THE HANDMAID’S TALE

DATES ON TV: April 2017 - ?

NETWORK: Hulu Original

STUDIO: MGM Television

FORMAT: One Hour Drama, Serialized

GENRE: SciFi / Drama / Dystopian Future

CREATED BY: Bruce Miller

KEY WRITERS: Bruce Miller, Ilene Chaiken

PRODUCERS: Bruce Miller, Warren Littlefield, Reed Morano

BASED ON: Novel by Margaret Atwood, 1986

PILOT DIRECTOR: Reed Morano

CAST: Elizabeth Moss, Joseph Fiennes, Yvonne Strahovski, Max Minghella, Samira Wiley

SERIES CONCEPT:
In a dystopian future where the human race is dying off, the few women who remain fertile must serve as ‘Handmaids’ to the country’s religious elite.

RELEVANT COMPARISONS:
‘Man in the High Castle’ (Amazon) presents a similarly dark ‘alternative reality’ in America although it’s nowhere near as good. George Orwell’s 1984 is the other obvious comparison (see the feature film, starring John Hurt).

THE WORLD OF THE SERIES:
In a ‘near future’ the world has experienced a dramatic plunge in human fertility rates. The cause is never specified in the series, but strong allusions are made to environmental degradation, pollution, and the lascivious morals that this new regime, a religious theocracy known as GILEAD, arose to stamp out.

Under the guise of moral imperatives, this ‘Army of God’ slaughtered the U.S. Congress and took over the majority of the country, which they hold with military force and an every present army of black-clad soldiers and spies.
Whether or not its religious beliefs are genuine, the army of Gilead has a decidedly Fascist tone.

Through a network of spies and civilian collaborators (known as ‘eyes’) they arrest and make ‘disappear’ any who speaks against them. The level of fear is everywhere oppressive.

Most relevant to the series, is the subjugation and enslavement of women, regardless of age or fertility. In a single day, after Gilead came to power, women were stripped of all jobs, financial assets, and property rights. They were forbidden from travel, gathering or protest. Resistance was met with brutality or death.

Any woman still capable of bearing children was enslaved and given to the ruling elite as a HANDMAID to bear his heirs. The monthly rape of the Handmaids was dressed up as a religious ‘ceremony,’ in which their barren wives also participated - an act that was conceived to give the cover of religion to the rapes, but which also creates some of the series’ most emotionally trenchant scenes as neither party (husband, wife, or handmaid) can stomach the hypocrisy.

If they are not pregnant, the Handmaids live a life of constant bullying and degradation at the hand of Commanders’ wives. They are made to do menial work, shop in twos, limit conversations to rote proclamations of the grace and bounty of God. Phrases like ‘under his eye’ and ‘may the Lord open’ are sometimes all that stand in for genuine human conversation. The Handmaids live in constant fear. Depression is so common, their jailers must take pain to avoid suicides.

The world of Gilead contains several classes of women: the wives of the Commanders are privileged and highest in social rank. Beneath them are the Martha’s - who are a servant-caste, dressed in a drab, dung-colored habit like nuns. Then there are the fearsome collaborators who train and terrorize and indoctrinate any newly captured fertile women. These are called ‘Aunts’ as in Aunt Lydia - the series’ most evil madame collaborator who uses scripture and violence to terrorize the Handmaids into submission.
Most cinematic, of course, are the Handmaids themselves, who are made to wear long robes of crimson red (to signify blood and fertility). Except for this color, they are dressed almost Amish and go about in pairs, avoiding all contact with men, all frivolous activities, and in a kind of weird 18th Century visor called ‘wings’ meant to hide their faces as they pass. It is impossible not to sense the similarities to the orthodox Muslim burka. The garb of the Handmaid serves the same purpose: to isolate and shame these young women from their own sexuality, and into obedience.

What ‘industry’ there remains in Gilead is not specified. A return to farming and a simple life seems to describe every day. Bread is made, not purchased. There is no television or radio or internet. Men alone hold jobs and are the only stakeholders in this new society. It is clear that once-educated women such as Serena Waterford (Offred’s master) are chafing under a deal they thought they wanted when the ‘revolution’ started. Now they are bored, and their boredom has turned to resentment and barely suppressed rage.

MAJOR THEMES:

In this carefully constructed world, with its brutal oppression of all but the few, the obvious themes in this series are: freedom vs tyranny. The main character is JUNE, introduced as ‘Offred’ (i.e., ‘of Fred’ Waterford). Having been identified as fertile, captured and separated from her 4 year old daughter - June never ending quest is to escape bondage and find her daughter. It is this maternal imperative that gives her the strength to endure the unimaginable. So the constant tension (theme) in her life is: Can she keep hope alive? (hope vs surrender).

Given the brutal suppression of women, the other dominant theme is this battle of the sexes (male vs female); but this is also more finely expressed in female collaborators in the new patriarchy - the Aunts and other self-serving women who banish loyalty for a few creature comforts: hence the theme of ‘selfishness vs loyalty’ finds its way into many storylines.
CHARACTERS:

JUNE OSBORNE / ‘OFFRED’ (early 30s)
Offred, meaning ‘of-Fred’ is the handmaid assigned to Commander Fred Waterford to bear children to he and his wife, Serena Waterford. She is also the main character and narrator of the series. She is seldom off screen. Prior to the overthrow of the US government, June was a working professional woman, mother to Hannah (4), with her husband Luke, an African American man (teacher?). The pilot episode opens on the day they are separated, pursued and captured by the armed forces of Gilead. And for the majority of season one, June will believe Luke was killed. Her daughter Hannah is likewise taken from her. June lives only to get Hannah back. Otherwise, like many of the Handmaids, she may have opted for suicide. Her life as a sex slave is cold and intolerable.

The key element to Offred’s personality is the quiet resistance she manifests whenever she can. And the snarky inner monologue that keeps her sane by commenting on the insanity all around her. She is both intimidated and ever aware of the hypocrisy of life in Gilead. Especially the monthly rape that comes dressed up as a ‘religious ceremony.’ Offred reserves a special disdain for Commander Waterford’s wife Serena, whom she regards as a cruel collaborator to the fascists in charge of this new world. There are times she can barely hide her contempt for Serena Waterford and is savagely punished for her insolence.

Over time, Offred comes to recognize that within this highly restricted world, she still holds the power of seduction. She uses it to flirt with Waterford and his ‘driver’ Nick, who is an ‘eye’ for the Gilead secret police.

Having tried once already to escape, Offred is never trusted nor ever completely out of sight of Aunt Lydia, the cruel trainer of Handmaids and enforcer of the new rules and protocols of subservience. Throughout the series, Offred’s less than submissive attitude will provoke beatings, isolation, and other forms of intimidation and torture. Such as when she refuses an order to ‘stone’ a fellow Handmaid to death. Offred functions as our constant hope of resistance in the series. A quiet leader waiting to be activated.
**SERENA JOY WATERFORD** (early 30s)

Serena is the infertile wife of Commander Fred Waterford, and head of the household to which Offred has been enslaved. She is a cold woman, made colder and more cruel by the realization that the ‘revolution’ she helped bring about has left her on the outside of the religious patriarchy. She is now a second class citizen who takes her anger out on Offred and other ‘lesser’ women assigned to serve her.

Once a brilliant professor and one of the seminal thinkers behind the revolution that brought Gilead to power, Serena has morphed into a bitter, intellectually stunted woman. Her only hope at purpose now is to bring a child into her life, but for that she needs Offred. And that ‘need’ offends her. It even makes her cruel enough to taunt Offred with the sight of Offred's daughter, as a means of dominating her. And breaking Offred's will to resist.

Serena is deeply afraid that her husband will leave her, or pleasure himself too much with other women. But she is powerless to stop him.

**COMMANDER FRED WATERFORD** (30s)

Waterford is one of the architects of the Gilead revolution and enjoys an elevated status in the new society. He owes much of the plan’s success to his wife Serena, and her keen ability to dress up tyranny in the guise of religion and moral imperatives. But now that he has tasted power, Waterford is unlikely to want to give it up. Hence he tolerates his wife’s input, but keeps a limit on it. He knows she is more brilliant than he; but he doesn’t like to be reminded of it. They no longer share a bed. The marriage has gone cold.

Being one of the architects of the revolution, Waterford is also keenly aware of the hypocrisy at its core. And of the veneer of religion and scriptures twisted to serve their purpose. We sense that he is long past caring about whatever ‘purpose’ drove them to take over the government (the pretext of saving humanity from dying off). If anything, the ‘fertility crisis’ has elevated Waterford and his fellow Commanders to a status none of them would have ever achieved. So he is probably grateful for it. In his heart of hearts, he is enjoying the new order, even if the rest of humanity isn’t.
‘Better never means better for everyone,’ he tells Offred, during one of their unsanctioned evenings in his private study. In truth, for all his status, Waterford is a coward and a bastard. We sense that he would do anything to save his own skin.

**Nick Blaine** (late 20s)
Nick is a low level driver and ‘eye’ for the Gilead secret police. Prior to the revolution he was a drifter and a malcontent, unable to hold a job, and prone to settle scores with his fists. His violence got him noticed by one of the party officials and he was recruited just prior to the revolution and rewarded for his violence with a plum posting in the new society.

Nick is not a true believer in Gilead. He is an opportunist. Deprived of a woman of his own, he quickly succumbs to Serena Waterford’s plan to impregnate Offred when Fred Waterford proves unable. Nick is also somewhat under Offred’s power, sexually. She comes and goes from his private residence, trading protection for sex. It is a weird, loveless partnership that neither of them seem to enjoy. And it is never intimate. Not emotionally. Nick knows that she is holding out hope that Gilead will collapse. And we sense he wouldn’t mind helping it happen. But we don’t know yet. At heart, Nick is a rule-breaker. Gilead may have been good to him, but he’s not one to follow others forever.

**Moira** (30s, African American)
Moira was Offred’s coworker and best friend before the revolution. She is lesbian (maybe bi?) and the two are deeply bonded, ever more since the country was taken away. It was Moira who first introduced Offred to Luke, her future husband. And it was Moira who kept Offred from losing all hope when her daughter Hannah was taken. The two have pledged to outlast Gilead and to get Hannah back, whatever the cost.
Following their attempted escape from the training center, Moira was put into service in a secret brothel servicing the ruling elite outside the city limits. It is there Offred finds her in a chance visit as Waterford’s escort. And through Offred’s reminder of their pledge, Moira finds the will to resist again. And to escape.
LUKE BANKOLE (mid 30s, African American)
Luke is a relatively minor character in season one. A good man, husband, and father to Offred’s daughter, he is simply outmatched by the storm-troopers who come to capture his wife and daughter. Through a lucky break he escapes capture and makes his way to Canada, where he will learn that Offred (June) has survived, and lives as a Handmaid.

Luke’s main function the series (so far) is an on-screen reminder for the life that was lost. And unconventional, mixed race marriage - no matter how loving - is something unimaginable in new Gilead. And scenes of Luke and June and Hannah enjoying life before the revolution serve as a poignant reminder of what was lost and what the audience would like to see reclaimed.

SERIES FORMAT:
This series is a serialized, one hour drama. Typical episodes include at least two or more flashbacks to the days and weeks leading up to the overthrow of the government, as well as the months when the country remained in denial about how bad things were getting. This earlier timeline culminates on the day that women were stripped of all rights and property, and enslaved to the ruling elite.

Intercut with this turbulent past, is a much more sinister and sedate present day (some months after the revolution). It is a time in which most women have given up hope of freedom. They have succumbed to the monthly rapes and daily cruelties inflicted by the ‘wives.’

The obvious ongoing conflict is ‘will Offred escape her captors?” Thematically, this is expressed as Freedom vs Tyranny and seen in dozens of acts of resistance, some as small as refusing to say the proscribed greeting. But each act of defiance, no matter how small, keeps up hope for the larger resistance. And hope that decent Americans can take their country back.
PILOT EPISODE:
The pilot opens with the capture and enslavement of the main character, June Osborne, thereafter known as Offred. She, her husband, and daughter are caught while attempting to flee into Canada. Offred’s four year old daughter is taken. Her husband (we believe) is shot dead. And she is beaten unconscious.

Fast forward months later to ‘ceremony night’ at the Waterford house, where the true nature of Offred’s new life as sex slave is made clear. A monthly rape to impregnate the ‘Handmaid’ is given the veneer of morality by a few lines of scripture read before the rape. Offred does not resist. By now, submission has been beaten into her.

Through the ritual of daily chores, we get a look into this new world order. Offred and the other Handmaids shop, two-by-two, in a town that now looks like the 18th Century. The technology we know has all but vanished from this new world. There is no internet, no television or radio, no music or entertainment of any kind. Even casual conversation is limited because all the women feel their shopping partner is spying for the secret police. The whole of life seems to be the worst kind of totalitarian nightmare.

Within episode one we also get flashbacks to the ‘Red Center’ where Offred was first taken after her abduction and tortured into submission by the cruel ‘Aunts’ that run the indoctrination camps. Here is where ‘Aunt Lydia’ first makes her appearance in the series. And she will forthwith become a figure of intimidation. All the Handmaids fear her and for good reason. She is Gilead’s answer to a Gestapo Commander. Ironically, she claims to ‘protect her girls,’ but this won’t stop her from ordering them stoned to death (in a later episode) for disobedience.

Episode one concludes - after Offred’s ceremonial rape - with a quiet moment alone in her room. After the shocking level of cruelty shown to her in this series opener, our biggest fear is not her death, but her suicide - her failure to keep hope. This is answered, however, by her own inner narration. Offred pledges to stay alive for the sake of her daughter. And quietly utters her real name for us (and for the first time). ‘My name is June,’ she says. And with this we know, defiance and hope are still alive.
ONGOING STORYLINES:
Beyond the pilot episode, what are the major storylines of the series?

The dominant storyline involves hope for Offred’s escape from Gilead and her reunion with her daughter Hannah and husband Luke. So any act of rebellion on her part keeps this hope (and this storyline) alive for the audience.

Luke’s storyline continues in parallel, charting his recovery from gunshot wounds and his unlikely refuge in Canada. Once word reaches him that Offred is still alive, a new dramatic tension opens: Will he go back to rescue her? And how can he?

The Resistance. Like any good story of oppression and resistance, there is an organized, secret resistance to Gilead that we learn about in season one, but just barely. Other Handmaids are involved and punished for it. Offred becomes aware of the resistance and undertakes one mission for them. While relatively minor in season one, we sense that the resistance will become a much bigger storyline as the series goes on.

Offred / Nick relationship. The possibility of a romantic relationship is opened by this sexual liaison in season one. Neither of them appear to love each other, but Nick clearly has the power to help Offred get free or at least not get punished. This relationship appears ongoing as Nick finds more and more of his soul stirring against Gilead and its leaders. We sense he will help Offred.

Serena Waterford. Her overwhelming quest to have a child dominates her actions while Serena makes life hell for Offred. This is a woman who seems to occasionally recognize the nightmare she has created for other women, but she lacks the guts to do anything about it. Will she recover her humanity and help free others from what she has brought about? We are not sure. But this storyline is very much alive.
TONE:
Handmaid’s Tale is one of the darkest dramas on television. Brilliantly written and exquisitely acted - it remains so close to the realm of possibility that many episodes are hard to watch. It is relentless in its willingness to explore man’s capacity for cruelty. And yet, the indomitable human spirit continues to show up, episode after episode. And all the darkness we endure is paid off, ten fold.

AUDIENCE:
Audiences who watched MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE would watch this show and probably like it better. Other dystopian fiction like HUNGER GAMES are a good parallel. But there are not many other television series that are this dark or this political. If Orwell’s 1984 were a series, this would be it. ‘Mr. Robot’ is the only other series that matches this one for ‘darkness of vision’ but the genre is so different, the audience may not be the same. Instinct also tells me that viewers of ‘Masters of Sex’ may watch The Handmaid’s Tale because of the subjugation of women in that series. Although it is far less cruel.