

**THE HANDMAID'S TALE VS.  
THE HANDMAID'S TALE.  
THE GRAPHIC NOVEL AS A MODERN  
READING OF THE TRADITIONAL NOVEL**

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**Abstract**

*The Handmaid's Tale*, which is Margaret Atwood's best recognizable work to date, has come into the spotlight again in the late 2010s thanks to the publication of two new adaptations, including Renée Nault's graphic novel. As the story has been translated into the visual medium by an artist from the new generation, able to look at many issues presented there from a different perspective, while also influenced by the changed sociopolitical context, it has gained a new meaning and has become recontextualized to fit the changed circumstances. This paper sets out to trace the links between the two novels and to explore a new interpretation of the original, which recalibrates the well-known tale through the lens of the comic medium. A close visual and/or textual analysis and the comparison of the two works proves that telling the story through the images mostly and trusting the readers to supply their own interpretation of the fragmented narrative is a new path that is worth exploring.

**Key words**

*Graphic novel; comics; The Handmaid's Tale; interpretation; reading; modern; transmedia*

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**1. Introduction**

Margaret Atwood, one of the most famous Canadian writers, whose rich and varied oeuvre covers novels, short fiction pieces, poetry, graphic novels, comic strips, and literary criticism, is hugely popular among readers and critics alike, arguably because she escapes simple classification, thus providing a never-ending riddle to the curious audiences. She is a witty author tackling serious subjects, a feminist able to create diverse and believable male characters, a keen observer of pop culture who is always ready to distort and parody it, an active participant in the mass media, using them to her own ends, and finally, a steadfast critic who is not afraid to condemn ecological negligence, excessive consumerism, and violence (Van Spankeren and Castro 1988: XX). Among the enduring concerns in her work, there are women's rights, ecology, and politics, all of them reflected in her most famous novel to date, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Adapted many times and in multiple forms, the story has been recontextualized in the late 2010s with the

simultaneous emergence of the popular serial by Hulu/MGM and the graphic novel by Renée Nault. Both versions constitute a fresh look at the classic story by bringing it to the (audio)visual medium and thus gaining new significance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences.

This paper aims to read the classic novel through the lens of the visual medium to find new overtones in it. Since the graphic novel is removed by over three decades from its literary predecessor, its analysis may grant a valuable insight into the interpretations and expectations of the new generation of readers. By juxtaposing the two versions and by applying a close reading, it is possible to discover the well-known tale all over again and consider it from the perspective of the tech-savvy reader living in a media saturated world. As the original novel has come into the spotlight again in the 2010s, when the handmaids became the symbol of the new fight for women's rights, people were already aware of the power of media and media manipulation, as well as the impact of the media on the life of an ordinary person. It has come to be indisputable that the image can be a powerful tool, with a much stronger influence than the written text. Therefore, taking this aspect into consideration, it becomes apparent that a visual medium can be much more efficient in disseminating the message among the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

*The Handmaid's Tale* – the graphic novel is a joint effort of two great artists, each a master in her field. Published as an adaptation, it is actually a reworking of the textual medium into a visual one. Every page has been painted in vivid watercolors, thus moving the novel closer to the realm of visual art and bringing out the beauty that is easily overlooked in the original version. However, the narrative had to be slightly modified, with some elements of the story shifted elsewhere and others removed completely. As Renée Nault explains (van Koeverdeen 2019), her main goal in designing the graphic novel was to identify the passages that constitute the essence of the story and recreate them in the new medium as closely as possible, while omitting or reinterpreting some other fragments, which she deemed to be less important for the plot development. Since the textual layer has been preserved in a form as close to its predecessor as possible – all of the words and sentences have been taken directly from the first novel – it is the illustrations which need to be considered in order to understand the vision of the adapting artist. Renée Nault can paint startling pictures that can haunt the audience for days. As she tried to preserve the narrative voice as much as she could (van Koeverdeen 2019), the readers seemingly observe the events from the same perspective as before. However, Nault has created the tale anew and has told it from a modern perspective by playing with conventions and alluding to other contexts and different media in order to bring the narrator into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Admittedly, Margaret Atwood has not interfered in the creative process, and only occasionally did she express her thoughts on the narrative decisions taken by Renée Nault – for instance, she strongly opposed Nault's idea of making a female professor give the lecture in *The Historical Notes* (van Koeverdeen 2019). In general, then, the adaptation is mostly the embodiment of the adapter's vision, and it is additionally enhanced by the constraints of the comic medium, where the room for both text and illustrations is limited, hence much of the story unfolds in the mind of the reader, in between the panels.

## 2. The graphic novel

Comics is a medium that belongs both to verbal and visual storytelling. As Daniel Stein emphasizes, these two channels of communication do not just exist side by side, but rather they are so closely intertwined that they blend into one coherent message (2015: 355). Not only are the two components inseparable, but also they complete each other, enriching the narrative by appealing to the reader's aesthetic sense as well as to their literary tastes (Goldsmith 2005: 17). For these reasons, Henry Jenkins calls comics "media hybrids" in his blog (2006a), additionally emphasizing the fact that they are embedded in the network of other media and contribute to the evolution of popular culture in a way that no other medium possibly could. Comics – or, to use the term coined by Will Eisner (2008 [1985]) in his seminal work, "sequential art" – can use similar literary styles and a variety of genres that can be found in traditional novels, and they often apply cinematic techniques, like camera angles, or the focalization of a shot, in the construction of panels (Stein 2015: 354). Moreover, they are often influenced by painting, which can be seen in the choice of colors, the composition of panels, or in the contrast. They are open to the impact of other media, readily adopting the techniques used, for example, in film (Somigli 1998: 285), while at the same time being a testing ground for daring experimentation with the form and content. Comics creators often discover and implement innovative solutions which are then readily transplanted into audiovisual media (Jenkins 2006a).

For most of their history, reaching back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, comics were treated as worthless and utterly disposable (Jenkins 2020a). This impression was further reinforced by the fact that they were printed on the cheapest paper that decomposed over time, and due to their preoccupation with superheroes, they were deemed proper for adolescent audiences only (Baetens 2012: 95). They have been gaining respectability since the 1980s, when they have been rebranded as graphic novels which have become bound volumes sold in bookstores rather than at newsstands, reviewed by reputable literary critics and appreciated by adult audiences (Jenkins 2020a). Moving from the fringes of other arts to their midst, sequential art has been able to develop its own distinctive features, and to discover a new artistic potential, which manifested itself in taking up new subjects, much more relevant for the modern reader (for example, the problem of fake news and misinformation which makes it almost impossible to find the truth, like in *Sabrina* (2018) by Nick Drnaso), using innovative techniques (for example, painting each panel and each page in watercolors, like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2019) by Renée Nault), or even broadening the scope of interest (for example, including literary criticism and a historical overview of sequential art that takes the form of a comic book, like *Understanding Comics* (1993) by Scott McCloud). However, as Charles Hatfield (2009 [2005]: 16-18) argues, graphic novels actually owe their innovative form and themes to the underground comix movement of the 1960s and the early 1970s, when the counterculture invigorated the old medium and inspired the artists to tackle social themes, often controversial or even taboo. The comix also defined the position of the artist-auteur as the central

figure in the creative process, rather than the assembly-line-like team of craftsmen dominated by the publishing house (Hatfield 2009 [2005]: 4).

In the simplest terms, as Henry Jenkins argues (2020b: 11), the graphic novel can be defined using a number of crucial parameters, namely: the format (a bound volume containing a monographic work with a clear beginning, middle, and end), the distribution (a bookstore or a library), the target audience (the general reading public, diverse in gender and age), the genre (usually realistic stories, often depicting everyday life or exploring the theme of memory and nostalgia), and the growing cultural status. Colloquial tone dominates, although Jan Baetens (2012: 99) also observes a gradual departure from the dominance of the word, and shifting the prominence to the visual side of the narrative. Nevertheless, the narrator is an essential entity, subject to experimentation, as can be observed, for example, in applying the cinematic technique of a separate “telling” instance, whom the readers can see in the panels, and the “showing” one, who is the focalizer of the events (Baetens 2012: 97-98). Furthermore, even in completely textless fragments, the “showing” narrator is still present, clearly controlling the tale by controlling the *mise-en-scene*, the angle, or the focus of the image (Baetens 2012: 98).

The layout is the most prominent feature that not only distinguishes comics from other media, but also defines them to a large extent. The narration unfolds through a sequence of images that capture the essential moments chosen by the author, but which must be interpreted by the reader, who makes the temporal and causal links between them (Stein 2015: 356). The composition informs the perception of the fragment of the story on a page, as it focuses the reader’s attention on certain elements, and it imposes the correct reading order, typically from left to right and then down, in the Z-path mimicking the way of reading of a standard text (Pederson and Cohn 2016: 8). Panels are neither uniformly sized nor organized, as there can be a different number and arrangement of panels on a page. They are usually circumscribed by a frame, which delimits the area available for the image and centers the reader’s attention on it (Groensteen 2007: 40). The blank space between the panels, called the gutter, as well as the margins around the grid, are no longer left blank, actually. Graphic novelists tend to use these spaces to generate additional meaning. As they sometimes reject the grid altogether and allow the panels to “bleed” (that is, overflow) and cover more area of the page, they turn the whole page – or even the two-page spread – into their canvas (Baetens and Frey 2015: 14). The double page, which Joseph Witek (1989: 7) calls “the largest perceptual unit”, is the basic segment of a comic or a graphic novel. It is dictated by the natural mode of perception of the human eye, and it is used by the authors in pacing their narrative.

Understandably, the layout is closely connected with the reading process. Since reading comics requires both aesthetic and intellectual involvement on the part of the audience (Eisner 2008 [1985]: 2), the appreciation of sequential art takes some knowledge of art and literature. Moreover, the meaning must be inferred both from what is drawn and written inside or outside the panels, and from what is only implied in between. Such “tell-tale gaps”, as Linda Hutcheon (2012: 43) calls them, or “the structural gutter”, as Jared Gardner (2012: XI) renames it,

necessitate an active and imaginative reader, who will be able to fill them in and bring “closure” (McCloud 1993: n.p.) to the story. Therefore, it is the reader that has the power to make the meaning out of the material written and drawn on the page, and the only meaning that can be derived from the narrative is the one which the reader has chosen to find there (Gardner 2012: XII). In other words, the meaning is collaborative, as it involves the comics’ (creator’s) negotiating with the reader in every panel, as well as in between them.

Comics are designed to be read in a certain pattern, but the reader is also encouraged to follow the narrative in a nonlinear way in order to discover new meanings and look at the story from a new perspective. Henry Jenkins calls these affordances the comics’ “scannability” and “flippability” (2020b: 42, 60). As he explains, readers approaching a comic for the first time tend to go through the book very quickly in order to get an immersive experience of the story, and as they read for the second time, they often move back and forth, comparing images and making connections between panels which are placed far apart. Such a strategy gives them a chance to trace the development of the story while focusing on the details, like, for example, the relationships between characters, or the changes occurring with time. Juxtaposing panels which are to be found at different stages of the narrative helps to explore certain textual and visual patterns that are hidden at first glance. As Jenkins (2020b: 60) observes, although the scanning and flipping strategies are by no means unique to sequential art, they are fundamental to the proper understanding of this medium.

### 3. Critical acclaim of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which is Margaret Atwood’s best recognizable novel, has gained substantial critical acclaim and multiple interpretations since its emergence. Often considered the author’s “most postmodern novel to date” (Hutcherson 1988: 156), it contests realist conventions and breaks their constraints. As Marta Dvorak (1999: 15) observes, the author “constructs a textual universe in which discourse prevails over event, enunciation and commentary take precedence over statement and fact” and the emphasis is put on the process of constructing/reconstructing meaning rather than on the story itself. The narration is fragmented and entangled, as it is punctuated by Offred’s doubts, rethinking and rephrasing her account, verging on the dream/reality boundary, as well as giving multiple variants of the same happening (Dvorak 1998: 455–457), although none of the versions is given precedence over the others. Moreover, the abrupt shifts in time and setting all through the narrative, including the final ploy in Historical Notes of embedding the story within a future Professor’s research, destabilize and recalibrate the tale even further, as they not only question the status quo of all the events, but also the sheer existence of the main characters. However, as Fiona Tolan (2007: 170) argues, the epilogue, which turns out to be the main frame of the story removed by over two centuries from the main events, comments on the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is the readers’ time and culture, thus questioning some of the values that the readers hold true.

The fragmentation of the narrative is additionally reinforced because of the metaphor of the body, prevalent across Atwood's oeuvre in general, but given special prominence here. As Hilde Staels (1995: 460) observes, the author often uses this metaphor in her writing, distinguishing between the 'outer' body, that is, the surface restricted by societal constraints, and the 'inner' body, which is the space for private thoughts and feelings, hence the place for unrestrained expression, as well. Here, the connection that exists between the body and the text is very pronounced indeed. It is implied in such comments as, for example, "I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 269). The discontinuous narrative is compared to a mutilated body, which is even more poignant, given how proleptic this quote is: it foreshadows the violent Particution later on in this section, in which a man's body is literally torn into pieces. Furthermore, as Eleonora Rao (2009: 256) observes, such a focus on body parts and fragments emphasizes their objectification by the regime, most significantly manifested in treating women as "two-legged wombs" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 136), but also clear in the deconstructing of the convicts hanging on the Wall, whose "heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 32). Since such textual clues are scattered across the tale like mismatched body parts (Dvorak 1998: 455), reading essentially involves putting them all together and making the mutilated bodies whole again.

The story is told by an unreliable, self-conscious narrator with a limited point of view, traumatized by the events and therefore unable to produce a coherent tale. Offred often struggles with words and pushes herself to continue, as in "I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 227). She also goes back and corrects herself, for instance: "And he was, the loved. One. *Is*, I say. *Is*, *is*, only two letters, you stupid shit, can't you manage to remember it?" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 229, emphasis original), although at times she can be objective and impersonal, for example, while describing the Ceremony: "One detaches oneself. One describes" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 96). However, as *The Handmaid's Tale* is inherently a palimpsestic text in its form and structure (Dvorak 1999: 78), the speaking voices are equally multilayered, as the narrator's words are often covered with the words of other characters, reaching out from the past and overshadowing the present, sounding like an echo. The speaking voices are sifted through the narrator's mind and they blend into a curious mix of dialogue and first person narration, for example: "I think of the others, those without. This is the heartland, here, I'm leading a pampered life, may the Lord make us truly grateful, said Aunt Lydia, or was it thankful, and I start to eat the food" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 65). Such polyvocality reverberates much stronger, as it gives an impression of the State controlling all aspects of people's lives, including their private thoughts. Furthermore, since Aunt Lydia often supports her authority with distorted or incomplete quotes from the Bible, the interweaving of her words and Offred's commonsensical comments creates ironic undertones that help to deconstruct the sociopolitical environment and lay bare the regime's duplicity.

Employing an unreliable narrator results in self-conscious storytelling, therefore in breaking the illusion and the continuity of the tale. The text also abounds

in alternative versions of one event, which draws the reader's attention to its construction, or even to the fact that the narrative is only a reconstruction, and as such, it can never reflect the truth faithfully ("This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction" – Atwood 2017 [1985]: 135). Simultaneously, Offred likes the metalinguistic play with polysemy and she often coins new terms or finds new, startling applications for the well-known phrases (Dvorak 1999: 85), like for instance in her musings over the word *household*: "the Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 81). Such wordplay and linguistic creativity additionally underline the self-reflexivity of the narration, pinpointing the fact that words can in fact be used to build any image, yet however grand it will seem, it will nevertheless be empty inside.

The novel is a site of intertextual play on many levels, with numerous links to other genres, cultural myths, and traditional folktales. The author's fascination with them is well established across her oeuvre, although not universally recognized by critics (Baer 1988: 24). Indeed, the Little Red Riding Hood is the prevalent allusion in *The Handmaid's Tale*, given the color of Offred's apparel that defines her so completely, and considering the narrator's recurrent remarks, for example describing herself as "some fairytale figure in a red cloak", walking along the hallway which is "like a path through the forest" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 9). However, other fairytales are also implied, for example, Snow White, invoked by the image of the "red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 8), which is a clear reminder of the Evil Queen, who was forced to wear red-hot iron shoes in which she had to dance until she dropped dead; or Rapunzel, who is endlessly locked up in her tower, observing Nick from above, even though she has "no rose to toss, he has no lute" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 191); or Cinderella, who has to "be back at the house before midnight; otherwise [she'll] turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 256). Such intertexts add a new understanding to the novel, as they extend the original story to include vivid images of violence and torture, which the Grimm tales are notorious for.

This is in line with the popular categorization of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist dystopia. The story begins in the middle of a terrible 'elsewhere', it follows one alienated female protagonist who focalizes the events, and it traces both the individual experience and the working of the system (Tolan 2007: 147). The place is controlled and automatized to the point that even holy prayers are produced mechanically by the Soul Scrolls, only to be recycled just after printing. The official language is highly formulaic, full of dogmatic yet meaningless phrases such as "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord open". Private conversations are full of pleonasm, therefore they are predictable, but do not leave any space for real communication – they are just "an echo of an echo" (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 264). Moreover, people are trapped by their social positions, which is particularly limiting for women, who are color-coded, perceived through the lens of cultural clichés, stripped of their individuality, and transformed into utterly replaceable objects.

Ironically, though, Gilead could also be understood as a utopia, a safe haven for women, where they are protected from unwanted stares, or verbal and physical

violence. Seemingly, the feminist activists of yore have won: women live in enclosed communities now, they can enjoy the sanctity of their homes, and harmful things such as pornography have been banned. Juxtaposing the flashbacks of the pre-Gilead activism and the contemporary practices within the regime suggests that at least certain feminist aims have been met (Tolan 2007: 145): as Offred snaps, “Mother, ... you wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 127). It shows that, in fact, the totalitarian state has been introduced with the general consent of the people, blinded in their fight for their rights and ignoring the obvious warning signs. However, “ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 56). The transformation of a utopia into a dystopia was possible because of the general passivity of the citizens who have taken their rights for granted and were “careless” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 51), turning a blind eye to the truth.

#### 4. A new reading of the novel: through the lens of the visual medium

The graphic novel based on the classic story by Margaret Atwood presumably is an adaptation, as suggested on the cover and in all the promotional materials. However, even a casual glance inside is sufficient to see that in fact it is a work in its own right – a reflection of the 1985 novel, but also a very modern interpretation of it, a transposition of the word for the image, retaining the plot of its predecessor while creating an oppressive atmosphere much more disturbing or even suffocating for the reader.

The new approach is already suggested by the cover, designed by the author, as well. It is very simple, even minimalist, using three colors only: black, white, and red. Large white letters with the name, Margaret Atwood, and the title, organized in a grid-like pattern, stand out from the black background and they immediately focus the reader’s attention on the tiny red figure placed on the top of the title and barely differing in size from the ‘H’ or ‘A’. The handmaid is covered from head to toe in her red outfit and she is holding a basket. The first impression that even a casual onlooker may get from such a layout is *The Little Red Riding Hood* lost in the dark forest. The matte black cover feels overwhelming and menacing, as if the darkness was about to devour her and efface her completely. Furthermore, the varied surface seems to invite the readers to close their eyes and feel it with their hands first, thus extending the scope of sensations with which they can experience the story. The smoothness of the handmaid’s figure jars with the roughness of its surroundings, whereas the slight indentations of the letters suggest traps that the girl may fall into while walking in this hostile area.

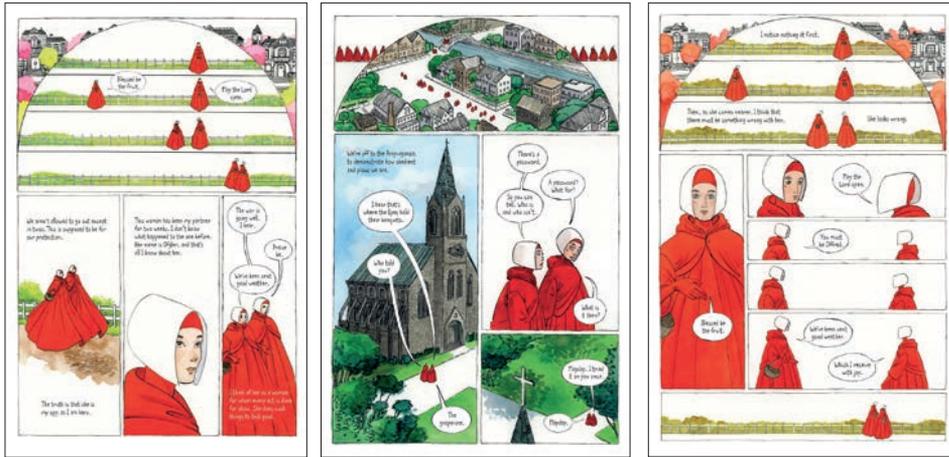
The novel is structured in the same way as its predecessor. It is divided into fifteen parts, entitled interchangeably: “Night” (in one case, in part 5, it is actually “Nap”) and a name of a daytime activity, like “Shopping”, or “Waiting Room”, followed by an epilogue in the form of Historical Notes. The sense of closure is further emphasized due to the frames that open and close the main story (Figure 1): Offred’s shoes in her new room as she arrives at the house (chapter II) and her foot, with the rest of her body already somewhere beyond the frame as she leaves

the house at the end (chapter XV). Most pages have been painted using a limited color palette, with mostly subdued colors, which makes the handmaids' vivid red stand out even more. Gilead is depicted mostly in dark colors: black, grey, brown, or greyish red, with white often used as the background. It is also the distinctive feature of the fragments quoting Aunt Lydia's teachings from the Red Center: the all-black panel is really conspicuous when set against all-white background of the present moment. Curiously, though, luscious green frequently appears in the outdoor images, as if to mock the bleak surroundings and to add peace and serenity where there is none to be expected. On the other hand, the images that do not belong in the regime: the ones that show the pre-Gilead world, the ones with Japanese tourists, or even the ones set in Jezebel's, are much more colorful, with warm, soft colors prevailing over the greyish dullness of the present times.

The setting is shown as closed, almost suffocating. The people of Gilead – especially the women – are always confined: by the strict rules, by the walls of the buildings which they cannot escape from, or even by the streets. This impression is reinforced by the organization of the panels showing the handmaids' walk (Figure 2). The layout on these three pages brings to mind an old-fashioned window, with the handmaids trapped inside the window panes. They are like rats inside a maze, “free to go anywhere, as long as [they] stay inside the maze” (Nault 2019: ch. X). No wonder, then, that their conversations are formulaic and predictable, dominated by the officially approved set phrases, like “Blessed be the fruit / May the Lord open” (Nault 2019: ch. II and XIV). The words in Gilead are a maze full of traps, with dire consequences if someone is caught speaking out their mind – hence, handmaids often limit themselves to such meaningless exchanges just for the sake of their safety. In contrast, though, the narrator is strong enough to escape the tight constraints of the story and eventually flee “into the darkness within; or else the light” (Nault 2019: ch. XV), as shown in the close-up of the shoes and the feet in Figure 1. Moreover, the mere fact that Offred tells the story



Figure 1. Left: Chapter II – Shopping; right: Chapter XV – Night



**Figure 2.** Left: Chapter II – Shopping; middle: Chapter XII – Jezebel’s; right: Chapter XIV – Salvaging

and shapes the images by inserting her dreams or her memories is an act of taking control and exercising power at least for a while.

The narrative is fragmented on multiple levels. In fact, fragmentation is inherent in the very nature of the medium, as each image presents a frozen moment in the narrative and it is up to the reader to find the connection between them and bridge the structural gutters to build a coherent story. Additionally, Renée Nault often breaks the grid and organizes the images differently – using overlapping or bleeding panels, playing around with the background and the frames, applying vertical and horizontal staggering, or even resigning from the panels completely and using a spread of one or two pages as her canvas. The layout is meaningful in as much as it informs the interpretation of the scene and it often gives an extra insight, for example, into the power relations between the characters.

Figure 3 presents two instances of breaking up with the traditional panel structure in order to draw the readers’ attention to other aspects of the story. Chapter II is a kind of introduction to Gilead, as it is the first time in the novel when the narrator walks around and observes the city and the people living there. This page features only one horizontal panel at the top, showing a street, with two handmaids stepping out of the picture and moving into the center. The large blank space below with women of different classes walking, or rather, parading in front of the audience while the narrator supplies the vital information about their apparel and social position, brings a fashion runway to mind. Inevitably, the readers’ focus is on the dresses, whereas the sudden disruption of the narrative allows the audience to take in the information and ponder the significance of the color-coding more closely.

The page on the right (Figure 3) diverges from the traditional organization of the panels for a different reason. Here, the Commander comes to Offred’s room, which is an unexpected action for him to take – “he isn’t supposed to be there” (Nault 2019: ch. IV). However, he does so because he can. As Offred wonders, “something



Figure 3. Left: Chapter II – Shopping; right: Chapter IV – Waiting room

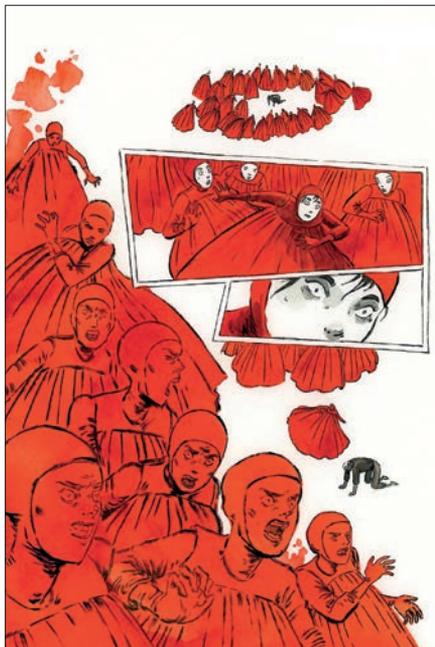


Figure 4. Left: Chapter XII – Jezebel's; right: Chapter XIV – Salvaging

has been shown to me, but what?” (Nault 2019: ch. IV), the answer is supplied by means of the large figure of the man overshadowing both her and the entrance to the room. He has the power to do whatever he wants in this house, or, indeed, in this world, because he owns everything and everyone there. His dominance is additionally marked by the small figure of Offred and the door drawn against the Commander’s jacket. It is a proleptic moment, prefiguring the image of the household – “the house is what he holds” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 81) – as shown in chapter VI.

The most dramatic moments in the narrative are emphasized using textless, dynamic panels, as shown in Figure 4. On the left, in the scene of the attempted flight from Gilead and capturing of the family by the armed forces, the panels are slanted to the side, giving the impression of colliding with each other, or of one being crushed by the others. Together with the motion lines and the dark figures on the red foliage, they create a dramatic effect and suggest the vehement fight that occurred before the men could snatch the child from the mother’s arms. On the right, in the scene of the Particicution, the blind rage of the handmaids is implied by the prevalent red color which covers them all, thus blending them into one furious indistinctive mass, breaking out from any control just as they broke out from the frames of the panel. The only voice of reason, Ofglen, is enclosed from them by means of a double frame, in a panel showing a close-up of her scared face. As red spills over all the page spread, so does the frenzy of the women, who are more similar to wild animals than to human beings here.

The fragmentation of the story may also take the form of a double-page spread, which jars with the small, densely packed panels of the previous page (Figure 5). The sudden change from minuscule images to one large picture inevitably effects



Figure 5. Chapter II – Shopping



Figure 6. Left: Chapter X – Soul Scrolls; right: Chapter VIII – Birth Day

a pause in the reading, and it forces the reader to stop and contemplate the Wall together with the handmaids. Therefore, the words, “we’re supposed to look: this is what they are for” (Nault 2019: ch. II), refer to both the handmaids and the audience. “We” all freeze in the face of such a horror.

Just as in the adapted novel, the main story unfolds in different timeframes, both horizontally (that is, following the chronological order of the events), and vertically (including numerous flashbacks and exploring various past timeframes, sometimes in great detail). The vertical movement gives insight into the story and helps the reader understand the background events whose results can be seen in the present, whereas the horizontal one propels the story forward, uncovers the various aspects of the life in Gilead, and follows the development of the main character. As mentioned before, all these changes are reflected in the shift of the color palette, which informs the reader about the flashbacks. It is the most striking when the two timeframes merge into one image, as in Figure 6.

The two-page spread covers the time “before” and “after” in the most poignant way, by blending the memory and the reality into one picture. In the central picture, shown above, the bustling street, with shop windows painted with pastel colors, with an abundance of snacks just at your fingertips, and with friendly-looking facades welcoming the passers-by to step in, is reduced to a line of old grey abandoned tenements, boarded-up and long out of business, where the only functioning facility is the Soul Scrolls, offering automatized prayer for a fee. The overwhelming dull bleakness of the present street is interrupted by the two red figures – Offred and Ofglen – looking at the noble machines, as if mesmerized by them. It is the zoom-in on the next two pages that reveals their true intentions, though – the “treason” of asking whether God listens to the machines (Nault 2019: ch. X). In the second case (Figure 6), the separate panels delineate Offred’s memories connected with her mother. Even though it is actually a stream of reminiscences, it shows different moments in her life, as well as her

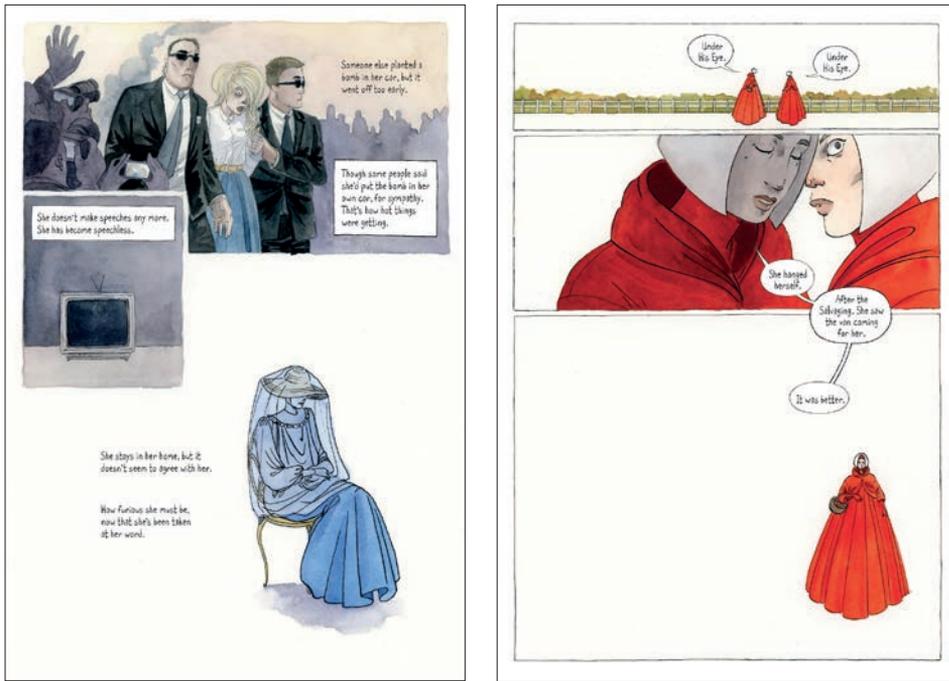


Figure 7. Left: Chapter IV – Waiting Room; right: Chapter XIV – Salvaging

various activities, from protesting in the street, to quarreling with Offred and Luke over dinner. The separation of all the images proves that memories can be like flashes of consciousness that come flooding in when one least expects them.

The layout carries additional meaning, as can be seen in Figure 7. In both cases, the lower half of the page is left blank, with only a single figure placed in the corner. The image signifies the woman's loneliness and her sense of betrayal by others. Serena “stays at her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her” (Nault 2019: ch. IV) after being taken at her word when she preached about the sanctity of the home and the woman's natural place there. The image of her sitting all alone, detached and resigned, jars with her brilliant career that is shown on the previous page in the colorful panels. Offred, in turn, is left on her own after the new Ofglen informs her about the previous Ofglen's suicidal death. It may prefigure her violent ending, as well, considering her involvement with Mayday, or the fact that Ofglen has chosen this solution after seeing the black van coming for her – which happens to Offred, too, just a few pages later. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these two images proves that there is an implied connection between Serena and Offred that goes beyond the Wife-Handmaid relations. Serena's isolation and despair, which the narrator ironically, or even patronizingly, considers to be the natural consequence of her wrong decisions, for which only she can be blamed, turns out to foreshadow Offred's own indiscretions and lapses which have finally brought a similar fate upon her.

The juxtaposition of images separated by many pages can also show the analeptic meaning implied there (Figure 8). The Ceremony, sanctified by the regime and justified as an act of faith described in the Holy Bible, is actually nothing more than a rape. It is clearly seen in the mirror position of the three people involved in both pictures, especially the person holding the girl's hands – in other words, the Wife becomes the accomplice to the crime. The comment made by Aunt Lydia – “That’s what they thought of women, then” (Nault 2019: ch. VIII) – inadvertently yet aptly sums up Gilead as a distorted mirror image of all the bad practices with which many people tried to fight in the times “before”. It is ironic, too, for her to say “consider the alternatives” (Nault 2019: ch. VIII), since neither can the handmaids actually consider anything or make any real choices, nor can they be called alternatives if both scenes look exactly the same.

The ambiguity introduced by the unreliable narrator presenting her subjective point of view is additionally emphasized in the graphic novel in the images that blur the past with the present, or the reality with the dream, as shown in Figure 9. Here, her night-time musings merge with the truth to create a disturbing picture connecting her present state of mind with the previous Offred (by means of the wreath on the ceiling where she hanged herself) and then with any other handmaid, whose fate equally depends on her ability to conceive. Moreover, by deconstructing the body and by focusing on the fragments, especially the uterus (“a central object, the shape of a pear”), the narrator underlines the objectification of the female body within the regime, which limits its significance to procreation



Figure 8. Top: Chapter VI – Household; bottom: Chapter VIII – Birth Day



Figure 9. Chapter XII – Jezebel’s

only. The “I” becomes insignificant and indefinable then, like a translucent cloud which gathers around the object and which gains meaning solely in connection with the significant parts. The overwhelming, all-consuming red of the page is the color of the blood, which stands for failure and the potential danger for the handmaid, and which defines her so completely through the lens of her body.

The fragmented body is also to be found in other scenes, like the ones in Figure 1 or Figure 10. In fact, many characters are often depicted with their body parts only, for example, the feet – marching to enforce justice, like Aunt Lydia



Figure 10. Left and middle: Chapter II – Shopping; right: Chapter XII – Jezebel’s

for the Particition (Chapter XIV), dangling in the air, as if dancing, like the convicts, or all brown and bleeding, like the memory image of Moira's feet after she received a corporal punishment (Chapter VI). Offred is frequently shown by her feet only, which may imply that she would end up first like Moira – tortured almost beyond recognition, and then like the previous Offred and all the executed people – killed in a suicidal act or as a result of a Particition.

The graphic novel plays with intertextual links just like its predecessor, but thanks to its reliance on the image over the word, the cultural allusions resonate much stronger. The traditional fairytales are a strong influence here, which can be observed in Figure 10. As it has already been mentioned, Offred is often depicted as the Red Riding Hood. There are many instances of that, for example, in Figure 10, where she is getting ready to go shopping, and the focus is on the parts of her outfit: the red shoes, the red gloves, the bonnet, and the basket that she holds in her hand. Serena, in turn, is a reflection of the Evil Stepmother of Snow White by the Brothers Grimm, sitting all alone in her home/castle, surrounded by mirrors and making sure that she is “the fairest of them all”. Offred is “a reproach to her” (Nault 2019: ch. II), just like Snow White to the Wicked Queen. However, Serena could also be understood as the image of the Snow Queen of Hans Christian Andersen’s tale, always depicted in a cold blue hue, incapable of any warm feelings and living in a palace surrounded by gardens. Presumably, she is the “queen of bees”, since these insects are shown in her vicinity on numerous occasions. Serena is often shown sitting alone in her garden, as if frozen, always

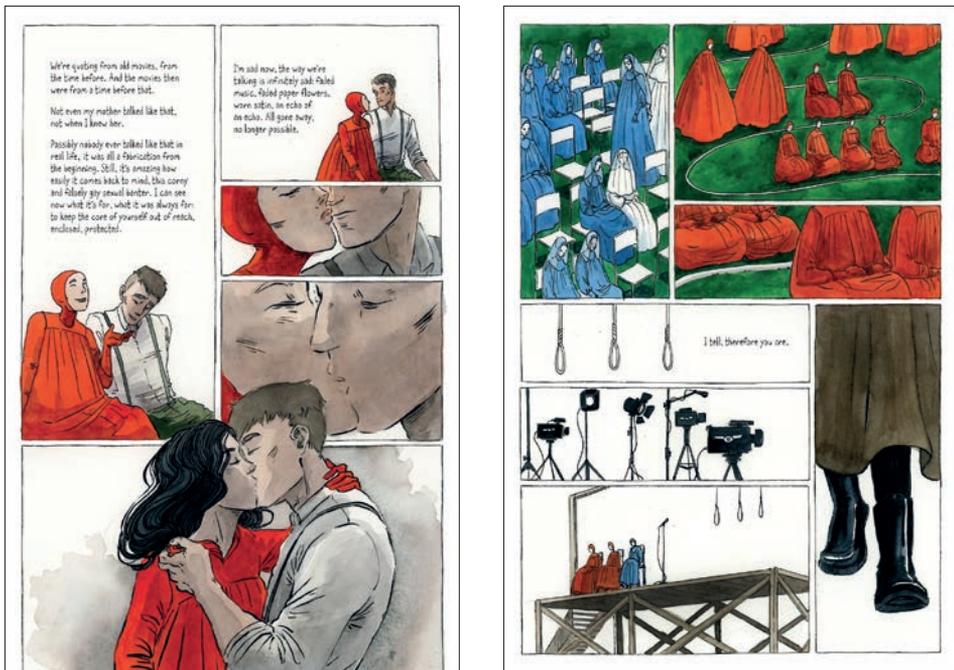


Figure 11. Left: Chapter XIII – Night; right: Chapter XIV – Salvaging

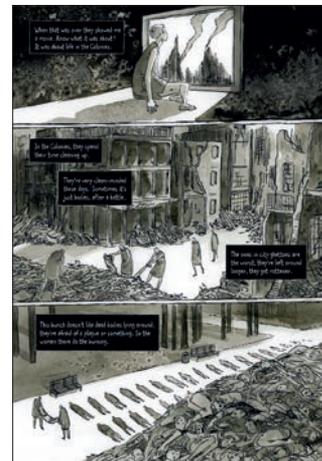
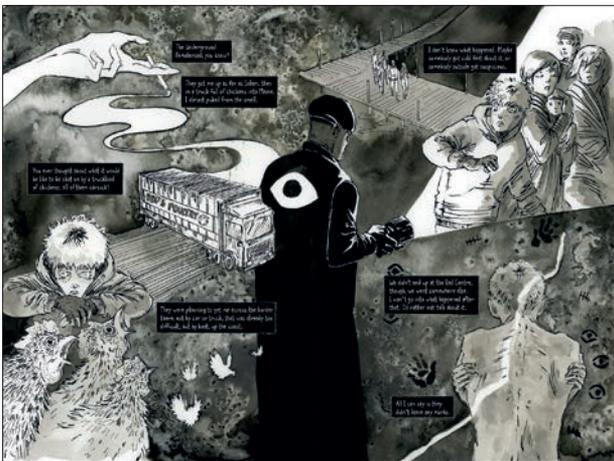


Figure 12. Top and bottom: Chapter XII – Jezebel’s

cold and miserable as though she had been hit with a splinter of the magic distorted mirror from the fairytale. The garden itself is cold, devoid of color, with all the flowers either blue or withering. Offred is made to play word games (the game of Scrabble with the Commander in chapter VIII), just like Kai, enchanted by the Queen. The idea of fairytale allusions is further emphasized in the text, for example, in Offred’s comment “here comes our bedtime story” (Nault 2019: ch. VI) on the Bible reading before the Ceremony.

The intertextual games also involve citing from other media and other times, as shown in Figure 11. Again, it is a reflection of the adapted novel, but the significance of “quoting from old movies, from the time before” (Nault 2019: ch. XIII) is additionally accentuated by the images of the happy couple, first laughing together carelessly, and then kissing, which is presented in a close-up typical for romantic comedies. The whole scene is undeniably “corny and falsely gay” (Nault 2019:



Figure 13. Left: Chapter XII – Jezebel’s; right: Chapter VIII – Birth Day

ch. XIII), but it also stands in stark contrast to the events that follow (Figure 11) – the violent and brutal Particution. It references a screen medium, too, which is indicated by the foregrounding the line of TV cameras in the central panel on this page, but the underlying meaning is completely different here. It is no longer an old Hollywood movie, but rather, a harsh reality which is of great interest to the mass audience, hence it is recorded and broadcast by multiple stations.

Chapter XII offers a glimpse of Gilead in a nutshell (Figure 12). On the one hand, there is Jezebel’s – the unofficial “gentlemen’s club”, colored mostly in pink, but with many purple and green overtones. It looks unreal, completely out of this world, it is “like walking into the past” (Nault 2019: ch. XII). Women are all dressed up to entertain the officials frequenting this place. All the state rules are broken because, as the Commander explains, “everyone’s human, after all”, and “Nature demands variety, for men” (Nault 2019: ch. XII). On the other hand, though, Moira’s story reveals a different side of the regime. Painted in black and white and squeezed in between the pink-dominated pages, it brings to mind the images of the Nazi concentration and death camps, with starved people, piles of dead bodies, and terror struck by the law-enforcement figures in black. Either way, though, it is a picture of a feminist dystopia, and the embodiment of the Commander’s words, “better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 2017 [1985]: 212).

The position of the woman in this world is aptly shown in the two pictures in Figure 13, focused on political dictatorship and pointing the woman’s due place in it. She is either trapped – quite literally, in the middle panel – between the Commanders, unable to even move without their permission and supposed “to be in silence” (Nault 2019: ch. XII), or she becomes a part of his game – the Queen of Hearts set against the King of Spades before they start playing the forbidden word game. Notably, the word that she uses on the Scrabble board on the next page is “zilch”, which could stand for her worth in such a men’s world.

## 5. A discussion and conclusion

Arguably, the graphic novel seems to be the prototypical transmedia platform, as it develops in close cooperation with other media and its content flows freely across media – most notably, to film, television, computer games, and the internet platforms (Jenkins 2006b, Morton 2017: 5). As such, it is the most relevant medium to comment on the classics such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, as it has the power to refocus the story and to make it more significant for younger audiences, who are commonly believed to be not so keen on reading, seem to have grown tired of traditional literary works and expect something innovative, thought-provoking, but more visually attractive at the same time. Renée Nault's graphic novel addresses all of these issues, as it presents a completely different view on the literary classic. Although keeping her adaptation close to the source text, she also subverts the canon, thus offering a modern point of view and a fresh look at the story.

It includes all the relevant elements of its critically acclaimed predecessor, but it presents them as a series of essential moments in a close-up. Like a magnifying glass used to heighten and augment the most important fragments, the graphic novel offers an opportunity for the readers to take their time and reflect on the events, mostly shown through images, thus meant to be contemplated like paintings. By varying the size and the organization of the panels, it paces the narrative to accommodate for the audience's need to focus on the crucial fragments and take in the story completely. The panels are often dynamic, slanted to the side or overlapping, and only rarely organized in regular grids, which makes the story fast-moving and more dramatic. Using a whole-page or double-page spread after a series of such panels turns them into a billboard, immediately catching the readers' attention and holding it there for a long time.

In the first novel, the narration is fragmented and ambiguous and discourse prevails over event. Words, often entangled in the process of the construction and reconstruction of meaning, come before facts. In the graphic novel, the image takes precedence, as much of the story is told through pictures only. Arguably, it is easier to establish the meaning, since the narrator does not offer alternative versions of events, nor does she go back on her words to change or correct something. Moreover, the timeline is disambiguated due to the color pattern, different for the present and the pre-Gilead era. However, the fragmentation of the narration manifests itself differently, namely, by differentiating between the showing and the telling entity. Most of the time, Offred's comments are written inside the panel, with or without the additional frame, whereas her actions can be observed from a distance. In some cases, the process of entering her thoughts is gradual, like, for example, in Chapter III (Night), where her room is first shown from an aerial perspective, then there is a close-up of her face followed by colorful panels scattered all over the page in a disorderly manner, showing her memories as a series of flashes. Yet even in the moments when words fail her and the dramatic events are shown as a procession of textless panels, the story is still recounted by the showing narrator (the focalizer), and the striking, often tragic actions are emphasized by means of visual effects typi-

cal for the comic medium, like the changed layout, the motion lines, or the onomatopoeic captions.

The play with cultural allusions and stereotypes, although clearly marked in the first novel, is much more pronounced in the graphic novel, mostly because of its reliance on the visual, which makes, for example, the fairytale references almost inescapable. However, many of the images where intertextual links can be traced and which carry additional meaning show the intricate power relations within the regime and inform the character dynamics. Portraying Serena as the Snow Queen suggests that Offred is her prisoner, whereas casting the handmaids in the role of the Little Red Riding Hood clearly points to their helplessness in the men's world, where they are more likely to be punished for breaking an arbitrary rule than to reach safety after finding their own way.

The transmedial strain of this adaptation, clear in the employment of cinematic shots and frequent references to the new media while retaining much of the spirit of the original novel, explores the subject matter in a very innovative way. It captures its core meaning and conveys the dark atmosphere, which is prevalent in this dystopian world, but it also gives a concrete shape to the events that were elusive and rather volatile before. Therefore, it brings the narrative closer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and makes it meaningful and relevant for the new generation of readers. By bridging the gap between the ambiguous discourse of the novel and the tangible, visual storyworld of the comic medium, it invites the audience to investigate the deeper ontological puzzles that were included in the 1980s story and begged for a new interpretation, taking into consideration the changed sociopolitical context of the decades that have passed since the first publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Such an approach places Renée Nault's work in the center of the modern multimedia culture, thus opening up new paths of interpretation within the media flow.

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