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**THE USAGE OF COLORS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DYSTOPIC  
UNIVERSE IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**CAMPINA GRANDE**  
**2020**

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Artigo)  
apresentado ao Curso de Licenciatura em  
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da Paraíba, como requisito parcial à  
obtenção do título de graduado em  
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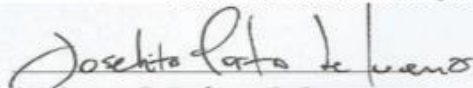
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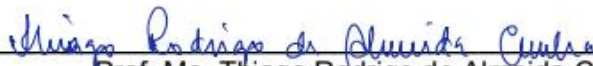
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To Marta and Jaime,  
may you remain alive in our hearts.

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## O USO DAS CORES NA CONSTRUÇÃO DO UNIVERSO DISTÓPICO EM O CONTO DA AIA

### THE USAGE OF COLORS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DYSTOPIC UNIVERSE IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Arthur Rennan Germano Nóbrega<sup>1</sup>

#### RESUMO

Se tratando de distopias, a construção de um universo da narrativa consistente é um fator chave para prender a atenção dos leitores e passar a ideia de desesperança. Autores têm que levar vários elementos em consideração e aplicá-los para criar uma realidade que, não sendo um reflexo perfeito da do leitor, ainda seja relacionável em algum aspecto. A escolha de cores dos elementos na criação da narrativa pode dar aos autores a oportunidade de colocar mensagens, simbologia e profundidade em suas obras. Considerando esta ideia, este trabalho tem o objetivo de analisar a escolha de cores na distopia de Margaret Atwood, *O Conto da Aia* (1985), na sua adaptação televisiva de 2017. Para tal, vamos levar em consideração teorias como a semiótica; considerando autores como Santaella (1983), Caivano (1998) e Chandler (2002); bem como psicologia das cores proposta por Heller (2004), buscando compreender, de forma documental, como o tratamento dessas cores como signo pode afetar a compreensão do espectador para com a narrativa em questão.

**Palavras-Chave:** Distopia. Semiótica. Narrativa. Psicologia das Cores. Signo.

#### ABSTRACT

When it comes to dystopias, the construction of a consistent narrative universe is a key factor in order to catch readers' attention and convey the idea of hopelessness. Authors have to take various elements into consideration and apply them to create a reality that, not being a perfect reflection of the reader's, is yet relatable in some aspect. The choice of element's colors in the creation of a narrative can provide authors with the opportunity to input messages, symbology and depth to their works. Considering this idea, this article aims to analyze the color choice in Margaret Atwood's dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in its television adaptation from 2017. In order to do that, we will take theories like semiotics; considering authors like Santaella (1983), Caivano (1998), and Chandler (2002); as well as the color psychology proposed by Heller (2004), seeking to understand, in a documental way, how the treatment of these colors as signs can affect in the comprehension of the spectator on the narrative in question.

**Keywords:** Dystopia. Semiotics. Narrative. Color Psychology. Sign.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The process of reading is more than just decodifying sentences, it requires the reader to be able to fully visualize the reality intended by the author, its singularities, and characteristics. With that in mind, it becomes crucial for some genres to have distinct universes in which the narrative is situated.

Fantastic literature can be mentioned as an example in which the universe is a key factor to the development of the story. How would the readers be able to imagine magic and spells being possible, if J. K. Rowling had not created a fully conceptualized universe in the Harry Potter saga? Or imagined the four houses in the school if the author had not given full descriptions from the color of their outfits to the main characteristics of their members?

Each genre has different characteristics that may be common when talking about universe construction. It is easy to describe many teenager novels simply by saying that the story is situated in a school where the two protagonists meet, one of them suffers bullying and the other is very popular, they fall in love in the cafeteria and so on.

Other genres require a deeper construction of their universes, and a great example of that argument is *dystopic narratives*. These texts express a world where reality can be easily conceptualized by the reader, but not exactly equal to any reality they live in. It becomes touchable, imaginable, but difficult to believe. (HILARIO, 2013, p. 6)

In dystopic narratives, it is common to see a world where all hope is gone thanks to a corrupt, terrible, or even, extreme government, making the reader think if something similar could possibly happen in real life. When reading a dystopic narrative, it is possible to imagine as if all the color of that world had faded to a sad sepia palette, and feel a bitter taste of that reality.

These feelings of hopelessness and lack of solutions are possible due to the fact that the universes are well conceptualized by the authors, and are possible to be clearly read in their books. Which elements are used by authors in order to be able to portray their imagination so well?

This article aims to show how the colors chosen by Margaret Atwood in her 1985 best seller *The Handmaid's Tale* help creating the universe in her book. In order to properly analyze how they impact that reality, we chose to also comprehend the television adaptation in a comparative way, aiming to better understand the placements of said colors and their influence in the creation of that narrative.

We will consider theories such Semiotics, and color psychology to fulfill our objectives and finally be able to answer how the colors chosen by Atwood help the creation of the dystopic universe in *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on the first season of this book's television adaptation.

## 2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

### 2.1 Semiotics

Santaella (1983, p. 13 – our translation) points that “the languages are in the world and we are in the language<sup>2</sup>”, in this context, Semiotics appears as a science that aims to understand all possible ways that languages can be found and used.

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<sup>2</sup> **Original text:** “A língua está no mundo e nós estamos na língua.”

Language can be defined by the process of building meaning to signs and finding ways to make sense of them.

It is not a surprise that languages are plural, diverse and limitless, making the idea of a language being just a conglomerate of words not accurate. Languages can be verbal, indeed, nevertheless, non-verbal languages are also a form of communication, and should be taken into consideration when trying to define the term. Thus, semiotics study not only verbal languages, but also, non-verbal ones. As Santaella (1983) states:

There is a verbal language, sound language that vehiculate concepts and that articulate in the vocal apparatus, sounds that, in the Occident, have received an alphabetical visual translation (written language), but there is, simultaneously, a huge variety of other languages that are also constituted in social systems and histories of world representation.<sup>3</sup> (SANTAELLA, 1983, p. 11 – our translation)

It is not possible to discuss Semiotics without mentioning that it could be interpreted as “the science of the signs” (SANTAELLA, 1983, p.7). However, in order to understand this terminology, it becomes important to analyze what can be understood by sign.

A sign is traditionally defined as ‘something which stands for something else’ [...]. All meaningful phenomena (including words and images) are signs. To interpret something is to treat it as a sign. All experience is mediated by signs, and communication depends on them. (CHANDLER, 2002, p. 2)

The idea of sign proposed by Chandler (2002) argues well with the one on language brought by Santaella (1983), since both allude to the fact that communication/signs are not limited. Anything can be treated as a sign, and communication being a junction of various signs brings us to the conclusion that, communication is not just made through words or writings.

## 2.2 COLOR PSYCHOLOGY

Colors are around us, and they represent more than just tonalities in a greater spectrum. It is with this idea that color psychology appears as an important tool to be used in this article, without which, it would be impossible to properly analyze the proposed theories and ideas.

Caivano<sup>4</sup> (1998) states that colors not only work on the *expression plane*, that is, the plane where we consider signs in their raw form, but also on the *content plane*, where representations and meanings are given to signs. This can easily be observed with a simple analysis in our routines. A red traffic sign, for instance, has more than simple arbitrariness in the color choice, in this case, red calls for attention, urgency and even if the text inside that sign is not readable for any reason, the driver will understand the message it is intending to pass.

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<sup>3</sup> **Original text:** “Existe uma linguagem verbal, linguagem de sons que veiculam conceitos e que se articulam no aparelho fonador, sons estes que, no Ocidente, receberam uma tradução visual alfabética (linguagem escrita), mas existe simultaneamente uma enorme variedade de outras linguagens que também se constituem em sistemas sociais e históricos de representação do mundo.

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Color psychology aims to understand the feelings and emotions each color triggers in its viewers. It is not as simple as red representing love, or green representing health. To base this theory, Heller (2004) carried out a research in which she lists each color and what emotions and/or qualities the interviewees were able to associate with.

It is important to mention that each color representation can vary from person to person and other outside factors, such as professions, can contribute to the difference in the answers given to each color.

In visual arts, the color palette becomes important in order to convey some feelings and sensations that can put the spectator inside the reality that is being watched. For instance, cold colors, like blues and purples can propel the idea of lower temperatures, when oranges, yellows and reds can give the idea of warmth, thus, a scene in a cave where the protagonist is dying from hypothermia is more likely to present colder tones in the color palette. The impact of this idea would not be the same had the color palette chosen favored warmer tones.

This is just one example of how color choices can interfere in the perception of the intended message. But we do not need to get this deep in order to understand that some color significances are intrinsic to our perceptions. Below, we provide more examples of how colors influence the perception universally.

When analyzing nature, some amphibian species have developed and evolved into forms that can pass messages to predators and other species. Small frogs found in South America, for example, have vibrant red, yellow, or even blue bodies that indicate they represent danger to anyone who dares to stay close enough to have direct contact with them (COSTA, 2000, p. 134).

Furthermore, in religious aspects, it is not necessary to define a belief to say that color white besides representing life, purity, also represents the divine, and, in many cases, the supreme deity worshiped in that culture, while the color black, as the opposite of white, represents death, despair, or even the entity/strength who opposes the deity mentioned earlier. This idea, of course, cannot be taken as universal, some cultures in Asia, for instance, see the color white as the color of the dead, the opposite of most of occidental cultures.

Considering the large scale of existing colors and the time space of this research, we will take into consideration the more relevant colors presented in the book, aiming to encounter possible meanings for chosen ones, they are: red, white, blue, green, and black. We have chosen to take the research made by Heller (2004) as our main reference to analyze the color representations and what they can transmit as an element of communication.

### 2.2.1 Red

Naturally speaking, red symbolizes the element of fire, an ambiguous element, for it can bring warmth to cold environments, but is volatile, and can also bring destruction to anyone/anything that has direct contact with it.

From love to hatred – red is the color of all passions, the good and the bad ones. Behind the symbolism is the experience: blood alters, goes to the head, and the face gets red, in embarrassment or for passion, or for both simultaneously. We blush for shame, irritation, or excitation. (HELLER, 2004, p. 103)

When talking about feelings association, the red color becomes as ambiguous as the fire it represents. Since the red color can be associated both with love and

hatred. These feelings are opposite, according to many, and it becomes no surprise that the color represented by them has both positive and negative connotations.

In Greek mythology, red is the symbol of Aphrodite, goddess of love and passion, but it is also the symbol for Ares, the god of war and combat. This supports the idea that the ambiguity of the color symbology is not part of just a modern convention. As we can see in the following biblical passage:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. (THE BIBLE, Mathew 27:27-28)

In Christian aspects, the red color, not differently, has a dubious symbology. In one side, for being the color of blood, the red color represents sacrifice, the blood of the savior that was given in exchange for human sins. On the other hand, red also represents these own sins, and also the wrath of God towards mankind.

For being the color of blood, the red color symbolizes life from its conception. The red color is considered a sensual color, and is frequently connected to sex/sexuality. This luxurious connection, reinforces the link between this color not only with sin, but also with fertility, Heller (2004) mentions that red is the first color babies see.

Culturally speaking, it is the color of danger. Traffic signs, when have to call for attention are usually red, representing the risks that drivers may face once they ignore that warning. "Code red" is an expression that represents urgency or even imminent danger in diverse situations (HELLER, 2004, p.120).

### 2.2.2 White

Different from other colors, the white color does not have an ambiguous connotation. It is the color that, in general, represents peace, purity, innocence. There are no bad feelings associated with this color, according to Heller (2004), and it rejects all negativity while evoking tranquility.

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. (THE BIBLE, Mathew 17:1-2)

The white color, in many beliefs, represents divinity, for its association with light and purity. In many religious cults, the white color symbolizes the supreme goodness entity, and its power of bringing peace to humanity.

The white color, in its basics, represents cleanness and hygiene, Heller (2004) points that in places where food is produced the white color is used so it becomes easy to identify any dirty spots and quickly clean it.

### 2.2.3 Blue

Although there are no bad feelings that the blue color can be highly associated with, making it one of the most liked colors (HELLER, 2004, p. 46)), the color blue, in its core, does have opposite connotations.

Blue is the color of joy, however, the expression “I feel blue” represents the opposite of that feeling. The color blue is a cold color, for that, sadness and isolation can also be associate to this color.

The color blue represents the element of water, opposite of fire, which makes, in general consensus, this color, the opposite of the red color. If red is the color of hell, blue is the color of heaven (assuming that, as many believe, heaven is up in the sky). Because of this opposition, the color blue may also assume the connotation of distance, intangibility.

This color is representative of nobility, fidelity, and harmony, however, in nature, due to its difficulty to be found as a pigment, it represents danger. For instance, the blue-ringed octopus is one of the most lethal animals to humans, according to biologists. It is very difficult to find a large variety of naturally blue species of animals in nature, this, associated with the fact that blue represents friendships, could represent that true friends are difficult to find.

In Greek mythology, blue is the representation of Poseidon, god of the sea. Water is calm, gentle, harmonious, while hides a great capacity of destruction. Biblically, the sea and rain were used as instruments for punishing humans for their sins (THE BIBLE, Genesis 7:18-24).

#### 2.2.4 Green

If red represents fertility, life and conception. The color green assumes, in a general aspect, the representation of nature itself. It is the color of environment and health. Under-ripe fruits have this coloration, in the stage where they are growing while collecting nutrients and approaching to the time when they are proper to consumption.

This color is associated with the earth element, that could be a justification to why it represents nature life, fertility, food. This element is solid, unlike the others, and for that matter, it is necessary for providing all terrestrial species with what is necessary for their living.

Green represents freedom, liberty of choice. In traffic lights, the green indicates that it is safe to continue. The term “green light” indicates that something is approved and ready to start. Because of this idea, it is possible to associate this color with youth and beginnings (HELLER, 2004).

When it comes to feelings, this color is associated with hope, maybe because this color indicates the end of winter and the beginning of spring. In nature, in order to achieve other colors, the color green is necessary first. (*id.*, 2004)

The color green is a result of the mixture of two other colors, blue and yellow. For that matter, it is considered a neutral color, standing in the middle ground between two extremes (cold and warm tones). It not only evokes good, but also bad feelings.

In artistic portraits, while it is possible to represent plants and nature, the color green can also represent poison. It is the color of the supernatural. For that matter, it can also be considered the color of disgust and envy.

#### 2.2.5 Black

Representing closure, death, mystery, the color black is the color that represents the unknown. Considering it is opposite to white, this color could be cited as the color of negation. If white represents purity, black represents corruption and suffering.

For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? (THE BIBLE, Jeremiah 8:21-22)

In religious aspects, black symbolizes sin, suffering, and death. In the passage, it is possible to see the usage of this color in an expression that could be associated with sadness, hurt, mourn. This idea can also be associated to funerals, where this color is worn by those who have lost their loved ones. It is also used by members of the clergy as a symbol of the negation of vanity.

Heller (2004) suggests that, if any color is combined with black, it will fade until it becomes black itself. That is why this color is, frequently, associated with negativity and corruption. In artistic expressions, for instance, the portrait of Lucifer (once a light angel), shows the dark shadows of corruption that took place in that narrative.

Culturally, the idea of associating black to mystery makes sense, according to Heller (*op. cit.*, 2004), black is the color of the void of space, and the deep sea, where light cannot reach, and both areas have always been mysterious to humanity.

### 2.3 DYSTOPIA AS A GENRE

The term *dystopia* can be defined by an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives<sup>5</sup>. In this aspect, many names appear as important figures in dystopic fiction writing, such as Huxley (*Brave New World*), Orwell (1984), Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), and Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*).

When reading fantasy books, people may imagine funny and colorful worlds, full of challenges, hopes and dreams. However, this multicolored palette somewhat disappears when the reader faces a dystopic text. It is almost possible to imagine that the only way directors could adapt these to visual media is with a black and white, or even sepia color scheme, in order to portrait the sensation of threat and lack of hope that maybe was originally intended (ALMEIDA, 2017, p.9).

Even though people differ, this idea of “losing the battle”, the “bitterness”, and the expectation for the worst are points that are common inside these novels, of course this can be attributed to the genre, but still, it is worth mentioning.

Wars are, undeniably, terrible for society and human race, however, many technologies used until the current days, are a result of human effort to winning, or else, “less losing” them. Post war periods are marked by the advances in technologies, an environment that can easily provide authors with the necessary material to imagine society in the future (SCHMITT, 2008, p. 140).

Questionably, the vast majority of humans wonder how different life is going to be in the next decades, and what advances in technology will be part of it. Many may find it easy to imagine flying cars and holograms as normal figures in society in the future. However, the dystopic novels appear showing a negative aspect of it.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

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<sup>5</sup> Definition found in the Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. Available at: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia>>. Access in: 11/20/2020.

This study assumes the qualitative approach, of documental and descriptive character. It will be divided into three sections that will analyze the usage of colors in the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 book *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In the first moment, we study the theory of semiotics, proposed by authors like Santaella (1983), and Caivano (1998), in order to understand how the field of semiotics develops and contributes in the process of analyzing the communication process. For a better comprehension of how non-verbal communication can be a tool in the process of creating an audiovisual adaptation.

We also take the theory proposed by Heller (2004) on color psychology, in order to raise hypothesis of what each color represent (taking into consideration that the full spectrum is formed by a great amount of tonalities, this study will solely focus on the colors highlighted in the series). To finish the first section, we will study the dystopian genre itself, with the objective of finding common aspects among its narratives.

In the second moment, we briefly discuss about the process of adapting the written novel to the screen. For that, we will compare the paratextual elements in both works, in order to understand a little more about the process of creating the adaptation.

Finally, in order to achieve our objectives, we bring an analysis that will join the theories proposed on the first part of this article and images cut from the TV series. This analysis is going to study the symbology and aims on giving meaning to the colors. For that, we will treat each color individually, then, try to find the best possible significance for them inside the narrative.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood is a dystopian novel from 1985. The book is published by Anchor Books in New York and is considered by the critics a presage for society and the theocratic government. The book was well received by the readers and critics for approaching debate topics such as the fight against the patriarchy, religion, and totalitarian dictatorships.

Atwood's novel was such a success that it was adapted to theater, radio, and cinema, however, for the purpose of this work, we are going to focus on the homonymous television series adaptation.

The series was first released on the channel Hulu, in April of 2017. The first season is a direct adaptation from Atwood's novel, and is composed by 10 episodes. From the second season on, production had to take creative measures to tell what would be, in their vision, the continuation of the story.

The story is centered around Offred (also named June in the series), and her life after a theocratic totalitarian government took place in the United States, changing society's dynamics and oppressing democracy.

This regime was imposed after the natality rates drop exponentially around the globe due to contraceptive methods collateral effects. When the government is imposed, the name of the country changes to Gilead, and it is centered in the Christian ideas of purity.

Women have all their rights taken and the few who are fertile are made into handmaids. They are sent by the government for the houses of high-scale commanders in order to have their children, as a surrogate, and then, give those to the commanders' wives who could not give birth.

Other important topic to mention are the aunties, angels, and marthas. The first being older conservative women, responsible for teaching behavior, and practices to the handmaids, and severely punishing them if needed. The second group is made by men who represent the armed force of the regime, and the third, are housekeepers, women that cannot have children and are not rich enough to be married spend their lives cleaning and cooking for the wealthy families.

Each one of these groups (handmaids, wives, commanders, angels, aunts, and marthas) are designed to a color by the government, these colors are the only ones they are allowed to wear and serve as an identification to what is the purpose of determined character in the regime of Gilead.

## 4 ANALYSIS

### 4.1 PARATEXTUAL ELEMENTS

Literature holds a great potential to be reconstructed in audiovisual format. From the fantastic narratives, to horror, every branch of it has its particularities, and, thanks to the entire scope of details provided by writers, the adaptations have a huge pool of references they can dive into, in order to reproduce the same idea of that universe.

In order to create logic adaptations, cuts and adds have to be made, otherwise, the narrative can be compromised. Some details may work well in a book but not in an audiovisual adaptation, for instance. Thus, these “treasons” to the original content are not seen negatively, but as strategies to convey some ideas.

In the case of television adaptations, some of these strategies are necessary to maintain linearity and keep audiences interested in consuming that content. That is why, various climax moments from the written version have to be pushed back and forth and a new plot is created. Clearly, this becomes just one of many justifications for why edits are made in said adaptations.

For better understanding of this idea, we will analyze aspects of the series by comparing them to the source material, Atwood’s book. They are: the official image representation, the character changes, the changes in the plot, and the ending of both. It is important point that this article focuses on the first season of the series, as it is the only one that is a direct adaptation from the book.

**Picture 1** – Official series poster.



**Source:** Hulu (2017)

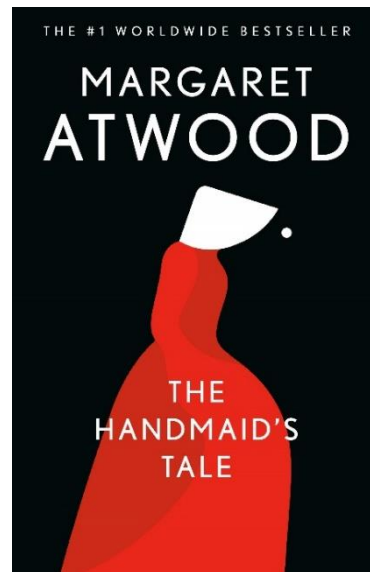
When talking about the official image of the television series (Picture 1), it is valid to observe that it shows the main character, here named June, is not alone,



behind her, there is the representation of Gilead, a guard (called angels in the book) holding a gun in front of a bloody wall. It is also possible to identify the sayings “we will bear no more”, indicating the revolution announced from the beginning.

The posture assumed by the book cover (Picture 2) is much more passive. The idea of revolting in the book is not assumed from its beginning, instead, the handmaid (any one of them since the face is not shown) is presented contrasting with a black background. This idea may represent the mysteries surrounding that universe about to be presented for the first time to readers. Based on the theory proposed by Heller (2004) that black evokes mystery and uncertainty.

**Picture 2** – Official book cover



Source: Hulu (2017)

The book cover presents us with the uncertainty in the life of the handmaid, she is staring at a single white point in the whole darkness around her. This might represent the small point of hope that these women have, but the reader is not presented with any answer of where this hope can be found, different from the poster in picture 1.

The black space surrounding the handmaid can also represent the oppression (represented in the poster by the threatening angel and the bloody wall) suffered by women in the story, especially in Offred's case (here, the reader is not gifted with her real name). The white dot, in this case, would represent her connection to her old self and the fact that she has not forgotten who she is, as shown in the story.

Gilead's dynamic is unaltered in both medias, and the series is successful in creating a heavy atmosphere for this place. In this work, the colors are a key element for understanding its views on society and creating a universe that is so aggressive to its characters, and their meaning and hidden messages help maintaining this atmosphere untouched.

## 4.2 THE COLORS OF GILEAD

As mentioned before, semiotics study all forms of communication. Everything that is intended to pass a message to the reader is considered a sign and should be taken into consideration when analyzing a message (Santaella, 2004).

In this context, we believe that the colors chosen by Atwood and used by the producers of the series become important factors in the construction of Gilead's universe. For that matter, this section is going to analyze the color choices made by the author in order to understand how they affect the narrative in the story.

#### 4.2.1 THE RED LADIES

In the society of Gilead, the handmaids are forced to wear everything red, except for the head piece, which has to be white. Analyzing this idea while conflicting to the color meanings proposed by Heller (2004), we could point messages that were possibly intended by the author in this context.

Firstly, the most important thing is to understand what role do the handmaids play in this dystopic reality. They are responsible for maintaining births from the rich families that are unable to have their own, and are forced to participate in a ritual called celebration, where they have to have sex with their commanders in order to get pregnant and generate newborns.

**Picture 3 – The Ceremony.**



**Source:** Hulu, 2017

For being the color of blood, the red color symbolizes life, and life can easily be connected to fertility. In a less specific way, the dress code for the handmaids could be a simple sign that they are fertile, a proper manner of showing society that those women are the ones capable of carrying life. However, if we go a little deeper, it is possible to find a dubious connotation for this color, as pointed by Heller (2004).

Biblically, the red color represents sacrifice, it is the color of the blood Jesus dropped in order to keep men from the divine punishment. In this context, these women could be seen as the ones that are passing through "the ceremony" as a sacrifice, aiming to avoid society to perish.

This idea would make sense in a theocratic reality, in the book, it is possible to see that the most faithful to the regime think the idea of being raped monthly, expecting to get pregnant, is almost a Jesus-like act, that should be praised. These ideas can be found in moments where the handmaids-to-be are in the red center being educated by the aunts.

Staying true to the religious aspects, but changing the perspective, it is also possible to see these women as sinners, full of lust. The idea built by Heller (2004), highlights the fact that the red color is frequently associated with sex. Being the ones having sex with the commanders, instead of their wives, to generate their babies would

mean these women are almost prostitutes, only they are not allowed to feel pleasure or have feelings.

We believe the choice of the red color could also represent strength. Indeed, this color is culturally associated with the feminine, and it is not a coincidence that the women designed to wear it hold the power to keep society from decimation in this narrative.

When observing the theory proposed by Caivano (1998), saying that colors work in the expression and content planes and the examples given by the author. It is possible to analyze that the red color in this narrative, besides all meanings, also calls for attention.

Handmaids are a valuable element of Gilead. Moreover, they are considered forbidden for the common people. So, the usage of this color aims to alert they are important, but people, because of their sins, should respect as they should repulse them. A paradox that fits the color representation perfectly.

#### 4.2.2 THE IMPURE PURITY

For the most part of their garments, handmaids are forced to use red, as mentioned. However, they are also forced to use a white headpiece, with flaps that avoid them from looking anywhere but straight. This color is also used by the handmaids in the moments of labor.

**Picture 4** – The Handmaids.



**Source:** Hulu, 2017

Recalling the theory proposed by Heller (2004), it is possible to identify the nature of this color choice. The white color, as a representative of God and purity, in this case, over their heads, limiting their vision, would represent that, while their bodies are fertile and used for reproduction (see section 3.2.1), their minds are pure and devoted to God.

It is valid to remember that Gilead is a theocratic regime, and, because of that, its philosophy could be considered by supporters, as God's willing. Thus, the idea of white showing that the regime controls the handmaids' thoughts and directions where they should be looking is not lost when analyzing this color.

White also appears in the ceremony parts of the plot (see picture 5), in the bedwear. This passes the idea that, for Gilead, the ceremony, although a sexual act, or even rape, is not intended to be treated with lust or desire, but rather with cleanness

of thoughts as proposed by the conservative idea that the women's bodies are sinful, but not the act.

#### 4.2.3 BLUE WOMEN

We believe that the society of Gilead is cruel to women in general, however, inside the genre, there is a group that stands out as privileged, the commanders' wives. These women are characterized for only using blue dresses, and are conservative, wealthy ladies, unable to have children.

The first possible interpretation for this color selection can be associated with nobility. Being part of the most influent families in Gilead, the blue color could be a proper representation of the "blue blood" of that society. However, when connecting these outfits to Heller's (2004) theory, it becomes possible to provide a variety of possible messages conveyed by this color.

**Picture 5 – The wives.**



**Source:** Hulu, 2017

The blue color is associated with the masculine, and opposes to red. In this aspect. The idea of a conservative group of women in a men-centered regime raises questions related to chauvinism amongst the wives. These are women who, deliberately, renounced their rights of being owners of their lives in order to be a part of the high scale of society.

If the handmaids wear red as a representation of their fertility, the color could also represent the idea of the incapacity of generating children, and the sadness brought by it. Those are, apparently, happy women, but, as shown in the series, they can be miserable inside.

Heller (2004) associated blue with coldness, distance. We believe this connection is also possible to the wives' role in the story. For the most part of it, they seem distant, in a level that is impossible to achieve, and cold, heartless. Perhaps, due to their infertility and the frustration of having to have another woman having sex with their husband, in order to give their families continuity.

In terms of comparison, the direct opposition between wives and handmaids is, in our opinion, obvious. And both groups resent each other in the storyline. The idea of the wives being associated with the color blue, more than an opposite pole in the color spectrum, brings the idea that they are the ones capable of destroying the lives of handmaids, like water can put out fire.

This idea becomes clear in the series finale, when Serena takes Offred to see her daughter. This scene showed the capacity the wives have to break the handmaids, as it is possible to see in picture 8.

**Picture 6** – Serena takes Offred to see Hannah.



Source: Hulu, 2017

Biblically, the water has been used by God to punish men's actions. The idea of bringing the color that represents this element as the color code for the ones responsible for punishing the handmaids in the plot does not seem to be random.

#### 4.2.4 ROTTING SERVANTS

Heller (2004) provides us with a full scope of the color green and its representations in psychological and cultural levels. The selection of this color to represent the marthas (servants in the commanders' houses) is interesting, due to the duality it brings to these characters.

**Picture 7** – Martha.



Source: Hulu, 2017

The marthas wear a faded green, almost gray, which could be representative to the lack of life. These women are not fertile, but they are not influential enough to be a part of the high society of commanders' wives. They have to take care of the cleaning,

cooking, and all the other housekeeping activities, servants to keep the wives from having to heavily work in the society of Gilead.

As proposed in the theory of Heller (2004), this color is naturally the color of under-ripped fruits. In this context, the marthas, due to the fading green tone of their clothes, could represent a fruit that was rotten before it was ripped. Women that could have a future as handmaids, but could not, therefore, being used as servants in the wealthy houses.

The color green is highly associated with envy (therefore, the expression “green with envy”), and middle ground (as it is placed exactly in the middle of the color spectrum), as proposed by the author. Taking these two aspects of this color, we could arrive in the conclusion that the role of marthas in the narrative is also associated with envy.

Envy of the wives, for they will never be able to achieve higher scales of Gilead’s society. Envy of the handmaids, because they are incapable of having children. This is an interesting placement for these characters. They spend their entire lives being envious of both extremes in the narrative while having to serve both.

We believe that this duality in the message for the marthas’ role was better explored in the series, when the executive production took the decision of fusing the two characters Rita and Cora, and giving the new Rita the possibility of showing both aspects in the adaptation, rather than the original novel, when each one of the characters had an individual aspect of the color associated to their personality.

#### 4.2.5 ANGELS OF DEATH

Finally, in order to finish our analysis, we are going to analyze the color used by the men of Gilead, the black color. There is much discussion if black is considered a color, or the absence of them, however, when we enter in the pigment scope, it is possible to see that color is, indeed, the mixture of all the other existing pigments.

Because of this connotation, the color is associated with mystery. We believe the choice of this color is not only connected to the elite (considering it the color of the high levels of society), but also, due to said mystery and its representations in the narrative.

**Picture 8** – The angels.



**Source:** Hulu, 2017

In the society of Gilead, the military forces are called angels. Those are the ones responsible for bringing the law and keeping the order in a society filled with possible rebellions. Because of that, this designation is given to armed men, they are in charge of controlling the chaos in society and applying punishments to the common citizens.

Little is revealed about the angels in the narrative, the reader/audience does not have necessary information on their objectives, beliefs, or backstories. This lack of information is supported by the choice of the color in question.

For being responsible for punishing people, it is unavoidable to link these characters to the common census of death. Its personification of a black-cloaked figure carrying a deadly weapon, bringing punishment and destruction to humanity. They would represent the fallen angels biblically speaking.

The idea of giving the commanders the same color as the angels is not senseless. The commanders are the leaders of the society of Gilead, but also, little information is given on what, specifically, they command, or how did they have risen to the title.

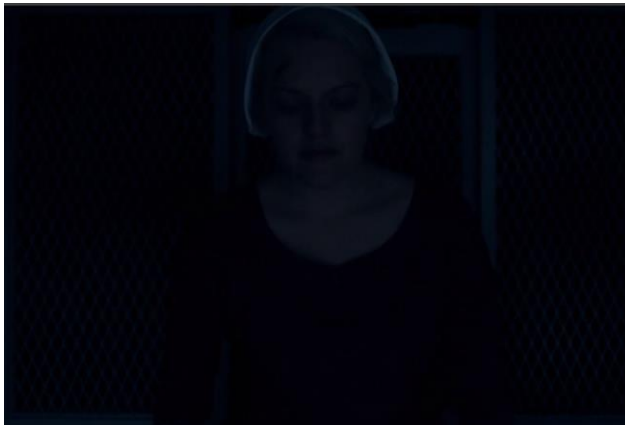
Taking Heller (2004) into consideration, it is possible to allude this color to the liberty and facility these characters have to proceed with corrupt acts and remain unpunished for them. An example of that is the Jezebels' house, where all the commanders are free to go, and remain out of any possible punishment.

Black is a color used, not only as a clothing code, but also in its rawest manner. In the last scene of the series, as well as the last parts of the book's narrative, it is possible to observe Offred going into the darkness of the van, leaving the ending of this narrative in complete mystery. The idea of not giving any conclusion to Offred's saga, living the readers "in the dark" supports our theory that the color choices for this work were not arbitrary.

This brings us to the last part of this section; it is not possible discussing the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* and not mentioning the dubious "ending" of the main storyline. We use quotations for the ending in the book happens before the actual ending of it, and the series uses this as a loose-end for building interest to the next season.

When Offred (June, in the series) enters the van, Atwood gives the reader the possibility to consider that she was taken by Gilead, or even *from* Gilead. This idea is not broken in the epilogue, where the reader still does not have enough information.

**Picture 9** – Offred enters the van.



**Source:** Hulu, 2017

Perhaps, Atwood wanted them to have a glimpse of what she had envisioned for the character's feelings of uncertainty and confusion in the narrative, and deliberately, chose not to properly conclude the story. In the audiovisual adaptation, however, these uncertainties become anxiousness to the next season, where the audiences would finally see where she was taken to. This theory can be based on the fact that the book's Offred and the series' Offred have distinct traces of personality.

While the written version is passive to the regime, and only rebels inside her thoughts, which is the one thing the government cannot control, the series version is more active and reluctant to accept the rules and ideas proposed by Gilead. In this case, anxiousness could be a feeling easily connected to that adventurous personality, but not exactly to the book version of the protagonist.

## 5 FINAL THOUGHTS

We agree with the idea pointed by Caivano (1998) that colors do not only work in the expression plane, but also, in the content plane. That is, the colors are not just colors, they can hide messages that bring much more depth to narratives.

In a dystopian work like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the choices of these colors can contribute in providing the reader the possibility of creating connections with the characters and their role inside the narrative. This selection also helps the ideas proposed by the author become more imaginable and, therefore, touchable.

It is valid to mention that all these colors analyzed in this study do not take the "sepia filter" from the narrative, in fact, they provide the viewer with more perception of the world intended by the author. These colors do not appear in the series as open and vibrant, in fact, they are always closed and very strong, maintaining the thought raised by Almeida (2017) of the dystopic universe being the universe of the lost ones.

The process of giving each group of characters in the narrative a color, possibly spoils the characters personalities. In this narrative, each character is treated by the government as each color is represented, proving the non-arbitrariness in the process of selection from the part of the author.

To illustrate this idea, we are going to take the marthas once more as an example. The faded green, almost colorless, of their uniforms show us that Gilead does not care for their existence. For this regime, they are almost dead.

Treating each color as a sign it becomes possible for us to perceive deeper levels in the narrative. These colors provide us with meanings that help the viewer to better understand the vision of Gilead to its citizens and build a better narrative for this story.

By the end of this work, it became possible for us to conclude that the color selection in *The Handmaid's Tale* was a crucial element in the creation of the narrative from its conception and not an arbitrary selection. Without this analysis it would not be possible for the viewer/reader, to fully comprehend the universe created by Atwood.



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