

The Handmaid's Tale

A Structural Breakdown of the First Season

(One Hour Drama, Miniseries, Hulu, 2017)

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The Handmaid's Tale Pilot Script :(Ilene Chaiken/Bruce Miller, novel: Margaret Atwood): http://www.la-screenwriter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/The_Handmaids_Tale_1x01_-_Pilot-1.pdf

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJTonzXTJs1>

Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale is a tv series on Hulu based on a novel of the same name by the Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood. The series and novel present a dystopian vision of the future in America told from the perspective of a handmaid. In the aftermath of an epidemic, a fundamentalist government of Gilead rules the United States through a class system. Women's rights have been taken away and because of widespread infertility, the few remaining fertile women have been conscripted as 'handmaids' for the ruling elite.

The series is told from the perspective of a handmaid, Offred, assigned to a commander, Fred Waterford, and his wife, Serena Joy. The story is told by alternating with flashbacks to Offred's previous life and how she has moved from being married with a family to her present day position in Gilead. Offred's voice-over provides a window on the handmaid's inner life and her journey frames each episode and the season.

Offred's external goal is basic survival while the larger series external story goal is to follow Offred in her journey as handmaid to produce a child for the Waterfords. Offred's internal goal is regaining her lost family and helping the revolutionary cause, 'Mayday' while the series' internal goal raises various contemporary questions and parallels of Gilead with our own world.

Screenplay Structural Overview

The series is carefully structured and stunning on a number of levels, among them, the screenwriting which is elegant spare and carefully structured. The season consists of ten focused one hour episodic screenplays and tightly woven narrative arc. This article conducts a full season structural analysis of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*. For the scripts, the general five act structure is used as model and each episode follows more or less the traditional 'five' act screenplay structure.

One Hour TV Drama Five Act Structure

Teaser: Introduce themes.

Act One: Introduce current story, set up goals, intention and obstacles. Introduce your characters and present the problem.

Act Two: Characters dealing with conflict in full swing, obstacle, possible false high, bad guys close in. Escalate the problem.

Act Three: Characters at their lowest points, bad guys winning, obstacle complications, dark night of the soul. All is lost. End hook so audiences have possibility of seeing how this turns out. Worst case scenario.

Act Four: Characters start to have hope of triumph, begin to prevail. Heroes take control, begin ticking clock.

Act Five: Resolution. Closure and cliffhangers/loose ends for next episode. Characters reach their moment of victory.

Each act of *The Handmaid's Tale* also usually sets up a 'cliffhanger' and, at times, deviates from the five act dramatic structure. To generalize, the higher, usually more upbeat moments of resolution in act four and act five are more subdued in *The Handmaid's Tale* with smaller symbolic victories or they descend further into darkness. The series also brilliantly makes use of lighting, sound, cinematography, costume, and set design and colors. This brings the novel to life, updating flashbacks to the present political moment and exploring more current identity politics (race, gender, class) subtly through casting and visual cues. Through a structural first season overview and episode/act by act breakdown of the episodes to follow, much can be learnt about the art of screenwriting and crafting of serious tv drama for longer form novelistic narrative.



Episode #1 - Offred

Teaser: The series opens with Offred trying to escape with her husband and child to Canada, introducing themes of both escape and the oppressive notion of this dystopian world.

Act One: Offred, the maid, Commander Waterford, Nick, the driver, Serena Joy, the commander's wife, Martha, a maid, Ofglen, and Moira, handmaids, are all introduced. Voice over is from Offred's perspective narrating her inner world. The future here is created through costume/set design and narration, not high budget special effects. Flashbacks of an earlier world start to occur. The past is referenced through current tech references (i.e. Tinder, Uber etc.).

Act Two: This act is presented largely in flashback introducing the conflict of Offred going to Handmaid's School. An overseer, Aunt Lydia, cattle prods independent young women into submission. An eye of one of the handmaids, Ofglen, is removed for her bad behavior. Offred also sees her earlier African American lesbian friend, Moira, subjected as a handmaid. Problems are immediately ones of basic survival.

Act Three: The Ceremony. Commander Waterford tries to impregnate Offred, his handmaid, while she lies in the lap of his sterile wife, Serena Joy. In flashback, Moira tells Offred to keep herself together. Nick, the driver, is set up as a glimmer of hope. There is a salvaging, a group ritual killing of a rapist, carried out by the handmaids. The state is complicit in both group executions and intimate lives.

Act Four: Flashback: Offred and Moira jog and, out of the blue, at a coffee shop, Offred's credit card balance is renounced. How this dystopian nightmare came to be will be shown from Offred's perspective through flashback.

Act Five: Offred's hope or moment of victory is her will to live for her daughter, Hannah. Offred reveals her true previous name, 'June'. She has not yet completely lost her previous identity.

Episode #2 Birthday

Teaser: The episode begins with a surrogate scene of Offred/Commander Waterford and Serena his wife. (Theme: subjugation of women in this dystopian world).

Act One: Ofglen/Offred's friendship is set up as they go shopping for their commander's groceries. There is continuing mystery with the driver Nick. Can he be trusted?

Act Two: Offred is examined by a doctor for pregnancy. A question of Commander Waterford's fertility comes up. The birthing mansion is introduced with different classes - handmaid's (surrogates) and Commander's wives (Upper class).

Act Three: One of the handmaid's, Janine, Ofwarren, gives birth to a beautiful baby, but the baby is immediately taken away for the commander's wife. This is the worst case scenario for the mother. In a flashback, Offred remembers her own baby also being almost stolen at the infertility epidemic's beginnings.

Act Four: Offred finds a moment of hope with the driver, Nick, and the commander, in the evening, with a game of Scrabble. Waterford recognizes her as being more than a breeding machine: Offred's literacy is emphasized as she is able to beat him in Scrabble. The word 'zygote' and her previous professional role, as cellular biologist, is used by Offred. Female literacy is not allowed in the dystopian society where women's rights have taken a huge steps backwards.

Act Five: Offred wishes to share her moment of victory with her friend, Ofglen, but as they are about to meet for their morning shopping, we are surprised that another handmaiden has taken Ofglen's place (cliffhanger).

Episode #3 Late

Teaser: Offred's speculation on what has previously occurred with Ofglen begins the episode.

Act One: Origins of the political dystopia, Gilead, is introduced in flashback. Offred is let go from her job and credit cards are frozen by the government for women. This explains how property and work rights are taken away from women. In the present, the larger question becomes, "Is Offred pregnant from Commander Waterford?"

Act Two: The conflict between Serena Joy, Waterford's wife, and Offred develops. False high - Offred tells Serena that Janine thinks her commander is in love with her. The objectified breeder part of the handmaids is emphasized and Janine bites her Commander's wife, also renaming her baby with a name of her own choosing, Charlotte/Angela.

Act Three: Nick, the driver, who Offred thinks is on her side, betrays her. Offred is tortured and interrogated by Aunt Lydia with an electric cattle prod regarding Ofglen, as a gender traitor - lesbian. There is a trial of Ofglen and a hanging of her lesbian partner. Offred tells Serena she is not pregnant sending Serena into a fury and locking Offred in her room.

Act Four: Nick mentions he was wrong for not driving away. There is blood on Offred's towel - she is not pregnant. Flashbacks show retrenchment of previous women's equality and Offred remembers protests turning ugly, reflecting on the necessity to fight like Moira. This may be seen as a moment of triumph for Offred as she reflects back, learning that she must stay awake and not be a victim.

Act Five: Gender circumcision of Emily (Ofglen) occurs. This example has somehow made Offred stronger as she knows she has no choice but to fight.



Episode 4 – *Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum* (Do not let the Bastards Grind You Down)

Teaser: Flashback to Offred, with her daughter, Hannah at a fair. The episode's theme will examine Offred now living/fighting for her daughter, the next generation.

Act One: Offred is locked in a room by Serena Joy, finding the words in Latin, '*Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum*' - Do Not Let the Bastards Grind You Down - carved into the wall. This forms a theme of Offred coming to this new consciousness . Flashback - Offred remembers Moira carving graffiti into girl's bathroom wall - 'Aunt Lydia sux' - echoing the other graffiti.

Act Two : A false high for Offred getting out of the house to the doctor's and alone with Nick. Offred has a flashback to the handmaid's school with the ceremony outlined. Women are emphasized as simply wombs, containers, and vessels. The doctor also turns out to be a pseudo rapist. Offred also does not want to go back home as it is ceremony night. Another false high with a flashback to Offred and Moira almost escaping. Moira succeeds and Offred is left in the subway. Later, Offred has her feet whipped as punishment for this attempt so she can't walk.

Act Three Lowest point – ceremony night . Dark night of the soul for Offred. She lies on the floor and touches the carved Latin afterwards. 'Do not let the Bastards win'. Flashback to her and Moira trying to escape.

Act Four Commander Waterford is unsuccessful at impregnating Offred and secretly invites her to play Scrabble. Flashback of her and Moira trying to escape. Offred sacrifices herself for Moira. Offred's memory holds up her African American friend, Moira's, fighting spirit as an example of survival. She uses her feminine wiles with the commander to empower herself.

Act Five Scrabble game with commander. Offred sees the Latin grammar book playing on the word “Sylph” (Lat. thin and graceful girl) to ask Waterford about ‘*Nolite de bastardes carborodourm*’. The commander reveals this was himself as a 12 year old boy studying Latin. Offred finds out about the previous Offred who was ground down. Waterford mentions her life became so unbearable she committed suicide. Offred uses this to her advantage. Flashback to other girls in the handmaiden’s group giving her small pieces of fruit/food after her beating and after her earlier escape attempt. Final voice over - “There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out.”

Episode 5 - Faithful

Teaser: Offred plays Scrabble with Waterford with the theme of the ‘lure’ (feminine wiles) of Offred emphasized. ‘You fit into me like a hook into an eye, a fishhook’.

Act One The commander gives Offred a beauty magazine, recognizing her more than a breeder . Serena Waterford introduces the idea of impregnation by Nick, the driver, to Offred. The problem juxtaposes love against animal lust and breeding.

Act Two Offred’s relationship with Nick, her previous husband, Luke, and the commander is examined in terms of themes of love, lust and relationships and previous graffiti, “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down”.

Act Three Ceremony with commander which descends to pornography. The commander brings Offred another glamour magazine and mentions “biological destiny”. Love versus lust versus animal breeding is juxtaposed. In this darker episode, all of the men and Offred are driven in different degrees by these. Cliffhanger in flashback: Offred’s previous husband, Luke, confesses his love to Offred (Not just lust). This is the ray of hope after this dark scene.

Act Four: Offred begins to take back her power, seeing Serena with shears, and finding out from Ofglen that she can join the subversive organization, “Mayday”, “*m’aidez*” (French tr.: Help me).

Act Five Offred gives herself to Nick but takes control of her own sexual power, a small but important step.

Episode 6 – A Woman’s Place

Teaser: Theme; Nick and Offred’s developing relationship and kindled passion.

Act One: A delegation from Mexico appears and the handmaidens must clean dead bodies hanging on walls. Flashback of Waterford and Serena. Serena is an intelligent woman who gives Waterford helpful advice and loves him.

Act Two: The Mexican delegation meets Offred. The female ambassador asks about the retrograde position of women in the US. She wears a pantsuit and Offred lies about her life. All of the upper class wives are obedient.

Act Three: There is an argument between Commander Waterford and his wife, Serena. Flashback: Waterford promoted the intelligence of his wife, her books and writing ability. Commander Waterford calls Offred to a Scrabble game but her mind is on Nick. She needs to be duplicitous to ensure her survival. This is a dark low point.

Act Four: The handmaidens are paraded for the Mexican delegation and the subjugated role of women is emphasized. Commander Waterford's wife, Serena, speaks to the delegation out of turn. Gilead's children are dressed and paraded like little Hitler youth. Handmaidens and children have become a commodity to trade. Offred resolves she must do something.

Act Five: Offred announces her name to Nick as a moment of humanity. She courageously corrects her previous lies to the Mexican ambassador: "We're prisoners. If we run, they'll try to kill us. They use cattle prods. If they catch you reading, they cut off a finger. I was trying to escape to Canada. They took my daughter. They are trafficking in children and women as breeders." Offred speaks her truth to the ambassador, speaking truth to power, and taking back her power in this way.

Episode 7 - The Other Side



Teaser: The episode begins with a flashback to a car crash: Offred's husband, Luke, daughter, Hannah, and Offred try to escape with Gilead police hot in pursuit. Theme of family and escape.

Act One After sending Offred and Hannah into the woods after their car runs off the road, Luke tries to get bullets into his gun but is shot by Gilead police and taken away in an ambulance. Luckily, the ambulance overturns. He is able to escape, finding Hannah's rabbit in the woods and signaling that his wife and daughter must have been captured.

Act Two: Luke tries to survive with the bullet lodged in him in an abandoned cabin. There is a flashback of the family retracing their Boston escape steps. This act ends again with a cliffhanger with a group finding Luke in the cabin. Are they friends or foes?

Act Three: The group who finds Luke is also trying to escape and help him with his wounds. There is a flashback to the family trying to be a family in an abandoned cabin as they leave town. There are constant questions as to who in the vicinity can be trusted.

Act Four: Luke continues with the new group to Canada. There is a flashback to a church where people are hung by the Gilead regime, reminiscent of the Nazi's crash and burn policy. Luke manages to get on a boat to Canada amid Gilead police firing at the group attempting to escape.

Act Five: Luke shows up in Toronto, Canada. It is now three years later and he is with one of the other female escapees. They are now political refugees. He goes to a Gilead refugee center crowded with pictures of others and receives a message that 'June' is alive. Cliffhanger: What will be his actions now that he has found this out?

Episode 8 - Jezebels

Teaser: The episode begins with Offred reflecting on her former husband, Luke, in Nick, the driver's, bedroom. Themes of sexual freedom will be explored.

Act One: In flashback, Nick, the driver, is shown earlier at an unemployment office speaking with a career counselor before getting into a fight. The job counselor takes him for breakfast, telling him about a new men's group, "the Sons of Jacob", a displaced, heterosexual, working-class white male club. Cliffhanger: Counselor: "Come to the meeting. There may be a job in it for you".

Act Two Waterford shows up in Offred's bedroom. He shaves her legs, gives her lipstick, a cocktail dress, high heels and holds a mirror for her. These scenes escalate the problem - Offred is treated as a sexual object showing objectification of women. Cliffhanger: Offred: "Where are we going?"

Act Three: Waterford takes Offred through checkpoints asking her to impersonate Mrs. Waterford and taking her into territory where 'women' aren't allowed. In flashback, Waterford and the commanders strategize about 'the ceremony' and handmaids. The commander then takes Offred to what looks like a high class bordello. The hypocritical upper class men disregard Gilead's fundamentalist religious rules. Offred sees Moira dressed as a prostitute. The women have been turned into handmaids, or prostitutes, of the elite – a complete historical step backwards.

Act Four: Meeting in the ladies room, Moira apologizes for leaving Offred at the train station. In the servant's quarters of the hotel, Nick exchanges contraband (drugs, alcohol, etc.) with a Martha and later watches as Offred and Waterford go to a hotel room. He flashes back to memories of the previous handmaid who hung herself. In the hotel room, the commander forces himself on Offred.

Act Five: Offred sneaks out of the hotel room witnessing the hotel's debauchery, finding Moira and hearing about the possibility of "Femaleroad", a way out of the country. Nick's backstory continues in flashback. It is revealed that he is an eye, watching Waterford's profligacy. At home, Offred approaches Nick, but he vacillates between his 'fundamentalist' mission and previous name, "Nick Blaine". The commander's wife, Serena, brings Offred a symbolic gift - a lock and key music box ballerina. On one level the gift is recognition of Serena's humanity and childhood memory. On another, it is a girl trapped in a box, symbolic of a woman's place in this dystopia. "She only dances when someone opens the lid, winds her up". The episode concludes with Offred, like the music box ballerina, in the closet, scrawling on wall "You are not alone" and narrating "There must always be someone when there is no one. I will not be that girl in the box". This is a slender but significant moment of victory for Offred, resolving not to be the girl in the box and carving the graffiti as an act of resistance for others for the future.

Episode 9 – The Bridge

Teaser: The handmaid's line up in a double row for a communal leaving ceremony of Ofwarren, symbolically forming a bridge. Bridges and divides between handmaids and upper class commanders' wives will be explored.

Act One: Commander Putnam's wife and her handmaiden, Offwarren, argue in the leaving ceremony over giving up the baby (Angela/Charlotte). Offwarren leaves running down a line of handmaidens. Offred notices her instability, making her intentions known to help with the revolution, Mayday after witnessing the separation of mother/child. Ofwarren is transferred to Ofdaniel as a new handmaid. The commanders' wives talk about handmaidens while they are walking Baby 'Angela'. Cliffhanger: Will Offred become pregnant and will Ofwarren, Janine, be able to let go of her baby?

Act Two: A Mayday handmaid talks to Offred about a secret task to get a package from Jezebels. Offred launches a plan to get back to the hotel with Commander Waterford. There is tension with Nick, Commander Waterford and Offred while Nick drives them to the hotel.

Act Three Serena sews baby boots at night and finds Martha, who makes a slip about the commander's absence. The women share a drink over the commander's infidelity and Martha's deceased son. Ofwarren participates in a new ceremony and forcefully kicks the commander off her. This shifts to Offred with Commander Waterford in the hotel room and Moira appearing.

Act Four: Nick reveals to the hotel cook that he has feelings for Offred while Offred tries to enlist Moira to help get the package. Moira's resilience seems lost and Offred suffers a dark night of the soul because of Moira's lack of fight. The commander returns to Serena's knowledge of his infidelity. Serena wakes Offred up in the morning and they go to the town bridge where Ofwarren attempts suicide with her baby. Offred convinces Offwarren, Janine, to relinquish her baby. Janine relinquishes her baby but tries to jump off the bridge to her death with Baby Charlotte taken from Offred. Cliffhanger - Janine is at the hospital. Her attempted suicide has failed.

Act Five Commander Putham is taken away for his infidelities and Offred receives a package from the meat market. It is a glimmer of hope as it is from Moira. The episode ends with Moira with blood on her hands. Having killed a client, she dons his clothes, and gets into his car to escape. These are moments of victory for Offred and Moira. Moira's fighting spirit is back and she is taking back her power as an example for Offred.

Episode 10 – Night (Season Finale)



Teaser: The final episode begins with a flashback of the handmaids in training at the Red Center. Offred is tortured with a cattle prod and electric device by Aunt Lydia: ‘Humble yourself in the eyes of the Lord’. This fundamentalist corruption of religious verse/doctrine and use of violence and torture by the state as a form of control forms a theme in this season finale episode.

Act One: The handmaids march in formation. Offred dreams of Mayday, noting that the handmaids’ red-colored uniforms serve to unify them as a larger ironically revolutionary army unit. The commander’s wife, Serena violently punches, Offred, confronting her with her dress worn at Jezebels. Offred bleeds from Serena’s blows and Serena makes her take a pregnancy test. She is pregnant. Offred has flashbacks of Luke and herself and her earlier pregnancy. Serena then confronts Waterford about his affair with Offred announcing Offred’s pregnancy. It is a dark moment as Serena also tells the commander, “The baby isn’t yours”.

Act Two: Martha and Offred talk about her pregnancy and Nick enters the dining room noticing Offred’s head wound. Offred reveals she is pregnant and Nick immediately thinks he is the father. Moira has also escaped to Canada and Serena and Offred take a strange trip where Offred’s daughter, Hannah, is shown in the care of another upper class couple. Offred sees Hannah but the car doors are locked so they cannot reunite. This escalates to a terrible blackmail attempt: ‘As long as my baby is safe, so is yours’ Serena says to Offred.

Act Three: The previous disgraced commander, Warren Putnam, confesses his sins to a Gilead tribunal. Putnam’s wife also asks for the harshest punishment and his arm is amputated. Offred also goes to Commander Waterford to protect her daughter from Mrs. Waterford. The commander asks of Offred’s pregnancy: “Is it mine?”. “Of course”, Offred answers. The commander replies, “You do that so well”. Waterford knows Offred is lying.

Act Four: In her room, Offred opens the package obtained by Moira, revealing letters of handmaids talking about their sorry plight and lost children. Moira is shown in Canada, taken in as a refugee.

Serena sets up a crib for the upcoming baby and Waterford tries to make amends with her. Offred wakes up to bells tolling for a salvaging. The question becomes, “for whom do these bells toll?”

Act Five: A salvaging ceremony of the handmaids takes place in snowy weather. The handmaids are told to pick up rocks for a stoning and Janine is brought in. Who will cast the first stone? A handmaid refuses to stone Janine and one of Gilead’s army members violently cold cocks her. Offred follows the previous handmaid’s example and all of the handmaidens follow, leaving the salvaging, and walking with Offred, united in their symbolic victory. Moira is shown reuniting with Luke in Canada while Nick comes to take away Offred for her transgression. He tells Offred not to worry as Offred is taken away in a van. The episode ends with Offred’s inner dialogue and season finale cliffhanger: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I know not”.

Conclusion

The first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides a tightly woven and well-crafted series doing justice to Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel and subtly updating this for contemporary times. In wider scope, the series heralds new possibilities for television today, fulfilling novelistic ambitions and exploring deeper themes, symbols and complex narrative over a longer episodic structure and novelistic visual-based character-driven drama. In terms of structure, the screenplays are a great example of how an episodic and intricate novelistic form can be adapted towards new expanded possibilities of television in the era of streaming and the web and, hopefully, more examples will follow.

About the Author

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