Female Dystopias as a Warning
How the Female Role in the Dystopian Narratives, *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, is Portrayed, Including a Comparison to their Audio-visual Adaptations

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## Table of Contents

0. Intro ........................................................................................................................................ 1

1. The Origin of Dystopia and the Feminist Role ........................................................................ 7
   1.1. What is a “Dystopia”? ........................................................................................................ 7
   1.2. The Causes of Dystopian Writing ...................................................................................... 9
   1.3. The Main Goal of Dystopia ............................................................................................... 10
   1.4. The Feminist Role in Dystopia ......................................................................................... 11
   1.5. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 13

2. Gender/women in The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale ...................................... 14
   2.1. Analysis of The Stepford Wives by Ira Levin (1972) ....................................................... 14
       2.1.1. The Characteristics of the Stepford Wives ................................................................. 15
       2.1.2. The Feminist Joanna Eberhart and her Friends ......................................................... 20
       2.1.3. The Practices of the Men’s Association ..................................................................... 22
       2.1.4. Joanna’s Husband Walter ......................................................................................... 26
       2.1.5. A Doubtful Protagonist ............................................................................................ 27
       2.1.6. Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 28
   2.2. Analysis of The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985) .................................... 29
       2.2.1. The Female Oppression: the Handmaids ................................................................. 31
       2.2.2. Procreation as a Main Goal ....................................................................................... 34
       2.2.3. The Novel’s Symbols ............................................................................................... 35
       2.2.4. Reflective Flashbacks ............................................................................................... 36
       2.2.5. The Two Influential Men .......................................................................................... 38
       2.2.6. Sexual Desire ............................................................................................................ 39
       2.2.7. The Female Power .................................................................................................... 41
       2.2.8. The Female Resistance ............................................................................................. 42
       2.2.9. Utopia or Dystopia? .................................................................................................. 43
       2.2.10. An Open but Hopeful Ending ............................................................................... 45
       2.2.11. Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 46
   2.3. Comparison between the novels of The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale .... 47

3. Audio-visual Adaptations ....................................................................................................... 52
   3.1. The Popularity of Audio-visual Media ............................................................................. 52
   3.2. The Creativity of Adaptation .......................................................................................... 53
       (1975) and The Handmaid’s Tale (1990) ......................................................................... 54
   3.4. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 56

4. The Audio-visual Adaptations of The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale .......... 58
  4.1.1. The Ambitious Women ........................................................................................................... 59
  4.1.2. The Gay Community ............................................................................................................. 60
  4.1.3. A Light-Hearted Parody ......................................................................................................... 60
  4.1.4. The Romantic Plot ............................................................................................................... 62
  4.1.5. The Overpowered Men ........................................................................................................... 63
  4.1.6. A Positive Ending ................................................................................................................. 63
  4.1.7. Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 64

4.2. The series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) in comparison with the novel ............................. 65
  4.2.1. The Sensational Aspect ........................................................................................................ 66
  4.2.2. The Romantic Plot .............................................................................................................. 67
  4.2.3. The Heroic Characters ......................................................................................................... 68
  4.2.4. The Multiple Perspectives .................................................................................................. 68
  4.2.5. The Problem of Infertility .................................................................................................... 72
  4.2.6. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 72

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 74

6. Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 80

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0. Intro

This dissertation focusses on the female role in dystopian fiction. Dystopian novels are valuable to humankind since they present a catastrophic future, warning us for dangerous tendencies in our present-day society. The cases of this particular research alert us for “the notorious backlash of neo-conservative and religious-fundamentalist anti-feminism (...) in the mid-1970s” (Lauret 71). “Women’s dystopias” reflect a feminist fear as they “foreground (...) the denial of women’s sexual autonomy. They show women trapped by their sex, by their femaleness, and reduced from subjection to function” (Lefanu 71). This paper will analyse and compare the ways in which women are oppressed in two dystopian narratives: Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Moreover, this investigation will also take into account the novels’ most recent audio-visual adaptations. In the case of *The Stepford Wives*, that is the film directed by Frank Oz from 2004; while for *The Handmaid’s Tale* it is the 2017 series adaptation directed by Bruce Miller. These audio-visuals are popular media nowadays and therefore have an influence on a wide public: “film (...) would make significant works more accessible to a wider audience” (Telotte & Duchnovay Introduction xix). Besides, it is compelling to observe the differences between the novel and its adaptation for the reason that they indicate the historical evolution of feminism. Concretely, they are situated in a different context than that of the novels.

Ira Levin and Margaret Atwood both take interest in the female perspective. Ira Levin, the author of *The Stepford Wives*, is mainly known for the film adaptations of his works *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*. His stories are focalised by female characters. Therefore, his preferred genre is the so-called “female gothic,” for on the one hand he writes about women being controlled in horrific ways and on the other hand he recognizes the values of the female gender in the light of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s (infra):
“Women’s Liberationists envisioned their revolution as a decolonization of mind and body, a freeing from male values, male modes of behavior, and most of all male power structures” (Lauret 53). “Women’s Liberation was more concerned with means and values than with ends, and more effective in achieving attitudinal and cultural change than in gaining lasting benefits for women in the traditional political arena of power, resources and legislation” (Lauret 71). As he writes during that time frame, the Women’s Liberation Movement undoubtedly influences his narratives evolving around female characters trying to free themselves from the male-centred society.

Margaret Atwood who wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is known for writing “critical dystopias” and “speculative dystopian fiction”. The “critical dystopia” is a typical feminist genre that adds a positive note to dystopian fiction by making use of an open ending which leaves room for hope (infra). “Speculative dystopian fiction” is a term given to dystopian stories that could possibly take place in our present-day world if present-day beliefs or movements took on an unhealthy prominence (infra). As a feminist writer, Atwood writes about females being oppressed in a society taken over by neo-conservatives, anti-feminists and patriarchs. While some aspects are magnified and exaggerated, the stories remain realistic. The characteristics of the “female gothic,” “critical dystopia” and “speculative dystopian fiction” are recognizable throughout Levin and Atwood’s narratives.

*The Stepford Wives* tells the story of a perfect town with perfectly-looking women. However, this ideal utopian town will appear to be just an illusion. These Stepford women who seem to have no personality or intelligence are insanely obsessed with cleaning, cooking and doing all kinds of house chores. When the main character, Joanna Eberhart, moves to Stepford, she notices the oddness of the town. Joanna starts of a friendship with Bobbie, who is most surprisingly not obsessed with house chores or with her appearance. Joanna and Bobbie want to erect a women’s club, but they are not successful. Nevertheless, they meet
another feminist woman, Charmaine, with whom they commence a friendship. From one day to the next, Charmaine changes and dedicates herself to her husband and household duties. Joanna and Bobbie grow suspicious and Bobbie believes there might be something in the town’s water. Joanna’s suspicion grows stronger when even Bobbie alters her ways and starts acting and dressing like the other Stepford women. After having done some research, Joanna comes up with a theory that the men gather each night to build female robots, replicas of their wives, that will eventually serve as replacements for their real wives. Although she tries to run away, the men manage to find her. They want to disprove her theory by going to her friend Bobbie with the question to cut her own finger. The blood should prove that she is a real woman of flesh and blood. On their way to Bobbie’s house, Joanna starts to think she has become mad and that everything she believed before was due to her madness. When all of them arrive at the house and Bobbie is about to cut her finger, there is a sudden ellipsis in the story. The next chapter commences with Joanna having been transformed into a real Stepford wife, leaving the reader in the dark about the realisation of the transformation.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian story “in which the American New Christian Right and neo-conservatives of the 1980s have seized power in a totalitarian theocratic republic,” the Republic of Gilead (Staels 157). In this regime, the main purpose of sex is procreation, eliminating pleasure. Women have been put into different classes each presenting a different function. The narrative focalizes through the eyes of the Handmaid, Offred. Handmaids are women who were torn away from their family and indoctrinated for the sole purpose of breeding. Afterwards they have been sent to a household where they are expected to become impregnated by the Commander of the house. They have to keep doing this until they are found to be infertile, after which they are put away in the Colonies. Handmaids have a particular dress code and are very much oppressed: they cannot talk to men, they cannot read, they cannot have intimate relationships, they cannot look attractive, etcetera. Whenever a
Handmaid opposes the regime, she is hanged at the Wall, or sent to the Colonies to die. It is undeniable that the story “centered on human rights abuses and particularly the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime” (Tearle 121). Other women in this society are the Wives of the Commanders who contain the highest status of all women, the Marthas who are infertile or too old and therefore used as household maids, the Econowives who have the lowest status, and the Unwomen who are put in the colonies. There are also some classes of men functioning in this society: The Commanders with the most important function, the Eyes who are the spies, the Guardians who guard the centre, and the Angels who can best be described as a kind of soldier. The story contains several flashbacks to a time before the regime was established, with references to Offred’s husband, Luke; her little daughter, Hannah; her mother; and her best friend Moira. At that time, conditions for women had already worsened due to the coup of the new government. Everything changed quickly as suddenly Offred could not work anymore and could not possess any property. Additionally, there are a few flashbacks to the Red Centre, the education centre where the Handmaids were being abused and treated as prisoners. In this Republic, sexual intercourse is a very impersonal and formal act considering that the Wife is involved while the Commander has intercourse with the Handmaid. A Handmaid giving birth is a public event, after which the baby is handed over to the Wife and the Handmaid is sent elsewhere to produce. Despite of this impersonal and unaffectionate society, intimacy and desire cannot be entirely banned. Offred becomes the Commander’s mistress as they secretly meet in his office to play scrabble or to read. One day, he smuggles her into a decadent private party at the Jezebel’s with women working as escorts. The women who rebelled against the government were punished and forced into becoming the sex-slaves of highly-respected men like the Commander. Towards the end of the story, Offred falls in love with the driver Nick and starts an affair with
him. The novel contains an open ending, in which the van of the Eyes comes to get her and the reader does not know exactly what happens to the main character afterwards.

The audio-visual adaptations of the novels elucidate the different context of the stories. In *The Stepford Wives*, the changing concept of feminism between the publishing of the book and the release of the 2004 film is noticeable in the plot differences. Director Frank Oz purposefully deviates from the original ending. The story resolves into a happy ending as Joanna’s husband cooperates with her to take down the system. Besides, the film is much more exaggerated and comical. The narrative had to be adapted to a time-related feminist context, because women have become more emancipated since 1972, making feminist plotlines less valuable. Contradictorily, the television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* remains faithful to the overall plot. Notwithstanding that the director adds some more perspectives to the narrative that were not present in the novel, which is logical considering the fact they transformed the novel into an entire ten-episode-long series. This brings us to the medium which reflects the modern context. Namely, the director chose to render the novel into a series, instead of a film, which gains more popularity these days. Think of “video on demand” like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and more where you can “binge-watch” your favourite series. “Binge-watching” means that “when all episodes of a season were released simultaneously, these shows inspired widespread marathon-viewing sessions” (Matrix 119). “Netflix is changing viewers’ expectations concerning what, how, and when they watch TV. As a result, viewers not surprisingly are watching more television, including in larger doses at a time” (Matrix 220). This makes series popular because people are able to “binge-watch” them anywhere and anytime.

One of the goals of this paper is to uncover the alignments and differences between the two different dystopian novels, *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, considering the way in which women are oppressed. The two stories represent an archaic image of the female
gender in an entirely different way. The motivation of adding the recent audio-visuals to this research is to recognize the different timeframes. To be more clear, the differences between the novel and its audio-visual adaptation accentuate the different historical context. The audio-visuals have to adapt the narrative to a modern context, which is in this case the renewed feminist context or the popular medium of a series. The public’s perspective is thus a significant aspect in this paper. The main goal is to provide an answer to which features the authors tend to use to confront their public with female oppression and how the directors try to appeal their public with their audio-visual adaptations.

This paper has been composed as the result of various steps. First of all, I consulted sources about dystopias, about the authors, and about adaptation studies to gather general knowledge about the study fields. Next, I performed close-readings of the novels of The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale, followed by a “close-watching” of the film The Stepford Wives and the television series The Handmaid’s Tale. Based on these readings, and taking a comparative transmedial perspective, I have analysed how women in the stories are being oppressed.

This dissertation is divided into four major chapters. In the first chapter, I will clarify the evolution of the dystopian genre and how the role of feminists intervenes. The second chapter contains an analysis of The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale as well as a comparison between both. In the third chapter, I look into the signification of transmediality and audio-visual adaptations, after which I compare the audio-visual adaptations of The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale to the novel they were based on.
1. The Origin of Dystopia and the Feminist Role

1.1. What is a “Dystopia”? 

In order to understand the meaning of “dystopia,” the meaning of “utopia” has to be clarified first. Morphologically, the term contains an ambiguous signification: “designed as a eu-topian “good place” and fictionally constructed as a ou-topian “non-place”” (Bammer 11). The Dictionary of the Académie Française defines “utopia” as “It means, That which is no place, nowhere” (Bammer 12). The novel by Thomas More, Utopia (1516) first mentions the word “utopia”. In his work, More presents “an alternative society”, an island called “Utopia,” in which all the problems of “early-sixteenth-century Europe (especially England)” have been solved (Booker 53). Booker explains that this “Utopia” is an island with very progressive ideas, in which women are given more opportunities than they had in England at that time, for example education and employment. Although More still considered women to be inferior in manifold ways, his beliefs were rather revolutionary and feminist considering the timeframe. Additionally, Ruth Levitas defines “utopia” as “the desire for a better way of being” (Levitas 198). Cavalcanti specifies this definition by addressing “women’s expression of desire for a different (better) way of being” (Cavalcanti 50).

Much later, in the 20th century, utopia received a different connotation as people became sceptical towards the term “utopia”. The “critical utopia (…) shaped by (…) feminist (…) thought,” that arose in the 1960s, criticizes utopian writings and challenges the “limits of the traditional utopia” (Baccolini & Moylan 2). Van Gheluwe supports this claim by saying that these utopias differ “from the traditional expressions by adopting a more self-critical attitude towards their own oppressive impulses” (Van Gheluwe 8). People began to recognize the dangers in utopian societies.
The term “dystopia” is literally the opposite of “utopia”. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines dystopia as “an imaginary place of state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression, or terror” (qtd. In Kaplan 13). According to Elliott, the genre of “dystopia” originated because of “developments in the twentieth century” which “have led to widespread skepticism toward possibility of utopia” (qtd. In Booker 4).

Increasingly, people began to realize the downside of utopia: namely, a society can never be entirely good to everyone. There are always people who take more benefit from it than others. The utopian genre became overshadowed by the rise of dystopia. As Booker defines it, “dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism” (Booker 3). Utopia and dystopia are on the one hand each other’s opposites, but are on the other hand very closely related to one another: “Margaret Atwood grasps this interrelation well when she says that (...) “you see something more like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia.” (Kaplan 13). To be precise, every utopia has its disadvantages, and every dystopia has advantages.

Additionally, contemporary women writers, such as Margaret Atwood, “increasingly foreground (...) the questioning of generic conventions which created “a “new” genre, such as the “critical dystopia,” or works of science fiction that contain both utopian and dystopian elements” (Baccolini 13). The “critical dystopia” is thus a dystopia invented by feminist writers which still contains utopian elements. As mentioned above, a dystopia cannot be fully a dystopia. To be precise, there is a hidden utopia behind every dystopia and the other way around. Although the critical dystopia is a dystopia, “the ambiguous, open endings of these novels (...) maintain the utopian impulse within the work” (Baccolini 18). Schmeink describes “critical dystopias” as “negative depictions of future societies that critique the utopian project, while retaining a possibility for hope or a different outcome” (Schmeink 7).
This literary genre that developed during the 1980s and 1990s destruct utopias but still remains hopeful. Some “science fiction novels negate the notions of utopia and dystopia as mutually exclusive terms to describe a future alternative society. The science fiction novels of some women writers contain, instead, both elements at once” (Baccolini 18). In short, feminist authors write about future societies including both utopian and dystopian elements. It is clear that the line between the two genres is rather vague and can be crossed easily.

1.2. The Causes of Dystopian Writing

According to Booker, “the rise of science as a discourse of authority in the Enlightenment” is the primary cause behind the “explosion of utopian thought and a corresponding wave of dystopian reactions” (Booker 5). Science ruined our previous beliefs in a just world controlled by a greater power. Science namely “presented humankind with the horrifying vision of a universe gradually decaying toward a condition of randomness” (ibid). Suddenly, scientists, like Darwin and Copernicus were suggesting that the “human species” was not “created by God” with a “divine plan” (Booker 6). People began to feel useless and invaluable in a world that was not spiralling around humankind. People felt threatened by the power of science and technology, as this is reflected in many dystopias focussing on the morality of science. Booker explains that “evolution more and more began to be conceived as having a dark side,” which inspired dystopian stories (Booker 6).

Furthermore, Kaplan claims in his work Climate Trauma that society experiencing a collective post-traumatic stress disorder may lead to some kind of “pretrauma”, which is expressed in the dystopian narrative. In other words, due to previous disaster in history, people are more frightened of future catastrophe. Kaplan adds to this that “media images (…) create (…) “cultural trauma,” when people live in fear of imminent disaster and fears of future threat dominate consciousness” (Kaplan 24). This “pretrauma,” encouraged by media, then
causes a boom of dystopian fiction. Kaplan acknowledges 9/11 as an example of a major turning point for American dystopian fiction. Likewise, “the impact of the realities of global warming” had a great influence on dystopian writers (Kaplan 1). All of this can lead to dystopias about “totalitarian regimes,” like Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale or dystopias “preoccupied with the end of the world as inhabitable for humans,” as in Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (Kaplan 4).

1.3. The Main Goal of Dystopia

The main goal of the dystopian novel describing a future catastrophic world is “that imagined future selves have an impact on one’s current view of self” (Kaplan 6). Generations should be able to learn from these narratives in order to prevent future social and political collapses: “we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future” (Baccolini & Moylan 7). Dystopian novels thus have a didactic purpose expressed by “writers with an ethical and political concern” (Baccolini & Moylan 1-2). They are mainly about worlds “that have long suffered deprivation – worlds that slowly have been declining over a long time” (Kaplan 30). The causes for these dystopias are already present in our world. Therefore, these novels not only warn us for the future but also for the present: “dystopian literature generally (…) constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems” (Booker 3). Schmeink supports this claim by saying that these stories “serve to address current technological changes, their social and political impact, as they are felt in our lives. More so, sf imagines possible extrapolations of how these changes progress and might turn out should the current path be followed further” (Schmeink 7). Such dystopias that speculate about a failed future are called “speculative fiction”. Atwood is known for her “speculative fiction (…) which rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence” (Howells 162). Atwood defines it as a narrative about “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely” (Kaplan 31-32). This “speculative fiction”
shows us what could happen if some contemporary tendencies were to take on an unhealthy prominence. This should prevent humanity of making the same mistake: it “allows a utopian space to emerge, in which global issues such as the war on terror can be solved and attacks such as those on 9/11 could be prevented” (Schmeink 17).

1.4. The Feminist Role in Dystopia

Gender plays a significant role in the dystopian genre. The dominant male perspective of novels becomes a source of concern: “feminist criticism has focused on the ways in which women were marginalized into noncanonical genres, on women’s use of generic forms traditionally dominated by men, and women’s use of genres of their own” (Baccolini 15).

Female writers should be more recognized. Literature plays a huge part in the fact that female emancipation has not completed yet. In the dystopian narratives about female repression, women are mostly denied any form of literary expression and intellectual development. Nevertheless, female illiteracy is not the only concern of the feminists: “feminists challenged traditional conventions in a multitude of areas within the so-called private sphere, such as sexuality, reproductive rights, marriage as institution, beauty and fashion regimes, and, in fact, the very notion of gender itself” (Schweishelm 111). Dystopian novels illustrate major feminist concerns about the unequal gender roles in traditional society. Literature is thus an meaningful form for the feminists to express themselves: “American feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s was a liberating literature, a female body of texts which sought to liberate both women and writing from the constraints of masculinist double standards in literature and life” (Lauret 1). However, feminist dystopias tend to exaggerate: “in terms of narrative technique, feminist dystopias paint an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes, as if they were placed under magnifying glass” (Cavalcanti 53). As it is stated earlier, dystopian novels try to warn the people for tendencies in our present-day life. This exaggeration allows the message to come across.
Margaret Atwood is an important example of a feminist dystopian writer. As mentioned before, she writes hopeful “critical dystopias” that are “speculative fictions” about current dangerous tendencies (supra). Atwood’s narratives that portray female abuse and oppression by male characters, are “directed against patriarchal oppression, which was loudly attacked by the feminism of the time” (Becker 155). She elucidates inappropriate conservative and traditional ideas of gender roles in modern times. Likewise, Ira Levin tends to write his dystopias from a female perspective. His genre is called the “female gothic,” which “‘implies the horrors of patriarchal control over women’s minds and bodies and at the same time veils a proto-feminist celebration of female survival and even accomplishment’ (Williams 2007, p. 88)” (qtd. In Whelehan 383-384). Levin’s stories reflect the particular timeframe of Women’s Liberation Movements of the 1970s: “the 1970s was a crucial period for feminism in the United States (…). Membership in Women’s Liberation groups grew spectacularly” (Hogeland 1). Despite of the manifold resistances, women were still fighting back. They were gradually moving upwards the social ladder and were being recognized for their values. This popularity of the Women’s Liberation Movement is very much palpable in Levin’s work.

These feminist dystopias portray political and cultural tendencies of that time: “the ensuing recession and the gathering momentum of the New Right provided a rude awakening. The notorious backlash of neo-conservative and religious-fundamentalist anti-feminism got into its stride in the mid-1970s, and was most spectacularly successful in the eventual defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982” (Lauret 71). The rise of anti-feminism and the defeat of the women’s rights caused this fear reflected in both *The Stepford Wives* from 1972 and *The Handmaid’s Tale* from 1985. According to Cavalcanti, “feminist critical dystopia” is “a major form of expression of women’s hopes and fears” (Cavalcanti 47). Both dystopias discussed in this paper are an expression of the fear that women will lose all their human rights. Women in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are either put in the position
of unintelligent but good-looking housewives or of objectified breeding stock. These women, put under the power of their men, are not allowed to read or have personal desires, out of fear for rebellion.

1.5. Conclusion

The term “Dystopia” on the one hand is the opposite of “Utopia,” while on the other hand it is also related to it. What for the one person is a utopia could be a dystopia for the other. “Critical Dystopias,” as it is called by Margaret Atwood, are more positive dystopias with an open ending offering a utopian thought. The need for dystopias arose due to technological and scientific developments which caused human’s neglect. Terroristic events stimulate the collective fear, which causes a boom of dystopias. Dystopian authors have a political, ecological, cultural or religious concern as they intend to warn people with their narratives. Namely, they want to prevent a catastrophic future based on currently human-endangering tendencies by exaggerating these tendencies in their dystopian fiction. Atwood calls this “speculative fiction”. There are a lot of feminist dystopian writers who want to express their concerns by rebelling against the male-dominated canon. Both Levin and Atwood write through the female perspective, focussing their narratives on women being oppressed by a patriarchal power. While The Stepford Wives express the fear of women to become unintelligent and sexualized housewives, The Handmaid’s Tale expresses women’s fear to become objectified and desexualized. Both women are dehumanized in their own way.
2. Gender/women in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

2.1. Analysis of *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin (1972)

The novel of *The Stepford Wives* about robotic housewives reflects “the horrors of patriarchal control over women’s minds and bodies” (Whelehan 383-84). The women of Stepford are described as unrealistic beauty ideals with the perfect figure, hairstyle and bosom, accomplishing their housework impeccably. They embody the stereotypes of femininity: “the Stepford woman’s body is thoroughly homogenized to meet the purported norms of patriarchal femininity” (Scheiwhelm 112). The women create the impression as if they came directly out of a television commercial for a household product. They clean, iron and cook almost automatically, showing the least interest in leisure or liberation movements. The few words in italics and the manifold repetitions in the book emphasize their obsession with household duties. Throughout the narrative it becomes clear that the men are behind this extraordinary behaviour as the novel includes some implications that they replace their wives with replicas. Apparently these very attractive yet shallow women are considered the ideal wives by the Stepford men. This novel paints “a gloomy picture of the predicament of women in a society that values them only for the way they fit with dominant cultural notions of femininity—dehumanising them in the process.” (Whelehan 372). Namely, their looks and duties are a decisive feature regarded as more important than their personality. However, feminists like Wollstonecraft believe that “a woman who relies entirely on physical beauty, charm and the illusory appeal of weakness and ignorance can neither fulfil her duties nor be a desirable partner in marriage” (qtd. in Colebrook 125). The main character, Joanna Eberhart, and her friends Bobbie and Charmaine are, in contrast to the Stepford women, open-minded and liberal. Although Joanna attempts to discover the reasons behind these robotic Stepford women, she and her friends will eventually suffer the same fate as the other housewives.
Joanna’s husband, Walter, is a very ambiguous character. As he appears to be a liberal-minded man on the one hand, while on the other hand he appears to be brainwashed by the Men’s Association and charmed by their secret practices. Nonetheless, there is no explicit evidence in the narrative that proves Joanna’s theory of the robotic wives. This renders the reader doubtful at times, especially near the end when the protagonist starts to doubt herself. However, the last chapter describing a transformed Joanna, proves her right after all.

2.1.1. The Characteristics of the Stepford Wives

A first striking characteristic in the novel is the many detailed and exaggerated descriptions of the Stepford wives. They are consistently dressed up, or rather overdressed, and wear make-up at all times. The Welcome Wagon lady for example has red nails, red lips and twinkling eyes and teeth. Carol Van Sant has a “profile of too-big bosom. (…) Her red hair was neat and gleaming; her thin-nosed face looked thoughtful (and damn it all, intelligent); her big purpled breasts bobbed with her scrubbing” (10). There is a lot of emphasis on her too-big bosom referring to this patriarchal ideal of femininity which objectifies women. Barbara Chamalian is “a square-jawed brown-haired woman, in a snug pink dress molding an exceptionally good figure” and “she smiled, widely and attractive” (24). The perfect figure and her toothpaste smile are described. Mrs Cornell “was tall and blond, long-legged, full-bosomed” (114). The Stepford wives occur in all kinds of forms with various kinds of dresses and hairstyles, like Barbie dolls. As the novel of Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven* confirms: “shallow and neurotic to the extreme, Barbie is the stereotypic decorative woman. She accepts without question the pop culture definition of beauty based on impossible body measurements and ludicrous get-ups” (qtd. In Snodgrass 55). Barbie is also portrayed as shallow, stereotypical and unrealistically perfect. Kit Sandersen’s “figure, in a short sky-blue dress, was almost as terrific as Charmaine’s,” who is a model (47). Likewise, they can be compared to an idealistic – and unrealistic – model from a magazine: as the novel
is “a blight on young women’s coming of age, the beauty myth trains all eyes on an unachievable goal” (Snodgrass 53). The Stepford women are examples of this unachievable beauty myth. At the end of the novel, Joanna herself underwent a huge metamorphoses and suddenly has thick-lashed eyes and red lips. From then on she looks like all the other Stepford women. The focus on the appearances of the women elucidates this superficial idea of femininity in the narrative: “a Western enemy of female content is the desire for a voluptuous, head-turning form” (Snodgrass 55). These Stepford women are examples of traditional women around 1915 which, according to Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

served vanity, competition, and public dictum by selecting clothes and finery intended to make them beautiful – neck-wearying plumes and hats, steel and whalebone corsets, petticoats and trains that trailed the ground, and stylish, ill-fitting shoes. Their models were advertisements and works of art that depicted females as too delicate for adventure or exercise and too feminine for anything but decoration. (qtd in Snodgrass 53)

Femininity is linked to the nice-looking, decorative and brainless gender. Their only goal is to make themselves look attractive which makes them unfit for intensive arduous work.

Additionally, these women even look as if they came out of a commercial: “the women in Stepford reproduce the kind of bland clichés found on television advertisements for domestic products” (Whelehan 380). The Welcome Wagon lady for example tries to sell local products to Joanna. Besides, while talking to Joanna, Carol “shook her neat red-haired shampoo-commercial head turning from her wiping” and “Mary Ann smiled and shook her head, swaying her sheaves of straight blond hair” (24). Both could be actresses of a shampoo-commercial because of the way they shake their perfectly looking hair. Moreover, Kit’s “ivory vinyl floor looked as if one of those plastic shields in the commercials had just floated down onto it” (46). Her floor resembles one in a commercial for floor wax. During the
conversation between Kit and Joanna, Kit only shows interest in her laundry: “‘These things came out nice and white didn’t they?’ She put the folded T-shirt into the laundry basket, smiling. Like an actress in a commercial” (48). It seems as if she tries to promote some kind of detergent. Throughout the narrative, there are thus several comparisons with actresses from commercials, some more explicit than others: “That’s what they all were, all the Stepford wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real” (49). The resemblance of Stepford to a commercial with their fake actresses clearly bothers Joanna. When Bobbie changes into one of them, Joanna confronts Walter with the fact that suddenly Bobbie’s “house is like a commercial. Like Carol’s, Donna’s, and Kit Sundersen’s” (96). This is a sign for Joanna that something is definitely wrong with the town and that it is contagious above all. These references to commercials indicate how theatrical and fake these women are.

Furthermore, the exaggerated vocabulary emphasizes the absurdity of these busy Stepford women. Joanna uses a lot of adjectives to describe Carol Van Sant’s kitchen: “What was so top-priority-urgent in that fluorescent-lighted copper-pot-hanging kitchen?” (9). There is some irony present in this sentence which emphasizes how over-the-top-perfect Carol’s kitchen looks. Joanna says to her husband Walter: “That Carol Van Sant is not to be believed (…) She can’t come over for a cup of coffee because she has to wax the family-room floor. Ted goes to the Men’s Association every night and she stays home doing housework” (10). Again, the irony behind this sentence is very clear. By repeating Carol’s exact words, and emphasizing some of them, she makes it sound ridiculous, for Carol’s priorities are almost unbelievable to Joanna. Likewise, the abundant repetitions in the novel emphasize their uncontrollable impulses to clean. Bobbie: “I’m beginning to think there’s a – nationwide contest I haven’t heard about,” she said (…). ‘A million dollars and – Paul Newman for the
cleanest house by next Christmas. I mean, it’s scrub, scrub, scrub; wax, wax, wax’ (21). The author constantly describes Carol doing household chores during her conversation with Joanna: “squeezing her sponge in a bucket of sudsy water (…) squeezed the sponge out above the bucket (…) reached the sponge to the top of the next span of folds (…) began wiping the folds with firm downstrokes, each one neatly overlapping the one before” (23). This repetitive description of Carol cleaning her windows emphasizes the obsessive cleaning habit of these wives. Besides, Mary Ann Stavros mentions: “There’s so much to do around the house. You know” (24). This sentence is repeated various times in the book, for example by Joanna herself after she has changed: “I’ve been taking better care of myself lately.’ (…) There’s been so much to do around the house? You know how it is” (137). Moreover, when Joanna confronts Bobbie for the second time with the fact that she has changed, Bobbie repeats the exact same words as the first time: “I simply realized that I was awfully sloppy and self-indulgent, and now I’m doing my job conscientiously, the way Dave does his” (102). These lines resemble the previous words of Bobbie: “she said, ‘Yes, I’ve changed. I realized I was being awfully sloppy and self-indulgent. (…) I’ve decided to do my job conscientiously, the way Dave does his” (93). This indicates that the words are programmed in their brains. Thus, the language as an indication for the repetitive and robotic behaviour of the wives is a very crucial aspect in the novel.

Moreover, these women seem to have no personality or interests at all. At first, as Joanna is still unaware of what is going on, she believes that these women may possess hidden qualities: “The women she had met the past few days (…), were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties. Maybe when she got to know them better she would find they had farther-reaching thoughts and concerns” (2). However, when Joanna tells the Welcome Wagon lady that she and her husband are interested in the Women’s Liberation Movement, the lady is astonished. They are programmed to be
ignorant which makes them unable to stand up for their rights. When Bobbie calls Joanna because she craves to know someone not solely focused on household duties, she introduces herself with the phrase: “Are you really not deeply concerned about whether pink soap pads are better than blue ones or vice versa?,” which refers to the brainless conversations of the Stepford women and their over-acting (20). Although Bobbie and Joanna “agreed that the women they had met seemed unlikely to welcome even so small a step to liberation,” they want to organize a get-together with the Stepford wives. Joanna asks Carol: “Doesn’t it bother you (…) that the central organization here in Stepford, the only organization that does anything significant as far as community projects are concerned, is off limits to women? Doesn’t that seem a little archaic to you?” (23). Carol responds that she has other responsibilities and that her husband Ted is better suited for such things. She pictures herself not intelligent or sophisticated enough to participate in such movement, which is a typical archaic idea of women. Like the other women, Mary Ann Stavros refuses because she does not “have time for anything like that” and that she does not “feel much need for relaxation” (24-25). The Stepford women do not possess any desire of their own, but feel satisfied by doing what they are told. When Joanna confronts Kit with her previous role as president in the Women’s Club, Kit avoids the conversation and claims it ceased to exist because everyone lost interest in it. But in fact, everything they say and do is being controlled by their men. Joanna rhymes: “They never stop, these Stepford Wives. They work like robots all their lives” (73). These lines contain some ironic truth. Although the protagonist does not know this yet, it will become clear that these women are indeed replaced by robots. At the very end of the novel, Joanna stopped with photography as she believes it was a waste of time: “‘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 counts, isn’t it?’” (137). She rendered into one of those Stepford wives without a need to have other
interests. This fear of women to lose themselves in their household duties is unreasonable, because “there could be rational, enlightened and liberated marriage, where women cultivated their reason alongside, and in harmony with, their roles as mothers” (Colebrook 124-125). Colebrook argument proves that these Stepford wives are not at all perfect housewives for a good housewife is able to combine her household tasks with a career for example. It is remarkable that the women in the narrative are brainwashed to be unintelligent, otherwise they would rebel.

2.1.2. The Feminist Joanna Eberhart and her Friends

In contrast to the Stepford wives, Joanna is a very open-minded and progressive woman and a true believer in the Women’s Liberation Movement. The novel contains some references to her feminist side, for example her dress code consisting of a shirt and sneakers, which is rather boyish and rebellious in contrast to the Stepford wives. Joanna hopes that “the lives of all four of them would be enriched, rather than diminished, as she has feared, by leaving the city – the filthy, crowded, crime-ridden, but so-alive city” (8). She is a city’s person who believes in progress and evolution, as the city stands for evolution and liberalism since the industrial revolution. It started with “the belief that technology would help us adapt to our environment, help direct human evolution, and become the basis for progress. The new city would be a product of such evolution” (Lehan 154). Besides, “the Enlightenment city had given birth to liberal individualism” (Lehan 157). Joanna is an intelligent woman, unlike the Stepford wives, with different hobbies and interests: “No, she didn’t know how it was, thank God. Not to be like that, a compulsive hausfrau” (10). She is a woman who could never be submissive to her husband: “She wasn’t going to do housework while he was there (…) any more than he was going to do it when she was out somewhere” (14). She will never allow herself to be put in the position of a housewife. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Fancher says to Joanna: “I can understand your not being happy in a town of highly home-oriented women” (106). A
lifestyle like these Stepford women is difficult to imagine for independent women. Joanna is someone who fights for gender equality. For instance, when the men are at their house: “She took part in the talk about them, and the men (except Coba, damn him) paid close attention to her. She felt very good indeed, meeting their questions with wit and good sense” (31-32). She tries to prove herself in order to be regarded as an equal. Joanna is the example that it is “possible (…) for women to go on being women – child rearing, tending the home, maintaining feminine virtues and practices – without excluding themselves from the activity of public reason” (Colebrook 119).

Furthermore, there are some more examples of women who are ambitious just as Joanna. Joanna becomes friends with two other liberal-minded women, Bobbie and Charmaine. Bobbie dresses herself casual with “a blue Snoopy sweatshirt and jeans and sandals” and has dirty toes (20). She is not bothered with her appearance, in contrary to the Stepford wives. Hereby she makes a statement that she is not the kind of person to fit in. Additionally, the rich ex-model, Charmaine, is a free human being who refuses to be dependent of her husband: “Charmaine wasn’t bothered by the sexist injustice. ‘Anything that gets him out of the house nights is fine with me,’ she said” (39). Charmaine is not interested in sex and she is of the opinion that no women really is. Besides, the women outside of Stepford are just as passionate as Joanna and her friends. One day Bobbie mentions to Joanna they did not made a lot of friends so far: “Is that your idea of the ideal community?” (66). On the contrary, when Bobbie went to Norwood, she saw “a dozen women who were rushed and sloppy and irritated and alive” and she wanted to hug them (66). When Joanna and Bobbie visit Norwood together they notice the women there are “alert, lively, and quirky, confirming by contrast the blandness of Stepford women” (76). The real-estate broker says about Stepford: “It’s dead there. We’re much more with-it.” (ibid). This town is the total opposite of Stepford. Near the end of the book, the new woman who arrived at Stepford, Ruthanne
Hendry, also has a free and intelligent spirit. She once wrote a children’s book, *Penny Has a Plan*. Joanna loved her book: “it’s so good to find one where a girl actually *does* something besides make tea for her dolls” (82). She hints at the habits of the Stepford women and relates herself to Penny. These women are the representation of the upcoming feminist and liberal mind-set at that time.

2.1.3. The Practices of the Men’s Association

Throughout the narrative it starts getting clear that the women in Stepford are indeed very unusual and that the Men’s Association is responsible for this. One day when Joanna wants to take pictures of the Men’s Association building, a police car arrives, and she hears the policeman talking inside. The car stops next to her and the officer acts as if he is sincerely interested in photography. When he leaves, the windows of the building are darkened: “He had radioed a message about her, and then he had stalled her with his questions while the message was acted on, the shades pulled down” (53). They obviously have something to hide. When their friend Charmaine has changed, Joanna and Bobbie start getting suspicious and look for a plausible explanation. When even Bobbie has changed, Joanna does some investigation about the history of Stepford. She discovers that the Men’s Association was built up directly after the Women’s Movement ceased to exist, which implies that the men were behind the collapse of the Women’s Movement. On top of this, the woman that Joanna hired to help at her party explains that it is the fault of the Men’s Association that she does not have a job at Stepford anymore. According to her, these men caused the obsessive cleaning habit of the Stepford wives. Besides, Walter is out of house a lot, which is also suspicious and confirms he might be working on Joanna’s replica. Although the Men’s Association fools everyone into believing that they are busy making Christmas toys, Joanna sees through it and confronts Walter: “’What did you do?’ she said. ‘Put a rush to the order? Is that why everyone was so busy this week? Christmas toys; *that’s* a hoot. I’m dying to know. What’s the going
price for a stay-in-the-kitchen wife with big boobs and no demands? A fortune I’ll bet” (120). This elucidates that these men have a very superficial idea of the ideal wife. Likewise, their belief that women should be controlled by their husbands is very conservative and traditional.

In addition to this, there are some signs indicating that these women may be robots, which shows the “overlap between dystopian fiction and science fiction” (Booker 4). When Joanna for example talks to her neighbour, Carol Van Sant, she does not approaches as if she has something to hide. Presumably, Joanna would notice something abnormal about her. Moreover, when Joanna visits Kit, she is doing Marge’s wash because “she’s got a bug of some kind and can’t barely move today.’ (…) ‘I’m sure she’ll be good as new in a day or two,’ she said” (47). Kit is talking about her as if she is an object. Marge probably has to be repaired because there is a bug in her operating system. Besides, when Walter calls Joanna, she hears: “Some construction work was being done at the house (she could hear the whine of machinery in the background),” which indicates that they might be building robots (28). Furthermore, Stepford also contains an industrial area with companies working on: “Optics, CompuTech, Biochemical, Computers, Microtech, Electronics,…” (67). Some technological and electronic acknowledgement could be very useful in the process of making a robot. Remarkably, “a lot of the men who have high-level jobs in them live in Stepford and belong to the Men’s Association” (105). They all have a job that could contribute to the production of these robots. For example, one of the men of the Men’s Association is Ike Mazzard, a magazine illustrator, and sketches Joanna: “Portraits of her. Full faces, three-quarter views, profiles; smiling, not smiling, talking, frowning” (34). Later on, Joanna discovers that Bobbie also has a Mazzard-drawing: “Boy, I wish I looked half this good.” (45). These sketches or reconstructions are improved versions of them which are necessary to build the perfect robotic housewives. Another man, Claude Axhelm, asks Joanna to tape-record lists of words and syllables allegedly for police work. Probably, they use these recordings to construct the
robots, which is proven later on, when Bobbie repeats the exact same words a few times, almost as if these words are programmed. Besides, Dale Coba, president of the Men’s Association, used to work at Disneyland to make human-size puppets who look very much alive. This implicates that he has the skills to build human-like robots. Joanna compares the Stepford women to these figures from Disneyland and then later on finds an article about Coba: “For the past six years he worked in ‘audioanimatronics’ at Disneyland, helping to create the moving and talking presidential figures featured in the August number of National Geographic” (112). He is the mastermind behind the Men’s Association. Although it is never mentioned explicitly, for Joanna this is proof that the men are busy making robots of their wives. This robotic feature is a typical element of dystopian fiction, especially science-fiction stories: “SF had accumulated an extensive vocabulary of meaningful images, such as the robot” (Attebery 12).

Chiefly, the way in which the women are being treated in Stepford is very wrong and unjust. The men believe that women are only “responsible for childcare” and “homemaking” (Colebrook 129). They rather have a fake obedient wife than a loving wife with a free will. Joanna and Bobbie find it odd that the Stepford women stay at home every night while their men are out of the house: “they talked about it – the antiquated sexist unfairness of it, the real injustice, in a town with no women’s organization” (21). Bobbie says: “‘Something fishy is going on here! We’re in the Town That Time Forgot!’” (26). The women behave and are treated in a very archaic way: “nineteenth-century thinking about women was centrally informed by the ideology of home and family” (Bammer 38). For instance, when Coba watches Joanna work in her kitchen, he says: “‘I like to watch women doing little domestic chores.’ ‘You came to the right town,’ she said.” (35). His idea of a perfect woman doing her house chores is also very traditional. At the end of the novel, Walter comments on Joanna’s looks: “it wouldn’t hurt you to look in a mirror once in a while” (98). By accusing her of
neglecting her appearance, Walter does not accept her for who she is and wants her to be someone else. He rather wants a pretty wife than a critical-minded one, just like the other men. The men thus replace their powerful wives with a traditional female robot which they can control. Probably, the men felt threatened because of their intelligent and successful wives and therefore wanted to become superior.

Although Charmaine, Bobbie and Joanna are persuasive and stubborn feminists, eventually they all undergo the transformation of the Stepford wives. First, Joanna notices that Charmaine and Bobbie suddenly look different and talk different. When Joanna calls Charmaine:

‘We’ve let Nettie go,’ Charmaine said. ‘it’s absolutely unbelievable, the sloppy job she was getting away with. The place looks clean at first glance, but boy, look in the corners. (…) Ed shouldn’t have to live with dirt. (…) Ed’s a pretty wonderful guy, and I’ve been lazy and selfish. I’m through playing tennis, and I’m through reading those astrology books. From now on I’m going to do right by Ed, and by Merrill too. I’m lucky to have such a wonderful husband and son.’ (60)

Joanna immediately suspects Charmaine’s husband: “’What did he do to you? (…) Hypnotize you?’” (61). Subsequently, when Bobbie and Dave announce to Joanna that they are going to spend the weekend together, “a sense of beforeness touched her; déjà vu” (79). Namely, as Charmaine also spent a weekend with her husband before she changed, Joanna realizes the same is about to happen with her friend Bobbie. After their weekend, “Bobbie had had her hair done and was absolutely beautiful” and Dave looks happy probably because he replaced his wife with the ‘ideal’ alternative (85). Bobbie acts very distant: “Joanna looked at Bobbie, expecting her to say something funny. Bobbie smiled at her and looked toward the stairs” (86). Afterwards, Joanna realizes that “Bobbie had seemed different; she – hadn’t said the sort
of things she usually did, and she’d moved more slowly too” (91). When Joanna calls Bobbie, Bobbie even asks “‘Who is this?’” as if she would not recognize her voice (90). Because Joanna still does not want to believe what is going on, she visits Bobbie. She notices something has changed around the house too: “Bobbie, in her immaculate living room – cushions all fluffed, woodwork gleaming, magazines fanned on the polished table behind the sofa – smiled at Joanna” (92). Likewise Bobbie “looked (…) beautiful, her hair done, her face made up. And she was wearing some kind of padded high-uplift bra under her green sweater, and a hip-whittling girdle under the brown plated skirt” (93). She changed from a casual and cheerful woman into this serious, dressed-up lady: “She said, ‘Yes, I’ve changed. I realized I was being awfully sloppy and self-indulgent. It’s no disgrace to be a good homemaker. I’ve decided to do my job conscientiously, the way Dave does his, and to be more careful about my appearance’” (93). Joanna realizes her time has almost come and that if she does not hurry, she will end up just like her friends.

2.1.4. Joanna’s Husband Walter

Joanna’s husband, Walter is a very ambiguous character. Although Walter is as open-minded as Joanna at the beginning, throughout the narrative he changes into a real conservative man who treats women as inferior. First, he is interested in the Women’s Liberation Movement and agrees that “the no-women-allowed business is archaic” (6). He joins the Men’s Association allegedly to change it from the inside and promises Joanna to protest together if it is not open for women within six months. Notwithstanding, he loses track of this promise and becomes a true member of the club that succeeded in gradually brainwashing him. One night, Joanna catches Walter masturbating next to her, which is the first indication that he loses interest in her and finds her less attractive. However, he wants Joanna to be part of their conversations when the men come over to their house: “a couple of them are die-hard men-only’s; it won’t do them any harm to hear a woman make intelligent
comments” (28-29). Once again, Walter appears to be on her side. The moment Joanna proposes to move, Walter acts as if he is willing to, but not until next summer because he knows she will be changed by then. When Joanna wants to move as quick as possible after her friend Bobbie changed, they fight about it. Walter deceives her into believing it is all in her head. According to him, Bobbie had to clean eventually: “they realized they’d been lazy and negligent. If Bobbie’s taking an interest in her appearance, it’s about time” (97-98). He starts treating the women as if they have duties and obligations. Then he directs his criticism towards her: “it wouldn’t hurt you to look in a mirror once in a while”, which shifts the conversation by putting the blame on her (98). Joanna begins to comprehend he is part of the complot: “‘Is that what you want? (…) a cute little gussied-up hausfrau? (…) Is that why Stepford was the only place to move? Did somebody pass the message to you? (…)'” (ibid).

Out of fear to be found out, Walter portrays Joanna as the crazy one and convinces her to go see a psychiatrist. However, Joanna’s thoughts are not at ease. When she overhears him on the phone later on saying “‘not sure I can handle her myself’,” she is convinced that she cannot trust him anymore (122). Throughout the narrative, Walter gradually takes over the extremely archaic ideas of The Men’s Association.

2.1.5. A Doubtful Protagonist

Nonetheless, it has never been explicitly proven that the hypothesis about the men making female robots is real. When the men find Joanna after she ran away, they appear to be concerned about her health. The men found out about her theory:

‘Nobody’s making robots,” Frank said. ‘You must think we’re a hell of a lot smarter than we really are,’ the man in the middle said. ‘Robots that can drive cars? And cook meals? And trim kids’ hair?’ ‘And so real-looking that the kids wouldn’t notice?’ The
third man said. (…) You must think we’re town full of geniuses,’ the man in the middle said. (127)

They want to prove her wrong so they can take her home afterwards: “Suppose one of these women you think is a robot – suppose she was to cut herself on the finger, and bleed. Would that convince you she was a real person? Or would you say we made robots with blood under the skin?” (129). Joanna agrees to follow them to Bobbie’s house. The men let her walk behind as far as she feels comfortable with to gain her trust. The intentions of the men are not clear as they appear to be genuine. Then the reader notices how Joanna begins to convince herself that Bobbie will bleed and that everything was a coincidence. She blames herself for distrusting Walter and is willing to go on with therapy. Is she walking into a trap or can it possibly be that the entire narrative has been told by an unreliable narrator? “Unreliable narration” is “a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator’s ‘unreliability’” (Nünning 30). Joanna starts convincing herself along with the readers that she is the one becoming mad, which could shift the entire story and make her unreliable. The reader never knows what actually happens when they all arrive at Bobbie’s house. However, the last chapter is told through Ruthanne’s eyes walking into Joanna who has changed too, which adds some intelligibility to the narrative. The ending proves that Joanna was not mad after all and that the men, along with her husband, manipulated her into believing she imagined everything.

2.1.6. Conclusion

The novel of The Stepford Wives lays its emphasis on the appearance of the housewives and their compulsive cleaning disorder. The wives look flawless at whatever they are doing at every possible time of the day. With their unblemished appearance and their fake behaviour it almost seems as if they are actresses from commercials promoting domestic
products. The abundant repetitions and emphases in the novel highlight the wives’ obsession for household chores and unveil that some standard sentences and words have been programmed in their brain. The Men’s Association acts very suspicious and the several signs in the book lead to their act of building robots who resemble their wives. Their ideas about women who should be obedient and attractive are very archaic. The men probably felt threatened by their successful wives and therefore wanted to compensate. Unlike the obedient Stepford women, Joanna is a very independent, liberal-minded city’s person. Although she is stubborn and undertakes everything to reveal the men’s practices, she is not able to prevent them of changing her. Walter, who at first seemed to be on her side, has been completely brainwashed by the Men’s Association with whom he sides to eliminate his wife. The men appear to be masters in manipulating Joanna when they get her to doubt herself and her theory.

2.2. Analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985)

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) represents a future America in which the female gender is being oppressed by the Republic of Gilead. The new government eliminated all women’s rights and tore their families apart to recreate a society in which each woman has her place. Allegedly, this is “a response (…) to the infertility caused by the ecological imbalance,” which is “merely an excuse for a government that has no other interests than to establish the elite’s privileged position in the hierarchy” (Gottlieb 105-6). Some men wanted to take power, so they claim it is for humankind’s sake and justify this regime by transforming the Bible to their own advantage: “the government uses the letter but not the spirit of the Bible to cover up for its own self-serving, power-hungry actions” (Gottlieb 105). As “Atwood shares the dystopian impulse to shock readers into an awareness of dangerous trends in our present worlds,” *The Handmaid’s Tale* warns her readers for the uprising of neo-conservatives and extreme patriarchal Christians (Howells 164). Staels adds
to this that the novel “unmasks the dangers of the present-day post- or antifeminism” (175).
The narrative reflects the fear of women to lose their rights and become dehumanized in a
country governed by the wrong people. Atwood presents a state evolving from “a modern
state with its civilized legal system based on inalienable human rights to a barbaric state
where the entire female sex is enslaved by the state through law” (Gottlieb 106). History
repeats itself for tendencies like this have already occurred in history, e.g. “the methods of
Hitler in Germany” (ibid). Namely, Gottlieb claims that “Gilead (…) borrows its methods of
terror and intimidation from fascism: the entire female population is reduced to life in an
enormous system of concentration camps, with inmates at various levels of degradation”
(ibid). Dehumanization of a certain group of people is a realistic phenomenon as it has
happened before in the past. Whether they do it to some religious-orientated group or to a
gender group, the intentions behind it remain the same. Dystopian novels like this intend to
warn us for this repetitive mistake of humanity.

There are many major aspects of female repression present in *The Handmaid’s Tale.*
The women are put into classes, thereby losing their personality. The main character, Offred,
functions as a Handmaid, meaning that she is objectified as breeding stock. Handmaids are
not allowed manifold things. They are obliged to wear unattractive long dresses, as breeding
should be their only function: “women are (…) silenced and reduced to their biological
function” (Baccolini 21). Remarkably, the government focusses more on procreation than on
the individual feelings and needs of human beings. The Handmaids’ “only purpose is to
provide healthy babies for the leaders’ families” (Van Gheluwe 14). Therefore a lot of
pressure is put on them, which is reflected in the metaphor of the red tulip to which Offred
compares herself (infra). The flashbacks in the narrative are significant elements that
demonstrate how women evolved into this inferior position. Despite the strict regime and their
cruel punishments, Offred attempts to use her female charms whenever she can. She meets
two men with whom she starts an affair, though one rather compulsory while the other one voluntarily. These affairs risk her life but also make it more bearable. Likewise, the men tend to abuse their superior position, as they easily break the law and let sexual desires come to the surface. This proves that, despite the attempts, sexual desire cannot be erased: “sexuality is a principal focus for the exercise of religious totalitarianism in Gilead” (Booker 78). There are some examples of female resistance noticeable in the novel and although Offred does not actively oppose the system, she passively opposes it by telling her story. Still, several characters believe that this new republic is an improvement. Finally, the ending is an open ending with an ambiguous undertone for it is not clear what is about to happen to the protagonist.

2.2.1. The Female Oppression: the Handmaids

Women are put into different classes represented by different colours of clothing. They cannot be unique: “women in this society exist not as individuals but as members of well-defined groups” (Booker 78). The Wives of the Commanders belong to the highest class of women and are dressed in blue. According to John Gage blue may refer to “the mantle of the Virgin Mary” (Gage 15). He also states that blue stands for purity, heaven and femininity. Therefore the Wives are comparable to the Virgin Mary who, according to the bible, also wears blue and received a baby without having had sexual intercourse. Secondly, the “Marthas,” who are dressed in green, are infertile or too old to breed and are therefore used as maids of the household. Thirdly, the “Aunts” are “older, collaborationist women” who educate the Handmaids (Baccolini 21). Fourthly, the “Econowives,” who are the wives of the poorer men, are clothed in striped dresses: red, blue and green, without one specific colour, as they possess no specific function. Fifthly, the “Unwomen,” who are dressed in long grey dresses, are put in the Colonies “to clean toxic dumps and radiation spills” (Baccolini 21).
These women are mainly unconverted nuns, lesbians, feminists and unproductive Handmaids. The classes of women dispose of their uniqueness.

Finally, the Handmaids are consistently dressed in red, “the colour of blood, which defines us” (18). Apparently, “the terms ‘red’, ‘rouge’, ‘rot’, or ‘rosso’ derive from the Sanskrit (…) meaning ‘blood’” (Gage 110). On the one hand, the colour may refer to their menstruation, confronting them each time with the failure of getting pregnant, which increases their chance to be sent to the Colonies. Snodgrass proves that Handmaids are “bearing the traditional color of (…) menstrual discharge” (Snodgrass 249). On the other hand, a delivery also involves blood. Thus, the colour of their dress definitely refers to their function as a Handmaid. Their dresses are also long and concealing, because they cannot be seductive and therefore cannot show too much skin. In comparison to the Handmaids, the Japanese tourists “seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom. Westernized, they used to call it” (38). Offred can barely remember the time she dressed like this: “Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my tights and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest” (72). The Republic brainwashed her into believing it to be shameful to show some skin. They are so heavily indoctrinated by the Aunts: “the Aunts gladly adopt the perspective that it is shameful to portray women as sex objects for a man’s gratification, but they conclude that women had therefore better be sexless objects” (Staels 161). Both visions of women are extremely wrong in their own way. The Handmaids are not allowed to wear makeup, nail polish, or lotions allegedly because their health is more valuable. The white wings around their face make it hard to have eye contact, which is forbidden. The Handmaids are portrayed as shameful and inferior: “the frown [of the Martha, Rita] isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck”
(19-20). They are not sure whether the Republic should be embarrassed about the Handmaids’ function or rather be proud of them: “Everyone is unsure about our exact status” (23). Namely, they serve as sex-slaves for future’s sake, which has a negative as well as a positive connotation. The clothes of the Handmaids reduce them to their function as breeding stock.

Additionally, the Handmaids have innumerable restrictions in this republic erected by “the American New Christian Right and neo-conservatives of the 1980s” (Staels 157). When someone says goodbye he or she has to say the words: “Under His Eye,” referring to the fact that they are always being watched by the Eyes. Offred is someone who is constructed by the government: “my self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes speeches. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (76). They want to destroy her identity: “memories of the past, together with personal desires, are supposed to fade away” (Staels 159). When the republic was erected, the Handmaids received a new name of the government, “a patronymic composed of the possessive preposition of and the first names of the men who own them,” like “Offred” (Baccolini 21). This patronymic emphasizes the fact that she is treated as an object, which prevents her of possessing anything herself. Handmaids may only be sexually involved with the Commander within the purpose of breeding. The Wives are allowed to hit the Handmaids and the Handmaids can only speak to them when asked. As Aunt Lydia said: “Try to think of it from their point of view (…). It isn’t easy for them” (24). However, the feelings of the Handmaids are entirely neglected. They cannot express inappropriate emotions like crying or laughing, as it would be described as hysteria and they would get pills and injections. This neglecting of the psychological and emotional wellbeing comes across as very archaic. Liquor, coffee and cigarettes are forbidden for the Handmaids, because it might ruin their chances to become pregnant. Likewise, a Handmaid cannot afford herself to be sick or else she would be send to the Colonies: “Anything lingering, weakening, a loss of flesh or appetite, a fall of hair, a failure of the glands, would be terminal” (163).
They are not allowed to make friends or have casual talks with a man, let alone seduce him, as any form of desire is strictly forbidden: “innocent flirting can lead to execution” (Van Gheluwe 14). Handmaids can never read or write, because of the republic’s fear they would rebel: “the powers-that-be often try to manipulate the population’s disposition towards society by managing and adjusting its everyday speech” (Van Gheluwe 12). Staels proves this claim to be applicable for Gilead by saying that “Gilead excludes all exchange of personal speech. (...) Any aesthetic, creative use of language is necessarily outlawed” (Staels 159). If they become illiterate and unintelligent, they will be unaware of the unjustness of the regime. Only the men, who adjusted the bible in favour of their new regime focussing on breeding, are allowed to read from the bible. If a Handmaid breaks any of these laws, they will be hanged at the Salvaging for treachery or sinfulness. The Handmaid’s are being objectified and dehumanized by the government.

2.2.2. Procreation as a Main Goal

The government focusses on procreation: “right-wing fundamentalists create a repressive theocracy where reproduction is compulsory” (Baccolini 21). The Republic of Gilead “forces fertile women into the role of breeder” because of “pollution and radiation fallout” which endangered “normal conception” (Snodgrass 203). Sexual intercourse, which is called a “Ceremony”, is presented as an emotionless, passionless and impersonal weekly ritual. Beforehand, the entire household gathers to listen to some Bible readings. Afterwards, the Commander has sexual intercourse with the Handmaid, while the Wife is holding the Handmaid’s hands. This major event puts a lot of pressure on the Handmaid to perform, because when determined infertile she can be sent to the Colonies to await her death. Although, in this “near-future society,” both women and men can be sterile as the result of the environmental pollution, “the infertility of a couple is always attributed to the woman” (Booker 79). Labour Day still exists in the Republic of Gilead, yet used in a different context.
Namely, when a Handmaid finally gets pregnant, the entire neighbourhood gathers at the house where she is giving birth. The delivery is an esteemed public event. The presence of such a multitude of people at the delivery seems very uncomfortable. During labour, the focus is more on the Wife, who acts as if she is in labour, than on the Handmaid. After the baby is born, it is immediately being handed over to the Wife. The Handmaid has to nurse her baby for a few months and afterwards she is sent elsewhere to reproduce. She cannot get emotionally attached to the baby. Nonetheless, her reward is that she will never be declared Unwoman and will therefore never be sent to the Colonies. Moreover, young girls of nearly fourteen years old are set up for an arranged marriage. This idea of arranged marriages is also archaic: “the motif of the pawning and trading of women has earned some of feminist’s literature’s most passionate revolts against patriarchy” (Snodgrass 352). This habit of marrying various people at the same time is just a formality without the involvement of emotions: “In the Republic of Gilead, marriage is promoted as a social goal” (Booker 78). The Commander at the service emphasizes that these women should be silent, subjected to their men. The inferiority of the women is emphasised upon. The Republic justifies their deeds with their need for reproduction.

2.2.3. The Novel’s Symbols

Additional to the focus on procreation, the novel contains some symbols like the image red tulip who returns a few times: “The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem; as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there” (22). The tulip bears resemblance to Offred, who is also damaged, but nevertheless remains positive and tries to make the best of it. Another symbol is the cushion in her room with the word faith on it referring to the fact that, considering the circumstances, she is rather hopeful: “sometimes, Offred gives voice to hope and belief in new life” (Staels 167). During the entire narrative she keeps on believing that she and her family will be reunited one day: “I must have patience:
sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they’ve put her. She’ll remember us and we will be all three of us together. Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later” (116). However, there are still moments when she is losing hope: “The tulips around the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalices, thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (55). This is a clear metaphor for the Handmaids who are only useful if they are young and productive. When they are too old to produce they could be sent to the Colonies, which puts a lot of pressure on the Handmaids to breed. This is reflected in this confrontation with the blooming and blossoming tulip. Moreover, the description of the beautiful garden is comforting, but also contrasting: “The humid air which stinks of flowers, of pulpy growth, of pollen thrown into the wind in handfuls, like oyster spawn into the sea. All this prodigal breeding” (190). This scene contrasts with Offred who is not breeding while her life depends on it. The flowers are more successful at reproducing than she is.

2.2.4. Reflective Flashbacks

There are several flashbacks presented in the narrative. Genette would call these flashbacks “mixed analepses” because they “start at an earlier point but come to inflect or invade the “present” of the main narrative” (Stam 32). They are linked to something happening in the present, which reminded Offred of the past. Gottlieb argues that “making Offred recapture memory” is “the only means to return to truth and a basis for human dignity” (Gottlieb 104). These memories of the past conserve her human dignity and identify her as a person.

There are some flashbacks to a free world before the Republic of Gilead was erected. Notwithstanding, there were already some signs leading up to this drastic turn. Namely,
Offred’s mother already had to fight for women’s rights, and there were porn riots and abortion riots at that time. Suddenly “they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency” and “they suspended the constitution” (182-183). From then on, everything changed very quickly. At one point Offred could not work at the library anymore because of the new law. They had frozen all the accounts of women, for the new law said women were no longer allowed to have property. As soon as Offred’s status in society changed and she became inferior, her love relationship with her husband Luke changed too, as she became his possession. When the situation got worse, Offred and her husband decided to run away with their daughter. However, Luke had to kill the cat first: “that is what you have to do before you kill, I thought. You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real. So that’s how they do it, I thought” (202). Offred compares the killing of a cat to what they are doing to women, namely reducing them to a thing. The reader does not know exactly what happened, except that they did not get far, that she lost her husband, and that they took away her daughter.

In addition to this, Offred also has a few flashbacks to the Red Centre, where the Handmaids have been trained and educated by the Aunts to become perfect breeding stock. They lived like prisoners who could not talk to each other and slept at an old gymnasium with poor beds. When they did not obey, they were being physically punished. They learned that abortion was a crime, and that women who had been raped only had to blame themselves for misleading the men and being provocative. The Aunts made them watch films about the Unwomen: porn films and films in which women were beaten up or cut into pieces: “Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then” (128). The Aunts believe that women, especially Handmaids, will become valuable and appreciated for the first time thanks to this new Republic. Peace should
return because each woman would have her own function in society. The Aunts try to manipulate and brainwash the young women with their talks and their old-fashioned physical violence.

2.2.5. The Two Influential Men

Offred manages to escape her horrid way of life thanks to two very influential men in the novel. She finds some freedom in her affair with the Commander, Fred. Offred has to secretly meet Fred in his office, even though it is forbidden for the Handmaids to be alone with their Commander. Although Handmaids are not supposed to be entertaining, Fred wants to play scrabble with her. Moreover he lets her read magazines and novels, which are forbidden for women “because it promotes literacy” (Booker 80). In the eyes of the reader he appears to be a harmless man with good intentions. Offred suspects he feels lonely because his wife does not understand him. It is Offred’s “job to provide what is otherwise lacking”. This affair makes her happier because now she has some kind of purpose in her empty life. She feels more appreciated and useful. “To him” she is “no longer merely a usable body” (172). The relationship affects her feelings towards him, as Fred “was no longer a thing” to her during the sexual transaction (170). Although it makes her weaker on the one hand, it also makes her feel powerful on the other hand, as she is able to manipulate him. Her interaction with the Commander has a positive influence on her.

Furthermore, the second influential man in the narrative is the driver of the Commander, Nick, whom she falls in love with. At first, the Wife, Serena Joy, orders Offred to have sexual intercourse with Nick to raise her chances of becoming pregnant. After this first time, Offred secretly returns to Nick’s dorm almost every night. The reader notices that she is gradually falling in love with him. She has missed the feeling of being touched and being wanted which makes life meaningful: “this belief in the power of love and life is key to
her own survival, and to that of other human beings” (Staels 168). Nevertheless, she cannot shake the feeling that she is cheating on Luke: “this is a betrayal. Not the thing itself but my own response. If I knew for certain he was dead, would that make a difference?” (275). She intends to memorize each detail of Nick’s body, because she does not want to forget him like she is forgetting Luke. She needs something to hold on to:

I ought to have done that with Luke, paid more attention, to the details, the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn’t and now he’s fading. Day by day, night by night he recedes, and I become more faithless. (…) We make love each time as if we know beyond a shadow of doubt that there will never be any more, for either of us, with anyone, ever. (281)

The world they live in made Offred and Nick desperate. They both run away from reality into each other’s arms. Above all, Offred no longer wants to risk her life by escaping this republic, as she rather wants to be close to Nick. Love has taken over and made her dependent. This proves that love is dangerous in this society because it neglects all reasoning, caution and will-power to fight. The major ethical question here is whether Offred is sinful and weak for having an affair with Nick and for cheating on her husband Luke. Offred “yearns to be filled with the sensation of love for another human being so as to make herself feel she exists” (Staels 169). The line between what is morally acceptable and what is not becomes rather vague. Therefore it is hard to judge her behaviour. Considering the context, she cannot be blamed for seeking affection and comfort with someone else, as it keeps her alive.

2.2.6. Sexual Desire

Some men abuse their power because they cannot repress their sexual desire in this society. The doctor of Offred takes advantage of his position and wants to have sex with her allegedly to help her get pregnant. Moreover, the Commander abuses his superior position, as
he asks Offred to see him in private, which is an offer she could never refuse from a man that powerful. He also adopts this position at the Jezebels to interact with prostitutes, which is forbidden in the Republic of Gilead. As a man of power he is able to bend the rules, because he partly made them. He is a hypocrite for not following his own rules. Likewise, Nick is in a safer position as a man and as an Eye. Therefore his affair with Offred is less risky for him. This indicates that “sexuality in The Handmaid’s Tale is very much a question of political power” (Booker 80).

Despite of the attempts, sexual desire cannot be erased by the government: “even in this rigorous regime, love and lust occasionally break through the cracks and create moments of rebellion” (Van Gheluwe 14). Staels adds to this claim that “the temptation is especially hard to resist in a context of total oppression of personal desires” (Staels 169). One day, the Commander orders Offred to put on a sexy garment with feathers, even though all sexy garments had to be destroyed, so he can take her somewhere. It is risky but Offred is willing to do anything to break the order of things. Offred arrives at a place, called the Jezebel’s, where women are dressed in festive clothes exposing a lot of skin and men wear black suits, all mingling with each other, having drinks and smoking cigarettes:

Some of them have on outfits like mine, feathers and glister, cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts. Some are in olden-days lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pyjamas, the occasional see-through negligée. Some are in bathing suits (…). All wear makeup, and I realize how unaccustomed I’ve become to seeing it. (247)

This rebellious scene is the complete opposite of the Republic in which women cannot be regarded as sexual objects. Both representations of women are extremely wrong, as in either way they are treated as property. This scene is a strong example that sexual desire cannot be repressed: “You can’t cheat Nature,” says Fred (249). Suddenly Offred sees her old friend Moira wearing a black bunny dress, black net stockings, and high heels. She tells Offred that
after she had run away from the Red Centre, some Quakers and other people who did not like what was going on, tried to get her out of the country. When they failed, Moira could choose between the Colonies or being an escort, which made her obviously choose for the Jezebel’s. They call this place Jezebel’s because “the Aunts figure we’re all damned anyway, they’ve given up on us” (262). According to Moira this place is not that bad, because they have face cream, good food, and drugs to forget everything:

> She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something that used to be so central to her. But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not? I don’t want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. (261)

Although Moira always reacted against women being sexualized by men, she is satisfied with this life. It worries Offred that this place rendered one of the strongest women into a lust object. It is thus clear that sexual desire is a powerful aspect in this dystopian world.

**2.2.7. The Female Power**

Notwithstanding, the Handmaids make use of their female qualities when necessary. Although they learned to be obedient to the law, Aunt Lydia gave them some personal advice: “Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good” (153). For example, the Handmaids at the Red Centre thought about selling themselves to the Angels to get freedom in return: “If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (14).

Furthermore, when the Handmaids are walking to the centre for some shopping, Offred provokes the young Guardians at the gateway: “I move my hips a little, feeling the full red
skirt sway around me. (…) I enjoy the power (…). I hope they get hard at the sight of us” (32). Because they never saw a naked female body, these young men are easily tempted. Offred abuses their weakness, as she relishes the feeling of power. Moreover, when Offred and Fred get intimate, she again likes the feeling of having some more power by being allowed much more. At the same time, her connection with the Commander makes her feel powerful over the Wife in some way. Fred wants her to kiss him as if she meant it: “I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall” (154). She uses her female charms in order to earn more favours and benefits.

2.2.8. The Female Resistance

There are some major examples of female resistance in the novel. It is essential to notice that “‘The feminist mother and the lesbian friend represent two models of active resistance (…). They are both rebellious, impertinent women who refuse to collaborate with the system” (Baccolini 22). Besides, the meaning of the name of Offred’s friend, Moira, strengthens this theory. The name “Moira is an Irish name meaning ‘rebellious woman’ or a Greek name meaning ‘fate, destiny’” (Gottlieb 109).

However, the main character, Offred, is not heroic like her mother and friend, Moira.

Offred:

showed little resistance to the process through which women were first deprived of their right to hold a bank account and then to hold a job. (…) The misogynist legislation of Gilead is simply the end result of the timid attitude of an entire generation in the 1980s, of the women themselves who gave their consent by not having the courage to protest or even to discuss their situation with others. (Gottlieb 105)
Offred belongs to this generation of women who did not care that much for feminist movements. She always “resisted her mother’s 1960s feminism, but she now vividly experiences her own oppression,” and becomes “filled with feminist rage” (Kaplan 66-7). However, she remains obedient to the regime and “tends to compromise” which shows that “she lacks courage” (Baccolini 22). Offred carefully remains on the background: “Atwood has created a heroine who is obsessively vigilant and observant” (Kaplan 66-7). This lack of resistance makes sense when “‘the ruling elite of Gilead is a military junta able to have objectors or those suspected of being subversives not only exterminated but also tortured’” (Gottlieb 105). It seems like this is her way of trying to survive: “Offred cannot be blamed for trying to appear compliant, since the semblance of compliance is the condition of survival in dictatorship” (Gottlieb 109). Nevertheless, Offred rebels in her own way by telling her story to someone. “Like all other women in the Republic of Gilead, Offred is not allowed to write or read” and by using the epistolary genre to tell her life story, she “reappropriates the word denied to women” (Baccolini 22). By recording her story she reacts against the desire of the government to keep the people, especially women, ignorant: “language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure” (Baccolini & Moylan 5-6). Besides, Staels argues that “the tale becomes an act of hope and faith” and that “narrating is a therapeutic process” (Staels 168). Through her storytelling, she tries to cope with everything. Offred also likes to take some risks by seeing the Commander in secret and sneaking out at night and by having an affair with Nick. This is her way of rebelling against the totalitarian state, in silence, unlike the other rebellious women in the novel.

2.2.9. Utopia or Dystopia?

Although the narrative is undoubtedly a dystopia as it is proven to be, for some characters this dystopia is a utopia. The government of Gilead argues that the Handmaid’s “sheer procreative function (…) should save the world from the threat of sterility” (Staels
They justify their regime by claiming that it should save the world from downfall. A few characters benefit from this regime and try to defend the new laws, like Serena Joy: “It’s (marriage) one of the things we fought for, said the Commander’s Wife” (26). Serena Joy is relieved that there is finally monogamy in marriage and that divorce has been abolished. However, not everyone has the benefit to be in this position. It seems as if she also wants to convince herself of the advantages of the Republic. Besides, the Aunts glorify the simplicity of each woman having her own place in society now and knowing what to do: “we seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice” (35). According to the Aunts, it will be less harder for the next generation of Handmaids because they will not have any memories of a previous life. They will accept their duties more easily and therefore will be blissful:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them (…). Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. (171)

Fred argues that “better never means better for everyone (…). It always means worse, for some” (222). He sincerely believes there is some improvement in the new government. As a master in justifying the new government, he explains that women and girls in the past had insecurities. Some could find a man easily, while others could not, which caused them to do plastic surgery or sell themselves. Men were abusive or abandoned their wives who had to raise their children alone. As a result, the children were neglected at day care. Mothers received less and less respect and as a consequence, less children were being made. “This way they’re protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement,” according to Fred (231). But Offred reacts that they forget about the “falling in love” part (232). Fred asks if it is really worth it, falling in love. He believes that “arranged
marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better” (ibid). Offred starts to believe that he is right in some way:

*Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion”* (237). “You’d remember stories you’d read in the newspapers, about women who had been found (…) in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not; at any rate killed. (238)

People can easily be manipulated into believing that a dystopia is a utopia. As Margaret Atwood believes, there is “within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia” (qtd. In Kaplan 13).

2.2.10. An Open but Hopeful Ending

The ending is rather ambiguous. From one moment upon another Offred’s world collapses. Apparently Serena Joy found out about Offred and her husband, Fred, seeing each other in secret: “Just like the other one. A slut. You’ll end up the same” (299). A few minutes later, the black van of the Eyes comes to get her. Nick gives her a sign that she should trust him and that she should go with them: “It’s all right. It’s Mayday. Go with them” he whispers (305). Although it is never mentioned explicitly who sent the van, it is being insinuated that Nick is behind it. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether he is on her side or whether he is tricking her. Serena Joy asks the Eyes why they take her, to which they answer that it is about a “violation of state secrets” (306). Offred’s last words are ambiguous: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (307). Just as the main character, the reader is left in the dark here. The informer was probably Nick, although his intentions are not clear. We never know for sure whether Nick is
“her saviour or her betrayer” (Gottlieb 109). You can look at it negatively or rather positively, as we do not know what is going to happen, so it may be something good. This ending offers the reader some hope. As stated before, these “ambiguous, open endings” is a typical element of Atwood’s writing (Baccolini 18).

2.2.11. Conclusion

_The Handmaid’s Tale’s_ novel is a narrative about a future regime, the Republic of Gilead, that regards women as a functional object. There are classes of women each containing their own function and matching colour. Handmaids are in red which refers to the colour of blood identifying their function as breeding stock. They are entirely covered up by a long dress and white wings to hide their face, because they can never look attractive. Handmaids are the Commander’s possession containing no unique identity. They are forbidden many things, for example reading, out of fear of rebellion because they might become aware of the oppression. Procreation is the main goal and the focus of this society. The flashbacks demonstrate how the republic of Gilead originated. Besides, these flashbacks also contain blissful moments that define Offred as a person. As a Handmaid, Offred learned to use their female body for their own benefit. Offred’s affair with the Commander, Fred, makes her feel powerful and useful, while the love affair with the driver Nick makes her feel alive but also vulnerable. Men cannot easily repress their sexual desire and abuse their superior position to break the law. They erected the Jezebel’s where all sinful women (especially Handmaids) could work as the escorts of the men in power. Luckily there are some examples of female resistance in the narrative that gives some hope, like Offred’s mother and her best friend Moira. Offred is someone who rebels more passively through her storytelling. Although this narrative is a clear dystopia, some believe in the benefits of it, mainly the ones who take the most benefit from it, like the Commanders. The open ending gives the reader hope. There is a chance that Offred will survive this and that she will be safe.
2.3. Comparison between the novels of *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

It is interesting to compare the differences and to reveal the resemblances between the two stories this paper focusses on: *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood. This comparison highlights in which way the women in both stories are oppressed. Although they might be presented in a different way, the similarities elucidate that the feminist concerns represented in both novels are more or less the same.

First, both *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* express the fear that some kind of powerful authority will eliminate all women’s rights and everything they fought for. Kaplan argues that the narrative of *The Handmaid’s Tale* proves that “pervasive religious fundamentalism, if allowed to gain control, will sweep away all the gains of the women’s movement” (Kaplan 67). This is also the case in *The Stepford Wives*, where men gained control and put an end to the Women’s Liberation Movement.

Secondly, the looks of the women are an object of difference. On the one hand, the Stepford women are portrayed as attractive role models: “the robot wives of Stepford are enhanced and airbrushed women, sexualised and ageless” (Whelehan 379). On the other hand, the Handmaids are being desexualized, made less attractive. Besides, the Stepford wives are a diversity of good-looking women, while the women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are put into classes with their own colour ruining their identity.

Thirdly, the women in both stories are dehumanized or objectified by their new authority. The feminist’s “focus repeatedly returned to the body as one of the primary sites of women’s oppression. (…) The body was fundamentally objectified” (Schweishelm 111). This is the case with *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the former, women are objectified
as working machines, while in the latter women are objectified as breeding machines. Women in both stories are being reduced to their function as a housewife or a womb. They are portrayed as the men’s possessions.

Fourthly, in both stories, the ideas of femininity are very archaic. Toril Moi explained that “patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain standards of feminine on all biological women, in order precisely to make believe that the chosen standards for ‘femininity’ are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both unfeminine and unnatural” (qtd. In Becker 44). To apply this theory to The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale, the women in the former are unfeminine when not looking like actresses from commercials, while the women in the latter are declared unfeminine when not being fertile.

Fifthly, the choice of pregnancy is also a significant aspect in both The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale:

Abortion became a major issue for radical feminists because without it, they argued, women would continue to be profoundly objectified by their lack of control over their own production. (…) Without the ability to choose whether and with whom to have children, women could never be fully self-determined. (Schweishelm 113)

In both stories, women are not free to choose whether they want to have children or not. On the one hand, in the Stepford Wives, the women supposedly cannot bear children because robots are not able to become pregnant: “without a womb, they are unable to conceive” (Whelehan 379). The women in The Handmaid’s Tale on the other hand are obliged to reproduce even if it is against their will. They are both deprived of that choice in its own manner.
Furthermore, women cannot have any desire. The feminist dystopias are “being characterized by the suppression of female desire (brought into effect either by men or by women) and by the institution of gender-inflected oppressive orders” (Cavalcanti 49). This theory is recognizable in *The Stepford Wives*, where women are being oppressed because they cannot have ambitions or interests, and in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where women cannot dress up or be attractive in any way. Besides, in both stories, they are not allowed to read out of fear for rebellion.

Additionally, the women in both *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are reduced to follow a certain language pattern. In the former, their language has been programmed in their brains. In the latter, they are obligated to use certain sentences and vocabulary, for example “Under His Eye”. As mentioned before, this restriction of language is out of precaution of the government who fear rebellion: ““The process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climatic event that attempts to change the society” (Baccolini & Moylan 6).

Moreover, the main characters in both stories are more or less the same. Both Joanna and Offred are liberal, independent women. However, Joanna is someone who stands up for herself and more actively rebels the system, while Offred passively awaits until everything passes by. Likewise, both characters have an ambiguous and unreliable man by their side. Throughout the narrative it never becomes clear whether Joanna’s husband, Walter, means well or whether he works along with the other men. At the same time, it is not clear whether Nick is on Offred’s side or whether he is a traitor siding with the Eyes.

Subsequently, the men in charge in *The Stepford Wives* are more closely related to the women than the powerful men in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The men behind the robotic Stepford women are the husbands of the women themselves, whereas the authorized men at the
Republic of Gilead are more distanced from the disadvantaged women. They have no real emotional connection with the Handmaids who are the real victims in the narrative. Their own Wives also have the most benefits of all the women in the republic.

Besides, the men in both stories are the same considering their desires. They cannot repress it and let loose their sexual desires, whether they express it through designing sex dolls or through the secret erection of prostitutes’ house.

Additionally, these men are also very manipulative. In The Handmaid’s Tale, the Commander tries to convince Offred of the benefits of the government and in The Stepford Wives the men gaslight Joanna into believing she has become mad.

Next to this, the motivations of the men wanting to take control over the women are in both The Stepford Wives and The Handmaid’s Tale the same. They clearly feel threatened by the women. In The Stepford Wives, the women were part of a Women’s Club in the past. Then it seems to have suddenly ceased to exist and immediately afterwards the Men’s Association has been erected, which cannot be a coincidence. This proves that they wanted their women to become less powerful and to stick to their household duties. In addition to this, before the Republic of Gilead has been erected, the women before Offred’s generation, like Offred’s mother, protested and held riots in order to gain more rights. Some men felt the threat of these opposing women so they managed to take over the government to suppress their increasing power.

Finally, the ending of both stories differs. In The Stepford Wives, it ends rather badly, while the end of The Handmaid’s Tale is more hopeful. Although there is a time-lapse before the ending, in the last chapter Joanna seems to have changed into one of those Stepford wives, leaving the reader blank about how this happened. This makes the ending less hopeful than
the one in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Offred does not know what is going to happen to her, which leaves room for positive ending.

To conclude, the women in both *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) are oppressed by traditional authorities. These dystopias share the same fear, namely for some power dehumanizing women. The Stepford wives on the one hand are portrayed as attractive and sexualized, while the Handmaids on the other hand are presented as non-attractive and non-desirable. Both women are objectified as working or breeding machines. The men’s ideas of femininity are very cliché and archaic: women doing household tasks or women bearing children. While the Stepford wives are unable to bear children without a womb, the Handmaids are obliged to reproduce. Besides, women are not allowed to have any desires and above all are restricted to a certain language. The authorities rather want them to remain ignorant out of fear for rebellion. Despite all of this, Joanna and Offred are both strong and independent women. However, the men who stands by their side are both dubious and questionable. The men in charge in *The Stepford Wives* are their own husbands, in contrary to the men in charge in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who are more distanced and less emotionally involved. In both stories, the men are unable to repress their sexual desires and act very manipulative towards the women. Finally, the cause of both dystopias is the men feeling threatened by the powerful women. As a point of difference, *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains a more hopeful ending than *The Stepford Wives*. 


3. Audio-visual Adaptations

3.1. The Popularity of Audio-visual Media

Dystopian films or series become increasingly popular in our contemporary culture: “in what may be even more indicative of a widespread pessimism, recent decades have seen the rise of a dystopian mood in popular culture as a whole. Many dystopian fictions have inspired popular films,” for example the film adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* from the year 2004 and the series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* from 2017 (Booker 7). These recent audio-visual adaptations are proof of the remaining and renewed interest in dystopian storytelling.

The film of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) directed by Frank Oz and the television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) directed by Bruce Miller are examples of transmediality, which in this particular case means that the novels have been transformed into audio-visual media. “In the plural form, “media,” it is often equated with mass and popular culture,” like “cinema and television” (Rippl 6-9). According to Pratten, “a traditional definition of transmedia storytelling would be: telling a story across multiple platforms, (…) such that each successive platform heightens the audience’ enjoyment. (…) We tell stories across multiple platforms because no single media satisfies our curiosity and no single platform our lifestyle” (Pratten 2-4). In short, transmedia makes use of different forms of media to translate a story in order to keep the public interested.

There are several differences between an audio-visual and its novel. Audio-visual media have the additional “capacity to show the world and its appearances apart from voice-over and character narration” (Stam 35). Film and series address various senses through image and sound. As Stam explains, the viewer sees the character’s expressions and bodily responses and hears the intonation of speech, which makes the public more emotionally involved and empathetic. Audio-visuals have the possibility to use more narrative techniques like “music,
sound effects, and moving photographic images” (Stam 17). The music and camera techniques give expression to the mood and make the viewer feel melancholic or happy. However, during the reading of a novel, one can use his/her imagination, while this is less the case with an audio-visual: “We read a novel “through” our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, fashioning as we read our own imaginary mise-en-scène of the novel” (Stam 14). The audio-visuals leave not that much to the imagination. Besides, the book, “whatever its length, must be greatly compressed in order to meet the time limits of a screenplay, customarily from ninety minutes to two hours, more or less” (Brady 6). This makes it necessary to eliminate some scenes. The director is supposed to maintain the general plot by only including the most relevant scenes.

Audio-visual media can be considered adaptations of the books they are based upon or remakes of the films that precede them: “a remake is generally considered a version of another film, whereas one of the principal arguments of adaptation theory is concerned with the movement between different semiotic registers, most often between literature and film” (Loock, Verevis 6). The film of The Stepford Wives and the series of The Handmaid’s Tale can be regarded as a mixture of both, because although they are based on novels, both could have taken some inspiration from their older audio-visual predecessor.

3.2. The Creativity of Adaptation

An adaptation is a “process of cultural reproduction,” which means that it adapts to the cultural context and the public’s expectations (Loock, Verevis 3). Consequently, a bigger time lapse between the novel and its audio-visual tends to cause a different plot. When there is much more time in between the novel and its adaptation “the adapter enjoys more freedom to update and reinterpret the novel. The existence of (…) prior adaptations relieves the pressure for “fidelity,” while also stimulating the need for innovation” (Stam 42). The time lapse and a
previous adaptation gives the adapter room to interpret the novel and adapt it to the modern, renewed context:

Stam (2005, 3) describes adaptations as “mutations” that help their source texts “survive” by adapting them to changing environments. (...) After all, the verb ‘to adapt’ means ‘to make fit’, ‘to adjust’, ‘to alter’, ‘to make suitable for a new purpose or to a different context or environment’, be this a different medium, a different historical moment, or a different culture. (qtd. In Straumann 251)

The renewed feminist context is noticeable in the adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* (2004), whereas *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) does not adapt the original narrative but makes use of a recently popularized medium namely a series. Creativity becomes more valuable than reliability and is the main characteristic in adaptations: “contemporary approaches regard all texts and adaptations as forms of (re)interpretation. Instead of following a negative rhetoric of loss, they see adaptation as an “interpretative and […] creative act” (Straumann 250).

Straumann adds that it is interesting to “offer additional insight and new levels of experience with each media text and platform adding another perspective, for example by introducing a change in focalization” which is the case for *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* series “or offering a backstory (i.e. the history or background story created for a character) in the form of a prequel,” for example at the beginning of *The Stepford Wives’* film introducing the main character, Joanna (Straumann 257).


The first filmic adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* from 1975 is very closely related to the plot of the novel: “*The Stepford Wives*, directed by Bryan Forbes, is a mostly faithful adaptation of Levin’s novel” (Schweishelm 109). This is logical because the film came out
only three years after the release of the novel, so there was no different context. Contrarily, the film *The Stepford Wives* from the year 2004 differs in manifold ways from the original plot. This film is an example of a “radical translation” of the book, “which reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work” (Cahir & Welsh 17). The film changes a considerable part of the plot, especially the ending. In this particular case, the historical background of this adaptation is the evolution of feminism. The women come across as more independent and obstinate. Unlike the book, the film is not about powerful men oppressing their women, but about women wanting to achieve perfection and being too ambitious. Besides, the focus is not only on women’s struggle, but it also addresses the stereotyped gay community. The narrative is modernized. Moreover, the film also utilizes a different, more comic, genre. Whelehan notes that “Oz’s film moves from horror to dark comedy” (Whelehan 382). The change in genre from a disturbing dystopia into a light-hearted comedy shows that emancipation was already less of an issue at that time.

Contrarily, the earlier film of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1990) adapts the plot by giving it more heroic and romantic value:

In the movie, not only does Offred - or Kate, as she is also known - heroically assassinate the Commander; she also manages to escape, with the aid of Nick and the Mayday underground, from the Republic of Gilead and her role as a Handmaid. The last shot we see is of Kate, heavily pregnant with Nick's baby, entering a trailer in a bucolic mountain stronghold controlled by the rebels. The voice-over indicates that she holds out hope for a reunion not only with Nick but also with her lost daughter by her former husband, Luke. (Dickinson 32).

The film gets a happy ending unlike the novel itself. A heroic and romantic film like this was very typical for Hollywood cinema at that time: “it turned Atwood's darkly dystopian and
ironic feminist text into a stock Hollywood romance, complete with a traditional happy ending where the boy presumably gets the girl” (Dickinson 32). The film reflects the public’s expectations of a popular film at that time. Contrarily, the content of the television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) is less adapted. The original plot of the narrative remains the same. The series is an example of a “traditional translation” of the novel, “which maintains the overall traits of the book (its plot, settings, and stylistic conventions) but revamps particular details in those particular ways that the filmmakers see as necessary and fitting” (Cahir & Welsh 16-17). Namely, scenes are added, as well as perspectives of other characters, which is logical considering they had to fill an entire season of ten episodes. This brings us to the medium. Although the plot remains the same, the narrative has been popularized into a television series. In this way, it has been adapted to a modern context, because series are very popular nowadays (supra). Series make the viewers able to sympathize more with the characters (infra). Besides, the makers are exploiting their success by producing a sequel and in this way elaborate upon the story by knitting a new plot to the previous one.

3.4. Conclusion

The rise of dystopian film elucidates the popularity of the dystopian topic these days. *The Stepford Wives* (2004) directed by Frank Oz and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) by Bruce Miller are examples of transmediality which means that the narrative has been transformed in an audio-visual medium. This keeps the public interested in the topic. Audio-visuals have a lot of additive values, namely image and sound. With various film techniques they can create a mood which secures the involvement of the public. While there is much more imagination needed while reading novels, audio-visuals ask less effort of the public to get in the story. Therefore, films and series address a much larger audience. It is crucial to adapt the story to the renewed context, and how bigger the time lapse between the novel and its audio-visual adaptation, how much more freedom for reinterpretation. *The Stepford Wives* (2004) and *The
*Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) adapt the narrative or the medium to the renewed context and add new perspectives. Creativity transcends fidelity. The first film of *The Stepford Wives* (1975) remains faithful to the novel because it has been released only three years after the publishing of the novel. The recent film of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) is a radical translation of the book, which has been adapted to the new context of feminism. The first film of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1990) is a Hollywood version with a happy ending which was very popular at that time. Unlike this film, the director of the television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) does not change a lot about the original plot. However, he adds some scenes and focalizations and popularized the story into a series which he exploits by producing a sequel.
4. The Audio-visual Adaptations of *The Stepford Wives* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*


The film of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) directed by Frank Oz has some similarities with the novel. There are a few aspects of the novel that are perfectly captured in the film, in particular the descriptions of the Stepford Wives. Nonetheless, the film differs in multiple ways from the original novel. This is due to the different context of feminism of 2004: “Schweishelm deals with the recontextualization of *The Stepford Wives*, “demonstrating how feminism is ‘remade’ at the same time as the film is remade” (Loock, Verevis 7).

Schweishelm argues that the definition of second wave feminism that arose in the 70s does not coincide with the renewed postfeminist movements much later. Therefore the narrative had to be adapted to the new feminist context, reflecting these changed values. The director values creativity more than reliability. At the beginning of the film he offers some side information about the main character, Joanna Eberhart, in which he portrays her as an independent woman having an imposing career. Because of the renewed context, the women are more emancipated than in the book, as they are ambitious careerists who are at times even more powerful than their husbands. Joanna’s friends are also slightly different. Namely, one of them is a gay-friend, which again proves the renewed context in which stereotypes about the gay community are included. Overall, the film exaggerates the story as in a parody (infra). Besides, the genre is more a light-hearted comedy than a thriller. Predominantly, the film has a more distinctive ending than the book which makes Joanna’s husband, Walter, stand out as a more positive, progressive and freethinking character. The love between the two of them seems to overpower everything. Joanna even tries to adapt herself to the Stepford lifestyle out
of love. The ending strengthens this romantic plot, when Joanna and her husband stand together to overthrow the system.

4.1.1. The Ambitious Women

The viewer receives much more information about Joanna Eberhart’s life before she moved to Stepford, whereas the book directly commences in Stepford itself. In the film “Joanna (...) is re-imagined as a tightly wound, shrill Manhattan careerist. Walter (...) is now depicted as Joanna’s subordinate at work, and a man who feels outdone by his tremendously successful wife” (Schweiselm 115). This turns Joanna into a different character than the one she plays in the book. She is more successful than her husband, hosting some famous television shows. At the beginning of the film the viewer sees Joanna presenting two of her shows in front of a large audience: “Joanna specialises in reality game shows that stage ‘the battle of the sexes’, usually with the effect of making men look absurd.” (Whelehan 382). The shows about gender competition, in which the women always seem to win, are very sensational and are meant to humiliate men. One show called “I can do better,” is about a couple testing their relationship by spending time apart in the presence of various attractive people. At the end of the show, the man chooses his wife while she chooses to leave him. The rebellious women in these shows are contrasted to the obedient Stepford housewives. Suddenly, the man, whom the wife left, interrupts Joanna’s show and accuses her for ruining his future and his family. He starts a shooting in the public. This destructive side of her makes her a less likeable character. Because of the incident, Joanna gets fired, and has a nervous collapse. This encourages her to move to Stepford to start over. Walter is even willing to give up his job for her. This contrast with the book in which Walter decided to move to Stepford. Thus, the roles are reversed in an extreme way. Instead of the wives being oppressed by their men, the men are being oppressed by the powerful women. These emancipated women in the film indicate the different time frame.
4.1.2. The Gay Community

The friends of Joanna are not entirely the same as in the novel. Bobbie Markowitz is also present as Joanna’s friend. However, the character of Charmaine is being replaced by a stereotypical gay man, Roger Bannister, who is a famous architect. This new character puts the story in a different daylight. Roger is a typical gay who loves to wear designer clothes and acts very female-like. One day, Roger has completely changed into a male stereotype who presents himself as candidate for senator and even threw away his designer clothes. This character exemplifies that it also works the other way around. Instead of making the women more female, they can also make a man more male. This gay character represents the “changing social mores” (Schweishelm 118). The transformation of the stereotypical gay man in a serious businessman reflects the fear of a homophobic society. Just as the women have to be extremely female, the men have to be very male-like. The idea that two genders have to remain separate is very archaic and conservative: “women had always been associated with embodiment and men had always been in greater possessions of reason” (Colebrook 117).

4.1.3. A Light-Hearted Parody

The film, especially the robotic theme, is much more exaggerated, parodic and absurd. The book that “touched a nerve in the popular imagination of the 1970s, in part due to the way they addressed the contemporary (and contentious) issue of the women’s liberation movement, (…) metamorphosed into a frothy, kitschy comedy” (Schweishelm 107). It seems to be a light-hearted comedy instead of a concerning dystopian thriller. The houses in Stepford are equipped with an advanced automatic security system, which even includes a robot dog. This is an early hint to the men’s interests in building robots. When Joanna joins the women for aerobics, they are all dressed-up performing a work-out based on household tasks. This ironic scene reflects the things they stand for: overly dressed-up females doing
household chores. It adds a humoristic undertone to the sinister story. Moreover, one of the wives, Sarah, gets broke by a short circuit during square-dancing at the fair. Nevertheless, Mike, the head of the Men’s Association fixes her. This proves that the idea of robot-wives is much more explicit in the film. Joanna, Bobbie and Roger visit Sarah at her house the next day where they find a remote control with the name ‘Sarah’ on it. Besides, the viewer also gets to witness the men’s perspective at the Men’s Association. Everything seems normal at first sight. Until suddenly one man pulls out a remote control, calls his wife, and gets cash money out of her mouth. This again is a very absurd scene, emphasizing the parodic aspect of the film. Later on, Joanna finds her own remote control in her house, which makes her realize her time has almost come. This element of the remote control is added to the story and makes it even more unrealistic. Furthermore, when Joanna visits Bobbie after she has changed into a Stepford woman, she notices that Bobbie gives no reaction when she accidentally puts her hand on the stove. The director explicitly elaborates upon the storyline of the female robots, while this theory has never been entirely proven in the novel. Finally, when Joanna visits the Men’s Association, Mike gives her a PowerPoint presentation of his automatic “female improvement system”. The woman has to walk into the machine, where they add some nano-chips and ingredients, and when she comes out of it she is entirely optimized. This again makes the story highly unrealistic. It is remarkable that “the second film cannot seem to make up its mind about whether the Stepford wives are robots with transplanted brains, or surgically altered women with nanochipped brains or some other option” (Schweishelm 119). Although there are several indications that the wives are robots, the “female improvement system” which apparently adds nano-chips to the wives seems to prove otherwise. This parodic theme of the film elucidates the new context of feminism in which women were already more emancipated and emancipation was less of a serious issue: “gendered power relations have progressed to a point where the original angst-ridden depiction of female struggle is
noticeably – and even laughably – dated by contemporary viewer’s standards, provoking the need for updating” (Schweishelm 108).

4.1.4. The Romantic Plot

The different plot of the film portrays Walter in a different way. He remains on Joanna’s side instead of gradually turning against her. In the film, Walter chooses his wife over a robot. He appears to be less rude than in the novel. His comments on her look are less personal or offensive. He only suggests her to wear less black because that is the colour of the town’s people. Unlike the novel’s main character, this Joanna makes an effort to adapt herself to the Stepford’s lifestyle. Following up on Walter’s advice, she tries to dress like the Stepford wives. She puts on a colourful dress and makes around a 5000 cupcakes to keep herself busy. She, Bobbie and Roger even join the Stepford book club where they talk about Christmas decorations instead of literature. She does all of this out of love: “the ultimate challenge for this version’s Joanna is not to overcome endemic, structural gender inequality, but to learn to make individual, personal compromises in the interests of romantic love” (Schweishelm 118). Joanna is less concerned with this gender inequality than in the book. She is willing to give Stepford a chance because of her love for Walter. Overall, Walter appears to be a good-hearted guy with a few insecurities. When Joanna arrives at the Men’s Association, as she found out about their project, he explains to her: “You’ve always been better in everything.” However, when Mike shows how the “female improvement system” works, Walter starts to look worried. Before they descend into the basement for her transformation, Joanna asks Walter if these Stepford women mean it when they say ‘I love you,’ after which she kisses her husband intensely. Joanna tries to move him with her words and kisses. At the end, Walter and Joanna stand together and try to make an end to the system. His love for Joanna made it impossible for Walter to change her: “she is not a scientist project.” Their love is stronger than his desire to have a perfectly looking wife.
4.1.5. The Overpowered Men

The motivations of the men differ. In the book, they try to keep the women under their power, while, in the film, they feel threatened about their wives’ various talents. Schweishelm states that:

the 2004 remake depicts the women as being no longer affected by any societal power imbalances whatsoever; in fact, more than anything else they seem to be victims of their own self-directed ambition and extreme success. Each (pre-transformation) female character is portrayed as fully in control, hyper-successful in the public sphere, and victorious in the imagined battle of sexes. (Schweishelm 115)

When Joanna visits the Men’s Association, the men confess their motives. All these men married successful women who overpowered them. Walter also “feels outdone by his tremendously successful wife” (Schweishelm 115). As mentioned above, he tells her how she has always been better than him in everything. The men were tired of being overshadowed so Mike invented a female improvement system: “We improve you, make you better”. The men used to work for Microsoft, Nasa, Disney,…, so they possessed the capacity to build a “female improvement system”. After this presentation, Walter and Joanna descend with her robot version. In the next scene at the supermarket it seems as if Joanna has changed because she is dressed up and behaves like the other Stepford women.

4.1.6. A Positive Ending

Finally, the ending is different from the novel’s. A party has been organized to honour Joanna and Walter as the newcomers. At the party, Walter goes to the lab where he deactivates all the chips programmed in the Stepford wives’ brains. The women change back to their old selves causing a great tumult. Then there is the big reveal in which Joanna confesses that she has been acting all this time to be a robot. Joanna knocks Mike’s head off,
which clarifies that he was a robot too. At that moment, Mike’s wife reveals that she was behind everything. In the past, she was a brain surgeon and genetic engineer, which explains how she could have made this happen. One day she caught her husband cheating on her and therefore she wanted to make a peaceful world, in which beautiful women had to stick to their archaic hausfrau-role: “this 2004 remake is less about the reassertion of patriarchy over women’s lives, and more to do with a sense that modern, ambitious women are no longer ‘naturally’ feminine” (Whelehan 383). She wanted women to return to their femininity. So she made a robot husband, Mike, someone all the men would listen to. In contrast to the book’s plot, “the ultimate villain of the remake is not male collective desire at all, but rather a solitary lunatic, a female no less” (Schweishelm 119). In the film, there is no open ending, but rather a resolution. Everything is explained to the viewers, while the readers of the book are left in the dark. In the last scene, Joanna, Bobbie and Roger are at a television show sharing their experiences. Joanna made a documentary about it, Bobbie wrote a new book, and Roger became senator. The ending is more positive than the novel. It “veils a proto-feminist celebration of female survival and even accomplishment’ (Williams 2007, p. 88)” (Whelehan 383-384). The film reflects the changed concept of feminism in which women were already more evolved. It recognizes the female values.

4.1.7. Conclusion

Because the film of The Stepford Wives (2004) directed by Frank Oz was produced in a new context of feminism, the main female characters are much more ambitious and powerful. This immediately leads to the cause of the Men’s Association. Namely, the men felt threatened by their successful wives. Besides, the film includes the struggles of the gay community. Not only do they transform the women into female stereotypes, they also transform a gay man into the male stereotype. This highlights the archaic gender ideas of how women and men should be. The film can be interpreted as a parody, as the story is much more
exaggerated which also makes it more light-hearted. The director magnifies the robotic theme on the one hand, but also uses the theory of the brains implanted with nano-chips, which is confusing. The director elaborates upon the romantic theme as well. Joanna and Walter make sacrifices because of their love for each other. Joanna on the one hand is willing to give Stepford a chance, while Walter on the other hand is unable to change Joanna into a perfect housewife. Instead of an open ending, the viewer gets a ‘happily ever after’ as Joanna and Walter save the women by destroying the computer system behind it and deactivating all the implanted chips.

4.2. The series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) in comparison with the novel

The television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains a few similarities with the novel, for example some lines that are literally reproduced, like the beginning lines and the very last lines, and some descriptions in the book that are perfectly captured in the series, especially the representation of the Handmaids. Nevertheless, the series differs in several ways from the book. Unlike a film adaptation, a series does not have to reduce the narrative due to its length. This particular season counts 10 episodes, each 35-60 minutes duration. Therefore, instead of eliminating scenes, new scenes or storylines were added. The fact that a series is longer and therefore takes more of the viewer’s time, makes the viewer more empathically involved: “a television series has clearly far more scope for the development of both plot and characters than would be the case in a two-hour feature film” (Straumann 251). The viewer experiences the gradual development of the characters. Because the director adapted the narrative to another public, he focusses more on the dramatic aspect of the story and on the love relationship between the characters. Furthermore, the director adds a technique which has not been used in the book, namely multiple focalization. This technique keeps the story interesting by looking through different points of view: “in order to maintain
the interest and enhance the investment of transmedia consumers, it is important to offer additional insight adding another perspective, for example by introducing a change in focalisation” (Straumann 257). Moreover, the characters in the series are more heroic and brave than the novel’s characters. Finally, the series elaborates upon the problem of infertility which explains the reasoning behind this new republic.

4.2.1. The Sensational Aspect

The series focusses more on the sensational aspect which intrigues a larger audience. As it is proven in The Greek Tragedy and Emotions, “there is probably some of this enjoyment of other people’s sufferings in many more people than would care to admit it, as the popularity of crude violence in modern theatres and cinemas attests” (Stanford 107). People tend to be attracted to drama. The first episode for example immediately starts with the scene in which the main character, Offred, runs away from the soldiers together with her daughter. The gunshot she hears implies that her husband, who stayed behind, is dead. When the men find them, they drag her daughter away. This scene is very emotional which makes the public immediately sympathize with the main character. Moreover, already in the first episode there is a cruel scene of a Salvaging, a dead sentence, whereas in the book this event appears more at the end. This intrigues people to continue to watch. The scene in which the Handmaids have to kick the rapist to death is very bloody and visual. As well as the scene from episode 10 in which they cut off Warren’s arms as a punishment for his betrayal. In contradiction to the reading of a novel, “the “seen” (…) is regarded as obscene” and direct (Stam 6). Furthermore, Ofglen tells Offred that there is a spy in her house, which immediately creates distrust and tension in the series. This scene is accompanied with some sinister music. In general, to add a dramatic undertone to the story, the director often makes use of some film techniques, like slow-motion and close-ups to focus on the facial expression and the body language. A close-up “is a tight shot that focuses clearly on an individual, usually from the
waist up” (Brady 62). These close-ups create a tension because the viewer witnesses the characters emotions and expressions magnified: “the close-up technique of film can be used to create a sense of psychological intimacy” (Straumann 252).

4.2.2. The Romantic Plot

In addition to the sensational aspect of the series, the director also elaborates more upon the love story. Already in the first episode, Nick tries to start a conversation with Offred when they encounter each other on the driveway. However, she doubts his sincerity, as she suspects that he is an Eye, which will be proven later on. Despite of this, Nick appears to be sincerely concerned about her after the Eyes tortured her. While the story evolves, Offred starts looking for signs that her love for him is mutual. Her feelings for Nick are more prominent than in the novel. In the 5th episode, Nick admits he is an Eye, which makes their relationship more complex and dramatic. Nevertheless, their relationship is not only superficial as in the novel, but more profound. In episode 6, Offred tells him her real name is June, which proves that she trusts him. Nick comforts her and holds her when she gets upset and emotional. Besides, he even acts jealous one time after he saw her and the Commander, Fred, going upstairs together at the Jezebels. Because of this, Offred and Nick get into a fight. He loses control by getting too emotionally involved. Offred confronts Nick that she does not know anything about him. In the heat of the moment, he threatens that she will end up at the Wall. She answers: “At least someone will remember me, someone will care.” She cries and this makes him break. He tells her a little more about himself: his name and origin. When Offred tells Nick she is pregnant, he touches her belly and takes her hand, which proves their emotional connection. In the book, they do not have such contact from the beginning. They start a relationship more at the end of the novel, which is less emotional and affectionate than in the series. This romantic relationship in the series renders them into more vulnerable characters.
4.2.3. The Heroic Characters

Additionally, the characters are more heroic than the ones in the novel. There is much more rebellion, which again refers to the sensational aspect of the series. Offred stands up for herself and others. When Moira runs away from the Red Centre, Offred joins her. Though she does not get far, her intentions are more brave than the Offred from the novel. Besides, she uses her female charms to convince Fred to return to the Jezebels. She risks her life in order to receive a package for the rebels. The package contains letters from Handmaids telling their story, confessing their mistreatment. The purpose of these letters is to reach other countries as a cry for help. Moreover, thanks to the visit of the female ambassador, Offred manages to send a letter to her husband, Luke, who survived and got to Canada. This letter provides the viewer some hope that he will do anything in his power to save Offred and their daughter. Furthermore, Moira was also able to cross the borders and arrive safely at Canada. The stories of these survivors are a hopeful sign that the others can survive as well. Ofglen is also an example of a hero in the series. She is one of the few that dares to stand up against the regime despite of the consequences. She is an inspiration to Offred and the other Handmaids. Near the end of the series, Offred is the first to refuse to throw the stone at Jeanine at the stoning. The others follow her example. This is the first time the Handmaids refuse to take an order. When the Handmaids are walking home after this resistance, an euphoric song is playing, “Feeling Good” by Nina Simone. This song adds a positive note to the series. The girls feel victorious because of this rebellion. They finally stood up and proved that together they stand strong. When Offred has to wait for her punishment at the end of the last episode she should feel terrified but she feels serene. The end is more hopeful, as Offred probably will be saved because she is pregnant and therefore valuable to the state.

4.2.4. The Multiple Perspectives
Another aspect that differs from the novel is the multiplicity of perspectives or multiple focalization. The series not only tells Offred’s side of the story, but other’s as well. A first new perspective is that of the Wife, Serena Joy, of whom the viewer gets to see her sensitive side. She gets emotional after her own Ceremony and when Jeanine’s baby is taken away from her. Besides, Serena Joy has some flashback to a time where she and Fred were (care)free and in love. She is being nostalgic and longs for that time to return. It becomes clear that Fred was one of the men that came up with the idea of this new republic. They believe in reproduction as the only purpose of life. Serena Joy supports her husband unconditionally. She even wanted to become part of the government, but women are not allowed: “we will never let them forget their real purpose again”. Even though she belongs to the higher class, she is still a woman and therefore inadequate for a position at the government. In one flashback, she and Fred are having sexual intercourse, although the regime opposes desire. They are hypocrites who only participate in this regime for their own safety, the status and the benefits. Throughout the episodes, the viewer notices Serena Joy changing and becoming aware of the downside of this government. Serena Joy stood by her husband’s side without realizing the consequences. Her perspective reveals a lot more about her true identity. Although she looks like a cold-hearted person in Offred’s eyes, the viewer is able to see her human side.

The series focusses on different Handmaids. A second perspective is that of the Handmaid Ofglen, whose real name is Emily. Ofglen represents the gay community in this story. Ofglen has been married to a woman in her previous life. One day, the Eyes appear at Offred’s house to question her about Ofglen while Aunt Lydia tortures her: “She was an offense to God” because she was gay (episode 3). Then there is a scene of Ofglen at the court being accused of having a relationship with a Martha. She is sentenced to redemption and the Martha is being hanged in front of her eyes. Afterwards she wakes up at the hospital and
notices they stitched her vagina. Later on, at a market, Ofglen escapes the crowd, manages to steal a car and runs over one of the soldiers. This again refers to the heroic aspect in the story. She is an example to Offred and the other Handmaids, who from then on dare to stand up more for themselves.

A third perspective that the series elaborates upon is that of the Handmaid Jeanine or Ofwarren. Jeanine comes across as a very naïve and unstable character. She is, in contrast to Ofglen, an anti-example. However, she had a lot to cope with. At the Red Centre they took out her eye one time when she did not obey. Besides, after she has given birth to a girl, she has to hand her over and move to another household. Nonetheless she believes that her Commander loves her and will come to save her. She says to Offred: “don’t be sad. He’s coming for me” (episode 8). One day, Jeanine is standing on a bridge with her baby in her arms ready to jump, while accusing her Commander for not keeping his promise: “you said we would run away and be a family (episode 9). Offred has to talk to her: “I know you’re not crazy. It’s a wonder we are not all crazy in this place. Change is coming. There is hope. Everything is going to get normal and we will go out together. (…) You have to do what is best for your daughter.” Jeanine then gives her daughter to Offred and says: “June, make sure she knows I love her,” after which she jumps. Nevertheless she is not dead and therefore she is being sentenced for bringing the precious life of a child in danger: “there is no greater sin than harming a child” (ep.10). Her punishment is stoning. However, they will not go through with it thanks to the rebellion of the other Handmaids.

A fourth perspective is that of June’s husband, Luke, the first male perspective in the series. The entire seventh episode is dedicated to his story. The viewer gets to see what happened after his wife and daughter ran away into the woods. He got shot but managed to escape. A few survivors found him in the abandoned city centre and took him along with their van. Although he wanted to look for June and Hannah in the first place, the others convinced
him it would be too risky. Thanks to them, he could cross the border to Canada. During Luke’s version of the story, there are a lot of flashbacks to June, Hannah and him trying to run away and hiding at a bungalow. Unfortunately the government went looking for them and they had to run. Three years later, Luke is still living in Canada, reading a letter from his wife, June, which she was able to send via the government of Mexico. The letter says “I love you so much. Save Hannah”. This episode ends hopefully.

A fifth perspective is that of Nick. In a flashback the viewer sees Nick hopelessly looking for a job. He was not able to find a decent job because he took care of his disabled brother. This perspective reveals his sensitive side and illustrates the position he was in. Then suddenly someone addressed him and offered him a job at ‘the sons of Jacob,’ who presented a group of men wanting to set things right and clean up this country. In another flashback, Nick already worked as a driver and he heard some of the men talk: “the human race is at risk. All fertile women should be collected and impregnated by the ones of superior status.” Fred said that the Wives would not accept that and someone answered: “Maybe the wives should be there. It would be less of a violation.” These men try to justify their means. When the other men had left, Fred asked Nick’s opinion, who agreed with him: “it is better for everyone.” Nick did not have much of a choice, as he needed this job and he wanted a safe position in this new republic. It is easier for the viewer to sympathize with him as we know his background through this form of focalising.

A last perspective is that of Offred’s friend, Moira. The last time at the Jezebels, Offred accused her of not fighting hard enough. However, this changes at the end of episode 9, when Moira is standing in the bathroom holding a sharp-shaped object. A male voice calls her from the bedroom. Then the story suddenly shifts to the last scene of the episode, in which Moira leaves the building in men clothes with blood on her hands. She gets into a car and drives away. She finally stood up and fought back. In the last episode, there is a scene in
which Moira is running through a snowy landscape. Apparently, she finds herself in Ontario, Canada. Moira arrives at a refugee centre. There she runs into Luke who came to pick her up, because apparently he put her on his list of missing family. This scene gives the public hope.

4.2.5. The Problem of Infertility

The problem of infertility and the decreasing birth rate emerges more in the series. Although this aspect is also present in the novel, the series focusses more on this problem. The men of the new government justify their laws by claiming that they want to solve this major problem. Offred tells Moira in a flashback scene that she is pregnant and that she is worried she will get a miscarriage, as those things happened frequently at that time. In one of the flashbacks, the entrance of the hospital was full of people praying to get a baby, for there were not manifold babies born alive back then. Everyone become desperate, for example one woman even tried to steal Offred’s baby at the hospital. When Offred informs the ambassador of Mexico about their conditions, the ambassador tells her she cannot help. Her determination to save her country, in which not one child has been born alive the last six years, makes her act out of despair.

4.2.6. Conclusion

The television series of The Handmaid’s Tale (2017) directed by Bruce Miller enlarges the sensational aspect in the story. Namely, suffering tends to attract the people, as the Greek Tragedies have always proven. There are several emotional and violent scenes. The camera technique of the close-ups also rises the tension. Besides, the series elaborates upon the romantic relationship between Offred and the driver Nick. Their relationship is much more profound and emotional than in the novel. Moreover, the characters are much more heroic, as they stand up, rebel and risk their lives for the higher good. This makes the series more hopeful, as one Handmaid even manages to escape and cross the borders. The multiple
perspectives of the other Handmaids, Serena Joy, Luke and Nick show a different side of the story, highlighting their thoughts and motives. Finally, the problem of infertility is more focussed upon through the flashbacks.
5. Conclusion

This dissertation has managed to answer the research question of how the female role in the dystopian narratives, *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, is portrayed, including a comparison to their audio-visual adaptations. It primarily compared the ways in which women are oppressed in both *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and likewise compared the novels to their recent audio-visual adaptations, *The Stepford Wives* (2004) by Frank Oz and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) by Bruce Miller, highlighting the renewed context they were produced in.

A first aspect that this dissertation has elucidated is the ambiguity of the term “Dystopia”. The line that separates dystopia from utopia is rather vague. Although the two terms are defined as each other’s opposite, a few authors, like Margaret Atwood, have stated that these two terms resemble each other very much. Atwood namely represents the genre “critical dystopia,” which, besides the dystopian aspects, also includes a utopian thought with an open ending. The major event that caused the rise of the dystopian genre is the technological evolution which made humankind feel useless. This feeling has only been increased throughout the years, as the recent terrorist attacks again caused a boom of dystopian fiction. The main purpose of these dystopian authors is warning humanity for future catastrophes by expressing their concerns about modern-day beliefs. Therefore, Atwood calls these narratives “speculative fiction,” as they represent possible futures based on current tendencies. The focus of this dissertation is on the female aspects in dystopian fiction which reacts against the male-dominated canon and male protagonists. As a feminist author, Margaret Atwood is a pioneer of the female dystopia expressing her concerns about anti-feminists, neo-conservatives and patriarchal movements. Besides, Ira Levin also expresses his concern of female oppression by writing his stories from a female perspective. This “female gothic”
reflects the importance of Women’s Liberation Movement at that time. Both novels discussed in this dissertation depict women being dehumanized by a patriarchal power.

_The Stepford Wives_ (1972) by Ira Levin portrays the archaic and classical image of the female gender as looking attractive and devoting themselves to their household duties. Snodgrass confirms that the classical image of femininity is associated with looks and appearances, while masculinity stands for reason. Bammer adds that the image of the hausfrau taking care of the home and the family is also a classical one. The Stepford women look and behave as if they are actresses from commercials promoting domestic products, which puts emphasis on their spuriousness. Besides, the language proves the robotic aspect of the story; the manifold repetitions refer to the programmed sentences in their brain. Throughout the narrative, abundant implications allude to the theory of the men making robotic replicas of their wives. The reason behind their practices is that the men probably felt threatened by the women gaining power through the Women’s Liberation Movement. The protagonist, Joanna, represents a powerful, independent and liberal woman, supporting gender equality. Although this character appears to be persistent, she is unable to prevent the men from changing her in one of the other Stepford women.

In _The Handmaid’s Tale_ (1985) written by Margaret Atwood, the female gender is being oppressed by reducing women to their biological function. With this dystopian novel, Atwood warns her readers for extreme and endangering uprising groups, like the neo-conservatives and patriarchal Christians. Gottlieb compares the act of dehumanization of the Republic of Gilead to the methods of the fascist. All women are put into classes reducing them to one sole function. The main character Offred, is one of the Handmaids, whose function is to reproduce with the purpose of providing the republic of descendants. The Handmaids are desexualized, as they have to wear a long red dress presenting their function and are forbidden to converse with men. Procreation is the only goal in this society and it is the Handmaid’s job to fulfil this
life-changing task. The flashbacks in the narrative elucidate the evolvement from a free state to this tyrannical republic. At the same time, these flashbacks define Offred as a person and make her hold on to her true self. Although there are a few heroic characters reacting against the regime, Offred tends to stay in the background and silently rebels the system. By telling her story to a future audience, she makes use of the language, which she is prohibited to apply, as an act of rebellion. Moreover, she uses her female charms in order to gain some benefits, for example through her affair with the Commander, which makes her feel powerful. Besides, her relationship with Nick makes her feel alive but vulnerable as well. The narrative recognizes that desire in any form can never be fully eliminated. Staels explains that it is even harder to resist temptation when it is being repressed. The Jezebels, a brothel offering sinful Handmaids to work as escorts, proves this eruption of desire. The open ending contains a hopeful aspect, which is a striking characteristic of Atwood’s “critical dystopia”.

*The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) more or less reflect the same fear of some traditional authority dehumanizing the female gender. While the former reflect the archaic image of housewives, the latter presents an image of a child-bearer. Both women are objectified and reduced to their function, neglecting their values and talents. As the Stepford women are sexualized on the one hand, the Handmaids are desexualized on the other hand. Desire comes to the surface in both narratives, whether more explicitly through the creation of robotic wives, or rather secretly at the Jezebels. The women’s choice of becoming pregnant is taken away from both the Stepford wives and the Handmaids. The Stepford wives are unable to bear children as robots are not provided with a womb, whereas the Handmaids do not have the freedom of choice as they are obliged to reproduce for the republic’s sake. Schweishelm argues that this inability to control their own reproduction was a major issue for the feminists who were in favour of abortion rights. The language of the women is being reduced and controlled by a computer programme or by the authorities, which proves their
fear of rebellion. The strong female protagonists in both narratives are an example for the feminists, although the character of Joanna is more heroic than the passively awaiting Offred. The men clearly felt threatened by the intelligent and powerful women who gained respect thanks to the Women’s Liberation Movements and the manifold riots.

The recent audio-visual adaptations of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) directed by Frank Oz and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) illuminate the renewed interest in dystopian topics. The transmedial act of transforming these narratives into a film and a series respectively keeps up the popularity and interest of the public. Thanks to their various film techniques including image and sound, audio-visuals secure the viewer’s empathic involvement. In contrast to the novels, the public does not need to stimulate their imagination. Due to this, films and series address a much larger audience. When making an adaptation, it is necessary to adapt the storyline to the renewed context, which allows the director some creativity. *The Stepford Wives* (2004) radically adapts the narrative to the new context of feminism, in which women are already more emancipated than the 1970s. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) remains faithful to its plot for the most part, while also adding some new perspectives and popularizing the story into a series having a sequel in mind.

The film of *The Stepford Wives* (2004), directed by Frank Oz, reflects the new feminist context in which the film has been produced by portraying the main female characters as ambitious careerists. The men in the film not solely felt threatened but also humiliated by their powerful wives. Thus, as opposed to the novel, the women in the film are already more successful than their men, which makes the men feel overshadowed. Furthermore, unlike the book, the film also includes the struggles of the gay community. This reveals the gender stereotypes of not only women but also men. According to Colebrook, the female gender has always been associated with the body while the male gender has been associated with reason. As the film is much more explicit, exaggerated and comical, it could be interpreted as a
parody, which has been confirmed by Schweishelm. Although the director elaborates upon the robotic aspect, he also introduces a theory of brain-implanted nano-chips, which confuses the viewer about the production of the Stepford wives. The amplification of the romantic storyline, likewise mentioned by Schweishelm, is another typical characteristic of the cinema, as it attracts the public. Joanna and Walter are making sacrifices out of love and eventually a happy ending ensues thanks to their invincible love. The positive ending of Walter deactivating the implanted chips offers the viewer a feeling of closure, which is not the case in the novel. To be concise, the film provides the public with a more light-hearted plot than the readers of the novel. This reflects the developed concept of feminism in which women were already more emancipated and in which female oppression was less of a serious concern. It recognizes the values and strength of the female gender.

The television series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017) directed by Bruce Miller adds a sensational layer to the story, as sensation tends to attract a larger public. The Greek Tragedies prove that human beings have always been attracted to drama and violence. The manifold visually violent scenes and close-ups that create tension maintain the public’s interest. Besides, just as the film of *The Stepford Wives*, the series likewise amplifies the romantic relationship between Offred and the driver Nick. Their relationship is much more profound and emotional than in the novel. Moreover, the heroic characters actively rebelling the system make the series more hopeful, as one Handmaid even manages to escape and cross the borders. The multiple perspectives reveal a different side of the story. The viewer detects the reasons and motives behind everything, which makes them empathize more with the other characters. With the exception of Nick and Luke, the female perspectives are in the majority. They represent the different struggles of various women in this regime, not solely focussing on Offred’s point of view.
Throughout this dissertation the research question of “how the female role in the dystopian narratives, *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, is portrayed, including a comparison to their audio-visual adaptations” has been answered. The analyses and comparison of *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) elucidate that the major feminist concerns projected in both novels are more or less the same, namely the female fear of becoming dehumanized by some patriarchal power. Additionally, their audio-visual adaptations of respectively 2004 and 2017 highlight the different context between the novels and their film or series. The audio-visuals reflect the evolution of feminism as well as the public’s expectations.
6. Bibliography


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