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**ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR**

**The Political Aspect of Literature: Criticism of a (Neo)conservative  
Community**

Politický aspekt literatury: kritika (neo)konzervativní komunity

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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# Declaration

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

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## **Permission**

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## Thesis Abstract

The political aspect of literature, specifically fiction, has always provoked passionate discussions, both in academia and in mainstream media. Avoiding politics might rob literary works of their context and power, while reducing them to mere political manifestos denies these works their aesthetic qualities and underestimates the role of fiction. One has to take into consideration the important fact that politics in works of fiction is crucially shaped by the historical context and is thus beyond the author's control.

The thesis examines how the political aspect of literature functions, and the focus is narrowed down to two dystopic novels which critically deal with life in a neoconservative community; namely Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*. The analysis of how the atavistic communities in the novels are constructed to appear illiberal, undemocratic or even fascist requires research not only in the field of literary theory (or aesthetics), but also in philosophy.

The thesis involves two streams of inquiry – the first one is centred on the community itself and on its totalitarian tendencies, where the works of Roberto Esposito and Hannah Arendt are of great importance, as they determine the dynamics of a community. Furthermore, they explain the reasons for the emergence of a community that tries to overturn the seemingly irreversible progress in the field of human rights. This research is applied in the analysis of the communities appearing in the mentioned novels.

The second stream of inquiry focuses specifically on the politics of literature and gains its relevance mostly from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. There are various issues which have to be consulted and resolved, for example the possibility that the development of the historical context will alter the political aspect of the novel or completely bury it, as future readers will not understand it. As a result, it is crucial that this theoretical background is applied not only to the novels themselves, but also to the TV and film adaptations of them. Those adaptations reveal a great deal about the way in which the original "political message" of these novels has been re-told, misinterpreted or appropriated to fit its own era or a certain agenda.

The result of my thesis should determine how the political aspect of the chosen novels operates not only in the context of literary criticism, but also in the social and political atmosphere in the United States (incidentally, I am aware that Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author, yet the fictitious Gilead regime in *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the United States and the novel accordingly reacts to various tendencies in this country). The conclusion might allude to a few thoughts on the desirability and the role of the political aspect of literature in general.

## Abstrakt

Politický aspekt literatury – zvláště pak beletrie – vždy vzbuzoval vášnivé diskuze, a to jak v akademickém prostředí, tak v mainstreamových médiích. Nezohledňování tohoto aspektu ochuzuje literární díla o část jejich kontextu a působivosti, redukuje-li je však na pouhé politické manifesty, dojde k umenšení estetické hodnoty těchto děl a potlačuje to jejich beletristickou povahu. Je také nutné vzít v úvahu skutečnost, že politika literárních děl z velké části odráží historický kontext, a autor ji tedy nemůže zcela ovládat.

Tato práce si klade za úkol probádat, jak funguje politický aspekt literatury, a to na příkladu dvou románů, které kriticky vykreslují život v neokonzervativní komunitě. Těmito romány jsou *Příběh služebnice* od Margaret Atwoodové a *Stepfordské paničky* od Iry Levina. Atavistické komunity zobrazené v těchto románech jsou vykresleny tak, aby se jevíly jako neliberální, nedemokratické, nebo dokonce fašistické. Jejich analýza vyžaduje výzkum nejenom v oblasti literární teorie (či teorie umění), ale i v oblasti filozofické.

Práce zahrnuje dva proudy výzkumu – první cílí na komunitu samotnou a na její totalizační tendence, kde jsou velmi důležitá díla Hannah Arendtové a Roberta Esposito, protože zachycují dynamiku komunity a vysvětlují, jak a proč vzniká komunita, která se snaží zvrátit zdánlivě nezvratný pokrok v oblasti lidských práv. Tato teoretická část je pak využívána při analýze komunit zobrazených v obou zmíněných románech.

Druhá část teoretického úvodu se zaměřuje výslovně na politiku literatury a získává svou relevanci především na základě četby *Estetické teorie* od Theodora Adorna. Zde vyvstává několik problémů, které je potřeba zvážit a vyřešit, například riziko, že vývoj historického kontextu změní politický aspekt románu, popřípadě ho úplně pohřbí, jelikož mu budoucí čtenáři už nebudou rozumět. Je tedy klíčové, že toto teoretické pozadí se neuplatňuje pouze na vybrané romány, ale i na jejich televizní či filmové adaptace. Tyto adaptace prozrazují velmi mnoho o způsobu, kterým bylo původní „politické sdělení“ převyprávěno, dezinterpretováno či přizpůsobeno, aby vyhovovalo určité éře či agendě.

Výsledkem práce je analýza toho, jak funguje politický aspekt vybraných románů, a to nejen v kontextu interpretací daného románu, ale také z pohledu

společenské a politické atmosféry ve Spojených státech (uvědomuji si, že Margaret Atwoodová je kanadská autorka, nicméně fiktivní režim Gileád v *Příběhu služebnice* se nachází ve Spojených státech a román tak reaguje na různorodé tendence v této zemi). Závěr by měl poukázat na několik obecných myšlenek týkajících se žádoucnosti a role politického aspektu literatury.



## **Key Words**

atavism, authoritarianism, community, conservatism, dystopia, feminism, politics, neoconservatism

## **Klíčová slova**

atavismus, autoritarismus, dystopie, feminismus, komunita, konzervatismus, politika, neokonzervatismus

# Table of Contents

1. Theoretical Part	11
1.1 Introduction	11
1.2 Community in Never-Ending Fight with Modern Individualism	12
1.3 Transfer to Totalitarianism	14
1.4 Why “Neo”?	16
1.5 Politics of Literature	17
1.6 How Fiction Is Reality: Political Power of Art	18
1.7 What If the Novel Loses Its Relevance?	20
1.8 “The Political” in Narrow Sense	21
2. <i>The Stepford Wives</i> – Novel Analysis	24
2.1 Community	24
2.2 “Neo” in Neoconservatism	27
2.3 Satire Mixed with Horror	29
2.4 Politics of Literature	31
3. <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> – Novel Analysis	35
3.1 Building the Community	35
3.2 Community Preaching Alliance Divides Women	38
3.3 Bitter Satire	41
3.4 Politics of Literature	44
4. In Popular Culture	49
4.1 <i>The Stepford Wives</i> – Films Analysis	49
4.2 <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> – TV Series Analysis	52
5. Conclusion	58
Bibliography	61

# 1. Theoretical Part

## 1.1 Introduction

*The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin, first published in 1972, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, are both set in the United States and were written in a period between the “progressive 1960s” and the liberalisation era of the 1990s (marked by the beginning of the so called third-wave feminism). There was a lot to reflect after the enhancement of rights of women and sexual and ethnic minorities in the 1960s. Both novels embody a dystopia in which this progress has been reversed because certain parts of society saw it as a disintegrating force to their communities. Both novels depict an atavistic *neoconservative* community which has grave consequences for the novel's narrators (who are both women and hence belonging to the oppressed ones).

The aim of the thesis is to explore the neoconservative communities in these two dystopias and, by extension, to spotlight their political aspect from various perspectives. By concentrating on the depicted communities, the thesis determines how both novels express their politics, why they cannot be interpreted simply as their author's political agenda, and how their political content is shaped by the historical context.

The paper consists of four main chapters (excluding the conclusion) – the first one deals with theoretical texts and outlines the important concepts which are necessary for the later analysis of fiction. The second and the third chapter examine the two novels based on the previous theoretical background and the fourth evaluates their screen adaptations.

The first chapter presents the theoretical research on two most crucial themes of the thesis. First, there is an analysis of the status of a community derived from various relevant philosophical texts. As the research will show, examining communities already leads to the theme of politics, as communities often embody a counteraction against the alienating aspects of modernity. This counteraction essentially includes not only totalitarian tendencies, but also

conservative aspects, and one has to clarify why there is the need to talk about *neoconservatism*.

The second theme of the theoretical part, politics of literature, thus partially follows from the first one and considers various works concerning the (political) function of literature or art in general. This section includes several views on “the political” or “politics”, which is an issue that needs to be clarified before commenting on the political aspect of the chosen texts. Furthermore, this part incorporates a few remarks on the fact that the interpretations of any novel change over time, which means that there cannot be any inherent and permanent (political) interpretation of a novel – it all depends on the “audience” and the historical context.

The second and the third chapter of the thesis analyse the neoconservative communities portrayed in the two novels. They determine how these novels are constructed to be read as primarily political and how much the political aspect plays a part when discussing the novels.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the “legacy” of the two novels and focuses on their screen adaptations. The intention is to observe how the previous political message was transformed, developed, or altered in the adaptations and what effect it has on more general interpretations of both novels. Moreover, the way how any literary work is interpreted is bound to be determined by the manner in which its screen adaptations were made, which means the screen adaptations are highly relevant for the examination of the political aspect of literature.

The conclusion is supposed to deliver final observations on the politics of literature generally, derived from the previous analysis.

## **1.2 Community in Never-Ending Fight with Modern Individualism**

In his research on community Roberto Esposito chooses an approach very similar to the one which was adopted by Martin Heidegger. Esposito describes

community as “a modality of interhuman relations”<sup>1</sup> – an entity which emerges in the space between individuals. Esposito believes that community is neither merely a group of individuals, nor something which needs to be established. Community is here all the time, even if it is only in a deficient mode (for example a group of alienated individuals who are not able to maintain any rules). It can be dysfunctional, yet only to the extent to which it mirrors dysfunctional relationships among its members. One cannot, however, get rid of it.

Not being a mere number of individuals indicates certain positive characteristics – community is the polar opposite of nihilism and a response to the insufficiency of modernity’s individualistic-universalistic model.<sup>2</sup> It naturally stands against certain negative aspects which were brought by individualism and the subsequent alienation of the modern society, which has often been accompanied by the tendency to erase specificities typical of different communities (this tendency is universalistic). This piece of information is crucial, because both communities in the novels which the thesis focuses on justify their existence as a reaction to the irreparable flaws of modern society (their leaders insist so).

Esposito writes:

Every time that the excess of meaning of a community – occupied by its own collective essence – wanted to counter the vacuum of sense produced by the individualistic paradigm, the consequences were destructive: first with regard to external or internal enemies against which such a community in constructed, and second with regards to itself.<sup>3</sup>

Community, as a “place” where the meaning is constructed, Esposito adds,<sup>4</sup> can react to the lack of one collective meaning (the lack is caused by the diversity of

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 92.

<sup>2</sup> Esposito 135.

<sup>3</sup> Esposito 143.

<sup>4</sup> Esposito 91.

value systems and lifestyles of its members) by becoming totalitarian. How else would one make all the members adopt one collective identity?

Esposito draws attention to the construction of both external and internal enemies, which implies the persecution of such individuals and perhaps even their elimination. Moreover, there are the fatal consequences to the community itself – when the community wishes to “make itself stronger” by (violently) opposing the individualistic aspects of modern society, it will eventually end up being dysfunctional and detrimental even to its honoured members, which one can observe especially in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Both novels depict the inevitability of the never-ending struggle between the alienating modern individualism and community. This struggle defies the “Darwinian” notion of continual progress (a serious and complex item “offered at the superstition fair of our time,” Hannah Arendt wrote)<sup>5</sup> with the reference to the rights of an individual – there is always the risk of reversal. The reversal is especially frightening because it does not have to be just a temporary anomaly, only boosting the next stage of future progress.

Both novels suggest that one cannot rely on the fact that what has been gained can never be taken away, because the members of such community, who often struggle with the contemporary world, can always choose to give up their own rights (or rights of certain groups of people) to create one common narrative and a feeling of authenticity. In both novels, the authenticity and the common unifying narrative are both rooted in the adoration of the past.

### **1.3 Transfer to Totalitarianism**

The idea of creating one unifying meaning already explains why this experiment of getting rid of “the vacuum of sense produced by the individualistic paradigm” is a totalitarian one, Esposito implies.<sup>6</sup> In order to enforce one collective meaning, one needs an ideology which each member would adhere to and one also has to

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience on Violence, Thoughts on Politics, and Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1972) 131.

<sup>6</sup> Esposito 143.

get rid of the opposing voices (in the individualistic society, there will always be some), which is justified by the ideology.

This brings about implications which were precisely characterised in the works of Hannah Arendt, as she claims that plurality is the condition for political life and human action itself.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, getting rid of plurality prevents humans from truly taking action and hence restricts their freedom. Arendt's description of a totalitarian state (which is, to a great extent, achieved through destroying plurality) can be in many aspects applied to both of the characterised novels: Firstly, the totalitarian regime tries to sabotage intimate bonds,<sup>8</sup> be it among family members or friends (as both novels deal with the demotion of women's rights, it is primarily female friendships which have to be destroyed, along with the love between romantic partners).

Secondly, the conformity is no longer achieved through direct intimidation, but by making the ideological doctrine seem real, and fitting reality into its frame.<sup>9</sup> As one can see mostly in *The Stepford Wives*, non-conforming individuals like Joanna start to have a feeling that their own image of reality is distorted and biased (even though hers is, paradoxically, the most rational one), as they detect "proofs" of the new reality all around them. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the whole comfort that the Handmaids are offered is the idea that the future generations will consider the attack on women's rights and human intimacy as something normal and common. As a result, the community, which ideologically takes pride in its cohesiveness, becomes a prison for an individual, as there is no escape from the omni-present ideology and its consequences. It is worth noticing that both dystopias portray the community from a point of view of an oppressed individual and thus put stress on this fact.

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1973) 323.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 413.

## 1.4 Why “Neo”?

It has been already hinted that both communities in the novels derive their ideology from an idealised image of the past. They excuse the lack of individual rights and freedom by stating that the community has become more united, which makes people happier. This troublesome excuse might seem absurd to a human rights activist, but it is for sure nothing new or rare in the American context – when the unsuccessful Alabama’s Republican candidate Roy Moore was asked what is meant by “great” in Donald Trump’s sentence “Make America great again,” he responded that the country was great in the past when “families were united and strong” and when “we had a direction” (reference to the one meaning) – “even though we had slavery”.<sup>10</sup> This shows that both novels react to a certain discourse of American politics, where one common narrative and the feeling of being united takes precedence over rights of individuals who do not fit into such narrative.

The neoconservative community is, however, not only “neo” because it wishes to dispute the progress of gaining various kinds of rights, as it deems them detrimental to the community and to the happiness of its members – the novelty also lies in the fact that it often asserts itself through the usage of very modern (technological) means. No one wishes to “go back to the caves” – on the contrary, the achieved technological progress is very often ingeniously appropriated. This is exactly why such a community can succeed in establishing itself, otherwise it would not be able to fight against the technologically ever-evolving world.

One could, nonetheless, dispute all that has already been written as ideological as well. What if the narrative of civil and human rights, as some have suggested, is an ideological position in itself, and its universal assertion is only used to discredit conservative and traditional values? Or what if such values can be somehow combined with those rights, while they can help to get rid of the negative aspects of modern individualism? Here, one must admit, Esposito and

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<sup>10</sup> German Lopez, “Roy Moore: America ‘Was Great at the Time When Families Were United — Even Though We Had Slavery,’” *Vox*, Vox Media, 8 Dec. 2017 <<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/12/7/16748038/roy-moore-slavery-america-great>> 20 Feb. 2018.



both novelists have a certain presupposed view which they project in their works – the pushback against the modern individualism and the “excessive rights” (and, as a consequence, against the plurality of lifestyles and against social disintegration) always ends up as totalitarian. One might be able to prove their point by introducing certain examples, yet one must constantly bear in mind that they operate in a context where rights and freedoms *of individuals* are automatically respected as a universal value in itself (and, accordingly, everyone who tries to oppose them is portrayed in a negative light).

What is the connection between community and politics? Community, as Esposito claims, does not have to be political,<sup>11</sup> but the sphere of the political is established in the same “space” as community – among different individuals, who are together and with each other (*Politik handelt von Zusammen- und Miteinander-Sein von Verschiedenen*), as Hannah Arendt points out.<sup>12</sup> Community and politics always permeate one another.

## 1.5 Politics of Literature

How does politics enter literature? One should avoid the straightforward notion that authors have certain political positions, which they simply encrypt in their novels to make their message more powerful than if they wrote a statement. On the contrary, Jacques Rancière writes that politics has always been present in literature,

The politics of literature is not the same thing as the politics of writers. It does not concern the personal engagements of writers in the social or political struggles of their times. Neither does it concern the way writers represent social structures, political movements or various identities in their books. The

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<sup>11</sup> Esposito 92.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass 1950–1959*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: Piper, 1993) 9.

expression “politics of literature” implies that literature does politics simply by being literature.<sup>13</sup>

Rancière alleges that any literature is inherently “political”. He later adds that this is so because literature is able to convert “all the rubbish of ordinary life into poetic bodies and signs of history.”<sup>14</sup>

How could one interpret Rancière’s outlook on the politics of literature? Here Adorno and his similar viewpoint might be of great help, as he declares that even the subtlest work of art takes a stance on the empirical reality (artwork as the afterimage of empirical life)<sup>15</sup> – one might explain it with the banally sounding assertion that literature always describes or interprets reality in a certain way. Adorno sees a work of art as a Leibnizian monad<sup>16</sup> – each monad mirrors the world from a certain point of view and more or less correspondingly. *Taking a stance on the empirical reality*, commenting on the empirical reality implies the necessary politics of each work of literature about which Rancière was talking about – this is “the political” in the wider sense.

## **1.6 How Fiction Is Reality: Political Power of Art**

Niklas Luhmann holds a similar position by voicing that art participates in society as a functional system in the same way as law, science, or politics do.<sup>17</sup> There is one very significant detail there – art is not only a certain description or interpretation of reality, but it also becomes part of these other systems and can influence the reality (for instance by determining the actions of individuals). Nowhere else can it be seen as clearly as in the two analysed novels – as a form of political protest, various women dressed as the so called “Handmaids” (inspired by the red and white costumes used in the TV series) in order to fight for their

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) 3.

<sup>14</sup> Rancière 29.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002) 4.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno 5.

<sup>17</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 134.

reproductive rights or protest against sexism (for example in Texas<sup>18</sup> or even in Poland<sup>19</sup>).

By doing that they suggest that what is happening in society bears the same features as the fate of the Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and thus say, "Look at us, what you see in the TV series/the novel is happening right here, it is real." One might, naturally, dispute this comparison, especially if one feels differently about issues such as abortion, but the fact remains that this is a very prominent case of art becoming entangled into people's lives and politics. These protests have been given a whole new meaning by emphasising (in a powerfully emotional way) the supposedly totalitarian background of those who fight against the pro-choice stance. One is able to observe the immense political power of art, which can be both used well and misused.

There have been no protesters masked as robots to demonstrate in favour of women's rights (even though it would make sense), yet there are examples of literature taking root in linguistic reality in *The Stepford Wives* as well. A "Stepford wife" has become a slur describing a woman who is always obedient, does not think in an independent way, and whose primary focus is to clean or care for her husband and children.<sup>20</sup> (It is ironic that there is no slur named after the truth villains of this novel, Stepford husbands). The existence of this slur and perhaps even the existence of this novel and the subsequent adaptations can paradoxically give rise to the contempt that some feel towards selfless housewives. This shows that even if the author wished to advocate women's rights (which will be discussed later), readers have treated the novel (and its political aspect) as they wished.

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<sup>18</sup> Christine Hauser, "A Handmaid's Tale of Protest," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 30 June 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/handmaids-protests-abortion.html>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Stolworthy, "Donald Trump in Poland: Women Stage Handmaid's Tale Protest Against 'Sexist' US President's Visit," *The Independent*, Independent Digital News & Media, 7 July 2017 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/the-handmaids-tale-poland-donald-trump-visit-hulu-speech-a7828206.html>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>20</sup> "Stepford Wife," *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press, 2018 <<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/stepford-wife>> 20 May 2018.

One has to take into account the well-known thread that art might become a slave to the other systems, such as politics, and that one should, therefore, refuse any political ambitions of works of art. Luhmann indicates this concern but does not worry that it is valid.<sup>21</sup> The reason is, as has been already debated, that art involves politics *per se* – a fact which one can do nothing about but accept it. Even if a work of art is demonstratively apolitical (or its author insists so), this already means adopting a certain stance on politics. Art can, consequently, be used or misused by political interests, but there is always the risk that its politics will be read or interpreted in a very different way from the one intended by the “producer”, which is the reason why art cannot be easily “enslaved”. The paradoxical nature of the already explained slur “Stepford wife” is a perfect minor example of that.

The crucial argument is that in art (and it is, incidentally, the same characteristic which Arendt ascribes to a totalitarian state)<sup>22</sup> one cannot clearly distinguish between the “truth” and ideology, Adorno says.<sup>23</sup> This is where art may prove to be much more powerful than, for example, a political manifesto whose reader knows that he is being persuaded. Art, including fiction, presents its own reality which somehow mirrors or interprets the “real reality” (and, accordingly, lays claim to be the “truth”), but this interpretation is formed (intentionally or unknowingly) by the author’s own convictions, life experience and, naturally, by the time and place of the work’s creation.

## **1.7 What If the Novel Loses Its Relevance?**

Adorno also tries to answer one of the most important questions concerning the politics of art – its transience. Any work of art is dynamic and might tell something different in each era in which it is read or enjoyed.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, the problem is that many literary works which are read as political manifestos are perceived as a reaction against something which was happening immediately before or during their creation. As time goes by, the references to particular

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<sup>21</sup> Luhmann 137.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 413.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno 234.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno 254.

people and issues might be lost from the reader's common knowledge and the work might gain a new meaning.

Adorno adds that it is only natural that certain works of art may become mute, which signifies that the past provides us with a decreasing number of meaningful works of art.<sup>25</sup> There are certainly many inherent aspects of a work of fiction which do increase the chance for future generations to find pleasure in reading and re-interpreting it, yet it is crucial (which the author of the book cannot influence) how the future will evolve and how future generations will interpret various aspects of the book.

This concern is valid in case of both of the chosen novels. One can detect that they react to specific issues (e. g. the second-wave feminist concerns in *The Stepford Wives*, or the Reagan era in *The Handmaid's Tale*) which might become outdated and thus not understandable for the future reader, because the world has changed. Yet these novels still have the potential to offer something universal.

When one analyses the film or TV adaptations based on them, one has to notice that these adaptations often appropriate the novel for the time of their own creation, resulting in the necessary shift of the original interpretation. This interpretation of reality, as has already been mentioned, which keeps evolving, is what should be broadly understood under the politics of literature.

## 1.8 “The Political” in Narrow Sense

One could, nevertheless, interpret “the political” in a narrower sense – Foucault, for example, defines “the political” as the power of a state, which applies numerous and diverse strategies for achieving control over population.<sup>26</sup> This thesis focuses on books which are read and interpreted as political based on the Foucaultian definition (in *The Stepford Wives*, it is not a state, but an autonomous community), and they are clearly meant to criticize certain political values or enhance others.

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<sup>25</sup> Adorno 254.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 140.

On one level, this is apparent – one might quickly find out, for example, that Margaret Atwood criticises certain streams of Christianity as hypocritical<sup>27</sup> and that she promotes progressive values such as women’s rights.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, her novel, as will be discussed, has many more layers of meaning which enhance or even dispute a simple “progressivist” or “feminist” one. The same applies to *The Stepford Wives*, whose ambiguity of meaning will be examined later. Therefore, it depends very much on the reader and the current discourse in society.

As will the analysis of the film and TV adaptations of these two novels show, the “screen interpretations” can very much change the way how most critics and readers have perceived the “true interpretation” of the book. Not to mention the fact that they might even transcend or go against the original text.

Certain novels surely lead readers to political interpretations (in this narrower sense) more than others, and the fact that the chosen novels are read primarily politically is because they are both dystopias. Murphy alleges that a dystopia depicts an oppressive society and “provides a warning about the possibilities for a resurgence of such oppression.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the very important, obvious and first way to read such novels is to regard them as a warning against values and tendencies which they portray as negative.

However, one should, as has been already indicated, take into consideration both the fact that the novels may have other layers of meaning which may broaden or even dispute the “primary” political message and that – especially if the novel reacts to a specific situation – this message might be interpreted in different ways or even shifted. Primarily, there are two dystopias

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<sup>27</sup> Layton E. Williams, “Margaret Atwood on Christianity, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and What Faithful Activism Looks Like Today,” *Sojourners*, Sojourners, 25 Apr. 2017 <<https://sojo.net/articles/margaret-atwood-christianity-handmaid-s-tale-and-what-faithful-activism-looks-today>> 21 Feb. 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Maya Oppenheim, “Margaret Atwood: Feminism Is Not About Believing Women Are Always Right,” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News & Media, 18 July 2017 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-author-feminism-women-not-always-right-a7847316.html>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick D. Murphy, “Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 17.1 (1990): 31, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239969>> 18 Feb. 2018.

criticizing the features present in the societies which they depict, but they are, at the same times, two very complex works which have other possible options of (political) interpretation and whose political impact in society has been so widespread that the range of interpretations has become even wider.

Moreover, reading these novels primary politically in this narrow sense would rob them of some of their quality – for example, as Žižek points out,<sup>30</sup> the specificity of the female narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is designated by the frequent observations of one's own body and the floral symbolism. *The Stepford Wives* presents a very genuine combination of horror and satire and perhaps even a witty probe into the nature of human relationships, which does not necessary have to be read politically (in the narrow sense). Prior to the analysis of the chosen works one needs to realise that interpreting them entirely as a political statement might not only reduce and overlook some of their qualities, but it also conveys that writing fiction means producing political propaganda, only doing it in a more “creative” or sophist way. If this was the case, there would be no reason to read or write fiction other than as a means of indoctrination.

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<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 121-122.

## **2. *The Stepford Wives* – Novel Analysis**

Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* is a very provocative novel, but, in the end, not so much in what it conveys, but rather how. It can be read both as a slur denoting the impossibility of the real application of progressive values and as a mainstream feminist manifesto. Its paradox lies in the fact that the described community promotes conservative values by the employment of the most prominent aspects of modernity, such as higher education, intelligence and technology.

The novel adapts certain strategies used by both satire and horror: Joanna's Orwellian and horror-like experience depicted in a grotesque light impersonates the greatest fear of the American society in the 1970s – that they will never be able to get rid of the oppressive “traditional” values which pervaded the 1950s. Paradoxically, this would happen not because of some “uneducated bigots” – on the contrary, the progress might be reversed by those who brought us into modernity in the first place. The satire goes hand in hand with the horror and indicates that this whole thing is, in the end, simply too far-fetched to be really concerned.

### **2.1 Community**

Walter and Joanna's moving to Stepford is described and perceived by Joanna as an escape from “the dirty city”.<sup>31</sup> Stepford truly epitomises exactly the opposite of the negative stereotypes which one associates with the city – it is clean both literally and metaphorically. The tidy houses in which the wives are working constantly mirror the community with no social pathologies, such as crime, economic instability, or alcoholism. Family, as a sacred unit, is in the centre of everything – there is no divorce or extramarital sex (at least in Stepford itself, even though it is suggested that Walter might be having an affair with his secretary, which he dismisses, 92). Women are clean, beautiful and always neat, while men are happy.

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<sup>31</sup> Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972) 17. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.



The community is, naturally, characterised by its uniformity. All women are the same – they are busy doing housework, only talk about housework and do not have any other activity to do. Their husbands, however, are very similar to one another as well – most of them have jobs outside the city, they all seem to have the same world view, spend their evenings in the Men’s Association and do not have any other activities and interests.

Stepford might seem like a sort of utopia. This peaceful and calm uniformity is even strengthened by the fact that it oversteps racial boundaries and issues, which one can observe in the African-American characters of Ruthanne (a feminist writer) and her husband – Jane Eliot asserts that this change is going to happen to white women first and then to the African-American ones.<sup>32</sup> Even though one might object that this community does not correspond to one of Arendt’s features of the totalitarian regime, as it does not seem to wish to “conquer” the whole world with its agenda,<sup>33</sup> the racial openness surely refers to a certain aspect of universality which signifies that there might be a potential for the Stepford way of life to expand. One can even argue, that – even though the community wishes to come back to the old values – it includes certain progressive features.

Only men already know what will happen when they come to Stepford, which is suggested in the remark that it was Walter’s idea to move there (90), and by the fact that men moving to Stepford all have “problematic” wives (unwilling to have sex all the time, unwilling to do all the housework, or having their own ambitions). At first sight, though, one does not suppose that women are somehow abusively manipulated to conform to any standards. There is no Orwellian fear of isolation at the very beginning. Even though Joanna finds the wives boring, she supposes that they do all the housework of their own accord and even feels sorry for the husbands a little bit (19). Walter tells her that the men are supposedly willing to open their association for women (28, which is most probably a lie and

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot 53.

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 415.

one realises that only at the end of the novel) and when Joanna meets the men, they laugh at her jokes and listen to her ideas (41).

This kind of calmness and uniformity might appear soothing, especially to those who find it difficult to cope with the problems of the modern world (which is exactly what Esposito was suggesting), but for Joanna there is something boring about it. The aspect of boredom is mirrored by the fact that when both Bobby and Joanna look for a new home, they come across complaints that there is nothing happening in Stepford and that surely no active woman would go to live there (“It’s *dead* there,” 90). Nevertheless, the unity of worldview which characterises the community’s struggle against the modern pluralism and individualism has been achieved, and the novel simply proposes that when one encounters such a “traditional” utopia, there is always something terrible (murders of actual women, in this case) behind the nice picture.

The atmosphere of horror is being introduced slowly and gradually. Jane Eliot emphasises that there is something frightening and demonic about the omnipresent repetition.<sup>34</sup> Not only do the wives say the same things, but Joanna has a feeling of *déjà vu* when Bobby tells her that she is going to have a “honeymoon” weekend with her husband (94) – the same as Charmaine had, after which she changed so much. Joanna’s weekend is also coming soon towards the end of the book. Perhaps the both most frightening and satirical repetition is on the last page of the novel – when Joanna tells Ruthanne that she no longer wishes to take pictures: “Housework’s enough for me. I used to feel I had to have other interests, but I’m more at ease with myself now. I’m much happier too, and so is my family. That’s what really counts, isn’t it?” (157-158). This recalls the words of both Bobbie and Charmaine, who have already changed. The reader, furthermore, knows that the same thing is awaiting Ruthanne, who is going to have the weekend with her husband as well (159). The constant repetitions awake the same feeling which one has when watching the famous *déjà vu* in *The*

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Eliot, “Stepford U.S.A.: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time,” *Cultural Critique* 70 (2008): 42, Literature Resource Center  
<<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A187053705/LitRC?u=karlova&sid=LitRC&xid=3d445333>>  
17 Feb. 2018.

*Matrix*<sup>35</sup> – a cat makes the same move twice which means that the matrix has been altered and the agents are coming – this kind of déjà vu is often a symbol of danger.

## 2.2 “Neo” in Neoconservatism

The neo-conservatism of this community is well demonstrated in the existence of the Men’s Association. Joanna believes that it is a relic of the past which can be easily got rid of, but later finds out that the association is, in fact, just a few years old and definitely younger than the women’s association which was dissolved sometime after the establishment of the Men’s Association (125-126). This shows that the community is not simply *preserving* the “traditional values” – those have already been forsaken through the existence of the feminist group. The Stepford husbands have been trying to reverse this development by forcing their own image of values which can be deemed as conservative, especially because of its stress on traditional gender roles: Men are supposed to be the “breadwinners”, who, however, spend most of their free time in male-only company, while women’s role is – how Walter puts it in the end (113) – to look amazing and do housework (plus, which can be concluded from Charmaine’s story, to be willing to have sex on request).

One could argue that such image refers to the “traditional values”, yet there is something very modern about this world. The feeling of being monitored constantly which Joanna experiences (for example when talking to a policeman, who most probably spies on her, 63) is something typical of Orwellian dystopias, which generally deal with the modern world. It is also crucial to point out, as has been already debated, that the husbands have surprisingly progressive values concerning race and ethnicity – they do not wish to purport segregation; on the contrary, they want to end it. Moreover, not only the constant control, but also making women into robots is conditioned by modern technologies. Jane Eliot

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<sup>35</sup> *The Matrix*, dir., writ. Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, prod. John Silver, ed. Zach Staenberg, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1999, 78 min, 40 sec.

describes it as “dark futurity as symbolized by the men’s use of specialized knowledge gained from their high-tech jobs to build their robot wives.”<sup>36</sup>

The irony lies in the fact that Cobra, who most probably helped to build the robots, gained his know-how in a highly commercial sphere when inventing moving statues for Disneyland (129). Levin shows that the Stepford husbands are not unsuccessful men whose ego could not bear the thought of emancipated women and who would like to go back a few centuries ago and get rid of all the pathologies connected with the modern era – they are successful and educated (Ruthanne’s husband is the chairman of the sociology department at a university, 98) and they manage to fulfil their neoconservative fantasy only because they know how to use the most modern technologies.

There definitely is conservative ideology present – Walter, in the end, accuses Joanna of not trying enough to be beautiful and to clean (113), but this ideology is not used to make women conform to the standards of Stepford men – the only way to achieve this completely is through a robotic replacement. In this way, the community corresponds to some of the totalitarian aspects, especially regarding the sabotage of all intimate bonds explained in the theoretical part – Joanna loses any possibility of friendship and trust (after Bobbie is killed), as Diana T. Meyers notes,<sup>37</sup> and even though she lives in a community which seems to be open and free on the outside, she is unable to collect all the needed information soon enough and pass them along to Ruthanne. This makes her completely isolated like any other woman is in Stepford.

There are no genuine relationships based on love or mutual respect in Stepford, as the wives and the mothers are valued only as sex dolls/cleaners/cookers. This also confirms Esposito’s hypothesis mentioned in the theoretical part – the return to one single meaning and to authenticity is, in the end, detrimental not only to the ones who do not conform (women in this case), but also to the whole community, which is based on lies and dishonesty. As her

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<sup>36</sup> Eliot 41.

<sup>37</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Who’s There? Selfhood, Self-Regard, and Social Relations,” *Hypatia* 20.4 (2005): 208, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810896>> 16 Feb. 2018.

replacement is slowly approaching, what Joanna goes through is very similar to the main character in *1984* – she cannot trust her dearest, because all the nice behaviour from her husband and his friends and the whole idea of a second honeymoon weekend is a scam. She knows something very bad is going to happen but cannot prevent it in any way, as her escape is immediately foiled.

### 2.3 Satire Mixed with Horror

The book itself involves elements of both satire and horror, and they stem from the very same source, which can be symbolically summed up in the sentence from de Beauvoir's famous book *The Second Sex* quoted in the epigraph,

Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go. (5)

What if Levin sarcastically voices that the progress is simply not possible, because at least half of the population are willing to do anything (even murder) to oppose it? This is the greatest fear the novel conveys, which Jeanette Winterson observes as well,<sup>38</sup>

At the beginning of the women's movement, men and women feared a disaster of Stepford proportions: men would never cope with the new threat to their status, and women would be made to pay. Murdering and turning us into robots is the price of feminism.

Levin might have used satire to criticize progressive values by emphasising the fact that they are going to result in women being even more unhappy than before, and mockingly employing a quote from a book written by a famous feminist

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<sup>38</sup> Jeanette Winterson, "Living Dolls," *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Ltd, 19 July 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jul/19/gender.uk>> 19 Feb. 2018.

author to prove his point. Such interpretation would reveal complete cynicism of the novel, as it would suggest that the lives of female human beings are for male human beings less valuable than the freedom of being excluded from doing house chores.

This aspect of “not being sure” is definitely part of the discomforting heritage of the novel. I do, however, find more plausible to read the novel in the context of Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*: The satirist faces a troublesome situation (certain men find it hard to come to terms with the changes of the world in Levin’s case) where the people involved refuse to apply real solutions (like admitting discomfort or unhappiness, which Joanna’s husband avoids to do, and continues to wash the dishes towards the end, 105), and the satirist criticizes this inaction by coming up with his own absurd solution, which is completely simple, rational and economical, but somehow refuses to take into account basic values of humanity. This very satire might be the core of the “political message” of the novel and brings one back to the idea that satire very often relates to politics.

How does Levin build the satire? The already mentioned repetition might not be only a sign of discomfort, but also a one of satire, especially if one puts it in the context of Coda constructing moving statues of famous Disney characters – Stepford resembles a cheesy children’s show. One must often laugh when one sees the beautifully clothed robots who just repeat the same replicas over and over.

The ingenuity of the project is also sarcastically stressed by portraying how the men are happy with this situation, which even Joanna realises when she talks to a pharmacist, ridiculing his robotic wife,

She took the pen. “You have a lovely wife,” she said, signing the pad. “Pretty, helpful, submissive to her lord and master; you’re a lucky man.” She held the pen out to him.

He took it, pink-faced. “I know,” he said, looking downward.

“This town is full of lucky men,” she said. (133)

The same humour is used when Joanna is composing a mocking poem in her head about the robotic wives (86). Another example is a sentence told by Bobbie’s son – after the “change” of his mother, he says that he hopes that she will not be coming back to her “old self” (119) – who would want to deal with real people, if you can have their perfect versions who shut their mouth and do everything for you? How convenient!

## 2.4 Politics of Literature

In the end, what does the novel express? That extremely conservative values are potentially leading to inhumane treatment of other people? Tricia Pummill would most probably agree, as she likens the replacement of women with robots to “the Nazis’ annihilation of Jews in order to simulate Germany’s imagined past glory.”<sup>39</sup> Pummill puts stress on the Jewish origin of Ira Levin and argues that in order to restore the seemingly glorious past, Stepford men are willing to kill all the individuals who stand in their way and who do not conform to their image of such values.

This horror-like interpretation is definitely plausible. At first, it starts with slight paranoia – Joanna realizes that all Stepford women are the same and that the ones who are not soon become. She refuses to admit that the reality could be that horrible and blames herself for being paranoid (“Oh come on, girl, you’re getting nutty!” is what she tells herself, 64), which is later strengthened by her husband who wants to gaslight her into thinking that it is her who is “mad” (“I think you are being irrational and—a little hysterical,” 114). She tries to escape, but it is already too late. In the end, she is ironically killed by her own best friend, or rather a robot who looks like her. Are all the wives killed in the same way – not directly by the men but by the robots who resemble the wife’s former friend? Such murder would mark the symbolic end of female friendship and women’s power.

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<sup>39</sup> Tricia Pummill, “The Stepford Wives: a Jewish American Novel,” *Western Tributaries* 2 (2015): 1, Open Journal Systems  
<<http://journals.sfu.ca/wt/index.php/westertributaries/article/view/20>> 20 Feb. 2018.

The most disturbing aspect is the fact that having a certain gender (similar to the ethnic origin, which Pummill had in mind) is the determinant of one's own fate – Joanna cannot rely on love or a special relationship between her and her husband. It does not matter what they have lived through together or that they were once in love and that she trusts him completely almost towards the end. Diana T. Meyers points out that the men chose to dispose themselves of love,<sup>40</sup> and it seems to be a very Orwellian message that this community works based on very strict inhuman rules which cannot be bend by affection.

The credible interpretation derived from Pummill's one is that no woman at the time of the novel's creation would willingly become a cleaning-only submissive housewife. This might obviously be offensive to women who have chosen such a life, as it implies that such a woman does not have "any brains" or her own will. As most people at the time when the novel was published – and not only progressives or feminists – would find such an idealised version of a woman extreme, unrealistic a possibly even undesirable (hence the slur "Stepford wife," which designates a non-thinking figurine-line woman), one might suppose most of the public would probably agree that this is not the right way how women should live. This statement can be supported by the fact that Jane Eliot describes the novel as an "iconic popular feminist text of the decade,"<sup>41</sup> which became part of the mainstream culture to a great extent. This supports the claim that the "ideology" of the novel is in no way extremist.

It is, nevertheless, not entirely plausible to suggest that one should beware of any sign of preference of conservative values, because they are prone to lead to genocide. The problem with Stepford is that one does *not* see signs of such preference, as men hide them – both Walter and Joanna wash the dishes (13), he takes care of the children (42), tells her that he does not want her to change (64), and it seems that they have an active sexual life as well (26) – and if it is not great, the problem is unwillingness on his side (92). The last sentence of the novel is importantly the insincere "I don't mind" (159) pronounced by Ruthanne's

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<sup>40</sup> Meyers 208.

<sup>41</sup> Eliot 33.



husband when he promises that he will take the children to a restaurant, while the reader knows the husband minds to the extent that he is going to kill his wife.

What the novel criticizes is the *lack* of Walter's comments on how he feels about marriage. Instead of sorting things out with his wife, Walter finds a place where she could be killed and replaced by her perfect robotic version so that he does not have to put any effort. This lack of communication and sympathy is one of Joanna's flaws as well – when she sees Carol for the first time, she forgets all female solidarity, feels sorry for her husband, and thinks that it is no wonder that he is “taking advantage of such an asking-to-be-exploited patsy” (19). Moreover, it is only at the end of the book when Joanna realizes how distant she became from her husband (149): “When had it begun, her distrust of him, the feeling of nothingness between them? Whose fault was it?”

She seems to be a bit self-centred, which one sees when she casually mentions that Walter is always away, because he probably has a lot of work, but does not detect any problem behind it. Furthermore, she supposes that Walter is also a feminist (“And I'm interested in politics and in the Women's Liberation movement. Very much into that. And so is my husband,” 10). It is true that Walter criticizes the Men's Association (15, most probably lying to her) but he avoids any real action by claiming that he does not want to be seen as an “activist” (28) and Joanna never seems to question his beliefs over time as she and Walter become alienated.

It would be, nonetheless, an exaggeration to insist that women are complicit in this whole situation because men do not voice their critical opinions. If anything, the Stepford wives might be a bit naive in thinking that all the new values and privileges will be accepted gladly and voluntarily by those who held higher positions in the past. One should not fall into victim-blaming – it is, primarily, the Stepford husbands who seem to be successful, educated (possibly privileged men) and who, however, cannot overcome their own self-centredness and comfort, and instead of dealing with the situation, they resort to a drastic solution.

One has to understand that the town of Stepford is quite peculiar and most probably the only one of its kind, because others always refer to it as an extremely boring place, very different from the others (90) – also a little slur aimed at those “well-behaved communities” and narrow-minded provincial morality. The novel, therefore, does not declare that the current development is bound to trigger the neoconservative dystopia. It asserts that it will happen only if people, especially men, are unable to confront and discuss what bothers them or makes them anxious about the recent shift from the 50s-like conservative community. The novel is thus controversial in its Modest-Proposal-like form, but its “message” is, as has Eliot already indicated, quite applicable to the mainstream.

### **3. *The Handmaid's Tale* – Novel Analysis**

Atwood's novel experienced immense rise in popularity after the election of Donald Trump: "In February, the book overtook George Orwell's *1984* on the Amazon best-seller list."<sup>42</sup> This was primarily because of the television series whose atmosphere, as will be discussed later, was likened to the one after the United States presidential election in 2016. Nonetheless, the novel was written as a reaction to the Reagan era,<sup>43</sup> which (considering the influence of the fundamental evangelical Christians on the US politics) denotes very specific circumstances. This poses a question already discussed in the context of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* – to what extent the novel can outlive these conditions. I will argue that it can, but one must examine the aspects of the novel which enhance or dispute the simple reading ("evil conservatives" vs. "great progressives," who are oppressed by them). Atwood's novel very carefully paints the universal dynamics of power and the continuity among different forms of (sometimes) unconscious oppression.

#### **3.1 Building the Community**

The community in *The Handmaid's Tale* was formed as a solution to very grave issues which society was not able to handle – the rise of STDs and the ecological catastrophe led to infertility, which then resulted in global instability and war. The community relies on the "return to traditional values," as Aunt Lydia alleges.<sup>44</sup> The Republic of Gilead designed its own path from this horrible state which people partly brought upon themselves and introduced its own version of Christian republic, which, nevertheless, was pushed on many people by force. It slowly started by cutting freedoms, which its representatives justified as a response to the thread of Islamic terrorism (162). The attack on modernity is

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Jones, "*The Handmaid's Tale* Is a Warning to Conservative Women," *The New Republic*, The New Republic, 20 Apr. 2017 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/141674/handmaids-tale-hulu-warning-conservative-women>> 21 Feb. 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Nussbaum, "A Cunning Adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*," *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast, 22 May 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/22/a-cunning-adaptation-of-the-handmaids-tale>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) 7. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

characterized as a replacement of “freedom to” (do things one wants to do) by “freedom from” (not doing unpleasant activities or experiencing danger or misery), which are the words used by Aunt Lydia (24). This is in accordance with the theoretical beginning – the community was strengthened as an answer to modern-world problems, and this process has resulted in totalitarianism.

This community relies on a strict hierarchy, and members of both genders have fixed “class” positions – with regard to men, their ethnic origin, sexual orientation and their compatibility with the new system is the decisive factor. Unlike women, however, men can enhance their status if they show themselves competent and loyal (22). For women, the first important factor is their fertility, and, as a consequence, they are reduced to their biological “ability” to have children: “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices,” says the narrator (128). If a woman is infertile, it depends on other factors – ethnic origin, age, previous class position, her sexual orientation, or her allegiance to the regime.

This desire for hierarchy, naturally, shows extreme obsession with order and “cleanliness” (a characteristic hugely important in *The Stepford Wives* as well), which stands in contrast to the previous pluralist and multicultural society. The new “Christian” community relying on a few passages from the Old Testament embraces the values of white supremacy – in the novel, “Children of Ham” (African-Americans) are sent to the colonies (79), which equals death. The same applies to all who do not correspond to the new standards (with the exception of fertile women) – feminists, lesbians, gays, Christians who have a different view on religion than Gilead, or simply those protesting the regime. Both feminists and lesbians are labelled as “Unwomen”, which confirms the community’s attempts to simply negate the existence of all those who do not comply with the new rules. Only Jews are offered to resettle to Israel (188). Those who (had to) stay have been brainwashed by propaganda or made to obey by the threat of the colonies (10).

The community is obsessed with rituals, for instance the one before procreation (“Communion”) or during the birth of a new baby, because the rituals

are supposed to justify the fixed order (in this case the “use” of the Handmaids). “Give me children, or else I die,” (57) has a literary meaning for June (otherwise she would be sent to the colonies) and, as a sentence from the Old Testament said by Rachel (also used in the epigraph), whose husband impregnated Rachel’s favourite maid to fulfil her wish, it forms the symbolic motto of the whole regime, which struggles with infertility. The ritual can also serve as a justification for simply barbaric practises, like rape (one should characterise it as rape if the only other option is death in the colonies) or letting the Handmaids kill a man falsely convicted of rape with their bare hands (“Participation,” probably a connection of “participation” – so that everyone is complicit – and “execution”, 261).

How the community functions corresponds to some of the totalitarian characteristics described by Arendt – this ritualization resembles the “secret societies”.<sup>45</sup> Only a few (in this case men) in the centre know what is behind those rituals and how the regime truly operates and was installed (and, according to Arendt, they themselves do not believe the propaganda they are spreading, that is only for the sympathizers)<sup>46</sup> – for example the arrangement of the coup (289), the brothel which plays an important role in the state’s diplomacy (“it stimulates trade,” says the Commander, 223), or the invention of the institute of “Handmaids” as forced surrogate mothers. These few men are surrounded by a much larger group of people who agree with the propaganda – the Wives, the Econowives and their husbands (poor people who are loyal enough to the regime to be allowed a family), the Angels (guards), the Aunts (who “educate” the Handmaids) and also some of the Handmaids and the Marthas (servants).

The strict rules include everyone – even the most powerful husbands could be destroyed if they are accused of “liberal” tendencies (which happens to one of the regime’s “fathers”, Waterford, 291) – and cover almost any thinkable part of both public and private life. The Commander is supposed to knock before he enters “Serena’s territory” (81) and the Handmaids are not allowed to look a man straight in the eyes (21). All these rules make it easier to spot any illegal or

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<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 377.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 383.

undesirable activity, which, as has been mentioned when analysing *The Stepford Wives*, indicates that Gilead is also willing to introduce certain aspects of the most modern times. This is enhanced by the presence of the Eyes in the private sphere (the omnipresent surveillance is a typical dystopian feature, Ketterer states)<sup>47</sup> and the outside is constantly monitored by men with automatic guns (166) – a very “modern” aspect which might be seen in many big cities all over the world, including Europe. It seems that the regime is afraid to rely solely on its propaganda.

### **3.2 Community Preaching Alliance Divides Women**

It is – primarily – the Handmaids who need to be closely monitored, as they are most drastically forced to do something against their will. The Wives (as the privileged ones, who often helped to build the regime) and the Aunts (as the indoctrinators of the Handmaids) probably believe in the new regime, and the Marthas have to fight for their place in the community, which disposes itself of older women (144). Only the Handmaids are the “exclusive goods” (who are at the risk of committing suicide, 8), which means that even the very defiant ones were taken into this community. The relationships between women are perhaps the most intriguing ones, because they are based on a great paradox – the solidarity among women from different “castes” is broken as they are pushed against one another, but there is an entirely new and different kind of very “traditional” female solidarity which partly fails and was only meant to be, but also functions in a way.

The Marthas often loathe the Handmaids, because they hate the fact that they have a better position than them solely based on their fertility, “Rita ones said to Cora that she wouldn’t *debase* herself like that” (10). Rita, a Martha, plays with the notion that the Handmaids have a choice (go to the colonies and die) which reveals her utter lack of sympathy and compassion. This lack was, nevertheless, intended by the rulers of the community – the narrator discloses that the Marthas are not supposed to “fraternize” with the Handmaids (11) and she

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<sup>47</sup> David Ketterer, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia,” *Science Fiction Studies* 16.2 (1989): 211, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239936>> 27 Feb. 2018.

also deems it undesirable to tempt the other Martha, Cora, into friendship (61), as if it could supposedly endanger Cora's position. The relationship between the Wives and the Marthas is unknown, although the Wives probably treat them as mere servants who are replaceable (which one can see when a Martha is shot by accident and it is only the other Marthas who truly care, 20).

The Wives are the ones who despise the Handmaids the most – in the society where the primary role of a woman is to bear children, infertility means huge trauma, which is constantly reminded by the fertile Handmaid who has a (forced) sexual intercourse with the husband. One can observe an element of irony when the Rachel-quote is constantly being brought up as an example and an ideal, while no-one is truly happy about it. The “Econowives” hate the Handmaids even more, as they envy them their good standards of living (like fine food) and even spit in their direction (42). Women have an inferior position in Gilead and their protest is prevented by dividing them into fixed groups which each envies the other something. This is intensified by the erupting jealousy when one of the women gets pregnant, which sometimes even results in murder (26). Moreover, women are the ones who should condemn each other for past “failings”, such as rape – the Handmaids have to repeat “her fault!” in the asylum after Janine describes how she was gang-raped (67).

The regime, nonetheless, truly strives to build a new kind of female community, which is suggested by Aunt Lydia, as she speaks about the united women in future, “The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them. [...] There can be bonds of real affection [...]” (152). For obvious reasons shown in the previous paragraphs, such a vision cannot become real (hence the inclusion of this monologue sounds sarcastic), as women are intentionally alienated one from another. One might notice certain aspects of solidarity between the Handmaids, even towards Janine whom they try to support after her childbirth (119) and whom they otherwise do not like, but that might be explained by the fact that they are all in an extremely difficult position, condemned by others, and it is only them who can understand one another.

There is, however, a certain level on which one can find a female communitarian aspect – June is pushed to the very basic female solidarity by her boredom and isolated situation:

Today [...] I would like to stay here, in the kitchen. Cora might come in, from somewhere else in the house, carrying her bottle of lemon oil and her duster, and Rita would make coffee [...] and we would sit at Rita's kitchen table [...] and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries. [...] I know what you mean, we'd say. [...] How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts. (10, 11)

June hints that this happens out of necessity, but one could also guess that the women have discovered something which they had lost before. This might be one of the achievements of the community fighting against the alienating aspects of modern life, where there was no time and place for such moments. In their previous lives, women were so focused not necessarily on their careers, but on the consumerist lifestyle, preoccupied with the quick tempo of living and with men that this was not possible. Aspects like these problematize the black-and-white reading of Atwood's novel and partly justify the struggle of the community with modern-day alienation, which Esposito was indicating.

It is paradoxical that such strictly-organised community can work only because many of its members systematically break the rules. The Handmaids are regularly impregnated by the doctors (202) or other men like Nick (which is even organised by Serena, who suggests that many Handmaids do that, 193) and the



diplomacy of the country can properly work only when arranging a brothel (223), which is obviously against the official laws, but somehow still part of the system (as they offer there a place to same women who are “unchangeable”, but whom they would not send to the colonies, like Moira).

“Everyone is human, you can’t beat nature, men need variety” (222), declares the Commander when talking about the brothel, by which he admits that the rules of the regime which he himself helped to create are impossible to adhere to and confirms Arendt’s supposition that the leaders of totalitarian states do not themselves believe in the propaganda that they are spreading. The Commanders feel absolutely no remorse in breaking these rules, which emphasises the hypocrisy of evangelical Christian fundamentalists (who are, as Hammer points out,<sup>48</sup> clearly the “target” of the novel) who want to control others with their strict rules but do not want to abide by them themselves. They promise women “freedom from” (sexual abuse, having to make a living, etc.), yet still force them to become heavily working servants or prostitutes or to have intercourse with the Commanders as the Handmaids.

### **3.3 Bitter Satire**

It is easy to interpret the novel in the way that the pre-Gilead regime was great and free, after that came a catastrophe led by extremely conservative evangelical Christians, and then society was free again. Atwood’s novel itself, nonetheless, disputes such reading by the means of satire, which throws a completely different light on the whole issue. The most eye-catching element of satire in general are the puns, like the name of “Serena Joy”, who is most of the time angry, sad and frustrated.

First, it is important to analyse the connection with the previous “free world”. As one listens to Offred’s story, one has to acknowledge that it is ironically not as different as her previous life, especially regarding her

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<sup>48</sup> Stephanie Barbe Hammer, “The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Modern Language Studies* 20.2 (1990): 40, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194826>> 18 Feb. 2018.

relationships, as Hammer claims.<sup>49</sup> Yes, she was able to go out as she wished, wear what she wanted and have her own money, but, in the end, she tied her fate with a married man, whose wife also did not have (and perhaps could not have?) children, and obeyed him unconditionally. Luke is a very troublesome character, who sometimes has sexist remarks (laughing that women are incapable of abstract thought, even though June excuses it as a joke, 115), and who does not seem to care at all when his wife is stripped off her freedom and her money transferred to him, while she has to stay home and just cook (168). June's life with Luke and her relationship with the Commander is mirrored by the story June mentions that she saw on TV when she was small – about a mistress of a famous Nazi officer: “He was not a monster, to her. [...] The instinct to soothe, to make it better” (137-138). She also chose to ignore the bad side because she “loved” him, and, in this way, is morally complicit. What if, as Hammer suggests,<sup>50</sup> June's story is not reliable, and she sugar-coats the image of Luke in her memories, when he – in fact – has the same traits as the Commander (which is what Miner asserts)?<sup>51</sup>

Even June's possible liberation (although one does not know for sure if there was one) was not achieved by her own actions and abilities, but solely based on the fact that she slept with Nick and carried his child. Her supposed moment of liberation from the regime which values women according to their fertility was achieved solely by means of her fertility. Furthermore, her affair with Nick left her in a state of relative satisfaction, in which she did not desire at all to join the resistance, as Miner accuses her of.<sup>52</sup> “I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. That must have been what the settlers' wives thought, and women who survived wars, if they still had a man. Humanity is so adaptable [...],” contains a great deal of irony and means that “having a man” is more important to June than freedom and rights. As a result, she validates some of the presuppositions of the

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<sup>49</sup> Hammer 43.

<sup>50</sup> Hammer 43.

<sup>51</sup> Madonne Miner, “‘Trust Me’: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.2 (1991): 155, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/441844>> 15 Feb. 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Miner 162.

Gilead regime (that women want primarily safety, not freedom, and that they will get used to the new state of affairs).

The most bitterly satirical part is, however, the ending. Gilead belongs to the past and the reader does not know what circumstances accompanied its downfall. Here we are again at the academic conference, with several female members and with ethnically much more diverse group (judging by their names, as Ketterer hints)<sup>53</sup> and we still have to listen to the same old sexist jokes, “We know that this city was a prominent way-station on what on what our author refers to as ‘The Underground Femaleroad’, since dubbed by some of our historical wags ‘The Underground Frailroad’ [...]” (283).

This is not the only indication that equality has not been achieved – the most powerful proof is that the author of the previous story is disrespected and disregarded, as Bergmann believes.<sup>54</sup> The Professor does not care how women felt under the regime, he only wants facts about the powerful men who founded it. He belittles June’s story with irony (“This item – I hesitate to use the word *document* [...]” (283)), as Bergmann mentions.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he erases her as a person and thus shows his ignorance when he complains that she did not even give us her name (287). Yet this is clearly not true – a careful reader notices that at the beginning of the book, the narrator enumerates the names of the whole group of women and throughout the rest of the book (Janine, 26, Moira, 35, Dolores, 68, Alma, 87) the reader hears about all of them except one – June. The Professor basically perpetuates the previous disregard for half of the population. He wants to get rid of the “female stuff” – not only does he have no sympathy, but this point is also not scientifically relevant for him at all – and focus just on the high-ranked men of the regime. So, implies the book ironically, is this what we have called for?

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<sup>53</sup> Ketterer 212.

<sup>54</sup> Harriet F. Bergmann, “‘Teaching Them to Read’: A Fishing Expedition in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *College English* 51.8 (1989): 583, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/378090>> 16 Feb. 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Bergmann 583.

### 3.4 Politics of Literature

The “political message” of the novel might be summed up by one of its epigraphs: “In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones.” If you find yourself in a difficult situation (such as infertility or being overwhelmed and depressed by the modern forms of alienation), you will simply not resort to a solution which is completely illogical, inhumane and painful in its consequences (if one is thirsty and hungry in the desert, eating stones surely will not help and only make it worse). It is no coincidence that the second epigraph is from Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, as it conveys the same advice as the Sufi proverb, alludes to the element of satire, and is relevant to both of the analysed novels.

Slavoj Žižek claims that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not a postmodern novel and it would be one only if it showed Offred or women generally as complicit in the whole regime.<sup>56</sup> It is not the task of the thesis to determine this aspect, but one definitely has to denote that Žižek is not completely right with the complicity. In no way should one suggest that June or other women somehow deserve what is happening to them, yet the problem is that June, albeit being a victim, not only accepts her passive role, but she has always had one. Her mother was one of those who fought for the rights of women, yet June finds her opinions a bit annoying and not very relevant (114-115). She, of course, feels horrible after she is deprived of those rights (171), but when there is an option to fight back, her husband tells her not to officially protest and she obeys (169).

June was offered to play an active role in the resistance, but she refused as she was happy that she has found another man, Nick, as has been debated. Various groups should have their rights even if they do not apply them actively, yet the reader is a bit frustrated with June, especially when one realizes that rights were often not given freely and willingly from the hands of the privileged but had to be fought. The novel implies that one has to fight not only for the new rights, but also to maintain the gained ones, as they can always be endangered. This is probably the true “political message” (in the narrow sense) of the novel.

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<sup>56</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 122.

One is able to see that not all values which stand in opposition to the Gilead regime are praised as wonderful. As June and her companion, for example, watch the Japanese tourists, June interprets their revealing clothes as a sign of freedom (27), mistaking western fashion for feminine liberation, as Hammer puts it.<sup>57</sup> One can notice this once more when June must wear a glittering dress and overdone make-up to go to a brothel. She does not like it, feels objectified when the other men are “checking” her (221), and she remarks that she did not use to wear such clothes (216). As the Commander wants to sleep with her, which happens in the same hotel where she used to meet with Luke when he cheated on his wife (235), the old conventions are coming back, and one cannot help but think that there was already something deeply wrong with the pre-Gilead regime.

This scene symbolises the ongoing battle over the interpretation of the already defined issue of (dis)continuity of the three regimes, which mirrors a very important aspect concerning the politics of this novel. Murphy complains that Ketterer stresses the discontinuity and praises both pre-Gilead and post-Gilead regime.<sup>58</sup> This would mean that the Gilead regime was just an anomaly and not the extension of something which is happening in the current society and might be going on in the future.

The already discussed similarities in June’s life before and after the beginning of Gilead favour the continuity reading. One should definitely not relativize her story and claim that women in the West are oppressed to the same extent as women in Gilead, but these similarities certainly have their meaning. What they denote is the same as the moral which, according to Žižek, one should take from reading Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment*: The fundamental lesson of this work is still relevant today, as issues like neoracisms and fundamentalisms “can in no way be dismissed as simple regressive phenomena, as remainders of the past that will simply vanish when individuals assume the full freedom and responsibility imposed on them by the second

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<sup>57</sup> Hammer 44.

<sup>58</sup> Murphy 32.

modernity.”<sup>59</sup> This can be applied to the regimes which heavily discriminate against women or people with certain ethnicity or sexual orientation and which gain their legitimacy from the authority of not only traditional values, but also old prejudice. The image of an unbreakable progress is an illusion, as the progress brings about many problems and the community frequently tries to solve them by fighting against the progress itself (which is the stone-eating non-functioning solution).

The new regime characterised by the conservative pushback can always feed its propaganda by highlighting the problems of the current state of affairs – for example the infertility partially caused by STDs, the fact that certain people cannot find a partner (the Commander talks about that, 205), or the danger women feel in the public space (23). Stressing only “freedom from” (those issues) brings the characters back to the past where none of these values which we deem self-evident existed.

Murphy writes that the novel allows certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humaneness, while describing the novel as having a pseudo-documentary framing.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, this kind of a documentary story is very subjective, intimate and emotional, which stresses the whole message, “do not let this happen, look for the signs which might lead to such a state of affairs”. Here, however, the novel comes across one of the problems which many other openly political works of fiction face – what if the state which it describes is completely unrealistic and the author, therefore, tries to manipulate us to share her values through demonizing the opposite ones by painting them as leading to a totalitarian regime? Especially the already depicted continuity of the three regimes includes implicit critique of conservative values, and one can also perceive the critique of fundamentalist evangelical Christians. Is this critique credible? Does the novel fabricate the danger?

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<sup>59</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008) 359.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy 26.

One might observe certain limitations of the novel when analysing this issue – it is undeniably connected with the very particular era which it criticizes – the presidency of Ronald Reagan, as has been mentioned multiple times. If one reads the essays by Gore Vidal, one can completely understand the atmosphere in which *The Handmaid's Tale* was written. Vidal describes how the threat of a nuclear war was widely interpreted through the Old Testament (which is also from where Gilead finds its primary source of ideology, though it censors it heavily), in a way that the beginning of the nuclear war is synonymous with the Day of Judgment, which means that the war cannot be avoided for example diplomatically because it was destined to happen.<sup>61</sup> When they asked the president Ronald Reagan about it, part of his answer involved interpreting the Soviet-American conflict through *Ezekiel* – according to Reagan, trying to make some demilitarizing deal with the Soviet Union would equal letting Gog win, who is the leader of “all of the other powers of darkness” (as the Soviet Union was an atheistic country).<sup>62</sup>

This shows that the policies of the United States (one of the world powers) were at least partly influenced by a very particular group of fundamental Christians to whom the President was close. One might recognise the link between the Reagan era and what Atwood was writing about – some of the features of Gilead might seem extreme and too far-fetched for many readers, but there are clear aspects of inspiration which she took from the actual political atmosphere in America and magnified. Naturally, Atwood sought inspiration in the American history as well – one could spot a critique of the same victimization and perhaps even fetishization of female sexuality (marked by the need to wear scarlet items of clothes) in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, which draws attention to the repressive customs of the Puritans.

Other kinds of inspiration can be found in Islamic militarism, biblical patriarchy of the Middle Ages, or Hindu caste system, Hammer alleges<sup>63</sup> – all these regimes stand on the opposite end of the progressive and liberal values. This

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<sup>61</sup> Gore Vidal, *Armageddon? Essays 1983-1987* (London: Deutsch, 1987) 100.

<sup>62</sup> Vidal 100.

<sup>63</sup> Hammer 45.

is where the plausible criticism of credibility lies – Atwood mixed too many features of various religiously fundamental regimes, both from the past and around the world, and the result might seem a little bit dubious and contradictory (for example the fact that the regime should be primarily in opposition to Islamic fundamentalism yet uses its methods – like the “Particicution” – which have no place in the tradition of evangelical Christian fundamentalism).

The perspective of the novel is politically or value-wise conditioned – when one belongs to evangelical Christians, which many people in the United States do, one might not find it absurd that the President decides its military strategy (at least outwardly) based on the Old Testament. Certain groups might claim that this aspect of “freedom from” has been hugely underestimated. One should, nonetheless, understand that this exclusion of certain people who would find the novel insulting to their values is a necessary feature of dystopia – one always criticizes the tendencies that are present in one’s society and that one deems dangerous, which means that there must be people who identify with them.



## 4. In Popular Culture

One must admit that certain aspects will always be lost when converting a work of literature into its screen adaptation, while new ones might be gained. The point is – to what extent? A screen adaptation does not have to be completely faithful to become a good film or a TV series, yet it is important not to avoid the complex questions which are asked in the novel, even though their form might be changed. Such avoidance, paradoxically, often happens when the political aspect of the novel is stressed too much and simplified to please the viewer.

This is frequently the “curse” of the works of fiction which are read primarily politically in the narrow sense – the adaptation makes them famous, but the reader might project the simplistic image of the adaptation onto the novel as well. Therefore, the novel might become a living argument in various sorts of bipartisan political discussions, but its political message in both narrower and wider sense (the depiction of human relationships and behaviour, for example) is lost.

### 4.1 *The Stepford Wives* – Films Analysis

The most remarkable fact about the old adaptation is that it was despised by the feminists, although it aspired to be a feminist film, Eliot comments.<sup>64</sup> The film visibly tried much more than the novel – unlike in the novel, it is suggested in the beginning that Joanna did not want to move to Stepford and Walter decided for both of them, which displays him as a selfish manipulator:

Why don't you ever once just tell me the truth? You pretend we decide things together, but it's always you, what you want. You asked me if I wanted to move out here and I found you'd already been

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<sup>64</sup> Eliot 35.

looking at a house. You asked me if I liked this place  
and I found you'd already made a down payment.<sup>65</sup>

Walter is painted from the beginning as someone who does not respect his wife at all, at the end of the film he even uses physical force.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Joanna is killed not by Bobbie, but by her “new self”,<sup>67</sup> which stresses the oppressive power of patriarchy where real women are “killed” by the standards which are forced upon them (be it spotless beauty or submissiveness).

The film, although it preferred the horror perspective, as satire could “degrade” the severity of the issue, most probably angered many feminists because it still preserved the basic dilemma of the novel – is women’s emancipation impossible because men simply wish the conservative community to continue existing no matter what it costs? Posing this very uncomfortable question – which was, however, valid and important to ask – might have been triggering. It is crucial that filming the same ideas which were presented in Levin’s book caused much greater controversy than the work of fiction itself. Incidentally, the satire is deeply missed, because avoiding satire erases the ambivalence, due to which the novel was so staggering.

A more crucial shift of meaning happens in the second film with Nicole Kidman. Winterson concludes that the primary question of the novel and the first film has been overcome (as time has proven that men would allow women to emancipate themselves) and that the new film, which clearly favours satire over horror, only deals with some of the minor problems, for example the difficulty to coordinate a woman’s career, childcare and house chores.<sup>68</sup> My own “reading” of the film was very different and certainly not in accordance with the opinion that the film is somehow more progressive.

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<sup>65</sup> *The Stepford Wives*, dir. Bryan Forbes, prod. Edgar J. Scherick, ed. Timothy Gee, Palomar Pictures, 1975, 15 min.

<sup>66</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (1975 film), 94 min.

<sup>67</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (1975 film), 110 min.

<sup>68</sup> Winterson.

“Packaged as a comedy,” as Jane Eliot writes,<sup>69</sup> means that the film tries to sugar-coat the original premise that men are willing to kill to preserve their traditional community. The film depicts the “poor men” whose wives do not have sex with them because they are so obsessed with their own careers. “You were so busy that we haven’t made love over a year,” says Walter,<sup>70</sup> who, in the end, is a decent man who decides not to change his wife, but he is the only one in the community. These male characters are almost “driven” into changing their wives, yet the change is not permanent, which makes the whole attempt look less serious.

The repentance of the previous wives (actually robots) who regret that they have not been meek, beautiful and caring enough is absurd and not made by genuine people, but in the film it becomes sincere, which transforms the whole question of emancipation into the following problem: the emancipation might have actually been overdone and not what both men *and women* wanted in the first place. This is crowned by the fact that the leader of the whole conspiracy and the one who wants the men to “control their wives”<sup>71</sup> is a woman who was a top brain-surgeon and genetic engineer.<sup>72</sup> She later became disillusioned (does this mean that women in science cannot be happy?) and realized that the good old conservative community was the best solution anyway, even against the will of women. When Joanna asks, “How could you do that to us?”,<sup>73</sup> it is implied that this woman is solely responsible for the whole plot, and not the husbands who were happy to have blond robotic wives whom they could control with a driver. It is, in the end, the women’s fault on two levels, which is the same view that the Commander in *The Handmaid’s Tale* expresses when talking about the severe rules of Gilead, as Hammer notices.<sup>74</sup>

Such a message is vastly distant from the one of the novel, as it ignores the horror aspect, the complicated dilemmas and the seriousness of the questions

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<sup>69</sup> Eliot 54.

<sup>70</sup> *The Stepford Wives*, dir. Frank Oz, prod. Scott Rudin, ed. Jay Rabinowitz, DeLine Pictures, 2004, 39 min, 44 sec.

<sup>71</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (2004 film), 100 min.

<sup>72</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (2004 film), 107 min, 30 sec.

<sup>73</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (2004 film), 107 min, 20 sec.

<sup>74</sup> Hammer 40.

posed. This idea is also very patronising and goes against the basic logic of the previous book (where women wanted to be independent and active) – women who are emancipated will become unhappy, because that is not what women truly want, and will themselves return to somewhere between the traditional way of life and the “over-emancipated” state. Men do not pose any danger, even though they are punished in the end – the husbands are forced to go shopping and the viewer sees them complaining that their wives will “kill them” if they bring something wrong.<sup>75</sup> Certain viewers might suggest that this balances or compensates the previous “harm” done to women, but not in a very good way, as it perpetuates the conservative gender stereotypes (that men are completely useless when they have to do tasks traditionally done by women).

## **4.2 *The Handmaid’s Tale* – TV Series Analysis**

I will focus on the TV series (and not on the 1990 film adaptation), which was watched primarily politically and was the reason that re-started the popularity of the novel. There is a lot to cover. The series diverts from the novel in many ways, which has very serious consequences for the political message. First, the novel is set in present-day America – before the establishment of Gilead, the characters have iPhones,<sup>76</sup> and use Uber<sup>77</sup> and Tinder.<sup>78</sup> Along with the most up-to-date music, the viewer is necessarily made to identify with the characters.

Yet the biggest change lies in the character of June. She is the one who does not want to put up with unjust things easily, for example when she wants an explanation why she and all her female colleagues are dismissed from work.<sup>79</sup> She is able to defy Aunt Lydia by quoting the Bible and risking physical violence<sup>80</sup> and is the active one who tries to talk Moira into joining the resistance as well,<sup>81</sup> while her relationship with both the Commander and Nick is much more

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<sup>75</sup> *The Stepford Wives* (2004 film), 113 min, 8 sec.

<sup>76</sup> “Offred” (episode 1), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, creat. Bruce Miller, ex. prod. Bruce Miller, Warren Littlefield, Reed Morano, Daniel Wilson, Fran Sears, and Ilene Chaiken, prod. Margaret Atwood and Elizabeth Moss, Hulu, 2017, 48 min, 15 sec.

<sup>77</sup> “Offred” (episode 1), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 48 min, 25 sec.

<sup>78</sup> “Faithful” (episode 5), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 5 min.

<sup>79</sup> “Late” (episode 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 6 min, 12 sec.

<sup>80</sup> “Late” (episode 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 31 min, 20 sec.

<sup>81</sup> “The Bridge” (episode 9), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 31 min, 15 sec.

balanced, as she gets from them what *she* wants (she is having sex with Nick, but this relationship does not blind her, as she is still part of the resistance).

The viewer experiences a very significant moment when June joins the pre-Gilead protests with Moira,<sup>82</sup> even though there are shootings later. Luke is not there, but there is no indication that she needs his approval to be involved. These scenes have a clear political drive – be active, do not put up with things (like the novel June did), go and join the protest if you feel that your rights are being attacked.

This is symbolised and enhanced by moments such as the ending of the fourth episode, when June goes out being bruised (which is mixed with her memories from the Red Centre, where other Handmaids help her after she was tortured), and she says proudly, “We are Handmaids. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches.”<sup>83</sup> This is what viewers want and what they enjoy, and they were not able to get this from the novel. There is, however, a question if such a gesture is not a little bit “cheap”.

This moment is preceded by one very powerful feature, which is again not in the novel – the presence of very strong female solidarity. When June was tortured after her escape attempt,<sup>84</sup> instead of Moira in the novel, the other Handmaids brought her as much as they could get from their own food.<sup>85</sup> A similar situation is also described in the novel, but in a very incidental manner, yet the TV series makes it an extremely important punchline of the fourth episode.<sup>86</sup>

June is, furthermore, much more gracious – she always tries to help Janine (during her childbirth,<sup>87</sup> when she is going insane<sup>88</sup> and when she tries to commit suicide),<sup>89</sup> whom she probably does not like very much as a person. This aspect of female solidarity is most visible (not in the novel, again) when the Handmaids

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<sup>82</sup> “Late” (episode 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 41 min, 30 sec.

<sup>83</sup> “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” (episode 4), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 51 min, 10 sec.

<sup>84</sup> “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” (episode 4), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 43 min, 55 sec.

<sup>85</sup> “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” (episode 4), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 50 min, 19 sec.

<sup>86</sup> “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” (episode 4), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 50 min, 35 sec.

<sup>87</sup> “Birth Day” (episode 2), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 14 min, 33 sec.

<sup>88</sup> “Late” (episode 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 14 min, 45 sec.

<sup>89</sup> “The Bridge” (episode 9), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 38 min, 17 sec.

refuse to stone Janine.<sup>90</sup> The first one to refuse is the Handmaid who actually enjoys the present state (she was a prostitute before and feels life is better now,<sup>91</sup> which is the only moment of the series pointing towards certain social issues of the times before and highlighting how much June was privileged – not all women were able to enjoy their freedom). Later, June steps up and puts the stone down (again the active and brave one) and all the others do the same.

This kind of female solidarity, when women are willing to risk their safety or lives just to help each other or not to hurt one another solely because they are women, is not very believable (given how severe punishment could await them) and mirrors one important characteristic of the TV series – it is not meant to be realistic, but rather depicts what modern women *should* do in such a situation. Some could find it positive as it explicitly promotes certain values, while others might argue that it ignores not only other important features of the novel (like the one that June is failing in many ways), but it also paints a simplistic image of the current society, as it divides it into defiant heroes and evil characters and ignores the complex layers of power dynamics and complicity.

These sentiments might have led many commentators to the claims that the TV series depicts the atmosphere of “Trump’s America”, as they feel that the whole country falls back into some kind of “good old values” (like sexism, homophobia or racial segregation).<sup>92</sup> <sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> Others have insisted that these

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<sup>90</sup> “Night” (episode 10), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 46 min, 40 sec.

<sup>91</sup> “Faithful” (episode 5), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 14 min, 14 sec.

<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Nicholson, “Hate Crimes, Honour Killings And FGM: How *The Handmaid’s Tale* Captures Our Age of Fear,” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Ltd, 12 June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jun/12/the-handmaids-tale-hate-crimes-gender-treachery>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Jones.

<sup>94</sup> Jessa Crispin, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* Is Just Like Trump’s America? Not So Fast,” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Ltd, 2 May 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/02/handmaids-tale-donald-trump-america>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Jen Chaney, “Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* Is Your Must-Watch Show This Spring,” *Vulture*, New York Media LLC, 13 Apr. 2017 <<http://www.vulture.com/2017/04/the-handmaids-tale-hulu-review.html>> 18 Feb. 2018.

opinions are hysterical and do not hold ground.<sup>96 97 98</sup> (Charlotte Allen even argued that Gilead society resembles rich liberal families with their servants and the popular use of surrogate mothers,<sup>99</sup> which is not a completely nonsensical point.) The fact is that the number of Christians in the United States is falling<sup>100</sup> and even though it might be true that the far right extremists gained a more powerful voice with Donald Trump's victory (as his, now dismissed, chief strategist was by some considered the father of the far right), the views of this "modern" far right are still very different from the ones of the religious fundamentalists described in the novel (both might be deemed dangerous, but they are different, for example because many members of the far right are atheists).

The TV show truly depicted certain aspects which are still relevant as criticism of the present-day America. Atwood herself spoke about "state-mandated childbirth" in April 2017,<sup>101</sup> alluding to women who are in some American states forced to carry their children against their will, which implies that the woman's ability to bear a child is more important than her decision or her mental welfare. The omnipresent soldiers with automatic guns throughout the whole TV series were described in the novel as well, but the tendency to militarism in the public space in order to protect citizens from terrorism (or control them and demonstrate how powerful the army or the state is) has arisen since and the relevance of this theme is surely worth acknowledging. On the other hand, the TV series intensifies the feeling of implausibility referring to the

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<sup>96</sup> Ross Douthat, "The Handmaid's Tale, and Ours," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 24 May 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/opinion/handmaids-tale-and-ours.html>> 21 Feb. 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Megan McArdle, "No, *The Handmaid's Tale* Is Not 'Unexpectedly Timely,'" *Bloomberg*, Bloomberg L.P., 25 Apr. 2017 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-04-25/no-the-handmaid-s-tale-is-not-unexpectedly-timely>> 19 Feb. 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Charlotte Allen, "Living *The Handmaid's Tale* – Courtesy of the Secular Liberal Elites of L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 2 May 2017 <<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-allen-handmaids-tale-20170502-story.html>> 20 Feb. 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Allen.

<sup>100</sup> "US Christians Numbers 'Decline Sharply', Poll Finds," *BBC News*, BBC, 12 May 2015 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32710444>> 25 Feb. 2018.

<sup>101</sup> Hope Reese, "Margaret Atwood Explains How to Know If You're Living in a Totalitarian State," *Vox*, Vox Media, 26 Apr. 2017 <<https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/4/26/15435378/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-interview>> 20 Feb. 2018.

impression that the whole story is a mixture of too many unrelated methods of oppression taken from various cultures, as it adds the already covered stoning and female genital mutilation,<sup>102</sup> both of which one would not connect with the United States.

The most substantial feature of the TV series is the stressed discontinuity between pre- and Gilead period (there is no post-Gilead). This is achieved especially by erasing all possible similarities between Luke and the Commander. The TV Luke is not patronizing, not jokingly sexist. Instead, he loves his wife very much even after many years (he still tries to find her and cries after he reads her note)<sup>103</sup> and puts her best friend Moira, who is a radical feminist, on the list of his family, which is one of the most moving moments of the whole series.<sup>104</sup> The same scene also paints Canada as a human, liberal and compassionate alternative to Gilead (and, by extension, to the United States as well, criticizing the American immigration policy).

As June is very active, there is no need for the feminist mother to whom she would be put into contrast. These factors result in one thing – the previous world had many problems, like infertility, but there was not anything inherently wrong with it which would lead to the present state, at least not within the circle of people with whom June was in contact. In her memories, their life is portrayed as sunny and idyllic.

This very much simplifies the reading of the novel: it is *them* – “the hypocritical crazy evangelical Christians” who not only created, but also entirely forced this whole world on “us”, progressive compassionate people. This clear bipartisan stance might please liberal viewers (often with a bit cheap images and replicas, for instance the one June says when using the Latin quote and the b-word, as has been already mentioned), but estranges the others. This is not a problem in itself, had the TV series not generally simplify what was expressed in the novel – it is always too easy to divide a group of people into the pure good

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<sup>102</sup> “Late” (episode 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 53 min, 5 sec.

<sup>103</sup> “The Other Side” (episode 7), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 44 min, 35 sec.

<sup>104</sup> “Night” (episode 10), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 52 min, 45 sec.



ones and the enemies, especially when Atwood's novel demonstrates that there are more forms of oppression with various different manifestations (June was, to a certain extent, oppressed by Luke, for instance). It is also a question if art, which is worth analysing, should be there primarily to please without posing any discomforting questions.

## 5. Conclusion

As a depiction of “reality”, art inherently involves politics and there are readers who interpret one particular work in different ways. This means that the political message in the narrow sense can have various options of interpretation. As the analysis of both novels suggests – in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there is the dilemma of (dis)continuity and *The Stepford Wives* are even more ambiguous – the political reading is not as simple as it might appear at first sight even in the novels which are otherwise generally deemed as indisputably criticising certain political opinions.

Both novels are more complex than just plain political manifestos in two aspects – due to the already described slight ambiguity of their politics, and also because of their other qualities, for example the power of grotesque in *The Stepford Wives* or the development of specifically female ambiguous relationships in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. One could, naturally, object that the incorporation of the letter issue might be already a political gesture. This is a valid point and leads to the idea that it is never possible to strictly determine all themes of a novel which fall under “the political” in a narrow sense. The reason might be that as the novel interprets reality, many aspects of this interpretation could be deemed as potentially political, even if they might not seem so straightforwardly. There will always be a grey area in the hands of readers.

How do the novels express their politics? The neoconservative pushback is portrayed through the community which is struggling with the pathological aspects of the modern world and its pluralism of lifestyles. This makes it easier for the leaders of the new communities to persuade the others that the idea of living under one single ideology (inspired by an idealised image of the past) would make most of the members of the community happier than they were before. The “neo”, however, signifies that these leaders do not achieve their goal simply by restoring the past, but they adopt strategies which are inherently typical of the modern, technological times. By portraying the newly build communities as oppressive and destructive to the individual, the novels are criticising the motives which stand behind them. This does not necessarily imply a critique of

conservative values in general – *The Stepford Wives*, for example, rather refers to the lack of communication.

As Adorno mentioned, the “truth”, which is conveyed in art, and ideology are very close. Herein lies the power of art, but it also indicates that a work of art can be manipulative – in this case, the novels try to persuade the reader that the values or tendencies which (as portrayed in the novels) lead to the dystopia are potentially dangerous.

What one should do is to find the balance between overstating the political aspect and neglecting it. One might see both extremes in the way how the adaptations of the novels were made. *The Stepford Wives* (2004 film) tries to erase the political aspect of the book (in ignoring the presence of horror) and creates a light-hearted comedy with a surprising plot-twist that not only reverses the meaning of the book into its opposite (which is perhaps unintentional), but also results in a cliché-like shallow show.

The problem with over-politicising (along with simplifying) is, on the other hand, clearly the case of the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*. The show disposes itself of all ambiguities presented in the novel – it creates a world (which it presents as “the truth”) of black-and-white “evil conservatives” and “great progressives”. The reality of Atwood’s novel, where there are various levels of complicity, surely offers a much more interesting view, with which one can also identify better. One might appreciate the series as a political manifesto and enjoy its theatrical moments when the heroin rebels against her enemies (which she does not in the novel), but it is a question if it is worth more than just “binge-watching”. The TV series has brought many viewers back to the novel, but one cannot be sure that they will be willing to appreciate it in its fullness.

The previous paragraphs accordingly suggest that one can never separate the “political part” (in the narrower sense, if there is one) from the other aspects of the novel. Politics is interwoven into them and into many other novels, short stories or poems. This has to be taken into account but talking about art in political terms only and overstressing this aspect distorts the work itself. Not in a

way that it shifts the whole meaning to some other (possibly remarkable) spheres;  
it rather creates a situation where art as such is degraded and forgotten.

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