

Atwood's Men Meet the Screen

Revisiting Literary and Cinematic Masculinities in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Los hombres de Atwood ahora en la pantalla

Un repaso de masculinidades literarias y fílmicas en
El cuento de la criada

JOE MONTENEGRO BONILLA

Sede Regional Brunca

Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, Costa Rica

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, offers innovative and intriguing perspectives on gender and gender roles, as they are dramatized and problematized in the context of a dystopian society that in many ways is a projection of our own. Particularly interesting in the novel are the roles of men, represented by the principal male characters: the Commander, Nick, and Luke. As Atwood employs these personae to describe at least three different manifestations of masculinity—all with their own conflicts and possibilities—the first season of the television version of the novel, created by Bruce Miller and released in 2017, explores, expands, and exploits various visions of manhood that help understand not only the protagonist's but also the reader's/viewer's world. This paper is an attempt to establish a dialogue between Atwood's and Miller's viewpoints on masculinity through their portrayals of these three characters and their interactions with their protagonist and their context.

Keywords: men, gender roles, cinema, television, comparative analysis

Resumen

La famosa obra de Margaret Atwood, *El cuento de la criada*, ofrece perspectivas innovadoras e intrigantes acerca del género y los roles de género, a medida que estos son dramatizados y problematizados en el contexto de una sociedad distópica, la cual es una proyección de la nuestra en muchos sentidos. Particularmente, resultan interesantes los papeles que juegan los hombres en la novela, los cuales son representados por los personajes masculinos principales: el Comandante, Nick y Luke. Mientras Atwood emplea a estos personajes para describir por lo menos tres manifestaciones diferentes de la masculinidad —con todo y sus conflictos y posibilidades—, la primera temporada de la versión televisiva de la novela, creada por Bruce Miller y estrenada en 2017, explora, expande y explota diversas visiones de la masculinidad que ayudan a comprender no solo el mundo de la protagonista sino también el del lector/espectador. Este artículo es un intento por establecer diálogo entre los puntos de vista de Atwood y de Miller sobre la masculinidad, por medio de los retratos de estos tres personajes y sus relaciones con la protagonista y con su entorno.

Palabras clave: hombre, rol de los géneros, cine, televisión, análisis comparativo

Introduction

In 2006, in Universidad de Costa Rica's *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, I published my first academic article, entitled "Not All Is as it Seems with Men: A Study of Masculinities in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." In it, I meditated on the two principal male characters of Atwood's novel, Nick and the Commander, and the modest result of this exercise was a brief look into the ways in which the Gilead regime, among other things, problematizes masculinity. In 2017, Bruce Miller transposed *The Handmaid's Tale* onto the television screen through the streaming service Hulu, and as I watched the first season of this version, I realized that the questions that had piqued me as a

graduate student twelve years before were as intriguing and as current as ever. This time around, however, I was being offered new perspectives on how the original characters could be reread and analyzed.

Viewed as hypertext, this television version of *The Handmaid's Tale* proposes a more contemporary reading of Atwood's work in all its senses; it modernizes and reinvigorates the novel's original agenda. This is particularly true for its approach to such gender issues as those involving masculinity. Therefore, viewers and readers are invited to discover whether the portrayal of masculinities on the screen reproduce, enrich, or trivialize those offered by the original text, and how a conversation is established between the two texts. As I review recent studies on masculinities

and masculine representations in literature and in film, I intend to return to my first reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* and analyze how my initial takes on its male characters are reinforced, rephrased, and/or replaced by the television version. In other words, I ask myself whether or not the men portrayed in the series develop or deviate from their literary characterizations.

In comparison with the novel, there is a multiplication of viewpoints in the screen adaptation. In the former, Offred is the only informant all throughout the narration, except for the very last chapter. Her perception of the male characters inevitably ends up becoming our perception as well. For her, the men of her world are something more than the perpetrators of oppression and suffering; they are, at least in some ways, fellow victims of the system, whether because they are lost, desperate, or indignant. Unlike in the novel, the male characters in the television series may also speak for themselves and offer alternative points of view regarding their position within their reality. We get to see them at times in situations or places where Offred is not present or of which she is not even aware. Still, they are often portrayed as sufferers and not so much as ultimate offenders.

This, my second reading of the novel, was assisted by the interpretation and the original portrayals offered by the television adaptation. This time around, Atwood's male characters appear to be more than catalogue depictions of masculinities. The Commander, Nick, and Luke do not only play a role in the story but live and dwell in it as much as Offred does. They are primary heroes, if you wish, since they

move, suffer, act, and react independently from the protagonist, notwithstanding the fact that it is *her* tale that is being told after all.

Miller's television adaptation of the novel helped me, through a concrete visual approach to the characters, a narrativity that involves other voices and eyes beside the protagonist's, and a conspicuous actualization of the story's themes, to look past the functions and roles of the male characters and discover their centrality, particularly as arguable victims of the same system that threatens to destroy the heroine. The male characters in Atwood's novel are vulnerable, fragile, fearful, even too weak to preserve themselves in their masculine performances. The Commander, in all his glory and power, fails to represent the Republic as he is expected to. Nick, on the other hand, is objectified by both Serena Joy and the handmaid herself, which places him in a position that not only underscores the oppression of women under the regime but draws attention to his own powerlessness. And Luke, finally, is lost to Offred, but he has helplessly lost her too, both to Gilead and to Nick. All of this is true in both the novel and the show, but on the screen, the dilemmas of existence and survival of the male characters and their masculinities take on more apparent and independent expressions.

The Commander

Fred Waterford, the Commander, represents the ruling order upon which not only one household but a whole system depends. He is law, and he is power, two of the attributes most often

associated with masculinity as it is traditionally conceived. Maria San Needham (2015) says about him:

The Commander embodies the Republic's ideal masculinity in Offred's narrative; he is considered a worthy man; he has a household; he has Guardians to tend his Wife's garden; he has obtained a rank and station that earns him a Handmaid. It is hinted in the ending of the novel [and made evident throughout the TV series] that he was instrumental in the setting up of the Republic, and throughout the novel [*and* the series] he maintains his status as a powerful male. (p. 16)

Such status is well-known to virtually every member of his community. When Rita, the Martha, sends Offred to get some things from the store, she instructs her, "Tell them fresh, for the eggs... Not like last time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen. Tell them who it's for [meaning the Commander] and then they won't mess around" (Atwood, 1998, p. 11). This same recognition of the Commander's power is endorsed by the first Ofglen (Alexis Bledel), in episode two of the series, when she is trying to recruit Offred (Elisabeth Moss). She tells her, "Waterford [as the Commander is also known] is important. He's very high up. You have to find out and tell us" (Miller, 2017, 6:21-6:26).

The Commander is obviously a very powerful man in town, and he definitely enjoys boasting about his position, especially in the presence of his handmaid. At Jezebel's, Offred narrates, "his spine straightens imperceptibly, his chest expands... He is demonstrating... his mastery of the

world" (Atwood, 1998, p. 236). In several episodes of the series, we also see that the Commander (Joseph Fiennes) does not miss a chance to show, at least to his wife (Yvonne Strahovski) and his handmaid, how much in control he is, and thereby, how much of a man. However, power is a fragile good, especially in the mind of those who hold it. According to Michael Kimmel (as cited in Needham, 2015), the fact that men are and have been effectively in power does not necessarily "translate to a feeling of being powerful at the individual level" (p. 6). This is how and why we find, both on the page and on the screen, a Commander that is powerless and weak.

Offred discovers this early enough. "There must be something he wants, from me," she says, "To want is to have a weakness" (Atwood, 1998, p. 136). She ultimately learns how to feed her master's ego in order to get at least some of what she wants, if only to survive, but he is also "worthy of [her] pity, for she sees him as a helpless poor creature that turns to her in a desperate attempt to redeem himself... and [maybe] get some love in return" (Montenegro-Bonilla, 2006, p. 49). Joseph Fiennes's portrayal of Fred Waterford in the series suggests a more philandering quality to the Commander. When he admits to Offred, "Maybe you're just learning my weaknesses" (Miller, 2017, ep. 5, 1:38-1:40), he does it in a flirtatious manner that would not be proper of Atwood's original character. He is a younger, maybe even manlier Commander; he at least does not have "a little belly" "sadly" hidden under his shirt (Atwood, 1998, p. 254), and he does not seem as desperate for the kind of quasi-maternal

attention that he pines for in the novel. Still, Waterford is helpless, lost in his own position as ruler of both Gilead and his household. Despite his constant display of masculine power, he does not know what to do with himself in this allegedly perfect society that he himself has helped create. According to Needham (2015), "Men are simultaneously everywhere, in every corner of the Republic, and yet nowhere at all through their lack of power over their own destinies" (p. 30). As a group, the Gilead men are unshakable; individually, they are helpless.

One particular way in which the Commander loses his power and his masculinity is through his failure to father a child. Needham (2015) explains it as follows:

The virile figure of man —the ability to sire the next generation— is enshrined in regime law, it is a protected status... This masculine virility, the power of the male to plant his seed and give rise to the next generation, has been a benchmark by which males have been measured, and measuring themselves, for generations. (p. 30)

"You're weak," Mrs. Waterford tells her husband in episode ten, "And God would never let you pass on that weakness... You can't father a child because you're not worthy" (Miller, 2017, 16:10-16:19). In Atwood's fictional world, paternity is underlined as the ultimate goal for any man. "What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood?" says Professor Pieixoto in the last chapter of the novel (1998, p. 311). As for the case of television and film, as Judith Franco (2008)

puts it, "in contemporary cinema, the exploration of masculinity is often associated with fatherhood" (p. 29). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Miller's show also places emphasis on the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity. The Commander wishfully asks his handmaid near the end of the season, "Is it mine?" meaning her unborn baby (2017, 34:13). He longs to be a father, yet his impotency undermines both his sense of masculinity and his position of power within the system.

Miller accentuates the Commander's helplessness and loss of power in at least one other way that is not evident in Atwood's original work: he shows his fear. First, the Commander fears the regime. When he intercedes in favor of his colleague Warren Putnam, who has committed the offense of maintaining a romantic relationship with his own handmaid, he is told that Mrs. Putnam herself has asked for "the harshest possible punishment" for her husband (Miller, 2017, ep. 10, 29:46-29:49). Waterford's reaction to this news is one of visible fright, especially considering that he has committed the same crime. At the end of the series' first season, the Commander has taken his liberties a little too far, and he is starting to realize it. Second, the Commander fears his wife, and probably for the same reason that he fears the system. He knows that, since she learned about his little escapades with Offred to Jezebel's, she has his fate in her hands, just like Mrs. Putnam has her husband's in hers, so he apologizes in fear (Miller, 2017, ep. 10, 40:12-40:28). Finally, the Commander seems afraid of Nick, his chauffeur. In episode eight, the day after his first visit to Jezebel's

with Offred, the Commander welcomes his wife back at the door. As she asks Nick (Max Minghella) to bring in her luggage, we see a closeup of Waterford's face twitching (Miller, 2017, 41:27-41:29). Nick's knowledge of his transgressions is a real danger, and a powerful weapon in the driver's hands.

Atwood's characterization of the Commander depicts him at times as a genteel patriarch who is even capable of tenderness and innocence, if only to satirize his seemingly indisputable position of power. Miller's Fred, on the other hand, is more of a seducer, more of a politician, and ironically enough, more of a failure since he lets himself be carried away by his desires. In both cases, the Commander relies on his power to assert his masculinity, yet he is helplessly at the mercy of his own destiny, a victim of his own trap. Gilead, his sterility, and even his household seem to exert more power over him than he can ever do over them.

Nick

Nick's portrayal of masculinity, both in Atwood and in Miller, is a very traditional one. He personifies heroism and sexual potency in a way that the Commander and Luke simply cannot. Upon meeting him, Offred immediately accepts Nick's model of manhood as a source of solace and perhaps salvation (Montenegro-Bonilla, 2006, p. 46). Among other things, Nick represents the "stoical, impassive face of masculinity, a gender experience, and an ideological principle, that is all-enduring and destined to prevail at the end" (Montenegro-Bonilla, 2006, p. 46). In comparison with the

Commander, the chauffeur has no practical power, but he offers an alternative representation of masculinity that suits not only the protagonist but also readers and viewers. He is not just a likeable character, but he brings hope and love to Offred's miserable life, hence his true power.

In both the novel and the first season of the series, Nick fulfills the role of the rescuing hero although it is not until the end that he actually delivers. In the meantime, he is a sexual and emotional force that counters the Commander's imposed presence. In this sense, he rises in power every time that the other fails to maintain his. "Where the Commander's power is reduced," says Needham (2015), "when he sheds his covering, Nick's masculinity is enhanced by the discarding of his, in doing so, he bares his true male form" (p. 62). It follows, then, that it is in the bedroom that the Commander loses and Nick wins. Offred's double narration of her first encounter with the driver leaves us a little puzzled. First, she almost screams: "His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him..." (Atwood, 1998, p. 261). But later she describes a more terrestrial experience: "He begins to unbutton, then to stroke, kisses beside my ear. 'No romance,' he says. 'Okay?'" (p. 262). Either way, she is rescued by Nick in the same way that she is enslaved by the Commander. Later in the novel, as she refers to the former, it is obvious that the first of the two accounts, whether real or imaginary, had a greater impact on her and her behavior from then on.

Miller builds on Nick and Offred's sexual relationship more clearly. Their first encounter, during the fifth episode, is completely unromantic, especially because Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, is present during the act (Miller, 2017, 23:55-25:27), yet on a second occasion in that same episode (48:48-52:05), and on more after that, the two actually enjoy each other. Offred even takes the initiative, at some point, and moves on top, which grants her a longed-for moment of liberation. Still, Nick's sexuality is fluent and harmonious, in accordance with the confident performance of his masculinity.

In the aftermath of these encounters, however, Offred experiences a growing anxiety regarding Nick's reaction to her every move. As a narrator in Atwood, she wonders constantly what the chauffeur is thinking or how he feels about her and her forced relationship with the commander, especially while and after he drives the couple to Jezebel's. "His posture disapproves of me, or am I imagining it?... does this make him angry or lustful or envious or anything at all?" (Atwood, 1998, p. 232). A little later, she continues, "As I turn to shut the car door behind me I can see Nick looking at me through the glass. He sees me now. Is it contempt I read, or indifference...?" (p. 233). It is difficult for the reader to help the protagonist answer these questions, but for the viewer of Miller's production, it is not. The driver's constant gazes through the rear-view mirror, looking over at Offred and Waterford in the back seat, are loaded with jealousy and annoyance, especially on their second trip to Jezebel's in episode nine (Miller, 2017,

15:21-16:12). His anger becomes even more palpable when the couple decides to make fun of him and tell him that he should "chill." At this point, Nick is visibly suffering. He is powerless in his position, and as a man, he is evidently threatened.

Another mechanism through which Nick's masculinity is problematized, both in the novel and in the television version, is his objectification. Paradoxically enough, his role as human breeder may place him at the very top of the ladder of masculine performance, yet it also arguably levels him with any handmaid. In comparison with Offred and her equals, Nick has only a little more choice in the matter, given his position as a disenfranchised male in the Gilead regime. He does not look kindly on the task that he has been imposed. Unsmilingly, he tells Offred, "I could just squirt it into a bottle and you could pour it in" (Atwood, 1998, p. 261), meaning his seed. This same discomfort is not so evident in Miller's representation; however, Max Minghella's portrayal of the character as humorless and largely unresponsive seems to support this view. He is also a passive object of observation all throughout the ten episodes of the series, just as he is in the novel, in which "...the female-as-viewed-by-the-male has been inverted... to give us males-as-viewed-by-females". (Needham, 2015, p. 80)

Offred describes him: "All this prodigal breeding. He stretches in the sun, I feel the ripple of muscles go along him, like a cat's back arching. He's in his shirt sleeves, bare arms sticking shamelessly out from the rolled cloth. Where does the tan end?... He's only my flag, my semaphore. Body

language” (Atwood, 1998, p. 181). Offred is quite explicit in her report of Nick’s attractiveness, which informs Miller’s vision very appropriately.

Although on the screen Nick also appears as objectified by Offred’s gaze and therefore at times dispossessed of his otherwise aggressive masculinity, he continues to offer traditional demonstrations of masculinity in at least one way that is not openly revealed in the novel. On episode eight, we get to meet a pre-Gilead Nick right before he is recruited by the so-called “Sons of Jacob.” As he involuntarily holds up the line at the employment office, another man complains rudely, to which Nick responds with a dramatically threatening look over his shoulder. Soon after, he loses his temper and engages in a brief scuffle, which results in him being expelled from the office (Miller, 2017, 4:27-5:02). Such display of aggressiveness in this character accounts for an expectedly masculine behavior which the novel suggests but never openly explores. In contrast, in the last episode of the season, Nick also shows another face of his masculinity that is not developed in Atwood’s work. This time, he succumbs to the knowledge of his prospects of becoming a father. Upon hearing the news of Offred’s pregnancy, he kneels beside her and tenderly strokes her belly. “Don’t,” says the handmaid, “Please... It’s terrible,” to which he softly answers, “No, it’s not” (Miller, 2017, 18:10-19:09). Like any man in Gilead, Nick is attracted by the possibility of fatherhood, yet his reaction to the prospect leaves us wondering what kind of man he truly is.

At this point, it is not clear how far Nick can take his role of protector and

hero, which he has not been able to fulfill completely. His traditional manifestations of masculinity render him, both in the novel and in the series, a seemingly uncomplicated character; he is manly and chivalrous, and he is sexually potent, and therefore closer to fatherhood than the Commander himself. However, he is a helpless pawn of the system, on account of both his material position and his condition as a disposable male.

Luke

In my first article about *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I did not explore Luke as a character, partially because he appears in the novel only as one of the protagonist’s pre-Gilead memories, and therefore lacks the presence that the other two characters have. However, Miller develops Luke as a central persona in his adaptation, which forced me to re-discover him in both texts. Firstly, it is impossible to contemplate Luke without his father suit. About Atwood’s version, Needham (2015) says the following:

Luke exists as an absent male figure, whose role as father was of the father-figures of before, he worried about things like if the plastic bags were within reach of their child and took steps to remove the hazard... He exhibited nurturing, caring tendencies which are predominantly associated with, and dictated to be by the Republic, feminine in their discourse. (p. 24)

Even before the birth of his daughter, Luke behaves quite fatherly, as is expected of any well-rounded,

well-educated modern man. This is how Offred remembers him, “lying in bed..., his hand on [her] belly. The three of [them], in bed, [the baby] kicking, turning over within [her]” (Atwood, 1998, p. 103). In Miller’s television version, this aspect of Luke’s masculinity is thoroughly emphasized. This same scene is transposed onto the screen in the final episode (Miller, 2017, 12:44-13:03), but also, through constant flashbacks to a beach day (episode 1) and to a night fair (episode 4) with June (Offred’s real name) and their little daughter Hannah, Luke appears as a happy father, accomplished in his masculinity.

It goes without saying that the Gilead men are not particularly interested in fulfilling their role as fathers, at least not in the way that Luke does, though they undoubtedly long for procreation. At the birth of Commander Warren’s baby, the child’s father “is nowhere in sight,” Offred narrates, “He’s gone whenever men go on such occasions, some hideout” (Atwood, 1998, p. 116). In episode five of the series, Waterford passionlessly declares, “Children, what else is there to live for?” (Miller, 2017, 31:47-31:49), as he distantly eyes a forbidden magazine. But Luke is different, especially on the screen. Even in the midst of his fight for survival in episode seven, he finds and struggles at all costs to preserve his daughter’s stuffed bunny, a symbol of what, from now on, will give sense to his life, a reminder of his true role, that of a father who searches for his little girl.

In Atwood’s novel, Luke offers more than one alternative representation of masculinity, and so does he in Miller’s filmic version. Timothy Shary (2013) explains:

...there is... a great intricacy and sensitivity to the depictions of men in American cinema, and many of their portraits challenge perceived norms about sexuality and sexual preference, social identities and expectations, power and strength, and the very essence of what ‘being a man’ means... (Introduction)

In this sense, Miller’s Luke is far from the traditional ideal of manliness and closer to Shary’s description. He is not politically or financially powerful like the Commander, and he is not sexually thriving or Byronically enigmatic like Nick. He is rather an awkward, kind of nerdish four-eyed guy who places the needs and interests of the women in his life above his own. He cares about things like a family photo album (Miller, 2017, episode 7, 15:04-15:15); he does not mind letting June on top on their first sexual encounter (Miller, 2017, episode 5, 23:11-23:54); and he even calls her “invincible” when he first meets her (Miller, 2017, episode 5, 06:32-06:34). Luke is like no other male character in the story.

Some of these traits are also present in Atwood’s original characterization. “Cooking’s my hobby,” he says in one of the protagonist’s memories, “I enjoy it” (Atwood, 1998, p. 121), and with this he exposes himself to his mother-in-law’s sharp feminist criticisms, which he meets knowingly and with humor. “He didn’t mind,” the narrator recalls, “he teased her by pretending to be a macho” (p. 121). About this, Needham explains:

The masculine of Offred’s former life was Luke, who embodied contemporary ideals of an enlightened masculinity which embraced

aspects considered to be feminine; he cooked, shopped with her, and took care of their home and child. This version of contemporary masculinity is fading from Offred, as it has faded from the Republic. (p. 67)

The type of man who, like Luke, is willing to metaphorically “cut [his] dick off” for the sake of gender equality, like he offers to do in episode three of the series (Miller, 2017, 25:03-25:05), is absent from Gilead.

Nevertheless, Luke is still a man, and as such, sometimes clueless about the extent to which his masculine protective instincts may undermine women’s independence and sense of self-sufficiency. “You know I’ll always take care of you,” he tells his wife when he learns that she has been denied access to her own money, but she understandably interprets the gesture as a little too patronizing for her taste (Atwood, 1998, p. 179). “He doesn’t mind this...,” she ponders, “We’re not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his” (p. 182). In Miller’s translation of this scene, it is Moira, June’s best friend, who scornfully laughs at Luke’s mindless comment. His unawareness of his own condescending attitude is contrasted by Moira’s ardent declarations that June doesn’t “belong to” him, that “she isn’t [his] property,” and that “she doesn’t need [him] to take care of her,” among other similar claims (Miller, 2017, episode 3, 24:22-24:57). It is Luke’s performance of his inbred masculinity that motivates him to treat his wife as a precious possession, but regardless of this heteronormative reaction towards the dilemma that his wife is facing, he remains a model of modern masculine behavior in the midst of suffering and denigration.

However, such ideal, at least in the novel, is lost. Men like Luke have no place in Gilead, and only remain as a distant memory of some placid and comfortable past. Needham (2015) explains:

Whilst Nick and the Commander, and even the Guardian’s [sic] at the gates, are immediate physical presences that are described using smell and female intuition, Luke’s description is a memory. His domesticated tendencies and his essence..., rather than his physicality, are what she remembers, looking back to him as her ideal of masculinity through the distanced, romanticised [sic] view of her former life. Offred longs for his presence and longs for him physically, but he is not presented as a physical being like the other men. (p. 66)

In a way that is very different from the Commander’s frail illusion of power or from Nick’s helpless attempts at heroism, Luke is utterly lost. The protagonist admits, “What is left of him: his hair, the bones, the plaid wool shirt... I can see his clothes in my mind..., though not his face, not so well. His face is beginning to fade...” (Atwood, 1998, p. 104). Luke is lost inasmuch as he is also a victim of Gilead, in the full sense of the phrase. Not only has he been defeated by the system, but his own wife has, although unwillingly, moved on to a new life, a new household, a new love. Miller, in turn, offers a much more material depiction of Luke than Atwood does, and in so doing, the character’s fatherly qualities and his alternative manifestations of masculinity become significantly richer. However, although he has survived the

regime by the end of the season, he is not entirely free or even recovered yet; rather, he still suffers.

Conclusion

“Many men,” says Michael Kimmel (2012), “do not feel very good about their lives... Traditional masculinity can be a fool’s errand, an effort to live up to standards set by others that leave you feeling empty, friendless...” (p. 133). The Gilead men are this dissatisfied with their world, no matter how proud of it some of them claim to be. The Commander, in all his glory, fails to comply with all that is required of him. Nick, with all his chivalry, is powerless to defend Offred from the impositions of the regime. And Luke, as ideally masculine as he is, loses everything and everyone helplessly.

As I read *The Handmaid’s Tale* a second time, and as I watched and listened to the lives of these men once again, I realized that perhaps the women were not the only victims of the brutal abuses of the Gilead regime. Needham (2015) agrees:

[the] disenfranchisement of the female individual extends also to the male, as he too is limited in his options... Whilst men are undeniably in control within the Republic, how much this control actually relates to the power by the individual is disputable. (p. 13)

Taking it a little further, “both Sally Robinson and Susan Jeffords have argued that articulations of white men as victimizers slide almost imperceptibly into constructions of white men as

victims” (Franco, 2008, p. 30). To look upon the Commander as a victim certainly poses a challenge, and to justify him or any of his fellow rulers in the least, simply on account of their imperfections, would be risky and even foolish, but it is not difficult to imagine that a system so flawed and so pernicious would necessarily backfire on those who conceived it.

Amidst all the distress and chaos incited by the Gilead regime, one lesson may be learned, however, and that is “how varied, open, relative, contradictory, and fluid masculinities can be” (Watson & Shaw, 2011, Introduction). This is true of any situation and of any narration that leads us to reflect upon the nature of manhood and the male gender, but what is truly revealing in this case is that the very structure of the social and political establishment that seeks to control gender relationships in Atwood’s novel and Miller’s television production, paves the way for multiple manifestations of masculinity to enter into play. In other words, Gilead, by its very nature, represents an institutionalized attempt to normalize the role and functions of both men and women, but Gilead, in spite of that same nature, also instigates multiple forms of masculine performance, all desperate to either satisfy or escape its demands. In that sense, Miller’s first season of his television adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s celebrated work not only expands but also enriches the reading of masculinities in literature and in popular culture.

Bibliography

- Atwood, M. (1998). *The handmaid's tale*. Anchor Books.
- Franco, J. (2008). "The more you look, the less you really know": The redemption of white masculinity in contemporary American and French cinema. *Cinema Journal*, 47(3), 29-47. www.jstor.org/stable/30136115
- Kimmel, M. (2012). *Manhood in America: A cultural history* (3rd edition). Oxford University Press.
- Miller, B., Moss, E. (Executive Producers). (2017-present). *The handmaid's tale* [TV series]. MGM Television.
- Montenegro-Bonilla, J. (2006). Not all is as it seems with men: A study of masculinities in Margaret Atwood's *The handmaid's tale*. *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, 4, 43-52.
- Needham, M. S. (2015). *Locating lost masculinities in Margaret Atwood's The handmaid's tale*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire. Semantic Scholar. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b100/a47c968791794e72f1e7acd0547a92da2033.pdf?_ga=2.216360917.21403681321582770793-306387269.1582770793
- Shary, T. (Ed.). (2013). *Millennial masculinity: Men in contemporary American cinema*. [Kindle edition]. Wayne State University Press.
- Watson, E., & Shaw, M. E. (Eds.). (2011). *Performing American masculinities: The 21st-century man in popular culture*. [Kindle edition]. Indiana University Press.