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## "Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again:" Burke's Perspective by Incongruity and the Shifting Image of the Handmaid

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“Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again.” Burke’s Perspective by Incongruity and the  
Shifting Image of the Handmaid

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Honors Thesis

Mississippi State University

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## Introduction

At first, the lack of privacy seems like the worst part of being a Handmaid—the constant coupling of women on their way to the store; the feeling that they are always being watched. Even the names of law enforcement, the Eyes, the Guardians, the Angels, give the impression that the Handmaid will always be seen no matter where she goes. But when the reader thinks about it, the Handmaid has too much privacy to the point of boredom. After all, she cannot go to the mall or a sporting event. Her only change of scenery comes when she goes to the doctor, a birth ceremony, or a Salvaging. At least when she walks by the river, she can choose to walk by the wall and look for signs of her husband, long missing, amongst the hanging “sex traitors” and abortion doctors. She cannot visit to the library; she is not allowed to read books. That is the worst part, then, the reader thinks. Sure, the Handmaid may not be allowed to have money, drive a car, or own a home, but she should still be able to retain the ability to read. Except, in an extremely regimented society, reading becomes a privilege, not a right, and the Handmaid does not have that privilege. Then there is the issue of the Ceremony—the routine monthly raping by a man who is likely sterile, like most of the country, as his Wife looks down at the Handmaid in anger. Surely, this is the worst thing the Handmaid has to face. Perhaps though, the reader thinks, even this violation is more bearable than the mental toll losing her family, her rights, and her home has had on the Handmaid. This defilement of her body is only one part of how the Handmaid loses her mind and soul to the government that controls her. This is the world Margaret Atwood has created in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Given the oppression Handmaids have to face throughout the novel, it is no wonder many of them are depressed and broken to the point where they do not try to fight back anymore. How, then, has the image of the Handmaid become a political symbol for activist groups in the real world? I argue that the answer lies in the ways the image of the Handmaid has transformed from the novel, to the recent television adaptation, to the resulting protests in which women assume the Handmaid character, making the Handmaid an empowering symbol instead of just a sympathetic victim. While Atwood's novel serves as the seminal work of this study, my argument is not strictly literary analysis; furthermore, I do not mention Miller's adaptation to present a strictly media-centric argument. Instead, the goal of this paper is more oriented toward tracking how the image of the Handmaid changes across mediums, from the novel, to the show, to the protests, and the best way to explain this shift is through Kenneth Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity. While perspective by incongruity does not speak directly towards the satiric and literary themes of the novel, it does provide the best lens through which we can see the shifting image of the handmaid.

The novel, the television show, and the protests all offer different advice on how society should behave and a different call to action, so people's perspectives on the Handmaid have changed over the past 32 years due to strategic literary and visual devices, namely juxtaposition, irony, the grotesque, and comic correctives. Through juxtaposition, both Atwood and Miller are able to examine the ruling class next to the lower-class, but each has a different interpretation of who is to blame for the Handmaid's circumstances when these groups are placed side-by-side. Additionally, the use of irony and the grotesque help both mediums accomplish the goal of shocking the audience and

surprising them to a point of recognition; they see a little bit of their world represented in Gilead. The biggest, and arguably most impactful, difference between the two mediums, however, is the frame through which they view the Handmaid's story and its potential manifestation in current society. In one medium, there is hope for the future; in the other, Gilead is already here.

In light of Donald Trump's election to President of the United States in 2016, sales of Margaret Atwood's novel have skyrocketed,<sup>1</sup> and the Hulu adaptation became one of the most-viewed television launch on Hulu in its history.<sup>2</sup> There is something about this story that people feel they can identify with, and there is something about the image of the Handmaid that women across the country want to relate to. This thesis offers an explanation of the shifting rhetorical strategies surrounding the Handmaid figure as it emerges from Margaret Atwood's original novel, Bruce Miller's television adaptation, and recent Handmaid-style protests. In order to accomplish this, I begin with the background of the novel and the television show, including some of the public's initial reactions. Then, I explain Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity alongside its implications in literature and in the real world. This section also covers the specific literary strategies that Burke says create perspective by incongruity that are especially important to *The Handmaid's Tale*: juxtaposition, irony, the grotesque, and the comic corrective. Next, I will examine how other communication theorists apply Burke's theory to other visual mediums and performances. I then discuss Atwood's methods of creating

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Liptak, "Sales of Margaret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale Have Soared Since Trump's Win," *The Verge*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/11/14586382/sales-margaret-atwoods-handmaids-tale-soared-donald-trump>.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Adalian, "How *The Handmaid's Tale* Changed the Game for Hulu," *Vulture*, September 17, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/09/hulu-the-Handmaids-tale-how-it-changed-the-game.html>

perspective by incongruity in her novel and then how Bruce Miller, the showrunner for the Hulu series, manipulates and adapts these strategies for a visual medium in order to re-shape the image of the Handmaid. I conclude by investigating the Handmaid-style protests that have taken place over the past year in order to see how their view of the Handmaid has changed and what the implications of this shift might be. If, as Burke says, we are supposed to view literature as “equipment for living,”<sup>3</sup> then the novel, the television series, and the protests present three very different instruction manuals.

### **Background of the Text and Series**

Margaret Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, the year George Orwell's dystopian novel was supposed to become a reality. While not every advancement Orwell imagined came to pass, aspects of the oppressive government he imagined could definitely be found in certain regimes like the Soviet empire. Atwood saw this first-hand in West Berlin, where she was living when she wrote the novel. When she decided to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, she dedicated herself to not including any atrocities that had not already happened in history.<sup>4</sup> In her foreword to the novel, Atwood writes, “If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real. [...] No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the devil.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, though her book was a work of science fiction and dystopia, Atwood ensured every element of the book had happened at some point, so there was always the underlying feeling that the events could happen anywhere at any time. It is this prospect that may frighten the reader.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Los Angeles: University of California Berkeley, 1941).

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, xiv.

The setting of the book is the former United States, now called Gilead, and the narrator guiding us through this complex new world is Offred, a Handmaid in this society. Most of the information the reader gleans about the world comes from Offred's personal experiences, but then the epilogue, called the "Historical Notes," depicts a university in the distant future where people study Gilead as a historical period. More information about this world and Offred is revealed through the Historical Notes. In summary, following a complete overthrow of the United States' government, in which every member of the legislative, judicial, and executive branch is killed and the constitution is suspended, the new government creates the theocracy that is Gilead. In addition to the total destruction of the government, nuclear war and environmental disasters have largely depleted the nation's resources, and it is in the midst of a fertility crisis. In this world, only men are in charge, and the women are put into one of six categories. The Wives are married to Commanders, the men in charge of Gilead; they are barren women whose primary jobs are to take care of everyone in their home. Conversely, Econowives are women who are married to poor men and are somewhat free to carry on their daily lives as usual, without being forced to work for the government, but they have very few rights.<sup>6</sup> Marthas are housekeepers and cooks who prepare meals for the household and clean. Aunts, while not the highest-ranking women socially, are the only women to have some sort of government-granted authority, and they use this authority to train Handmaids. They train the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center, also called the Red Center, in which the Handmaids learn why their position was created. Handmaids are women who are assigned to a Commander's household and are tasked

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<sup>6</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 24.



with giving birth to children for Gilead's sake, but they must give up these children to the state. During the first wave of Handmaid assignments, all second marriages were nullified, and the women from these marriages who were still of child-bearing age were taken by the state to become Handmaids.<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the Handmaids are forced into sexual slavery, and their only other choices are to kill themselves or join the Unwomen. The Unwomen are all of the infertile or defiant women who are sent to clean up nuclear waste in an area called the Colonies.

In addition to the strict social hierarchies Gilead has created, there are also heavily regulated rituals. At the Red Center, the Handmaids learn how to behave as Handmaids and the specific ceremonies they will participate in. Each Handmaid is assigned to a Commander and his Wife, and her primary job, besides bearing children, is just to do the grocery shopping. Even when she goes to shop, however, she has to meet up with another Handmaid; Handmaids are not trusted to walk around by themselves. They are constantly being watched by law enforcement officers, called Guardians or Angels, and secret officers, called Eyes. The most important thing the Handmaids learn in the Red Center is how to act during the Ceremony. Every month, they participate in the Ceremony during which each Handmaid lies down between a Wife's legs while the Commander has sex with her in hopes of impregnating her. Essentially, the Ceremony is state-mandated rape.

The main character, Offred ("of Fred," the name of her Commander), gives the reader an idea of how Gilead was formed and how poorly the women in this world are treated through her narrative. The novel begins with Offred being introduced to her third Commander and his Wife, Serena Joy. Throughout the novel, Offred recounts her life

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<sup>7</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 304.

before she was a Handmaid, including information about her daughter, husband, and best friend, and the reader gets the sense that Offred has nearly forgotten how she used to live before Gilead. In some ways, she is like an employee in one of the strictest work environments in the world; her clothes and her accommodations are chosen for her, and she has little to no choice in anything that happens to her in her daily life. She steals butter to moisturize her face, she makes no effort to read, and she never uses her name from “before.” As Offred mentions near the beginning of the novel, this new world has become her new “normal” even though it has only been a few years since Gilead was created.

As the novel continues, however, Offred reveals a few instances in which she begins to rebel slightly. Her grocery partner, Ofglen, tries to recruit her into a secret organization working against the government because Offred’s Commander holds a lot of power. The Commander himself entices Offred into breaking rules by inviting her to play Scrabble with him in secret and by taking her to a popular brothel. Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, later convinces Offred to have sex with the household’s driver, Nick, in hopes that he would get her pregnant when the Commander could not. Offred then begins to sneak off to Nick’s apartment regularly to have sex with him, and she allows herself to feel like her old self again just for a little while. The novel ends with a black van full of Angels coming to arrest Offred at home without revealing the charges. In her closing narration, Offred suspects Nick was an Eye, but she does not know if he is a part of the underground resistance movement or not. The reader is left wondering whether or not Offred will survive at all; the “Historical Notes” tell the reader she does. Atwood’s novel ultimately serves as critique not only of this theocracy but also of the

people, including Offred and other women in the past who remained silent and allowed Gilead to take shape.

In 1990, Margaret Atwood sold the film rights of her novel to MGM studios, and a fairly unsuccessful movie version was produced later that year.<sup>8</sup> After being in development for a period of time, Hulu made the announcement in April 2016 that it had picked up the show from MGM featuring showrunner Bruce Miller.<sup>9</sup> Starring Elisabeth Moss, of *Mad Men* fame, as Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale* series became an instant success. Months before the show's actual premiere, Hulu and the show's producers began garnering interest in the series. At SXSW, an annual arts and technology conference in Austin, Texas, groups of women dressed in the Handmaid costumes were seen walking around in silence as human billboards for the show.<sup>10</sup> Hulu released the first three episodes on April 26, 2017, and the remaining 7 episodes were released weekly. Since Margaret Atwood contributed to the series, the show follows along with the book's major themes, characters, and plot points fairly well. The show, however, does take some creative liberty in order to cater to a more visual audience and to make the show last for so many episodes. For example, there is an entire episode dedicated to what happens to Offred's husband, Luke, after they attempt to escape with their daughter, which is a sequence Atwood leaves a mystery in the novel. Additionally, in interviews about the show, Miller refers to Offred by her name from "before," June, which aligns with a

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<sup>8</sup> Katie Kilkenny, "Margaret Atwood Says Bulk of 'Handmaids Tale' Profits went to MGM," *Hollywood Reporter*, February 2, 2018. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/margaret-atwood-says-bulk-hulu-Handmaids-tale-profits-went-mgm-1081423>

<sup>9</sup> Hulu, "Hulu Announces Straight-to-Series Order for The Handmaid's Tale from MGM Television," April 29, 2016, <https://www.hulu.com/press/hulu-announces-straight-to-series-order-for-the-Handmaids-tale-from-mgm-television/>

<sup>10</sup> William Hughes, "Hulu is filling SXSW with Silent Handmaids," *AV Club*, March 11, 2017, <https://news.avclub.com/hulu-is-filling-sxsw-with-silent-Handmaids-1798259060>

popular fan theory about Offred's real name. Ultimately, the show has been widely-successful since its release; it has won two Golden Globe Awards and 8 Emmy Awards. A second season is also scheduled to premiere on April 25, 2018.

A large part of the Hulu series' success is the impeccable timing of the show with Donald Trump's election as president. Unlike Atwood's initial readers in 1986, people who read the book today and then watch the television show often see multiple similarities between modern culture and Gilead. Ever since the show's premiere, there have been protests around the globe in which women dress as Handmaids and stand together. Whereas some of Atwood's original readers found the novel too far removed from their reality,<sup>11</sup> Hulu viewers find the show hits too close to home. Good timing alone, however, cannot bring about the social disruptions that the Hulu series has created. So, what has caused this major shift in the characteristics and perception of the Handmaid figure? I argue that Kenneth Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity can help readers, viewers, and scholars make sense of how a novel that has always had a strong message of remaining aware of the government's decisions has been re-appropriated as a manual on how to fight back against oppression.

### **Burkean Perspective by Incongruity**

In order to understand how a work of fiction like *The Handmaid's Tale* could possibly lead to such strong actions and reactions by readers and viewers alike, Kenneth Burke's views of piety and impiety, perspective by incongruity, and his "equipment for living" must be consulted. In one essay, Burke delves into the reasons why literature

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<sup>11</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Book Review," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/specials/mccarthy-atwood.html>

often serves as a guide for human behavior.<sup>12</sup> Since Burke was a communication scholar and not a literary scholar, he does not write from the point of view that good literature presents characters and plotlines that relate to some crucial aspect of universal human nature. Instead, Burke argues that works of literature, whether in novel or proverbial form, present strategies for how to behave in or navigate the real world. Near the beginning of his essay, Burke discusses mankind's centuries-long pattern of using proverbs, and he states, "The point of view might be phrased in this way: Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Burke believes that people create literature or subsequently read literature in order to handle a situation that has come up. Literature serves as a guide for readers full of advice that can be applied to multiple situations in life. In regards to novels themselves, Burke writes, "A Work like *Madame Bovary* [...] is the strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutandis mutatis*, for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude towards it."<sup>14</sup> When it comes to sociological issues then, Burke believes that grouping literature by genre or common themes could provide some insight into what strategies people are looking for when it comes to living. In other words, societal criticism through strategic naming of situations reminds people that many

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Los Angeles: University of California Berkeley, 1941).

<sup>13</sup> Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 296-297.

<sup>14</sup> Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 300.

human experiences are still as relatively the same as they have been for hundreds of years.<sup>15</sup>

This view of literature genres and strategic naming carries over into his book *Attitudes Towards History*, in which Burke discusses what he calls the “Poetic Categories,” or the literary genres that continuously find and represent some truth in people. Burke writes, “[Each] of the great poetic forms stresses its own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time.”<sup>16</sup> Though he discusses several poetic categories, there are three that come up more often than the rest in communication scholarship: tragedy, comedy, and satire. Burke identifies some key themes in each of these genres that he believes correspond to real human emotions and experiences. For example, tragedies often feature a hero who experiences failure because of some fatal or irredeemable character flaws. Often in the original tragedies, pride is the downfall of the tragic hero, and only when he recognizes his faults can he be redeemed from them.<sup>17</sup> With satire, on the other hand, Burke argues that the vice does not lie within the hero of the story but rather with the author himself. Burke claims that those who write satire only critique failures that they have committed themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Comedy strays from both of these genres by exemplifying that people are “mistaken,” and instead of writing people who privately or publicly act as criminals, comic writers create people who just make foolish mistakes.<sup>19</sup> Burke continues, “When

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<sup>15</sup> Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 301.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41.

you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy.”<sup>20</sup> Comedy ultimately works to reveal truth about the common man, or the “man in society” as Burke says.<sup>21</sup> Burke is careful to make a distinction between “comedy” and “humor.” Though many communication scholars use his ideas of “comedy” to refer to stand-up comedy or late-night talk shows, Burke says that humor is separate from comedy because it diminishes the truth that comedy reveals. Burke says, “[Humor] takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation*.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike humor, comedy does not work to downplay or mock serious situations; instead, using a variety of tactics, it works to give people a new perspective on the situation and show how they are mistaken. When comedy works in this way, Burke calls it a “comic corrective.”<sup>23</sup> Burke claims that people typically perceive human motives for certain actions and emotions through “acceptance frames.”<sup>24</sup> The comic frame works with the acceptance frame to disrupt what is accepted and to help people see the whole picture.<sup>25</sup> Burke writes, “A comic frame of motives avoids these difficulties, showing us how an act can ‘dialectically’ contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both ‘service’ and ‘spoils.’”<sup>26</sup> Burke believes that comic frames are useful then because they can open the public’s eyes to actions they often

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<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 166.

<sup>26</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 166-167.

accept that are actually meant to “alienate” other people.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, if people are exposed to comic correctives more often, they will be more aware of the ways in which private entities (the government, corporations, etc.) exploit, abuse, or alienate the members of the public sector.<sup>28</sup> The public is ultimately able to find these comic correctives in literature and art because artists can employ certain strategies that use a comic corrective to bring a situation out of the acceptance frame and cause people to think critically about it.

The reason, according to Burke, that so much of society buys in to the acceptance frames is there are certain categories, or pieties, people have already created.<sup>29</sup> Burke defines piety as “the sense of what properly goes with what.”<sup>30</sup> Because people typically associate the words “pious” and “impious” with religious settings, Burke says that many of them do not realize the extent to which they subscribe to certain pieties.<sup>31</sup> This is especially true because pious “linkages” can be found in just about everything, and one linkage almost always leads to another. Furthermore, piety in the neutral sense, meaning non-religious, does not carry with it an inherent moral distinction; a pious action can be a correct action or a misguided one.<sup>32</sup> He uses the example of a person who lives alone and feels lonely but often hears his neighbor’s doorbell ring. Years later when he is not miserable anymore, that same man may hear a doorbell and immediately feel sad because he has linked the sound of the doorbell to his time of loneliness.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 167.

<sup>28</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 303.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1935), 45.

<sup>31</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 76.



Burke's views of piety and impiety and his equipment for living directly correlate with his definition of perspective by incongruity. Perspective by incongruity is the direct violation of pieties, and it generally produces a new way of thinking about a situation, making it a common strategy for comic correctives. Furthermore, perspective by incongruity disrupts the strategies people set up for themselves and the typical categories of literature that most people have agreed on. There are several different ways to achieve perspective by incongruity, including juxtaposition and inverting the grotesque. Burke writes, "Nietzsche establishes his perspectives by a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names."<sup>34</sup> Perspective by incongruity can be an effective tool for authors and artists to use to reinforce a point or to have readers think about issues in a new way. For example, Burke states, "Were we finally to accommodate ourselves, for instance, to placing the lion in the cat family, a poet might metaphorically enlighten us and startle us by speaking of 'that big dog, the lion.'"<sup>35</sup> Other ways of achieving perspective by incongruity are through the use of metaphors, abstractions, and analogies.<sup>36</sup> Authors are able to create new categories of objects, themes, or ideas by simply showing how they are similar any way they can think of. Though many people are "outraged" or thrown off by these incongruities, Burke argues that at some point, people will come to terms with the analogy or the metaphor. He states, "For once you take words as mere symbolizations, rather than as being the accurate and total names for specific, unchangeable realities, you have lost the criteria of judgment which will tell you that it is

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<sup>34</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 103-106.

‘wrong,’ say, to describe a bullfight as a love encounter between the male toreador and the female bull, with the audience perhaps as peeping Toms.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, perspective by incongruity, according to Burke, breaks down the pieties that many people hold in order to strategically name a situation in an inventive way and cause people to see the issue in a new light.

While perspective by incongruity is a strategy of the comic corrective in its own right, there are further strategies of perspective by incongruity that authors employ in order to reveal the truth of a situation. These four strategies, or “tropes” as Burke calls them, are the use of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.<sup>38</sup> Each of these strategies can be used figuratively, such as they are used in poetry, and realistically. Burke states, “The ‘literal’ or ‘realistic’ applications of the four tropes usually go by a different set of names. Thus: for *metaphor* we could substitute *perspective*; for *metonymy* we could substitute *reduction*; for *synecdoche* we could substitute *representation*; for *irony* we could substitute *dialectic*.”<sup>39</sup> Each of these literal applications of the four tropes is often used in conjunction with one or more of the other tropes,<sup>40</sup> and each aims to reveal truth and change the public’s perspective on an issue. Metaphor, in particular, aims to give new perspectives of things in the world by calling it something it is not, thus creating perspective by incongruity.<sup>41</sup> As Burke writes, “By deliberate coaching and criticism of the perspective process, characters can be considered tentatively, in terms of other characters, for experimental or heuristic purposes.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, metaphor allows

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<sup>37</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 110.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1945), 503.

<sup>39</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 503.

<sup>40</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 503.

<sup>41</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 503-504.

<sup>42</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 504.

people to develop new perspectives of human emotion and action by equating them with something different that allows people to see the nuances in the issue. Metonymy has a similar strategy, but it is much more focused on making intangible emotions, feelings, or thoughts into something tangible.<sup>43</sup> By linking the transcendental with the materialistic, Burke says that metonymy reduces the feelings or emotions into terms that are more easily digested by the public.<sup>44</sup> In poetry, synecdoche is a term used when a poet refers just one part of something in order to give the audience a new perspective on the other parts.<sup>45</sup> This can be used in a variety of ways such as referring to a part of something when the poet means the whole. Burke says that one classic example of synecdoche is that elected officials are supposed to represent the electorate body as a whole.<sup>46</sup> This idea is why synecdoche's "realistic" application is representation; the part the poet or the author refers to is representative of the whole body.

Finally, Burke defines irony as "the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms."<sup>47</sup> For example, Burke refers to classic ironic pairs such as hero-villain and disease-cure.<sup>48</sup> There can be no hero without some sort of villain, and there can be no cure for a disease without the disease. In a similar fashion, dialectic subjects are circular and have no clear right or wrong answer. Instead, when discussing a dialectic topic, the orators constantly build on and work to improve and combine each other's arguments. Overall, each of the four tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) and their corresponding practical applications

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<sup>43</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 506.

<sup>44</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 507.

<sup>45</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 507.

<sup>46</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 508.

<sup>47</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 512.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 512.

(perspective, reduction, representation, and dialectic) produces a new perspective on human actions and emotions that attempt to reveal some sort of truth. This is the primary goal of perspective by incongruity, and these ideas have helped communication scholars recognize these tactics and incongruities in other artists', authors', and public figures' works.

Communication scholars have used Burke's perspective by incongruity concept when discussing a variety of art and literature-related subjects and the people who created them. Perhaps the most dominant subjects scholars studying perspective by incongruity look at are comedians and other humorists. Those scholars who study humorists typically focus on their use of the master trope of irony, but many of the comedians also employ the other three tropes and other strategies such as juxtaposition and mimicry. For instance, Lowrey et. al. look at female comedian Sarah Silverman and how she uses perspective by incongruity to raise awareness about cultural issues.<sup>49</sup> They argue that Silverman often uses irony in her show in both her appearance and in the jokes she tells on stage.<sup>50</sup> This "ironic persona" that Silverman takes on sounds and appears very sweet, but often her jokes are controversial at best and offensive at worst.<sup>51</sup> Silverman ultimately attacks her audience's commonly held beliefs on a wide range of topics by challenging them while appearing too nice to do so. In Meg Tully's article, she makes the argument that comedian Amy Schumer uses perspective by incongruity to critique postfeminist ideology.<sup>52</sup> Tully emphasizes that the ironic methods Schumer uses in order to achieve

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<sup>49</sup> Lacy Lowrey, Valerie R. Renegar, and Charles E. Goehring, "When God Gives You AIDS... Make Lemon-AIDS: Ironic Persona and Perspective by Incongruity in Sarah Silverman's *Jesus is Magic*," *Western Journal of Communication* 78, no. 1 (2014): 58-77, doi: 10.1080/10570314.2013.792387

<sup>50</sup> Lowrey, Renegar, and Goehring, "When God Gives You AIDS," 62.

<sup>51</sup> Lowrey, Renegar, and Goehring, "When God Gives You AIDS," 62.

<sup>52</sup> Meg Tully, "Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Don't Rape': Subverting Postfeminist Logics on *Inside Amy Schumer*," *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 4 (2017): 339-358.

this criticism including “mimicking post-feminist surveillance”<sup>53</sup> and “feminist pop culture parodies.”<sup>54</sup> Schumer, Tully argues, mimics post-feminist surveillance by creating characters who are hyper-feminine or satisfy many different female stereotypes and then uses their environment to show how they are still not equal to men.<sup>55</sup> Finally, Denise Bostdorff looks at the political cartoons of the early 1980s that critiqued James Watt, the United States Secretary of the Interior.<sup>56</sup> These cartoons often achieved perspective by incongruity by using irony within the cartoons. For instance, one cartoon presents an oil field that is supposed to be an ironic interpretation of Watt’s policies and his neglect of the environment even though it should be part of his job.<sup>57</sup> These three examples demonstrate that comedians and humorists may employ some strategies of perspective by incongruity that are meant to reveal a sort of truth but are often thinly veiled by the guise of genuine comedy.

Other communication scholars are much more interested in Burke’s theories of comic correctives and how authors and artists insert comic correctives into their work. For instance, Shannon Walters argues that the writers of the television shows *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community* use comic correctives to show how people with mental disabilities can contribute to the normalcy of a group.<sup>58</sup> In *The Big Bang Theory*, the character Sheldon Cooper shows many signs of Asperger’s Syndrome: he craves routine,

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<sup>53</sup> Tully, “Clear Eyes,” 343.

<sup>54</sup> Tully, “Clear Eyes,” 349.

<sup>55</sup> Tully, “Clear Eyes,” 344.

<sup>56</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff, “Making Light of James Watt: A Burkean Approach to the Form and Attitude of Political Cartoons,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 43-59.

<sup>57</sup> Bostdorff, “Making Light,” 45

<sup>58</sup> Shannon Walters, “Cool Aspie Humor: Cognitive Difference and Kenneth Burke’s Comic Corrective in *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community*,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013): 271-288.

he does not understand sarcasm, and he hates lying.<sup>59</sup> Sheldon's purpose on the show is ultimately to demonstrate how the "normal" or "neurotypical" characters are still incapable of navigating struggles in their social lives. He acts as a comic corrective not only for the other characters on the show but also for the audiences at home because he, at times, can seem to be the most normal person in the group. However, Walters is careful to point out that while Sheldon serves as a comic corrective, his presence does not truly create perspective by incongruity because he may be seen as an "ideal" autistic person.<sup>60</sup> Walters writes, "The alternatives and forms of resistance offered through the comic correctives in *The Big Bang Theory* offer a humorous shaking up of the categories of 'neurotypical' and 'autistic,' but do not achieve the more complete 'verbal atom cracking' that humor at its most radical can inspire."<sup>61</sup> Though Sheldon as a character does not create a new perspective through incongruity, Walters argues, his presence on the show can lead to a largely neurotypical audience reevaluating how they treat people with disabilities and see that they may be mistaken.

Another lens scholars view perspective by incongruity through is the artist's critique or use of the "grotesque." Burke defines the grotesque as "a stage of planned incongruity that goes beyond humor [...] wherein the perception of discordancies [sic] is cultivated without smile or laughter."<sup>62</sup> In other words, the grotesque presents audiences with something clearly ridiculous, to the point where it is not funny anymore, but it still seems to reveal the truth.<sup>63</sup> Tully argues Schumer inverts the grotesque by making her

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<sup>59</sup> Walters, "Cool Aspie Humor," 275.

<sup>60</sup> Walters, "Cool Aspie Humor," 277.

<sup>61</sup> Walters, "Cool Aspie Humor," 278.

<sup>62</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.

<sup>63</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.

body, which is not considered typically beautiful, very sexualized and desirable to many characters on the show.<sup>64</sup> Tully writes, “By refusing conventional readings of her body as unattractive, Schumer makes an important feminist intervention. [...] That is, comedy becomes an important strategy to reexamine the ways mainstream culture labels bodies that do not conform to Hollywood ideals.”<sup>65</sup> Schumer’s goal is to ridicule conventional beauty standards by showing through her words, actions, and sketches that she is just as desirable as other women. Walters also discusses the grotesque as it relates to Abed, an autistic character on the television show *Community*. In one episode, Abed’s friends want him to go talk to a girl, and they suggest that he take on a different version of himself so that he will go talk to her.<sup>66</sup> However, instead of trying to be a suave version of himself like the men he has seen in movies, he decides to be a vampire and attempts to approach the girl hissing and snarling.<sup>67</sup> Walters argues that what Abed is doing here is showing his friends that they cannot possibly attempt to understand or change him or his mental disability because he cannot change himself. She writes, “By admitting that even he does not know what exactly that version of himself is—it’s a vampire he thinks but it also resembles a gargoyle—he draws attention not only to the parts of himself that are inexplicable, but also to the fact that the community is not sure how to handle this version of himself.”<sup>68</sup> Through his actions, Abed moves beyond comedy to show how his disability cannot be put into a certain category of autism. Walters says that Abed’s friends must learn to embrace his disabilities because he has embraced them even though

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<sup>64</sup> Tully, “Clear Eyes,” 348.

<sup>65</sup> Tully, “Clear Eyes,” 348.

<sup>66</sup> Walters, “Cool Aspie Humor,” 281

<sup>67</sup> Walters, “Cool Aspie Humor,” 281.

<sup>68</sup> Walters, “Cool Aspie Humor,” 282.

he does not clearly understand them.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, the grotesque is a technique used by Amy Schumer and the writers of the television show *Community* in order to critique society's attitudes towards people who are "abnormal."

Finally, many communication scholars study the ways in which artists create perspective by incongruity and comic correctives through the use of juxtaposition. This juxtaposition can be achieved by placing contrasting images next to each other or contrasting words or phrases with images in order to get a certain point across to the audience. Anne Teresa Demo's article about the Guerilla Girls delves into how this group often used juxtaposition of images and quotes in order to make people aware of the lack of female artists on display in prominent art museums and the disenfranchisement of minorities by the American government.<sup>70</sup> Demo argues that there are three ways in which the Guerilla Girls accomplish this "strategic juxtaposition."<sup>71</sup> One method is that the women created posters with actual quotes from conservative politicians and other leaders, but they were accompanied by ironic headlines that undermined what they pundit was trying to say. She uses the example of a poster that read "SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SUPPORTS RIGHTS TO PRIVACY FOR GAYS AND LESBIANS" along with a quote from Judge Clarence Thomas that talked about his own right to privacy when it comes to his intimate personal life.<sup>72</sup> The Guerilla Girls would also juxtapose powerful images alongside rhetorical questions that were meant to make the audience question how the government treated women and other minorities.<sup>73</sup> Finally, Demo

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<sup>69</sup> Walters, "Cool Aspie Humor," 283.

<sup>70</sup> Anne Teresa Demo, "The Guerilla Girls' Comic Politics of Subversion," *Women's Studies in Communication* 23, no. 2 (2000): 133-156.

<sup>71</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 147.

<sup>72</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 147.

<sup>73</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 147.



argues, they juxtaposed the group's own images alongside famous sculptures and paintings in order to show how female artists are underrepresented in museums.<sup>74</sup> Their most famous example of this juxtaposition is a poster featuring Auguste Dominique Ingres' painting *Grand Odalisque* in which the odalisque was wearing the Guerilla Girls' notable gorilla mask. Beside this image, the poster reads, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"<sup>75</sup> Just below that are statistics stating that 5% of the artists featured in the museum were female while 85% of the nude muses were female. Demo writes, "The suggestion that, even in 1989, a woman has better chances of appearing on gallery walls as a nude model rather than an artist dramatizes the art world entailments of institutionalized sexism."<sup>76</sup> The Guerilla Girls' juxtaposition of words and images ultimately work as comic correctives to reveal some truth about how women and other minorities are oppressed. In the first two instances, the Guerilla Girls are not calling for the removal of conservative leaders. Instead, they are attempting to show audiences how mistaken these conservative ways of thinking are. The final strategy also works as a sort of comic corrective, but it also seems to call for action against the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There is an implied call to action, and this call is to include more female artists' work in the museum.

Similarly, the artist Anne Taintor juxtaposes images that are representative of "good girl" advertisements of the 1950s with powerful words and phrases in order to open her audience's eyes to ways in which women are still oppressed by dominant sexist

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<sup>74</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 147.

<sup>75</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 148.

<sup>76</sup> Demo, "Guerilla Girls," 149.

attitudes.<sup>77</sup> For example, one of Taintor's pieces presents a scene in which there is a room full of nicely dressed young people. There are three women and five men, and each of the men seems to be engrossed by at least one of the women. Each of the women is dressed modestly and seems to be having a good time; they are ideal representations of "good girls." However, between one of the women and the two gentlemen she's talking to, Taintor has inserted the words "I enjoy being a slut."<sup>78</sup> The juxtaposition of these words with a stereotypical good girl image, breaks the dichotomy that women either fall into the categories of "good girl" or "bad girl."<sup>79</sup> Instead, Taintor shows through her artwork that women can be "active constructors of their sexuality."<sup>80</sup> In another image, Taintor presents an ad that features a husband standing by some curtains after hanging them while his wife looks at him adoringly. Young points out that, on its own, this image presents a submissive portrait of a woman who is just happy to have her husband around to do the "hard work" around the house for her.<sup>81</sup> The text accompanying the picture, however, tells a different story. It reads, "Gosh, he went well with the drapes."<sup>82</sup> According to Young, this juxtaposition between the text and the image reverses the "male gaze" dichotomy and instead makes the male the subject of the female's gaze. Young writes, "The text-image juxtaposition shifts the woman from an amorous gazer passively watching her man save her from a domestic tragedy to an active agent of consumerism that recognizes and revels in surface appearances and mock-chivalrous performances."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Stephanie L. Young, "(Re)presenting Gender: Exploring Text-Image Incongruities in Anne Taintor's Artwork," *Women & Language* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 73-93.

<sup>78</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 79.

<sup>79</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 81.

<sup>80</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 81.

<sup>81</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 85.

<sup>82</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 84.

<sup>83</sup> Young, "(Re)presenting Gender," 85.

Through Anne Taintor's juxtaposition in her artwork, she is ultimately able to creative perspective by incongruity by showing the audience new ways to view typically sexist dichotomies and social relationships.

Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity can ultimately be viewed from several different communication lenses and literary methods. Though Burke himself could be quite meandering in his writings and philosophies, his discussions of the four master tropes, comic frames, and genres all ultimately lead back to the creation of perspective by incongruity. Only when people create genres do they know which pieties perspective by incongruity can break. Furthermore, through the use of irony, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, writers and artists can create perspective by incongruity reveal the truth about a society or social situation. And finally, by viewing the world through a comic frame and creating comic correctives, people may learn that most people are not inherently evil; they are just mistaken. By capitalizing on perspective by incongruity and comic correctives, Margaret Atwood, the producers of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and leaders of the so-called "Handmaid's Resistance" have each tried to bring public awareness to the mistreatment of women and minorities and to ultimately bring action against the offending parties.

### **Margaret Atwood's Equipment for Living in the Novel**

If, as Burke says, literature should be read as equipment for living, then the average reader of *The Handmaid's Tale* should be able to use the novel as a sort of instruction manual for dealing with everyday life. This is difficult to do, however, with a novel that is so outside of the scope of the modern world. To be sure, Atwood drew on real-life events and ideas from the past, but over the past 32 years, at the very least,

American society has grown to largely reject the inhumane ideas and actions Gilead holds. There is no system of Handmaids or state-mandated rape, so it is difficult to see how Atwood's literature could provide any useful instruction. However, through the use of juxtaposition, irony, and the grotesque, Atwood creates perspective by incongruity by showing the parts of this heinous society that mirror the reader's own society or the reader herself. The reader may expect that he or she will not be able to recognize any part of the real world in this dystopian society, so by disrupting this piety, Atwood reveals that there are some serious social and political issues that need to be tackled in the modern world, and most of that change begins with a change within the reader. Atwood's incorporation of comic correctives shows that there is no pure villain or hero to this story; instead, it is up to every reader to make an effort to question his or her own beliefs and the beliefs of others in order to gain new perspectives and find helpful solutions. The Handmaids in her novel are presented as victims of oppression, of course, but Atwood implies that if everyday citizens had paid more attention to subtler forms of oppression before Gilead, the society could have been prevented. One of the ways in which Atwood parses out how to prevent Gilead is to help the audience establish who is to blame for this creation, and this is something she accomplishes through juxtaposition.

### *Juxtaposition*

In its book form, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* embodies many of the characteristics of a work that creates perspective by incongruity. Though clearly making use of the grotesque by presenting gruesome scenes that are beyond humor, Atwood's juxtaposition of three rituals, the Testifying, the pre-Ceremony, and the Salvaging, serves to unsettle perceptions of blame for Gilead's creation. In each of these scenes, a group of

women stands in a circle or semicircle focusing on someone who is at the center of attention. Atwood shows through each scene how the attribution of blame shifts depending on the person's perspective: from the Handmaid's perspective, the person in the middle is the one the women blame for their circumstances, but from others' perspectives, the people on the outside of the circle are to blame.

The "testifying" is a gruesome practice Offred recounts that took place in the Rachel and Leah Center, or "the Red Center," as Offred calls it, which is a sort of training center for the Handmaids. In this particular scene, one of the other Handmaids, Janine, sits in the middle of a circle formed by the other Handmaids and recounts a time when she was gang-raped at the age of 14. Atwood writes,

But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.  
*Her* fault, *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*.<sup>84</sup>

In this scene, Atwood indicates a couple of key beliefs the Aunts hold and teach. First, they feel that any unwanted sexual interaction the women experienced in their past lives was a result of something that they did wrong. For Atwood's audience, this passage surely calls to mind modern debates over what women are wearing when they are sexually assaulted and whether or not they should be more careful by dressing modestly. Furthermore, this passage indicates that the Aunts have mentally separated the act of rape and what the Handmaids are being trained to do. The reader cannot escape the crushing irony that in this moment where women are telling another woman she brought gang-rape on herself, they are all preparing themselves to be raped routinely. Ultimately, Atwood

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<sup>84</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 72.

shows in this passage that the Aunts and Gilead's government blame the women for the current state of affairs. They were careless "sluts"<sup>85</sup> who ultimately caused a fertility crisis, and now the act of routine rape is each woman's own fault.

Atwood complicates the attribution of fault by presenting multiple conflicting accounts of who is to blame. Offred is disgusted with herself for taking place in the Testifying and for not believing Janine. Recalling Janine's previous Testifying the week before, Offred says, "For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her. Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby. We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of myself. I didn't then."<sup>86</sup> Here, the reader is invited to feel Offred's frustration with her own compliance as well as the helplessness she feels now that her own ideology is changing. It is notable that all of the people present at the testifying are women who are blaming a woman for bringing sexual assault on herself, and what is worse is that they actually believe what they are saying. From Offred's reaction to the Testifying, Atwood is indicating that perhaps women are to blame for the creation of Gilead, but it is not the same sort of blame the Aunts and the government place on them. This scene suggests that patriarchal ideology relies on women not speaking out against crimes against women. While Offred and the other women are not to blame for the infertility crisis or the continuous acts of rape that happen to them, but their silence or their past condemnation of women placed in these same situations nonetheless supports the patriarchal ideology that oppresses them. My argument, however, is not intended to place blame on the women or one group in particular; instead, I am showing how Atwood presents a more complex configuration of blame, which undermines a simple narrative.

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<sup>85</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 113.

<sup>86</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 72.

In order to further emphasize this conundrum of who to blame for Gilead's creation, Atwood juxtaposes the Testifying scene with the household Bible reading just before the Ceremony. In this scene, the entire household gathers in the living room while the Commander sits in the middle of the room and reads from the Bible. While Offred, Serena Joy, and the other members of the household wait for the Commander to arrive, Offred indicates that she recognizes that everyone in the house blames her for what is about to take place. Offred observes, "Rita scowls at me before slipping in to stand behind me. It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims."<sup>87</sup> This inability to discern whether it is her or her body that is to blame for her circumstances demonstrates how Gilead's ideology has been further engrained into Offred's psyche. Gilead sees the Handmaids as nothing more than childbearing vessels; they are not humans with thoughts, hopes, and desires. Therefore, in the minds of Gilead's officials and everyone else who subscribes to their system of beliefs, the Handmaids have brought their circumstances on themselves because they have fertile bodies. Once more before the ceremony begins, Offred observes that someone present resents her for her position and ability to bear children: Serena Joy. As Serena Joy cries behind Offred during the prayer, Offred says, "I bow my head and close my eyes. I listen to the held breath, the almost inaudible gasps, the shaking going on behind my back. How she must hate me, I think."<sup>88</sup> Here, Offred assumes that Serena Joy blames her for the upcoming ceremony and directs her hate toward Offred herself and not Offred's body. Once again, in this scene Offred only points out the women's judgments of her and how they direct the blame on the only

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<sup>87</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 81.

<sup>88</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 90.

completely helpless woman in the room. By juxtaposing this scene with the Testifying scene, Atwood shows not only how women will blame other women for the sexual crimes committed against them, but she also shows how by characterizing a woman by her body alone, it is easier for women to place the blame her.

The final scene Atwood juxtaposes with the Testifying and the pre-Ceremony is the Salvaging scene. After seeing two Handmaids and one Wife hung for their crimes at a ceremony called the Salvaging, Aunt Lydia brings a man out, gathers the Handmaids in a circle, and places him in the center. She tells them that the man, who Offred describes as looking like “a drunk who’s been in a fight,”<sup>89</sup> raped two Handmaids. Furthermore, one of the Handmaids was pregnant, and this act of rape killed her baby. After hearing this, Offred states, “It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It’s true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend.”<sup>90</sup> Again, the women on the outside of the circle are blaming the person on the inside for some egregious crime, but this time, they have a man to blame. This man single-handedly destroys a Handmaid’s new purpose in life, and this crime is too much for the Handmaids to take. For the reader, however, one cannot help but contrast this scene to the Testifying scene, a moment when the woman was to blame for the rape that took place. It is only when a child’s life is at stake that the Handmaids are free of blame when it comes to rape. Just as in the pre-Ceremony scene, Atwood emphasizes the Handmaids’ places in this world as merely vessels for children, and it is only when someone hurts that child that the perpetrator can be punished. After Ofglen kicks the man in the head, knocking him out, Atwood redirects the reader’s attention to the group who is really to blame for the crimes of this novel:

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<sup>89</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 278.

<sup>90</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 279.



Gilead's government. Ofglen says to Offred, "Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours."<sup>91</sup> For perhaps the first time in the novel, someone places the blame not on the women themselves but on the government entity that allows them to be treated this way. By juxtaposing these three scenes in which women within a circle make judgments about the person in the center, Atwood shows how society's attention can get too focused on blaming someone who is not at fault by forgetting they are human and therefore fallible. This makes readers wonder if they, too, are misplacing blame for crimes and unjust laws against women. By placing blame on only one person or party, readers are creating a scapegoat, someone who is always to blame for unjust laws. However, Atwood's juxtaposition of these three scenes does not allow the reader to create a single scapegoat because blame, across these instances, is fluid.

### *Irony*

Another tactic that Atwood uses throughout her novel to create perspective by incongruity is irony. When it comes to irony in literature, Burke thinks of irony as the use of contrasting terms or images in order to create a dialectical development using all of the terms which creates a new perspective.<sup>92</sup> Essentially, irony creates perspective by incongruity by violating the piety that there are only two sides to one issue; there may be an underlying solution or answer that combines both perspectives and transcends the limitations of either one. Atwood's use of irony, like her use of juxtaposition, primarily focuses on the women of the novel and what they did or did not do in the past that influenced their present circumstances. Perhaps the most ironic part of the novel comes in the form of Offred's description of Serena Joy. She had been a sort of televangelist when

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<sup>91</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 280.

<sup>92</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 512.

Offred was a child who preached that women needed to remain in the home. Offred states that at the time when she was watching Serena Joy make speeches on television, she could recognize the irony of Serena Joy's own hypocrisy. Offred says, "Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all."<sup>93</sup> This display of irony shows that Serena Joy firmly held an idea of the type of world she wanted to live in as long as she did not have to also follow the same rules. Offred goes on to describe her styled hair at the time and the amount of makeup she wore, which was in stark contrast to the image of austerity that she preached again and again. Offred continues, "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word."<sup>94</sup> Like one of Burke's ironic pairs, Serena Joy's vision of an ideal world cannot exist without Gilead, and Gilead cannot exist without Serena Joy's vision, but Offred suggests Serena Joy never predicted she would fall victim to her own ideology.

Additionally, Offred's memories of her mother serve as other ironic contrasts to the current world that she is living in. Offred describes her mother as being very politically active throughout her entire life. In one flashback, Offred describes a time when her mother took her to a bonfire to burn magazines as a young child. When a woman hands her a magazine, she sees that it has a naked woman on the front, and her mother tells her to quickly throw it into the fire. Offred recalls, "I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose,

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<sup>93</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 45.

<sup>94</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 46.

sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes."<sup>95</sup> This scene has several ironic features. The first is that burning these pornographic magazines and seeing only parts of the women's bodies serves as foreshadowing for the way future Gilead is going to see Offred and the other Handmaids. Instead of focusing on who the women are, the government will eventually see them as nothing more than sets of reproductive organs. Furthermore, the fact that women like Offred's mother are burning these magazines indicates that they have no idea the extreme someone can take their opinions to. Offred's mother and her friends believe they are making the world a better, more moral place by getting rid of the pornographic magazines, but this action represents a larger movement that is brewing of extreme morality. Secondly, this scene is ironic because they are burning reading materials. They do not realize that there will one day be a future when they are not allowed to read, and such magazines are illegal contraband. While these women think they are contributing to the decline of moral decay in their society, they are actually contributing to the future oppression women everywhere will face. Atwood's use of irony in this scene shows how one group can genuinely feel it is doing the right thing, but there is always someone else who can take those views to the extreme.

In another scene involving Offred's mother, Offred recalls seeing her mother in a film from the past while she was in training at the Red Center. In the film, her mother leads a group of women all carrying signs that are related to some sort of abortion conflict. Atwood is never explicit about which side of the political aisle Offred's mother fell on, but signs such as "Freedom to Choose," "Every Baby a Wanted Baby," and

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<sup>95</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 39.

“Recapture Our Bodies” suggest that she was on the pro-choice side of the argument.<sup>96</sup> This is further proved by her disgust when she tells Offred that when she was pregnant with her late in life, her friend accused her of being “pronatalist” because she wanted to keep the baby.<sup>97</sup> Offred continues her tale of her mother by pointing out that she was so concerned about women’s rights that she even objected to Luke, Offred’s husband in the past, cooking for her because “Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?”<sup>98</sup> The irony comes into play shortly after Janine gives birth to her child, and Offred states, “Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.”<sup>99</sup> It is as if Offred’s mother had been so focused on creating a society in which women could be independent and valued at the same time that she did not stop to consider the more sinister ways in which a woman could be valued by the government. She likely envisioned a world in which women may be valued for the equal work they contribute at their job or the brilliant ideas they come up with that change laws, science, or ways of thinking. Instead, she finds that it is possible for a society to value women strictly because of what their bodies are capable of—strictly because of their reproductive organs. Furthermore, in Burke’s writing, he states that irony and dialectic go hand-in-hand.<sup>100</sup> Atwood ultimately presents two opposing sides of activism through scenes of Serena Joy’s activism and Offred’s mom’s. Through the use of irony, Atwood creates

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<sup>96</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 120.

<sup>97</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 120.

<sup>98</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 121.

<sup>99</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 127.

<sup>100</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 512.

dialectical scenes by showing that neither one of them was completely right in the end, and both women had their views taken to the extreme by another group all while they were arguing with each other. Instead of the dialectic in this case presenting enlightenment, however, it produces oppressive views that are ultimately used against all women, regardless of what their political views are.

### *The Grotesque*

Though Atwood depicts blame as difficult to place on one group or person, the cruel treatment of the Handmaids is never in dispute. The use of the grotesque allows Atwood to show how the Aunts and other government officials mistreat the Handmaids. In one scene from Offred's memory, she recounts a time in the Red Center when Aunt Lydia was explaining the Handmaids' purposes to them. She blames the "lazy" women of the past who were too concerned with the world potentially ending to "breed" children.<sup>101</sup>

Then Offred recalls,

A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savors in her mouth. Think of yourselves as pearls. We, sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives. I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit. This is what I will tell Moira later; if I can.<sup>102</sup>

Through this grotesque image of Aunt Lydia salivating her morals and shaping the Handmaids into her image of the perfect woman, Atwood indicates that the Aunts, as members of the government, contribute to this oppressive regime. Atwood has moved beyond a point of humor; her image of the salivating woman is intended to produce disgust, but it ultimately represents how little choice the Handmaids have in whether or

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<sup>101</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 113.

<sup>102</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 114.

not they can be free from this situation. The Handmaids are metaphorically trapped in the mouth of the oyster, and they have no choice but to be turned into pearls. Even when Offred attempts to find humor in the metaphor, “I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit,” she then undercuts herself to remind readers of her dangerous situation. She says she will only tell Moira about the congealed oyster spit “if [she] can” meaning it will be dangerous for her to do so. In this environment where the women can be severely punished for speaking, just relaying this bit of humor could cost Offred her life. This grotesque scene demonstrates just how oppressive this new society is even before they send the Handmaids out into society and just how little choice the women have in their own lives.

In addition to providing interesting juxtaposition to the Testifying and pre-Ceremony scenes, the Salvaging also presents another example of the grotesque. Though the accused man seems disoriented and tries to deny any wrongdoing, the idea that he raped two Handmaids and killed a baby in the process is too much for the women to handle. Offred states, “The air is bright with adrenaline, we are permitted anything and this is freedom, in my body also, I’m reeling, red spreads everywhere.”<sup>103</sup> In many other books or movies, the idea of a group of women deciding to take revenge against a man who has wronged them could be portrayed as humorous or, at the very least, justified. In this particular scene, however, Atwood reinforces that this is an example of the grotesque through the phrase “this is freedom.” With those words, Atwood is reminding the reader that this is the first time in the novel when the Handmaids are released to do whatever they want to do, but this freedom comes with a hope that they will kill a man. Later,

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<sup>103</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 279.

when Offred is home, Offred states, “My hands smell of warm tar. I want to go back to the house and up to the bathroom and scrub and scrub, with the harsh soap and the pumice, to get every trace of this smell off my skin. The smell makes me feel sick. But also I’m hungry. This is monstrous, but nevertheless it’s true.”<sup>104</sup> The reader can agree with Offred that this quick shift from bloodthirstiness to physical hunger does seem monstrous, but it reveals the impact oppression can have on a person’s morals, beliefs, and actions. The truth that is revealed through this grotesque scene is that there is no telling what an oppressed person will do to have freedom if it has been denied to them for so long. This causes the reader to question whether or not he or she would commit murder in similar circumstances just to have a moment of freedom. It also further indicates how oppressive and cruel the government of Gilead is. Though the Handmaids are the ones inflicting pain on the accused man, it is the government body who told them he was to blame, who kept these women in bondage for years, and who encouraged the women to kill this man. The grotesque here reminds the reader that the Handmaids are not necessarily to blame for their actions; this is the only opportunity of freedom that they have.

### *Comic Corrective*

Ultimately, there are several parts of Atwood’s novel that feel removed from the modern world today. Even the portions that seem familiar, such as the abortion debate, use different terms and points of contention so that the pre-Gilead United States still seems somewhat foreign to readers. Atwood’s use of the comic corrective, however, encourages readers to apply parts of the book to their own lives and to see how their own

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<sup>104</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 281.

views or actions may be mistaken. For example, while thinking about the events leading up to Gilead's creation, Offred states,

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death, or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others.<sup>105</sup>

Here, Offred states that while she saw the newspaper stories about some of the events that precluded Gilead's creation, she and many other people were not quick to act in protest or to question the government because these things were not happening to the people they knew. As a comic corrective, the image of the gradually heating bathtub serves to open the reader's eyes to events in the world that may be signs that something even worse is coming. Atwood is telling her readers explicitly that it is a mistake to not pay attention to the world around them because nothing bad is happening to them in the moment. The events happening in other parts of the country or other parts of the world could be indicators of future events that will take place in the readers' own backyards. Offred continues, "How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom."<sup>106</sup> Before Gilead, Offred's primary mistake was in believing that everything that was going on in the world that she read about in the newspapers was not going to happen to her. For a modern audience, this realization serves as a wake-up call to not only pay attention to what is

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<sup>105</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 56-57.

<sup>106</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 57.



happening in the world but to also be more proactive instead of reactive to the situations surrounding them.

Finally, the “Historical Notes” epilogue serves as a comic corrective that is equal parts a summary and a warning. In the epilogue, the fictional Professor Maryann Crescent Moon and Professor James Darcy Piexioto deliver speeches before an audience about the Gileadean Period and the Offred’s story. They explain that researchers found Offred’s story recorded on several cassette tapes in lockers in Maine, and from these tapes, they were able to write down her story. In some ways, the historical notes may function as a source of comfort for the reader. They are proof that life does continue after Gilead, and not only does life continue, but it begins to look a little more like the modern world today. The academics in this epilogue study and talk about Gilead in the same way researchers today would study the pilgrims or any other ancient population. However, to some degree, Atwood intends to warn or frighten the readers with this very fact. For example, Professor Piexioto makes a couple of comments during his speech that indicate that women are still not valued as much as men in this society. At one point, he jokes, “We know that this city was a prominent way station on what our author refers to as ‘The Underground Femaleroad,’ since dubbed by some of our historical wags ‘The Underground Frailroad.’”<sup>107</sup> Piexioto repetition of this degrading nickname shows that he has little respect for the women who were attempting to escape Gilead and little respect for the women in his own society. This indicates that nothing much has changed regarding women’s places in society; they are still seen as lesser beings.

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<sup>107</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 301.

Furthermore, Piexioto later goes on a tangent in which he says he and others have no right to judge the people of Gilead. He says, “If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. [...] Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand.”<sup>108</sup> These statements are met with applause from the crowd, which is unsettling for readers who are finishing up reading about the horrors Offred had to face. This soon after the end of Offred’s story, the memory of the atrocities she faced are still fresh in the readers’ minds, so they can recognize the fact that Piexioto and others seem to have forgiven Gilead too easily. For Atwood, this is a statement about how easily modern society can forget about the crimes past societies committed, and instead, society tends to idolize the past for its simpler nature. As Piexioto points out, however, even the pre-Gilead United States did not treat everyone equally. He says, “[Gilead’s] racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did.”<sup>109</sup> This statement changes the audience’s perspective of Gilead’s formation; Gilead formed not just as a result of society wanting women to stay at home. Rather, Gilead was able to form because there existed a society that feared not having enough Caucasian people and not having enough babies to replenish the population of Caucasian people. Therefore, Atwood’s audience is unable to simply attribute Gilead’s creation to the marginalization of one particular group of people. Instead, readers must recognize that it is the mistreatment and oppression of

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<sup>108</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 302.

<sup>109</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 305.

people of all backgrounds that pave the way for a theocratic society like Gilead to form. Ultimately, a society does not have to be as cruel as Gilead in order to oppress women and to hold on to misogynistic views; even the most enlightened society can forget to learn from the past.

### *Conclusion*

Though it was published over 30 years ago, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* still manages to feel eerily relevant regardless of the time period in which someone is reading it. Atwood achieves this by creating a novel that embodies the different aspects of Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity. Through her novel, Atwood violates pieties and reveals truths regarding the treatment of women, complacency with government, and the degradation of minorities. Atwood disrupts pieties regarding treatment of women through her use of juxtaposition and irony. By juxtaposing three scenes in which there is someone outside of a circle judging the person inside the circle, Atwood reveals that there is still a common idea that women are only as valuable as their reproductive organs. In the testifying scene, the pre-ceremony scene, and the salvaging scene, Offred recognizes that she is simultaneously revered and condemned because of her body, and it is sometimes women themselves who are the quickest to pass judgment or praise. Similarly, the irony Atwood uses in her novel helps show that though some women are politically active, they are often busy fighting against each other instead of focusing on a different source of their oppression. Atwood reveals this oppressive source through her use of the grotesque in the descriptions of some of the government's most egregious actions. Using the grotesque reminds readers of the severity of the situation Offred is in, and though it is fictional and can sometimes be seen as unbelievable, readers

may question how they would respond in those very same situations. Finally, Atwood's use of the comic corrective violates pieties of fiction and the dystopian genre. Dystopian fiction is supposed to seem unbelievable or far off in the distant future. Her use of the comic correctives, however, demonstrate that this line of thinking is mistaken and that if readers are not careful to treat people equally and stay alert for ways in which some power of authority is mistreating them, modern society could form a Gilead of its own.

### **Establishing a Scapegoat: Miller's Use of Tragic Frames in the Hulu Adaptation**

While Margaret Atwood's original novel *The Handmaid's Tale* survives and succeeds very much from the use of comic frames and comic correctives, Bruce Miller's made-for-television adaptation by the same name thrives off of tragic frames, the grotesque, and a lot of good timing. Though Hulu's production of the show was put into motion months before Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president,<sup>110</sup> many viewers have seen the show as social commentary on his election and his prevailing attitudes towards women.<sup>111</sup> Because he takes the show out of the 1980s and puts it in a modern setting, there is no denying that some of the changes Miller made for the television show and some of the scenes that he kept the same do eerily resemble many of the modern issues the audience sees in the United States and around the world. Furthermore, though Miller denies this was the goal of the show,<sup>112</sup> there seems to be a clear enemy in the show and a clear call to action by the end of the series. Miller and his team paint Offred as a much more dynamic character who underhandedly fights back

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<sup>110</sup> "Behind the Scenes of 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" narrated Kara Swisher, Recode Decode, *Recode*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2017/6/7/15758374/transcript-Handmaids-tale-writer-producer-bruce-miller-hulu-streaming-recode-decode>

<sup>111</sup> "How the Handmaid's Tale Traveled from Page to Screen, explained by Showrunner Bruce Miller," narrated by Todd VanDerWerff, I Think You're Interesting, *Vox*, Aug. 30, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/30/16225740/bruce-miller-interview-podcast>

<sup>112</sup> "How the Handmaid's Tale Traveled from Page to Screen"

against the repressive regime she is a victim of. Lines such as “It’s their own fault. They should’ve never given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army”<sup>113</sup> demonstrate June’s willingness to fight back against Gilead, whereas Offred in the novel has little option or desire for rebellion. In addition to the same tactics Atwood uses (juxtaposition, irony, and the grotesque), Miller’s use of the tragic frame creates perspective by incongruity for audiences who go into the show expecting to be unable to relate to the characters or the plot. June is ultimately a heroine figure who Miller wants audiences to follow into creating social and political change. By taking a look at the same tactics of perspective by incongruity that Atwood uses, one can see how Miller helps transform the image of the Handmaid from an oppressed victim to an empowered fighter.

### *Juxtaposition*

Because the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an audiovisual text, juxtaposition becomes even more important than in the novel both visually and thematically. For instance, in the second episode, Offred and the other Handmaids are called to one of the Wife’s houses because her Handmaid, Janine, is giving birth. Visually, Miller and the directors make it clear that these two groups of women are separate, even though they are supposedly having the same experience. As soon as June walks in, she tells Alma, one of the other Handmaids, that she smells “real coffee,” and Alma replies, “We do the work, and they pig out.”<sup>114</sup> Immediately in front of June, she sees the room where the Wives are gathered for their own birthing ceremony. Though the Wife of the household is not actually pregnant, she lies almost exalted-looking in the

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<sup>113</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Night,” *Hulu* video, 60:00, June 14, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1092255>

<sup>114</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Birth Day,” *Hulu* video, 45:00, April 26, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1069120>.

middle of the room. The room looks white and clean with the sun shining through it, and the other Wives surround her in their blue dresses, softly imploring her to breathe through the phantom pain.<sup>115</sup> As June watches, she cannot help but giggle, suggesting that she sees this ceremony as nothing more than a performance piece. As she moves to the next room with Janine, however, the visuals of the room change. Though the same sunlight shines through the room, the red outfits of the dozens of Handmaids in the room make the atmosphere heavy. Just in case the audience is not attuned enough to the dankness of this room compared to the other, June begins to describe the smell. She says, “There’s a smell coming from [Janine’s] room, something primal. It’s the smell of dens, of inhabited caves. It’s the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed where the cat gave birth, once, before she was spade. It’s the smell of genesis.”<sup>116</sup> This visual juxtaposition of the two scenes is intended to show how separate these two classes of women and how both groups of women are given two different birthing experiences.

The juxtaposition of these scenes, however, is not just demonstrating class distinctions between the two women. Besides the visuals, there is a more sinister underlying distinction between the two sets of women. Miller is ultimately showing how much more valued the Wives are than the Handmaids even though they are not giving birth. If having a child is supposed to be what makes the women valuable, as Aunt Lydia points out both in the book and in the television show,<sup>117</sup> then what does it say about the Handmaids that they are not even treated with reverence and respect when they are fulfilling that one duty? When Janine finally gives birth, the Wife of the household is

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<sup>115</sup> *Handmaid’s Tale*, “Birth Day.”

<sup>116</sup> *Handmaid’s Tale*, “Birth Day.”

<sup>117</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Offred,” *Hulu* video, 57:00, April 26, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1067334>

placed directly behind her, so the performance of her giving birth is finally complete. And in the end, Janine is only allowed to nurse the baby for a few weeks; she is not allowed to name or care for the child. This juxtaposition between how the Wife of the household is treated during the birth and how Janine is treated creates perspective by incongruity because it disrupts the audience's piety that a woman who gives birth to a child should be respected as its mother. In Gilead, the only respect the Handmaids ever get is only if they are pregnant, and they do not get to maintain this respect as women or as mothers even after they give birth. Instead, the child is given to someone who has pretended to be in the same situation, and a Wife will take care of the Handmaid's baby.

Another thematic use of juxtaposition in the Hulu adaptation is to reestablish that Gilead is still the former United States of America, and there is an outside world that is behaving as usual. The introduction of the Mexican delegation helps solidify Gilead's geographic place in the world, and because the delegation has a female leader in charge, it is proof that Gilead's mistreatment of women is, for the present, restricted only to the former United States. In the scene in which Offred first meets Ambassador Castillo, there is one moment when the two women speak facing each other, and Mrs. Waterford, Serena Joy, can be seen between them in the background. Here, Miller juxtaposes these three women: one the lower-caste of an oppressive society, one the upper-caste of an oppressive society, and the third the upper-caste in a democratic society.<sup>118</sup> Each of these women would have been relative equals when it comes to rights and freedoms in the society before Gilead. Each one of them would have had the same opportunities to be leaders in their respective fields. However, seeing the three women together in this frame

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<sup>118</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, "A Woman's Place," Hulu video, 53:00, May 17, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1080394>

reminds the viewer just how unequal all of them are. Even Serena Joy, who in everyday life has more power than any of the other women, has less power and is more disenfranchised than Ambassador Castillo. The juxtaposition interrupts the dichotomy that valuable women are either high-status Wives or low-status Handmaids because there are women who hold power outside of Gilead.

In a later scene, when the Commanders, Wives, and Mexican delegation are gathered in a room for drinks, there is an interesting visual juxtaposition where Ambassador Castillo is seated on the side of the room where the Commanders are seated. The Wives, on the other hand, sit on the opposite side of the room relatively silent. This, again, shows how much power Ambassador Castillo has in her country and how her amount of power is only afforded to men in Gilead's structure of government. The Commanders' actions reinforce the commonly-held practice of equating powerful women with men; indeed even June assumes that Ambassador Castillo is the assistant to a male ambassador at first.<sup>119</sup> The perspective by incongruity that these scenes ultimately create is that even Ambassador Castillo, a woman who has been afforded power and status, cannot fully recognize Offred's oppression and abuse. She asks both June and Mrs. Waterford if they are happy or fulfilled in their relative roles, and when they say that they are, presumably out of fear of retribution, she just accepts their answers. The audience can see the mistreatment of the women in Gilead, particularly the Handmaids, but the inability of an educated, powerful woman to recognize this oppression encourages the audience to wonder what it might be missing.

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<sup>119</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "A Woman's Place."



Finally, by juxtaposing June's current situation with memories of the past, both stated in the moment and presented through flashbacks, Miller reminds the audience that the United States of the past, within the context of the show, looked a lot like the United States of the present. Miller stated in interviews that moving the setting of the show to the present-day United States instead of keeping its original 1980s setting was an intentional move.<sup>120</sup> This makes the problems with Gilead and the struggles June faces in the past and in her present seem more immediate and more likely to happen to a modern audience. For example, in one scene, Moira and June have just finished a run, and they are wearing yoga pants, typical workout tops, and holding cellphones.<sup>121</sup> In another scene, Moira and June attend a protest in the streets, and the signs the protestors hold in addition to the barricade of armored police officers at the front of the crowd are reminiscent of recent protests against police brutality such as the protests in Baton Rouge, Louisiana<sup>122</sup> and Ferguson, Missouri.<sup>123</sup> Finally, during a flashback scene of the Red Center, June recalls the reasons Aunt Lydia says the birthrate declined in the US before Gilead. Aunt Lydia states, "They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals, and radiation, and poison. So God whipped up a special plague. The plague of infertility. ... As birthrates fell, they made things worse: birth control pills, morning-after pills, murdering babies just so they could have their orgies; their Tinder."<sup>124</sup> Her mention of topics of modern debate may be shocking to the viewer and jarringly places them in the

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<sup>120</sup> "Behind the Scenes of 'The Handmaid's Tale.'"

<sup>121</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Late," *Hulu* video, 51:00, April 26, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1069121>

<sup>122</sup> Yoni Appelbaum, "A Single Photo from Baton Rouge That's Hard to Forget," *Atlantic*, July, 10, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/07/a-single-photo-that-captures-race-and-policing-in-america/490664/>

<sup>123</sup> BBC, "Ferguson Unrest: From Shooting to Nationwide Protests," *BBC*, Aug. 10, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30193354>

<sup>124</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Offred."

correct timeframe for the show. If Tinder, a current popular dating app that is commonly used for people to find casual sex partners, is blamed as a potential cause of a national fertility crisis, then Gilead cannot be the creation of a distant future. These familiar aspects of the show create perspective by incongruity for the audience because the audience does not expect to be able to identify with this genre. *The Handmaid's Tale* is dystopian fiction, and it is easy to see that the modern United States does not currently operate as a theocracy. Therefore, this world should seem foreign and unreasonable to an American audience. However, the fact that it does seem so familiar causes the audience to worry that if Gilead can form in a society that looks and operates just like the current society, then that means Gilead can become a reality. Ultimately, Miller's juxtaposition of pre-Gilead scenes and memories and Gilead itself may encourage audiences to wonder if Gilead could happen in their own world and to make these audiences more invested in the outcome of the society.

### *Irony*

Miller uses irony in the show in a similar way that Atwood uses it in her novel, especially when it comes to Serena Joy's involvement. Where he differs from Atwood is in his introduction of more modern themes that viewers would be able to see the irony in. However, it would be difficult for the viewer to miss the irony of Serena Joy's involvement in the planning stages of Gilead. When the Mexican delegation comes to visit, Ambassador Castillo quotes from Serena Joy's own book, *A Woman's Place*, "Never mistake a woman's meekness for weakness."<sup>125</sup> She tells Serena Joy that she re-read it on her way to Gilead, and she coined Serena Joy's argument as "domestic

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<sup>125</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "A Woman's Place."

feminism.” Then, Ambassador Castillo questions Serena Joy, “Back then, did you ever imagine a society like this? ... A society in which women can no longer read your book or anything else?”<sup>126</sup> Serena Joy responds saying she did not imagine it would be quite this way, and, for a moment, it is easy for the audience to sympathize with her. The irony Miller creates here is a sad one, similar to the irony Atwood creates in her novel. The audience sees that Serena Joy was a vocal feminist, though her feminism was a more conservative type, and while she wanted women to take up more domestic duties, no woman could have ever wanted this extreme. Through irony, the audience sees Serena Joy as an unhappy victim of someone adopting and then misconstruing her ideas.

While this irony produces a point of view that Serena Joy is a victim of a group of men stealing her ideas, this perspective quickly changes just a few minutes later. Miller shows a flashback scene that demonstrates just how involved Serena Joy was in Gilead’s creation. The scene shows Serena Joy and the Commander, back when they were just Mr. and Mrs. Waterford, on a seemingly normal date at the movie theater. All around them, there are men and women also going to the movies, but many of the women are dressed in outfits that show much more skin than does Serena Joy’s outfit. This sets them apart from the rest of the crowd visually, even though they are a part of the same activity. As they sit down for the movie, Serena Joy tells her husband how an article she is writing has been going. She says, “You know, I was thinking, fertility as a national resource, reproduction as a moral imperative, I think that’s a really interesting idea, and it could make for a great second book.”<sup>127</sup> With this statement, the irony that Miller creates in the preceding scene takes a dark turn. The viewer realizes that Serena Joy’s ideas cannot

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<sup>126</sup> *Handmaid’s Tale*, “A Woman’s Place.”

<sup>127</sup> *Handmaid’s Tale*, “A Woman’s Place.”

succeed without a government like Gilead, and Gilead would not exist if it were not for Serena Joy's ideas. As she tells Ambassador Castillo, she never imagined a world in which women would not be allowed to read her book, but in order to have a perfect domestic society that mandates reproduction, the government has to take away power from women any way that it can. In other words, Serena Joy's ideas can only exist in a world like Gilead. Furthermore, the audience sees that, for the most part, the suffering they have witnessed on behalf of June and the other Handmaids is a direct result of Serena Joy's ideas. The suffering of so many women is ultimately caused by one woman's ideas.

While Atwood's book also includes the irony of Serena Joy's involvement in conservative feminism, Miller takes a different approach to this irony. In Atwood's book, the irony surrounding Serena Joy is that her ideas have now been taken to their logical extreme, but there is still the sense that perhaps she was distracted by fighting with women like Offred's mother. In the show, the viewers are not given this same look into the other side that Serena Joy is arguing against, so Serena Joy seems inherently evil. There is a sort of sadness surrounding the irony of Serena Joy being stuck in a domestic lifestyle in the book, while in the show, her position seems justified, and the viewer can feel somewhat vindicated. Additionally, unlike in the book, this irony does not lead to the dialectic because there is no "other side" that a mediator can take a solution from; there is only Serena Joy's view of conservatism. However, irony ultimately still creates perspective by incongruity for the audience because it reveals a truth that in order to enact any extreme views, an extremely oppressive government has to form.

Another ironic twist in the television show is that Americans, who often argue over the refugee crisis, are now refugees themselves in Canada. Throughout the series, viewers see both Luke and Moira's attempts to cross the border into Canada. Since their escapes are not documented in the novel, viewers can assume that Miller and his team included them both for practical reasons, like the show's second season, and to make a statement. In the final episode, the audience sees Moira has finally arrived at a refugee center in Canada. There is a flyer on the door that features a man smiling and reads "I support refugees."<sup>128</sup> Here, the irony breaks through the fourth wall and extends to the world outside of the show. Miller and his team may be assuming that the majority of their audience will be familiar with the refugee crisis and the fact that many Americans do not want to accept refugees at all. Those who do not want refugees coming to America typically hold conservative values and argue that they want to be kept safe by keeping refugees away.<sup>129</sup> It is ironic, then, that a theocracy, an ultra-conservative government, is ultimately what could cause Americans to become refugees themselves. Miller creates perspective by incongruity in this moment by showing how every conservative idea cannot be upheld to the fullest extent because it leads to the oppression of many people and ultimately could turn these people into refugees.

### *The Grotesque*

The instances of the grotesque that Miller uses in the television show are scenes that would initially seem familiar to the audience and draw off of real-life issues in modern American society, but he takes them to a point where these scenes are ridiculous.

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<sup>128</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Night."

<sup>129</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump and Pence's Opposition to Syrian Refugees is Based on a Huge Lie," *Washington Post*, Oct. 5, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/05/the-huge-lie-at-the-heart-of-trump-and-pences-opposition-to-syrian-refugees/?utm\\_term=.ef867759fd7d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/05/the-huge-lie-at-the-heart-of-trump-and-pences-opposition-to-syrian-refugees/?utm_term=.ef867759fd7d)

There is an important distinction between Miller's use of the grotesque, however, and Atwood's. Though Miller portrays the ridiculous, there is no way to find humor in any of the situations. Burke describes the grotesque as moving "beyond humor,"<sup>130</sup> but in the case of Miller's scenes, there was no humor to begin with. In Atwood's text, there is some humor that the audience can find in the drunken staggering of the accused rapist or Offred's connection between pearls and oyster spit; Miller does not allow any of this humor to take shape. Therefore, Miller's use of the grotesque is not intended to remind readers of the seriousness of an issue, but instead, it shows commonly seen issues at their most extreme in order to reveal some truth about each issue and to establish an enemy.

The first two grotesque scenes actually occur in June's past as Gilead was starting to take shape. The first of these scenes was mentioned earlier as an example of juxtaposition: the scene in the coffee shop. After June orders her coffee, she hands the barista her debit card and asks if the woman who is normally there is sick. He responds rudely, saying there is no way for him to know, and then he tells June that her card is declined. She protests and kindly asks him to run the card again, and he refuses, responding, "What's your problem? ... Fucking sluts, get the fuck out of here. ... Get out of here."<sup>131</sup> Outraged, Moira and June question the man on what his name is and what his problem with them is, but he offers no explanation. Because he calls them "sluts," the audience can only assume the barista yelled at them because of what they were wearing. This condemnation of women's clothing is not a new concept for Miller's audience; it is the central question and argument surrounding many contemporary debates from the issue of modesty to rape. Where Miller's scene moves from social critique to the

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<sup>130</sup> *Permanence and Change*, 112

<sup>131</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Late."

grotesque is in the location of this verbal abuse. Not only is it shocking for a modern audience to see a man berating women in this way using profanity, but it is also shocking that he does this in a public setting in which he is working. Furthermore, none of the people present in the coffee shop step up to defend the two women. At the man's tone of voice, everyone in the coffee shop should have heard his abuse, but nobody steps up to defend Moira or June. Within the shock the viewer experiences as a result of the grotesque, there lies the potential for recognition that if criticizing women in this way openly and in public is wrong, then doing the same thing in private is also wrong. Additionally, this grotesque scene establishes those people who do judge women in that way as moral enemies, and the people who sit around and do nothing about this verbal abuse are just as guilty.

A second instance of the grotesque in a flashback is a protest that follows the suspension of all women's jobs and finances. There is a barricade of armed police officers standing stoically as a crowd holds signs and shouts at the officers.<sup>132</sup> One of the signs reads "Human Rights = Women's Rights," which is a phrase that has been used at women's rallies and marches for decades.<sup>133</sup> Moira and June are present at this protest standing alongside men and women who are screaming at the police. When the crowd starts to get physical with the officers, a couple of them come to the front of the line carrying large, military-grade weapons. When June sees this, she convinces Moira to move further back in the crowd. The police start firing into the crowd; then, a bomb goes off. Once the police start shooting, there is no dialogue in the scene, and all the audience

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<sup>132</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Late"

<sup>133</sup> Amy Chozick, "Hillary Clinton's Beijing Speech on Women Resonates 20 Years Later," *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/09/05/20-years-later-hillary-clintons-beijing-speech-on-women-resonates/>

can hear is the sound of bullets and a slow, haunting version of Blondie's "Heart of Glass." The scene closes with the sound of another military-grade weapon causing an explosion that sends glass flying into the coffee shop where June and Moira have taken refuge.

The police officers' actions in this scene would be considered extreme in a dangerous, anti-government protest, so the fact that this occurs during a protest for women's rights and equality makes it all the more shocking. The viewer recognizes in this sequence that while the beginning of the scene seems familiar in light of the Women's March, police brutality protests, and other human rights campaign protests, the action the officers take is not normal. This action represents a restructuring of laws at a government level that these officers are even allowed to shoot into a crowd of citizens. This scene also portrays the grotesque because of the great mental and moral change these officers would have to go through in order to be willing to shoot into a crowd of people. By showing law enforcement at its absolute worst and most dangerous, Miller opens the audience's eyes to the possibility that viewers are fortunate to be able to protest when officers are not likely to shoot into a crowd. But it also opens the audience's eyes to how much power law enforcement does have on a daily basis. Like the coffee shop scene, the protest scene is designed as grotesque in order to shock the viewer and cause them to think differently about an issue outside of the television show. It also exposes the government within the show as the enemy to fear; once police officers start shooting unarmed citizens, there is little those citizens can do to fight back.

*Comic Corrective*



The one element of perspective by incongruity that Atwood makes use of in her novel that Miller largely neglects is the use of a comic corrective. Instead of viewing this project through the comic frame in which one or multiple parties are simply mistaken instead of completely wrong, Miller's show blames and condemns the tyrannical theocracy of Gilead from the beginning. Whereas Atwood presents hope that there is perhaps a lesson that readers can learn from Gilead, Miller uses tragic frames to create a clear hero, June, and a clear villain, Gilead. There are some rare moments, however, when Miller attempts to make the audience sympathize with some of the show's most despicable characters. In an interview, Miller stated, "The other things that I was thrilled with were the fact that everybody was getting angry at themselves for having sympathy for [Aunt] Lydia and Serena Joy and all these people, you know, who on some list would be considered villains. I don't consider them villains, but [the viewers] were having sympathy and hating themselves for it."<sup>134</sup> For Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia, Miller shows moments in which each of them is at her most vulnerable, and the audience gets a sense that they were not always monsters.

For Serena Joy, Miller attempts to show her in a similar light as the Serena Joy of the book: a firebrand woman who was simply mistaken in the ways she saw a woman's place in the world. Viewers cannot help but notice the way her demeanor changes and exhibits pride when she tells her husband that she is going to write a second book or when Ambassador Castillo tells her she read her book. Additionally, in one flashback scene, viewers see Serena Joy and her husband praying together before having sex and saying that they want a child.<sup>135</sup> There is a sense of desire in Serena Joy's face; it is clear

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<sup>134</sup> "How The Handmaid's Tale Traveled from Page to Screen"

<sup>135</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "A Woman's Place"

that she misses sex as she remembers that moment with her husband. There is also the sense that Serena Joy desperately wants a child in the present. She seems frustrated with her friend who is taking care of Janine's baby because the woman does not care for the baby the way Serena Joy would.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, viewers get the sense that Aunt Lydia has not allowed herself to become completely hard-hearted. The first indication that she cares for the Handmaids comes as she takes care of Janine while she is giving birth to the baby.<sup>137</sup> She again shows that she cares for Janine when she and some other Handmaids are disinvited from the dinner with the Mexican delegation because they are deformed.<sup>138</sup> Finally, she defends the Handmaids and prevents them from being killed or injured after they defy her. When she finds out that she can not keep her baby and that her Commander does not actually love her, Janine kidnaps the baby and threatens to jump off of a bridge with her. Though she eventually gives the baby to June and survives her fall off of the bridge, Janine's punishment is to be stoned to death. When the Handmaids refuse, and June steps out of line, an armed guard threatens to shoot her. Aunt Lydia stops him and says, "No! ... These girls are my responsibility."<sup>139</sup> By taking ownership of the Handmaids, Aunt Lydia shows that she feels like she has to take care of them in any way that she can, even though she has mistreated them.

Up for debate, however, is whether or not the somewhat redemptive or "comic" parts of Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia can truly be called comic correctives. Seeing both women's repulsive actions towards creating Gilead and then in their treatment of the

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<sup>136</sup> *The Handmaid's Tale*, "The Bridge," Hulu video, 49:00, June 7, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1087499>

<sup>137</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Birth Day."

<sup>138</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "A Woman's Place."

<sup>139</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Night."

Handmaids makes it difficult to believe that they could just be mistaken or misunderstood. Clearly, Miller sees conversations online between viewers that show that they do feel some sort of sympathy for these women at times, but I would argue that these sympathies stem from an establishment of tragic frames. In a tragic frame, like the great Greek tragedies, there is usually an established hero and an established enemy, and the hero usually struggles with hubris, or pride, which is the ultimate sin. Burke writes, “[The playwrights’] frame of acceptance admonished one to ‘resign’ himself to a sense of his limitations.”<sup>140</sup> While June is clearly the heroine of this story, Miller does portray Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia as people who recognize their own limitations, especially now that they are in this repressive regime. Both women indicate, through actions and, at the very least, facial expressions that often they would rather be back in their old way of life than as integral parts of Gilead’s machine. Additionally, perhaps the audience sympathizes with these women at times because they see Gilead as a government controlled by men, so any woman under its watchful eye is a victim of the regime. Either way, Miller cannot successfully portray Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia as examples of the comic corrective because their actions are so reprehensible that there is no indication they are purely mistaken. He has established through his other methods, irony, juxtaposition, and the grotesque, that there is clearly a “good” side and a “bad” side, and these tragic frames do not leave room for the possibility that members of the bad side are redeemable.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, Miller and the rest of his team used many of the same tactics Atwood used to create perspective by incongruity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Whereas Atwood

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<sup>140</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 39.

explores blame, responsibility, and hope for a better future, Miller explores the ways in which Gilead mirrors the world today and implores active steps against Gilead forming. His use of juxtaposition reminds the audience time and again that Gilead used to be the United States in the audience's present. None of this is taking place in a distant future or an ancient past; Gilead is here and now. Furthermore, juxtaposition establishes that Gilead's government is the enemy that the hero, June, is up against by showing how undervalued the Handmaids actually are to the rest of society. His use of irony shows that this restrictive government was not the result solely of men's ideas; Serena Joy has just as much of a part in creating Gilead as the Commander does. Irony also proves that ultra-conservative views cannot be enacted without an ultra-conservative, restrictive government that will do more harm to the population than good. Furthermore, Miller's visual demonstrations of the grotesque are intended to shock viewers and to cause them to question how they view certain social and political issues that exist outside of the show itself. In the end, however, Miller's lack of true comic frames makes it difficult to rationalize finding any redeemable traits these women, who are some of the worst characters in the novel. What is ultimately missing from his show is any notion that June, the other Handmaids, and millions of other people in the United States could have contributed anything that led to the creation of Gilead. If he had included more comic frames, the audience would be able to see how June, Serena Joy, Lydia, the Commander, and many others were, in some ways, responsible for Gilead either through complacency and silence or wicked conservatism. With all of these traits in mind, the perspective that Miller ultimately creates, whether intentionally or not, through incongruity is that this

dystopian world is closer to the audience's than they may think, and they need to take action and stop it.

### **Implications of the Handmaid's Rhetorical Transformation**

Just a couple of weeks before the Hulu series premiered, a group of women in Texas donned white bonnets and red hooded capes and stood inside the Texas State Capitol in silent protest over two abortion bills that were being voted on.<sup>141</sup> Though the series had not been released yet, advertisements for the show were already making rounds on the Internet as interest in the novel grew, leading these women to protest dressed as the Handmaids. After the show's premiere, other similar protests immediately took place. While each of these groups had slightly varying reasons for gathering in protest, most of them blamed the current political climate for their need to protest. One activist group, UltraViolet, led an entire movement called The Handmaid's Resistance, in which they provided media guides, instruction manuals, and costumes to anyone who wanted to hold a Handmaid-style rally in August 2017.<sup>142</sup> The group's instruction manual read, "Now is the time to join together and loudly call out sexism and anti-women policies of Trump and politicians—or risk starring in a real-life version of 'The Handmaid's Tale.'"<sup>143</sup> For UltraViolet, Donald Trump and his associates are to blame for the perceived inequality and mistreatment women in America are experiencing, and by dressing as Handmaids, they hoped to draw attention to the president's misogynistic or unfair legislation and

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<sup>141</sup> David Canfield, "Activists Dressed as Characters from *The Handmaid's Tale* to Protest Texas' Anti-Abortion Measures, Slate, March 21, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/03/21/texas\\_women\\_gathered\\_dressed\\_as\\_characters\\_from\\_the\\_Handmaid\\_s\\_tale\\_to\\_protest.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/03/21/texas_women_gathered_dressed_as_characters_from_the_Handmaid_s_tale_to_protest.html)

<sup>142</sup> UltraViolet, Facebook message to author, March 26, 2018.

<sup>143</sup> UltraViolet, "The Handmaid's Resistance Toolkit," *The Handmaid's Resistance*, PDF.

behavior. Other groups, such as one group of women in Ohio,<sup>144</sup> blamed other specific politicians for restrictive legislation or general misogynistic behavior. After a couple of months of quiet, there was a resurgence of Handmaids protests in the wake of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements combatting sexual assault. A group of women even lined up near the Golden Globes dressed as Handmaids to protest sexual assault in Hollywood.<sup>145</sup> As my analysis has suggested, Miller's version of *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a Handmaid who is also a heroine; whereas Atwood presents a Handmaid figure who is disempowered and victimized, my analysis shows that Miller's version of the Handmaid provides a figure that women can emulate in order to show they will fight back against injustice

In the wake of these protests, however, there were a string of sensationalized representations of the Handmaid. One group of women had gathered together in Houston to protest dressed as Handmaids, but that night, a separate group with the same organization went to a *Wonder Woman* screening in Handmaid costumes.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, the popular television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* advertised its third All-Star Season with a *Handmaid's Tale*-style commercial depicting two of the former winners in Handmaids costumes.<sup>147</sup> Finally, *Handmaid's Tale* memes, viral images or text spread around on the Internet, made the rounds on Twitter with many users comparing current political issues to scenes from the Hulu series. For the women who wore the Handmaid costumes to the

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<sup>144</sup> Christine Hauser, "A Handmaid's Tale of Protest," *New York Times*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/Handmaids-protests-abortion.html>

<sup>145</sup> Lexy Perez, "Golden Globes: 'Hollywood Handmaids' Launch Silent No Longer' Protest Outside Beverly Hilton," *Hollywood Reporter*, Jan. 1, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/golden-globes-hollywood-handmaids-launch-silent-no-longer-protest-beverly-hilton-1072349>

<sup>146</sup> Hauser, "Handmaid's Tale of Protests"

<sup>147</sup> Joey Nolfi, "*RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars 3* Unites Winners for *Handmaid's Tale* Spoof," *Entertainment Weekly*, Jan. 22, 2018, <http://ew.com/tv/2018/01/22/rupauls-drag-race-all-stars-3-unites-winners-for-handmaids-tale-spoof/>

movie theater, the image of the Handmaid has become such a heroic symbol that they wore the costumes to an empowering film in order to feel more liberated. Wonder Woman fights back against an oppressive regime and evil forces in the film, so to these women, June and the other Handmaids are analogous to Wonder Woman because they are attacking an evil system of their own. On the opposite spectrum, the writers of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and those who created *Handmaid's Tale* memes used the image of the Handmaid for humorous purposes. All three, however, are parts of the same confusing puzzle: why has the image of the Handmaid become a symbol of heroism?

For the real-life women who dress as Handmaids, the protests are their opportunity to speak out against what they feel is an oppressive government, a government just like the ones that controlled the Handmaids in Atwood's novel. Though they often do not speak verbally, they hold signs and banners that state the reason they are there, and they present talking points to the media who cover the protests. However, Atwood's Handmaids would not have been allowed to speak out in this way. They were not allowed to read, much less write, and it would have been extremely dangerous for them to take a stand against the government. Offred, in the novel, understands this, and she states several times throughout the novel that there is little she can do to change her situation much less everyone else's. Even Offred's acts of rebellion in the novel are acts of self-satisfying defiance that are only meant to satiate a need inside of her, not to improve the condition of all womankind. June, on the other hand, seems to consistently be looking for ways to improve the situation of women pre-Gilead and during her time as a Handmaid. She is a figure that stands on the front lines and practically beckons people to follow her. Perhaps the clearest image of that is in the final episode after the

Handmaids refuse to stone Janine.<sup>148</sup> They line up in two lines with June leading the pack and walking alone, and the audience gets the impression that she is leading an army into battle. It is difficult to watch this scene and not want to follow June; in a sense, there is hope that change is about to come.

There is a degree of danger in seeing June in this way, however. While it may seem harmless that hundreds of women are emulating fictional characters they feel they can identify with and turning them into heroes, one has to think of the implications of taking on this status of a Handmaid. The television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to have one simple message: fight back or die trying. June hardly flinches after she steps out of line and a Guardian threatens to shoot her<sup>149</sup>; she is not afraid to yell in the faces of police officers during the equality protest<sup>150</sup>; she is bold enough to retrieve a package from Jezebel's and deliver it to another Handmaid.<sup>151</sup> Each one of these acts threatened June's safety and could have cost her her life. If this is the kind of Handmaid the women at the protests are emulating, then they are essentially saying they are willing to put everything on the line for women's equality and autonomy of their bodies. The simple truth is that the United States of America is nowhere close to Gilead at this point in time, and yet these women are already saying they would risk everything for their rights. What will they do, then, if their lives are ever actually put in danger?

This is not to say, however, that the purpose of this paper is to present an anti-feminist point of view; one that blames women for the problems that befall them and criticize them for acting out in protest against these transgressions. There are very real

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<sup>148</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Night."

<sup>149</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Night."

<sup>150</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "Late."

<sup>151</sup> *Handmaid's Tale*, "The Bridge."



policies passing through state houses and Congress that could negatively affect American women's lives. Instead, this paper presents evidence that the shift in the Handmaid's character from Atwood's novel to Miller's adaptation represents a shift in ideology about how to solve issues of injustice. Atwood's Offred is submissive and subservient because she, along with many other people, did not speak out against injustice enough in the past in order to prevent Gilead. Atwood does not blame these women, however. She indicates through her use of juxtaposition that blame is fluid, and nobody in Gilead is fully responsible for its creation. Miller's June, on the other hand, fights back from the beginning and presents this idea that the most disadvantaged group should always fight back. Again, this is not to say that women should not actively protest or fight against oppression; instead, I suggest that society as a whole should be open to the idea that nobody is completely right or wrong. By viewing the world through a comic corrective, as Atwood's original novel presents it, people may be able to be more understanding of each other and more open to productive political discussions.

Ultimately, over the course of Margaret Atwood's novel, Bruce Miller's adaptation, and the recent Handmaid-style protests, there is a distinctive change in the characteristics and personality of the Handmaid, which changes the overarching message of each artifact. Kenneth Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity helps explain why these women have shifted their perceptions of the Handmaid. Bruce Miller's adaptation of the novel and its modern, recognizable setting make Gilead seem inevitable given today's society. His use of juxtaposition, irony, and the grotesque serve to make the Handmaids seem like heroes who are currently facing trials but will eventually come to overthrow the government, and Wives and Aunts seem like victims of a society they

could not have imagined. However, the lack of a comic corrective in the show, a moment or a character to demonstrate that multiple people are mistaken instead of evil, causes the audience to place the blame for Gilead squarely on the men who created it and who control it. Atwood is clear in her novel, however, that the point is not that the blame is on one group of people. Instead, years of complacency and ignoring the pertinent issues allowed Gilead to be created. The reader is not asked to choose sides based on who is good and who is bad, but rather, she is meant to examine her own life and decide if she has been complacent. In Miller's dichotomy, however, the audience can either be on the side of the Handmaids or on the side of Gilead; there is no in-between.

The implications for this shift are two-fold. First, it shows how rhetorical strategies help audiences see how the government oppresses the Handmaid and potentially opens their eyes to ways in which women in today's society are being oppressed. The Handmaid, then, does not serve as a figure to emulate but rather a figure to remind people to pay attention to subtle forms of oppression before they become too large. By using juxtaposition, irony, the grotesque, and comic correctives to look at the ways Gilead controls the Handmaid, audiences may use these tools to challenge their own pieties in their own lives. Secondly, the shift in the Handmaid's perception shows a lack of fidelity between the original novel, the television show, and the protests. In some way, it is more comforting to have a modern story of a woman who is fighting back against extremely harmful circumstances that the government places on her. However, with this rebellion comes the acceptance that the Handmaids could die at any moment at the hands of the government. By taking on the Handmaid's cause in real life, protestors have to be willing to risk their own safety and security. These protestors may believe they are

reclaiming the image of the Handmaid as someone who recognizes the injustice that the government forces on her and women across the country. They believe the Handmaid, like Elisabeth Moss' portrayal of June in the show, is someone who can lead a revolution and who will ultimately not stand complacent and silent while the government tells women what they can and cannot do. The reclaimed image of the Handmaid is a woman who is fighting to regain control over her own body. But this is not Atwood's Handmaid. Atwood's Handmaid is complacent and subservient because she has to be if she values her life. Atwood's Handmaid has no control over her own body, and any rebellious work she does is done with the realization that at any point, a double-agent may burn her. By relinquishing this version, Atwood's version, of the Handmaid, protestors are forgetting that the point of Atwood's novel is that everyone is at fault for the creation of a place like Gilead either through misogynistic beliefs or simple silence. The point is not for the Handmaids to resist; it is for the everyday people to stay aware.

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