

THE SYMBOLISM AND AESTHETICS OF THE WINDOW AS A VISUAL MOTIF IN THE TV SERIES *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

ÁNGELES MARTÍNEZ-GARCÍA
MÓNICA BARRIENTOS-BUENO

Name: Ángeles Martínez-García
Email Address: angelesmartinez@us.es
Academic Centre: University of Seville

Name: Mónica Barrientos-Bueno
Email Address: mbarrientos@us.es
Academic Centre: University of Seville

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* has been widely researched, most studies have addressed aspects like narrative, feminism, violence against women or visual and compositional elements, such as the use

of light and the symbolism of colour. However, there is still a dearth of scholarly works focusing on the analysis of the series' staging and art direction. Accordingly, a comprehensive enquiry is performed here into one such aspect, namely, the windows appearing in the first season of the series. The aim is to verify the aesthetic and staging resources used when windows appear on screen. Additionally, the intention is to analyse the visual codes and the diegetic universe apparent in the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to unravel the latent/symbolic meaning of the TV series. An analytical tool based on iconography is employed to examine three of the most relevant windows – those of June/Offred's bedroom, Commander Fred's study and Serena's bedroom – arriving at the conclusion that they are interwoven at a narrative and symbolic level in the main social values of the Republic of Gilead.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 there have been adaptations of the novel revolving around the character of June/Offred, a young woman in the theocratic Puritan Republic of Gilead, which only offers her one future: to be raped in order to bear the children of the Commander to whom she has been assigned. Before the release of the TV series created by Bruce Miller for Hulu, Atwood's dystopia had been made into a film directed by Volker Schlöndorff (1990), an opera composed by Poul Ruders, with a libretto by Paul Bentley (2000), a radio drama produced by John Dryden for BBC Radio 4 (2000) and a play written by Brendon Burns (2002). The release of the series was followed by the publication of the graphic novel, going by the same name, by Renée Nault (2019), an artist chosen by Atwood herself to adapt and illustrate her work, which promptly became a bestseller.

The fact is that of all the adaptations it is the TV series that has had the greatest impact on the popular imagination. To this should be added that it has fleshed out Atwood's dystopia with an iconography that has become so well-known that it has even been leveraged by different protest movements defending women's civil rights.

Most research on this TV series has focused on three main aspects: the storylines of the TV adaptation of the novel (Bece 2020; Wells-Lassagne and McMahon 2021; Gerrits 2022; Amina 2023); its sociological and political implications, including feminism and the repression of and violence against women (Cortés-Silva and Martínez-Guillem 2021; Ju Oak Kim 2022; Boyle 2023); and, lastly, visual elements like, for example, the composition of the shots and the use of light (Bejarano Petersen 2021; Roche 2021; Mayorga 2022), the symbolism of the costumes and the semantics of the use of colour as basic resources in the conception of Gilead (Martínez-García 2020; Gruber 2023; Tesone 2023). However, none of the analyses performed to date on the staging and art direction of the series have addressed an indispensable element of its visual and symbolic design: the window. It is the architectural element which the characters most interact with, especially June/Offred, and which has more time on-screen than others. Therefore, its symbolic, narrative and aesthetic study constitutes an unexplored way of approaching the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in a series that takes care of every aspect of its mise-en-scène. This paper is part of a broader investigation that, among other elements of the

mise-en-scène, addresses the staircases, doors and corridors of this TV series.

The window is a frequent visual motif in Western art, as discussed below, and one of the architectural elements most used in cinema and television. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, windows appear frequently in domestic settings, such as the different rooms of the homes of the Waterfords and the Putnams, as well as in Nick's apartment over the garage and in public or semi-private places like the food store Loaves and Fishes, the hospital, the Rachel and Leah Centre (unofficially known as the Red Centre), the Waterfords' car and a shop. When they become the focal point, they all give shape to a universe of windows as broad as it is varied because of their multiple uses and meanings in the narrative context of the series. Symbolically speaking, the iconography of the window is related to the idea of consciousness, especially when it has to do with the top of a tower (Cirlot, 2022: 354), something similar to where June is located. Moreover, it is also associated with vigilance, the possibility of distance, the rational and the terrestrial.

In light of the foregoing, the principal aim is to analyse the visual codes and the diegetic universe apparent in the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to unravel the latent/symbolic meaning of the TV series. As there are no previous studies or information in this respect, the following research question has been formulated: How do the visual and narrative codes that appear related to the use of windows in *The Handmaid's Tale* tie in with the latent/symbolic meaning of the series?

2. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *The window*

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a window is “an opening in the wall or roof of a building, for admitting light or air and allowing people to see out; esp. such an opening fitted with a frame containing a pane or panes of glass (or a similar transparent substance)”, in addition to “a space behind the window of a shop where goods are displayed for sale”. Its second meaning broadens the concept of window in relation to its spatial dimension to include an “area of a room behind or beside a window”. According to the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, its etymology, which dates back to the

thirteenth century, derives from the Old Norse term *vindauga*, from *vindr* (wind) and *auga* (eye).

Although basically an architectural element whose specific practical uses are linked to its etymological root, namely, “to look through” and “to air”, the window is a “stimulating object” (Eco 1989: 286) that can involve a process of communication, even if this is not the initial purpose for which it was devised. According to Eco, its mere placement on a façade and its shape can both connote an ideology and, consequently, “a particular conception of the manner of inhabiting” (1989: 291). This gives it a strong symbolic significance which, in the words of Cirlot, expresses “the idea of penetration, possibility and distance” (2022: 354).

As a visual motif, the window frequently appears in the arts, with very thought-provoking uses in its basic function of separating interiors and exteriors. Specifically, it marks the transition between both as a symbolic borderline and represents the duality between the private and public sphere, between the individual and the collective (Balló 2000: 21-2). Special mention should go to its communicative aspects, such as whether it is open or closed, for in the latter case it allows one to observe the world through its panes but not to connect physically with it. When it is open, in contrast, the reality beyond its limits can be perceived and felt with more of the senses. Furthermore, it is also conducive to fantasy, to mental and physical transport; as Pérez Cifuentes (2008) remarks, the window is associated with opening, with the beholder, wearing an expression of hope, looking out of it in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the future, regardless of what has gone before.

Given its ability to “coordinate the external world of places with the internal world of thought and feeling” (Kaplan 2002: 162), the window frequently appears in literature and painting. In autobiographical narratives it plays a relevant role as a metaphor (Fernández 2007), whereas in Baudelaire's prose poem, *Paris Spleen* (1869), emphasis is placed on the mystery surrounding a closed window illuminated by a candle: “In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers” (Baudelaire 1970: 77). In Romantic poetry, that same mystery, but this time melancholic and bleak, can be found in G. A. Bécquer's legend of *The Three Dates* (1871), depicting the phantasmal vision of a woman concealed behind the curtains of a window. As a metaphor of curiosity, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *My Cousin's Corner Window* (1822), the ailing main character observes a market from his vantage point, inventing the past of the people frequenting it. In Kafka's

Metamorphosis (1915), among other works of his, it embodies hope that is both distant and close.

As to painting, Western art embraced the conception of the picture as a window during the Renaissance; several artists of the period, including Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Van der Weyden, included window frames in their compositions. Later on, Vermeer van Delft made windows a recurrent feature in his paintings of pensive women, but without revealing to the beholder what they are observing outside, whereas other painters played with the aforementioned dual conception of the window, as something for gazing out of and as an architectural element (as can be seen in *Two Women at a Window*, Murillo, 1655-1660).

Those works including representations of windows have also resorted to the *trompe l'oeil* kind, which contributes to the creation of perspective and atmosphere (as in the case of its function in *Las meninas*, Velázquez, 1656). Although windows have appeared in paintings throughout the early modern age, it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century that they began to play a more autonomous role, while also taking on a new meaning (Grant 2021), subsequently influencing masterpieces like *Young Woman at a Window* (Dalí, 1925), which now does indeed show the beholder what the main character is observing through it.

The broadcasting industry has also frequently resorted to the window as an inspirational visual motif, being one of the most popular architectural elements. In this respect, the most iconic film is *Rear Window* (1954), by Alfred Hitchcock, in which all the visual planning refers to it repeatedly, framing the vantage point from where the main character observes his neighbours, with the action taking place outdoors. It also has a significant presence in melodrama, two of the most noteworthy films being *Gone with the Wind* (1939), by Victor Fleming, and *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), by Douglas Sirk, in which the characters reveal their innermost feelings next to windows. In contemporary series, together with the doorsteps of houses and other settings, windows continue to represent conflict and the absence of stability that have characterised these spaces in the imagination of modern-day TV audiences.

The window as a visual motif includes the specific case of the woman in front of a window, heir to those appearing in paintings and films, normally with a certain melancholic air about her. Contemporary series resort to this iconography because, moreover, it is associated with the destruction of the patriarchal model. This is why it not only appears in series drawing from Sirkian melodrama, as in many episodes of

Mad Men (2007-2015) and *Masters of Sex* (2013-2016), but also in film noir like *Ray Donovan* (2013-2020) (Balló and Pérez 2018: 19).

In other cases, however, it is also used as a metaphor of confinement, as in the case of Elizabeth II in *The Crown* (2016-2023), whose power contrasts with her slight human figure gazing through the windows of her palaces, where she secludes herself.

2.2. The Handmaid's Tale. *Visual identity*

The TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the eponymous novel that Margaret Atwood published in 1985. It is set in what the author herself calls a "theocratic dictatorship" (Atwood 2017: 12), to wit, a heteropatriarchy in which the obligations and rights of women are reduced to human reproduction. By contrast, men occupy all the positions of responsibility with complete control over women who, for their part, are confined to the domestic sphere. The first season of the series faithfully reproduces the novel's plot. Borrowing the concept of hyper-surveillance from *1984* (George Orwell, 1949), her source of inspiration, she revamps it while also including her own experiences after the Second World War.

The voice of the series – and also of the novel – is that of June/Offred, the female lead who, in an autobiographical way, recounts her experience as a Handmaid in the service of the Waterfords. The timeline of the plot includes flashbacks – which help viewers to understand how that totalitarian patriarchal theocracy has come about – and moments of the present that gradually acquaint them with the Republic of Gilead. These defining features of the totalitarian and extremely hierarchical regime, located in what used to be the United States, are progressively revealed. A coup d'état led by the Sons of Jacob has led to the construction of a state defending conservative values at the expense of the subjugation of women: the suppression of rights and freedoms, the subordination of women to men, a religious fundamentalism grounded in the Christian Bible, public executions and lynchings as exemplary punishments and total media censorship. The epitome of these extreme measures is the Ceremony, a biblical ritual in which the Handmaids are raped by the Commanders in the presence of their Wives on their fertile days to bear the children of these high-ranking families.

One of the most striking aspects of the series is its staging, painstakingly designed and implemented with this extreme narrative in mind. For instance, lighting and photography are used to illustrate the duality between past and

present: in those flashbacks in which June/Offred is still a free woman, the lighting is more colourful and intense, in contrast to the scenes set in the present inside the home of the Waterfords or the Red Centre, in which the Handmaids are housed and trained, where the lighting is much more sombre, in consonance with the dictatorial values of the new regime. This aspect is accentuated in the night scenes and when June/Offred shuts herself in the cupboard of her room as a form of seclusion. However, in the present these visual treatments differ depending on the space; the predominance of white in the scenes that take place in the health centre that June/Offred visits to see the gynaecologist (1.04) and when Janine is in hospital (1.09), plus public spaces like Loaves and Fishes (1.01 and 1.05), alludes to the aseptic nature of this futurist dystopia (Martínez and Rubio 2020).

One of the most relevant aspects of the definition of the characters, which is very effective for indicating their position in the social hierarchy, is colour, each group being associated with a different one. Specifically, the Commanders and the rest of the men in Gilead wear dark clothes, mostly black. For their part, the women are divided into two groups – legitimate and illegitimate – although they all possess the same inferior status and are subordinated to the men. The Wives, all high-class women married to the Commanders, wear blue. The Aunts, who are responsible for looking after and training the Handmaids, wear brown. Whereas the Marthas, infertile low-class women, wear green or dark grey. As can be seen, the members of these last two groups of women wear drab clothes that are a faithful reflection of the bleakness of Gilead. They are sombre colours that convey a sense of desolation and which contrast sharply with the robes of the second group, that of the Handmaids, which are red, a colour associated with the fertility that they embody.

As Handmaids should never be alone but always in groups or pairs, at a compositional level this creates a focal point of colour that lends an enormous visual weight to the images. On many occasions, they even form rows, circles or geometric blocks, which are exploited with overhead or high-angle shots in which symmetry stands out. This reflects their status as a uniform group forming part of an artificial reality, which is presented as fictitious through its visual treatment (Martínez and Rubio 2020). The costume designer, "settled on a shade that she dubbed "lifeblood", similar to a red found in a photo of scarlet autumn leaves against a very dramatic overcast sky that has struck Morano as dark and Gilead-esque" (Robinson 2019: 35).

With respect to the composition, the director Reed Morano defines this clearly: “The aesthetic I had in mind for the show was always a mixture of graphic symmetry and Kubrickian framing with the freedom of a handheld camera” (Robinson 2019: 35). So, the former is characteristic of present-day Gilead and the latter of the time before the dictatorship. As Morano also notes, the Kubrickian style encapsulates beauty in a setting characterised by terror, which makes Gilead even more eerie and threatening, whereas the time before the triumph of the Sons of Jacob is even more determined by an aesthetics inspired by Terrence Malick, with more frenetic sequences and disconnected aspects (Robinson 2019: 93) depicting the way in which the characters remember that former period.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND CASE STUDY

3.1 Analytical tools

As to the procedure followed to conduct an analysis on the windows appearing in the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, screenshots of the frames with them were made of the ten episodes.

Following this, an initial selection of these windows was performed, including those that, because of their prevalence, play an important role in the series at a narrative and visual level, before finally choosing those of June/Offred's bedroom, Fred Waterford's study and Serena Waterford's bedroom. They are spaces that create a sort of symbiosis with the characters, thus making their study more worthwhile. In addition, a contextual description of the main house as a whole was performed, focusing on other secondary spaces, including the sitting room and the kitchen which, albeit not as important as the others, do indeed have a certain bearing on the narrative.

A methodology based on iconography has been used, which studies form and content. In 1939, Panofsky (1987) established three levels of meaning in a work of art:

- Pre-iconographic level: an analysis on the relationships between the formal elements comprising the images. A division is established between the scalar and morphological elements. This level also includes a narrative analysis.
- Iconographic level: recognizing conventional themes.

- Iconological level: identification of the symbolic values, that is, to see how the elements of the previous levels interact so that the latent meaning of the series appears.

Based on the methodological proposal of iconography, the following steps will be taken:

- Pre-iconographic and iconographic level: Description of the room – June/Offred's bedroom, Fred Waterford's study or Serena Waterford's bedroom. Description of the physical characteristics of the window; it is approached as an element separating interiors and exteriors, thus emphasising the concepts of surveillance and confinement. This involves a deeper level of meaning, analysing the role of the window in the action at specific moments in the series.
- Iconological level: Symbolic significance of the window, which is addressed in that it is an element linked to the personality of the characters and even to their parallel evolution in the plot.

3.2. Results and discussion

The home of the Waterfords, the main setting of the first season, is a Victorian mansion, built in Hamilton (Ontario, Canada) in 1892, known in the past as “Ingleneuk”. The low-angle shots of the building give the mansion a threatening presence, whose architectural grandeur also dwarfs the characters. Although the ivy partially covering the mansion's stone façade is original, this is not the case with other architectural elements, such as the fence surrounding the plot “to give the house an imposing, guarded feel” (Robinson 2019: 26), Nick's garage, the greenhouse and Serena's garden, which were all built by the production team. Most of the interiors appearing in the series are filmsets reproducing the rooms of the house, built at Cinespace Film Studios in Toronto; the only scenes filmed inside the mansion itself take place on the main stairs and in the hall and the dining room.

The mansion has three floors connected by two staircases, the backstairs next to the kitchen and the main stairs in the hall, with a window at the top of the first flight. The smaller window of the backstairs is leaded with some stained glass. On the whole, the rambling house and its smaller spaces, like the passages, trigger emotions like fear, anxiety and hostility. The interiors, furnished with antiques and whose walls are covered with dark wood panelling and where white is conspicuous by its absence, are meant to transmit the feel-

ing of oppression, confinement and darkness. This is heightened by the production design, the lighting and, of course, the windows of the rooms which are usually gloomy, “as if the sun itself were struggling to break through and shed some light inside the house” (Moldovan 2020: 116), in which the heavy atmosphere is palpable. Even during the daytime, when a few timid rays of light manage to slip through the heavy curtains or blinds, table and wall lamps are often turned on in the rooms, thus creating an even more suffocating atmosphere. In sum, it is a prison without locks and bars but replete with fear; a fear so intense that it makes any idea of escape impossible, at least in the first season.

The house itself tells the story of its inhabitants, especially in relation to the main characters, their personalities and emotions being reflected in the rooms to which they are linked, intimate spaces that serve as a metonymy and expression of their position in Gilead. This is combined with an axiological representation of vertical space: June/Offred above, Serena in the middle and Fred below, which, in the case of the Handmaid and the Commander inverts their positions in the perfectly defined pyramid of social stratification and power relations of Gilead. It is for this reason that the analysis of the windows focuses on those of the bedrooms of June/Offred and Serena, plus that of Fred's study.

In addition to these spaces there are others that are briefly covered here. Certain parallels can be drawn between the sitting room, where the first part of the Ceremony is held, and Serena's bedroom. Indeed, the fireplace is located in the same place as her bed on the floor above it and, on both sides, there are two floor-to-ceiling windows covered with heavy curtains which are always drawn. The famous paintings hanging on its walls convey the idea that they have been purloined by the Commander.

On the other hand, the kitchen has been expressly designed to represent the Draconian laws governing Gilead, whose lack of modern appliances signifies a return to the past. Additionally, it features a dining room specifically designed for the Handmaids and Marthas, separated by a glass door. This space stands out because the grid windows have no curtains, but are covered with plants, and there is a skylight. Its state of neglect contrasts with that of the rest of the rooms, thus underlining “Serena's attitude towards the household staff” (Robinson 2019: 32). With warm colours, the lighting of this room is very similar to that of June/Offred's bedroom.

June/Offred's bedroom

June (Elizabeth Moss), renamed Offred in Gilead, is the Waterfords' Handmaid, whose role is solely reproductive, being systematically raped by the Commander on her fertile days to this end. Aged 35, she has blue eyes and long blond hair which is gathered in a bun under the white bonnet of her uniform. Her subordination to the Waterfords is reflected in all the details of her room. Located on the mansion's top floor, it is reached by a narrow spiral staircase that leads to an equally narrow passage, all of which exacerbates the feeling of enforced isolation and confinement. Moss defines it as an autonomous universe (Robinson 2019), in which June/Offred constructs something of her own, after having been deprived of everything. Although Serena has given her the coldest, most secluded, abandoned and austere room in which there is nothing to entertain the mind, June/Offred has managed to convert it into a place of intimacy and reflection. In addition to the aforementioned connotations, the fact that the room is on the top floor of the mansion gives its windows a special symbolism, for it is an analogy of the human mind (Cirlot 2022).

The room has three windows and an ensuite bathroom. The windows of the bedroom are square and have net curtains, whereas that of the bathroom has translucent panes, below which is an old bathtub. June/Offred passes long hours in her room, especially next to the windows, seated on the sill of one of them in her confinement, as if it were a chair. She spends most of this time lost in her thoughts while surveying the activity outside.

The first time that June/Offred appears before that window is when she is presented as a Handmaid, following her violent capture. The scene is filmed from a limited number of highly aesthetic angles. The first is a long shot whose back-lighting accentuates the grid of the window, whose vertical lines evoke the bars of a cell, and makes it impossible to distinguish her features, only that she is wearing a dress and a bonnet (fig. 1). Sitting rigidly on the sill, her voice-over and the visual narrative, with the camera slowly zooming in on her, offer viewers a glimpse of her thoughts as she silently contemplates the sparsely furnished room, listing the few things that it contains and cursorily describing the window, ‘with white curtains, and the glass is shatterproof’.

As to the other two camera angles, the first is a semi-profile shot (first a long shot – fig. 2 – and then a medium, slightly low-angle one), showing her with her hands folded and eyes lowered, accompanied by her voice-over in which she addresses Gilead's fear of suicide among the Handmaids, be-

fore introducing herself: “My name is Offred. I had another name, but it’s forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now.” The forbidden things to which she is referring, without specifying them, are “reinforced by means of the room’s aesthetics and her wardrobe, she reinforces that she is oppressed as a woman. She also demonstrates that the Gileadean government has gone to great lengths to ensure she remains a subjugated object” (Hurley-Powell 2020: 97), a moment at which her dark thoughts are replaced by a flashback of her first encounter with Fred and Serena Waterford.

This combination of elements includes a highly pictorial treatment of light which is repeated in this same room at other moments in the series: the window as the only source of light, a soft, diffuse and golden sunlight whose density gives it an almost physical presence in the room. The idea of the director of the episode, Morano, and the director of photography, Colin Watkinson, was to create a “volumetric lighting as a way of keeping the audience’s experience of Gilead mysterious for as long as possible” (Yuan 2017).



FIGURE 1. EPISODE 1 (04:36)

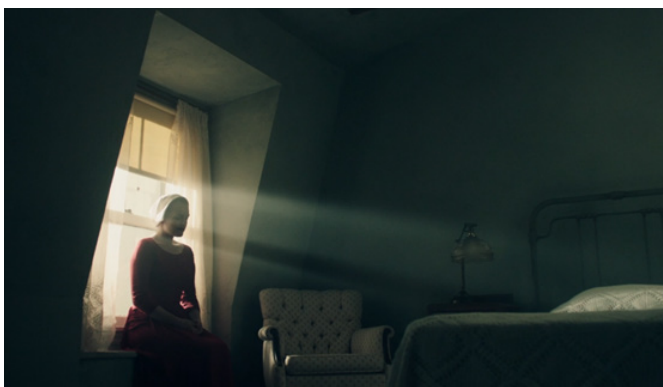


FIGURE 2. EPISODE 1 (05:00)

In this first scene, June/Offred adopts a passive attitude while sitting on the sill, with the window behind her, in a re-interpretation of the aesthetic motif of the woman in front of the window depicted in the works of both Vermeer, owing to her position in the semi-profile shots, and Vilhelm Hammershøi, by virtue of the room’s simplicity, in which the architectural elements frame or enclose her in the long shot, thus emphasising the sense of confinement that is transferred from the series’ theme to its visual aspects. On this subject, it is worth noting, as Bastidas Mayorga (2022) points out, the coincidence of the clothes and colours worn by June/Offred with Vermeer’s *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* (1660), as well as the similarity of the light tone and the staging in other appearances of the window.

At the end of episode 1, June/Offred appears as before sitting on the sill in front of the window, but, although the staging is the same, there are a number of differences, including more close-ups and the fact that her attitude has changed. She is no longer sitting rigidly upright (except at the beginning of the scene in which the aforementioned initial long shot is reproduced) but leaning forward (figs. 3 and 4), while her voice-over now has to do with her struggle for survival for the good of her daughter Hannah and her husband Luke. She knows that she is being watched and that she has to keep up appearances, for which reason the initial staging is the same. Nonetheless, something has changed and that transformation is shown in a series of semi-profile shots (fig. 3), from the same side as before, after which she introduces herself again, this time calling herself by her real name: “My name is June.” In this sense, it is possible to talk about an arc of transformation from one window to the other.

The shots of June/Offred in front of, or next to, the window, when she is not interacting with it, are linked to moments of respite and reflection, often periods of idleness when confined to her room. Like, for instance, in the final episode of the season, when she is waiting to be punished for not having killed Janine, which precisely reproduces the first long shot of her in front of window in the series (1.10, 52:37), preceded by a series of short shots of its inside and outside, which aesthetically focus on the texture of the glass (1.10, 52:13). This contrasts with those moments when she uses the window to survey the surroundings, like when witnessing the arrival of the red van, preceded by the sound of its siren, in which the Handmaids are transported from one place to another (1.02, 09:19).

Her observation of the outside world through the window becomes narratively even more relevant when it leads to her



FIGURE 3. EPISODE 1 (53:14)



FIGURE 4. EPISODE 1 (53:20)

exchanging glances with a man. This occurs for the first time when she is watching Nick wash the car (1.01, 38:28), with the window as a physical barrier between the two. On the two occasions when they have interacted before then, without anyone else being present, there has not been any type of physical or visual impediment like a window. This scene is filmed with the shot/reverse shot technique with emphasis on the angle of observation and the presence of elements of the window in the framing, such as part of the net curtains. June/Offred is apparently driven by curiosity, but she is always careful not to be caught spying. This is why when Nick looks up at the window, he cannot see her, because the blind is sufficiently low for her to observe without being observed.

In the following episode, Nick and June/Offred swap roles, with the former now observing her through a slit in the window of the latter's bedroom where the lights are on, after night has fallen (1.02, 31:55); she returns his gaze (1.02, 32:08) before finally lowering the blind. In this case, the visual planning is different. There is no reverse shot of June/Offred, which underscores the fact that it is Nick who is looking at her while emphasising her own reaction, in which the low-an-

gle shot highlights the window as an illuminated opening at the top of the house, thus creating the perception of distance. This hammers home June/Offred's confinement, the surveillance that she is under and also the sexual tension that has emerged between both characters.

The window as a physical barrier between Nick and June/Offred disappears when they start sleeping together with the acquiescence of Serena, whose intention is to get the Handmaid pregnant behind her husband's back. A highly significant example of this is when the chauffeur visits her in her bedroom in episode 6; as per usual, June/Offred is at a loose end, sitting on the sill of the window closest to the bathroom, in a composition that clearly points to the influence of Hopper (19:35). In a two shot in which Nick is framed by the door, to the left, and June/Offred by the window, to the right (19:55), he tells her that Commander Waterford wishes to see her in his study. This physical distance between the two disappears when, in the doorway, they kiss passionately.

The frustration of the hope a pregnancy, at the end of episode 3, explicitly reveals why June/Offred is confined to her bedroom, which also includes the window: Serena drags her towards it, before finally throwing her to the floor and shouting, "You will stay here, and you will not leave this room. Do you understand me?"

With June/Offred confined to her room, the window appears more than ever to be that of a prison cell throughout the following episode, although she is not under lock and key. Closed for the first time, she is incapable of opening the shutters, which prevents her from looking outside. Pale-faced and unkempt, wearing a nightgown instead of her Handmaid's uniform, she looks like a prisoner who has been confined for some days, 13 in fact, as specified in her voice-over. The shutters also create a strong backlighting that emphasises the darkness of the room, whose rays penetrate through the gaps between the latticework (fig. 5). This effect creates pronounced lines like bars, thus intensifying the claustrophobic feeling of confinement, a stifling atmosphere to which the close-ups also contribute (fig. 6).

Still confined to her room, June/Offred puts on her Handmaid's uniform to visit the gynaecologist because there are only a few days to go before the Ceremony (1.04, 10:08). The shutters are still closed and she is looking forward to abandoning her confinement. But, in reality, this is prolonged by other window-related elements in the Waterfords' car in which she is being driven to her appointment, specifically the glass partition separating the chauffeur from the passengers and the red curtains covering the windows.



FIGURE 5. EPISODE 4 (01:55)

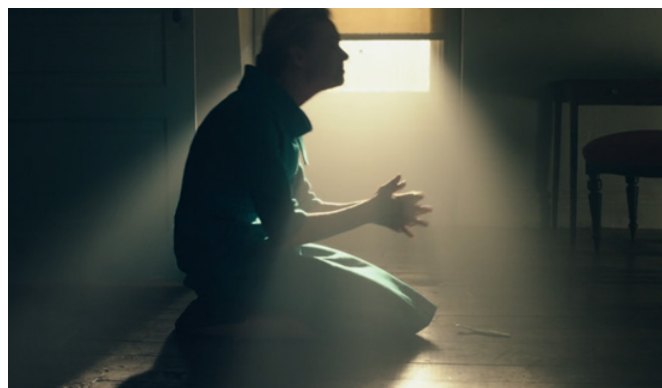


FIGURE 7. EPISODE 10 (09:05)



FIGURE 6. EPISODE 4 (02:06)



FIGURE 8. EPISODE 10 (09:25)

At the end of the season, Serena goes up to June/Offred room where she physically assaults her, for she has discovered that her husband has been taking her to the Jezabel, before forcing her to take a pregnancy test. While they are waiting for the results, there are alternating shots of June/Offred in the bathroom, kneeling with her forehead resting against the edge of the bathtub, and Serena in the bedroom, kneeling on the floor, next to the window, as if in supplication (fig. 7). The use of low shots with the absence of significant elements in the top part of the framing makes the window the focal point in both rooms.

In this last episode there is an outside shot of the window, partially opened, presented on two occasions, with the same basic composition. In the first one, only Serena's gift of her childhood music box appears (1.10, 11:22), with the ballerina moving to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*; in the second, June is introduced, exhaling air through the crack (1.10, 33:16). The both windows are narratively linked by the protection of the children: June/Offred's pregnancy in the first (as evidenced by caressing her abdomen while lying on the bed), and her

eight-years-old daughter's in the second (in the previous scene Fred was asked for protection for her from Serena's threats).

Lastly, it is important to underscore the use of golden light, the divine kind, pictorially speaking, which links some moments in the series to religiosity. This can be seen in the last shot of Serena, discussed above, whose attitude of supplication seems like a desperate attempt to commune with the most sacred.

In this respect, there is another scene, in episode 5, in which light is put to the same use, albeit involving a different window and space, also connected with the hope of a pregnancy. Serena and June/Offred return home after the latter has had sexual intercourse with Nick in the presence of the former. Through the window on the stairs in the hall, a ray of light emphasises the physical point of encounter between both characters, namely, the palms of Serena's hands resting on June/Offred's belly (1.05, 24:28). It is a moment that calls to mind the Christian iconography of the Annunciation, for Serena recites some verses of Jeremiah (1-5): "Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee. And before you camest out of

the womb, I sanctified thee, and ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

Fred Waterford's study

In the series, Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) is a member of the senior leadership and one of the founders of the Republic of Gilead. Although he appears to be a decent enough person, who normally wears a suit, the actions of 40-year-old Commander Fred, as he is also known, reveal the cruel inner man.

Commander Fred's study is the only room in the Waterford's house that is for his use only. Located on the bottom floor, practically in the semi-basement, it is construed as an extension of the character himself, associated with the values that he represents: iniquity, darkness, the closest thing to hell. The actor himself said as much in an interview: “He knows the impact it has for others, it's a display of power, indulgence and intelligence that is part of his amour [sic]” (Robinson 2019: 30). This space contains all the things that are prohibited for all the women of the house: books, games and all types of representations of knowledge. Moreover, there is a map painted on the ceiling, a symbol of his status of Commander (Robinson 2019).

By and large, this is where June/Offred and Fred have their illicit encounters during which they indulge in things that are morally deplorable in Gilead. For instance, in episodes 2 (34:03), 4 (39:26) and 5 (02:05) they play Scrabble together. In episode 5 (02:05), Fred gives June/Offred a fashion magazine, a rare and prohibited item. It is also, according to Julie Berghoff, a reflection of Fred's hubris: “I thought, “What would his character like to have in this room?” And the answer was, “I want to have everything in this room that no one else can have. And I'm going to be arrogant and show it to everybody.” And so it was sexual art, modern art, it was all the books of poetry and love.” In the study, June/Offred finds out about the demise of the previous Handmaid from Fred, they both kiss, she recriminates him for stroking her thigh during the Ceremony (1.05, 32:21) and the idea of going to the brothel together emerges.

In episodes 9 and 10, Fred's wife Serena finally appears in her husband's study. Her first appearance is her only daytime visit – as a metaphor of the fact that she has finally seen the light, for she now fully understands her husband's double standards – the study also being the place where information as relevant as the pregnancy of June/Offred is transmitted (1.10, 13:51).

The triptych window at the end of the room is the most noteworthy feature because its venetian blinds create the impression of being in an oppressive place, like a prison. This sensation is exacerbated above all because of the fact that all the scenes taking place in the study, except for one (1.02, 1.04, 1.05, 1.06, 1.09 and 1.10), are filmed at night, thus underscoring the illicitness of both the room and its contents. This window often serves as a frame, for Fred's desk is located just in front of it. The vertical lines of its grid convey the idea of greatness and firmness, whereas the horizontal ones give it the appearance of a cell, neither offering views of the outside nor letting anyone see what is within. The contents of this room enhance this hermetic and clandestine feeling.

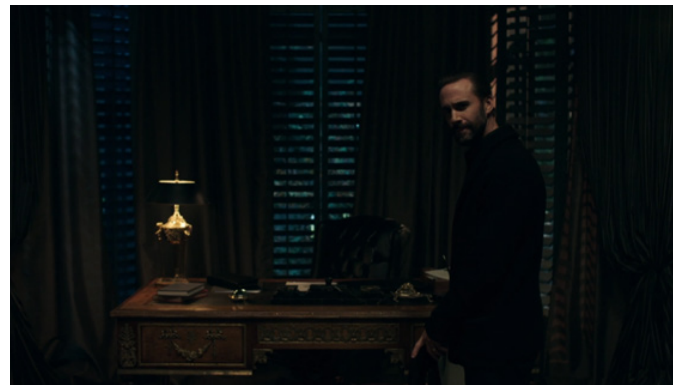


FIGURE 9. EPISODE 2 (34:03)



FIGURE 10. EPISODE 4 (39:26)

The only moment that light shines through that window is when Serena appears in the study for the first time (fig. 11), which implies a qualitative leap forward for the character: she has finally discovered her husband's real personality and has the ability to confront him in that space that is his exclusive preserve. From that moment on, Serena treats him as an equal, evidenced by the fact that when she next visits

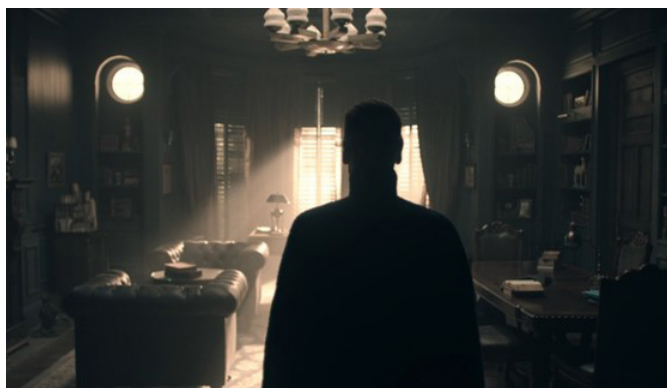


FIGURE 11. EPISODE 9 (43:55)

the study, this time at night (1.10, 13:51), she broaches subjects that have hitherto only been of Fred's concern, like her proposal to play Scrabble.

Serena Waterford's bedroom

Serena Joy Waterford (Yvonne Strahovski), Fred's wife, is an influential woman in Gilead and also one of the republic's founders. In her early 40s, she dresses like all the Wives of the Commanders: modest blue frocks and stockings, with her hair always in a bun. She is an intelligent woman who usually suppresses her emotions.

Her bedroom posed a challenge for the production designer because it had to serve as both a prolongation of her character and as the place where the second part of Ceremony is held. The room, located on the floor under that of June/Offred, in an intermediate position, is a practically empty space with very few personal belongings. Nonetheless, it complements that of her husband, both painted blue, although in a colder shade in the case of Fred's and a warmer shade in that of Serena's (Robinson, 2019).

The part of the room with the canopied bed, on which the Handmaid is raped, is flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides, covered with heavy curtains that make it almost impossible to see outside, reinforcing the idea of the house's oppressiveness and also its complementarity with the sitting room as the other space in which the Ceremony is held. It is important to note the composition of the angles from which the Ceremony is shot, with the symmetry of the windows contrasting with the grotesqueness of the moment (fig. 12).

Additionally, this bedroom has a living area with a semi-circular window covered with curtains which, as before, block out the outside world. Albeit similar to the area of Fred's study with the desk, in this case it is lighter (fig. 13). However, it is not as personal as the study, for Serena does not have

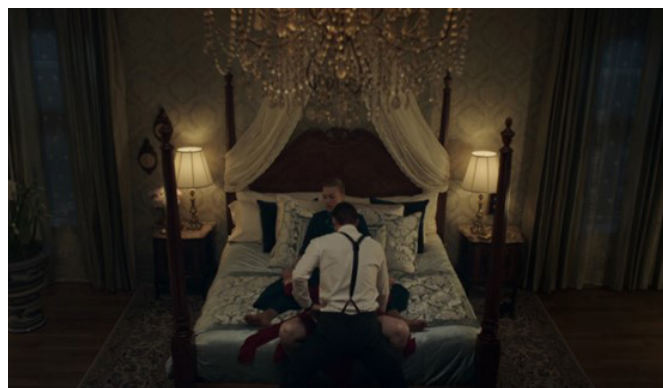


FIGURE 12. EPISODE 5 (27:23)



FIGURE 13. EPISODE 6 (36:52)

the opportunity to express herself here. It heightens the sensation that women are alienated and have completely relinquished their identity, hence the absence of personal belongings and cultural representations such as books.

4. CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, we can conclude that, although the house of the Waterfords is a home of sorts, it isolates June/Offred from the outside world, a confinement epitomised by her bedroom by means of the symbolism and aesthetics of the window. To this room should be added Fred's study and Serena's bedroom, where the other most relevant windows of the house are located in the first season of the series.

Each space analysed here is a metonymy of the character inhabiting it and an axiological representation of the mansion as a whole. In response to the research question, the windows are part of a very particular context, with seemingly implausible characters and plots, but which works profoundly for the viewer, that is, on a symbolic level, shaping spaces of

confinement and isolation from the outside world: as a prison for June/Offred, as a place for keeping prohibited objects for Fred and as a dehumanising space for Serena. In short, it deals with contemporary issues in a society that maintains patriarchy and perpetuates the alienation of women and their relegation to a reproductive role, which are the main social values of the Republic of Gilead.

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- All that Heaven Allows* (1955)
Gone with the Wind (1939)
Rear Window (1954)

TV Shows

- Mad Men* (2007-2015)
Masters of Sex (2013-2016)
Ray Donovan (2013-2020)
The Crown (2016-2023)

