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Resistance and Women's Solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*, from 1985 to 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

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to all of the women in my life – friends, family, mentors – who challenged, supported, and loved me along the way
Introduction

On January 21, 2017, women all around the world marched to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump, carrying signs that used sharp wit to focus attention on their objections. Margaret Atwood and her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* received special mention as women carried posters proclaiming, “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again,” “The Handmaid’s Tale is not an Instruction Manual!” and the novel’s famous mantra, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (Levine). In the past year, women have also donned Handmaid costumes to protest restrictive reproductive policies at legislative houses in multiple states. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and the story it tells about women’s suffering and survival in a patriarchal theocracy, has become a rallying cry for feminists critiquing the current GOP regime and its propagation of a backlash against women.

This makes it all the more problematic that Margaret Atwood continues to deny both the feminism of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the feminist movement generally. Although Atwood’s work was linked early with the feminist movement, she has continually avoided acknowledging or outright accepting this connection. In a 2017 *New Yorker* profile by Rebecca Mead, Atwood elaborated on her reasoning for avoiding feminist identification, saying, “I was not in New York, where all of that kicked off, in 1969…I was in Edmonton, Alberta, where there was no feminist movement, and would not be for quite some time” (Mead). Here, Atwood appears to struggle specifically with feminism as a movement rather than a concept. She continues, “I didn’t want to become a megaphone for any one particular set of beliefs,’ she said. “Having gone through that initial phase of feminism when you weren’t supposed to wear frocks and lipstick—

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1 I am borrowing this term as it is used by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991).
never had any use for that. You should be able to wear them without people saying you are a traitor to your sex’” (Mead). Atwood has bought into stereotypes that connect being a feminist with specific undesirable characteristics that cause one to be un-feminine. In this commentary, she has distorted and misconstrued the underlying message of the feminist movement and added undue weight to the decades of stereotyping the movement has experienced.

I am defining feminism as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” or “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Merriam-Webster). Estelle Freedman, a historian and feminist scholar, further defines feminism as such: “Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (Freedman 7). Feminism is about emphasizing that women are human beings, and they deserve equality alongside men.

Although Atwood resists identification with the feminist movement, she is not actually opposed to gender equality. Mead says that Atwood presumes women’s rights to be human rights, and that the two sexes are absolutely equal; she theorizes that Atwood’s resistance to identify with feminists is due to “her bent toward precision, and a scientific sensibility that was ingrained from childhood: Atwood wants the terms defined before she will state her position” (Mead). The trouble with this explanation is that feminism has been repeatedly defined in a wide range of ways. Atwood instead continually subscribes to the most unfavorable and trivial stereotypes about feminism, which she also then rejects in relation to her work. In a recent op-ed in The Globe and Mail, Atwood once
again addressed her views on feminism, directly stating, “My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system” (“Am I a bad feminist?”). Atwood has given a version of this answer many times when asked about feminism in interviews over the years. She is correct in stating that not all women are saints, and not all men are sinners. But while women and men are all human beings who all deserve the same rights, feminism exists precisely because women are still not regarded as equal to men.

Atwood’s continual resistance to identify directly with feminism gives an opening to individuals to deny the important feminist messages in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Atwood’s other novels. For someone in the powerful position of a world-renowned author, this is an important identification to make. *The Handmaid’s Tale* may appear to speak for itself in terms of feminist affinity and inspiration, but Atwood’s own association is also important to the book’s reception and to the frequent discussions around its feminism.

Because of Atwood’s own resistance to the feminist identifier, others are able to wiggle out of defining *The Handmaid’s Tale* as feminist, thus diluting its power. An article published recently in the *New York Times* about the production and process behind the 2017 Hulu adaptation of the novel had this to say about the series’ male director:

Mr. Miller wasn’t a shoo-in for showrunner because producers were looking for a woman, he recalled. “The Handmaid’s Tale” has been a seminal rite-of-passage novel for many young women for over three decades; a feminist sacred text. “It’s sacred to me, too,” Mr. Miller said. “But I don’t feel like it’s a male or female story; it’s a survival story.” (Onstad)
Literary critic Alexandra Schwartz from the *New Yorker* elaborated on similarly dismissive comments made about the text’s feminism by the TV show’s cast:

Weirder still was Elisabeth Moss, who said that Offred’s tale, like that of her character Peggy Olson, on “Mad Men,” is “a human story because women’s rights are human rights.” This is as clear and succinct a definition of feminism as any—Hillary Clinton famously used it in her 1995 speech at the U.N.’s World Congress on Women, in Beijing—except that Moss, too, insisted that “The Handmaid’s Tale” is “not a feminist story.” (Schwartz)

These words may seem innocuous initially, but the message they send is dangerous: feminism is not essential when discussing *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Given increased awareness of this book in the political world as a tool of protest and as part of the larger feminist consciousness, this dismissal suggests that feminism is not important to the world at large today. I disagree, and close analysis of the novel has supported my argument. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the story of women’s survival, and their gender plays a specific role in the motivation and enactment of the oppression they face. Schwartz explains that, “the disavowal [of feminism] amounts to a deeply strange evasion of the themes that animate the book and the show. Women’s rights are indeed human rights. But the ways in which women are deprived of those rights—in Atwood’s fiction, and in the reality, past and present, that she bases it on—are unique” (Schwartz). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is gender that determines the particular punishments and daily discrimination women face. That is not to say men do not also struggle in Gilead, but the novel focuses on the particular struggle of women, specifically the Handmaid Offred. Men matter for the plot and context of the world in which women live, but male characters are not explored or developed to the same extent that women are within the novel. It is women’s relationships with each other, both those that are destructive and
those that are empowering, and their attempts to survive and escape that are chronicled within the book, through the powerful narrative voice of a woman.

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, as Schwartz puts it, “is a story about the ways in which women are oppressed in a society run by men for their own benefit…and about how certain women take advantage of the situation to ally themselves with male power for personal gain. It’s also full of warnings about the danger that comes from failing to recognize that such oppression is categorical, and gendered” (Schwartz). *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an undeniably feminist text; it is an influential and poetic narrative that tells the story of women suffering and surviving in a theocratic and patriarchal society. Through an in-depth exploration of the horrors they face – horrors that are uniquely constructed to control women – the novel advocates for women’s rights and interests. Published at the height of the 1980s backlash against women, Atwood’s novel has been an important device for bringing feminist issues to light both in 1985 and onwards to today.

Regardless of Atwood’s identification of herself or the text as explicitly feminist, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has become a powerful tool for strengthening the message for women’s equality by highlighting the horrors of patriarchy and sexism in a dystopian setting. The novel provides an amplified account of the institutionalized sexism that was encouraged and expanded during the antifeminist backlash of the 1980s and its dangerous implications for women. *The Handmaid’s Tale* employs the dystopian genre in order to hold a mirror up to the sexism, misogyny, and power politics prevalent in our own world and emphasize that women face horrors like the ones in this dystopian world every day. The novel provides powerful examples of both how women can be and have been used as tools against each other and how women’s solidarity can still be galvanized in the
unlikeliest of places – even in a patriarchal theocracy like Gilead – to resist the institutionalized sexism implemented during antifeminist backlash. Women can and do have a powerful effect on each other’s failure and success within this backlash environment. *The Handmaid’s Tale* resonates with me – and countless women – because of this perceived message. Indeed, since its publication in 1985 it has never been out of print (Gilbert). In the Trump era, the novel’s popularity has peaked again, and it has become an important site for discussion and debate.

This thesis examines the original text of the novel (*HT*) within its contemporary context of 1980s backlash and analyzes one of its central messages: that of the power and potential of women’s solidarity. This original message will then be compared to the messages communicated by the 2017 Hulu adaptation of the novel and focus on differences in depictions of backlash and women’s solidarity, concluding with an analysis of how these differences may affect the important original underlying theme of *The Handmaid’s Tale*: the strength found in women’s solidarity. Women’s solidarity in the novel can be defined as either genuine solidarity, bonds developed naturally that work against the regime’s interest, or as forced solidarity, bonds fostered by the regime to position women against each other and keep them repressed. Through analysis of these two main types of solidarity and how they intersect in the relationships between Offred and other women in the novel, it becomes clear that women have the greatest impact on each other’s success or failure in this backlash environment. Women’s solidarity – whether it is genuine or forced – translates to power. Women can affect the backlash, either by undermining it through genuine solidarity or upholding it through forced solidarity. With changes made in the 2017 Hulu adaptation, focus shifts away from the
quiet power of women’s genuine solidarity to instead promoting male allies or active feminist resistance, departures from the text which limit the original novel’s powerful promotion of internalized resistance.

*The Handmaid’s Tale – the Original 1985 Novel*

According to Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), strides made by women towards equal rights have historically been followed by defensive, anti-women policies and rhetoric; this trend can be defined as backlash. Ronald Reagan’s presidency (1981-89) represents the ascendancy of a backlash against the second wave of feminism in Faludi’s analysis. Faludi writes,

> The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women’s position have actually led to their downfall. (Faludi 10)

Independent women and feminism were demonized and diminished, while the New Right and anti-feminist fervor grew in strength. Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* was written in 1984 and released in the midst of the backlash in 1985. In Gilead, the regime that has replaced the United States in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the religious right has seized power and stripped most basic rights from women. Women have been segmented into strict, repressed categories devoted to either running a household called Wives, serving the members of the household as chefs or maids called Marthas, training other women for their new roles in the society called Aunts, or bearing children called Handmaids. Men without power also suffer at the hands of the new regime, but it is women who are the focus of the novel. Women struggle to survive in Gilead, where they are isolated from each other, the rest of the world, and their own bodily autonomy. What
first strikes a reader is the realism of *The Handmaid’s Tale*; the world Atwood imagines feels so possible. This was intentional on Atwood’s part – as Shirley Neuman explains,

> By 1984, the year in which pundits looked back on George Orwell’s dystopia to assess how much of his vision we had escaped and also the year in which Margaret Atwood sat down to write *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both totalitarianism and those who hoped to retrench some of the gains of feminism had made significant inroads on the successes of the 1970s. Atwood kept a file of these inroads on human rights and women’s freedom, which she took with her on book tours as evidence for her insistence that she had ‘invented nothing’ in Gilead. (Neuman 859)

As I discovered when I visited Atwood’s archives at the University of Toronto, Atwood maintained a binder of newspaper clippings highlighting real events happening in the mid-80s that form the basis for the dystopian world she creates in Gilead. Atwood clipped articles about birth control, abortion, and the rising trend of conservatism and then contributed them to the archive clearly marking out the genealogy of the novel. The issues for women presented in these clippings remain unresolved and just as prevalent today. Articles clipped include: “Sexual equality threatened with a renewed fervor in ‘80s” by Lynda Hurst in the *Toronto Star*, 14 February 1985; “In many public spaces, women are on sufferance” by Katha Pollitt in the *New York Times’* Hers column (n.d.); “US Abortion Clinic Rocked by explosion” in the *AP* in Washington on 2 January 1985; “Is abortion really a ‘moral dilemma’?” by Barbara Ehrenreich in the *New York Times’* Hers column (n.d.); and “U.S. conservatives push new order” by William Johnson in the *Globe and Mail* on 9 May, 1985. The dystopian society of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is constructed directly from the ideas and issues seen in these clippings and others.

Atwood was clearly inspired by the rising fervor of the religious and conservative Right, near-constant attacks on abortion clinics and debates about the morality of abortion, and the persistent unequal treatment of women in public and private spaces in

> The New Right’s messages to women have been, precisely, that we are the emotional and sexual property of men, and that the autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion, and state. The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled—patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality—are being strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and efforts at censorship. (Rich 24)

I will return to Rich’s essay later to mine some of the parallels between her work and Atwood’s, but for now I simply want to note that in Gilead, an extreme version of these Right-wing religious conservatives has seized power and implemented an agenda which constitutes a return to traditional values in the most extreme sense, similar to that described by Rich. Moral absolutism reigns supreme: abortion and birth control are wrong and absolutely outlawed, women remaining in the home and serving their husbands is not only right but also the only option available to them. Women are undeniably inferior to the domineering patriarchs of their households, while men have far more freedom. Women can only be assigned a single role – that of Wife, Aunt, Handmaid, or Martha. This practice of using real-life events as inspiration for the dystopia presented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* emphasizes that,

> Gilead as an imagined dystopia in Atwood's fiction is a warning to present-day readers about how perilous is their present, in which it is possible to imagine and project a Gilead, in which everything described in Gilead has recently been enacted in some form in some society.² The practices and powers of Gilead—and its ability physically to constrain Moira and Offred's mother and to convert Offred—exist in contemporary societies. The future dystopia of Gilead is latent in the present. (Stillman and Johnson 81)

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The dystopian future and the everyday present are linked through the descriptions of the all-too-familiar backlash and misogyny women regularly face. The present and future are inspired by and consistent with the past: “…Atwood also reaches back to past generations in the telling of her tale, and she also includes an epilogue that takes place in the distant future. The one thing constant across the centuries is patriarchal control. Atwood implicitly suggests that we are in some way ignoring the continuing problem of the subordination and denigration of women” (Templin 175). By amplifying real events in a dystopian setting, Atwood emphasizes the reality and danger of the backlash against women. Shirley Neuman argues that,

The novel’s outwardly conformist and once independent Offred has seen her social value reduced to reproduction, and her personal freedom completely curtailed. But the retrospective monologue in which she tells her story reveals her as observant of the gendered configurations of power in both the personal and the political realms, in both ‘the time before’ and the present of the novel. It also shows her as analytic and ironic about those relations and as capable of using them to her own advantage. Offred, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women’s rights that gathered force during the early 1980s. (Neuman 858)

Offred is a woman assigned to be a Handmaid required to serve as a vessel for childbearing under the new regime. She is the narrator of the novel and the recorder of the horrors of Gilead. In Offred’s description of the dystopian world in which she lives and memories of her time in the “normal” world before, Atwood creates a dramatic allegory for the real-world women struggling through the backlash after formerly enjoying the freedoms and reforms for women enacted in the 1970s. What is also emphasized through Offred’s narration is that even the so-called “good times” before Gilead were not perfect. Reflecting on her life before Gilead, Offred thinks, “I’m remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on
them…Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew…” (HT 24). Casual sexism, misogyny, and sexual violence existed in Offred’s supposedly “free” past. They exist in our modern world as well, and in Gilead they have been institutionalized. Patriarchy is inescapable, and backlash promotes the power of patriarchy. All Gileadean society has done is remove the element of a nasty surprise that is often attached to sexism, misogyny or sexual violence today; women still experience these horrors, but they know when to expect them in the patriarchal rituals of the regime.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is taking a stand against backlash by exposing the reader to the horror evident in an amplified version of backlash. According to Susan Faludi, “Feminism’s agenda is basic: it asks that women not be forced to ‘choose’ between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women be free to define themselves—instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men” (Faludi 15). In first-person narration through Offred, Atwood explores the misery of a world in which feminism has been rejected, in which women are restricted from any form of self-definition and pressed into strictly dictated roles. She uses the dystopian society of Gilead to explore women’s issues, and at the same time, she explores the idea that women’s solidarity is the key to their survival. The first way in which Atwood emphasizes this message is through the frame of the dystopian genre.

*The Purpose of the Dystopian Genre of The Handmaid’s Tale*

The dystopia presented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is distinctly woman-centered; meaning that women’s perspectives and their horrifying experiences are emphasized.
Although Gilead is a regime orchestrated by men, women are the most influential and interesting figures within the novel, and they are the focus in Atwood’s exploration of the world of backlash. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is linked so effectively to real-world issues precisely because it is not set exactly in the real world. By choosing to write a dystopian novel, Atwood captures and maintains the reader’s attention by staying both close to and far enough away from the real world the reader inhabits. That degree of separation between the real and the unreal, even though the two are closely tied, makes the feminist message of the book more viscerally powerful. By amplifying the familiar backlash until it is shocking and dramatized within the dystopian reality of Gilead, Atwood is able to raise and address issues that have become normalized and are no longer immediately noted as unusual in our current reality. As Adelina Cataldo explains,

> The time of the events that are described is located in the future, although that future is not so far from the reality of the ideal reader, due to the typical dystopian device of extrapolation that the author exploits for her critical purposes. The future thus represents a privileged observing point to look at present events, creating an estranging effect, which allows a detached consideration of present society and, therefore, of the gender politics of the author’s present and past times, without excluding the possibility of change. (Cataldo 159)

The dystopian setting allows the reader to visualize and conceptualize problems related to their environment outside of that exact environment; this makes it easier to approach issues that otherwise might be difficult to separate from everyday life. Charlotte Templin relies on the work of the Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson to explain this: “We take our present for granted and accept its normality and inevitability. As Jameson explains, ‘elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to “experience,” for some first and real time this “present,” which is (after all) all we have.’” (Templin 175). The dystopia of Gilead is not
Atwood’s vision of the future but rather a dramatization or extension of the conditions of the present day. Templin elaborates that “…the question suggested by Jameson is the correct one--not ‘Did the dystopian novelist get the future right?’ but rather ‘Did the work sufficiently shock its own present as to force a meditation on the impossible?’” (Templin 175).

This approach of using dystopia to abstract and analyze the present does not diminish the messages of the novel about the present. Rather, the profiles of backlash and the power and potential of women’s solidarity within such an environment are raised with profound feminist implications. The dystopian genre makes these issues of backlash ideology and women-specific struggles even more shocking and demanding of attention and discussion. At their core, “…dystopian fictions point to current trends, and suggest serious threats to our well-being. The purpose is to make the reader examine the society we have created and to get to work on drastic alterations—or to allow the reader to gain the self-recognition that is the first step toward change” (Templin 175). By having the reader only hear the first-person voice of a female narrator and exploring specifically her multi-dimensional and impactful relationships with women as opposed to comparatively dimensionless relationships with men, Atwood emphasizes her interest in the power and potential of groups of women. Different groupings of women carry different messages throughout The Handmaid’s Tale, but the overarching theme is that women are the most powerful influence on each other’s success or failure in this dystopian world. Thus, women’s solidarity is the most effective method of combating the effects of the backlash. Peter Stillman and Anne Johnson explain that: “…a close reading of the text and attention to its dystopian context, [demonstrates] the need for sustained political,
feminist consciousness and activity among women by exploring what may happen in their absence” (Stillman and Johnson 70). When women are voiceless and isolated, the effects are disastrous and damaging for them, as Offred demonstrates through her striking narration about Gileadean society and how it affects her mental and emotional states.

Women need other women, and need to remain active together, to combat those effects – both within Gilead and in the contemporary backlash environment of our real world. Community and solidarity between women, whether it grows naturally or unnaturally, is absolutely essential to the message of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

**Women’s Solidarity in The Handmaid’s Tale**

Women are linked with other women constantly throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*, at first primarily through strictly-controlled, regime-sanctioned “solidarity.” This perversion of solidarity serves to keep women under surveillance by their fellow women. Knowing that the Handmaid who is your shopping partner, the Wife of your household, the Marthas of your household, and the Aunts there to “help” and train you are all watching you – and that you are watching them as well – sows distrust and discourages rebellion by the women. If you are alone, with no one to trust, how can you rise up against the regime? At the conclusion of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in the “Historical Notes” chapter – which is set at a university conference analyzing Gilead long after its demise – speaker Professor Piexoto delivers one of the most important observations about Gilead. When describing the thought processes behind the methods put into place to control women in Gilead, he says:

[Commander] Judd – according to the Limpkin material – was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise
has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. (HT 308)

In his speech, Professor Piexoto describes the women through a metaphor of colonialism; they are the indigenous who must be self-colonized. Within the system of forced solidarity encouraged by Gilead, women are helpless to effect change yet simultaneously essential in enforcing and maintaining the regime. Offred delivers an astute observation of this paradox when she says, “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” (HT 127). She makes this comment after a day of helping another Handmaid give birth, in a process that has been carefully ritualized. The Handmaids come together to help Janine have her baby, but under their seemingly-natural and primal emotions and actions there remains a strong undercurrent of structured supervision – the Aunts run the birth and watch the women to make sure they do not transgress the limitations set by the regime for their relationships with each other. Even in a space as putatively “natural” as this one, surrounded by other women who should be their allies, the Handmaids are not allowed to be multi-faceted individuals or form organic connections with each other. Their supervisors, jailers, and spies are the women amongst them. Even the most natural and feminine process of birth has been corrupted and co-opted by the Gileadean regime.

Through the use and ritual rape of Handmaids, Gilead can produce children as well as effectively control the women by splitting up maternal roles between them and pitting them against each other. In Gilead, being a mother appears important and powerful, but it is a hollow importance and power. This can be seen clearly in the example of Janine, a Handmaid who gives birth to a child who does not survive. When
she is pregnant, she is revered: “She’s a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She’s a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved” (HT 26). Producing a child for the regime is supposed to save you from being banished to the nuclear wasteland on its edges. But when Janine’s child is not healthy as expected, we see how fickle the power afforded by motherhood is within Gilead. When Offred sees Janine in passing after the birth, Atwood writes, “We watch as Janine enters the roped-off enclosure, in her veil of untouchability, of bad luck. She sees me, she must see me, but she looks right through me. No smile of triumph this time. She turns, kneels, and all I can see now is her back and the thin bowed shoulders” (HT 215). Janine is drained of all her former power after her birth was not as expected. She performed the task assigned to her – to carry a child to term – to the best of her ability, and it is still not enough for the regime. She is not safe or powerful. As Audre Lorde explains, “Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women” (Lorde 111). This comment is from Lorde’s famed essay, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” This work, originally written in 1979, was published in Lorde’s book Sister Outsider in 1984, one year before The Handmaid’s Tale. Lorde’s point here supports what Atwood describes as happening in Gilead. In order to prevent women from rising up against the men in power, connections between women are severed as they are split into tiers where different levels of motherhood and thus power drive them to resent each other. Maternity is women’s only source of power, but it is also set up to be a division between the women as children are a commodity to be taken and redistributed based on Gileadean oversight. The regime attempts to ensure that …sisterhood is perverted into an enforced, compulsory all-female community built on sorrow, loss, envy, and angst. Subtly turning the notion of freedom on its
head, women’s freedom of personal liberty is cut; as Aunt Lydia appreciatively remarks, now women are being ‘given the freedom from’ (HT 24) competition and gender equality. Overlooking the important fact that women lack any choice, the Aunts believe in ‘a spirit of camaraderie among women’ (HT 208). As Gilead demonstrates, this compulsory ‘sisterhood’ isolates and disempowers women, precluding any potential solidarity among women. (Mohr 249)

This compulsory sisterhood is certainly dangerous and damaging to women’s success and survival within Gilead. It forces women into adversarial positions with each other, working to prevent real relationships of genuine solidarity from forming; the leaders of Gilead seem to be well aware that women standing together are a powerful force and one that they want to pre-emptively destroy in order to maintain their power.

However, despite this toxic and carefully constructed regime-sanctioned “solidarity” among women, real relationships and more genuine solidarity still take root, even under the constant threat of severe punishment. Throughout the novel, almost all of the women – regardless of their ranking within Gilead’s hierarchy – put themselves at some level of risk to form genuine bonds with each other. The repressed and victimized women in Gilead crave love and genuine relationships with their peers. They cannot survive without these relationships, so they seek them out. Offred gives an astute analysis of the true deprivation of the regime when she says, “nobody dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from” (HT 103). Genuine female relationships are formed out of necessity. These relationships spring up to fill the void in women’s lives left by the isolation the regime forces upon them through the implementation of forced solidarity. These genuine bonds and expressions of solidarity are contrasted to and often developed within the regime-sanctioned antagonistic relationships between women. It is especially instructive to analyze the interplay between these natural and unnatural bonds between women that are part of Gilead, as they communicate The Handmaid’s Tale’s message
about the power and potential of women’s solidarity that has contributed to the book’s adoption as a feminist beacon. Offred’s relationships with Aunt Lydia, Serena Joy, other Handmaids, and Moira are examples of the layers of bonds – genuine and forced – between women and how impactful they are upon the women within them.

By contrast, when heteronormative bonds exist in the novel, such as in Offred’s relationships with Nick or the Commander, those connections appear notably lacking compared to the depths of the bonds developed between women. It is as if, “the novel subverts the subversive force of [heterosexual] love, and that it raises serious questions about a man-woman axis, when this axis models itself upon patterns that restrict rather than liberate. In its representation of such patterns in relationships between Offred and Luke, Offred and the Commander, Offred and Nick, the novel insists upon love’s limitations, rather than upon its latitudes” (Miner 37). Love, here taken to mean heterosexual romantic relationships, is a clearly restrictive force on Offred. The men in the novel do not motivate or impact Offred the way the women do; they are tools that contribute to her survival but not the key to it. Nick, the chauffeur with whom Offred falls in love, is arguably the most important and developed heterosexual bond Offred has. At the end of the novel, he reveals himself to be a member of the resistance; if true, this link would have a profound impact on changing Offred’s current situation. But Atwood never writes an epilogue explaining what happened to Offred and if what Nick revealed is true; the resulting ambiguity about Nick’s potential to be Offred’s savior in Gilead emphasizes that his possible heroic actions do not even matter in the larger understanding of the novel’s message. Nick still remains a mostly unexplored and one-dimensional character when he is featured in the novel, like the Commander and Offred’s former
husband Luke. The male characters are important in the moments in which they appear, but they are not as crucial or involved in Offred’s daily life or survival as female characters are. Heterosexual relationships are a distraction to the truly empowering and important relationships of the novel: women’s connections with each other. As Adrienne Rich likewise argues in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,”

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other. (Rich 63, Rich’s emphasis)

In The Handmaid’s Tale, as in Rich’s theory, women bonding with each other – whether those bonds are ones of romantic love or friendship – leads to relationships that endow women with the power to liberate themselves. In Gilead, women’s relationships with each other give them the strength to survive and stoke their internal resistance to the patriarchal theocracy that rules their lives. Women, whose actions are small and not grand or heroic, occupy more of Offred’s thoughts and analysis throughout her narration and demonstrably enable her to survive on a day-to-day basis in Gilead; the rich and complex dimensions of women’s relationships with each other are boundless, and explored through various female characters throughout The Handmaid’s Tale.

By comparing genuine and forced solidarity between women in Gilead, one can explore the power of women as the ultimate arbiters to maintain the dystopian world in which they live or provide respite from it by creating small comforts or pockets of solidarity within their genuine relationships, which are crucial to their survival. Women are a force to be reckoned with in Gilead, both as instruments of the backlash and victims
of it. Offred has complicated relationships with many women throughout the novel, but her relationships with four main women demonstrate the range of power and potential available in women’s solidarity: Aunt Lydia is an example of forced solidarity at its most extreme and the success that has in subduing women; Serena Joy is an example of forced solidarity that begins to blur into genuine solidarity and the potential impact such a bond can have for better or for worse; other Handmaids are examples of the persistent development of genuine solidarity even in the smallest interactions and how crucial any support is to women’s survival; Moira is an example of the enduring and sustaining nature of completely genuine solidarity.

**Offred’s Relationship with Aunt Lydia**

Aunt Lydia is the most prominent figure acting for the regime throughout the book, serving as a “mother” figure for all of the Handmaids while they are being trained. She serves as their supervisor and warden during their re-education at the “Red Center” where the new order of the regime and their roles as Handmaids are impressed upon them. She is the definitive example of an unnatural and forced bond being formed between women. Aunt Lydia is an especially strong and prominent figure in Offred’s thoughts throughout the narrative, even though for the majority of the novel she only appears in flashbacks. Aunt Lydia is a figurehead for the regime and a crucial element of its implementation. As a mother figure, she attempts to bond herself to the Handmaids while also maintaining power over them. The importance of the forced solidarity demonstrated through Offred’s relationship with Aunt Lydia is twofold. Firstly, their relationship demonstrates how solidarity can be co-opted as an effective tool by the regime. Putting Aunt Lydia in a position of power over the Handmaids and forcing the
women together constantly under the illusion of solidarity is effective in subduing any possible physical rebellion by the Handmaids. But secondly, this forced solidarity actually proves essential to Offred’s survival: Offred’s awareness of the disingenuous relationship she has with Aunt Lydia and her status as an instrument for the regime leads Offred to develop an intense dislike for the woman that contributes to her internal rebellion and resistance to Gilead.

Aunt Lydia plays up the idea of a new and special role in society for women in Gilead. As connections between women are discouraged in reality, Aunt Lydia espouses a new kind of women’s solidarity as being key to the regime:

> There can be real bonds of affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn’t reasonable or humane. Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you -- the clasped hands again, the breathy voice -- and that’s just one for instance. The raised finger, wagging at us. But we can’t be greedy pigs and demand too much before it’s ready, now can we? (HT 163)

This myth of women’s “solidarity” is essential to the success of Gilead, for through the repression of its women the new order will be sustained. Rather than allow women to actually unite as individuals for a common end, in Gilead each woman is assigned only a limited aspect of womanhood which requires them to work together alongside other women to run the household. Each woman has a different level of status depending on the role they are assigned, and all of their parts together fulfill the complete role of the “woman of the house.” They are all the woman of the house and none of them truly are, because they are not allowed to embrace their individuality or the entirety and complexity of womanhood. Instead, they only fulfill aspects of it as prescribed by the state. By
carefully dividing traditional aspects of womanhood between women and not allowing any non-traditional or holistic expressions of womanhood, divisions are built into the regime.

Gilead relies on the division of women by their differences, sowing separation and suspicion instead of the supposed leisure and happiness of women, as Aunt Lydia suggests. If women cannot form a community, they cannot truly succeed. Success in this sense means having a life which is truly one’s own and that allows for happiness and fulfillment. Gilead’s continued existence depends on its women not being able to succeed. Having a woman like Aunt Lydia ensure that other women will not have the opportunity for success strengthens the effectiveness of separating women by their differences. As J. Brooks Bouson states,

The Aunts, who ironically place a high value on ‘camaraderie among women,’ uphold the male suprem[ac]list power structure of Gilead with its hierarchical arrangement of the sexes, and they play an active role in the state’s sexual enslavement of the Handmaids…The Handmaid’s Tale describes the brutal reeducation of the Handmaids, who are coerced by the Aunts to forego the ideology of women’s liberation and to revert to the ‘traditional’ values of a male-dominant system. (Bouson 47)

Aunt Lydia exploits feminist language and rhetoric to keep women subjugated and the regime intact. Offred sees through these attempts, and they fill her with an extremely venomous attitude towards Aunt Lydia which occupies her thoughts and, in a way, helps sustain her. Offred thinks of Aunt Lydia often; in the middle of a passage she will recall a moment of Aunt Lydia’s instruction from the past. When walking down the streets in town, Offred remembers, “The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (HT 23). When looking at the wall where prisoners are hanged, Offred remembers, “Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not
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It will become ordinary” (*HT* 33).

When helping a fellow Handmaid give birth, Offred remembers a time at the Red Center:

“They made mistakes, says Aunt Lydia. We don’t intend to repeat them. Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good. I would like to strangle her. I shove this thought away almost as soon as I think it” (*HT* 114). Offred remembers Aunt Lydia’s dictums, but she does not take them to heart. Instead she recalls them and contrasts what Aunt Lydia said to the horror of what Offred is experiencing, exposing the lies behind Aunt Lydia’s words.

Aunt Lydia is one of the figures in the novel who serves as an allegory for a real-life instrument of the backlash, Phyllis Schlafly. Both Schlafly and Aunt Lydia are intelligent, educated women who took on powerful roles within conservative organizations. Their roles as women in power are contradictory to their respective organization’s goals of elevating men, but their roles are acceptable because they are essential in spreading the word about the new standards set for women by the male leaders. Susan Faludi explains, when discussing the real women of the New Right, “As long as these women raised their voices only to parrot the Moral Majority line, as long as they split the chores only so they could have more time to fight equal rights legislation, the New Right male leaders (and their New Right husbands) were happy to applaud and encourage the women’s mock ‘independence’” (Faludi 267). Women can only be powerful in the eyes of Gilead as the means to an end, and Aunt Lydia is a tool of Gilead like Phyllis Schlafly was a tool for the mid-1980s backlash and the New Right. Faludi continues, “The women always played by the men’s rules, and for that they enjoyed the esteem and blessings of their subculture” (Faludi 267). Endowed with artificial power by
the Gileadean patriarchal theocracy, Aunt Lydia performs her role as “matriarch” of the Handmaids and exists in “solidarity” with her charges while actually training them to turn against each other. In ritualized sessions at the Red Center, the women are required to turn against or shame each other, during “Testifying” (HT 71) sessions. Friendships and conversation are actively discouraged. The effect upon the Handmaids is pronounced; Offred, despite not being a true believer of Gileadal ideology, originally resists engaging in genuine relationships with women during her time in Gilead: she engages in Testifying sessions actively and she resents Serena Joy, the wife of her household, as she is supposed to.

An interesting element of Aunt Lydia’s role as “mother” to the Handmaids is her attempts at seeming genuine while manipulating the Handmaids. She will occasionally depart from her role as an authority to become a confidant to the Handmaids, dispensing information that she wants distributed in a seemingly benevolent way. When Moira escapes from the Red Center, the women are desperate for information about her, and Aunt Lydia makes sure to give it to them. But this dispersal of information is not done out of pity or in a moment of weakness: it is a calculated release. When relating the story she heard about what happened to Moira, Offred says, “Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia. There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another” (HT 129). The alliance formed here is forced and regime-sanctioned; it is heavily implied that Aunt Lydia wants to quell the questions about Moira and finish the story so she can move on. Offred is correct in asserting that there are
always alliances within Gilead – but whether or not they are genuine is the question. Her seeming ignorance of Aunt Lydia’s conscious motives in revealing this specific information indicates that in some ways, even Offred – who we know to be a firm dissenter – is swept up into elements of the regime.

As previously mentioned, Aunt Lydia is the Gileadal figure who is most often in Offred’s mind. She appears in almost every chapter, where Offred remembers and analyzes her words and actions, criticizing and tearing down the lies Aunt Lydia espouses. Years after her initial relationship with Aunt Lydia was formed at the Red Center, she still occupies Offred’s thoughts. Offred says, when seeing Aunt Lydia at a Salvaging; “It’s Aunt Lydia. How many years since I’ve seen her? I’d begun to think she existed only in my head, but here she is, a little older…I’ve begun to shiver. Hatred fills my mouth like spit” (HT 274). Aunt Lydia becomes emblematic of the regime for Offred, and an essential element in Offred’s rebellion, all because of their regime-sanctioned bond. This forced solidarity has led to Offred’s intense hatred for Aunt Lydia that fuels her internal fire and desire to resist the ideas of Gilead. But Aunt Lydia also emphasizes how powerful women are at controlling as well as freeing each other. Women have the power and potential to inform and affect each other’s success and failure.

*Offred’s Relationship with Serena Joy*

In training at the Red Center, even as Aunt Lydia attempts to paint the image of an idyllic society where women work together to accomplish their roles, she also takes care to maintain the divisions between the women’s roles, especially between the Handmaids and the Wives of the households they will be assigned to: “It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it’s the Wives. You should always
try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them” (*HT* 46). In her instructions, she gives power to the Wives while depriving the Handmaids of power, making the two groups resent each other when in reality they are both powerless. The Wives are also mother figures, but in a different context than Aunt Lydia. They will not mother the Handmaids, but instead steal and mother their children. This of course sets the women up to be at odds; they both want to claim the child as their own but only one is allowed that privilege. Additionally, to conceive the child, the Wife, the Commander, and the Handmaid all have to take part in the “Ceremony” together, where the Handmaid engages in sex with the Commander but the Wife must be present. This arrangement is said to bring the family closer together but actually succeeds more at driving the women apart. The relationships between Handmaids and Wives are thus predictably contentious.

As a result, from the first meeting between Serena Joy and Offred, their relationship is hostile. Offred says, “I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me...I wanted to think I would have liked her, in another time and place, another life. But I could see already that I wouldn’t have liked her, nor she me” (*HT* 16). The initial hostility between Serena and Offred only continues to grow throughout the book, as each woman seeks to undermine the other. The most hostility between them occurs during the Ceremony:

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings on her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge. (*HT* 94)
Although Serena treats Offred viciously during these encounters, her anger is somewhat understandable. Both women are being stripped of their agency and full involvement in their own lives. Offred notes that, saying after the Ceremony when Serena has forced her out of the room: “Before I turn away I see her straighten her blue skirt, clench her legs together; she continues lying on the bed, gazing up at the canopy above her, stiff and straight as an effigy. Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” (HT 95). Offred’s feelings about Serena grow more complicated throughout the novel. As she becomes more used to the household and her own place in it, she begins to think more deeply about Serena.

Offred explains:

> Serena Joy had changed for me, too. Once I’d merely hated her for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all. But now, although I still hated her, no more so than when she was gripping my hands so hard that her rings bit my flesh, pulling my hands back as well, which she must have done on purpose to make me as uncomfortable as she could, the hatred was no longer pure and simple. Partly I was jealous of her; but how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried-up and unhappy? You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I was jealous. But I also felt guilty about her. I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers. (HT 161)

Even to a woman she is meant to be at odds with, or at the very least distanced from due to imposed divides, Offred begins to feel some form of solidarity, or at the very least some remorse or guilt for fraternizing with the Commander and invading Serena’s supposed territory. Offred continues: “She was a malicious and vengeful woman, I knew that. Nevertheless I couldn’t shake it, that small compunction towards her” (HT 162). But at the same time as this new and genuine solidarity develops beneath the surface, the original hostility still remains intact. Although Offred may feel some guilt for her relationship with the Commander outside of the regulations, she also enjoys what it gives
her, explaining, “...I now had power over [Serena Joy], of a kind, although she didn’t know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot” (*HT* 162).

Despite the subtle and mostly-subconscious solidarity Offred begins to feel with Serena, their relationship does not stray from what it is defined to be for the majority of the novel. It is Serena who takes the first steps to bring their relationship outside of what the regime has defined for it. She does this when she speaks honestly with Offred about the Commander’s infertility and offers to set her up with the household driver, Nick, to become pregnant. Offred accepts Serena’s proposal, entering a new type of relationship with her: “‘I think about this. ‘Not with a doctor,’ I say. ‘No,’ she agrees, and for this moment at least we are cronies, this could be a kitchen table, it could be a date we’re discussing, some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation. ‘Sometimes they blackmail. But it doesn’t have to be a doctor. It could be someone we trust.’” (*HT* 205). Serena and Offred are working together, breaking rules together, and supporting each other in that mission. But even though their relationship has changed, and they are standing together in this conspiracy for a child, their relationship is still not entirely genuine. Serena Joy breaks the rules and gives Offred this opportunity not because she is thinking of Offred, but because she is thinking of herself. Women who do not have children are looked down on and eventually punished in Gilead. Serena wants a child and this is how she will procure that child. Offred accepts the proposal not because she likes Serena or wants to help her, but because she wants to help herself. Having a child will secure her safety for a time and the chance at a real human connection with Nick is tempting. Yet despite the mostly self-serving relationship Serena Joy and Offred maintain, the solidarity they
develop is still unsanctioned by the regime and exists to subvert the rules; this new element of their relationship gives them each license to take more control of their lives.

When Serena is leading Offred to Nick’s apartment to engage in unsanctioned sex and thus subversion of the regime’s rules, Offred thinks, “I see two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse” (HT 259). Serena Joy has become Offred’s counterpart, but also her opposite. The language of mirroring used here echoes that used when Offred compares herself to other Handmaids, but a subtle difference remains. There is no visual difference between Offred and the other Handmaids. Describing pairs of Handmaids walking down the street, Atwood writes, “We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation” (HT 212). While there is no difference between Offred and the other Handmaids, there is a distinct visual difference between Offred in red and Serena in blue; they are partners but also inverses. Serena Joy and Offred do not have the same relationship as two Handmaids would, but they still have an important and different relationship from that which is sanctioned.

It is important to note that Serena Joy is written as another Schlafly-esque figure, reminiscent of the women of the New Right who supported and espoused its anti-women backlash ideals. In the time before Gilead, Serena Joy was a Christian singer and televangelist turned advocate for traditional values and the sanctity of the home. Like Schlafly, she advocated for traditional values while living a life very different from those traditional values: “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 greater good” (*HT* 45). Serena Joy is presented as a hypocrite—consciously or unconsciously—as many New Right female advocates from the backlash period have been analyzed. Susan Faludi explains, “These female leaders who relayed the [New Right] movement’s most noxious antifeminist sentiments to public ears embraced far more of the feminist platform than either they or their male leaders let on—or perhaps realized” (Faludi 251). These women advocated against their own rights while using those very rights to develop and advance their advocacy. Faludi elaborates:

> The activists of Concerned Women for America could report to their offices in their suits, issue press releases demanding that women return to the home, and never see a contradiction. By divorcing their personal liberation from their public stands on sexual politics, they could privately take advantage of feminism while publicly deploring its influence. They could indeed ‘have it all’—by working to prevent all other women from having the same opportunity. (Faludi 268)

The women advocates of the New Right and Moral Majority ironically used what feminism gave them to espouse antifeminist backlash ideals. Through her description of Serena Joy, Atwood presents dystopian Gilead as the resulting society if these advocates of the backlash ideology had won out. But do the conservative women advocating against feminist advances and for a return to the home even want those things? That question is explored within the figure of Serena Joy. Offred thinks, “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” (*HT* 46). This skewering of Serena as a Phyllis Schlafly allegory underscores the anti-backlash message in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It also emphasizes the potential power of women in shaping the
backlash. Gilead would not exist without women to maintain it, and Serena Joy is one of those instrumental women.

Although she is not in as direct of a role as Aunt Lydia, Serena is still responsible for Gilead’s continued success. But Serena differs from Aunt Lydia in that she is shown to be unhappy with the position she advocated for herself. All women suffer from effects of the backlash: those very same female advocates for the New Right who helped get Ronald Reagan elected to office were shunned by the new administration when choosing political appointments because the backlash ideology they helped promote did not include women in positions of power (Faludi 269). Serena Joy, while unhappy, is not presented as entirely aware of the fact that her unhappiness stems from how the regime stifles her. She is angry and dissatisfied but appears to blame Offred and the Marthas in their household for not fulfilling their roles perfectly, rather than considering the fact that she is too limited in the role she is assigned and is frustrated by its constraints. Serena also lacks the power to do any analysis or research on the source of her anger, she is silenced and isolated within the regime. Her subversion of Gilead grows out of a desperate desire to live successfully within the world she advocated for: she wants a child from Offred above all, and only breaks the rules and changes their relationship to achieve success within the structure of Gilead that she supports. Despite these motivations, the fact that the bond between her and Offred blurs somewhere between forced and genuine solidarity allows both women to develop a better understanding of the other and some perceived sense of support, which can be crucial in contributing to their survival.
Offred’s Relationships with Other Handmaids

When Aunt Lydia is training the Handmaids together, they are not allowed to develop friendships. They are not allowed to speak to each other out of turn, and they are constantly forced to shame each other while “Testifying.” They are each other’s spies, watchful partners, and supervisors making sure each woman remains faithful and contained in their limited roles as Handmaids. Atwood emphasizes the importance of doubling and forced solidarity among the Handmaids in her language; repeatedly Offred refers to her Handmaid shopping partner, Ofglen, as her “twin,” “double,” and “reflection.” She explains, “We aren’t allowed to go [anywhere] except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable” (HT 19). Solidarity is allowed and encouraged among Handmaids, as long as it is for the benefit of the regime. Since the women all know this, they are mainly suspicious of each other and remain isolated. But despite the danger it poses to their lives, the Handmaids still take risks to speak to and bond with each other. The solidarity of the Handmaids often transforms from the suspicious and regime-sanctioned solidarity into genuine relationships. This is visible early on in the novel. At the end of the introduction, Offred discusses how she and the other Handmaids, stuck at the Red Center to be trained for their new roles, risked their own safety to learn each other’s names and forge connections: “We learned to whisper without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each
other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June” (HT 4). In ending the introductory chapter with this, Atwood sets the reader up to recognize the key to survival is connection with other women, in this case, connection between the Handmaids. The Handmaids are alone and heavily ruled over, but they risk punishment to talk to each other anyway, because what life would they have if they remained completely alone?

Offred and her shopping partner, Ofglen, take that risk to become genuine partners in solidarity. Offred is notably filled with joy at the prospect of a friend, a sister, a confidant and a fellow dissenter: “We walk, heads bent as usual. I’m so excited I can hardly breathe, but I keep a steady pace. Now more than ever I must avoid drawing attention to myself” (HT 168). Having an ally is essential and it greatly lifts Offred’s spirits. But because of the regime’s constant effort to group and pair the Handmaids together, the women actually have many chances to recognize and get to know each other. At events Handmaids all attend, like Births, Salvagings, Prayvaganzas, and even daily shopping errands, a subtle yet genuine system of solidarity grows alongside the regime-sanctioned one. The Handmaids have established discreet patterns of recognition amongst each other to communicate: “I see several women I recognize, exchange with them the infinitesimal nods with which we show each other we are known, at least to someone, we still exist” (HT 283). When heading to a birth, Offred has an illustrative exchange with another Handmaid:

Impulsively she grabs my hand, squeezes it, as we lurch around the corner; she turns to me and I see her face, there are tears running down her cheeks, but tears of what? Envy, disappointment? But no, she’s laughing, she throws her arms around me, I’ve never seen her before, she hugs me, she has large breasts, under the red habit, she wipes her sleeve across her face. (HT 112)
This kind of friendship or solidarity can be fleeting, but connection with each other gives the Handmaids hope and strength to survive. It could be argued that Gilead allows the Handmaids these moments, of seemingly genuine solidarity, for release of their pent-up emotions; they could be a built-in way to maintain control over the women. However, most of these fleeting moments witnessed throughout the novel lead to full-blown subversive and genuine solidarity, which is decidedly not what the regime wants. Offred and Ofglen initially communicate solely through minor gestures and slightly off-script statements, but their relationship develops into one that is extremely powerful. Through Ofglen, Offred learns about the existence of Mayday, the formal resistance movement to Gilead. Ofglen can provide not only in-the-moment support for Offred but also big-picture information and solutions for escaping Gilead. Despite the importance of their relationship, Offred lets it fall by the wayside when she begins sleeping with Nick; she is distracted by this heterosexual romantic connection. When Ofglen commits suicide to avoid being captured and tortured by the Gilead Secret Service, Offred is profoundly affected: “Now that Ofglen is gone I am alert again, my sluggishness has fallen away, my body is no longer for pleasure only but senses its jeopardy” (HT 284). Offred took Ofglen’s friendship and partnership for granted; Atwood clearly emphasizes that as a mistake. Not only was Ofglen necessary for Offred’s possible physical resistance to Gilead, she provided a mental haven of resistance that was essential and now is painfully gone. In pairing off the Handmaids, Gilead has inadvertently given the women a network that becomes perfect for subversion. However, that subversion is not always successful; it is often fragile and disrupted by either forced solidarity or distractions such as
heterosexual relationships. But the fact that this genuine solidarity exists and continues to spring up despite the disruptions emphasizes its power and importance to the Handmaids.

An especially interesting example of natural or genuine solidarity between Handmaids is the relationship that develops between Offred and her predecessor, who was the Handmaid of the house before the Offred we know as the narrator of the novel. Both women were assigned the patronymic name of Fred, or Offred. Previous-Offred is dead and the two have never met. But current-Offred, our narrator, sees evidence of her predecessor in the room she now inhabits and thinks of her often. After current-Offred finds the message “nolite tes bastardes carborundorum” carved in the closet by her predecessor, she feels even closer to her “ancestor,” as she refers to her: “…it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn’t yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next. It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I’m communing with her, this unknown woman” (HT 52). The fact that this woman is supporting current-Offred and helping her survive, even when they have never met and previous-Offred is no longer alive, is a powerful one. The carved message left by her predecessor becomes sort of a prayer for current-Offred, a mantra provided to help her by the woman before her who found help within the saying herself. This mantra has also been adopted by real-life members of feminist resistance to backlash policies or rhetoric. At Women’s Marches in 2017 and 2018, many signs were carried displaying Atwood’s famous phrase (Levine). As evidenced by both Offred’s and current protestors’ reliance on these words, past women’s voices provide an important well of strength on which current women can rely.
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Offred’s Relationship with Moira

The most subversive and genuine relationship Offred has throughout the novel is with Moira, her college best friend who is trained as a Handmaid with her. When Moira and Offred are together at the start of the novel, their friendship serves as a powerful balm. After Moira appears at the Red Center, Offred is instantly soothed: “It makes me feel safer, that Moira is here” (HT 71). Friendship is a risk at the Red Center, since individuality and interpersonal relationships that go beyond doing your duty are discouraged, but Offred unquestioningly takes the risk for Moira. She remembers,

Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other during the mealtime line-ups in the cafeteria and in the halls between classes. But on the fourth day she was beside me during the walk, two by two around the football field. We weren’t given the white wings until we graduated, we had only the veils; so we could talk, as long as we did it quietly and didn’t turn to look at one another. The Aunts walked at the head of the line and at the end, so the only danger was from the others. Some were believers and might report us. (HT 71)

The women’s willingness to continue their friendship despite the enormous risks it poses to their personal safety is notable. Friendship is essential; it is a priority; and it is indubitably worth the possible punishment. Moira is the most rebellious woman in the Red Center and her escape attempts enthrall the other women who cannot or will not escape themselves. When Moira is caught and brought back to be punished, the Handmaids support her: “We stole extra packets of sugar for her, from the cafeteria at mealtimes, smuggled them to her, at night, handing them from bed to bed. Probably she didn’t need the sugar but it was the only thing we could find to steal. To give” (HT 91).

The Handmaids are willing to sacrifice and help Moira when she is in need; she is one of them and inspires them by doing what they cannot. More specifically, she inspires them to survive – especially Offred – with her bravery and friendship, and so they devote
themselves to helping her survive in turn. Offred explains Moira’s effect on the other women as such:

Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you’d come apart, you’d vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together. Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked. (HT 133)

After Moira escapes the Red Center a second time and does not return, Offred internalizes Moira’s friendship and rebellious spirit to motivate and sustain her in her life as a Handmaid.

Like Aunt Lydia, Moira is extremely present in Offred’s mind. Unlike Aunt Lydia, Moira is an undeniably positive influence on Offred’s mindset while being equally important to stoking her internal fire of resistance. As I have argued, Aunt Lydia’s words create resistance in Offred, but here she notes how the whole environment of the training at the Red Center wears the women down; Moira rejuvenates their consciousness. Memories of Moira keep Offred sharp and motivated, propelling her forward even as her daily life is terrible and, in many ways, hopeless. Even in Moira’s absence, her friendship sustains Offred. She imagines: “But the night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good. Moira, sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, ankle on knee, in her purple overalls, one dangly earring, the gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric, a cigarette between her stubby yellow-ended fingers. Let’s go for a beer” (HT 37).

Knowing that Moira was there for her, and still feeling as if Moira is there for her, provides relief for Offred. When she finally sees Moira again at Jezebel’s – the illicit club in Gilead that forces rebellious women to serve as prostitutes to satisfy men in power –
her happiness at seeing her friend again is pronounced: “I still can’t believe it’s her. I touch her arm again. Then I begin to cry” (HT 242). But when they talk, it is revealed that Moira’s rebellious and brave spirit has been diminished. She has succumbed to the new role prescribed to her by the regime – that of a whore or “Jezebel” – and no longer bothers to resist. Offred is shocked and disappointed by this, thinking, “I don’t want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack” (HT 249). In her disappointment, Offred reveals that Moira has become more than a friend and instead a sort of talisman or mythical figure. Their friendship is genuine, but it has also taken on a life of its own in Offred’s mind in order to sustain her. She needs Moira and solidarity with Moira to survive, which becomes dangerous when Moira has been beaten down by the regime and is no longer exactly the rebellious heroine Offred imagined her to be. Here, Atwood emphasizes the problems inherent in demanding heroism from “feminist” characters. The revelation that Moira is not what Offred has been imagining her as is a wake-up call to Offred to stop dreaming about heroics and return to focusing explicitly on her own day-to-day survival. Offred’s thoughts of Moira are still powerful fuel for her internalized resistance and their solidarity is genuine, but this idealization of Moira is detrimental to Offred’s navigation within the reality of Gilead.

Within Gilead, regime-sanctioned and genuine solidarity have been layered within each other, and each form of solidarity has immense power and potential; women can maintain the regime or work to subvert it. Women’s solidarity – natural/genuine or unnatural/forced – is developed within Gilead, simultaneously formulated by it, as a
result of it, and in resistance to it. By exploring the different levels and layers of solidarity that exist and grow within the dystopian world Atwood has carefully constructed, she investigates different dimensions of its necessity and possibility as a solution for women fighting against backlash. Throughout the novel, the persistence of genuine solidarity – even in the face of strict regime-sanctioned solidarity and women working to undermine each other – demonstrates just how crucial women’s solidarity is to survival in a backlash environment.

*The Independence and Unsentimentality of Atwood’s Original Novel*

Although her relationships with all these women help Offred survive, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not a novel about heroines or heroes: Offred never takes explosive action against the regime she is imprisoned by. But Atwood emphasizes that Offred’s rebellion, albeit internalized, is still extremely powerful. Offred’s rebellion is her survival, her internal monologue and her refusal to accept the role of Handmaid assigned to her by Gilead. She internalizes her rage and uses those moments of genuine solidarity and connection with other women to sustain her in a regime that constantly attempts to manipulate women against each other to achieve their total isolation and powerlessness. Her survival itself is an accomplishment; active heroism in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is superfluous to the power of internal rebellion and human connection. Throughout the novel, Atwood also emphasizes that grand acts of rebellion are fruitless. Dunja Mohr explains:

Resistance in the form of heroic deeds ‘is not condemned by the text—it is merely seen as useless.’ Physical resistance against Gilead fails, as Offred’s own escape attempt, to some extent her mother’s feminist fight in the pre-Gileadean era, Moira’s failed flight and subsequent life at Jezebel’s illustrate. Moreover, physical

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resistance might ultimately lead to self-destruction, as Ofglen’s suicide demonstrates. (Mohr 257)

The women who do take direct action against Gilead are killed or cruelly punished, while the women who express solidarity in silence gather strength, internalize their rebellion, and survive as dissenters.

Additionally, Atwood refuses to romanticize Offred’s life or elevate her into a heroine. Instead, Atwood’s general tone in the text is rather unsentimental and matter-of-fact. Instead, Offred remains utterly human and therefore extremely accessible to the reader; she is flawed and complex much like real women. Offred is not a character constructed to be inherently likable: she is cold (Nussbaum), indecisive, inactive, and selfish. She chooses to pursue a relationship with Nick over helping Ofglen gather information for the Mayday rebellion; she often takes pleasure in her hatred of and occasional triumphs over Serena Joy; she yearns for her personal escape from Gilead with her daughter rather than scheming to aid in the downfall of the regime. Offred is aware of her own flaws, at one point saying, “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (HT 267). Because Offred is a flawed character, she feels real to the reader. Female readers especially can relate their own experiences of frozen and frightened inactivity in the face of backlash or sexism to Offred’s solely internal rebellion in Gilead. As a result, the novel continues to hit a nerve with women especially and remains a source of inspiration or a rallying cry when protesting modern-day backlash policies. Women readers stand in solidarity with Offred, and with each other. Ironically, the story about a woman struggling to survive in a regime where she is unable to act has inspired many women to take action at protests and
Women’s Marches all around the world. As is demonstrated in her characterization of Offred and her relationships to other women, what matters to Atwood is Offred’s survival rather than her potential status as a heroine. Survival and internal strength in a backlash environment like Gilead – a dystopian society completely hostile to women – is a powerful achievement in and of itself; in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women’s solidarity has the potential and power to make or break that survival.

*The Handmaid’s Tale – the 2017 Hulu TV Adaptation*

The continued relevance of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is emphasized by the immensely popular 2017 Hulu adaptation of the story into a television series. Although Hulu does not release viewership statistics, they did acknowledge that the show was the most popular Hulu original thus far (Beley). In addition to driving subscription growth for Hulu (Adalian), the release of the show has also helped promote the conversation comparing the current GOP-dominated government in the U.S., including Donald Trump’s presidency, to the authoritarian government of Gilead depicted in the series. Although production began before the current administration was in place, many of the women-specific issues depicted in both Atwood’s original novel and the Hulu adaptation still feel relevant to women across the U.S. and the world. After the installment of the GOP regime in November 2016, the women’s issues depicted in the series felt more important than ever. The actress who plays Moira, Samira Wiley, elaborated on how the atmosphere of filming the series heightened after Trump’s election: “Suddenly it was dangerously close to the climate that we were starting to live in. We were hoping to be relevant, but we weren’t hoping it would be *this* relevant” (Onstad). Elisabeth Moss, who plays Offred, added: “We just tackled the story we intended to tell and that
Margaret Atwood told in 1985. Behind the scenes we were kind of taking a deep breath and saying, ‘Wow, this is becoming a bit close for comfort.’ You’re in a scene, and the character would say something and it would be a little more meaningful, a little more chilling, more resonant’” (Onstad). After the show’s premiere on April 26, 2017, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was once again a major topic of conversation and cultural analysis. The perceived feminist message and aims of the series were simultaneously debated, celebrated, and denounced. But what exactly does the TV series seek to communicate? While this adaptation maintains the basic plot of Atwood’s original novel, the series makes specific modifications that shape the overarching message of the work. These modifications display a drastic shift away from the novel’s original message, and it alters what women can take from *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s into the continuing feminist struggle against backlash. There are two main areas in which I will analyze the shifting message of the 2017 Hulu adaptation of Atwood’s original novel. First, the role of men – as both allies and abusers – and their relationships with women are emphasized far more than in the original text. Second, women – in relationships with each other and independently – are vastly more active and heroic, taking steps to physically and verbally fight the regime as opposed to focusing on internalizing strength to survive. This leads the Hulu adaptation to depart from the crucial ambiguity and unsentimentality of Atwood’s original work. Where the novel upholds the importance of the power and potential of women’s genuine and forced solidarity, the Hulu adaptation instead focuses on more explicit action; the impact of and demand for physical and active resistance plays a dominant role in women’s lives within Hulu’s version of Gilead. Women become heroines rather than flawed humans attempting to survive at any cost; strength from
women’s solidarity is no longer presented as a the ultimately powerful solution in a backlash environment.

*The New Importance of Male Characters*

Atwood’s 1985 novel focuses almost exclusively on female characters. We as the reader only see and hear through the perspective and narration of Offred, the lead female character, and she mainly interacts with other women. There are men within the world of Gilead, but they are presented as relatively one-dimensional, or not mentioned very much at all. The three main male characters explored in the original novel stay consistent in the Hulu adaptation. They are Luke, Offred’s husband from whom she has been forcibly separated; the Commander, the man whose household Offred serves; and Nick, the driver in Offred’s new household and her eventual lover. However, the adaptation makes significant changes to these characters, specifically in the roles they play in Offred’s life and the frequency with which they appear on screen. This changes the implications associated with men and heterosexuality in the world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Mainly, this makes a new focus on men as both allies and abusers an important element of the Hulu adaptation. The series provides us with backstories for Luke, Nick, and the Commander that make them more multi-dimensional—more human, more understandable. That is not necessarily a negative development on its own, but it becomes negative when the male characters are developed in such a way as to subordinate the female characters. Daniel D’Addario from *Time* explains in his review of the series finale:

In the show’s early going, what we could see was limited to Offred’s field of vision and her memory, in keeping with the narration of the source material, Margaret Atwood’s novel. Using new viewpoints to tell the story made sense, but practically every choice the show made in expanding its aperture felt
completely baffling…An episode focused on [Offred’s] husband’s own experience of the dystopia — having successfully escaped to Canada — seemed to miss entirely what about the story worked in the first place. (D’Addario “The Handmaids Tale Season Finale Review”)

As D’Addario points out, there are a variety of new perspectives provided within the Hulu series that aren’t seen in the novel. Some of them are from the perspectives of important female characters like Ofglen, Offred’s friend and shopping partner who is now shown to be punished for being a lesbian – or “gender traitor” as the regime refers to her – and Serena Joy, the wife of Offred’s household, who is now shown to be one of the important architects behind the development of Gilead. But the choice to expand so far into exploring men’s viewpoints when the novel is about a dystopia that creates very specific roles and punishments for women is damaging to the novel’s original message about women’s specific oppression in a patriarchal theocracy and the complexity of women’s solidarity and its power as a form of resistance. The main issue with male allies specifically, in real life as well as in the Hulu series, is the adulation given to men for doing what is right and treating others decently. This is not an issue so much with male allies existing, but rather the discussion around and presentation of male allies. Men in the Hulu series are usurping women’s power, which is ironically the terror of dystopian Gilead in the first place.

A crucial way in which male characters are further developed is through the exploration of their heterosexual romantic relationships with women. These relationships are given a large amount of screen time in the adaptation, while they are only briefly touched upon in the original source material. There are still graphic scenes depicting Ceremony nights, where Offred is ritually raped by the Commander in order to produce a child for the regime, but now they are contrasted with seemingly positive “loving” sex
scenes between Offred and Nick. Sex has a powerful presence in the original novel; it is used as a tool by the regime to control and oppress women as the only time sex is sanctioned is for the impersonal “Ceremony” which emphasizes to Handmaids how their only value is as child-bearing vessels. The Hulu series modifies the overwhelmingly negative depiction of sex in the novel by spending time focusing on the development of the sexual relationship between Nick and Offred. In the novel, Offred gives three stories of the first time she and Nick slept together of their own volition, ending with the provision that none of them are really true. She does romanticize Nick in the novel, but only occasionally; Offred indeed acknowledges that Nick was distracting her from staying completely alert to her friendship and solidarity with Ofglen and her own chances of survival. She remembers their relationship, saying, “I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him. Telling this, I’m ashamed of myself” (HT 271). In contrast, the Hulu series fully depicts the first sexual experience Offred and Nick have together and the repeated times she returns to his room. There is no voiceover revealing Offred’s internal monologue and no implication that this scene between them is a false depiction, or a romanticized one. Offred’s relationship with Nick in the Hulu series develops far beyond that in the novel; he becomes a crucial confidant and her main support. There are multiple scenes in which they speak about their lives before Gilead and discuss the current problems under the regime; they are intimate in a way that Atwood does not explore within the original novel. In the text, Offred reveals her secrets and thoughts to Nick and he remains mostly unresponsive. She says, “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout” (HT 270). Their relationship endures but remains dimensionless; they
are not partners and Nick is depicted as considerably less revealing and invested in their relationship than Offred. In the Hulu series, Nick becomes not only Offred’s lover but also her partner. He is a source of solace and support, whereas in the novel he is more of a stand-in for Offred’s desire to assert some form of control over her life and not a solution to her problems. By serving as her partner and providing Offred with what appears to be genuine solidarity, Nick is co-opting the role only women have in the novel.

The heterosexual romantic relationship between Offred and the Commander, as well as between Serena Joy and the Commander, is also more fully explored within the Hulu series. As an example, we see flashbacks of the Commander and Serena when they were first married and trying to have children, before Gilead. This elevates the Commander to a multi-faceted, somewhat sympathetic, and complex character. In the novel, the Commander is an unsympathetic instrument of the regime. While he is nuanced – we see he is insecure and pathetic as well as powerful – ultimately, he exists to express the larger issues with the patriarchal structure in Gilead. The Commander’s open desire to impress Offred and Serena with his power and subject them to his dominance while the women are working together to develop a plan to conceive a child behind his back underscores the haughty absurdity, but also the dangerous pathologies, inherent in Gilead. But while the Commander in the novel is power-hungry and pathetic, he is never written as sympathetic or understandable. The age of the Commander in the Hulu series is also a departure from how he is depicted in the novel: he is played by Joseph Fiennes, who is 47. Offred in the novel, and in the Hulu series, is presented as being around 30. In the novel, the Commander is much older than her, with notably white and wispy hair.
Physically, in addition to ideologically, he is repulsive to Offred. When the Commander forces her to have sex with him at Jezebel’s, her repulsion is visible. She says, “He sits up, begins to unbutton. Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He’s down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair” (HT 254). She feels no attraction to his physical form, but she continues, “I can’t afford pride or aversion…” (HT 255). Immediately before the Commander initiates this sexual encounter that Offred does not want, she comments, “Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried” (HT 255). All of these remarks indicate the Commander is older, pathetic, and unattractive to Offred in appearance as well as personality. Casting Joseph Fiennes obviously modifies this aspect of their relationship. Mr. Fiennes is a stereotypically attractive actor and has played a variety of roles in which he is marketed as being extremely desirable to women. The viewer is then led to associate him, and thus his character of the Commander, with some level of attractiveness – despite the appropriately sinister performance Mr. Fiennes delivers. The changing of the age gap between the Commander and Offred is a small change, but a significant one. Having the Commander and Offred be closer in age inherently modifies the relationship they have to be more appealing and less unequal, even though the basic relationship they have in the Hulu series is not much modified from the original text. Their relationship becomes sexier, where it is originally only intended to be perverse.

The third main male character, Offred’s husband Luke, is also modified and developed significantly in the Hulu adaptation. Mainly, he is portrayed in a much less ambiguous and more favorable light. In the novel, he trivializes Offred’s concerns about the growing power of the group that eventually forms and runs Gileadean society and
takes a bit of a misogynistic tone with her. When Offred is fired from her job alongside all women and Gilead begins to form, she takes on more of a traditional homemaker role on Luke’s advice: “I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and [my daughter]” (*HT* 180). Likewise, when Offred voices her concerns about the new society forming – and her complete lack of agency within it – to Luke, he brushes them off:

We still have… he said. But he didn’t go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying we, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him… He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his. (*HT* 182)

While his comments are not explicitly anti-feminist or hostile, in Offred’s recollections of Luke’s words we can see the echoes of backlash ideology. He half-heartedly attempts to comfort Offred with a platitude, trailing off with “we still have…” Luke could have meant “we still have each other” or “we still have love,” but either sentiment is meaningless if Offred – and all women – no longer has physical rights. In the Hulu series, this ambiguity is gone, and Luke is presented as a vital and idealized male ally. Now, he saves their child from a deranged woman in the hospital soon after she is born; he comforts and supports Moira and Offred as Gilead becomes the law of the land; he even attempts to sacrifice himself in the hopes that Offred and their daughter will escape the Gileadean forces chasing them. He is molded into an undeniable feminist ally. As previously mentioned by Daniel D’Addario, there is an entire episode following his arc of escaping to Canada and his subsequent life and ever-burning love for Offred; none of the women actively living and surviving in Gilead – including Offred – are shown during that episode. This is a typical way that the Hulu series displaces women and emphasizes
men’s stories and roles. The message of the original text is about the struggle of women, their power, and their ability to survive by working together. Men struggle in the novel as well, but they are not the focus. Superseding female characters and making these male characters more central takes time away from developing the thematics of women’s solidarity that is so essential throughout the novel, and it diminishes its power.

*The Promotion of Active, Heroic Women*

It is also true that Offred’s relationships with other women and the possible development of solidarity within those relationships are still featured within the Hulu series. The relationship that changes perhaps the least between the novel and the Hulu series is that between Offred and Aunt Lydia. Aunt Lydia, portrayed masterfully by the actress Ann Dowd, has the same harsh and indestructible loyalties to the regime. She guides, guards, and disciplines the Handmaids. And when she is not on-screen, her words and past instructions remain omnipresent and Offred’s hatred for her is continuously burning. Offred also remains close with Ofglen, although in the Hulu adaptation they are more verbally friendly and both are more active in their resistance to Gilead. Ofglen does not commit suicide to avoid capture and torture as she does in the novel, instead she lives and is horrifically punished for her lesbianism with a clitoridectomy. After Ofglen has been captured and punished, Offred is interrogated about what she knew about Ofglen’s lesbian indiscretions. When asked why she did not report what she knew, Offred replies, “Because she was my friend” (“Late”). For that remark, she is shocked with a cattle prod and beaten. But in making their relationship explicit, she has elevated its power. This relationship is shown to be more active, in both its open recognition and the actions taken by Ofglen and Offred together and apart. Ofglen and Offred reveal their pasts to each
other and speak about escaping Gilead with the resistance organization Mayday, Ofglen steals a car and drives it around a market to get a taste of freedom as Offred watches. But their closeness remains important to Offred’s survival just as it is in the original text. The relationship between these Handmaids has developed within the regime-sanctioned one – as in the novel – and it gives each of them hope and help in holding on to survive. However, it also motivates each of them to act directly, which is not negative by itself but only when it is shown to be the only acceptable choice for strong women. Direct action being presented as the only option for “real” resistance implies that other forms of resistance – notably the quiet, internalized resistance grown from genuine solidarity and focused on in the original text – are not valuable. This puts pressure on women to perform feminist resistance in a specific manner that is often impossible or even counter-productive to their situations.

By far the most complex relationship in the Hulu series is that between Offred and Serena Joy. As the Commander is made younger in age, so is Serena. About this change, Sophie Gilbert theorizes,

In the novel, it’s implied that Serena is past childbearing age…Perhaps the biggest shift in the Hulu show is that Serena is younger, closer to Offred’s age, and more resentful of her as a result. ‘It sharpened the edges of what the dynamic between them would be,’ Littlefield told me. ‘It added an element of competition and there but for the grace of God go I to every time they were on camera together.’ (Gilbert)

This heightens the enmity of their relationship. Simply by virtue of being more equal in age, Serena and Offred become emphasized as rivals for the heterosexual love or lust of the Commander. Their new closeness in age also exacerbates the multiple tense facets of

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4 Warren Littlefield is the Executive Producer of *The Handmaid’s Tale* series for Hulu.
their relationship with each other; Serena is forced to act as a mother figure but also a sort of sister-wife to Offred. Gilbert continues,

The relationship between Offred and Serena is heightened in the TV adaptation to the point that it becomes the show’s most intriguing relationship. Serena’s resentment over having a younger woman in the house becomes a pathological hatred of a sexual interloper [of the Handmaid] who’s also a reminder of Serena’s deficiencies as a woman. Yet her frustrated maternal instincts lead her to treat Offred with a kind of patronizing infantilism, telling her to finish her food so she can “join the clean-plate club,” praising her when she’s a “good girl,” and doling out cookies as treats. (Gilbert)

In Episode 8, Serena gives Offred a music box from her own childhood. In her voiceover, Offred says, “The perfect gift. A girl trapped in a box. She only dances when someone else opens the lid. When someone else winds her up” (“Jezebels”). Serena exercises her power and reminds Offred of her lack of agency with the metaphorical meaning behind the gift of the music box. But Serena is trapped as well, both women are undermined by the patriarchal and sexist structure of Gilead. In flashbacks of her life before the regime, we see that Serena was an important architect of its design but becomes a victim when her plan is implemented as she is confined to the home and stripped of her power and agency. This is even more explicit than Atwood’s original comparison of Serena to Phyllis Schlafly and other women of the New Right. Offred and Serena maintain the same fraught bond that they have in the novel, fluctuating between hating and helping each other. Even though they undermine each other, they also make possible each other’s survival, by working together to conceive a child as in the original text. During the Hulu series, Serena says to Offred, “What we do together is so terrible….we must remain strong” (“Late”). There is important tension in this line; Serena acknowledges that she and Offred are working together, but that the work they are doing – work which subverts
the regime – is “terrible.” In the Hulu series, as in the novel, Serena still supports Gilead despite the fact that it completely stifles and isolates her.

While there are many elements of the Hulu series that detract from the original message about the power and potential of women’s solidarity as analyzed throughout the novel, it must be noted that there is still some focus on the importance of women’s relationships with each other. It remains true that,

There’s little hope in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but there is this: The show depicts a world in which women come to one another’s aid as often as they miseducate, abuse, and inform on each other. Moss’s character endures cruel treatment at the hands of her master’s wife, the infertile Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski). But she also forms bonds, as with fellow handmaid Ofglen (Alexis Bledel). The pair’s conversations, as they do the shopping for their respective households, are a way of maintaining their humanity. (D’Addario “Handmaid’s Tale Review: Hulu Adaptation of Margaret Atwood”)

These relationships remain an important part of the story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as it has been adapted by Hulu. But even larger than specific changes within these relationships is the overarching re-definition of how women should gather strength and survive. In the Hulu series, it is no longer about subtle solidarity but rather loud and open action. Women’s solidarity is emphasized only when it is suited to the new depiction of active, resistance-fighter Offred. For example, in a powerful section in the novel, Offred’s friend Moira escapes from the Red Center where Handmaids are being trained. As previously analyzed, this act gives the other women hope and inspiration that they internalize and draw on for strength to continue surviving. In the Hulu series, Offred helps Moira escape and leaves with her. Here, the power being provided by women’s solidarity is physical and active. But this new power takes away from the small exchanges between women that provide solace, strength, and enable survival in the novel. In the original text, one does not have to be a heroine to reject the ideology the regime
propagates. As long as women have each other’s support, the regime will never succeed entirely in controlling and diminishing them, even though physically Gilead is undeniably in charge. The Hulu adaptation changes direction dramatically on this point: now, to be a strong woman and survive you have to be a heroine. In the finale episode, Offred says in her voiceover, “It’s their own fault. They should have never given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army” (“Night”). But the Handmaids are not an army – not in the original novel, and not even really in the Hulu series. They will be punished dearly for any overt resistance, and their agency remains out of their hands. The Handmaids are unable to rally, and it is damaging to the multi-faceted nature of feminist resistance to promote radical action as the only effective solution to backlash.

This new focus on active resistance leads the Hulu adaptation to depart from the ambiguity and unsentimentality of Atwood’s vision for Offred in the original text. As discussed previously, in the novel Offred is not exactly likable and definitely not a heroine. She is cold (Nussbaum), indecisive, inactive, and often selfish. At one point in the novel Offred openly admits, “I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power” (HT 286). Offred wants to survive rather than explicitly rebel. In the Hulu series, she becomes a bona-fide rebel and an unambiguous heroine. She constantly demonstrates her active opposition to Gilead; these changes are noteworthy. Many of the changes the show makes to demonstrate active resistance are clearly intended to be inspiring; “Some of the smartest moments in the show—like Ofglen’s story, and one featuring a Handmaid named Janine—are radical edits from the book, making a passive plot active” (Nussbaum). But this shift to active resistance diminishes
the power of solidarity that the novel suggests provides relative power in a totalitarian regime and which also makes more complicated and ambiguous the significance and nature of resistance. The television critic at the *New Yorker*, Emily Nussbaum, explores the Hulu series’ unambiguous promotion of active resistance in her review of the series, when analyzing the fourth episode specifically:

The final sequence is a montage. As tinkly music plays, we see Offred on her bed, healing. One by one, other Handmaids place gifts by her pillow. Then we’re back in the current day, where she walks the streets side by side with fellow Handmaids. In red, they glide, in slo-mo, their habits blooming against the dull street. The scenario is familiar to anyone who has seen a Tarantino film or “The Craft”: the storm gathering, the team uniting. [Offred’s] internal monologue adopts the defiance of a Nike ad: “We are Handmaids. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches.” That go-girl moment made me sit up straight—and pull back. I could feel it being hashtagged, like “she persisted.” The book is never inspiring, not explicitly. Offred is a witness, not a heroine. She’s often ashamed and numb. She’s even a little cold. It’s painful for her to remember her daughter, but her drive isn’t to find her family; it’s to stay sane. (Nussbaum)

The inspiration within the novel comes from its lack of resolution, the tangible possibility of the women-specific horrors presented in Gilead, the wake-up call that it can become to women living in modern times. Atwood’s original work is not advocating for heroism but rather exploring the difficulty and dynamics of women’s survival. Survival is not glamorous in the novel as it is in the Hulu series where it is linked to heroism. Nussbaum continues, writing, “Step by step, you feel the show mining Offred’s story for something that’s more aspirational, less psychological; less horror, more thriller” (Nussbaum). As the episodes progress, Offred speaks openly to multiple other Handmaids about her resistance; she motivates Moira to escape from Gilead; she transports a secret package full of women’s letters to the outside world. Swinging music plays in the background of Offred’s most triumphant moments, playing up the viewer’s sense of accomplishment and persuading us to forget about the pervasive existence of the institutionalized backlash
ideology that tortures these women. “Inspirational” moments keep coming as the show continues. It is as though, “Every episode seems to end with a moment in which we’re told that [Offred] will survive this because she is strong” (D’Addario “The Handmaids Tale Season Finale Review”). Being strong seemingly mandates active resistance; being passive is seen as weak. Strength is explicit, dramatic, and a departure from the small moments of solidarity we see in the novel. For example, “In the finale, Offred leads a procession of Handmaids after a small, provisional triumph down the street to the strains of “Feeling Good.” It’s shot as though the Handmaids are hyperpowerful and in control, which we know they are not. Moments later, thrown into a car and driven into an uncertain future, her face is too darkly lit to make out, but we can hear the music in her mind: Tom Petty’s ‘American Girl’” (D’Addario “The Handmaids Tale Season Finale Review”). Offred becomes the public leader of this Handmaid resistance. She is fierce, and powerful, and female, as the choices of music specifically emphasize. But the Hulu series stops short of considering what the novel so carefully emphasized: the complex power politics of survival in Gilead and how futile unambiguous heroism really is.

Gilead is a society that Atwood carefully crafted to manifest the most extreme expressions of backlash against women. It is structured to systematically undermine, punish, and control women for their reproductive value. It is a society that takes no prisoners; dissenters are publicly executed to maintain order and their bodies displayed for everyone to see. Everyone – but especially women – lives in fear. There is no space for active resistance or heroism. The Hulu adaptation preserves all these qualities of Gilead, except for the last one. This misses the original point Atwood seeks to make, about the power but especially the potential of women’s solidarity. She is exploring the
quiet, subversive power of genuine women’s solidarity rather than the loud, idealized, and romanticized power of drastic or violent acts of resistance; the Hulu series is unfortunately doing the exact opposite.

_in conclusion_

The Handmaid’s Tale Hulu series was well-received, and immediately seized upon for its continued relevance. The themes delivered in the television series clearly stem from the powerful prose of the original novel, even as they were adapted for what I am arguing is a far less powerful and nuanced message. But it is important to remember that both the novel and the Hulu series draw from the unfortunately recurring trend of backlash in real life. As Daniel D’Addario puts it:

Handmaid’s themes — the cruelty and illiberal thinking of organized religion, the ease by which open democracies slip into authoritarianism as a result of misogyny — may well find an eager new audience in this country. That would be giving The Handmaid’s Tale too little credit, though. First, the themes drawn out in Hulu’s masterful adaptation did not suddenly become relevant after the election. The climate America finds itself in now, with echoes of disregard for women, did not come about overnight. Whatever forces led us to the point where The Handmaid’s Tale is a once again widely read and shared novel have always been at work. (D’Addario “Handmaid's Tale Review: Hulu Adaptation of Margaret Atwood”)

Backlash against women has long been a part of American culture and rhetoric. Atwood’s novel and the new series provide respectively powerful images and ideas and a gripping visualization of that continuing trend. It is true that the particular brand of backlash from the Reagan era at the time the novel was written is different from the backlash women are experiencing today. But the continued resonance and power of Atwood’s story indicate that the existence of backlash overall remains consistent. Emily Nussbaum explains that,

The sexual politics of 1985 survive today only in distorted form, reordered like Scrabble tiles. Our President is a Playboy-brash predator; his Vice-President is pure Gilead. The anti-porn movement is as dead as the Shakers; naked photos are practically second-date etiquette. In pop culture, the eighties are often portrayed
as cartoonishly sexist: “Well, it was the eighties, after all,” goes the excuse. It’s like the fifties, if you lived in the eighties. Atwood’s story may now be an artifact about an artifact, but it retains its great power as a reminder of the thin tissue between the past and the present. (Nussbaum)

The misogyny evoked in *The Handmaid’s Tale* adaptation does not just stem from the election of Donald Trump, although the GOP regime he leads is a painful reminder of how strong the backlash still is. Atwood put it best herself in a recent interview when she said, “…what leaders do gives permission. So you can have people all along who have thought those things and done those things, but if a world leader is doing them and making clear that that world leader is thinking them, it gives permission to other people to be much more in your face about it” (Morrison). President Trump is not the first misogynist elected to office in the United States, but his promotion of backlash ideology is loud and unabashed. In another interview, Atwood elaborated, “There’s an undercurrent of this [type of backlash thinking]. And then it rises to the surface sometimes.

But *The Handmaid’s Tale* is always relevant, just in different ways in different political contexts. Not that much has changed” (Dockterman). Our physical environment might change, but our mindset does not seem to evolve much at all. *The Handmaid’s Tale* taps into the undercurrent of backlash that is constantly flowing through modern society.

Sophie Gilbert explains,

But just as horror stories reflect the distinct anxieties of their eras (zombies stand in for immigration, irradiated beasts for fear of nuclear fallout), the timelessness of Atwood’s story is hard evidence of how persistent hostility toward women has always been. Gilead is a world out of time, but also a world that has the ability to reflect each new society that encounters it. A scene in the book where the character of Janine is excoriated by the Aunts and the other handmaids for being gang-raped at a party, is an example of slut-shaming that was written by Atwood in 1984 before the term even existed. These instincts are as old as humanity, *The Handmaid’s Tale* tells us. (Gilbert)
Atwood did not predict the future with her novel, but she tapped into an important trend about women’s treatment in the United States – and around the world – that has remained remarkably and disappointingly consistent in contemporary history.

In the original novel, Atwood relied on the frame of the dystopian genre and an in-depth exploration of genuine and regime-sanctioned relationships to emphasize the power and potential women’s solidarity has on women’s success or failure within a backlash environment. The Hulu adaptation loses sight of that focus, with the displacement of female characters for the promotion of male allies and new emphasis on active resistance rather than subtle solidarity. Male allies are important for the continued success of feminist movements and protests around the world, but they should not be revered – while women identifying as feminists are still demonized – for merely standing up for what is right. The complexity of feminist resistance, and how it can exist quietly and internally forms, is also important to emphasize, especially when considering that loud and explicit resistance is not always safe or possible for women. The 2017 Hulu adaptation missed an important opportunity to present a more woman-centered, nuanced feminist show in the midst of a political environment that, like in the 1980s, is seeking to silence such messages. But regardless of Margaret Atwood’s or the Hulu adaptation’s own explicit feminist identification or acceptance, the feminism inherent in *The Handmaid’s Tale* remains clear. Around the country at women’s protests, the novel has become a rallying cry. “Nolite tes bastardes carborundorum” is written on countless protest signs. Women in Texas, Missouri, and many other states are showing up to protest at State Capitols in full Handmaid regalia. Women are raising their voices together and
harnessing that very same solidarity that is seen as so crucial in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to advocate for an end to the backlash.
Works Cited


“Late.” The Handmaid's Tale, season 01, episode 03, Hulu, 26 April 2017.


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