of Connecticut. Like the Stepford wives, the Wives in *The Handmaid's Tale* are outfitted for leisurely pursuits, not for physical labor or anything beyond light domestic tasks and socialization. Similarly, the Stepford wives “don't get mussed

up – they probably don't sweat, either. They don't have personal interests; they're devoted solely to their husbands, homes and children" ("The Stepford," 2019, n.p.). There is another similarity between the two – the boundaries of their existence are defined by men: "As dull as these women sound, they represent the ideal or 'ultimate' woman, as dreamed up by the Stepford Men's Association" ("The Stepford," 2019, n.p.). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Sons of Jacob created the idea of what role the wives would play in the new society of Gilead.

Next, there are the Marthas. They are the domestic workers who clean the house, cook the meals, and raise the children. They wear earth-colored linen dresses, aprons, and headscarves. Unlike the Handmaids, they are not fertile, which is why they are given this caretaker role. While they have little power in society, they are mostly left alone to tend to the house. Finally, the men in the show are not outfitted in the same intricately designed uniforms as the women. The Commanders wear suits and the rest of the men wear all black. The fact that the women wear uniforms and the men do not is further evidence that a power disparity exists. The women's uniforms help the men keep track of their positions. Because the men do not need to be controlled, they are allowed to dress neutrally and somewhat individually.

The ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> often intersects with <the hangings of dissidents>, duly illustrating how the Handmaids are subject to the authority of Gilead, or else. In one striking scene, a group of Handmaids cloaked in their usual red outfits scrub at the bloodstained wall where the hangings take place. It is their job to erase the evidence of violence. While no bodies are currently hanging, to viewers, the Handmaids, and everyone else in Gilead, the wall has become synonymous with the ideograph <the hangings of dissidents>. As the Handmaids scrub, rivers of blood stream down the wall and over the stone steps, reminding the

women where they stand in society and what will happen to them if they dare try to upend the balance.

In the early days of Gilead, the ideograph <the hangings of dissidents> gains its meaning. After June and Luke are separated, he encounters his own problems and is shot, but manages to narrowly escape his capturers. Luke is initially determined to locate and rescue June. Then, he meets a group of people who have banded together and are journeying to freedom in Canada. Even though the leader of the group tells Luke he will be better positioned to help June from outside Gilead, it takes him a while to warm to that idea. Part of what sways him from staying in Gilead is witnessing bodies hanging in a church. Here, the ideograph <the hangings of dissidents> begins to assert its influence. By hanging bodies in what was previously a sacred space, the power and ruthlessness of Gilead's leaders become obvious. These people – the Sons of Jacobs – are not playing by the rules that used to exist in the United States. They are using any means necessary to gain control and quash anyone who dares challenge them. By then repeatedly hanging people in Gilead, the ideograph builds in impact. It is reinforced for the audience, too, as the Handmaids are constantly shown walking next to bodies hanging on the wall, looking up at them, as the feet of their fellow humans dangle next to their heads. Based on how the wall is depicted in the show, it serves as a specific reminder to the Handmaids. Other characters in Gilead are rarely shown walking past it and never pictured staring up at it. Situating the camera in this way further solidifies a sense of power disparity between the Handmaids and the people in power who have sentenced anyone to death who threatens their chokehold.

<The Handmaid's ear tag> is another important ideograph connected to the theme of power disparity. While it is only shown a few times during season one, what it represents is incredibly powerful and creates a long-lasting impression on the viewer. The ear tag is initially

seen in episode one, as June takes a bath before the “ceremony.” On her left ear an orange tag is visible, similar to what is used on cattle. By employing a device that is usually used with animals on the Handmaids, the leaders of Gilead demonstrate what they think of the women – they are merely “breeding stock,” as Moira expressed earlier (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). At the end of the season, in episode ten, we see in a flashback that June was first tagged with this device, presumably a GPS tracker, soon after arriving to the Red Center. She is brought into a dark room and sits quivering as a loud machine is turned on next to her. She has no idea what is about to happen, until Aunt Lydia pulls out what looks like a high-powered ear-piercing gun and says, “This will be painful, I am sorry to say. But you are so very precious, we wouldn’t want to lose you” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). This is the ultimate display of power disparity for the Handmaids. They can never escape the system because, if they try, they will be tracked and re-captured. As June explains, the revelation that the power imbalance is significant and unchangeable comes early during their indoctrination as Handmaids: “There was a way we looked at each other at the Red Center. For a long time, I couldn’t figure out what it was exactly. That expression in their eyes. In my eyes. Because before, in real life, you didn’t ever see it. Not more than a glimpse. It was never something that could last for days. It could never last for years” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). As Aunt Lydia pierces her ear with the tracker, she adds, “That look was terror. Utter and unutterable” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The ideograph <the Handmaid’s ear tag> visibly depicts the theme of power disparity and constantly reminds the Handmaids, and the viewer, where the authority lies.

There are other, more subtle ways that the power disparity is depicted throughout the show. The Commanders – and men in general – clearly hold the most authority over all women. Then, there are the Aunts who control the Handmaids with a combination of coercive tactics,

including extreme violence and torture. The Handmaids and the Marthas are at the bottom of the ladder with no power. That leaves the Wives in the middle. While the Wives have little real power in society – they cannot vote, make laws, or even read – they are allowed to exercise minimal authority over the Handmaids. Lukács (1971) would argue that this gives the Wives (and the Aunts) a false consciousness. They embrace the system that is oppressing them because they are occluded from seeing anything else. Perhaps the release of aggression they feel when they violently lord over the Handmaids makes them believe they have some control and keeps them in line. The set-up ensures that the women fight against one another rather than questioning those on top. That is precisely how the patriarchy works and, in fact, any hegemonic system. According to Gramsci (1971), those at the core of the hegemonic system hold all, or nearly all, the power. They keep their position by dividing and conquering the subaltern – the oppressed, unprivileged groups below them. To perpetuate the system and remove themselves from the everyday minutia of enacting the rules, the powerful dole out small, insignificant amounts of authority to a section of the subaltern. While, in reality, these select few will never ascend to join the ruling class, the little power they think they have helps them continue to buy into the system and reinforce it. They seek to protect their position and quash those beneath them from rising. Feminists have made a similar argument about the patriarchy – women will never hold the same power as men do, but a small group of elite women are given limited access to make it seem like women, too, are participating in the system. As Harrison et al. (1994) point out, this is strategic: “the use of women spokespeople to articulate patriarchal ideas...insulat[es] those who ought to take public responsibility for them” (p. 29). These women actively work to prevent those beneath them from threatening their position and sense of control, as small as it may be compared to those at the top.

*The Handmaid's Tale* provides an apt example of this hegemonic/patriarchal system at work. The Aunts are given some control and the Wives a little less and, with this sense of authority, they unleash their wrath upon the Handmaids. In fact, the men have to do little enforcement of the rules with the Handmaids, besides in a court setting, because punishments are carried out against women by women. The men keep their hands clean. For instance, upon finding out that June had traveled to a secret club with Commander Waterford, Serena Joy hits her so hard that she slams her head into a doorframe and falls over, bleeding. Commander Waterford is ultimately responsible for this act, as he took June there. But he is more powerful than Serena Joy, and she cannot punish him in any way that would not in turn affect her. She could report the incident to the Eyes, but the consequences would likely be relatively minor, and, in the intervening period, she would suffer as a woman without a husband. So, instead, Serena Joy does exactly what the system was set up to allow – she lashes out physically at June. Another time, Serena Joy bans June to her room for 13 days, exercising a type of mental torture over the Handmaid. June's crime was that her period came late and for a few days the house thought she was pregnant and grew excited about the possibility of a baby. The solitary confinement wears on June as she flashes back and forth between her old life and her new one. She recognizes what is at work here: "my door is unlocked. It doesn't even close all the way. A constant reminder of who's in control" (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). June and the other Handmaids learn to fear the Wives and Aunts because they are the ones who dole out day-to-day punishments.

A strong power disparity exists in Gilead and allows the Commanders to keep their authority. Three ideographs strongly illustrate the theme of power disparity: <the Handmaid's uniform>, <the hangings of dissidents>, and <the Handmaid's ear tag>. These visible symbols show who is in control, who is controlled, and what happens to those who step out of line. The

theme of power disparity is closely connected to the next theme I will explore, oppression of women, in that, to keep the power disparity in place and stay in control, the male leaders must oppress all the women in Gilead.

### **Oppression of Women**

June and her shopping partner walk into a store. There is no name above the threshold. Inside the shop, none of the goods are labeled with words, only pictures. For emphasis, the camera pauses on a shelf of canned goods. The tomato sauce, pickles, and green beans are identified only by images on their jars, and the milk jug is emblazoned with the outline of a cow. All of this is because all women in Gilead are forbidden from reading. When one Handmaid mentions something from the news, the others stare at her so pointedly that she stutters, “I didn’t read it. I promise” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Reading – and keeping up with the news – are men’s work now. There is historical precedent for the idea. According to Gordon (1997), women began demanding opportunities for higher education starting in the 1830s and 1840s. However, they were sharply rebuked by conservatives who thought allowing women to go to university would destroy society by eliminating the clear delineation between the work of men outside the home and the work of women in the home. As Garrett (1977) explains, “in a world in which men make the rules, female sexuality creates a perpetual dilemma. As the vessels of the biological mysteries of menstruation and lactation, as creatures of sexual passion, women are mistrusted, but as mothers, women are the nurturers and preserves of society” (p. 466). Keeping women in traditional caretaking roles is seen by the leaders of Gilead as safe, because it prevents them from dreaming up deviant ideas and potentially gaining power (Tozer, Violas & Senese, 2002). While the patriarchy is certainly alive in the United States today, in Gilead it is stronger, as the leaders seek to both oppress women and return to tradition/religion by banning education. Keeping

women ignorant was historically a way of ensuring women did not threaten the men, and it reemerges in Gilead for the same reason.

The Sons of Jacob engineered a society that keeps men at the center of the government and their households. Here we see illustrated another theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the oppression of women. While there are a multitude of examples that illustrate this theme, two ideographs, <the Handmaid's uniform> and <the Handmaid's ear tag>, represent it most succinctly. These ideographs make the point that the entire system of Gilead is designed to keep women under the thumbs of men. Women, from the Wives to the Handmaids, are supposed to simply acquiesce to this new system. As Aunt Lydia explains to the newly anointed Handmaids, "Girls. I know this must feel very strange. But 'ordinary' is just what you're used to" (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.).

The ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> provides a constant visual example of women's oppression. All of the Handmaids wear the exact same thing – there is no room for individuality or for expressing one's personality. In Gilead, Handmaids are not supposed to have personalities. After all, their sole lot in life is to bear children and ensure the continuation of society. The uniforms, besides emphasizing the power disparity between the Handmaids and others, also serve to dehumanize the Handmaids. The "wings" they wear are really blinders, like we might see on a racehorse. Trainers place these on their horses to help them avoid distractions and remain focused on the path in front of them because racehorses have one job – to win the race. So, too, are the Handmaids supposed to pour themselves into their sole pursuit, which is to become pregnant and deliver a healthy baby for a Commander and a Wife. After that, they are sent to the next house to attempt to repeat the whole ordeal again with a new family. The Handmaids' uniforms reinforce their role in society as breeding stock – chattel to be used and

traded. The red, draping outfits paint the picture that they are vessels for new life and the drab top and voluminous skirt remove any hint of sexuality from the endeavor. In one particularly striking visual, four Handmaids are pictured at the grocery store, two on either side of large display of eggs. The camera zooms out and shows June and her shopping partner staring at their peers, as their red cloaks stand stark contrast with the white eggs in front of them. It is an obvious metaphor for the women's fertility, which is the only thing they are valued for in Gilead.

As an ideograph, <the Handmaid's uniform> is an inescapable visual. To the viewer of the show, repeatedly seeing the trials the Handmaids endure means the uniform becomes inextricably tied to the oppression of women. For those in Gilead, the ideology of the uniform leads citizens into believing it is acceptable and even righteous to treat the Handmaids as less than human. The uniform also has a powerful effect on the Handmaids, who begin to see themselves as unworthy of a different life. Aunt Lydia was right when she earlier told the women in the Red Center that they would eventually see the society of Gilead as ordinary. For example, after Emily is taken away for her illicit affair with a Martha, June finds herself with a new shopping partner. This Handmaid has no desire to rebel against the system and is livid when June absconds with another Handmaid at the grocery store to talk. She tells June, "I'm not going to let you mess this up for me...I used to get fucked behind a dumpster just so I could buy a sixth of Oxy and a Happy Meal. I'm clean now. I've got a safe place to sleep every night and I have people who are nice to me...And I want to keep it that way" (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). June's companion is happy with her place in the new system, even if it is a place of oppression, and she refuses to let June ruin it for her.

The ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> could be partly responsible for the belief of June's companion. McGee (1980) explains ideographs can "influence (if not determine) the

shape and texture of each individual's 'reality'" (pg. 5). For June's partner, the uniform represents her new life. Although she is treated like less than a human in Gilead, she has become convinced her previous life was worse. She is willing to sacrifice the freedom of the old world – which was essentially inaccessible to her – for the constraints of the new one. In Gilead she is at least given a few basics, like a place to sleep and food to eat, that she used to lack. This is a powerful commentary on the nature of privilege in today's world and one reason why certain groups of people might be more amenable to the new way of life in Gilead. According to McGee (1980), "social control in its essence is control over consciousness...Human beings are 'conditioned,' not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief" (p. 5-6). People like June's companion did not have it easy in the United States' capitalist culture – they became "conditioned" to a world that they felt gave them to agency. They had no power then, so the situation in Gilead was not as dramatic of a change to June's shopping partner as it was to June or Moira. In the consciousness of June's companion, Gilead is a society that makes sense and has more comforts to offer than her old life.

Like June's companion, at some point all the women in Gilead become at least somewhat accustomed to their lack of agency. For instance, in their first foray outside the Red Center, Moira and June notice that the subway signs are being removed and they comment on it. Later on, though, women never discuss the lack of text anywhere in the world. This linguistic oppression is the new normal. It becomes commonplace even for Serena Joy, who once advocated for women's return to domestic roles and even wrote a book about it called *A Woman's Place*. Serena Joy receives what she hoped for in Gilead, perhaps beyond her wildest dreams, because the new rules of Gilead make it illegal for women to read and write. During a

purge at the start of Gilead, we see that Serena Joy's book ends up stacked on a trash bin along with a pair of high heels. In the old world, Serena Joy helped engineer Gilead. Now she has traded her "oppressive" high heels for a different level of oppression altogether. Serena Joy and June's shopping partner illustrate that some women's life experiences and beliefs have made them more accepting of the regime change than others. Part of that acceptance and compliance is related to the rung of the social ladder on which each woman lands. Unlike June's companion, the Wives will never endure the same trials as the Handmaids. Their fate in Gilead is undoubtedly still oppressive, but they are not raped each month in a "ceremony" and do not endure having their children ripped from their arms or having their names erased.

The new naming system for the Handmaids is a particularly apt example of the oppression of women. With the addition of uniforms comes the removal of given names. The Handmaids' names are replaced with patronymics derived from the first name of the Commander they "serve." For instance, Commander Waterford is Fred. When June is assigned to his house, she becomes Offred – literally "of Fred." June says at the start of the show – before we know her as June – "My name is Offred. I had another name, but it's forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now" (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The Handmaids become property of their commanders. Though, in the lore of Gilead, the removal of the women's names is also spun to make it sound more palatable. Waterford tells a foreign delegacy that the Handmaids' new names are a "symbol of their sacred position" (Hauser, et al., 2017, n.p.). Over time and following their violent "re-education" at the Red Center, even the Handmaids conform to this new normal as evidenced through their vocabulary. When June is at the grocery store one day and does not have a token to buy oranges, a Handmaid tells her "tell them you're Commander

Waterford's. He's really high up." June *is* Commander Waterford's in the new world of Gilead. She belongs to him.

The sense that Handmaids are property to be owned and traded is further demonstrated by their shifting identities. Not only do the Handmaids have their old names stripped from them in Gilead, they also cannot ever become too attached to the new ones they are assigned. For example, a short time after giving birth for Commander Warren, Janine is forced to participate in a ceremony where she gives her child to Warren and his wife. Janine's role at that house is now complete but, evidenced by her grip on the baby, she is not ready to part with her child. The scene is hard to watch – even Aunt Lydia appears stricken by the involuntary adoption. Next, Janine is marched out of the house as mournful music plays and is taken to her new “assignment” with Commander Daniel Monroe. She is no longer Ofwarren; Aunt Lydia tells her, “You are Ofdaniel now” (Tuchman et al., 2017, n.p.). The changing of hands Janine endures has obvious parallels to slavery, though in this case it is polished with a thin sheen of civility to make it look like it is a choice. As Janine leaves Commander Warren's house, she is treated to pomp and circumstance as she walks a tunnel of Handmaids who have gathered for her departure. Now in episode nine, however, the audience has seen enough of the show to know that Janine's free will plays no part here. If Janine refused to go, she would certainly be compelled through violent means. Janine has no freedom and cannot choose who she “works” for, or if she works. Her job as a Handmaid is not consensual. Instead, she is compelled by the laws of Gilead – made by men – that she bears a child for Warren and his wife and then moves to another family to do the same for them.

Along with their patronymics, the ideograph <the Handmaid's ear tag> is another example of how the Handmaids are seen as property. These trackers designate them as a valuable

commodity rather than a human being. When the viewer first sees the ear tag on June as she soaks in the tub, it comes as a shock. This type of device is only ever seen on animals, never on humans. According to McGee (1980), “‘ideographs’...signify and ‘contain’ a unique ideological commitment: further, they presumptuously suggest that each member of community will see as a gestalt every complex nuance in them” (p. 7). While <the Handmaid’s ear tag> is seen only a handful of times in the first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is still incredibly important as a visual ideograph that represents the ideology of private property and its control. In particular, <the Handmaid’s ear tag> underscores the extreme oppression of women in Gilead. Because it is completely unexpected on a human, it therefore serves a chilling symbol. <The Handmaid’s ear tag> demonstrates that Handmaids are treated like cattle – their use value comes from their ability to produce offspring. When they can do that, they are prized and passed between families like award-winning livestock. Similar to livestock, these women are worth something only for a limited amount of time. When they stop bearing children, they have no other purpose in society. They are then sent to “the Colonies” to labor physically until their bodies collapse. Until that time comes, the ear tag serves as an important way to track the Handmaids, Gilead’s most valuable commodity.

The constant surveillance provided by the Handmaid’s ear tag is one way that the leaders of Gilead enforce the rules, thereby keeping women oppressed and themselves in power. The control permitted by constant surveillance, as we know from Foucault (1977), provides an intimate form of power to the state over the governed. This notion of disciplinary power is explicit in Gilead by the use of <the Handmaid’s ear tag>. There are other more subtle tactics used to monitor the citizens as well – chief among them as a tool of oppression is the sowing of distrust among women. “They do that really well – make us distrust each other,” Emily says

(Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). This tactic is employed by requiring the Handmaids to travel in pairs. June explains, “We go everywhere in twos. It’s supposed to be for our protection. For companionship. That’s bullshit. There are no friends here. Can’t be. The truth is we’re watching each other. She’s my spy” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.).

As Handmaids, if their partner does something wrong, they are expected to report it. For instance, when Emily is discovered to have been in a relationship with a Martha, a Guardian and Aunt Lydia come to the Waterford’s house to question June. The Guardian tells June, “Offred, if you do your best to answer these questions, this’ll all be really painless...That’s what we all want” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). When he asks June what she and Emily would discuss on their daily walks to the grocery store, June appears terrified. The two of them conversed about Mayday, the resistance movement in Gilead. Plus, Nick, the Waterford’s driver, warned June to be careful with Emily. June thinks she is about to be taken away – and tortured – for her insubordination. But, then, the line of questioning changes and Offred realizes the Guardian is asking her about Emily’s sexuality. June admits she knew Emily was “gay,” which earns her a shock from Aunt Lydia because “that word is not to be used” (Miller et al., n.p.). Aunt Lydia calls Emily “a gender traitor,” and both she and the Guardian rebuke her for not reporting the conversation to Mrs. Waterford (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The lesson that Aunt Lydia and the Guardian aim to teach is that Handmaids are to be the eyes and ears of Gilead for those in power and, if they do not report on the misdeeds of their peers, they will suffer violent consequences.

This pairing of women and the punishments they receive for not revealing each other’s secrets reminds me of the stories I heard people tell about communist Romania when I was living there. I was told that people could not trust their neighbors because it was entirely possible, and very common, that their neighbors would report them to the secret police. Sometimes the reports

were false, but the facts mattered little. The important part was that those in charge had implemented a system that made it very hard for anyone to rebel. It was nearly impossible – and incredibly risky – to organize acts of resistance. In Gilead, the same thing is true. The Sons of Jacob created a surveillance system that uses instruments of technology, like ear tags for the Handmaids, but also more basic means of control, like terrorizing women into reporting on one another to avoid cruel punishments. As such, Gilead governs through disciplinary power and force, much like communist Romania (Foucault, 1977).

Besides pairing the women up and threatening them with violence if they fail to report on their partners, the organization of social classes in society also gives the leaders of Gilead a greater ability to oppress women. Each group of women – the Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, and Aunts – hold very different roles in society and do not socialize with one another. As I described in the section on the theme of power disparity, there is little authority allotted to women in Gilead, and those who have just a sliver of power want to keep it. No one is willing to share and risk giving up an ounce of control. One day at the grocery store, June’s shopping partner Emily tells her that Mrs. Waterford, “your Mistress,” likes oranges. Another adds, “make sure she knows you got them. Don’t let a Martha take the credit” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The sense of competition is immense between women from the different statuses. Because these women see each other as competition, they are preoccupied by establishing their place with one another and unable to direct their attention to dismantling the larger system that keeps them down. This is an example of divide and conquer, used by colonial powers, like Britain, to quash potential rebellions (Zompetti, 2012). Just as the Handmaids’ “wings” act as blinders, so does the infighting among women act as a way to keep them focused on only what is in front of them and not what is at work in the bigger scheme of things. Besides, even if the women stopped trying to

gain control of one another, the opportunity to organize any type of resistance rarely presents itself. Group gatherings are rare and highly policed, and everyone assumes their daily tasks and conversations are subject to scrutiny both by the security apparatus as well as their peers.

Through these examples, including the ideographs of <the Handmaid's uniform> and <the Handmaid's ear tag>, the theme of the oppression of women in Gilead is highly apparent. The Sons of Jacob established a strong system in which various mechanisms keep women in their place. From carefully assigned societal statuses and on-the-ground, peer-to-peer spy systems to dehumanizing uniforms and high-tech tracking devices, men rule the society with iron fists. Still, the system it is not airtight. What the men have failed to recognize in envisioning Gilead is that their extreme oppression of women eventually becomes unbearable. Some women, like Emily, Moira, and June, realize their lives are so miserable that they are willing to risk death to resist the power disparity and overcome their oppressors. As the adage says, the more they tighten their fists, the easier it is to slip through the cracks.

### **Resistance**

In the second episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, June and Emily are walking down the street when a black van suddenly screeches to a halt just in front of them. Two men dressed in black burst through the rear doors. June, a look of pure terror on her face, freezes. Emily was just talking about how the leaders of Gilead tore down St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and June asked Emily how she knew that and how she knew there is an Eye in the Waterford's house. For a split second, June thinks the men are coming for the two of them. After all, the Handmaids heard the Eyes and Guardians are always monitoring them. At the last moment, though, the Eyes march toward a man carrying a briefcase. They snatch him from the sidewalk and hustle him into the back of the van. As quickly as it began, the abduction ends. When the women begin walking

again, Emily comforts June. She says, “it’s ok to be relieved it wasn’t you” (Miller et al., n.p.). Then she pauses before adding, “there’s a way to help them. You can join us” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Emily goes on to describe a secret spy network. June, still in shock, says she is “not that kind of person,” to which Emily responds, “no one is until they have to be” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Still looking traumatized, June listens as Emily tells her the group wants to know more about Commander Waterford, because he is one of the leaders of Gilead. After Emily leaves, June’s face registers shock. She thinks to herself, “There is an ‘us’? It seems imagined, like secrets in the fifth grade...Now, there has to be an ‘us’ because, now, there is a ‘them’” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). The camera pulls back to show June caught in a sudden downpour as sunlight streams through the clouds behind her. This conversation with Emily leads to a moment of revelation for June. While at the Red Center, June and Moira schemed about an escape, but, in the end, only Moira managed to flee. Since that time, June has more or less settled into her role as a Handmaid and given up any thought of liberation. Now, though, a new possibility opens in June’s mind. Although she told Emily that she is not the type of person to participate in a spy network, the image of June standing in the rain, with the sun peeking out from the clouds behind her, illustrates that there is some hope – even in a storm, there can be a ray of light.

The scene described above illustrates the final, predominant theme I discovered in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: resistance. The theme of resistance underpins the show, starting with the moment above, when June first awakens to the idea of the Mayday movement. While June does not know the resistance is called Mayday yet, she begins to understand that not everyone has acquiesced to their fate – some are fighting. Three ideographs represent the theme of resistance: <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*>, <the Mayday movement>, and <the Handmaid’s uniform>. The ideograph <the Handmaid’s uniform> is especially important, because it is the

only ideograph that changes from a positive to a negative connotation over time, in certain contexts. <The Handmaid's uniform> represents the themes of a return to tradition/religion, power disparity, and the oppression of women, but I will demonstrate that it is also has a strong connection to the idea of resistance, making it incredibly powerful and able to transcend the television screen to hold meaning for political activists. Before exploring <the Handmaid's uniform> as a transformational ideograph, though, I will first look at other two ideographs, ones that fit solely in the theme of resistance.

Episode four begins with a flashback to happier days. June and her husband are at a carnival with their daughter. They ride the merry-go-round and wonder at the bright lights. The evening is filled with laughter and joy. Suddenly, we return to the present day, and see June sitting on the floor in her undergarments, looking distressed. She tells the audience that she cannot spend too much time in her memories, or she will become stuck there. Still, these moments keep her sane – they give her something happy to remember. June is banished to her room for thirteen days and counting, because she failed to become pregnant. It is clear that June's mental state is deteriorating. She kneels on the floor, staring at cracks of sunshine through the blinds and says that she has been exploring the room during her captivity. The scene harkens to Charlotte Perkin Gilman's (1892) short story "The Yellow Wall-paper," in which a woman is sequestered to her room as treatment for her supposed hysteria. This therapy, of course, only serves to push the woman into greater despair. She becomes convinced that there is another woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper, and so, she circles the room each day, trying to free this prisoner by stripping the wallpaper as she repeatedly rubs her shoulder against the wall. Though June is held in her room for punishment and the woman in Gilman's (1892) story for recovery, the isolation has similar effects. One thing saves June from the madness of the woman

in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” The camera shoots from above, as we see June lying in the fetal position on the floor of her closet. June appears to be feeling desperation, until a close-up of her hand appears, tracing a phrase that has been carved into the wooden panel on the wall. By scouring every nook and cranny in the room, June discovers something that gives her hope – the phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*” Although she does not know what it means yet, the phrase makes June feel less alone. She says, “It’s Latin, I think. Someone wrote it. In here, where no one would ever see it. Was it Offred? The one who was here before? It’s a message, for me” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). Regardless of the author, the note provides June something with which to cling.

The message, plus remembering how her friend Moira escaped from the Red Center, gives June the courage to avoid the same fate as the woman in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” It compels June to take matters into her own hands – to make a choice and take action rather than waiting for something to happen. She thinks, “Moira, you wouldn’t stand for this shit. You wouldn’t let them keep you in this room for two weeks. You’d find a way out” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). With that thought, June drags herself from the closet and marches downstairs to Commander Waterford’s study. The two have secretly been playing Scrabble with each other for weeks – at his request – and now June seeks his company on her own, to end her isolation and to learn something, too. It is there she discovers what the phrase in her closet means. The same words are written in Waterford’s book of Latin grammar. Waterford tells her that it is a joke that does not really translate, but roughly means, “don’t let the bastards grind you down” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). During this exchange, Waterford tells June that the previous Offred – the one who wrote the phrase – hung herself, because she could not cope with her life as a Handmaid.

With this new knowledge, June attempts a small act of resistance. She pretends to grovel, and she tells Waterford that her banishment is causing her to lose hope, and that she does not want to meet a similar fate as the last Handmaid. Desperate to avoid another scandal, Waterford apparently ends the isolation, owing to the fact that, at the end of the episode, June has her limited “freedom” again. Or, at least, she is free enough to experience the outdoors during her daily shopping. Upbeat music plays as June joins her shopping partner and remarks, “there was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She’s dead. She’s alive. She is me. We are Handmaids. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, bitches” (Gerstein et al., 2017, n.p.). June has drawn inspiration from the message carved into her closet; it gives her a shove to keep her from falling into a deep depression and encourages her to seek an active way to resist.

In the episode where June discovers the Latin phrase, the two final scenes speak to June’s growing recognition of Handmaids’ solidarity as a powerful force of resistance. During June’s final monologue, the Handmaids all meet in the middle of the street and walk in formation, like a battalion or a team in a parade. The Handmaids represent a strong force when they gather together. The second scene of solidarity is shown in a flashback. After June was tortured at the Red Center, her fellow Handmaids gathered around her and offered her the only things they could – small pieces of food from their meals. Johnson (2004), remarks, “When women cease to believe the patriarchy is very strong, when we stop being afraid of it, when we stop believing that we must do everything through and in relation to men and their system...then the patriarchy is over. The instant enough of us detach from patriarchy and stop facilitating it, that is the instant tyranny will cease” (p. 284-285). <*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*>acts an ideograph that exemplifies the idea of a resistance movement. Here, halfway through the first season of the show, hope flourishes. June is no longer afraid of the patriarchy. She is still cautious, of course,

but knowing that someone before her cared enough to send a message encourages June to persist. As triumphant music plays, it is impossible to watch the Handmaids march down the street and not imagine that, through their sisterhood, a brighter future is coming.

The ideograph *<nolite te bastardes carborundorum>* plays such a pivotal role in June's awakening to the idea of the resistance movement that it eventually inspires June to pass on her sense of hope to the next Handmaid at the Waterford's. Although the Waterford's Handmaid hung herself, she left something behind – encouragement for June not to let her state of despair overtake her. The simple phrase compels June to connect with the resistance movement, which then gives her purpose in life and the will to live. The phrase helps June persevere through her darkest moments, and later the idea comes full circle when June carves “you are not alone” into the closet (Snyder, et al., 2017, n.p.). Through this deed, June demonstrates that she has found a sense of motivation through the resistance movement. She both means to send a message to the next Waterford Handmaid and to remind herself not to quit, even when she feels alone. June says, “If this is a story I'm telling, I must be telling it to someone. There's always someone, even when there is no one” (Snyder, et al., 2017, n.p.). Though June is isolated – the resistance movement is underground and must stay secretive – her will to live is strengthened by the feeling that she is contributing to the greater good. June refuses to act like the ballet dancer in the music box that Serena Joy just gave her: “A girl trapped in a box. She only dances when someone else opens the lid, when someone else winds her up” (Snyder, et al., 2017, n.p.). With the carving of her own message, June commits to the resistance. Using the key from the music box to carve “you are not alone” symbolizes June's refusal to be submissive. She will not wait until someone gives her permission to dance, like the girl in the box. She will take control of the key herself and use it to decide for herself which moves to make and when to make them. She now has valuable

work to do; she must inform others of the horrors of Gilead as a means to overthrow the society. Even June's body language illustrates the change. When she first discovered the phrase <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*>, the audience watched June from above while she lay helplessly on the floor. After she inscribes her own message, she sits up in the closet, defiantly and triumphantly, and the audience sees June at eye level. June's mindset has shifted from despair to determination, as illustrated by the changing angle of the camera.

While the phrase <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*> jumpstarts June's sense of hope and encourages her to undertake small acts of resistance, her awareness of the Mayday movement ultimately keeps her from succumbing to despair about her position in Gilead and spurs her to make her actions larger and more defiant. June is initially introduced to the term "Mayday" in episode five. Emily previously told her there was a network of people resisting the leaders of Gilead, but now she learns what the movement is called. In this episode, Emily returns as Ofstevens, having recently witnessed her lover hung and having undergone genital mutilation surgery. June asks for more information about the Waterford's driver Nick, and Emily tells her that, "after what happened, I'm too dangerous to be a part of it...Mayday" (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). Suddenly, for June, the resistance has a name, which gives it shape in her mind and strengthens her resolve. <The Mayday movement> is an important ideograph in *The Handmaid's Tale* because it demonstrates the theme of resistance in Gilead, and knowing it exists keeps June – and in turn, the viewer, – from losing hope. The show is difficult to watch, with its violent torture scenes and the way it turns rape into a "ceremony." The ideograph <the Mayday movement>, though, provides a sense of optimism around which people can coalesce. June and the viewer begin to believe that, though the Sons of Jacob rule with an iron fist, they are, perhaps, not infallible.

Unlike the theme of resistance, the other themes I discovered in *The Handmaid's Tale* – return to tradition/religion, power disparity, oppression of women – are, for women, associated with a loss of autonomy. Resistance is the first one that imbues female viewers and the Handmaids with the feeling of choice and action. The Mayday movement is quiet; it exists underground and in whispers between Handmaids, who drop the words “May day” into a sentence, as code to determine if someone else is aware of the secret society. No one could take a picture of <the Mayday movement>, yet, that is precisely why it functions as such a powerful ideograph. As McGee (1980) explains, “the important fact about ideographs is that they exist in real discourse, functioning clearly and evidently as agents of political consciousness. They are not invented by observers; they come to be as a part of the real lives of the people whose motives they articulate” (p. 7). For those who know about Mayday, like June and Ofglen, the term is loaded with meaning – it represents their future salvation from the horrors of Gilead and compels them to action. They do not have to see a physical manifestation of the larger group. Instead, the occasional glimpses they witness make the movement real in their own lives.

For instance, it becomes clear that <the Mayday movement> is seared into June’s political consciousness through the increasing number of resistant choices she makes after learning the network’s name. The stakes are higher with June’s newfound knowledge – no longer is she surviving just for her daughter; she is resisting to bring freedom to the Handmaids in Gilead with whom she has formed a bond. When, during a “ceremony,” Commander Waterford provocatively grabs her leg, June confronts him. She cannot have Serena Joy discover the two have been seeing each other, because it could interfere with her ability to contribute to Mayday. No longer is June timid; she scolds Waterford, speaking in a harsh tone that she has never used with him. “Don’t you ever do that again,” she says (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). June’s

statement and her tone do not sound like someone subservient. She appears to be recognizing and testing her power. Shockingly, Waterford apologizes. June is emboldened, and, from there, the acts of resistance multiply.

Next, June shakily asks Nick if he is an Eye. Each one of these confrontations demands energy from June – she is not used to questioning anything or anyone anymore. Still, she does it anyway, and she gains momentum and confidence through each encounter. A few scenes later, Emily and June meet again and talk briefly about Mayday. The two exchange real names for the first time – another act of resistance that strengthens their bond. Although Emily was downtrodden about her fate, the spark of connection with June revitalizes her. Like June deciding to take control of the proverbial key for her own music box, Emily has her own moment of revelation that she is not yet ready to go quietly. Suddenly empowered, she jumps into a car that a Guardian just exited, slams the door shut and accelerates into a group of men, mowing them down. This is a crucial moment of change. The Handmaids at the market who bear witness to the event smile and laugh, initially, pleased that one of their own is doing something so brave. Their happiness turns to shock when they realize that Emily will be severely punished; but, regardless, Emily’s power grab has revealed a crack in the façade of Gilead for these women. She demonstrates that there is still free will, for those unafraid of facing harsh consequences.

In fact, immediately after Emily’s escapade, June demonstrates that the act has a ripple effect on her. Upon returning home, June finds Serena Joy painting and approaches her with confidence, rather than her usual trepidation. As Serena Joy lectures June on how, “someone women can’t handle the requirements of their position. They can’t do what needs to be done,” June stares at a pair of sharp garden shears on the table behind Serena Joy (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). We see in June’s face that she considers stabbing Serena Joy. June recognizes that

not everything has been taken from her in Gilead – she still has some choices to make. The moment at the market, plus all June recently learned about Mayday, has altered her. She later reflects on Emily, saying: “They didn’t get everything. There was something inside her that they couldn’t take away. She looked invincible” (Fortenberry et al., 2017, n.p.). June finds inspiration from her fellow Handmaid’s act of resistance, and it is clear to the viewer that more subversion is coming.

The best illustration of the resistant power of the Mayday movement is when June, with Moira’s assistance, attempts to help the network smuggle a package of letters out of Gilead. June, at first, thinks she is carrying a bomb, but she soon learns that she is carrying something just as dangerous to the *status quo*. In the package are notes of hope from people trapped in Gilead. The letters are addressed to the people’s families, letting them know they are still alive and have not given up hope. Herein is the power of the Mayday movement. It seeks to overthrow Gilead by countering the hate it created. Instead, Mayday exists by harnessing the power of love and solidarity among humans. June learns that there are people searching for their families, and she realizes the cacophony of voices has the potential to cause change. Not everyone is mindlessly going through life in Gilead. Similar to June, many people – hundreds, judging by the letters – are secretly engaging in tiny acts of resistance. June and the audience understand that these small acts build up over time. After all, a thousand cracks in the armor of Gilead can weaken it so gravely that it shatters.

The ideograph that most exemplifies this change in outlook during the course of season one is <the Handmaid’s uniform>. It is the only ideograph that switches from a symbol connected with terror and submission to one imbued with hope. The evolution happens slowly and subtly. At some point, the viewers witness the meaning of the uniform shift, as the

Handmaids begin to crack jokes about their required outfits. For instance, before a trade delegation from Mexico visits the Waterford's, Serena Joy scrutinizes June's appearance, telling her, "You're fine" (Hauser, et al., 2017, n.p.). June sarcastically retorts, "red's my color" (Hauser, et al., 2017, n.p.). Minutes later, Nick tells June that she looks pretty, and she smiles and flirts back: "I wore it just for you" (Hauser, et al., 2017, n.p.). By finding humor in her clothing – something that she cannot control – June removes some of her uniform's power as a dehumanizing garment. Yes, she is required to wear it, but it does not mean she cannot quietly point out its absurdity, in turn disarming it as an instrument of oppression.

<The Handmaid's uniform> is especially important because it is the main ideograph that has transcended the television screen to be used by women in real-life protest movements. Its power as a symbol comes from its transformation and reclamation. According to McGee (1980), "sometimes an alien force frontally assaults the structure" of an ideograph; "such instances have the potential to change the structure of ideographs and hence the 'present' ideology—in this sense, an ideology is dynamic and a *force*, always resilient, always keeping itself in some consonance and unity, but not always the *same* consonance and unity" (p. 13-14). <The Handmaid's uniform> undergoes this change over the course of season one. While it begins as a way to dehumanize and control the Handmaids, the women eventually appropriate the uniform as a symbol for their sisterhood. June explains the transition, as she carries the package of smuggled letters:

There was a way we looked at each other at the Red Center. For a long time, I couldn't figure out what it was exactly. That expression in their eyes. In my eyes. Because before, in real life, you didn't ever see it. Not more than a glimpse. It was never something that could last for days. It could never last for years. That look was terror. Utter and

unutterable. It tastes like gun metal... We don't look at each other that way anymore. It's their own fault. They should have never given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army" (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.)

June points out that the Handmaids take their assigned clothing and begin to use it as a sign of their solidarity. While the women have endured countless horrors since the beginning of Gilead, they have experienced them together. They understand each other's pain and suffering, because they have faced the same thing. No longer is <the Handmaid's uniform> a mark of shame – it is a symbol of pride and demonstrates that the women wearing it have, and will continue to, persevere.

In the final episode of the first season, the Handmaids bring June's army to life when they collectively engage in their largest act of peaceful resistance yet. They are brought to a field where they are supposed to stone Janine to death, because she endangered her baby. Aunt Lydia tells them that the life of a child is sacred, and now, Janine has to pay for her actions. Although the audience expects to see another grim scene of brutality, something else happens. Ignoring Aunt Lydia's demands, the Handmaids stand there, holding rocks in their hands. No one casts the initial stone. Surprisingly, June's shopping partner, Ofglen – the one who previously told June she likes her new life in Gilead – is the first to tell Aunt Lydia that they cannot participate. She is, of course, brutally rebuffed by a Guardian and dragged out of the field for her disobedience. Then, June steps forward, extends her hand, and drops the rock on the ground as she says, "I'm sorry, Aunt Lydia" (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Empowered by Ofglen and June, the other Handmaids all step forward, in turn, and drop their stones. This defiant act marks a significant turning point for the Handmaids, who begin to understand, as June already has, that they do have a choice – especially if they act together. Aunt Lydia admonishes the women but June smiles.

She knows what has just occurred. After the Handmaids refuse to stone one of their own, it becomes clear that the oppression the women have been subject to in Gilead drew them closer together. They will not kill their sisters-in-arms – the entire society mistreats them enough as it is; they do not have to contribute and further the violence. The trials and tribulations the Handmaids faced have made them an army, just as June imagined. While Gilead’s cruel tactics created order for a while, the abuse did something unexpected, too. It fomented a rebellion.

The idea that a change is afoot is driven home in the scene immediately following the Handmaids’ refusal to stone Janine. The women slowly file down the street while Nina Simone’s (1965) “Feeling Good” plays. The women march in step as Simone croons, “it’s a new dawn, new day, it’s a new life for me, and I’m feeling good” (Newley & Bricusse, 1965, track 7). The song reinforces the idea that June, and the Handmaids, have awakened. The audience has watched a bloody season of television; yet, at the end, there is a glimmer of hope that things in Gilead might change. As the episode concludes, June is taken away in a van. She thinks, “whether this is my end or a new beginning, I have no way of knowing. I have given myself over into the hands of strangers. I have no choice. It can’t be help. And so, I step up, into the darkness within. Or else the light” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). This time, “American Girl” by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (1976) plays. While it is unclear where June is going and why, it is obvious that things will never be the same. June and her fellow Handmaids have exposed a fatal flaw in Gilead – the leaders have discounted the women as mere breeding stock and are not prepared to deal the power that comes from their collective resistance. Though Gilead’s torturous tactics have left Handmaids without eyes and appendages, they have failed to extinguish the women’s spirits.

If the key tenet of feminisms is the working toward the goal of overturning the patriarchy, June and her peers in Mayday are certainly feminists. Gilead is, after all, a patriarchal utopia for the Sons of Jacob, who created a society that returns to tradition/religion by creating an abject power disparity through the oppression of women. At the end of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see that Gilead is not invincible – a force of resistance has been working beneath the surface and is increasingly recruiting new members to the cause. By studying the ideographs in the show, I explored both how the leaders gained their power and why it started to slip through their fingers. Ideographs like <the Handmaid's uniform>, <the Handmaid's ear tag>, and <the hangings of dissidents> gave visual meaning to the strength of the state. Yet, over time, <the Handmaid's uniform> changed from serving as an instrument of control for leadership to acting as a marker of solidarity for the Handmaids. Ideographs like <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*> and <the Mayday movement> emerged, bringing hope to June and the audience. Against the odds for such a dark, violent show, the ending of season one seems optimistic. It is no wonder that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cultural icon and the Handmaid's uniforms have become a symbol of the real-life resistance movement.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Resistance is a buzzword in the era of Trump's presidency, but what does it really mean? As McGee (1980) says, "no one has ever seen an 'equality' strutting up the driveway, so if 'equality' exists at all, it has meaning through its specific applications. In other words, we establish a meaning for 'equality' by using the word as a description of a certain phenomenon" (p. 10). *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a memorable visual to encapsulate "resistance," which is why the show – along with its themes and ideographs – matters in today's political environment. Synecdoche is at work here, with images from the show, like the Handmaid's uniform, standing in to represent the larger message of what happens when the patriarchy goes unchecked. For the women watching, the program is not mindless entertainment. It is a warning sign of what our society could become if we return to tradition and religion in a way that fortifies the patriarchy. The show embodies the darkest fears of many women who imagine what can result from a Trump presidency that makes America great again for some men while leaving behind most women. Remarkably, though, *The Handmaid's Tale* also offers a sense of hope. By exploring the themes in the show and the most powerful ideographs related to gender, I explored that paradox. On one hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a worst-case scenario – life in Gilead is the patriarchy taken to the extreme, a world where women are stripped of choice and some are treated like prized cattle. Yet, at the end of the first season, despite all the violence and terror that plays out, there is still optimism. There is a sense that a wind of change is coming. When the audience sees the Handmaids – the least privileged group in society – engage in resistance, the impact of collective strength is on display. Through their quiet bravery, the Handmaids simultaneously save the life of one of their peers and provide an important lesson about what it means to resist. During a political and historical moment when women are constantly fighting for

their rights, that message – and the ensuing feeling of hopefulness – resonates. *The Handmaid's Tale* is certainly a dark story. But, as we see quite literally when June first learns the name of resistance movement, a ray of light can shine through even a downpour.

By exploring four main themes in season one of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and five corresponding ideographs, I discovered why the show makes such a strong impact on its audience, so much so that they appropriate its costumes for real-life political activism. The themes I unpacked were a return to tradition/religion, power disparity, the oppression of women, and the resistance. These motifs represent the evolution of the first season of the show and the characters in it. When the audience initially learns about Gilead, the return to tradition/religion becomes apparent and, soon after, so do the power disparity and extreme oppression of women. The theme of resistance is more subtle but, over the course of the ten episodes, it becomes central to the story. In each of the themes, I found nuance. For instance, while the society of Gilead appears to be a return to tradition/religion, closer analysis reveals that the founders have, in fact, corrupted traditional religious beliefs, choosing only the parts that allow them to ascend to and retain power. Likewise, the themes of power disparity and oppression of women are not black and white. There are many layers of power relations within Gilead and, while oppression of women certainly originates from the male leaders, it is also doled out by women who hold tightly to any inconsequential amount of status or control they are given. Finally, the theme of resistance is especially fraught with meaning because it seems unlikely in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. Yet, resistance manages to exist and even gives those who participate a sense that the pendulum might shift in the future.

In my analysis of the four themes from season one of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I identified five corresponding ideographs that illustrate the motifs and thereby symbolize the larger show:

<the Handmaid's uniform>, <the Handmaid's ear tag>, <the hangings of dissidents>, <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*>, and <the Mayday movement>. Some of the ideographs apply to multiple themes. For instance, <the hangings of dissidents> represents both a return to tradition/religion and power disparity. <The Handmaid's ear tag> symbolizes power disparity as well as the oppression of women. Two of the ideographs, <*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*> and <the Mayday movement>, illustrate the theme of resistance and, because they involve such activism and optimism, they do not apply to any of the other themes. Of particular interest to me is the ideograph <the Handmaid's uniform> which symbolizes each of the four themes, in turn. It is the only ideograph that changes meaning, crossing between darker themes that represent a miserable existence for women and the theme of resistance, which symbolizes the potential upheaval of the patriarchy. <The Handmaid's uniform> changes from acting as a dehumanizing tool to serving as a form of empowerment. Through this transformation, the uniform demonstrates that symbols that were previously seen as oppressive can be reframed and rearticulated. Because of its ability to represent both the potentially bleak future and also the possibility of collective resistance, <the Handmaid's uniform> transcended the screen and became used in real life protests against current politics, which represent a fight against the patriarchy in general.

The idea of being a part of a resistance movement – in the show and in real life – gives people hope. Having a sense of meaning and purpose in life allows people to persevere, even though immense suffering (Frankl, 1959). Women dressed in the uniforms have appeared at Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing, a fundraiser for Vice President Mike Pence, various Women's March gatherings since Trump's inauguration, health care and abortion bill protests and more (Bradley, 2018). For those who wear outfits in their political

activism, “the reasons for dressing like a handmaid span solidarity, personal empowerment, inspiration for voting, and intersectional expansion for the feminist movement” (Cohen, 2018, n.p.). Given the widespread use of these costumes, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is obviously powerful and worthy of careful analysis. Thus, my research is useful for understanding why the show, and in particular the uniform, resonates so strongly with women. The show does not exist in a vacuum – it exists in a current political moment. Also, even those who do not watch it regularly can recognize the uniform as a symbol. This is the power of television on our consciousness and also the power of social media to spread a phenomenon. My research takes that into account and explains why the show matters in the *zeitgeist*.

Besides exploring an important, political, historical and cultural moment, my research also adds to the theoretical work of McGee’s (1980) ideograph, and it contributes to the larger scholarly feminist conversation. First, very little has been done with visual ideographs, besides the work by Edwards and Winkler (1997) and Ballard (2016). My research thus broadens McGee’s (1980) work, giving it wider application to visual mediums, including television. Secondly, my analysis is important for feminisms, both from an academic perspective and as it applies “on the ground.” Too often theorizing about feminisms in a classroom is far removed from the experience of women as they live their daily lives. As Sowards and Renegar (2006) explain, “in an increasingly fragmented and contentious world, activism must necessarily reflect the complexity and needs of the individuals who choose to participate in it” (Sowards & Renegar, 2006, p. 71). My position about the importance of everyday resistance in feminisms is in alignment with theirs. As I demonstrated through my exploration of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a popular television show with feminist messages provides one way to bridge the gap between the academic and the applied. Women who use the uniforms from the show in protest are doing a

very feminist act – bringing attention to the patriarchy and trying to overthrow it. Through my exploration of the meaning behind the uniform, I shed light on why people choose it as a stand-in for their hopes and their fears. The power of collective action is visible in the show when the Handmaids band together, and it is also palpable when women take the Handmaids’ costumes and use them to achieve their purposes in a protest situation. For these women activists, their protest is not academic. It is completely intertwined with their lives and the lives of their friends, family, and fellow humans. Finally, tying together the ideograph with a feminist lens contributes to both areas of study. There is commonality between the two – ideographs are created through collective meaning and the feminist movement requires collective action for advancement. Plus, both the ideograph and feminisms are strongly connected to politics. McGee’s (1980) ideograph is inherently political – its meaning is derived from societal context, which cannot be separated from the political situation. The feminist idea “the personal is political” does not just refer to one individual, but the idea that women as a whole will benefit from the dismantling of the patriarchal system. By combining the ideograph with feminisms, I demonstrate that the two can work in conjunction to reinforce specific and collective political meanings.

While my work connects the theoretical and the practical, there are still limitations to my study and areas for additional research. In my analysis I only looked at season one of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as that was the one that first introduced the visual of the Handmaid’s uniform to the world, and it was also the season released closest to the time Trump took the office of President. Since then, there have been two subsequent seasons of the show and a fourth is slated (Mackrell, 2019). Further study could explore the more recent seasons of the program to determine how if the themes I identify persist and if it continues to resonate with the audience in the same way. Secondly, given the show appears on Hulu, a subscription-based, streaming media

platform, only those who pay for the service can watch it. While this is more of a limitation of the reach of the program than of my research, it is important to note that that is not accessible to everyone. Along the same lines, there are criticisms of *The Handmaid's Tale's* depictions of race and sexuality. Further research could seek to understand the show's appeal to a certain socioeconomic group and the potential connection to its existence on a subscription platform. There is also room for deeper interpretation of the allusions to slavery and Islam. There are clear references to the Handmaids as slaves and their uniforms as burqas; these interpretations of the show could be examined more closely. Moreover, there is additional work to be done with expanding the ideograph. Other scholars can continue to apply McGee's (1980) theory to other visual media, including additional television shows. Finally, I see the need at this time in history to explore other pop culture phenomena that are connected with political activism. By studying touchstones in contemporary culture, we can better understand what qualities give a show, a movie, or even a meme, the ability to resonate with protestors and activists and transcend the screen.

I originally wanted to study *The Handmaid's Tale* because I was extremely moved by the show, but I couldn't figure out why. By looking at it in depth, I can see how powerful the show is for the women who decided to take the uniform and use it in their protests. I hope this thesis forces people to take a second look at "another television show" that might be written off as entertainment or "torture porn" (Weber, 2018, p. 193). Right now, we are at a crucial moment. The 2020 U.S. presidential election is nearing, and this could be the difference between a continual clawing back of women's rights and a decided turn into a more progressive, less patriarchal future. Shows like *The Handmaid's Tale* expose a dystopian world that could result if we fail to care enough to make our voices heard. They also give us hope that, in times when we

think things are too far gone to be improved, the power of solidarity and collective action can make a real difference. It is impossible to watch *The Handmaid's Tale* and not feel something. As June describes, “Now I’m awake to the world. I was asleep before” (Miller et al., 2017, n.p.). Unlike June, hopefully a group of us are paying attention early enough to make a difference.

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