



*THE HANDMAID'S TALE:*

**UNCOVERING THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RONALD REAGAN'S AND  
DONALD TRUMP'S ADMINISTRATION**

**Trabajo de fin de Máster en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Ingleses y su Proyección  
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To my housemates, for the immense patience they have shown during the completion of this undertaking and the hours spent occupying the living room table with papers.

Blessed be the fruit, *darlings*.

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## 0. Abstract

*The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a major piece in North-American literature for it puts forth a variety of women's issues that were in the spotlight in the 1980s. Not only did the book challenge the established order of the 1980s politics, but it did also cast light on the fatal consequences of instituting a deeply religious authoritarian regime. In 2017, the book made the leap to Hulu, an online series broadcasting service, which provoked the story to become available to millions of viewers. The novel and the TV series have become internationally acclaimed by the feminisms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The aim of this Master's dissertation is to analyse the particularities of Ronald Reagan's and Donald Trump's political measures while, at the same time, connecting the findings to correlating events in the novel and the series, respectively. In order to carry out this analysis I will first proceed to discuss the interplay of women, power and violence in Atwood's literary production to establish the fundamental grounds around which this paper will revolve. Once the theoretical foundations are provided, I will examine the novel in detail supporting my analysis with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*. Subsequently, I intend to connect my findings with the main political events under Regan's administration; in particular, focus will be placed upon the issue of abortion and women's agency over their own bodies. Later on, I comment on the TV series peculiarities in order to cast light upon the events currently unfolding under Donald Trump's administration. Finally, I shall compare Reagan's and Trump's administration in the quest for similarities between their political agendas, while, of course, linking my discoveries to specific events in both the novel and the TV series.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, patriarchy, female reproductive rights.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Statement and Objectives

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”

–George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*

I have always been interested in the way literature has been used historically to warn us about the dangers threatening coexistence and harmony between human beings, to which end dystopic novels have proved to be fairly helpful. The main purpose of this Master’s dissertation is the analysis of the ways Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is still working as one of those warnings by presenting a comparative study of the latest TV series success *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Atwood’s source novel. This comparative analysis will delve into the political undertones of past events happening during the time the novel was written under Ronald Reagan’s administration and those currently unfolding under Donald Trump’s government. In the pages that follow, the literary and cultural analysis of Atwood’s novel and TV series adaptation will serve to show that both presidents present a strikingly similar political agenda and argue that Trump’s administration might be driving the USA towards an extremely dangerous territory where fundamental rights are about to be forfeit.

Published in 1985 *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents a dystopian future in which an ultra-Catholic regime forces fertile women to bare children for the infertile ones, all of which is disguised under the fantasy of religious duty. Much to the displeasure of book-lovers, however, *The Handmaid’s Tale* owes much of its emerging popularity to the recent creation of the TV series under the same name in Hulu, which has adapted the novel and made it accessible to the masses. Having said this, I must confess I am no exception at all and I was led to the book after having been seduced by the TV series. Once I had watched the series and read the book, I concluded that there were events relatable to both the time when the book was published and contemporary events, which lead me to believe that the current popularity of the TV series is not a matter of mere coincidence at all. I then decided to embark on the task of investigating the peculiarities of both the novel and TV series. The importance of such an investigation lays on the fact that both the novel and the TV series seem to be an expression of utter revulsion and major concern about the socio-political events happening at each piece’s respective time.

This paper starts with a chapter dedicated to Margaret Atwood and her literature since understanding Atwood's notions of women, power and violence is pivotal in order to grasp the complexity of her work. Thus, in the second section I briefly discuss the main topics in Atwood's literary work. Under significant Foucauldian influence, Atwood discusses issues of power and violence all through her pieces, and brings to light delicate matters such as liberty, autonomy, surveillance and also, in a rather subtle way in *The Handmaid's Tale*, surrogacy. The arduous task of examining and sketching Atwood's work facilitates and broadens our understanding of the various relations between Atwood herself, the feminist movement, and the novel's and TV series' socio-political context.

Once such multiple relations are descrambled, I devote one section to examining the most important elements of *The Handmaid's Tale* to establish the foundations for the subsequent analysis of both the novel and TV series. The dissertation is thereupon divided into two main sections, which represent the core of this project. The fourth chapter of the present paper focuses on the novel and its context, tracing both the development of feminism and Reagan's political agenda during the 1980s. Needless to say, a socio-historical approach will be adopted to conduct such analysis. I explore the characters and their interplay in the novel, supporting my claims with references to Foucault's and Bourdieu's theories while, at the same time, I analyse the main events described in the novel and connect them with real situations of the 1980s in America and Canada. Similarly, the fifth section aims at examining the topicality of the TV series since it extends the plot and provides insights that are crucial to understanding contemporary events. In order to examine the TV series, I mainly rely on newspaper articles and YouTube videos since they provide the most updated information about events that are currently unfolding under Donald Trump's administration, although I realise that a potential problem arises by using this kind of sources inasmuch as many might be biased. Therefore, I have tried to make a painstaking reading of the aforementioned sources in order to avoid partiality. The final section reflects on the entire project, tying up the ideas that emerge on the way in order to cast light upon the initial query: the revelation of the similarities shared by Donald Trump's and Ronald Reagan's administration through the analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, both the novel and the TV series. Finally, I cannot resist to finish this project without issuing my own warning to the future.

As I mentioned before, Atwood's work is deeply influenced by Michel Foucault's theory, especially on the account of power, discipline and resistance. Since Atwood's main concerns are violence and power I will rely on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, which will

set the basic framework for this project. In the book, Foucault explores the development of punishment from 18<sup>th</sup>-century public executions and corporal punishment to the more modern institution of prison. In prison individuals are supervised and controlled by means of discipline, which, in turn, is materialised in three components: hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and the examination. Although they are not strictly in prison, in Gilead characters are subject to a similar coercive apparatus, especially female ones, which makes Foucault's theory the more interesting for my work.

Having established Foucault's theory as central to this project, I was inevitably led to the analysis of the symbolic mechanisms of power that force women to subject positions. Thus, at this point I will rely on Pierre Bourdieu's brilliant *Masculine Domination*, especially the chapter devoted to the study of symbolic violence, "A Magnified Image." Here, the sociologist begins by explaining that "[t]he social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division" (11). According to this position, the anatomical contrast between the sexes justifies the socially constructed difference between the genders as well as the functions and responsibilities attached to each. What is more, Bourdieu explains that symbolic violence results in the *paradox of doxa* since the conceptual basis of masculine domination is both the cause and the effect of such domination, which results in the fact that "[t]he dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural" (35). The whole domination system appears as natural, legitimate and irrefutable.

Gilead is therefore founded upon a unique combination of elements, namely masculine domination, observation and control over bodies; all of which are indispensable to create an immutable self-legitimising system. What is more, Gileadean regime tinges the system with a religious aura, in which citizens are implored to sacrifice themselves –and even others– for the sake of a greater good, leaving morality in a state of suspension.

When I first undertook the enterprise of writing this Master's thesis –almost two years ago– no scholar had attempted to correlate the events of the novel and the TV series with the time when both were brought to light. However, once I finished my project and a couple of weeks prior to the presentation of my work, I came across a Bachelor's degree thesis written by Maike Surmund named *The Roles of Women in The Handmaid's Tale. A Comparison between the Relevance of the Novel Then and the Series Now* that I had previously overlooked during my thorough investigation of the literature concerning *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*. To my amazement, Surmund had explored the same topic I have considered in my undertaking and our conclusions are occasionally somewhat similar. Having acknowledged the similitude of both works, I feel the urgency of highlighting the contrast between them. With no intention of devaluing Surmund's production, which is indeed of great investigative value, I honestly believe the scholar errs on the side of the broadness with which the topics are discussed in his effort. Surmund does not go in depth to the core of the issues tackled in the novel and TV series to unravel their peculiarities and momentousness. Contrastingly, the present paper applies Foucault's and Bourdieu's theories to the novel and TV series as well as the socio-political situation of each of them and puts name to certain phenomena that are only implicitly examined in my fellow scholar's endeavour. Besides, Surmund's thesis emphasises the topic of surrogacy whereas my thesis' central focus is women's agency over their bodies and choices, which definitely covers the issue of surrogacy and also, perhaps more intensely, the quandary of abortion. Another positive aspect of my Master's thesis, due only to the timing in which mine has been finished, is that I have been able to watch the second and third seasons of the TV series and, also, I have been lucky enough to read the sequel to the book, which adds more nuances to Atwood's already extraordinary literary world.

As Atwood herself declared, the novel is a means to understand society in the quest of moral growth (Somacarrera 19), that is why I intend to review *The Handmaid's Tale*, both in the novel and the TV series, basing such an analysis on Foucault's and Bourdieu's theories in order to expose the closeness of Reagan's and Trump's political agenda and, in the end, broaden our understanding of the current events under Trump's administration. Actually, in the aftermath of Trump's election to presidency Atwood claimed that the novel had taken a different meaning considering Trump's administration and judging from his openly misogynist remarks regarding women's issues ("The Handmaid's Tale' Author"). The author warned that a relapse of rights might happen, not necessarily as it is portrayed in the novel, but women's rights might indeed suffer considerable setbacks in the years to come. The truth is that women's governability and autonomy over their bodies and choices is currently at stake.



## 2. Margaret Atwood: Women and Power

Born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada, Margaret Atwood is a highly cherished writer in Canada while she is also internationally acclaimed for her defiant writings, all of which are loaded with controversial topics such as power, violence, feminism or autonomy to name but a few. The early years of Atwood's life were spent in the forests in North Ontario and Quebec, where her father conducted experiments in the area of entomology, so it is hardly surprising that her literature is heavily laden with references to nature and wildlife (Somacarrera 13, Macpherson 1). Keen reader as a child, Margaret Atwood had access to literature even before she had moved to cities and entered the formal schooling system at the age of five (Macpherson 2). No sooner had Atwood reached the age of sixteen than she had already decided to pursue a career as a writer. Once graduated from the University of Toronto, Atwood continued her studies with a Master's degree at Radcliffe College and even started a Doctoral thesis in Harvard, which was nevertheless left unfinished.

One of the most prolific authors of the time, Atwood's collection contains more than 70 titles belonging to a wide variety of genres, from prose to theatre, which have been translated into more than 22 languages ("Full"). There is even an association devoted to analysing her literary production, the Margaret Atwood Society, which created the *Margaret Atwood Studies Journal* in 2007. Such journal, with which Atwood has an "uneasy relationship," is committed to "promote scholarly exchange of Atwood's works and cultural contributions by providing opportunities for scholars to access, disseminate, and exchange information" (Macpherson 3; "About Margaret Atwood Studies Journal"). What is more, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, belonging to the University of Toronto, contains the Atwood Archives where a vast array of materials based on her work are stored. Such prominent writer has won over 55 internationally acclaimed awards, out of which the Man Booker Prize, the National Book Critics and PEN Center USA stand. It is certain, therefore, that the dimension of Atwood's influence extends far beyond anything we may conceive.

The literary works of Atwood are best understood if placed within the Canadian context since the writer is actively engaged with exploring the relationship between the USA and Canada. The analysis of such relationship brings to light that these countries differ in economic matters and foreign policy and what is more, Atwood underlines that the USA has profound influence upon Canada, whereas any trace of influence in the opposite direction is practically inexistent (Somacarrera 10). Shannon Hengen has even compared the relation between Canada and the USA and claimed it parallel to the relation between men and

women: women are to men what Canada is to the USA, somewhat incomplete entities (Somacarrera 11).

But Atwood does not only explore the topic of Canadian identity, her work is probably best known for her profound concern with the question of womanhood. Having been influenced by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Atwood's work is notoriously known for exploring the topic of womanhood in all its dimensions and aspects. She examines topics such as gender violence, sexuality, motherhood, femininity or surrogacy, among others, which were also found in the Second Wave feminist agenda. Atwood, nonetheless, is –and has always been– critical with the feminist movement, to the extent of being remarkably reluctant to labelling herself as feminist since, in her own words, "...it's become one of those general terms that can mean a whole bunch of different things" (Oppenheim). In fact, many are the interviews in which she refuses to consider *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, perhaps two of her most celebrated novels for their treatment of the question of womanhood, as feminist texts on the basis that "...the feminist label can only be given to writers who wilfully and consciously work within the context of the movement" (Oppenheim). In addition, according to Somacarrera, upon having received the adjective of feminist Atwood insisted that *The Edible Woman* was written before the Second Wave had even emerged so, in any event, it should have been called profeminist (15). More recently, Atwood found herself in the middle of another scandal after having signed a letter in favour of a UBC professor accused of sexual misconduct. Feminist reaction was not long coming and, for many, Atwood, one of the most prevailing feminist voices of our times, became a traitor to the feminist cause (Kassam). Atwood, in turn, did not remain silent and released an article responding to the charges pressed against her one by one, arguing that they were insubstantial and tried only to demonise her character. The article in question concludes with Atwood stating that "[a] war among women, as opposed to a war on women, is always pleasing to those who do not wish women well," which feels like a call for truce and reconciliation within the feminist movement itself ("Am I a Bad Feminist?").

Whatever Atwood's relationship with the feminist movement, it is undeniable that her life and the feminist movement have developed, if not together, then at least alongside. By 1920, nearly two decades prior to Atwood's birth, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted all

women the right to vote in the US and some women were also enfranchised in Canada<sup>1</sup>. Having fulfilled its main aim of vote and political representation in different boards, the first wave of feminism was coming to its later years and giving way to a Second Wave, which sought to achieve more ambitious goals in the fields of sexuality, reproductive rights and the workplace primarily. Tracing back the origins and progress of such a heterogeneous and dispersed movement as the feminist movement is not easy, yet the Second Wave is roughly dated beginning from the 1960s and finishing by the 1990s. In Canada, the Second Wave developed under the guidance of VOW –Voice of Women– and “[i]t was a period of significant accomplishment during which Indigenous, union and visible minority women and lesbians demanded to speak and received growing attention from mainstream activists” (Strong-Boag, “1960-1985”). The Second Wave in Canada was characterised by the fact that women were determined to recover agency over their own bodies, which was reflected in the fight to demand rights over birth control and abortion. In addition, Canada saw the birth of the “Take Back the Night” movement in the 1970s, a night march that sought to denounce violence against women. In 1969, coinciding with the publication of Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman*, in which Second Wave concerns are tangible, birth control was removed from the Criminal Code. In the following years Atwood wrote two of her best-known poetry collections *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Power Politics*, which do also provide accurate account of the anxieties of the Second Wave.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* was published towards the end of the Second Wave. It was apparent that the political and social paradigm, marked by women’s recuperation of agency over their body and the coming-out of minority groups, had directed attention to poststructuralist interpretations of gender and sexuality. Issues of violence against women, sexual liberation, decriminalisation of diversity and of course, reproductive rights were crucial to the Third Wave, which had to face the threat to “state support for social initiatives” posed by neo-liberalism (Strong-Boag, “1985-present”). A variety of experts now claim that we are at the threshold of the Fourth Wave which will be defined by the use of technology in the quest of equality. It is certainly remarkable, nonetheless, that the novel under examination brings to light matters that are still of great importance to the feminist agenda such a women’s agency over their bodies, reproductive rights and gestational surrogacy. The

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<sup>1</sup> Do let me emphasise that full voting rights for every citizen, regardless of race, ethnicity, wealth, gender and social status was not recognised until 1960 in Canada. It is merely for purposes of orientation that we shall understand this date and must bear in mind that it only grants recognition to certain sectors of society, that being white middle-class educated women for the most part.

latter is coming under to the spotlight in recent times in countries such as Spain, France or Germany, where such practice is nowadays illegal.

In spite of the bitter controversy surrounding Atwood, the fact that her work raises burning questions is plainly and simply irrefutable. Virtually every piece she has ever written treats –more or less explicitly– topics that are inextricably linked to the question of womanhood, although it may be the theme of violence which constitutes the most recurrent in her writings. Atwood explores the topic of violence in all its forms and manifestations and explores the relationship between power and violence, which –as I will discuss in section 3– are closely intertwined. Her fiction, thus, gives a great account of the notion of power in Foucauldian terms, for whom power permeates each and every human relation and interaction.

### 3. *The Handmaid's Tale*

The text under examination presents an ultra-Catholic regime where women are classified according to their ability to bear children: on the one hand are the infertile, Wives, Aunts and Marthas; whereas on the other hand are the fertile, Handmaids and Econowives. Among the infertile, the Wives represent the higher class, whose role is to be obedient spouses; these are followed by the Aunts, in whose hands the Handmaids' re-education falls and finally, the Marthas, whose duty is reserved to taking care of the household. Alternatively, among the fertile, the Handmaids' task is to bear children for their masters and the Econowives, who represent the lowest class in the hierarchy, must fulfil each and every task otherwise reserved to the Wives, Handmaids and Marthas. Outside the scope of this classification are the Unwomen, who having committed an offense against the regime are sent to the Colonies and condemned to forced labour. In the following pages I will discuss the scenes that I have found more interesting for my purpose. The section is divided in three subsections where I explore different topics: in the first part, I focus on the meaning of the three epigrams prior to the novel itself; in the second subsection, I try to examine the arrangement and manipulation of bodies in Gilead and, finally, I inspect the role of Gileadean surveillance system.

#### 3.1 "Gilead is within you"

*The Handmaid's Tale* begins with three epigrams, each of them presenting and foreshadowing three conflicting worldviews, which are echoed all through the novel: Catholicism, American Puritanism and Sufism. Kristy Tenbus carries out a comprehensive analysis of the novel in terms of religion and the subordination of women. The critic proves that past events, which are materialised in texts such as the three clashing epigrams, are crucial to understand present and future situations and that favouring some texts over others constitutes an act of deliberate construction of certain "politics of truth" (6). Amongst these, Tenbus discusses the role of institutionalised religion in perpetuating the subjugation of women<sup>2</sup>. By means of a thorough analysis of the religious events happening in the decade of the 80s, Tenbus concludes that "...gender roles are based not only on biological differences, but on the privileging of texts that authorize social constructs" in *The Handmaid's Tale* (9).

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough inspection of the role of religious fundamentalism in subjecting women consult Lemke.

The first quote, taken from the *Book of Genesis*, narrates the story of Jacob and Rachel. Unable to bear children for Jacob, Rachel had her handmaid Bilhah as a surrogate mother, who brought two children to Jacob. The reason why these words resonate in the novel is immediately evident since it is laden with indirect references to this biblical story and also because it is literally mentioned<sup>3</sup>. The second quote is extracted from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," a satirical essay in which Swift mockingly proposed to sell the children of the poor as nourishment with the aim of denouncing the uncompassionate attitudes of tenants towards the poor, which were regarded as mere commodities. Atwood mockingly juxtaposes the Irish state of affairs by the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the country was headed towards a historic degree of overpopulation prior to the Great Famine; and conversely, the tragic situation of Gilead, where underpopulation represents the major problem of the regime (Tenbus 6). The third quote is generally regarded as more ambiguous than the aforementioned. It is a Sufi proverb that foreshadows the dystopian nature of the novel, presaging that under turbulent political climate moral conventions and customs fall into a state of pause. Not entirely content with the simplicity of such an interpretation, Workman tries to prove that Sufism is far more present in the novel than it may appear since

Offred's attitude...demonstrates a Sufi perspective: one, in her inwardness, her attempts to discover and evaluate her own feelings and psychological realities despite the teachings and proclamations of society that denies them and which refuses to accept their legitimacy; and two, in her need to express that inwardness through language games that appear to be simple or perhaps clever, but which actually reveal complex networks of feelings and ideas. (2)

These epigrams represent in fact texts with a certain degree of authority that establish the very foundations upon which Gilead is erected: masculine domination. A term coined by Pierre Bourdieu in his homonym work, masculine domination is an example of symbolic violence, a form of power that is exerted on bodies with the contribution of those who experience it, for they construct it as such (35). But subjects are not to be held responsible for their own subordination, symbolic violence is exercised uncsciously because the modes of thinking are already built from within the parameters of subordination; therefore, everything is understood and measured according to such principles, which are encompassed in what Bourdieu names *habitus* (39-40). The *habitus* constitutes one of the central themes of Bourdieu's and consists of a set of habits and dispositions which are shared by a certain social body. The structures of domination within the *habitus* are not to be understood as

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<sup>3</sup> See direct reference p. 99. Indirect references are discussed throughout this project.

ahistorical for they are “the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction, to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions –families, the church, the educational system, the state– contribute” (Bourdieu 34). Bourdieu’s concepts will be referred to constantly throughout the analysis of the novel for they lead to and establish the grounds of Foucault’s concept of the *regime of truth*. In an interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino Foucault explains that

[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (“Truth and Power” 131)

The French philosopher alludes to a whole system of procedures which are aimed at legitimising certain ideas over others judged as false, assembling a somewhat unquestionable discourse which establishes the grounds of every society. Truth possesses five essential characteristics: it is based on the scientific discourse and the institution which generates it; it is constantly stimulated by economy and politics; it is the object of propagation and consumption; it is spread by the society’s political and economic machinery and it is a matter of political and social discussion (Foucault, “Truth and Power” 131-132).

At one point of the narrative Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that “the Republic of Gilead... knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” which points to the ideas at hand (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*<sup>4</sup> 33). With such plainness Aunt Lydia points to the fact that the citizens of Gilead are, in fact, constantly creating and reproducing the system itself. I hasten to add that, quite obviously, masculine domination is at the core of the regime of truth in Gilead, a regime of truth that arises from and is reinforced by religion. As Tenbus puts it “*The Handmaids Tale* demonstrates the palimpsestuous relationship between truth, institutionalized religion and sexual politics” (4).

### 3.2 Licked into Shape

Low birth-rates in the political system prior to Gilead leaves the country about to collapse, somehow allowing the rebellion of the Sons of Jacob, an organisation which seeks to establish an authoritarian patriarchal theocracy. Under the aura of religious obligation, the

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, hereafter *THT*.

Sons of Jacob devise an apparently seamless system where, to maintain control over citizens and ensure their commitment to the wellbeing of the community, a whole body of inhabitants whose roles and duties are clearly framed is required. As a result, the regime needs a corpus of docile bodies, each of which is "...manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 136). The system needs to impose upon bodies a relation of docility-utility, which is achieved by means of disciplines, which according to Foucault are "general formulas of domination" (137).

Such docile bodies are arranged at Red Centres in the first place. By means of an intensive training into the word of God, in which the words of sacred texts are manipulated to brainwash Handmaids into their new role of surrogate mothers, Handmaids have fulfilled the first phase to their re-education. They are taught that women are no longer in control of their bodies and their reproductive abilities, these are now in the hands of the high representatives of the Sons of Jacob, who are the ones to decide. It is hardly surprising that one of the measures that a regime in which fertility rates are plummeting imposes is to control the bodies and reproductive abilities of women for they are the only ones to contribute to the social capital of the regime. It is not the survival of the species which is at stake *per se*, but the continuance of the regime of Gilead and its regime of truth: without a social body willing to accept and follow the word of God, the regime of Gilead would be doomed to extinction.

Once their period of indoctrination at Red Centres has finished and Handmaids have been assigned to a Commander, they are reintroduced to the society from which they had been expelled for their prior impious behaviour. Having been expiated, Handmaids return compliantly to fulfil their sacred duty: bearing children for their masters. Although no longer at Red Centres, their docility must be safeguarded for the sake of the whole society's wellbeing, consequently certain mechanisms of discipline must immediately be implemented. According to Foucault docile bodies proceeded from four main mechanisms of coercion: spatial distribution, control of activity, a combination of linear phases and a composition of forces. For my purpose, nonetheless, only the first two prove to be useful.

As mentioned before, one of the first measures taken by Gileadean regime to create an army of docile bodies is materialised at the Rachel and Leah Centres, more commonly referred to as Red Centres in the novel. Red Centres aim at re-educating fertile women into becoming Handmaids by brainwashing them into believing the subordination of their gender to men and their life-long sole function of bearing children. Such a place recalls some of the



techniques mentioned by Foucault regarding the control of spatial distribution. To begin with, indoctrination takes place at a gymnasium which had a “football pitch which was enclosed...by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire” (Atwood, *THT* 14). The aim of agglutinating Handmaids in an enclosed gymnasium is to “...derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences” which, in the particular case of the Red Centres, certainly refers to mutiny, rebellion, escapes, physical harming to others –or even to one’s self– to name but a few (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 142). But keeping Handmaids captive in a shut location is hardly sufficient to ensure their subordination, thus arriving to Foucault’s second technique for the distribution of individuals in space. It is important that groups are split and that distinctive spaces are assigned to each individual to avoid a confusing circulation of bodies within the enclosed space (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 143). Offred speaks about “...the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk” (Atwood, *THT* 13). Quite obviously, the aim of such a disciplinary arrangement is

to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conducts of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merit. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 143)

When Handmaids arrive to their destination, where they will serve their Commanders, the microcosmoses at Red Centres are somehow transferred. Far from keeping Handmaids together in one enclosed space, each of them is settled in one house and a room is provided for them. In the beginning, June speaks about her room from a distance: “The door of the room –not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* ...”, “... the room where I stay” (Atwood *THT* 18, 59). Curiously enough, once the commander trespasses it, June is puzzled with her own reaction: “Was he in my room? I called it *mine*. My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time” (59). A place that June once felt to be strange, somebody else’s room, becomes her own when the figure of the Commander intrudes it. There is a shift in the way June perceives the room she is kept in: what was once a place of submission becomes a space for resistance, “a way out by transforming the few elements she finds...into liberating instruments that take her back to the past” (Cerezo 7). An escape route from utter torment.

Aside from these rooms, certainly reminiscent of carceral cells, in which nonetheless the Handmaids find a hint of privacy, there are some rooms where the Handmaids’ entrance

is restricted, either temporarily or permanently. The Commander's office is perhaps one of the most interesting places in these terms. Only when the Commander summons her, and the Wife is either away or in her bedroom, is June to enter the Commander's office, a place which holds unspoken secrets. June knows that being caught in the Commander's office could be fatal, but not attending his requests might still be worse: "There's no doubt about who holds the real power" she claims (Atwood, *THT* 146). The first time June is called in to the office, she reflects on the threshold before entering the emplacement: "I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians" (146). The first thing the reader knows about the Commander's office is that women are prohibited from entering, not even the Wives are allowed to come in. Again, subordination of women to men is codified in space. But ironically, this room becomes a place of the illegal later in the text, "an oasis of the forbidden" (147). Almost any kind of illegality enters a period of temporary suspension at the Commander's will: in this room the Commander is in charge, he holds the power of giving and taking away. The Commander becomes a God-like figure in his office, capable of contributing to and, at the same time, redeeming a felony.

Space is encoded depending on the variable of gender. In Gilead women are only allowed to enter certain areas of the house; and what is more, depending on their status restrictions vary. What I find interesting, nevertheless, is the fact that Commanders have full legitimacy to turn a deaf ear and permit women to access the areas in which they are to be under no circumstance. The machinery of masculine domination is set in motion: symbolic violence is again inscribed in the acts of being able to summon, giving permission for committing illegalities, having access to knowledge about the situation of the regime or ordering the withdrawal of the Handmaid to her room. The Commander has total control over the situation, he has legitimacy of giving and taking.

If we keep on gradually distancing from isolated rooms, we come to an insightful realisation: it is the country of Gilead itself which fulfils the role of the enclosed space mentioned by Foucault, and each of the Commanders' houses becomes the isolated cellular emplacements where the Handmaids are doomed to serve their sentences. Spatial distribution is therefore guaranteed in the very way the regime of Gilead is organised, each household unit being a microcosm of the government. By carefully arranging and ordering space, a space which is clearly marked by gender and masculine domination, Gileadean regime establishes what Foucault calls "tableaux vivants," "which transform the confused,

useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities” (*Discipline and Punish* 148). In other words, spatial delimitation individualises the experiences of the Handmaids and guarantees their subordination.

Another key aspect of discipline is control of activity. Each and every aspect of the life of the Handmaids’ life is tightly scheduled, from the very moment they are made to wake up to the time when they go to bed. According to Foucault, timetables have three fundamental methods: to establish rhythms, to impose particular occupations, and to regulate the cycles of repetition (*Discipline and Punish* 149). These three are strikingly evident in the novel. Handmaids must walk daily, in pairs, to get food from All Fresh, the local market where they obtain supplies. Within walks even the smallest gesture is ritualised: the greeting, the body posture and even the small talk. There is a whole range of conventions to which the Handmaids must strictly adhere. Apart from a strictly planned daily routines, the lives of the Handmaids are also programmed in monthly cycles where three important events happen. Firstly, the celebration of the Ceremony, which in the end is a kind of ritualised rape, even if June states that “[n]or does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Atwood, *THT* 105). The terms in which this choice has been made are significant: either she chooses to collaborate, or she is sent to Jezebel’s, the Colonies or, death. Secondly, the failure or success of insemination by means of the apparition of menstrual blood. June makes a heart-breaking narration about her menstrual cycle:

Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (84)

Again, something that determines her entirely, her biological body and its natural processes, conveniently mark her failure. Menstrual blood, thus, “...turns into a symbol of despair and failure” (Cerezo 6). Defeated, each beginning is devastating for a Handmaid whose worth is measured in terms of her ability to procreate. June is absolutely alienated from her own body, which she perceives as a “container,” a “two-legged womb,” a “sacred vessel,” an “ambulatory chalice” (Atwood, *THT* 107, 146). It follows that the regime has succeeded in its goal: that even women measure themselves from within the parameters established by the regime of truth of the theocracy. The apparition of menstrual blood reinforces June’s estrangement from her own body: “I don’t want to look to something that

determines me so completely” (73). In Shelton’s words, “...the more she becomes just her body, the less is left of her self” (173).

And thirdly, the visit to the doctor “...once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood tests,” which is “...the same as before, except that now is obligatory” (Atwood, *THT* 69). Although apparently inoffensive, the Handmaids are forced to have their bodies subjected to tests regularly and what is more, the only visit to the doctor described by June is laden with patriarchal violence. The appointment begins with June’s description of the stretcher where she is to be examined: “At neck level there’s another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only” (70). The brutality of the words suggests Foucault’s analysis of medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in *The Birth of the Clinic*, where he suggested that there was a shift in the way patients were inspected in modern medicine: there was a dehumanising separation between the patient’s person and their body. The doctor is expected to analyse the body, without any kind of interference on the part of the person. In fact, June explains: “He isn’t supposed to speak to me except when it’s absolutely necessary.” (Atwood, *THT* 70). Pamela Cooper analyses Foucault’s term of “medical gaze” and demonstrates that visual perception is a gendered act and explores the role of guardians and gynaecologists as representatives of male observation in Gilead, where the former articulate the “bureaucratic surveillance...a paradigmatic figure of supreme paternal authority, and definitive role model for Gilead’s oligarchs” whereas the latter “...can introduce the over-controlling, patriarchal gaze of totalitarianism into the most private of all spheres, the inner spaces of the human body” (50, 52). The Handmaid’s body is therefore depersonalised, it becomes an object which must be examined and controlled because “[w]ithin the oppressive culture depicted in the novel, the woman’s body is obsessively designated as the site of male fear, anxiety, and desire” (Cooper 53). Fear and anxiety come from their own capacity and the fact that they are so necessary for the regime, and desire because the society designed by the Sons of Jacob has established rigid norms regarding sexuality and relationships. No wonder that the visit to the doctor leaves another remarkable scene, in which the physician offers himself to inseminate June and blasphemes when suggesting that Commanders might be sterile (Atwood, *THT* 70). In a state of utter vulnerability June finds herself at a crossroads, each path being potentially dangerous: either let the doctor inseminate her and take the risk of being discovered committing an extremely serious crime; or decline his offer and remain at the mercy of the doctor’s will. June is well aware of the power that the doctor has over her:

I must leave the impression that I am not offended, that I am open to suggestion. He takes his hand away, lazily almost, lingeringly, this is not the last word as far as he is concerned. He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped to the Colonies, with the Unwomen. None of this has been said, but the knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air as he pats my thigh, withdraws himself behind the hanging sheet. (71)

Once again her body is subject to masculine domination. The figure of the doctor incarnates a double violence: on the one hand, as a man he is at a vantage point already; and on the other hand, as a representative of the medical staff he can designate June as unfit and have her sent to the Colonies, thus becoming a highly dangerous character. Furthermore, he has got access to her medical chart and tells June: “You don’t have a lot of time left” (71). The cycle is about to see its end.

The three representatives of the monthly cycles discussed above, namely The Ceremony, the apparition of menstrual blood and the visit to the doctor’s office, finish in two possible scenarios: if the Handmaid succeeds in getting pregnant, systematic rape would be suspended during the period of pregnancy; however, if the Handmaid fails to become with child, then she is doomed to be sent to the Colonies, where a dire future of suffering awaits.

Apart from establishing rhythms, imposing particular occupations and regulating the cycles of repetitions of the activity of the Handmaids are also pivotal to ensure that their sacred duty is fulfilled. Although speaking about the activity of workers in the market economy, Foucault explained that apart from carefully controlling rhythms, occupations and cycles of repetitions, it was important to ensure the quality of the time employed as well, which was conducted by eliminating any kind of distraction and being subject to ceaseless surveillance<sup>5</sup> (*Discipline and Punish* 150). The same applies to the text under examination. The Handmaids do not have access to any kind of stimulus, they must only focus on keeping healthy and bearing children for their masters. Marta Cerezo provides examples of the mechanisms of power present in Gilead, where, in line with Foucault’s view of the progressive transformation of the punitive system throughout the eighteenth century, extreme physical violence has been substituted by a rather subtle form of violence that penetrates into the very souls of the members of Gilead. The Gileadean regime is only interested in turning the Handmaids’ bodies into “rentable social properties,” that is, bodies

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<sup>5</sup> Surveillance is examined in the following section.

that are profitable inasmuch as they meekly submit to strict coercive mechanisms, stick to their role in society and dispose of any intention of rebellion (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 5). No one, apart from the Commander and Wife, is to address them unless it is strictly necessary. June finds lack of any kind of action extremely tedious and when the Commander proposes a night out June is willing to take the risk, she states: “I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things” (Atwood, *THT* 243). Moreover, when talking about lack of stimuli, it generates considerable interest to me the fact that the Handmaids are prevented from any kind of access to knowledge. Knowledge is power and, knowledge is often liberating as well. So much so that in one of the meetings in the Commander’s office, when June finds out about the previous Handmaid the following insightful conversation takes place:

“What would you like?” he says, still with that lightness, as if it’s money transaction merely, and a minor one at that: candy, cigarettes... “I would like to know.” “Know what” he says. “Whatever there is to know,” I say; but that’s too flippant. “What’s going on.” (Atwood, *THT* 198)

June craves for information not only because she needs to alter the monotony that she finds so annoying, but also because she needs to reconnect with reality. Having been alienated from her body and identity, June requires knowledge in order to be able to bear her miserable existence. Interestingly, the Commander is the one who possesses knowledge and; therefore, holds the power.

To summarise the section, as many other scholars before me concluded<sup>6</sup>, Gileadean regime succeeds in manipulating a group of fertile women into people who respond in a certain manner to external stimuli, which is achieved mainly by means of certain arrangement of space and rigid control of activity. If these women fail to be useful to the regime by bearing children for their masters, they are doomed to be punished or, worst-case scenario, be sacrificed. Aunt Lydia’s words summarise flawlessly the mechanisms of subordination in the quest for docile Handmaids in Gilead: “All of us here will lick you into shape” (Atwood, *THT* 124).

### 3.3 There is More than it Meets the Eye

In the barren society of Gilead the Handmaids are “too important, too scarce...a national resource,” which forces the regime to atomise the experiences of the Handmaids in

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cerezo, Davies or Hsieh.

order to extinguish any spark of rebellion (Atwood, *THT* 75). Gilead produces a mass of women who are apparently worshipped because of their sacred duty to the nation, but also feared for the survival of the nation is entirely in their hands –or rather, their wombs. Fragmentation is crucial in Gilead, the regime requires to remove their power and annul them. In fact,

...instead of bending all its subjects into a single uniform mass, [disciplinary power] separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units...[d]iscipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 170)

After the Handmaids are isolated and individualised, Gileadean disciplinary power turns to another technique to ensure their subordination: surveillance. The regime maintains the status quo by means of three main instruments: hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and the examination.

Surveillance is a key aspect of the Republic of Gilead. It is mainly conducted by the figure of the Eyes of God, a secret branch of spies, which is in charge of maintaining the law and informing against infidels. Nobody knows for certain who belongs to the organisation of the Eyes, and such secrecy permits that “the Eyes of God run over all the earth” (Atwood, *THT* 203). According to Foucault the effectiveness of surveillance lays on the fact that it transforms disciplinary power into

a multiple, automatic and anonymous power; for although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network ‘holds’ the whole together and transverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised. (*Discipline and Punish* 176-177)

Despite the fact that the regime counts with the cooperation of the Eyes, in reality the system is articulated in such a way that each and every individual is both constantly supervising and supervised. June is conscious that the Handmaids are supervised by the Eyes and, what is more, she seems to know that the Handmaids are assembled in pairs in order to spy on each other:

We aren’t allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as

I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable. (Atwood, *THT* 29)

Thus, surveillance is introduced into any remote crack in Gilead; it becomes an intense and ceaseless network of vigilance which is integrated into the system itself (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 174). Everyone is an observer whilst being observed at the same time, any kind of deviation is doomed to failure. No longer do disciplines operate by means of force, force has been replaced by gaze. At this point it is important to note that even if the Handmaids are supervising one another, their visual capacity is willingly impeded by an item of clothing forced upon them: the veil and the white-wings. In David Coad's analysis of the veil-like images in the novel, it is suggested that the veil is closely related to femininity and gendered oppression. As maintained by Coad, the veil has two functions: to hide women and to prevent them from seeing (56). Such duality, most certainly contradicting Foucault's idea of surveillance, leads me to affirm that the Handmaids' blindness is strikingly deliberate and, I would venture to say, a highly efficient means of alienation and disempowerment; which, in turn, bolsters their domination.

The second instrument to ensure that disciplines are fulfilled is normalising judgement. Foucault mentioned that most institutions were subject to a system of micro-penalties of time, activity, behaviour, speech, body, sexuality; while at the same time a range of methods were conducted as a way of punishment for such penalties. The aim of punishing even the smallest deviation was that "each subject [found] himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality" (*Discipline and Punish* 178). In line with this, punishment is scaffolded in Gilead. When Moira, June's best friend, unsuccessfully attempts to flee the Red Centre, she is taken to a room where they harm her feet. June reflects the following:

It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential...Her feet did not look like feet at all. They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour. They looked like lungs. (Atwood, *THT* 102)

Female subordination is yet again encoded in punishment. Moira's violation of the regime's law costs her unbearable physical and psychological pain, for her feet are damaged, but also because she is reminded of the fact that her reproductive abilities are only to have any importance for the government.



But the disciplinary system does not rely entirely on punishment, it is combined with gratification (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 180). Rewards must be more frequent than sanctions to encourage the correct behaviour. When Janine is pregnant, June notes that "... the walk may be a whim of hers, and they humour whims, when something has gone this far and there's been no miscarriage," which gives a fair account of the logic of rewarding in Gilead (Atwood, *THT* 36). If the Handmaids stick to their role of surrogate mothers, they are awarded with small compensations. Likewise, there is another scene which I feel must be quoted at length:

...Would you like a cookie, dear?

Oh no, you'll spoil her, too much sugar is bad for them.

Surely one won't hurt, just this once, Mildred.

And sulky Janine: Oh yes, can I Ma'am, please?

Such a, so well behaved, not surly like some of them, do their job and that's that. (Atwood, *THT* 125)

The scene above gives a fair account of the logic of gratification in Gilead, Janine rigidly adheres to her role as a servile surrogate mother and in exchange she obtains petty compensations. Of course, the greatest recompense for a Handmaid stems from the fulfilment of their duty, that is, succeeding in bearing a healthy child. So much so that Janine, who succeeds in breeding a child, is pardoned of the dreadful destiny of the Handmaids who fail at procreating:

She'll be allowed to nurse her baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward. (Atwood, *THT* 137)

In Gilead disciplines are continuously mapped. By combining a system of punishment-gratification the government forces every Handmaid to pursue a pre-established path, bringing any kind of deviation into the spotlight. "The perpetual penalty that transverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions," Foucault mentions, "compares, differentiates hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*" (*Discipline and Punish* 183). The relevance of the act of normalisation lays on the fact that it "imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure

gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 184). In a nutshell, along with surveillance, normalisation is a key instrument of power because it contributes in identifying, measuring and taking actions if any deviation from the norm happens. The Handmaids' actions are constantly supervised and considered in terms of what is regarded as a correct behaviour in Gilead.

Lastly, the examination combines both the hierarchisation of observation and normalisation of judgement. The fact that the Handmaids are constantly supervised results in a double process: "at the heart of the procedures of discipline," Foucault justifies, "[the examination] manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected" (*Discipline and Punish* 184-185). The Handmaids are subordinated objects in the Gileadean regime whose duty is to contribute to the state's well-being by bearing children for their masters; but at the same time the fact that they are subjected provokes that they are conceived as objects, national resources.

Thus, Gilead assembles itself around a flawless mechanism of surveillance, where every individual is continuously under the gaze, or, at least, under the threat of being seen and, at the same time, they can supervise other individuals at any time. As a consequence, individuals are both subjects and agents of sight simultaneously: the paranoia of being constantly monitored sustains the foundations of Gilead. Citizens, especially the Handmaids, are perpetually examined and accordingly, any prospect of rebellion is exterminated with utmost efficiency.

#### 4. The Handmaid's Tale and Ronald Reagan

*The Handmaid's Tale* was originally published in 1985, during Ronald Reagan's term of office. Many are the authors who claim that the novel is a direct response to the measures taken by the Reagan administration during its mandate<sup>7</sup>. Since the chief aim of the present paper is to examine the correspondence between Reagan's and Trump's administration through the analysis of both the novel and the TV series, understanding the situation of the American politics in the 80s is crucial in the first place. But before I proceed with my task, I find that explaining some background of the politics of the United States is of paramount importance to complete the first part of my assignment: to conduct a thorough analysis of the relation of the novel with the political environment of its time.

Virtually since the beginning, with a few notable exceptions, the political arena in the USA revolves around a two-party system, where the Republican Party (also named the Grand Old Party, hereafter GOP) and the Democratic Party (hereafter DP) take turns to rule the country. The United States is divided in what is commonly referred to as Red States and Blue States, a distinction based on the predomination of certain type of voter in each state. Such differentiation only surfaces the perception of certain states as being liberal (DP) or conservative (GOP). Naturally, the GOP and the DP differ in a wide range of matters such as taxation, gun laws, voter ID laws, same sex marriages and state intervention to name but a few. For the present paper, the question of reproductive rights is particularly significant for it establishes a red line between the parties: while the DP is pro-choice, meaning that they believe women should have access to abortion as well as birth control; the GOP is pro-life, meaning that they oppose to abortion unless in the event of rape, incest or the mother's life being at risk. The main policy of the GOP is highly influenced by religion and tradition. They oppose same-sex marriages to the extent of wanting to ban the use of the term "marriage" regarding a couple of the same sex. Furthermore, they are in favour of obstructing the adoption of children by homosexual couples. By the same token, being under pervasive influence of religion and strongly lobbied by Christian groups the GOP is in favour of restricting abortions.

The turmoil surrounding the issue of reproductive rights has a long history in the USA, many having tried to pass legislation on it. As mentioned before, the USA followed the Anglo-Saxon Common Law meaning that abortion was allowed if performed before the

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Armstrong, Coad, Cooper, or Shelton.

quickenings, that is, before the mother felt the foetus move in her womb, which conferred to the mother power to determine the beginning of the life of the foetus (Freedman 232). In the early stages of the history of the USA, thus, abortion was legal but in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and oddly enough coinciding with Britain passing Lord Ellenborough's Act, which punished abortion with death penalty, some legislation emerged against doctors who supplied abortion-inducing medicines. Passing legislation to control women's reproductive capacity is a clear instance of control of activity since the state penetrates to the very centre of women –the body– and restricts its conduct thus creating a set of behaviours that are acceptable and others which are deviant. The purpose of legislation, therefore, is to create a mass of citizens who acquiesce to function in a certain manner and who reproduce the structures of power of the state, which is precisely what happens with the society in Gilead. When speaking about docile Handmaids in the previous section, we have examined the intricate punishment-reward machinery that sets in motion to secure the regime of truth of Gileadean society.

In Reagan's times, women's activity was controlled by means of the law. In addition to restrictive laws, women's efforts to control their fertility found another obstacle from the field of medicine: American physicians led state campaigns against termination based on morality. The Comstock Act of 1873, named after the creator of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice Anthony Comstock, prevented the circulation, production or publication of obscene materials, in which information regarding abortion and contraception was included. By impeding that such material circulated, another strategy to control women's activity is put to function: hindrance to access to knowledge. As analysed before, many are the examples in the novel in which June craves for information<sup>8</sup>. Even if June's desire for knowledge finds its source in utter monotony, her inability to access any kind of information has got one main consequence: if she does not know what is going on within the regime, she is completely unable to even conceive an alternative and her subordination to the state's interest is thus secured (Pettersson 10). Similarly, if women in Reagan's times were banned from receiving proper information about abortion and contraception, their adherence to the reproductive policies of the state was certain. As Aunt Lydia used to say "Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you..." (Atwood, *THT* 205). In other words, if pregnant women were not aware of the options they had regarding abortion

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, in pp. 29, 53, 82, 198

and contraception, they would not be encouraged to have them and for that reason women's activity would stick to the state's interest.

Hence, "new state laws banning abortion forced the practice underground from the 1870s to the 1970s," which quite obviously did not deter abortions but made them extremely dangerous for women (Freedman 233). In 1916 Margaret Sanger, an Irish-background working-class nurse, opened the first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn, which was unfortunately raided and shut nine days after its opening. Having served 30 days in jail, Sanger toured the country to share her vision on reproductive rights and eventually, in 1923, opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in Manhattan, which aimed at providing birth control devices to women and collecting data about them ("About Us"). With the economic depression of the 1930s, family planning became pivotal because families struggled to provide for their offspring, which contributed to Sanger's organisation assuming a decisive role. June also reflects about "Take Back the Night", a movement that originated in Philadelphia in 1975 and "...sought to provide a venue for women to speak out against sexual violence" (Atwood, *THT* 129-130; Harrington). A few pages afterwards, June remembers her mother coming back from a march wounded and claiming: "You can't stick your hand through a glass window without getting cut" (189-190). These words reaffirm the idea of active resistance to assimilation to the system while, at the same time, reinforce the fact that those earnestly engaged in the fight against it do in all probability suffer loss. Just as Sanger jeopardised her well-being for the sake of other women, June's mother perhaps is the incarnation of the idea of resistance in the novel.

But there are also many cases of resistance within the Gileadean system itself. From the first lines of the book we learn that the Handmaids have a network of whispers and lip-reading which is repeatedly referred to throughout the narration<sup>9</sup>. Even June seems to be surprised with the effectiveness of the Handmaids' communication system: "There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances" (139). What is more, in the pages that follow June narrates Moira's escape. Moira becomes a symbol of resistance and hope for the Handmaids, she is a "fantasy," "lava beneath the crust of daily life" (264, 254). Similar to June's mother, Moira is also a non-conformist who tries to attack an Aunt and flee the country, but unfortunately her attempt is a complete failure. Both dissidents, June's mother and Moira, face dreadful destinies in Gilead: the Colonies and Jezebel's. Needless to

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<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in pp. 14, 83, 100, 129, 177, 211, 212.

say, the organisation of Mayday also constitutes an outstanding instance of resistance to Gileadean regime since it endeavours to give Gileadean insurgents a social circle of confidence while coordinating attacks against the regime<sup>10</sup>. Another act of defiance which is widely depicted in the novel is suicide<sup>11</sup>. Yet the story under analysis itself is the greatest representative of resistance in Gilead. As elaborated in the Historical Notes, the story itself is supposed to be narrated in some tapes and at some point June records the following: “By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I am telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (279). By applying such a cartesian reasoning, June communicates her desire for a listener because only a hearer’s existence would confirm in turn her own being.

Therewith we are prompted to consider the landmark case *Roe v. Wade*, in which the US Supreme Court ruled that abortion was a constitutional right in 1973<sup>12</sup>. Norma McCorvey, named Jane Roe for the judicial procedure, was a 20-year-old Texan who wanted to terminate pregnancy in 1969, but abortion was legal in Texas only if the mother’s health was at stake. McCorvey’s filed a case against the district attorney in Dallas, Henry Wade, who enforced the Texan abortion laws. In 1971 the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case and in 1973 a verdict was reached in a 7-2 decision: during the first trimester (weeks 1-13) and the second trimester (weeks 14-27) women had the right to terminate pregnancy, and during the third trimester (weeks 28-40) the state could prohibit abortion except when necessary to prevent a mother’s life or health. According to Freedman, “within a year of ruling the mortality rate for abortion fell from eighteen to three deaths per hundred thousand women, making the procedure far less risky than childbirth” (237). In the years since, *Roe v. Wade* has been modified, but never overturned.

One of the most important alteration to *Roe v. Wade* came from another landmark case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. A group of physicians who performed abortions sued the governor of Pennsylvania, Robert Casey, for the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act of 1982, which imposed five provisions to abortion providers and abortion-seeking women: informed consent, reception of state-published information at least 24 hours before performing the procedure, parental consent if the woman was under-age, spousal consent and keeping report and record. The District Court concluded that the five restrictions were

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<sup>10</sup> Mentioned in pp. 53, 212, 305.

<sup>11</sup> Discussed in pp. 17, 18.

<sup>12</sup> This part is largely based upon the Netflix documentary *Reversing Roe*.

unconstitutional, but the Court of Appeals determined that only the spousal notification requirement was unlawful, consequently leaving the decision in the hands of the Supreme Court. The essential holding in *Roe v. Wade* was reaffirmed based on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and five out of nine justices resolved that spousal notification was unconstitutional, but they dissented in the rest of the points. The remaining 4 justices believed that *Roe v. Wade*'s initial holding was incorrect and thus the five restrictions were, in fact, constitutional. In conclusion, in a 5-to-4 decision the Court reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade* but most of the provisions in Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act were upheld. In conclusion, *Roe v. Wade* seems to be hanging in a very thin thread for it is subject to the interpretation of the active justices and, as mentioned before, these are nominated by the President and the Senate. Therefore, depending on who holds the power of the State, *Roe v. Wade* sails in more or less troubled waters. Another thing to consider at this point is that even if abortion is technically still legal in the USA, each state restricts it at various degrees, which translates to insecurity for women who seek abortions, especially those at harsher living situations<sup>13</sup>. Undoubtedly, those women in privileged conditions will still be able to have abortions on demand by travelling to countries where abortion is legal and safe. In addition, as mentioned in the documentary mentioned before, *Reversing Roe*, a more subtle way of impeding that abortions take place was to close down the clinics where they are carried out or, otherwise, convince physicians not to perform such procedures. A straightforward example is the fact that in 7 states<sup>14</sup> there is only one abortion clinic.

Soon after the decision of *Roe v. Wade* abortion came to be threatened from two flanks: “right wing politicians seized on the highly charged issue to catalyse opposition to a range of liberal policies, while religious fundamentalists shifted the debate from the rights of women to the rights of the foetus” (Freedman 240). The debate at the heart of the issue of abortion is at what specific point of gestation foetus was in fact considered to be alive, and therefore its rights had to be protected and safeguarded. Thereby, another agent, and the most significant opponent to abortion, got involved in the question of reproduction: Christian lobbies. Back in 1986 there were several Christian outbursts in which they attempted against abortions since, they believed, abortion was contrary to the 10 Commandments. According to these any life whatsoever, considering God's interference and will in its creation, is sacred

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<sup>13</sup> For a first-hand description of the consequences of not having access to universal, free and safe abortion prior to *Roe v. Wade* read testimonies in Messer, E. and Kathryn E. May. *Back Rooms: Voices From the Illegal Abortion Era*. Prometheus Books, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia and Mississippi.

and it constitutes a moral obligation to ensure its well-being, so much so taking into account the foetus' vulnerability.

At this point, it is difficult to ignore the striking similarities between these events and the novel under analysis. In both cases, a group of Christian religious fundamentalists try to impose their worldview and aim at controlling women's bodies as well as women's choices under the pretext of acting in the name of God. By privileging the Bible, several movements, Operation Rescue among them, claimed to defend the life of the unborn babies and as such struggled to close down abortion clinics. What remained at the core of Operation Rescue was their aim of altering the regime of truth of the American society, Bible in hand they sought to sanction every conduct that was not acceptable under Christian beliefs: equality between genders, non-traditional gender roles, non-heterosexual sexual orientation, abortion to name but a few. Anti-abortionists wanted to control women's and doctors' activities. They lectured women who were about to go through abortions, criminalised their behaviour and ostracised them, organised exposure protests at the clinics' door, intimidated and harassed physicians who were performing abortions. As time passed, the strategy of Operation Rescue became more aggressive and confrontational. The uproar resulted in the death of George Tiller, a gynaecologist who performed abortions shot dead because of it. To this must be added two women who were killed in Boston, a doctor who was murdered in Pensacola and a doctor and an escort who were killed in Florida. Similarly, any threat to Gileadean regime of truth is immediately punished. And as mentioned before, the severity of the punishment increments proportionally to the relevance of the crime committed: for trying to escape Moira has her feet harmed, for practicing abortions or preaching other religions, death (Atwood, *THT* 102, 42, 210).

Ronald Reagan was born in 1911 in Illinois into a poor and deeply religious family which was involved with a fundamentalist sect named the Disciples of Christ. According to Will Bunch, an award-winning political journalist who wrote *Tear Down This Myth: The Right-Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy*, a book in which he questions Reagan's status as a legend in the American collective imagination, Reagan's childhood and fundamentalist upbringing left an unmistakable imprint on his personality making him a deeply ambitious, yet a strangely distant man (ch. 2). Prior to attending a disciples-oriented liberal Eureka College, where he majored economics and sociology, he started to work as a lifeguard, which as reported by his son Ron Reagan contributed to outlining Reagan's "big-brother" nature (*Reagan*). Besides being the head of the Screen Actors Guild, Ronald Reagan began to work



for General Electric, an American multinational, as a salesman. He used to tour the country convincing workers about free enterprise. Just as most of the experts featured in the *Reagan* documentary agree, it was the path from actor to salesman, passing through being president, which shaped his character as a politician later on. Coste summarises and remarks that

Both his personal life (he was born in 1911 in rural Illinois, in a deeply Evangelical family) and his Hollywood years (where his success was largely based on his appeal to female audiences, as Warner Brothers' publicists marketed him as the all-American heterosexual hero, "tall and handsome," with "nothing of the pretty boy about him" since "virility [was] his outstanding characteristic") explain that Ronald Reagan considered his popularity and his success with women as the most normal thing in the world (Vaughn 70). This tended to give him a very traditional vision of gender roles, rather typical of the white, middle and upper-class post-war United States (1).

But the key turning point to Reagan's political career came in 1964, when he spoke on behalf of Barry Goldwater, and gave a momentous speech which left a mark on Americans, who began to see Reagan as a politician who would attract great attention. And indeed, in 1965 he announced his campaign for governor of California for the following year. When Reagan got elected 1966, he tried to fix Californian economy by freezing government hiring and also, as opposed to his promises during the electoral campaign, raising the rate of taxes. But indeed, one of the most noteworthy events in the years of Reagan's governorship happened when he signed the California Therapeutic Abortion Act, in 1968, which made abortion more accessible to Californian women. The reform sought to prevent that women went through unsafe abortions and made abortion legal, in a rather ambiguous way, if the mother's wellbeing was at any risk. In a 1967 analysis conducted by Pendleton, the California Therapeutic Act is examined in detail. According to Pendleton, the law multiplied and broadened the situations in which abortion was considered to be acceptable, considering the development in the field of psychiatry and the realisation that pregnancy might indeed be detrimental for the mental health of some women (245-246). In case of rape and incest therapeutic abortions were granted, but in the specific case of statutory rape, that is, a voluntary sexual intercourse in which one of the partners is under the age of consent, there was a blatant contradiction in the application of the law: the age of consent in California in determining statutory rape was 18; however, the application of the therapeutic act was limited to girls under the age of 15 (247). Thus, I could not agree more with Pendleton when he claims that "[i]t is unreasonable for a state to declare girls under the age of 18 legally incapable of consenting to sexual intercourse but to hold them responsible

for their conduct by denying them an abortion unless under the age of 15 or 16” (248). Just as in the book under analysis, had Janine been a real Californian woman she would have been lucky enough to be granted an abortion after having been gang-raped at the age of 14 (Atwood, *THT* 81). Contrary to acknowledging Janine her position of victim and relieving the burden of being pregnant of her rapist like the California Therapeutic Act granted, the Aunts revert Janine’s status as victim and run one of the most heart-breaking and wicked scenes of the book:

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

*Her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.*

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

*She did. She did. She did.*

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*.

Last week, Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom. Hands behind her back, where we could all see her, her face and dripping nose. (82)

Janine is slut –and victim– shamed at once from the part of the rest of the Handmaids, as it happens. The result is that Janine ends up believing that she is guilty of having been raped, which is precisely what the California Therapeutic Act implicitly suggested (82). Not only did the California Therapeutic Act slut- and victim-shame women, but also in “[c]ountries such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Pakistan operating Sharia Law have often punished rape victims as responsible for their own plight” (Dray). As described by many women in *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era*, in the society of the 60s and 70s becoming pregnant was solely responsibility of women. The same is implied in Atwood’s novel, only women –Handmaids– are responsible for getting pregnant. But contrary to what happened in Reagan’s times, when women were held responsible if they got pregnant, Handmaids are to blame if they do not succeed in such an enterprise. Examples of this are Serena telling June that her stay at the Waterfords’ is about to expire or Serena blaspheming when she suggests that Fred might be sterile (Atwood, *THT* 214-215). Correspondingly, Hammer discusses the idea of guilt by referring to the scene where Fred explains that establishing Gilead was essential because men were not necessary anymore in the old society. According to the scholar, the fact that American men were no longer needed

by women provoked the coup of the Sons of Jacob, which means that ultimately the change of regime was, in fact, women's fault (Pettersen 22).

Another restriction that the California Therapeutic Act introduced, which was aimed at legally protecting the foetus, was that abortions could not be performed once the period of 20 weeks after conception expired (Pendleton 249). Pendleton argued that one of the reasons for imposing such a limitation might have been to procure "support from those opposed to the passage of the legislation on religious and moral grounds" and also a reflection of an increasing tendency in law of recognising the rights of the foetus as a separate biological entity (249). As regards defective babies, the law prohibited that abortions could be performed for eugenic reasons since it included a certain degree of speculation from the part of doctors (248). The idea of abnormal babies reminds of the Unbabies in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When Janine is about to give birth, June reflects about the Unbabies and states: "There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing, anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term (Atwood, *THT* 122). In the Republic of Gilead every pregnancy whatsoever must be taken to its end even if the baby is to be born with serious and life-hampering problems. Just as Teresa Gibert –a highly prolific scholar who is particularly devoted to examining Atwood's work– explains, children and childhood are often a source of "...fear, anxiety and painful awakening, as well as cruelty" in Atwood's literary work, in *The Handmaid's Tale* babies, especially unbabies, originate feelings of uneasiness and often aversion ("Unraveling the Mysteries" 39). In the event of having an Unbaby, June reflects that "We didn't know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly, away" (Atwood, *THT* 123). What this quote suggests appears to be contrary to one of the indications of the California Therapeutic Act, which used to be against the practice of eugenics. It seems like the Republic of Gilead sought to preserve only perfect individuals of the species.

The result of the act was that "from a total of 518 legal abortions in California in 1967, the number of abortions would soar to an annual average of 100,000 in the remaining years of Reagan's two terms –more abortions than in any U.S. state prior to the advent of *Roe v. Wade*" (Kengor and Clark). It was perhaps the law's loose interpretation that rocketed abortion numbers so substantially. At this point I find it interesting to remark Linda Greenhouse's words in the documentary *Reversing Roe*: "California governor Ronald Reagan actually signed a reform bill. I think one think that people don't realize today is that

it was the Republican party that was the pro-choice party. And there were states with Republican governors who passed abortion reforms” (16:42-17:14). Interestingly, years afterwards Reagan admitted that had he been more experienced, he would not have signed the reform and confessed that he had been subject to pressure from some political allies (Bunch ch. 2, Coste 3).

In any case, having lost against Ford as a presidential candidate in 1976, Reagan embarked on the task of preparing for the presidency of 1980. The 1979 announcement for presidential candidacy established the foundations of Reagan’s later administration: a firm rejection of government intrusion in economic matters, willingness to cut down taxes and a fierce anticommunism. Reagan’s electoral campaign relied heavily on the Christian Right, which had emerged in the 1970s and had become the major Evangelical lobby of the time (Diamond in Coste 2). Two points had become crucial to win the Christian Right’s support during the electoral campaign: first, Reagan’s compromise to ban abortion in every state of the USA and second, Reagan’s rejection of the ERA<sup>15</sup> on the basis of it being prejudicial for women (Coste 2-3). At this point I feel forced to remark that none of the points that the Christian Right sought to achieve with Reagan’s presidency do, in fact, let women choose for themselves. In the same manner that the Handmaid’s in Gilead, who are forced to have children and be under male subordination, have no right to choose under the totalitarian regime, women under Reagan would not be able to make any choice whatsoever. In the 1980 presidential debate of Reagan and Carter, Reagan affirmed that

I am for women's rights. But I would like to call the attention of the people to the fact that so-called simple amendment could be used by mischievous men to destroy discriminations that properly belong, by law, to women, respecting the physical differences between the two sexes, labor laws that protect them against doing things that would be physically harmful to them. Those could all be challenged by men. (*Ronald Reagan/Jimmy Carter Presidential Debate*)

The aforementioned fiercely protective personality of Reagan’s is perceivable. But behind such an apparently naive and well-meaning commentary lies a generally accepted notion of women as incapable of protecting themselves, intensely vulnerable creatures unable to make sensible decisions. It almost feels as if Reagan felt that women were like small children, dependent and reckless. In an article where the use of the metaphor in *The*

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<sup>15</sup> Equal Rights Amendment.

*Handmaid's Tale* is analysed, Gibert points out to the fact that June's narration is laden with references to Handmaids as if they are children ("Madres e Hijos" 479). One of the scenes in which I believe the metaphor of Handmaids as children is perceived straightforwardly, out of the vast array of examples that Gibert provides, is the event in the Commander's office, which has been discussed before in this paper: when June is summoned to Fred's office to play *Scrabble*, she submissively attends the meeting, just as a little child would when summoned by the headmaster of the school (Gibert, "Madres e Hijos" 480). It shall not be forgotten that in such a scene in which the Handmaid is treated like an infant Commander Fred becomes a dominant God-like figure, who is in charge of both protecting and punishing her actions. Just as Fred treats June as a subordinate defenceless child, Reagan performed the function of "women's protector," stripping women of agency over their bodies, choices and decisions. There is another example in the novel where June is treated condescendingly. After the coup, June is fired, her money is confiscated and given to her husband. June and Luke have the following conversation:

You don't know what it's like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn't crying. Also, I couldn't put my arms around him.

It's only a job, he said, trying to soothe me.

I guess you get all my money, I said...

Hush, he said... You know I'll always take care of you.

I thought, already he's starting to patronize me. (Atwood, *THT* 188)

This quote is highly interesting for many reasons. To begin with, June is completely outraged and unable to do anything about the fact of having been dispossessed of her job and money. She is also starting to feel resentment against Luke, which implicitly points at the fact that June knows that it is her biological body which determines that she is no longer suitable for work and possessions, she is no longer to bear any sort of power. Luke, seemingly well-intentioned, tells June that she will be looked after, which she feels is a highly patronising sentence. Some pages later, June's bitterness against Luke grows. Luke tries to comfort June, but his strategy backfires: "We still have... he said. But he didn't go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn't be saying *we*, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him" (191). June is acutely aware of her being the only victim of the situation, she has been deprived of work and possessions because she is a woman. Surmund notes that June objectifies herself when she states that she feels like a doll,

thus reinforcing the idea of being women being property owned by men (9). And, in fact, she immediately comes to the following realisation: “He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, any more. Instead, I am his” (Atwood, *THT* 192). Her job and possessions sustain the balance of the relationship, having them removed results in June becoming less favoured and, therefore, under Luke’s complete domination.

Eventually, Reagan was associated with the Moral Majority, an organisation founded in 1979 to spread traditional Christian family values, opposition to ERA, rejection of abortion in all cases, disapproval of homosexuality and proselytism of non-Christian to conversion to Christianity. In fact, he publicly supported the views of the organisation (Coste 2, Miller). The similarity between the precepts of the Moral Majority and the Sons of Jacob in the novel is extraordinary, as both crave for “a return to traditional values” and represent the highest echelons of the religious organisation (Atwood, *THT* 17). By the same token, both groups had power over paramount decisions regarding the course of action to be taken in order to fulfil their objectives. The Moral Majority and the Sons of Jacob wanted to change the *habitus* inscribed in the society’s regime of truth. In order to return to traditional Christian principles, both organisations began by re-educating women into a traditionally assembled *habitus* where women were expected to submit to male subordination. June constantly reflects about the malleability of the *habitus*, and especially the easiness with which Handmaids were getting used to their new context, even as early as during the indoctrination process in the Red Centre: “Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (143). But, as a matter of fact, Aunt Lydia had already pointed at the flexible nature of the *habitus* at the very beginning of the novel: “Ordinary...is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (43). Later on, June thinks about working and considers the following: “All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing” (182). Having a job was usual before the coup, it was conceived within the *habitus* of women; in Gilead, the fact that women work is by no means part of the *habitus*; women’s *habitus* has been altered. June also deliberates about such a change in their *habitus*: “I’m a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me, and it all seems just as quaint, from here, and I am just as obsessive about it” (239). With all due probability June’s own resistance to accept the change is what makes her be so fixated with practices of her past.

Another aspect worth mentioning about the *habitus* is the fact that for the second generation of Gileadeans sticking to it was certainly going to be simpler. Quoting Aunt Lydia's words and June's reflections about them at length:

You are a transitional generation...It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way.

She said: Because they won't want things they can't have. (127)

As commented previously in this paper, having no knowledge about alternatives only reinforces the *status quo*, the second generation's adherence to the *habitus* will be painless. Some pages afterwards in the novel, Aunt Lydia elaborates the idea and presents her expectation of Gilead becoming an idyllic society where women's *habitus* is based on peaceful cooperation and coexistence while the community's child-bearing problems heal (171). In short, both the Moral Majority and the Sons of Jacob presented highly powerful organisations capable of remodelling the *habitus* of women in the quest for reshaping the regime of truth of their respective states.

Although some authors such as Miller claim that the Christian lobbyist's persuasive power was perhaps somewhat overestimated, it is undeniable that the Moral Majority had a significant influence in two respects: it was decisive in twelve of the seventeen states that voted Reagan instead of Carter (Miller), and contributed in putting the question of reproductive rights along with issues regarding the LGTB community in the national political spotlight. However, such connections provoked a growing backlash especially from the part of female voters. Reagan's campaign advisors warned the candidate about the fact that an overwhelming majority of Americans supported the ERA (Coste 4). In an effort to rescue female votes, Reagan created the Women's Policy Board which aimed at making Reagan's campaign more woman-friendly but committed the tactical error of encompassing principally moderate Republicans who supported the abortion rights and the ERA. The inevitable outcome of such a move was that conservative groups such as the Moral Majority felt outraged and forced Reagan to create the Women's Policy Committee, on this occasion formed by anti-abortion and anti-ERA members. In reality, even if Reagan tried to gain women's acceptance, his message did not touch women deeply since "the voting pattern of women proved quite distinct from that of men, with a majority of female voters choosing the

pro-women's rights candidate (Jimmy Carter) over the conservative one" (Coste 5). Be as it may, Reagan won the 1980 election in a landslide: he won 43,642,639 popular votes, 489 electoral votes and won 44 states ("United States presidential election of 1980" [Britannica]). What is more, the same year Republicans obtained control the US Senate for the first time in 28 years. The question of abortion hung on a very thin and dangerous thread.

As previously examined, in the years of Reagan's governorship, the "Dutch" had passed The California Therapeutic Abortion Act which allowed Californian women to have abortions practically on demand, however, once Reagan came into office those who had offered him assistance during the campaign wanted a retribution:

Reagan knew, though, that his new coalition partners wanted some clear victories. A few of the president's initial appointments offered hope. James Watt, a Pentecostal and a strong conservative, joined the cabinet as Secretary of the Interior, antiabortion activist C. Everett Koop became surgeon general, and Robert Billings landed a position in the Department of Education. (Miller)

The fact is that Reagan failed at addressing women as a separate politic body with specific needs (Coste 5). One of the first measures taken by the 40<sup>th</sup> president was cutting the social programs which targeted those at greater social risk, a vast majority of which were single mothers and poor minority women. No wonder why the president's popularity among these groups plummeted dramatically. In addition, during Reagan's presidency women's groups fought to pass the Women's Economic Equity Act (EEA), which sought to relieve the burden of working women. Having been brought up under Christian precepts, Reagan was deeply convinced of the roles and duties each gender was destined to fulfil and, according to Coste, one of the main problems that the EEA incarnated was precisely the fact that it recorded the evolution of gender roles in America (6). Just as every woman in Gilead has her own role in society, with its own responsibilities and duties, Reagan genuinely believed that women in the 80s had to assume that their role was to provide affection and support, take care of the household and bear children for their husbands. These three ideas are portrayed respectively in the main three characters in the novel: Wives, Marthas and Handmaids. In Gilead, Wives are expected to be compassionate and supportive, Marthas obedient and complaisant and Handmaids selfless and resigned. In other words, the three main female characters embody traditional female stereotypes, which are actively promoted by sacred texts. Just as Aunt Lydia fantasises with a future where women would stick to their roles and live harmoniously (171), with the recovery of the American economy in the 80s



Reagan expected that women would return to take care of the household and offspring responsibilities, but due to the needs of the economy women had left their role as homemakers and had entered the workplace with the intention of staying.

When Reagan was elected for presidency antiabortion groups came into action. The groups had two objectives: firstly, to reconstitute the Supreme Court with justices that were friendly to their interests; and secondly, to conquer anti-abortion restrictions gradually (*Reversing Roe*). In 1983, in coincidence with the 10-year anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Reagan published a book named *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* in which he presented his views against abortion. His arguments against termination were deeply rooted in Christian morality and were in line with those expounded by the Christian Right: abortion as an act of assassination, the unconstitutionality of *Roe v. Wade*, a comparison of abortion and slavery and the relationship between abortion and eugenics (Coste 8). Following after this, parenthood –and especially motherhood– was a natural and inborn characteristic of human beings for the Christian Right, which is remarked in the biblical verse “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,” which of course is also mentioned in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Genesis 1:28; Atwood, *THT* 99). In fact, many are the scenes in which women’s biological destiny of bearing children is underlined throughout the novel. At the very beginning when Janine is pregnant and the rest of the Handmaids are envious of her condition June reflects that Janine incarnates the fact that, in June’s words, “...we too can be saved” (Atwood, *THT* 36). Furthermore, when Moira is punished for trying to escape the Red Centre, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that “For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential,” probably because Handmaids are just “two-legged wombs...sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (102, 146). What is more, at the Red Centre Aunt Lydia reminds the Handmaids that the Wives will surely be bitter towards them because “... they are defeated women. They have been unable ...” (146). Even if Aunt Lydia is not capable of finishing the sentence, this last pause carries a crucial implication: Wives are indeed failed women because they are sterile, because they are not suitable for breeding purposes. By the same token, women who were able to bear children but willingly chose not to comply with the sacred duty in former times are considered to be “sluts” by Aunt Lydia (123). Towards the end of the novel, when Fred is justifying the rationale of the regime, he claims that in Gilead women “... [are] protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace” (231). The biological destiny of having children is inscribed in Gileadean women, and such was the intention of the Christian Right as well.

Once Reagan took power he stood in the middle-ground in terms of reproductive rights since losing the votes of Christian Right to the DP was practically impossible and confronting the growing popularity of the feminist movement was political suicide. The fact that Reagan strategically took no stance at the issue of reproductive rights verges on utter hypocrisy since he actively mingled with the Christian Right from the beginning of the campaign, while at the same time he firmly declared that he was in favour of women's rights. I hereby pause again to have a look at the novel under analysis. Gilead rests its foundations upon a system which is based on the privileging of the Bible, by the word of the Bible each citizen of the regime is expected to act in a specific way, each and every instance of the characters' *habitus* is governed by the Biblical authority. Then again, if we have a closer look at the characters, we realise that none of the character does believe in the principles and values of the regime, or, at least, not entirely (Pettersson 24). As already mentioned, even those who are apparently committed to the system are hypocritical and bend the rules to fit their needs: the Commander with every illegality he commits in his office and Jezebel's, Serena when blaspheming about Fred's sterility and pushing June to have sexual intercourse with the chauffeur, and even Nick, who actively engages in a relationship with a Handmaid, which is of course tacitly forbidden. Notwithstanding the most serious matter, in Barbé Hammer words is that

an allegedly profoundly Christian society ironically transforms every citizens into a sinner in so far as each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system. This is, of course, the supreme irony of Atwood's fictional future world; this is a theocracy where not one person is devout and where such notions as faith and morality simply have no meaning. (in Pettersson 24)

Another strategic move of Reagan's was the appointment of justice Sandra Day O'Connor<sup>16</sup> to the Supreme Court, which was celebrated by many women while reproached by religious conservatives. Let us not delude ourselves, such move was a mere matter of tactics again. During his campaign Reagan had promised to nominate the first woman to the Supreme Court, which would be of the uttermost importance in the history of American women, and the fact that he honoured his word is only a matter of numbers: "in the presidential election of 1984...Ronald Reagan won a majority of the women's vote (58%)" (Coste 10). It is interesting that Reagan wanted women to go back to traditional Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, justice O' Connor had previously claimed to be against abortion and conservatives saw an opportunity to overturn *Roe v. Wade* when she was appointed to the Supreme Court. Contrary to expectations, in a case in 1989 justice O' Connor sustained *Roe v. Wade*.

values, yet he made some specific exceptions. Inevitably, one thinks about the Aunts' status in Gilead, where they hold immense power and help maintain the regime. Gilead takes representatives from the ranks of the oppressed –women– in order to carry out an effective counterattack on the cooperative and supportive efforts of the abused. O' Connor's case might have been a small allowance in exchange of guaranteeing power, which inevitably reminds me of June's words: "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood, *THT* 285).

In terms of the issue of international reproductive rights, the Global Gag Rule –also called the Mexico City policy– was critical during Reagan's presidency. Such policy's purpose was to block US funding of NGOs that revolved around the issue of abortion, counselling and assisting women who sought to terminate pregnancy, unless pregnancy derived from rape, incest or the mother's life was in danger. As a result NGOs were –are<sup>17</sup>– seriously impeded from giving conscientious support to women and “force[d] organizations to choose whether to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care and education without U.S. funding, or comply with the policy in order to continue accepting U.S. funds,” at the expense of neglecting women's health (“What Is the Global Gag Rule?”). Since its implementation in 1984 the policy has been in force intermittently, determined by the political party in charge (*Prescribing Chaos* 8). In fact, taking into consideration that the Global Gag Rule is a presidential memorandum it can only be withdrawn and re-established by the president. Hence, the intermittent nature of the directive in Reagan's times resulted in discontinuing health services, dissolution of NGO partnerships, and interruption of advocacy efforts (*Prescribing Chaos* 8). The Global Gag Rule impacted mostly on low-income women, especially women belonging to minorities, and contrary to expectations, the policy increased the number of unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions as well as the rates of maternal mortality<sup>18</sup> (“What Is the Global Gag Rule?”). In line with this, stigmatised individuals such as members of the LGTB+ community or sex workers had their health compromised as they are generally more exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV and AIDS services' funding comes mainly from US budget<sup>19</sup> (“What Is the Global Gag Rule?”). Similar to the previously examined, Jezebel's constitutes another example of sheer

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<sup>17</sup> Note that the paragraph is written in past tense, but it may also be understood as a present tense.

<sup>18</sup> Several thorough studies have been conducted recently regarding the international impact of the Global Gag Rule see K. Jones, 31-69; Bendavid et al., 873-880; van der Meulen Rodger; Lo and Barry, 1399-1401 and Abdool Karim and Singh, 387-389 to name but a few.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed list of the effect of the Global Gag Rule consult *Prescribing Chaos in Global Health*, pp. 9-10.

hypocrisy of the Gileadean regime. In such a brothel all the pretensions of the regime fall into a state of pause, with all due probability every principle praised by the Sons of Jacob are viciously compromised. If Fred boasts of having designed a system in which women are protected from the dangers of former times, Jezebel's constitutes a place where the threats of sexual violence from previous times still take place and the Commander simply attributes the existence of such a barbaric place as Jezebel's to the biological necessities of men (Pettersson 25). Identically, as I previously explored, Reagan took pride in acting in favour of women, of protecting women's well-being, yet none of the laws and policies that he passed seemed to have even the slightest objective of protection, which is analogous to what happened in Gilead.

The political-judicial system of the USA reveals considerable complexity in terms of integrating changes into its structure, wherefore overthrowing *Roe v. Wade* constituted a long-term goal which would consist in a lot of small, yet steady steps towards its fulfilment. In Reagan's times religious fundamentalists realised that they would need both small-scale actions, such as shutting down abortion clinics and persuading physicians to cease to perform abortions, and large-scale actions such as prompting that an anti-abortion candidate came into presidential office. Their opposition to abortion took root in an understanding of abortion as an offence to God and the Commandments, consequently fanatics appropriated the fight for the rights of the foetus –closely sustained by a development in the sphere of law– and believed they had complete legitimacy over the conflict. The Sons of Jacob, on the other hand, seize power in a coup and remove the figure of the president along with the political-judicial structures of the country to install a totalitarian regime, where the upper echelons of society are in charge of the system. Prior to attaining presidency, Reagan had signed the California Therapeutic Act as governor of California which granted abortion in a wider range of situations apart from rape and incest. But Reagan's anti-abortion national agenda was limited to the executive branch since Reagan's proposals were not popular in Congress, and the reality is that he did not, in fact, divert as many resources as might be expected from the part of a pro-life candidate to the task of overruling *Roe v. Wade*. Even if the Christian groups of the time wanted to change the *habitus* of women by means of introducing restrictive reproductive laws, which would be supported by the Bible, in pursuit of changing the regime of truth of the USA, the truth is that their efforts did not yield any fruit whatsoever. Unlike the Sons of Jacob, who succeed in reshaping the Handmaids' mindset and remodel them into completely subordinated and docile beings, Reagan and his

aides completely unable to bring women back to their traditional roles and duties. Besides, one might recall that Reagan actually nominated justice O' Connor, who sustained *Roe v. Wade* and consequently, it appears not to be completely absurd to affirm that Reagan's anti-abortion agenda was, in fact, carried out more attentively outside national frontiers with the imposition of the Global Gag Rule.

It is clear, however, that Atwood shaped her novel taking the aforementioned events, if not literally, at least into serious consideration. As we have already seen, many and varied are the events that correlate in the novel and in reality during Reagan's times: a group of powerful religious fanatics that try to impose their conservative worldview through privileging certain texts, imposing docility to the female social body by means of an extraordinarily complex punishment-reward machinery and an iron-fist control of activity.

## 5. *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series and Donald Trump

We live in a time when the possibility of modifying highly valuable written literary pieces into audio-visual pieces is within reach, making such masterpieces accessible and, probably, more comprehensible to a larger audience. The media productions, additionally, by means of a wide array of techniques, allow the director of a certain piece to focus on specific elements of the narration whereas others might be, deliberately or not, cast into shade. Throughout this section I intend to analyse only some scenes of the TV series, many of which –for obvious reasons– correlate with scenes previously mentioned in the analysis of the book and Ronald Reagan.

In April 2017, a TV series which would revolutionise not only the media scene, but also the socio-political arena was broadcast for the first time: *The Handmaid's Tale*. Under the guidance of Margaret Atwood, writer of the homonymous book, Bruce Miller created the TV series for Hulu, an American video on demand service. The success of the TV series came swiftly, partly because of the authenticity with which the severity of the atmosphere of the plot is captured and partly because of Elizabeth Moss's outstanding performance as June, a part which has granted Moss two Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe Award. It did not take long for the announcement of the renewal for a second season, and subsequently in 2018 and more recently in 2019 the TV series has been renewed for a third and fourth season respectively. The book is not lagging behind. In view of the recent emergence in popularity of the novel, Margaret Atwood has published the sequel to the *Handmaid's Tale* in 2019 named *The Testaments*, in which 15 years after the events in the first novel Aunt Lydia, Agnes –June's oldest daughter– and Daisy –June's youngest daughter– narrate their experiences. The seemingly endless conflict between Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* or the series is out of question since they appear to be complementary rather than incompatible. The first season of the series was inspired in the *Handmaid's Tale*, but the following seasons have taken a different course of action and narrate events that would supposedly happen in the years between the first and second novel. Thus, both pieces' complementarity is noteworthy since hitherto the series is, in fact, acting as a bridge between both novels, filling the gap, putting affairs in order and tying up all the loose ends. In *The Handmaid's Tale* June offers a first-hand comprehensive account of her life in Gilead, but it is the series which succeeds in blending June's words and audio-visual material, making the story more appealing to the senses and, thus, presumably more captivating. The greatest accomplishment of the series is the determination with which the ceremonies are

represented, the meticulousness and attention to detail of which is truly remarkable. Moreover, when reading the novel the reader relies completely on their imagination, whereas the TV series might perhaps assist in the way a viewer might convey images and might direct attention towards details that would otherwise remain virtually unnoticed.

Even if the novel was popular at its time, I would venture to say that it is actually the series which has reopened the debate and has brought it to the spotlight, probably due to the reach of the novel's popularity thanks to media platforms. Apart from the unprecedented accessibility and the impressive range of influence of the series, the current socio-political arena has also paved the way for the ongoing popularity of the series. The unfolding of the series takes place by combining both June's inner narration –we are supposed to listen to her own thoughts– and specific scenes of the story, which provides a first-hand report of what living in Gilead is like. The course of action is very slow, probably in an attempt to highlight the monotony of the life in the regime, contrary to the flashbacks to former times, which are notoriously more fluid and dynamic. Flashbacks are used repeatedly in order to compare present time in Gilead and the time before, there is always some kind of correlation between the events happening in Gilead and the flashback portrayed. Close-up shots are widely used probably to emphasise the loneliness characters –specially Handmaids– are subject to in Gilead. By means of using such type of shot the aforementioned atomisation of Handmaids is dramatised. It is remarkable that the main character –June– conveys feelings while at the same time hiding these emotions from the rest of the characters in the scene. In order to transmit feelings and emotions the series also relies largely on light and music. The former leads viewers in understanding what a scene is going to be like: if the setting is dark, something dreadful is doomed to happen; if, however, the setting takes place in broad light, the events are probably more positive, generally speaking. In fact, many of the scenes depicted in daylight are somehow related to resistance. In many of the dark scenes there are windows through which light shines intensely, as to remark God's authority and power while in the meantime insisting on the characters subservience. In general, the settings are either too bright or too dark, presumably insisting on the duality of good and bad. As to the latter, the music has got two main functions in the TV series: either it accentuates the gloom of the atmosphere by means of sinister music, or it underlines the absurdity of the scene by means of playing cheerful music.

In the early 1990s the third wave of feminism was born as a result of the detachment some feminists felt towards the previous wave, which considered that feminist goals had

been achieved and, thus, took gender equality for granted. The third wave welcomed individualism, understood as the individual quest for self-satisfaction by means of achieving particular aspirations and desires, and diversity as well, introducing a variety of theories such as intersectionality, which refers to layers of oppression –aspects such as race, gender, class, age, sexuality, disability, etc.– suffered by women. Third-wave feminists focused on issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights, reclamation of derogatory terms and sexual liberation to name but a few. At the moment we are experiencing a new phase in feminism: the fourth wave. Unlike the third wave, the fourth wave is characterised for a wide use of the Internet, especially social networking sites, as a means not only of reaching a vaster amount of people, but also as an instrument for discussing, reflecting upon, denouncing and challenging gender inequality. Several movements such as #MeToo<sup>20</sup> or #YesAllWomen emerged precisely from these social platforms.

The third and the fourth wave have reopened debates that had been discussed for years but had not perhaps been accessible to such a wide audience yet. The novel and the series have obviously contributed to bringing about the issues of abortion and surrogate motherhood to the centre of the socio-political arena. In the USA, an extremely liberal country that takes pride in supporting civil liberty and equality, surrogacy is currently legal and many people who are unable to bear their biological children resort to hiring a surrogate mother with the aim of having biological children. It is striking, therefore, that a country that praises liberalism, is nevertheless in the quest for overturning *Roe v. Wade* with the ultimate objective of banning abortions.

As I already anticipated, *The Handmaid's Tale* has achieved a widespread popularity probably due to the fact that a TV series is a media product with a high consumption rate, which has a substantial and undeniable social impact<sup>21</sup>. Certainly, socio-political events nurture cultural products, and, in turn, cultural products have a significant effect on socio-political affairs. Furthermore, characters bear the specific social worth of a particular era, meaning characters promote certain conducts whereas criminalise deviant behaviours. Faced with all this we embark on the last section of this project in which I examine the interrelation between the TV series and Donald Trump's administration.

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<sup>20</sup> For more details concerning the #MeToo movement consult Surmund, pp. 24-26.

<sup>21</sup> As a matter of fact "Unknown Caller" and "Household," fifth and sixth episodes of the third season, contemplate the subject of the media and its manipulation when June is compelled to appear next to the Waterfords when they address Canada mourning for the loss of Holly and later the Handmaids are forced to pray for the return of Holly to Gilead.



Donald Trump's political campaign in 2016 was marked by overt sexist and racist remarks as well as numerous references to Christianity and God, which from the start transmitted a sense of the terms in which his mandate would be framed. In the first chapter of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series June encounters three hanged bodies in the Wall, the place where those opposed to the principles of the regime are killed and displayed to prevent that others attempt against the system ("Offred"). The subjects at display are a priest, a doctor and a homosexual man, each foreshadowing three aspects the Gileadean regime fiercely opposes: Catholicism, medical "malpractice"<sup>22</sup> such as prescribing contraceptive methods or performing abortions and non-heterosexual and therefore "deviant behaviour." Closely analogous was Trump's proposal for the government and future of the USA. The fact that Trump overtly expressed such an extremely reactionary attitude might –and should– at first sight doom any candidate to a foreseeable defeat but did in fact have no influence whatsoever in Trump's election. Ballot data had placed Hillary Clinton before Donald Trump from the very beginning of the presidential campaign, and according to Boatright and Sperling even the party and supporting groups had withdrawn their support for Trump as early as October 2016, a support that was not resumed until the last weeks prior to the presidential election of November 2016 (ch. 5). In fact, wealthy donors had withdrawn economic support from Trump's presidential race to redirect it to competitive Senate and House races, in an attempt to play safe and secure seats to the House and Senate. In an analysis of previous elections in which candidates were expected to lose, Boatright and Sperling find that earlier candidates did not carry out an aggressive campaign against minorities and women while Trump "...was unique among anticipated losers because his impending loss was seen as being due to his propensity to cause offense, particularly to women, who constitute a crucial voting constituency" (Boatright and Sperling ch. 5).

Immediately after Offred faces the dead bodies of the Wall, there is a flashback to the Leah and Rachel Centre where Aunt Lydia explains the dramatic reasons that lead to the regime's present state, some of the lines which have been previously mentioned throughout this paper are reiterated in the scene: "They were dirty women. They were sluts. But you are special girls. Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a Biblical purpose. Like Bilhah served Rachel, you girls will serve the Leaders of the Faithful and their barren wives. You will bear children for them. Oh. You're so lucky! So privileged!" ("Offred" 17:02-17:34). As the TV series implies, women's biological destiny of bearing children is

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<sup>22</sup> The inverted commas are absolutely on purpose.

constantly reinforced until it is taken to the extreme in the third season, when a brain-dead yet pregnant Handmaid is connected to a life support machine with the objective of ensuring the delivery of the baby (“Heroic”). Back to the episode I was commenting on, in “Offred,” Janine, who is not brainwashed yet, challenges Aunt Lydia’s –and by extension, the regime’s– authority, which is not left unattended: Aunt Lydia punishes –tortures– Janine. Next, Aunt Lydia explains the following while a sinister background music is played: “Girls, I know this must feel very strange. But “ordinary” is just what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you right now, but after a time, it will. This will become ordinary” (18:40-19:10). Similar to the objectives Trump had in mind, women in Gilead were bound to fulfil their biological destiny of bearing children under God’s guidance. They just had to get used to it, they had to incorporate the Gileadean religious principles and masculine subordination into their *habitus*.

Campaign advisors are acutely aware of using gender stereotypes in their favour, always seeking to limit damage and maximise benefits to political races. Thus, candidates are expected to “perform” gender in elections, which will be based according to the political contexts (Sperling and Boatright, ch. 2). Again, events present in the TV series resonate. People in Gilead are expected to act according to their own gender. One of the mechanisms to perform gender in Gilead is achieved through specific clothing: each of the outfits –red, green, blue or striped– codifies the behaviour expected from each woman, whereas men are dressed with either a black suit or striped clothes of Econopeople. Of course, female clothing is highly stereotyped: Wives wear elegant blouses, ankle-length skirts and matching high-heeled shoes; Marthas are clothed in green aprons with small cloaks and Handmaids wear ankle-length red dresses, cow-boy shoes and wings. So significant is the uniform that any alteration to it is frowned upon. Janine’s eye-patch is “...not regulation,” Commander Winslow makes a grimace of disapproval even if it is given in the episode “Heroic” to her by Aunt Lydia (“Witness” 12:15). Commander Winslow opposes to the uniform of Handmaids being modified, but going some episodes back we realise that the Handmaids in his district have an even more draconian adjustment in their attire: their mouths are sealed with some round staples (“Household” 16:15). Handmaids are not even capable of uttering a single word in Commander Winslow’s region. Subsequently in the same episode, upon being handed an item of clothing to prevent speaking, June with watery eyes asks Aunt Lydia if she wants Handmaids to be silenced, to which Aunt Lydia replies with a categorical negation (39:22-40:46). Coad has already outlined the meaning of the clothing in Gilead so

it will not be discussed in the present paper, but, in short, each of the outfits underlines the roles each female character is expected to play: marital support, household maintenance and reproduction, respectively. The importance of each one's role and duties is repeatedly outlined in the series. Serena tells Eden that it is fundamental that each of the members of the household knows their role in the house and drops a knitting needle on purpose to the ground with the intention of forcing June to collect it ("First Blood" 50:02-51:50). Not happy with humiliating June and remarking her power and dominance over the Handmaid, Serena commands Eden to do the same, as if highlighting June's powerlessness and submissiveness to each and every woman in the household. In "The Word" Fred justifies Serena's finger amputation likewise: "We all have our roles to play. Serena needed to be reminded of hers" (35:44). Back to the present, it is interesting that Trump's strategies to annul his female opponents ranged from body shaming, making references to certain women's lack of desirability or absence of characteristic traits associated to presidency (toughness, decisiveness, strength, assertiveness etc.). Unfortunately, female candidates must mind Aunt Lydia's words: "Modesty is invisibility" (Atwood, *THT* 38).

Of course, body shaming, lack of desirability and absence of particular characteristic traits do also affect men, but it is undeniable that these impact men to a lesser extent. If campaign advisors are conscious of gender stereotypes in political races, it is remarkable the mild rejection a male candidate received for an array of statements that, contrastingly, "for women in politics to refer publicly to other political figures in such terms would likely be seen as a career-ending, wildly inappropriate, and unfeminine display" (Sperling and Boatright, ch. 3). In addition, during campaign when Trump felt that some questions addressed by female journalists had to be dismissed, he used to reduce them solely "to their looks or their bodily functions" (Sperling and Boatright, ch. 3). In other words, Trump allowed himself to issue appreciation or repulsion for female bodies at any time and without having been asked to opine. As in the novel, the whole TV series deals with women being treated and categorised depending on their biological capacities and their appearance. An example of this is when Fred tells June "You look stunning," which is interesting since June is wearing a strictly forbidden outfit, which would surely be categorised as promiscuous ("Jezebel's" 12:00). When the Mexican ambassadors are invited to dine with Commanders, Wives and Handmaids, Serena supervises that every Handmaid looks decent ("A Woman's Place"). Every Handmaid is assembled in a line while Serena looks at them one by one, and

when she arrives to Janine's level turns back to Aunt Lydia and the following conversation takes place:

SERENA: Please remove the damaged ones.

AUNT LYDIA: Mrs Waterford, Ma'am. Whatever punishment these girls had to endure was for the greater good. They deserve to be honoured like everyone else.

SERENA: And we do honor them. But you don't put the bruised apples at the top of the crate, do you? (25:35-26:56)

Handmaids that do not look acceptable for such an important party are afterwards removed to the van. Serena's words indicate that the Handmaids are indeed highly regarded for their reproductive capacities, but the guests cannot see defects that arise from the punitive system of Gilead. The regime needs to show the Mexicans that the Handmaids are biologically capable of bearing children, obedient to the regime and also acceptable in the way they look.

Not only has Trump made use of such methods during presidential campaign, but also once he came into office Trump continued to address misogynistic remarks every time his "hypermasculinity" felt threatened. None gets away with pointing to Trump's errors or shortcomings without being scolded by Trump himself. So was the case when Trump commented on Brigitte's, Macron's wife's, physical shape, which under the guise of an innocent compliment implied a kind of "trophy wife" comparison (Sperling and Boatright, ch. 3). In one chapter of the TV series Commander Grinnell jokingly praises Commander Fred's Handmaid, June, treating her as a trophy as well ("The Last Ceremony" 12:14).

From the beginning of the presidential electoral campaign many Republicans, as well as interest groups and donors cut support of Trump's candidacy (Boatright and Sperling ch. 5). Some Republicans even had to distance themselves from Donald Trump's latest extravagant offensive statements expressly. After *Access Hollywood* tapes, in which Trump boasted about having a *carte blanche* to do as he pleased with women granted by his condition as a celebrity, were leaked, even more Republican representatives and senators withdrew their support to Trump's candidacy (Boatright and Sperling ch. 5). To make matters worse, in the midst of the campaign Donald Trump was accused of misconduct towards several women in the past. According to such accusations Trump had raped, sexually assaulted and harassed at least 23 women since the 1980s (Rupar). Only two days before the second presidential debate in 2016, October 7<sup>th</sup>, *Access Hollywood* tapes were

disclosed. In such recordings, which dated back to 2005, Trump took pride on the fact that he could do anything he wanted to women since his popular status would shield him. Analogous to Trump's commentaries is the Commander's, Fred's, attitude throughout the TV series since he is entitled to do anything he wants with June, who involuntarily relinquishes to Fred's will. This is the case when Fred summons June to his office or takes her to Jezebel's; June is required to go with no complains whatsoever ("Birth Day", "Jezebels"). In the fourth episode of the first season, "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum," which deals mostly with the previous Offred's fall, June reflects on what she might have done to face such a dreadful ending: "Did she displease him, the divine emperor of this house?" (40:47). And, moreover, when June and Moira reunite in Jezebel's and June tells Moira that she has been brought by the Commander, Moira replies "Some of them do that. It's just another shitty power trip" ("Jezebel's" 25:54-26:00). What these words imply is that the Commanders are well aware of their authority and power and, as mentioned before, any kind of offense to the regime enters a state of suspension at their will. The name of the brothel itself, related to sexual immorality in Christian tradition, suggests that the place will be laden with fallen women, that are, in Commander Fred's words, "all women who couldn't assimilate" (NT, Rev. 2:20-23, "Jezebel's" 22:58). Later on in the same episode, the Commander complains about his person being in danger and June replies: "I suppose that's what happens when you're the boss" (30:54). Everyone seems to know who calls the shots, literally. In "A Woman's Place" June is distracted while Fred is complaining about the Mexican ambassadors. Seeing that June is not listening to him Fred states "Being here is a privilege" as if emphasising the fact that he is in charge and might do as he pleases (20:50-21:30). Even if most of the accusations against Trump were disclosed in 2016, I believe that it is important to note that long before the 2016 presidential election, Trump had already been accused of rape by his first wife, Ivana Zelníčková, who included such allegations when she initiated court procedures to divorce Trump. However, later in the legal proceedings to divorce Trump, Zelníčková retracted the accusations of rape. In addition, in 1997 businesswoman Jill Harth accused Trump of sexual harassment but dropped the charges afterwards. She remained silent until the electoral campaign in 2016, in which she felt her image and business had been compromised by some comments issued by Trump himself and his daughter (Graves).

The issue of rape is highly complex in the TV series –and novel as well. There are two types of rape in Gilead: the acceptable ritualised rape of Handmaids, and the

unacceptable sexual intercourse with Handmaids. The former is not punished by any means, Commanders shield behind the scriptural precedence of Rachel and Bilhah's story and the whole event is taken as a sacred ritual. Even if the higher classes of the regime are supposed to be satisfied with the system, the first episode shows a different story: none of the characters is indifferent to the course of action during the Ceremony ("Offred"). The first frames of the scene focus on June's face while she is being raped: her face displays utter absence, June tries to detach herself from the moment. Quick switching of the camera portrays disillusionment with the Ceremony, the characters look at each other as they become aware of what has just happened: for Commander Fred it is a monotonous job-like procedure, for Serena it causes deep affliction and for June –no wonder why– the Ceremony is utter torment. Once Fred leaves the bedroom Serena blurts "Get out. Are you deaf... Just get out" to June while her eyes are becoming watery in a dismal setting ("Offred" 31:22-31:50). The latter type of rape is the one inflicted to Handmaids, even if it is consensual, by anyone but the Commanders. At the very end of the episode the Handmaids assist to a Particicution, where Handmaids execute a man accused of raping one Handmaid. In short, rape during the Ceremony enters a state of suspension that under other circumstances would mean death. In the second season, nevertheless, the issue of rape takes a different tone as Fred and Serena orchestrate the raping of June in order to punish her and, by the way, try to induce labour ("The Last Ceremony"). It is precisely this last raping, in which the act itself is not carried out under religious convictions, which brings problems in the third season to Serena as her immunity deal is annulled once the event is confessed by Fred in an act of revenge on Serena ("Mayday").

Prior to the presidential campaign Trump "... had vacillated ... on a number of more obviously gender-related issues, such as abortion, support for Planned Parenthood, and workplace equity" (Boatright and Sperling, ch. 3). In an article which sought to foresee Trump's policies once he became president, Redden remarked that Trump had stated that abortion for low-income women should not be covered by Medicaid, a state programme that aims at covering medical expenses of people with low-income and resources, and intended to bring this decision to Congress to turn it into law (Redden et al.). In addition, Redden anticipated that Trump would naturally nominate pro-life justices to the Supreme Court<sup>23</sup> and would defund Planned Parenthood. Moreover, in an interview for the MSNBC on 30<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Trump had already stated that he would appoint anti-abortion justices to the Supreme Court (Biryukov et al.). Soon after coming to office he nominated Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, both well-known anti-abortion justices.

March 2016, Trump reflected that women who underwent abortions should have to get “some form of punishment” (in MSNBC). Even in the final debate prior to election day, when asked if overturning *Roe v. Wade* was desirable to him, Trump stated that he would appoint pro-life judges which would unequivocally stir the reversal of the landmark decision of 1973 (CBS News). Trump sustained that once *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, decision over abortion matters would be determined by each state. Having asked Clinton about her opinion regarding late-term abortions, the interviewer turned to Trump for his opinion, and he was only capable of stating that abortion is simply unacceptable. In the very same interview by CBS News, Clinton referred to Trump’s intention of defunding Planned Parenthood.

In 8<sup>th</sup> November 2016 American politics gave an unexpected twist when a candidate that was largely expected to lose actually became the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the USA. An analysis of voting preferences carried out by Pew Research Center presented that women, members of minority groups and youngsters aged 18-29 were more likely than men to have voted for Clinton as a protest probably because they were more frequently targeted by Trump’s sexist and racist remarks and as a consequence, relied more on the Democrat candidacy of Clinton’s, perhaps as a way of combating Trump more than supporting Clinton herself. For further analysis to be carried out remains the fact that white women, in spite of Trump’s sexist statements, supported Trump in a higher percentage than Clinton. It might be utter coincidence, but Wives in *The Handmaid’s Tale* series are mostly non-racialised, which might in fact be a subtle reference to the aforementioned.

In the aftermath of 2016 election results, there was a deep political division in the USA. On the one hand, within Republican ranks an unrepeatabe feeling of victory flooded their offices; on the other hand, sparks of outrage and frustration –for some, even fear– showered the streets. When Donald Trump was officially elected as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the USA an endless list of protests against him began worldwide, but it was perhaps on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2017, when one of the most multitudinous marches ever celebrated in the USA took place in Washington DC, which gathered 470,000 people and “... was roughly three times the size of the audience at President Trump’s inauguration” (Wallace and Parlapiano). Many were the issues addressed in the demonstration, women’s rights, racial equality, healthcare reform, LGTBQ rights, reproductive rights among the most important ones. Yet behind such protests lay a resolute opposition to Trump and his administration. Not only were protests registered in the streets of important cities, but they were also staged in social media. In the age of technology, protesting has taken a different form and public outcry is now also

conducted via the Internet. This is the case with movements such as #Resist, #NotMyPresident, #StillWithHer and #LoveTrumpsHate to name but a few. The importance of these hashtags lies in the fact that it “has come to symbolize the fight for all those most vulnerable under Trump — immigrants, Muslims, people of color, women, members of the LGBTQ community and anyone else who feels they have been targeted by his policies” (Wenzke). Protests are also represented in the series. The third episode of the first season, “Late,” revolves around the idea of the response to the progressive setback to women’s rights prior to the instauration of Gilead. The episode opens up with June’s reflection, which gives an accurate description of the chapter’s development:

Now I’m awake to the world. I was asleep before. 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. (02:10-02:40)

Immediately afterwards, a flashback scene where June and Moira are disrespected by a barista is juxtaposed and subsequently, a scene where June and her female workmates are made redundant takes place. June’s colleagues pack their belongings with utter amazement and preoccupation and evacuate the building under the intense gaze of the Eyes; but it is interesting that June and her colleagues appear to be acutely aware of the exceptional nature of the police apparatus (07:35-07:48). Further into the episode, in another flashback, Moira and June discuss about the fact that women’s bank accounts have been blocked because a new law prohibits that women have property (21:30-24:00). What is more, Moira seems to know exactly who is to blame for the situation: “Hey look, here’s the fucking problem... She doesn’t belong to you. No. She isn’t your property. And she doesn’t need you to take care of her. See, that’s what all of this comes from... You really are the fucking problem, you know that?”. But unlike in the novel, which has been previously exposed, June simply laughs at Moira’s and Luke’s clash, which powerfully reinforces June’s early reflection in “Late.” Briefly, these three flashbacks show four major relapses in women’s rights: freedom of expression, the right to work, the right to own property, and as a direct consequence of these, freedom of movement. Towards the end of the episode, there is another scene worth commenting on. Citizens attend a demonstration against the setback of rights to which the newly formed state-police respond with extreme brutality to vindications to the point of firing indiscriminately to protesters (39:46-42:50). By all means, Gileadean machinery of



repression, which has been analysed in the third chapter of the present paper, is initiated by means of the Eyes of God as soon as citizens react to the latest relapse of rights. Such a repressive state apparatus withholds unlimited power to act as they consider best to fit the needs of the regime.

In “Baggage,” the third episode of the second season, there is a flashback to June’s childhood. Her mother, a radical feminist activist, brings June to a “Take Back the Night” rally, where a group of women chant the proclamations of the movement in unison: “Take back the night! Claim our bodies, claim our rights! Take a stand, take back the night!” (05:37-06:33). Around a bonfire, women throw papers to the fire and June reflects: “Later, my mom told me they were writing down the name of their rapist. And I remember thinking, there were so many pieces of paper” (06:24-06:33). June’s mother Holly –and I would say Moira as well– incarnates the very notion of resistance to Gileadean regime although their fate is markedly different: the former is sent to the Colonies and presumably dies there while the latter succeeds in fleeing Gilead (“Baggage” 33:38, “Night” 20:40). Naturally, there are many other more subtle references to the resistance in Gilead mainly carried out by the Handmaids themselves: whispering, exchanging information, delivering packages and written messages, telling each other their real names for example. The Marthas also have a network of resistance to the regime which is broadly explored in season three and one of the reasons why several children are finally able to escape Gilead (“Mayday”).

Leaving the issue of the resistance to the repressive machinery of the state aside, let us move on to addressing the issue of abortion, which is on the spotlight in the USA. In the state of Georgia, a law was passed banning most abortions, precisely as Trump advanced on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016. Similarly, the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri and Mississippi have passed a six- to eight-week ban, which limits an abortion once a heartbeat can be detected (Lai). Some abortion rights defenders quite rightly point out that these laws do, in fact, outlaw abortions since many women do not learn they are pregnant until that period has already expired. In addition, in the state of Alabama congressmen have passed a law that bans abortions in almost every case (Dray). According to Lai, however, “most other states follow the standard set by the Supreme Court’s Roe decision in 1973, which says abortion is legal until the foetus reaches viability, usually at 24 to 28 weeks”. In the same article, Lai herself explains that the aforementioned laws are not yet into effect, they are “all are expected to face lengthy court battles” which will, most definitely, reach the Supreme Court. In other words, pro-life advocates are aiming at passing laws that at the moment are

unconstitutional in order to bring the issue forth to the Supreme Court with the intention of challenging and, ultimately, overturning *Roe v. Wade*. As shown before, in 2019 anti-abortionists have adopted more aggressive strategies when initiating anti-abortion legislation because Trump nominees to the Supreme Court are pro-life and, therefore, the long-standing scales in favour of *Roe v. Wade* might be tipped against abortion rights (Lai). Quite obviously, similar measures to challenge *Roe v. Wade* are to be expected in the near future.

Another strategy of pro-life advocates is the persecution of groups which provide women<sup>24</sup> with information about abortion and refer them to abortion providers: such is the case of Planned Parenthood. Back in the days when Donald Trump had not been elected to the oval office, Trump praised the labour of the organisation and claimed that he was going to be “really good for women’s health issues,” only five days after stating that he would defund it (in PBS NewsHour). In 2019, Trump’s administration is committed to get on and complete the job. In February, the latest rule to turn federal health programmes in a conservative direction was issued: those organisations that received funding from a federal family planning programme called Title X were still allowed to carry out abortions but were required to do so in a distinct installation and needed also to “...adhere to the new requirement that they not refer patients to it” (Belluck). The amount of money that will be removed from women’s health organisations is around \$286 million, which means that 4,000 clinics and approximately 4 million patients, most of whom are low-income and minority women, will not be able to have access to safe abortion procedures, nor will they be informed about several other issues concerning their reproductive health. Around \$60 million will be cut down from Planned Parenthood’s funding, which administrates 40% of the clinics mentioned before. As expected, groups that support reproductive rights challenged the rule in court for it would “...interfere with health providers’ responsibilities to fully counsel patients about reproductive health” (Belluck). In the same article, Belluck points at the fact that back in the 1988 Ronald Reagan himself banned clinics from both referring for and counselling about abortions; a rule which, fortunately, after being upheld by the Supreme Court was not ultimately implemented by the Bush administration.

Laura Bassett, an American journalist, argues that from 2011 onwards there has been an increase in anti-abortion restrictions and also, these have become more severe, especially

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<sup>24</sup> The words “woman” and “women” are used broadly in this project. Although I am aware of the current controversy surrounding the meaning/referent of this words, in this specific occasion I obviously refer to any person capable of bearing a child.

in red states (MSNBC). Considering these limitations to the option of obtaining an abortion violate a constitutional right which is protected by the landmark case discussed above, the host cleverly asked about the strategy that republicans might be pursuing by carrying out such questionable strategy to which Caroline Fredrickson, the president of the American Constitution Society, answered that “they obviously mistook *The Handmaid’s Tale* for a how to manual” (in MSNBC). Fredrickson goes on to argue that republicans are trying to overthrow *Roe v. Wade* taking advantage of the fact that Trump’s nominees –Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh<sup>25</sup>– are indeed pro-life, and therefore, against *Roe v. Wade*. Upon being asked if women are worried by the latest decisions regarding abortion laws, Bassett reflects that the decision in Georgia parallels abortion and murder, which might be translated into death penalties or lifelong imprisonment for women who resort to abortion procedures (MSNBC). Even suffering a miscarriage –whether on purpose or not– might be dangerous for women. In the TV series it is suggested that June forces her own abortion (“Late”). The whole episode deals with the idea of June being pregnant, and believing that she might indeed be, the Handmaid challenges Aunt Lydia’s authority when she’s questioned about Emily’s sexual orientation as if trying to get punished in order to provoke stress to her body, and therefore, prompt a miscarriage (25:03-30:34). And indeed, in the last minutes of the episode June confesses Serena that she got her menstruation and is not pregnant. The Wife reacts with an intense burst of rage followed by punishing June to confinement and a dire threat: “Things can get much worse for you” (45:25-46:46). That is not the only instance in which June tries to induce an abortion on herself. In the fifth episode of the second season, “Seeds,” June finds out that she is having vaginal bleedings, but instead of informing Serena or Aunt Lydia, the Handmaid lets herself bleed to unconsciousness. Towards the end of the episode, June wakes up at the hospital and asks the following to her womb: “You’re tough, aren’t you?” (46:15). It is clear that June is determined to avoid that her child grows up in Gilead, which is precisely confirmed thereafter: “I will not let you group up in this place. I won’t do it...They do not own you. And they do not own what you will become...I’m gonna get you out of here. I’m gonna get us out of here.” (46:55-47:50).

As in the novel, punishment is widely explored throughout the TV series. Many are the instances in which women<sup>26</sup> are reprimanded for not acquiescing to the regime’s principles: Janine’s eye is removed during the brainwashing period; Emily undergoes female

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Kavanaugh was also accused of sexual assault only a few months before being nominated Associate Justice of the Supreme Court (Dray).

<sup>26</sup> Men are also punished in “The Bridge,” “Other women” and “Postpartum.”

circumcision; Alma has her hand burned for defying Aunt Lydia's authority at Janine's stoning; the second Ofglen's tongue is cut for defending Janine at the stoning; Janine is punched for being impolite to an Eye; Eden is drowned in a swimming pool for infidelity ("Offred," "Late," "June," "Other Women," "Smart Power," "Postpartum"). One of the most unforeseen scenes I have ever had the chance of watching intertwines punishment while at the same time underlines the Handmaids' biological destiny of bearing children. The first chapter of the second season, "June," opens with Aunt Lydia overtly threatening June by showing her another pregnant Handmaid who is chained to a bed (22:35-24:10). The Handmaid, Ofwyatt, tried to induce an abortion by drinking drain cleaner. Ofwyatt is kept in a dark room with a foot chained so that the physical space where she can move is severely limited. The Handmaid shows clear signs of mental instability presumably due to incarceration and deprivation of stimuli as well as several wounds around her mouth and bruises all over the face. Ofwyatt is tortured in every possible way. It is interesting to note that in the TV series punishment is a public action, the regime seeks that –unlike many other activities– punishment is readily visible as a warning for those that intend to threaten the *status quo*. Even the Wives, prime exponent of the orderliness, cannot elude Gilead's punitive system. When Serena forges a pass so that a Martha, having formerly been the best neonatologist of the country, inspects the Putnam's baby Angela, Fred himself carries out her punishment of Serena being whipped ("Women's Work"). Albeit Serena's intention was noble, Fred feels the urge of re-establishing his dominance in the Waterfords' household and forces June to witness Serena's torment. I dare say that this is the precise moment when Serena and Fred's relationship is finally broken. In the last episode of the second season Serena has her finger removed for speaking in an audience to the rest of the Commanders in an attempt to convince them of letting women read the Bible ("The Word"). Many are the Wives who agree with Serena on this matter, but the episode proves once more that in the event of facing men women are utterly powerless in Gilead. But the ultimate example of punishment is carried out in both the Wall, where dead bodies are displayed, and the Colonies, where women are expected to work removing toxic waste until their death. Emily summarises life in the Colonies: "We come here. We work. We die" ("Seeds" 11:06).

In January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, in the March for Life rally, an anti-abortion gathering celebrated every year since it began in 1974, one after the *Roe v. Wade* decision, Trump again referred to abortion issues by adopting a rhetoric tinged by allusions to Christianity. The president said that "under my administration we will always defend the very first right

in the Declaration of Independence and that is the right to life” (in CNN, “Trump touts” 3:30). More recently, in a speech in January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Trump referred to a law passed in New York which granted abortions up until 24 weeks of pregnancy. Trump stated that he would take the matter to Congress because it constituted the execution of a baby and wanted to create a culture that “cherishes innocent life” (in CNN, “Donald Trump’s entire 2019 State of the Union address” 58:52-1:00:10). Trump went on to refer to Christianity and declared that every child, even those unborn, had been created to the image of God himself. Just as Aunt Lydia vindicates that there is no greatest miracle than the miracle of life and concludes that trying to hurt a child constitutes the severest sin of all<sup>27</sup> (“Night” 41:46-42:04). These words take place while Janine’s salvaging after the Handmaid having kidnapped Angela-Charlotte and having tried to kill herself by jumping off a bridge. Characters such as Aunt Lydia or Serena, who fervently obey and support the system’s principles, are crucial to maintain the *status quo* of Gilead. Serena has been described as an “amalgam of Phyllis Schlafly and Tammy Faye Bakker with a dash of Aimee Semple McPherson” and such a character “is proof of American fundamentalism’s durability, and a reminder that it could not thrive without the enthusiastic backing of women” (S. Jones). Janine is sentenced to death by stoning, which is to be conducted by the Handmaids themselves, but in the end, and following June’s example, the Handmaids pretend to drop the stones accidentally as an act of resistance to the system (44:10-47:46). Similarly, a group of Democratic women defied Trump’s latest measures in terms of women’s rights by attending the speech dressed in white. Clothes were used as symbol, but reversing the meaning given in the TV series: in *The Handmaid’s Tale* women passively wear certain garments in order to facilitate instantaneous identification of their status and role; but the Democratic women that attended Trump’s speech actively wore one-colour clothes in order to protest against the setback in women’s rights. In addition, just as every Democratic representative brought a guest who embodied a specific political dispute, representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez invited a sexual assault survivor in order to cast light upon such issue (Gay Stolberg). At the present year’s March for Life speech, Trump again remarked his commitment to defending the first right of the Declaration of Independence, again under several references to Christianity, and mentioned that he would veto any legislation that would threaten human life (LifeSiteNews). Quite clearly, the issue of abortion remains in the limelight in the USA, where a series of major battles in court are to be expected in the years to come.

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<sup>27</sup> Reaffirmed in “Under His Eye.”

Just as a variety of experts had advanced Trump has not only declared war on the issue of abortion within national frontiers, but as mentioned before, he has prompted abortion becoming a worldwide matter by means of cutting down funding international NGOs aiming at reproductive health. Soon after getting into office, Biryukov et al. wrote an article in which they stated that Trump had reinstated the Global Gag Rule to overturn reproductive rights at both national and international level. The president of the Centre for Health and Equality, Serra Sipel, stated that the re-implementation of the rule from the part of Trump would result in not only a reduction in access to contraceptive and safe abortions, but also a hindrance to HIV prevention and closure of health clinics in developing countries (Biryukov et al.). Furthermore, Planned Parenthood warned that the language used in Trump's issue of the law was more restrictive as compared to the previous draft by George W. Bush, which would introduce new limitations. In Trump's document family planning and abortion are gathered under the category of "health assistance," the broadness of the term meaning restrictions will be easier to be applied (Biryukov et al.). Of course, abortion will only be acceptable in cases of rape, incest or life-threatening pregnancies. In line with this, Trump's administration sketched a plan that sought to apply the provisions of the Global Gag Rule, named "Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance" wherewith Trump intends to withdraw federal funding from NGOs considered to be involved in abortion procedures, will be responsible for removing finance from NGOs that in addition work on the prevention of Aids, cancer, malaria, tuberculosis and gender-based violence as well (Fernandez). The idea behind such a policy is that no taxpayer money is directed to foreign organisations that are in any way related to abortion. Under the pretext of an increase in abortion rates, Trump's administration has now put in danger the lives of every woman worldwide, and especially those in less favoured countries, where the arduous work of NGOs is of the utmost importance in the issue of abortion. Once again, cutting down budget to international NGOs and therefore, restricting access to safe abortion will only be suffered by those in more disadvantaged positions.

In the TV series there is another scene in which a worldwide war on abortion and a fierce defence of the Gileadean system to increase birth rates is implied when the political representatives of Mexico are invited to know and supervise the system ("A Woman's Place"). Let's examine the chapter in detail. The chapter opens up with the Handmaids cleaning blood from the Wall for the visit of Mexican ambassadors as if to cleanse the wickedness of the regime. In the Commander's office, a room that, as mentioned above,

holds a particular significance therefore confirming the transcendency of the occasion, June makes a mistake and confuses the ambassador's assistant –male– with the ambassador –female– which proves that June is already thinking in terms of the regime's principles, inevitably leading us to Bourdieu's idea of symbolic power: June already constructs reality from the point of view that has been inscribed in her, she unwillingly contributes to her own domination because she constructs it as such (40). From this viewpoint no woman is to hold any position of power, at least not entirely. Having apologised for her mistake, the visit continues with the questions of the Mexicans. The gloomy atmosphere portrayed by means of applying a fading of light and placing the subjects of the conversation in the forefront accompanies the grotesqueness of the scene. The situation forces June to lie and say that she made the choice of becoming a Handmaid. No music supplements the scene, no need to enhance the rawness of the situation. Later on, when the children of Gilead –born of Handmaids– are shown to the diplomats June is informed of the real purpose of the Mexicans' visit: to arrange a deal involving the trade of Handmaids. The spectator had already been tipped about this when Commander Warren speaks about Handmaids as “resources” (13:24). The realisation is utterly dramatic for June, sinister music as well as a slow-motion recording of otherwise cheerful scenes accentuates the effect. But the most remarkable scene of the episode takes place at the very end of the chapter. June runs into the Mexican diplomats in the kitchen and in a display of bravery confesses all the barbarities she is subject to:

This is a brutal place... We're prisoners. If we run, they'll try to kill us. Or worse. They beat us. They use cattle prods to try to get us to behave. If we're caught up reading, they'll cut off a finger. Second offense, just the whole hand. They gouge out our eyes. They just maim us in worse ways that you can imagine. They rape me. Just every month. Whenever I might be fertile. (45:28)

The Mexican ambassador is only capable of uttering a simple “I'm sorry” followed by a narration of the difficulties that Mexico is suffering regarding childbirth which is nothing but a blatant excuse for June (46:45-48:26). The scene reverts the situation we were discussing, that is, the fact that Trump's latest policies have the objective of defunding NGOs that tackle the issue of abortion, among others. What is at the core of both this episode and Trump's procedures is that any measure, which aims at reverting the plummeting birth rates, seems to be acceptable even if women's rights are infringed. Women are not allowed to make their own decisions, they are disposed of any kind of agency over their bodies and choices.

In Gilead, women do not have any kind of power over their bodies and choices, they do not even have agency over matters such as sexual orientation. When Aunt Lydia and the Eyes discover that Emily has had a relationship with a Martha, both the Handmaid and the Martha are punished. The Martha, having no ability to bear children, is condemned to the gallows; whereas Emily, being fertile, is circumcised (“Late”). Emily is not to have any clitoral orgasms anymore. Aunt Lydia states “You can still have children, of course... You won’t have what you cannot have” (48:02-48:22). Aunt Lydia’s words take Emily to her own place: a place of utter subordination to the regime and her duty as a surrogate mother. The issue of sexual orientation and particularly same-sex marriage is also threatened in Donald Trump’s times. The Supreme Court guaranteed the right to same-sex marriage in 2015 with *Obergefell v. Hodges*, but during campaign Trump claimed that he was in favour of “traditional marriage” and would appoint judges that would overturn it (in Sieczkowski, in Coleburn).

There is only one instance in which a woman seems to gain agency over her body and sex is understood as agreeable in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: when June and Nick have sexual encounters on the quiet for the simple sake of pleasure (“Faithful”, “A Woman’s Place”, “Jezebel’s,” “Unwomen”). In “Jezebel’s” June reflects about her relationship with Nick and says: “I can see these are acts of rebellion, a fuck-you to the patriarchy, but those are excuses. I’m here because it feels good and because I don’t want to be alone” (01:54-02:10). June feels good precisely because she carries out such acts of rebellion which in turn prompt that she regains power over her body and actions.

Another matter that resonates in the novel and, of course, the TV series is surrogacy, which has been under dispute recently in view of the last political decisions. The series –and novel– revolves around the idea Handmaids bearing children for Wives, who are to become the new-borns’ mothers from the very day they are born. When speaking about new reproductive technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Freedman explains that these “make possible surrogate motherhood, in which a fertile woman is paid to be inseminated and give birth by an infertile couple who will raise the child as their own” (250). Surrogate motherhood comes with its own problems, since it “introduce[s] a range of ethical dilemmas by bringing reproductive labor into the economic marketplace” (250). While it is true that altruistic surrogate motherhood does, in fact, exist; the practice is currently in retreat. Surrogate mothers, thus, sell the use of her organs in exchange of a certain sum of money. According to research, it is mainly women of harsh social and economic backgrounds who resort to this



procedure (Bauer). As required by the capitalist system, moreover, the emerging need to reduce costs in pursuit of increasing profit has favoured the outsourcing the procedure to underdeveloped countries where this profile of surrogate mother abounds (Bauer). In the same article, Bauer also discusses other adversities surrogate mothers are subject to especially in developing countries: lack of medical coverage from the part of the hiring company, unawareness of possible complications during and after pregnancy, and questionable surrogacy contracts to name but a few. By comparison, while in many developed countries surrogacy is currently prohibited, or restricted to altruistic agreements, there is no federal legislation that regulates surrogacy in the USA. As Dray points out, nevertheless, the issue of surrogacy is not specific of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but several countries such as Australia, USA and Canada carried out programmes in the 70s in which children were taken away from their families and placed with adoptive ones in accordance to law.

So is the case in the TV series, where fertile women are overwhelmingly forced to bear children for other infertile women. Thus, the regime creates a complete set of ritualised procedures to associate such procedures with Bilhah and Rachel's story. Two scenes are worth examining in this respect: the Ceremony and the Birth Day. The Ceremony starts with all the characters in the living room where Fred is going to read a passage of the bible prior to the procedure of the Ceremony itself ("Offred"). Once in the bedroom, where Commander Waterford is going to inseminate June, Serena is placed behind June and holds her hands while Fred has sexual intercourse with June. During a close-up shot of June's face while the raping is happening Fred's voice narrates Bilhah and Rachel's story, to remind the spectators of the event's sacredness (29:14-30:24). A few episodes later, in "Jezebel's," three Commanders are discussing about the Ceremony when one of them claims: "The wives would eat that shit up" (17:36-17:40). Even the Commanders, implicitly, do not take into account the consequences of ritualised rape. The Birth Day opens up with the Birth Mobile, which is picking up the Handmaids to take them to the house where a baby is about to be born ("Birth Day"). The Handmaids enter the house silently and walk past a room where a sumptuous banquet is being prepared by the Marthas. June spies on the Wives who are attending the Mrs. Putnam, who is seemingly about to give birth and is suffering the pain of contractions. Suddenly the camera focuses on Mrs. Putnam's belly and the spectators learn that it is by no means puffy (12:04). The Wife is not pregnant. In the room upstairs a truly pregnant Handmaid, Janine, is being helped by the rest of the Handmaids and Aunt Lydia. The camera focuses on June touching Janine's swollen stomach (14:02). When Janine is

about to give birth, the Wives are summoned into the room with Mrs. Putnam who is placed behind Janine with her legs open, as if pretending she is giving birth to the child. When the baby is finally born and Aunt Lydia checks its' suitability, the baby is brought to Ms. Putnam under Janine's attentive and defeated eyes (23:50-24:42). Janine craves after holding and naming her daughter. The holiness of the scene is enhanced with background secular music. If surrogacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought forth an array of problems between intended parents and gestational mothers, in Gilead gestational mothers are immediately wiped away, they are barely allowed to breastfeed the child. Mrs. Putnam narrates the difficulties they have with Janine's lack of understanding of her role as a surrogate mother ("Late" 13:08-13:30). Indeed, Janine does not understand her role in Gilead. In "God Bless the Child" the Handmaids are invited to Angela's baptism at the Putnam's, where Janine addresses the Putnam's and praises their parenthood (34:46-34:48). What seems to be an idyllic scene shortly goes awry. Janine proposes to provide a sibling to Angela and desperately says: "I just wanna be with my daughter" (35:23). Under the gaze of the Commanders and Wives Aunt Lydia loses control and savagely beats Janine until June intervenes to stop the beating. It is exceptionally interesting that instead of promoting childbirth of fertile women in Gilead, the regime is built around the idea of surrogacy, just because it correlates with a passage from the Bible.

Apart from these clear instances of the issue of surrogacy from seasons one and three, the second season further examines the topic by making Moira a surrogate mother in pre-Gileadean times. From the very beginning Moira treats the activity of being a surrogate mother as a mere economic transaction:

JUNE: ... Two thousand and fifty dollars?

MOIRA: Yup. For a healthy baby. Jesus. Coffee is on me forever...Look I can pay for my student loans and take a shot at that web-dev thing with Hollis. ("After" 11:00-11:12).

June warns that she might become attached to the baby, which is actually confirmed as the episode unfolds. Moira gives the baby to Odette, Moira's obstetrician and fiancé later in the story, and watches warily the moment when the parents meet the baby for the first time (34:33-36:15). This scene presents another problem that surrogacy might pose: the difficult situation of the woman who has gestated a baby for nine months, with all the

emotional and physical experience involved, who is later required relinquish each and every right over the new-born by contract<sup>28</sup>.

If the novel was interpreted as an open protest against Reagan's administration in the 1980s<sup>29</sup>, it is fairly acceptable to link the current popularity of the series to Trump's ongoing administration. It is true, however, that when the series began its journey towards success Donald Trump had not been elected for presidency yet. However, when Trump was elected for the oval office all eyes turned to the creators and cast of the series, and, of course, Margaret Atwood herself. Upon being asked what Trump's victory meant, Atwood stated that

the cast woke up on November the 9th and thought, this just took on a different meaning. And that is true. So I think had Hillary been elected, you would have had a reaction to it more like, look at an alternative reality that might have happened. Whereas now you're getting: this might actually happen. Not quite the same way...But the rollback of rights might well happen. ("The Handmaid's Tale' author")

As Atwood's words indicate when Trump was elected to presidency the TV series took a distinct significance. A TV series which portrays severe limitations on women's rights might be foreshadowing events under Trump's administration and possible re-election as the president of the USA in 2020, a turn to darker times for women's rights might be at stake now. More recently, actress Ann Dowd –performing Aunt Lydia– expressed a deep concern for the latest abortion bans discussed before, those of Alabama, Ohio, Georgia, Missouri, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Dowd reminded that restrictions in abortion would only be suffered by those in worse socio-economic positions and urged the so-called pro-life advocates to help those in real need, foster-care children (Acuna). As a response to the Alabama bill, protestors wore the iconic garments of the TV series, a red handmaid's gown and white coifs, which has become a widespread protest attire<sup>30</sup> (Acuna). It is irrefutable that the clothes in *The Handmaid's Tale* have become a symbol for basic human rights of women worldwide.

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<sup>28</sup> For more information regarding this quandary consult Surmund, pp. 12-16.

<sup>29</sup> Consult Note 5.

<sup>30</sup> The outfit was also used in protests against the funding cuts of Planned Parenthood in 2017 or during Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings (Acuna). It has also been used in international protests such as a silent march in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in which Argentinian feminist groups demanded that abortion became legal (Rey).

In a nutshell, the fight has taken a different form, far from Reagan's times when pro-life advocates used mainly violence, threats and intimidation against those physicians who carried out abortions, presently the dispute seems to be destined to be resolved in courts. The strategy employed by the Republicans involves bringing such disputes to lower courts and appealing once their petitions are turned down with the intention of reaching the Supreme Court in the end, where Trump will take good care of placing a suitable nominee who is willing to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. In the meantime, the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the USA has taken steps towards defunding organisations that inform about and provide abortions in order to debilitate pro-choice advocates.

## 6. Conclusion

“Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances”

–Margaret Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”

In this Master’s thesis I have examined the correlation of Ronald Reagan’s and Donald Trump’s political agenda in terms of women’s issues by analysing both *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel and TV series. My intention was to draw similarities between their agendas in order to cast light on the dark alley which will inevitably lead to forfeiture of women’s rights.

Both presidents presented a candidacy that had been hatched by Christian ultraconservative religious groups, hence from the very beginning a certain amount of misogyny was to be expected in their political proposals. In the novel and TV series as well, the ultra-Catholic system is created by a group of fanatics, The Sons of Jacob. Under a religious aura, both presidents declared war on abortion since, they believed, was contrary to Christian beliefs and by the same token, abortion is simply incommensurable in Gilead. In their respective times, Reagan and Trump condemned *Roe v. Wade*, which sustains the abortions constitutionality in the USA. However, incapable of overturning it since it is the Supreme Court’s jurisdiction, both presidents nominated pro-life justices in an effort to annul the law. Within national frontiers, besides, abortionists have proceeded to appeal to lower courts in an attempt to escalate until reaching the Supreme Court. Internationally speaking, Reagan implemented the Global Gag Rule in 1984, which was aimed at defunding NGOs which informed about the issue of abortion. The policy has recently been reinstated and enforced even more strictly by Trump.

The objective of the aforementioned measures is to control women’s bodies, to inscribe the particularities of masculine domination into our own bodies, just as women in Gilead, and Handmaids particularly, are dispossessed of agency over their bodies, sexuality or choices. Both presidents aimed to withdraw women’s power to act according to their will in order to keep women under their traditional roles, as remarked by Christian precepts. By granting absolute authority to the Bible, the Sons of Jacob install a regime where masculine domination penetrates into women’s bodies by an infallible apparatus of surveillance and punishment, whose objective is to modify the *habitus* of Gileadean women to create a mass of easily manageable bodies that help maintain the *status quo*. Gilead’s *regime of truth* is to

remain intact as long as the rigid apparatus of control is on-going and the citizens of Gilead reproduce the *habitus* incessantly. Even if Reagan's and Trump's eras in government were fairly turbulent, neither Reagan nor Trump imposed such extreme tyrannical measures as those adopted by the Sons of Jacob, whose moral conventions fall into a state of suspension depending on the regime's requirements. The policies I previously explored did, nevertheless, reduce women's control over their bodies and choices, therefore presenting a severe setback to women's rights. Neither of the presidents realised, nonetheless, that the feminist movement would also resurface reinvigorated from such an outrage.

Margaret Atwood's words resonate in my head from the day I embarked on this enterprise. Under specific conditions, even the most unbelievable of events might take place and that is precisely what we should keep in mind. All that is needed is: a group of fanatics with certain political and economic power who would incarnate the system itself, a tragedy or problem which needs to be overcome, a fairly feasible motive which is supported by authority texts, a capacity to assemble a system in which the previously mentioned mechanisms of control are covered and a mass of people to subordinate. Impossible as it may sound, *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and TV series give a fair account of the fact that a society similar to Gilead is, in fact, truly possible; even if such a society might have its own internal problems, which is precisely what Atwood examines in *The Testaments*. As it was to be expected, her latest novel is not lacking in detail and the Canadian leaves another piece worth of profound analysis. Having been once more dragged into devouring *The Testaments* owing to the TV series, I found that the relationship between the sisters –June and Luke's daughter from the time before Gilead and June and Nick's daughter from Gileadean times– is highly interesting. After a series of events both sisters are reunited in Gilead, where their *habitus* dramatically clash: Agnes raised in Gilead, where she has been trained to become a Wife, but becomes an Aunt instead and therefore, is obliging and diligent; Daisy, brought up in Canada, where she has been taught to be critical of totalitarianisms, yet displays an absolute lack of constraint and compliance. Another character that I think is worth mentioning is Becka, whose father is not a Commander yet his abilities as a dentist make him necessary for the regime, although it is well-known that he is an unscrupulous rapist that takes advantage of the girls that attend his consult. Again, a male representative of the medical arena wields his twofold power –as a man and as a physician– to subjugate young women and force them to satisfy his desires. Having suffered her father's abuses in her own flesh in addition to a Christian upbringing in which the Aunts prepare young girls in order

to become Wives, Becka becomes traumatised with penises and decides to commit suicide rather than comply with her sacred duty. Becka's failed suicide attempt opens a new gate to becoming an Aunt, where Aunt Lydia plays a decisive part by accepting her into Ardua Hall –the emplacement where Aunts are trained– and orchestrating revenge against her father.

Aunt Lydia contributes to one of the most unforeseen and startling plot twists ever by being solely responsible of the destruction of Gilead. Once an indisputable representative and symbol of the regime, she is overwhelmed by the corruption and depravity that has invaded what, in her view, constituted an immaculate holy regime and decides to collect all types of sordid material to bring about the downfall of the regime. An expert schemer, Aunt Lydia's character is highly enigmatic in the sequel: she seems to be the ultimate religious fanatic, a person who is completely committed to the cause, but especially in *The Testaments* the reader discovers that there is more to Aunt Lydia than it seems. It is a woman that is deeply convinced of her role as caretaker of those who are in the path of instruction of the word of God and she "...may be more on women's side than you think, even if circumstances force them to gouge out some eyes or supervise the occasional stoning" (Pollitt). What makes this character exceptionally fascinating, from my point of view, is that she is indeed truly committed to saving the girls of Gilead, in her own way of course. This is already suggested in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Aunt Lydia states: "I'm doing my best... I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have" (Atwood 65). That is indeed the case with Becka first, and later with Agnes as well in *The Testaments*. Aunt Lydia reflects that "... what Grove had done to the young Becka –the very young Becka, and then the older but still young Becka– that, to my mind, demanded retribution" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 252). Even if Becka is reluctant to confess what happened to her, over the course of the years Aunt Lydia develops an infallible system to eavesdrop and patiently waits for years with the unique purpose of revenging the dishonour inflicted on one of her disciples. Eventually, when Agnes' time to get married arrives, Aunt Lydia comes into play again and drags her out of the path of marriage because she anticipates a very special destiny for Agnes. As a last note, *The Testaments* also provides a fair account of the process of becoming an Aunt and also, a Wife; which again is full of references that are surely to be inspected by others in the years to come.

At the very beginning of this Master's thesis, I had promised to issue my own warning to the future. We are living in a golden era where access to knowledge and information is becoming increasingly easier. The last decades have seen a blooming of trends

in feminism, each focusing on specific issues and overcoming formidable obstacles in the path. It is time to debate, discuss, reach agreements, create new spaces for empowerment, re-appropriate everything previously expropriated, dismiss invaluable old-fashioned ideas, and construct, build alliances. Let's be critical of not only the opponents, but also of ourselves, our socio-economic positions, our daily practices, our way of interacting with others; otherwise we will only promote a depoliticised movement which only responds to the needs of the elite and the capital, which is unable to build partnerships. Appropriating June's words "Now there has to be an *us*. Because, now, there is a *them*" ("Birth Day" 06:54-06:58). Sorry Aunt Lydia, the feminisms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are about to collect what is theirs: freedom, power and agency. And this time is for good.



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