

From Page to Screen: Adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* for Media

LLL 499: Capstone Project

Akbilge Kutym

April 30, 2026

Adviser: Jenni Lehtinen

Submitted to the Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature in Partial Fulfilment of the

B.A at Nazarbayev University

Abstract

The research project analyses the transformation of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid Tale* into a television series by Hulu. The main purpose of this capstone study is to show that adaptation is not a recreation of Atwood's novel, but a creative transformation of the story with the help of character development, fan reception and visuals. The project mainly focuses only on the Season 1, while later seasons are used in parts of analysis. The TV show is not a direct adaptation of the book but a reinterpretation for modern society. Particularly, the TV adaptation give more backstory for certain character by changing their character arc and adds new plotlines to make it more relatable for the consumers in our modern society. This can be clearly seen in the character arcs that are expanded through Serena Joy, Moira and certain added scenes such as Moira and June at the Jezebels, the ambassador's visit, backstory of Serena Joy. Moreover, these new additions create new meanings in contrast with the novel, which is a first-person narrative and doesn't give characters enough backstory.

The theory and methodology used within the research include adaptation theory, feminist media theory, television studies, and fan studies. By means of detailed scene analysis, this capstone illustrates the fact that through adaptation Gilead evolves from a dystopian private space to a larger political institution relying on public performances, violence, and gender discrimination. The transformation of Japanese tourists into the Mexican delegation, Jezebels, and Serena's story serve as examples of creation of feminist and political meanings through adaptation. The adaptation also gives rise to a wide discussion about women in Gilead and their position within this society. Serena and June are particularly popular topics discussed in social media like TikTok and Instagram.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Scholarship and Theory.....	6
Theoretical Framework.....	11
Analysis & Discussion.....	12
1. Public Image vs. Reality.....	13
1.1 Moira: Resistance Within the System.....	18
2. Serena Joy: Oppressed and Oppressor.....	21
2.1 Serena in Adaptation and Her Character Expansion.....	21
2.2 Fan Response and Moral Complexity.....	23
Conclusion	27

Introduction

Adaptations rarely reshape the public's imagination, but *The Handmaid's Tale* is an exception in this case. Its adaptation recreates Margaret Atwood's novel, one of the most popular literary pieces of the 20th century. The adaptation was created by Bruce Miller (Hulu, 2017–) for a 21st-century audience. The series has 77 nominations and 15 awards, including Emmy Awards and Golden Globes (*Television Academy* n.d.). It was also the first streaming program to win at the 69th Primetime Emmy Awards in the outstanding drama series category (Battaglio 2017). The story takes the readers into a dystopian scene of Gilead was once the U.S., a totalitarian theocracy depriving women of their rights in the feign of religious decency, in which fertile women called Handmaids are compelled to produce offspring.

While Atwood's novel is a limited narrative through Offred's perspective, the television adaptation expands the narrative through multiple characters. The author uses first-person narration to immerse the reader in her inner world, through which she constructs Gilead from different fragmented memories, stolen glances, and whispered fears of individuals. Whereas Bruce Miller's television adaptation expands that single voice of Offred into a world of different perspectives, sounds, and emotional scenes. It is not just a question of the medium changing to screen; it is a question of narrative changing. As well as the visualization of the dystopia of Atwood, it also redefines it as a group of female experiences. All characters of women in the story depict various levels of weakness, silence, power, and contradictions in the story. The TV show, in the form of characters like June Osborne, Serena Joy, and Moira, makes the experience of a single female voice impossible in the novel and only suggested by highlighting characters such as these and stressing them through their dialogue and active interest in the show.

The analysis of this transformation adds to the adaptation theory, receiving of the fans,

media studies of the dystopian narratives in contemporary history. Specifically, the series became an object of discussion in online communities because of global discussions regarding reproductive rights, gender violence, and authoritarianism. Scholarly analysis is a study that is interesting due to the cultural and literary significance of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a television adaptation. Atwood and her novel have been praised as works of literature because of the intricate storyline and good use of symbols. This symbolism and narration are taken to the present media culture that is produced and distributed by the television adaptation itself. Through this, the television adaptation makes viewers venture into the world of Gilead not by just the use of language and symbolism. The experience of adapting the novel into the television series plays a significant role in modern media culture. It is specifically this cultural phenomenon, where literature reports are re-contextualized on the television screen, that offers such an important cause of cultural study on the topic.

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* by expanding Margaret Atwood's first-person narrative into a complex series by using camera, sound techniques, and creating backstories for multiple characters to show the emotional and feminist resonance of the story. The analysis will be done on the first seasons, and specific episodes from each of the seasons. Certain episodes are valuable because they show various forms of resistance that are done by characters such as June, Serena, and Moira.

Building on these foundations, this paper will investigate:

- How does the adaptation of Atwood's novel expand and reinterpret the single narrative structure into a multi-perspective narrative?
- How do fans respond to these adaptations in online communities, and how do these choices influence the cultural significance of the series?

The paper is organized thematically by having a visual analysis of major scenes, a close reading of the novel, secondary scholarship, and fans' engagement comments.

Scholarship and Theory

The three significant fields: adaptation studies, narrative and media studies, and fan studies serve well to comprehend why the Hulu adaptation cannot be viewed as a loose interpretation of the novel written by Atwood. Instead, it is shown as an interpretable reformulation that transforms the original text because of both the possibilities of serial television and the reactions of new viewers. Meanwhile, much of the available literature would rather speak about these areas individually. A large part of adaptation scholars is devoted to such aspects as fidelity, transformation, and the connection of the original text with the adapted one. Scholars of the media place more emphasis on seriality, narrative expansion, and character development. The fan studies concentrate on reception, participation, and online discussion. Nonetheless, not as many publications unite them in a single overview of how *The Handmaid's Tale* develops character lines, new plots, and new significances in the eyes of the audience; this is where this project fits in.

1. Adaptation

Among the main arguments used in the adaptation studies, one must mention that the concept of adaptation cannot be evaluated only on the level of its loyalty to the originating text. Rather, researchers are more inclined to regard adaptation as a creative process, which transforms a previously existing text in a different medium and culture. The given argument relates well because the series does not just adapt the novel by Atwood, but also expands it with additional scenes, backstories, and character insights. According to Hutcheon, adaptation is as much a product as it is a process: it is built upon a previous piece of work, but it also recreates

the same work in a different shape (2006, 22). In this regard, difference does not always indicate a weakness, but it is a part of how adaptation generates meaning. Indeed, İşısağ and Örs demonstrate that the process of adaptation combines transformation that includes the process of modulation, mutation, and modification (2025). Whereas Gerrits proves that the process of transformation of the novel type into television not only transforms the medium but also the political and narrative focus of a narrative (2021).

By reading such scholars simultaneously, one will conclude that adaptation should be viewed more as being reinterpreted and not reproduced. The changes made by the adaptation should not be perceived as an immediate distortion of the text. Instead, they could be viewed as interpretive decisions that rebrand the story to television and to a contemporary viewer.

Meanwhile, the adaptation theory on its own is not completely sufficient to answer the question of how the television format itself renders such expansions possible. That is why the adaptation studies should be read alongside the narrative and media studies.

2. Narrative and Media Studies

The second key field of scholarship is narrative and media studies, particularly the study of serial television. The concern here has shifted to the matter of adaptation as a whole and specifically to the possibilities of television form. Mittel claims that serial television enables characters to develop over time with extended arcs, backstory, repetition, and change (2015). It applies to *The Handmaid Tale* quite well, since the series have episodes and the long narrative format to psychoanalyze the characters and expand the world of Gilead, beyond what the novel alone does. The adaptation devotes itself to several characters and even timelines rather than remaining stuck in the narrative of June only. By doing so, the series builds several layers of story world and a more complicated emotional framework.

This storytelling expansion is also related to intertextuality and transmedia narration. The differences between What Is and What If, as defined by Mittel to describe the aspects of transmedia expansion, can be considered helpful to understand why official narratives of a story can coexist alongside the alternative ones, whereas the multiplicity in the narration as introduced by Scarano into the discussion of the novel by Atwood as intertextual, multi-vocal narrative (2015). Combined, these elements demonstrate that the Hulu version is not a screen to page to screen translation of the story. It restructures the narration in the form of serial revelation, many points of view, and a more powerful emotional gathering. The medium of television can slowly postpone and expose the hidden agenda, as well as create contradictions in characters as the character advances. These attributes matter to decipher the reason why the adaptation devotes so much space to the back story of Serena and the experience of Moira.

Nevertheless, such academic literature does not answer one important question. Narrative and media analysts justify the proliferation of stories through television, yet never always analyze how viewers perceive the increase in numbers of stories politically or emotionally, particularly when some of the moral depth of a character, or in theory a representational matter, is distorted. The fact that this weakness is relevant to *The Handmaid's Tale* is because its amendments are not only structural, but also ideological. The story expansion alters the reading of the power, resistance, complicity, and gender by the audience.

3. Fan Studies

The third significant field is fan studies, where it is less about the text itself and more about its audiences. Fan studies further state that viewers are not passive receivers, but are active participants who interpret, debate, and recirculate meanings. Studying the implications of being a textual poacher by Jenkins is critical at this point since it introduces fandom as a place of

engagement and re-authoring instead of being a consumer of text (1992). This is further developed by García-Rapp who demonstrates that adaptation audiences do not fit into the same group (2021). Some viewers treat the text like the purists of a book; some viewers are aware of the two versions, and then some are only aware of a screen version of the text. This implies that there is always an adaptation that one gets with various expectations, loyalties, and interpretive habits.

It is also critical to *The Handmaid Tale* in this view since it has gained status beyond a just a television show. It is also distributed as a feminist and political image in the media and the real world. Kellner (2023) interprets the show within the context of patriarchy, reproductive politics, and authoritarianism, and Boyle (2020) interprets the show as no longer being based on the novel but a transmedia feminist phenomenon travelling through protest, digital culture, and activist imagery. These papers indicate that the reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* by the audience is not all about entertainment or dissatisfaction. It is related to ideology, feminism, and cultural debate as well. Through this, fan response becomes an element of the meaning of the very adaptation.

Nevertheless, there is a void in this literature. Fan analyses and political interpretations describe the cultural influence that the series gained; however, they do not necessarily correlate the cultural influence with adjustments made to the scenes, character alterations, or story extensions. Stated differently, the scholarship demonstrates that viewers are eager to react to the series, yet the specifics of how the specific departure of the novel influences those reactions have been overlooked. This holds especially true in the case of the given project, as its interest is not in the presence of the fan response per se, but the connection between the choice of adaptation and the interpretation by the audience.

4. Contribution and research gap

Combined, these three areas of scholarship demonstrate that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be viewed as a creative adaptation, a complex tv show, and an object of active fan response. Therefore, this capstone fills a gap between adaptation, media and fan studies. In most cases already existing scholarship treats these areas separately.

A key problem of classical adaptation studies is that it focuses on the fidelity or how “faithful” is the adaptation comparing to the original text. Furthermore, this view tends to see adaptations as secondary source or inferior. Besides, the idea fails to recognize the fact that various media narrate differently. A novel creates meaning through storytelling, whereas a TV show uses performance, cinematographic techniques, sound design, costume, and even serialization to convey its meaning. The traditional adaptation theory neglects fan interpretation and its importance in the construction of a series' meaning online.

In contrast, my project sees adaptation as a means of expansion instead of reproduction. First, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from Atwood's novel through adding more perspectives, expanding the universe of the story, developing subplots, introducing entirely new aspects. All these differences can be considered valuable, because they are determined by the characteristics of the TV medium which allows exploring some themes and aspects which a novel would never touch upon. Including fan response into my study, I prove that adaptation creates meaning through its audiences as well. In other words, my capstone paper is concerned with the relationship between the text, the medium, and the audiences at the same time. The value of any adaptation is to some extent determined by the fact that it differs from the original novel. Therefore, in its capacity as an expansion of Atwood's novel, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* has just as much value as the latter.

Theoretical Framework

Adaptation theory gives a framework to understand the way stories change across media. Linda Hutcheon defines the adaptation as “repetition without replication” and “a creative act of reinterpretation” (2006, 8). The novel’s first-person voice gives limitations for the reader by having only Offred’s subjective perspective, because it shows only the things she remembers or imagines, which also makes it unreliable. As Brian McFarlane says, first-person narration is a form of “restricted consciousness,” where the story is filtered through a single character’s memories and perceptions (1996, 16). On the contrary, the adaptation transforms the story from this narrow frame by using a visual storytelling technique. Robert Stam, in his article *The Theory and Practice of Adaptation*, notes that film adaptations operate through a different “semiotic regime,” translating verbal signs into visual and auditory codes (2005, 57). Miller’s adaptation by the usage of color coordination, costumes, camera movement, and audiovisuals recreates Atwood’s silences into images: Serena’s clenched jaw, Moira’s trembling hands, or the eerie hum of the Red Center.

It has been noted by Mulvey, who studies feminist media, that visual media can produce patriarchy but also criticize its power (1975, 7). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the show is changing how we gaze upon and experience the lives of women from the novel. The novel’s limited narration illustrates the political repression of Gilead, because Offred cannot know what other women think or their emotions and experiences, and the regime constrained communication among them. The adaptation constructs what Jason Mittell calls a “complex narrative network” typical of modern television, where multiple timelines and character viewpoints interweave to build a broader social world (2015, 32). Rather than simply adding plot, this complex network tells the story in a new way. It expands Offred’s consciousness beyond just a single voice

narrative; the series transfers the singular consciousness by giving voices to marginalized and silenced women. Serena's flashbacks and added backstory, Moira and June's act at Jezebels become plotlines that reveal the true image of Gilead, supposedly a unified system. This expansion doesn't just open the world up; it recreates resistance as a collective rather than individual by showing women's fight through the regime. As a result, the adaptation uses Mittell's complex narrativity through voices and forms of resistance.

The notion of "paratext" is the idea that adaptations, sequels, or any form of retellings are a part of a larger written universe (Genette 1997, 408). The show, *The Handmaid's Tale*, plays as a paratext that uses and expands Atwood's novel by transforming it into a transmedia phenomenon where the meaning is recreated through new perspectives of different characters and reinterpretation of fans. It's not just being transferred but instead actively recreated. The additional plotlines, such as Serena's political engagement before Gilead, make viewers reinterpret the meaning of the story differently because the book has never offered multiple perspectives. In this paratextual universe, the story expands with fans' debate about Serena's character and the criticisms of creatures and fans that continue to reshape *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The next section shifts from the theoretical to the analysis of selected episodes. It shows how these ideas contribute to an understanding of character, perspective, and narrative visualization changes in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Analysis & Discussion

The adaptation made by Hulu continues to hold up the image of Gilead as a regime that exists only by having a performative act. It's not only about controlling women's bodies or words, but also the control of what can be seen by the outside world. Linda Hutcheon's concept can explain that adaptation is not a replication, but a repetition where new meaning is created out

of the medium and the specific context in which the adaptation is created (2006, 20). It fills in the gap in the classical adaptation theory of it being “inferior” or as a secondary source. This concept is important for the analysis of the television series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as it keeps the main theme of the novel but expands its narrative structure. The Hulu adaptation does everything the way television should do by crafting scenes, choosing soundtracks, and spatial contrasts to connect with the audience.

1. Public Image vs. Reality

In the very first scene of the first Episode of Season 1, the authority of the regime introduces lots of religious ceremonies. Gilead's image is not only created by uniforms, choreographed gestures, but also by its manner of speaking, which turns simple conversation into an ideological performance. For instance, Handmaids' daily greeting phrase, “Blessed be the fruit,” “May the Lord open” can count as politeness while it is listening to an order and hiding terror (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 2017). These phrases reduce women to their reproductive function and support the idea of fertility by turning it into an obligation. To an outside world, these phrases may seem like casual conversation with gratitude and not as an obedience to a threat coming from authority. When people from other countries arrive in Gilead, the government puts on a show of diplomacy. Whilst when doors are shut, they show the complete opposite, the harsh truth.

A similar issue appears in the novel, when Offred and Ofglen are walking outside, they noticed the Japanese tourists. They look at the Handmaids and ask, ““Excuse me,” says the interpreter again, to catch our attention. I nod, to show I’ve heard him. “He asks, are you happy,” says the interpreter. I can imagine it, their curiosity: Are they happy? How can they be happy?”” (Atwood 1985, 32). Offred cannot give a truthful response because she is always being watched.

This scene highlights that the oppression of women in Gilead requires them to portray happiness in any cases. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the role of the Japanese visitors serves as the outsiders who witnesses the Handmaids' lives but fails to recognize their violent reality.

This part in the novel was changed into a diplomatic delegation in the Hulu adaptation. In Seasons 1, Episode 6 shows an international setting, where a Mexican delegation arrives in Gilead. This new plotline wasn't just adding new material, but it also shifts the scope of the story. Gerrits argues that the Hulu series expands Atwood's world by incorporating side stories and politics that stretch Gilead beyond what Offred can comprehend on a personal level. This is clear in the new plotline about the Mexican delegation, which gives the novel a new perspective that the novel is unable to fully illustrate through Offred's limited perspective. The series shows how Gilead is aware of international pressures from foreign countries and tries to manage the issues. For example, while the strangers can misinterpret the workings of Gilead within the novel, strangers can understand the violence carried out by Gilead. But the real reason behind the visit was that Mexico wanted Gilead to give them the Handmaids, because Mexico's birth rate is very low. These adaptations align with Hutcheon's theory that adaptations are not just copies of their originals.

Commander Waterford and Serena Joy put on a scripted act of being happy and content with the Gilead regime, while also having the Handmaid and Martha around to show the regime's 'success.' This scene can be analyzed using the concept of social performance put forward by Goffman. The dinner scene with foreign visitors was full of controlled smiles, perfect shiny silverware, and scripted conversations. The scene below shows a vision of prosperity, stability, and domestic success by use of warm-toned lighting, formal attire, and symmetrical arrangement. Nevertheless, all of this is evidently performative. In this scenario, Serena and Fred

play the role of performers on the political stage of Gilead, trying to present an image of a perfect family when everyone in the audience is already aware that the image is a fraud (Goffman 1969).



Figure 1. Screenshot from *The Handmaid's Tale*, “A Woman’s Place,” 00:23:15.

The concept of restricted consciousness, as McFarlane uses it, explains the importance of this change. Restricted consciousness implies that, contrary to being recounted by an all-knowing narrator, it is only what one character can see, perceive, and experience. The world is seen through Offred’s restricted consciousness in Atwood’s narrative, and June’s personal experience is center stage in the series. Therefore, the readers get to know Gilead through her fear, memories, and poor knowledge. However, the television version expands this limit beyond by depicting scenes and political events that cannot be seen or described completely by June. This transformation is significant in that it will help the series make Gilead no longer a subjective experience of oppression but a larger political system.

The response of June to the Mexican ambassador demonstrates how Gilead forces women to give consent. The moment when the ambassador of Mexico asks June, “Are you happy?” June replies after a long pause with the camera focusing on her trembling voice, teary eyes, and stiff face “I have found... happiness” (*The Handmaid's Tale* 2017).



Figure 2. Screenshot from *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 6, “A Woman’s Place,” 00:11:47.

We can see how the series enforces coercion not through direct instruction but through stillness of the bodies, the slowness of the scene, and the accuracy of June’s performance, all of

which are attempts to show that this “happiness” on screen isn’t natural but enforced. At this point, the difference between what June says, and her body language is apparent. The second shot shifts to a close-up of June's stressed hand, which shows how she cannot be open when she is tense. The little physical detail matters since her response is under pressure. She manages to say the words she expects, but her body is in fear and suppressed resistance.

Through these scenes, we can see moments of obedience. The moment where even the silence has meaning, here the silence isn’t just the absence of noise but a product. When a character cannot speak, the body language and facial expressions shown with the help of cameras help the audience to read and interpret. This also connects to the reason serial television often relies on building tension through repetition and variation. Complex television develops its characters and worlds through repetition and variation, forming the long-form character arcs identified by Jason Mittell. Episode 6 isn’t just about dinner; it is about the ongoing need to perform for survival. When June is told to show contentment, the viewer reads her face, her pauses, her carefully controlled voice, and recognizes them as part of the ongoing endurance to survive. It's a form of character development, and the show expands our notion of June's agency by showing us what agency might look like when public coercion is at work.

June’s private conversation with the ambassador breaks the illusion of Gilead's public image. By the end of the episode, June has an opportunity to speak to the ambassador privately by saying, “They rape us. They take our children” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 2017). This short line shatters the whole image of a perfect Gilead society. The reason why the Mexican delegation came to Gilead is because they need their help and the ambassador explained that, unfortunately, she cannot do anything: “I am from Xipica, Miss Offred. It is a nice city; maybe the size of Boston. There hasn't been a child born, alive, in Xipica in six years. My country is dying” which

shows how people can easily ignore injustice for their own interest (*The Handmaid's Tale* 2017). This part is significant because it changes the concept of 'outsider rescue,' which is usually present in stories where a victim gets to share their hidden truths with someone who has the power to do something about it. In contrast, June's confession will not lead to any action. It will lead to politics. This plotline extends beyond what is happening inside the homes and into international politics. It doesn't exist in Atwood's novel; it expands the political stakes beyond the novel and uses a Mexican plotline to show how repression cannot be ignored or accepted. The ambassador's interests suggest that there may be outside forces that are aware of the violence but are moving forward anyway, perhaps because of other factors at play. This is the point where Kellner's idea of media culture is relevant because it demonstrates the trade-off of rights for security. The use of reproductive politics as a form of currency, and how outrage can be tempered by pragmatism. Instead of portraying the outside world as inherently good, the show depicts a world in which authoritarian regimes can be "partners" if they are of value to the situation.

1.1 Moira: Resistance Within the System

Whereas "A Woman's Place" provides Gilead's desired image for outsiders, "Jezebels" shows Gilead's dirty secrets, including elitism, prostitution, sexual slavery, and women's survival under Gilead's oppressive rule. 'Jezebels' is a secret brothel where men in Gilead with authority break the rules they publicly defend. Applying Hutcheon's concept of "adaptation as reinterpretation," "Jezebels" is not to be interpreted solely as an adaptation of the same event from the book. The same secret brothel continues in the show; however, its role is modified in that where the book highlights the aspect of failure, the show adds hypocrisy and builds up on Moira's arc.

Once the audience sees it, they realize the ‘purity’ of the regime isn’t really a rule at all, but a way to keep a grip on the women. The hypocrisy becomes even more apparent in “Jezebels” when Commander Waterford takes June to a secret brothel with loud music and women in revealing clothes, which is the complete opposite of the strict, gray world above. Commander Waterford dictates to her, “Don’t gawk, you’ll give yourself away. Just act natural.” The warning describes Gilead perfectly by showing that even corruption looks normal. Considering Harrison’s theory on June’s estrangement from her environment, this can be explained further as to why Jezebels seems disorienting to the reader. June is physically present within the environment but emotionally estranged from it. Her estrangement suggests that Jezebels is not an environment of liberation even when it appears so. (2020, 29).



Figure 3. Screenshot from *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 8, “Jezebels,” 00:22:19. Hulu, 2017.

The adaptation gives Jezebels more symbolism on a personal level. This is where the

television show and the novel differ in terms of how they are presented. In the novel, Offred only understands what she sees, so it is focused on her isolation and understanding. In Atwood's novel, Moira mostly exists in Offred's memories or fragments - a rebel who was able to escape Gilead, and she was a figure who symbolized freedom. When Offred sees Moira again in the brothel 'Jezebels,' she is defeated by it, and Moira seems to have a broken spirit. This part was described by Offred's narration, but readers could not see Moira's emotions. Nevertheless, in the TV series, Moira was turned into a full protagonist with her own arc.

The audience is already aware of Moira and her previous attempts at escaping, so seeing her in Jezebel personalizes the hidden reality in the show. Mittell's point is important in understanding the impact of this scene in long-form television; it is where meaning is developed through ongoing character arcs and emotional moments (2015). It illustrates the increased significance of the character of Moira. Television narratives feature recurrent scenes that allow characters to evolve; therefore, Moira ceases to be just a flashback in the story of Offred, transforming into an important character whose escape change the very notion of rebellion. The television show keeps June at the center but also expands the circle around her. Expanding the circle around June is also significant because of its ethical implications, making it so that the viewer cannot remain at arm's length from the suffering depicted on the show. With Moira's escape to Canada, the adaptation recreates resistance not as a win but as endurance.

By placing these two episodes side by side, we can see two systems at work. Episode 6 centers on a morally right image: the staged happiness, the scripted speech, the staged display. Episode 8, on the other hand, shows the reality of elite privilege, exploitation, and the rules of what should be shown and hidden. In each, we see the performance, but the performance has a different purpose for each. One performance seeks foreign legitimacy, and the other performance

seeks elite reward. Episodes 6 and 8 of *The Handmaid's Tale* show the real face of Gilead, of them playing the role of religious individuals while committing the worst crimes. In “Jezebels,” the fake act can be seen, while in the episode of “A Woman's Place,” it reveals the truth that exists below that masked performance. The episode “Jezebels” proves that the adaptation by Hulu involves expanding the narrative for feminist purposes. It is not merely an expansion that adds to the show’s entertainment value but one that changes the audience’s perception of the hypocritical nature of Gilead and the defiance of Moira. Through the character development and visual presentation of Moira, it is proven how adaptation can create a different meaning.

2. Serena Joy: Oppressed and Oppressor

2.1 Serena in Adaptation and Her Character Expansion

Serena Joy serves as a prime example of an expansion of perspective by the Hulu version of characters, in addition to Offred. In Atwood’s novel, Serena is largely a background figure; she is described through Offred’s limited lens and often narrated as a hostile woman. She is Commander Fred’s wife, who obeys all his wishes. She also appears manipulative, physically frail, and bitter at life, and spends most of her time in the garden smoking cigarettes. Offred often describes Serena as bitter for life, because she is living in the world that she helped to create: “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” (Atwood 1986, 47). Serena played an active part in creating the domestic ideology that now renders her voiceless. Although Serena suffers under Gilead, it doesn’t negate the fact that she has actively oppressed Offred.

Another example, which evokes sympathy towards her complex character and makes her morally debatable, is during Ceremony. It is a procreation ritual authorized by the Gilead

government where the Handmaid, the Wife, and the husband participate to conceive a child. In these rituals, Offred describes Serena as: “Serena has begun to cry. I can hear her, behind my back. It isn’t the first time. She always does this, the night of the Ceremony. She’s trying not to make a noise. She’s trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us” (Atwood 1986, 87). She sacrifices herself every time during rituals. Even though Handmaids pay the highest price for these actions like living as captives and being raped, the Wives endure different kind of oppression. In doing so, this episode adds complexity to Serena, but it doesn’t justify her behavior. McFarlane’s theory of “restricted consciousness” can provide an answer for why Serena is restricted in the novel since it is only known through the eyes of Offred (1996). In contrast, Hulu’s TV adaptation breaks such a restriction using flashbacks and visual narrative.

However, in adaptation Serena’s character is given insight to her life before Gilead through performance, flashbacks and cinematography. In Episode 6, “A Woman’s Place” we see her past as an intellectual and public figure, who delivers speeches about conservative family-values ideology before the fall of the United States and the creation of Gilead (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 2017). This description expands Atwood’s portrayal of Serena. Offred recalls that “Serena Joy was never her real name... Her real name is Pam,” and she watched her on TV giving emotional speeches about values of “sanctity of the home,” which she herself doesn’t follow (Atwood 1986, 46). This novel description shows Serena as a hypocritical figure, while the series delves more into Serena’s character giving her more screen time, by presenting to her a controversial redemption arc. She is forced to confront her past actions and have moments with compassion. Through the usage of visuals, the series presents flashbacks, which sharply contrasts with Gilead’s present cold palette. The moment when she becomes a mom makes it a major new plotline and departure from the novel, where she always stays as an antagonist. Her intellect and

ambition helped her to build a Gileadean ideology, it might have once given her authority but it has now made her a silent and obedient Wife. This paradox is impossible in the limited narration of the novel, but we can see it through visual storytelling. It gives us multiple perspectives and uses flashbacks to show her intelligence and ambition in the past before the fall, which contrasts to her current situation with no voice to speak.

Serena Joy's flashback in “A Woman's Place” illustrates her previous life as a well-known writer and speaker. She once used to advocate “the restoration of family values,” unaware that these thoughts would result in her imprisonment (*The Handmaid's Tale* 2017). In one scene, Fred throws her manuscript into the flames after questioning him, the burning pages represent her silence, no longer only as a wife, but as a woman whose words previously had authority. Serena's thinking that she could succeed under patriarchy becomes what destroys her. In the scene where she smiles alongside her man during the Mexican dinner, her face is both pride and remorse. She helped to construct Gilead, yet now she finds herself imprisoned in it. It is in this context that her development proves to be important because the adaptation does not just attempt to make her more sympathetic.

2.2 Fan Response and Moral Complexity

The reaction of the fans toward Serena Joy is not one fixed meaning but instead mixed between sympathy and rejection, proving that the audience does not want to perceive her as a completely or entirely guilty or innocent person. This contrast is significant because it was created due to the adaptation. It is easier to perceive Serena as a bitter and hostile character in the novel since she is described by Offred's limited narration. Serena, in the TV show, however, is a fully developed character with the flashbacks, emotional scenes as being a motherhood and added plotlines. This makes her seem both like an oppressor and the woman who fenced herself

in her own system. Viewers are forced into considering whether the pain she endured as a part of Gilead's system could alter her culpability for helping build the system. This section presents qualitative interpretations of fan reaction through a selection of comments taken from TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit. The comments are not intended to be statistically representative; rather, they are presented as interpretations of the adaptation. The division about Serena can be seen in the comments posted by fans.

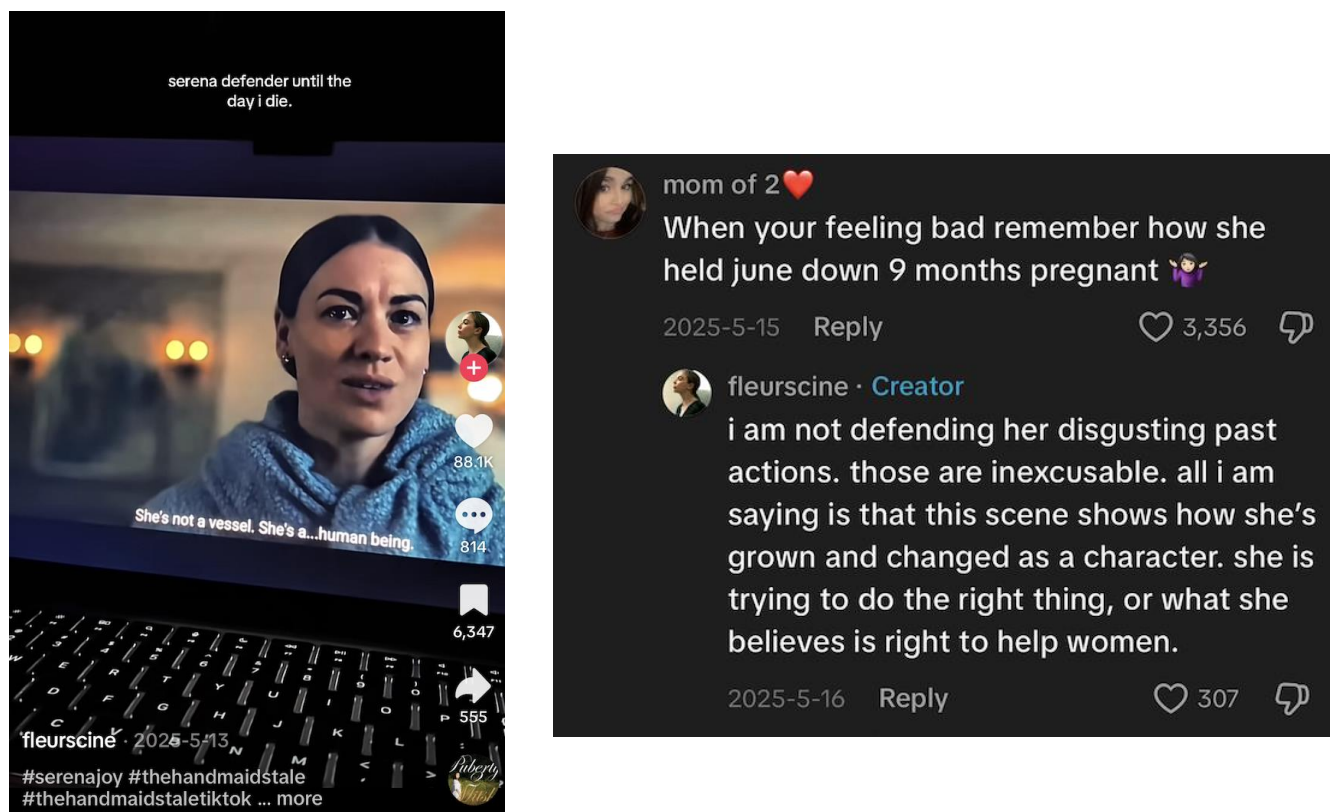


Figure 4. TikTok fan debate about Serena Joy's moral complexity. Screenshot from TikTok, posted May 15, 2025.

The TikTok comments in Figure 4 represent the two sides in terms of Serena Joy's fandom reception. The first user, @mom of 2, criticizes sympathy toward Serena since she oppressed June back in the day and even had the ability to control June's pregnancy.

On the other hand, the user @fleurscine who made the post explains that this post is not about Serena's actions, but rather about the fact that the scene represents Serena's personal growth and Serena trying to support the women. This example demonstrates that fandom reception is not limited to negative or positive opinions but involves more complicated discussions about whether character development can create sympathy towards a character. This disagreement also shows that adaptation doesn't produce only one stable meaning but instead creates ethical debate towards the character.

The reactions support Jenkins's idea of fans being an active participant (1992). The viewers do not simply embrace the storyline of Serena but discuss its ethical implications and argue how the show attempts to make her more likable. In addition, it also reinforces the claim of García-Rapp about the non-unified audience in terms of adaptation (2021). While some audience members interpret the character of Serena as someone who learns the lessons about emotions, others see her in the light of accountability and feminist ethics. As such, the new role assigned to the character in the adaptation does not provide any one true meaning; rather, it creates heated discussions and debates.

In this respect, the fan debate is not unreasonable; it demonstrates different stances towards adaptation. The series transform Serena in such a way that the audiences are pushed to a negotiation as to whether expansion gets sympathy. Simultaneously, the topic is also a political one. According to Kellner, *The Handmaid's Tale* is consumed by questions of patriarchy, reproductive politics, and authoritarian dominance, thus rather than addressing Serena as a fictional character, the viewers engage in a debate about the issues of complicity, punishment and gendered dominance (2023). In this context, the transmedia feminism defined by Boyle is also relevant, since these responses reveal that

the series still generates feminist discourse off screen on the internet such as Tiktok (2020). The widened role of Serena does not merely replace the story; it replaces the type of public debate that is creating it. It is particularly heated for the simple reason that the relationship that Serena has with June is unstable. Serena can sometimes seem loving and vulnerable to her viewers but on other occasions, she is seen oppressing June. This duality of her character leads people into discussions about Serena as a victim and an oppressor.

One of the examples is in Episode 8, “Jezebels,” Serena presents June with a ballerina music box. In the beginning, it might seem like a kind gesture, however, it had another deeper meaning for this. After opening a small box, a ballerina pops up from the inside and circles elegantly to classical music. By analyzing this, June after going into her room says to herself, “A perfect present. A girl in a box. She only dances when someone opens the top, when someone winds her up. This, I guess, if it's a story I'm telling, I must tell it to someone. There's always someone, even if there isn't any. I shall not be that girl in the box” (*The Handmaid's Tale* 2017).



Figure 5. Screenshot from *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 8, “Jezebels,” 00:46:55.

The musical box highlights the paradox in Serena's nature; while she appears to present June with an actual gift, the actual item represents an image of confinement. It is from this that one gets an understanding of the conflicting fan reactions Serena receives. The ballerina was not just a gift but an allegory in order to point out the Handmaid's role once again and June's current situation in Gilead, where she is both seen as an emotionless doll that is imprisoned and dances only when someone opens up its lid, and is able to move only with the consent of others. However, her rejection of this allegory shows her character development in a way. June starts to resist the Gilead system and stops remaining silent and motionless like the rotating ballerina in a box. In Offred's struggle to survive, the inner dialogue and intertextual references which are related to her memories and to the Gileadean propagandistic discourse generate a reconstruction of her fragmented self. It is a process of transformation for the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* that allows Offred's survival in the oppressive theocratic Republic of Gilead.

Hence, through fans' reception, we can observe that Hulu's adaptation does not simply alter the story; rather, the role of the audience is transformed to shape the new meaning-making process. The portrayal of Serena as a moral character who is no longer an object in Offred's telling of the events addresses the first research question by demonstrating how the adaptation takes one point of view and transforms it into multiple perspectives. Fan reactions on the issue provide the answer to the second research question posed in the paper.

Conclusion

My capstone has revealed that the reception of *The Handmaid Tale* adapted by Hulu is not a simple retelling of the novel by Margaret Atwood, it is rather enlarged and remaking. The analysis of the series has brought to light that the contradictions in Gilead are more evident in the

series as of the emphasis on Episode 6, A Woman place, and Episode 8, Jezebels. Gilead appears to be a moral, stable and religious society, on the outside. But behind this facade of publicity, there are acts of violence, hypocrisy and exploitation. The difference between the Mexican group of episodes 6 and the obscurity of the world of Jezebels in episode 8 reveals that the power of Gilead lies not only in violence, but in acting as well as dictating what people can and cannot see and hear.

The adaptation also broadens the meaning of the story with the help of its characters. The most obvious illustration of this transformation is Serena Joy. In the novel, she is largely viewed through the narrow prism of Offred, whereas in the series she is much more nuanced as she is depicted not only as a woman who has built Gilead, but also as somebody imprisoned by the latter. The adaptation is also extensive on Moira. She is largely rebelling in the memoir of Offred in the novel, but a more rounded character in the series since her pain and survival give the violence of Gilead a more human face. The series depicts the multiple forms that resistance can assume through June, Serena, and Moira through resistance based on silence, endurance, memory, and even small refusals.

The other significant aspect of this project is that the process of adapting alters the way the audiences receive the story as well as the story itself. This is evident in how people react to Serena Joy as some people take pity on her, others despise her in totality due to the role that she plays in the suffering of June as well as the establishment of Gilead. These polarizing responses indicate that the adaptation generates moral confusion and promotes an argument. In this respect, fan reactions become constituents of the meaning of their own series.

In general, the Hulu adaptation transforms the dystopia of Atwood to a more immediate

and relevant one to the present audiences. It maintains the primary caution of the novel, but enriches it with visual storytelling, addition of scenes, and additional character lines.

Bibliography

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Bakare, Lanre. "Emmys 2017: The Handmaid's Tale Makes History on Politically Charged Night." *The Guardian*, May 24, 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/sep/17/emmys-2017-the-handmaids-tale-hulu-streaming>.
- Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms If They Didn't Want Us to Be an Army': The Handmaid's Tale as Transmedia Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 4 (2020): 845–70. <https://doi.org/10.1086/707798>.
- D'Antonio, Carla Scarano. "The Handmaid's Tale: An Intertextual Transformation Through Storytelling." *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 592–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2021.1997484>.
- García-Rapp, Florencia. "From the Books to the Screens, to the Memes and Beyond: Fans' Notions of Game of Thrones as an Adaptation." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 17, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 217–37.
https://doi.org/10.1386/macp_00050_1.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. of *Literature, Culture, Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997,
https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/genette_gerard_paratexts_thresholds_of_interpretation.pdf.
- Gerrits, Jeroen. "From Episodic Novels to Serial TV: The Handmaid's Tale, Adaptation and Politics." *Open Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (December 21, 2021): 209–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0180>.
- Grammarly. Grammarly, www.grammarly.com/
- Goffman, Erving. 1969. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Press.
https://monoskop.org/images/1/19/Goffman_Erving_The_Presentation_of_Self_in_Everyday_Life.pdf
- Harrison, Chloe. 2020. "'The Truth Is We're Watching Each Other': Voiceover Narration as 'Split-Self' Presentation in *The Handmaid's Tale* TV Series." *Language and Literature* 29, no. 1: 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947020905756>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge eBooks, 2006.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203957721>

- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB11273072>.
- Kellner, Douglas. 2023. "Reading Media Culture Politically: The Case of *A Handmaid's Tale*". *Journal of Political Sociology* 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.54195/jps.14921>.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 1-30. https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/3340/files/2017/08/McFarlane_Novel-to-Film.pdf
- Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. NYU Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zww>.
- Mulvey, L. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 1975): 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.
- Örs, Merve, and Korkut Uluç İşısağ. 2025. "The Shifting Worlds of Gilead: An Analysis of Adaptation Shifts in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *İstanbul Üniversitesi Çeviribilim Dergisi / Istanbul University Journal of Translation Studies* 0, no. 22: 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.26650/iujts.2025.1611556>.
- Stam, Robert. "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation." In *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, 1–52. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Television Academy. "The Handmaid's Tale," n.d. <https://www.televisionacademy.com/shows/handmaids-tale>.
- The Handmaid's Tale*. Directed by Bruce Miller. Hulu, 2017–present. <https://rasskaz-slujankii.ru/>