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Life without certainty: Margaret Atwood's ambiguous worlds

by Rachel Thorpe

*The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue
after all.*

*Why do you need it?
Don't ever ask for the true story.*

Margaret Atwood, 'True Stories'¹

Summary

Margaret Atwood is one of the most important and influential writers alive today. Her fiction explores and reflects the current cultural move away from metanarrative and towards fragmented notions of truth. She celebrates this new intellectual trend, whilst also revealing the damage done by its more confused, frustrated and narcissistic elements. This paper will argue that Atwood's 'speculative fiction' in particular uncovers our deep human need for stable knowledge, language and sense of self. Furthermore, her novels point to society's insatiable longing for the God that it has turned away from, showing all substitutes to be inadequate and dangerous.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood has written over fifty books – including poetry, short stories, scripts, children's fiction, non-fiction, and fifteen novels – which have been translated into more than forty languages. She has won over fifty awards, including the Booker Prize in 2000, and holds numerous Honorary Fellowships. Her most famous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is a cultural phenomenon. A recent article celebrating a new edition described its importance: 'It has been banned in schools, made into a film and an opera, and the title has become a shorthand for repressive regimes against women.'²

The Handmaid's Tale is commonly described as a feminist work, but Atwood is not exclusively interested in the politics of gender. She is an author who is keenly aware of her cultural surroundings and constantly engages with multiple facets of contemporary theory and philosophy. Her work has also been critiqued in the light of environmentalism, Canadian nationalism and postmodernism. Atwood is ironic and self-aware, playing with ideas through a humorous and detached authorial voice.

Her most complex and interesting books, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) participate in a genre of 'what-if' stories, imagining the day after tomorrow and speculating on the shape of things to come. Atwood herself refers to them as 'speculative fiction', a genre which unfolds the future to 'explore the outer reaches of the imagination' and confront the timeless questions at the core of human experience: 'Where did the world come from? [...] What do the gods want, or God, if it's a monotheism? [...] What are the right relationships between men and women?'³ In addressing these issues Atwood places herself and her novels firmly in the realm of ideas, addressing notions about God and the supernatural, the self, the nature of reality, the possibility of knowledge and the character of truth. Let us see how these issues are explored in Atwood's three 'speculative' novels: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*.

The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale explores a future society run by a tyrannical sect that uses Christian imagery to support the oppression of women. Echoing popular stereotypes of Puritan New England, as filtered through Nathaniel Hawthorne and Arthur Miller, Atwood suggests an alternative version of American history in which seventeenth-century Puritanism 'would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself'.⁴

Atwood issues strong cautions about patriarchal dominance and 'heavy-handed theocracy', reframing complex social power play in a single core question: 'Who can

1 In Margaret Atwood, *True Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1981, p.9.

2 Margaret Atwood, 'Haunted by The Handmaid's Tale', see www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/20/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood

3 Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Virago, 2011, p.51.

4 'Haunted by the Handmaid's Tale'.

do what, with which set of genital organs, and with whom.’⁵ In Gilead, the Handmaids’ entire identity is constituted in their ability to reproduce and this is signified by a complete loss of autonomy and freedom. We don’t even know the real name of our narrator Offred. She is simply Of-Fred, her Commander. Her life revolves around a strict routine: a daily visit to the food market and a monthly ritual in which her Commander attempts to make her pregnant. Her past life, in which she had a job and a child of her own, has vanished.

The authorities of Gilead achieve absolute control by limiting important knowledge to particular sections of the populace. The Handmaids are told very little, and are allowed to tell almost nothing in return: Offred is not allowed to read and barely allowed to speak. The novel hinges around a pivotal moment at which Offred is given an illicit opportunity to reveal to her Commander her most powerful desire:

‘I would like...’ I say. ‘I would like to know.’ It sounds indecisive, stupid even, I say it without thinking.

‘Know what?’ he says.

‘Whatever there is to know,’ I say; but that’s too flippant. ‘What’s going on.’

This is a revelation because elsewhere Offred ignores and suppresses her desire for knowledge, claiming: ‘I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was.’

Eventually she begins to hope that the reality which she experiences is itself just a story: ‘I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe such stories are only stories have a better chance.’ Offred crafts stories for herself and the reader which both defiantly reveal and imaginatively edit reality, but her sanity is tested as she becomes confused about which story is the true version. Taking the collapse of knowledge to its logical conclusion, Atwood shows how reality and illusion completely blur once the distinction between truth and fiction is removed.

Yet Offred is compelled to keep speaking: ‘By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you [...] Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.’ Her recasting of the famous Cartesian statement proves her awareness of the importance of relationship. In order to define herself, she needs to be in relationship with another. However, having spoken her readers into existence, she refuses to be straightforward with them. Her fragmented narrative constantly turns on itself with asides that negate the previous paragraphs, ‘It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction.’ Offred needs to hear the truth, for this is what will set her free. Instead she is forced to remain trapped within the prison of her own consciousness.

Oryx and Crake

Atwood’s next dystopia is a thematic continuation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. *Oryx and Crake* is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which scientific experimentation and genetic modification have spun out of control as humans attempt to adapt and create animal forms: ‘There’d been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God.’

The result of humans playing at divinity is a world which is falling apart. The apocalypse always requires a narrator and here the central character is Snowman, who takes a journey into his own past to reveal the cause of the devastation. He wanders around dressed in a bed sheet, searching for food and grieving for his best friend Crake and his beloved Oryx, both of whom are dead when the novel begins.

Atwood continues to explore the disintegration of truth by expanding her scope to the area of communication. The novel opens with Snowman looking down at his watch and realising that universally accepted systems of knowledge and communication are crumbling: ‘[i]t causes a jolt of terror to run through him [...] nobody nowhere knows what time it is.’ His horror is proof of residual reliance on shared systems. Scholars may discuss the ways that Atwood and her fellow writers enact the “assassinations” of traditional genres, plots, narrative voices, structure, techniques, and reader expectations’.⁶ However, this is another example of Atwood’s famous detachment, infused with a distinctly Canadian sense of self-deprecating irony. For although these ‘postmodern techniques’ attempt to deconstruct convention, they eventually ‘uncover a traditional subtext’.⁷ As Steven Connor writes: ‘Postmodernist fiction seems to show that we cannot entirely do without the old systems of weights and measures, as we attempt to take readings of a world that has gone off the scale.’⁸ Atwood simply cannot escape the old ways of reading, and writing.

Neither can Snowman. He remains fascinated by the ‘old system’ of language, and this compels him to speak and write, despite the fact that he acknowledges, ‘The only reader I can possibly imagine is in the past.’ Having worked in a library, studied self-help manuals and later created linguistically savvy advertising campaigns, he is a logophile, obsessed with the thought that language will die out: ‘He compiled a list of old words [...] He’d developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were his children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them.’ However, he is all too aware that language often fails. His mother’s final words are lost when the technology allowing her to speak cuts out. He finds a radio but is unable to make it function properly, pleading: ‘Say something, say anything!’ When he needs them most, he finds the reassurance of words diminished by the knowledge that without anyone to listen or understand, they are useless: ‘[T]here was no longer any comfort in the words. There was nothing in them. It no longer delighted [him] to possess these small collections of letters that other people had forgotten about.’

Snowman does have some willing listeners. The Crakers are a post-human race, created by genetic engineers who were seeking to eliminate undesirable human characteristics. They are now in Snowman’s care, and they continually ask him to tell them stories. They are desperate to know about their own origins, beyond the hint in their names that they were created by Crake. Snowman is forced to write creation myths which they accept without question. These stories become a powerful but deceptive means of communication. The reader is also listening, but is forced to discern the true from the false, and to glean the major plot points through a series of flashbacks and snatched explanations.

Atwood begins to pose some of the same questions as Nietzsche: ‘Are [the conventions of language] really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? [...] Is language the adequate expression of all realities? What then is truth? [...] Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.’⁹ Snowman lives on beyond a physical disaster. He also lives on beyond a philosophical disaster which renders language problematic and painful. This makes it difficult for him to refer to the world around him, to communicate with others, and to define his own existence.

The Year of the Flood

The Year of the Flood is ‘not a sequel, nor a prequel, but a “simultan-uel”’¹⁰ to *Oryx and Crake*, describing the same set of

6 Sharon R. Wilson (ed.), *Margaret Atwood’s Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, Ohio State University Press, 2003, p.xiii.

7 *ibid.* pp.xiii–xiv.

8 In Steven Connor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.79.

9 Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense’, in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche*, 1959, pp.45–47.

10 Margaret Atwood, interviewed by Arifa Akbar, *The Independent*, 4 September 2009.

5 Margaret Atwood, ‘Everybody is Happy Now’, see www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/nov/17/classics.margaretatwood

events occurring over the same period of time, but narrated by different characters. The novel withholds a number of crucial pieces of information, causing Ursula Le Guin to write: 'I sometimes felt that I was undergoing, and failing, a test of my cleverness at guessing from hints, reading between lines and recognising allusions to an earlier novel.'¹¹ The novel does come closer to defining the elusive 'waterless flood' which has threatened the planet, by introducing us to the man who predicted disaster: Adam One, leader of an eco-cult called the God's Gardeners. It also answers the main question posed by *Oryx and Crake*: are there any other humans left alive, and, if so, who are they?

Toby – a former member of the God's Gardeners – and Ren – an exotic dancer – are still alive, although perhaps barely. At the climactic moment of the book Snowman meets Toby and asks, 'Are you real?', before turning to Ren to ask, 'Is it you?' His questions underline the core issues of the novel: what it means to be human, and what it means to be a unique individual. The novel explores these issues by destroying, undermining and fragmenting personality.

Humans have been philosophically cut loose from the 'I AM' who created them, knows them and helps them to know themselves. Without this unchanging, objective reference point, human introspection has reached its limits and the human 'I am' becomes an impermanent and a shifting concept; a stable sense of personhood is impossible and Atwood's characters, Toby and Ren, exemplify this, experiencing a disintegration of autonomy and self-awareness.

In *A Long Way East of Eden*, Pete Lowman writes 'Arguably, what's happened in the west over the last four hundred years is that the "individual", the "self", has become more and more important, more and more central, has been blown up like a balloon – and then, suddenly, has exploded.'¹² Toby and Ren inherit the aftermath of this explosion. Without an inherited sense of self-worth, they are both lured by the opportunity to create their own identity. Toby has her official identity removed as technology becomes capable of casually adapting the hallmarks of individuality: hair, eye and skin colour, fingerprints, DNA. Ren has her history rewritten, and as with many characters in these two novels, her name is changed, signifying a break with the past. Even Amanda, a supporting character who appears in both novels and holds them together, is casual about her loss of selfhood: 'That was my identity. But I don't have an identity now.'

Theological narratives

Margaret Atwood's latest book of lectures and essays, *In Other Worlds* (2011), describes certain genres of contemporary fiction – primarily works of science fiction or dystopia – as the inheritor of Miltonian and Blakean concerns. In many of the works that she discusses, a Romantic appropriation of religion as myth gives the appearance of a reliance on metanarrative. However, the narrative arc of these works undermines this; in fact, biblical imagery persists but conventional theological rhetoric has been subverted. Angels are replaced by aliens whilst Atwood notes that 'Heaven and Hell [...] have gone to Planet X. [...] And many of us are more than willing to engage with them there.'¹³

Atwood's speculative fictions are amongst those works which are continuing the tradition of 'theological narrative' in new and surprising guises. Her works are 'products, finally, of the moral rather than the literary sense',¹⁴ which combine predictions about the future with satirical comment on the present. This may seem an unlikely interest for an author steeped in the thought-life of a post-Nietzschean world. Yet despite his pronouncement that 'God is dead', many individuals still believe in some form of supernatural

power or being. Phillipa Berry writes: 'The society and culture we inhabit today, at the start of the third millennium, appear at first glance to be the most secular that the world has yet known. [...] Traditional conceptions of knowledge and religion appear increasingly redundant in the context of a postmodern pluralism [...] yet postmodern culture is also imprinted with the traces of other, more ambiguous and elusive, modes of spirituality.'¹⁵

The supernatural realm still exists, but it does not have anything to say about 'Truth'. Indeed, the contemporary thinker finds this banal: 'The most boring question to ask about religion is whether or not the whole thing is "true".'¹⁶ Instead, writes Mikael Stenmark, religion is something which is now commonly seen to 'traffic in things that may be true for you, or a particular community, or from one perspective, but do[es] not tell you how things are [the truth that it presents] is [...] socially constructed, contingent, inseparable from the peculiar needs and preferences of certain people in a certain time and place.'¹⁷

In engaging with traditional theology and contemporary theory, Atwood reaches some startling conclusions. *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests that reality is shaped by what you know. *Oryx and Crake* suggests that language has the power to create reality. *The Year of the Flood* goes further, suggesting that the individual possessing hopes, beliefs and certainty is malleable to the extent that identity can be dislocated from the outside world. Such distance allows the individual to project one's own meaning back onto the world.

Atwood is frequently asked about her personal engagement with religion. She describes herself as a 'strict agnostic' who believes that: 'you cannot pronounce, as knowledge, anything you cannot demonstrate. In other words if you're going to call it knowledge you have to be able to run an experiment on it that's repeatable. You can't run an experiment on whether God exists or not, therefore you can't say anything about it as knowledge. You can have a belief if you want to, [or] if you have a subjective experience of that kind [...] You just can't call it knowledge.'¹⁸

Faith, of a kind

Atwood's works, and her personal beliefs, appear to reject entirely the Christian metanarrative. However, her three major pieces of speculative fiction continually refer to, challenge and rely on the Bible, both philosophically and aesthetically. Echoes of Scripture run throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, but they are twisted and obscured. For readers immersed in traditional Christian interpretations of the biblical texts this may be uncomfortable and difficult. However, Atwood is simply echoing the message that the post-modern world has imbibed from a misrepresented and distorted reading of the Bible.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the regime controlling Gilead promotes the Bible as the absolute authority, but with an end in mind: to support their own interests and give them power over the populace. Their actions promote the assertion that, '[t]he "truth" is just a way of getting some people to do what you want them to do and marginalizing the ones who do not do what you want them to do.'¹⁹

Atwood says that the novel, 'ought to warn the reader against the dangers inherent in applying every word in that extremely varied document [the Bible] literally.'²⁰ Her awareness of the complexities and subtleties of the diverse books of the Bible is precisely what is missing in Gilead, where passages of the text are dislocated from their contexts and are repeated mechanically by humans and machines alike. The Handmaids must speak to each other in predetermined scripted exchanges built of pious-sounding

15 In Steven Connor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.168.

16 See www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/77/full

17 Mikael Stenmark, introduction to Denis R. Alexander (ed.), *Can We Be Sure About Anything? Science, Faith and Postmodernism*, Apollos, 2005.

18 In a US TV interview, see www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/perspectives4.html

19 Mikael Stenmark, *ibid.*

20 'The Road to Utopia', see www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-utopia

11 Ursula Le Guin's review, see www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood

12 Pete Lowman, *A Long Way East of Eden*, Paternoster, 2002, see www.bethinking.org/who-am-i/intermediate/a-long-way-east-of-eden-1-identity-after-god.htm

13 Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Virago, 2011, p.65.

14 Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, 1982, p.276.

phrases. Biblical language is no longer a system of communication; it has become a means of smothering dissenting outbursts. Prayers are regurgitated by machines which act as babbling pagans, ‘the toneless metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over again’. These prayers are ordered by the Wives not out of faith but because ‘it is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime.’ Even in the act of prayer, faithfulness is a routine followed out of fear.

Offred asks one of the other Handmaids if she thinks God listens to these prayers. They both conclude not, although Offred adds, ‘I suppose it’s faith, of a kind.’ Faith, however, is a harmless word: in Gilead, women are banned from seeing written language, but Offred has a cushion in her room with the word ‘faith’ embroidered on it. The word now performs a decorative function, not having been deemed dangerous enough to have been removed from her sight.

Atwood cannot move beyond the supernatural completely. *The Year of the Flood* is ‘haunt[ed ...] by something like yet unlike religion’.²¹ In the novel, genetic engineers attempt to explain religion entirely in terms of the scientific metanarrative, eventually concluding that ‘God is a brain mutation’. Yet the spiritual realm is still present: during the course of the book there is a return to mystical or ritual religion in the face of moral uncertainty.²² The thick Edenic imagery at play throughout the novel is obvious from the name of the God’s Gardeners, who are intent on melding religion, science and a love of nature. The God’s Gardeners hold beliefs with Eastern overtones, which are born out of a distinctly Christian aesthetic. Atwood manages this blend by cherry-picking imagery from the Bible that, when taken out of context, seems to support pantheism: ‘It is the green parts of Christianity that are in there.’²³ She is honest about her sources and her selective method of using them to form part of a new story.

The true story

Nietzsche knew that when he declared the death of God he was also announcing the death of the possibility of certain knowledge: ‘There are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.’²⁴ Atwood inherits this uncertainty. Her fiction explores a future world in which humans have rejected the reality of a Creator God and subsequently, knowledge, language and selfhood begin to fall apart.

Yet, for all that Atwood tries to escape the Christian metanarrative, it resounds throughout her writing. She eventually retreats to a kind of skewed, mystical religion which resembles Christianity in its trappings but not its core. The suppressed human desire for truth, communication and identity are unable to find satisfaction without Christ, who figures in her writing only as a vague metaphor for the life-force of nature. Even this becomes a joke, an ironic comment on consumer-driven capitalism: ‘Anything that

suffers and dies instead of us is Christ [...] The animals die that we may live [...] and] that is Christ also. [...] Canned Spam, canned Jesus.’²⁵ Without the true ‘Word made flesh’ who exists from the beginning of time to the end and ties language to concrete reality, humans lack the crucial relationship which allows them to find certainty.

Atwood reflects the crucial human need for a concrete source of knowledge, language and identity through her inability to dispense with them altogether: she cannot dispense with the idea of trustworthy knowledge altogether or her novels would move beyond the mysterious and become unbearably frustrating for her readers; she cannot dispense with language because that is what her narratives consist of; she cannot dispense with the coherent self because her narratives rely on characters.

Indeed, in her more recent fiction she has begun to loosen her ‘irony, emotional detachment, and [...] lethally precise vocabulary’, tending instead towards ‘a multiplicity of voices and corresponding changes in tone towards compassion and elegy.’²⁶ However, this results in a rather half-hearted humanist conclusion: ‘[O]f course we should try to make things better, insofar as it lies within our power. But we should probably not try to make things perfect, especially not ourselves, for that path leads to mass graves. We’re stuck with us, imperfect as we are; but we should make the most of us.’²⁷

Atwood’s novels have drawn us so far into the internal horror of her characters’ uncertainty that any such pastiche of traditional theological narratives is not persuasive. We are left with a glimmer of hope for the future of humanity in the nuggets of Christian reality submerged in the novels. Most obviously, the hymns of the God’s Gardeners contain in their parody of Christian hymns residual elements of truth. They are ambiguous, uneasy insertions which may be read as caricatures of religious naivety, but, if taken sincerely, they point to a world beyond human uncertainty:

Oh Lord, You know our foolishness,
And all our silly deeds;
[...]
We either claim You don’t exist,
Or else that You ignore us.
[...]
Your starry World’s beyond our thought,
And wondrous without measure;
We pray, among Your Treasures bright,
Your Fools You’ll also treasure.

25 Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, Bloomsbury, 2009 (special edition, first pub. 1972), p.154.

26 Coral Ann Howell, introduction to Coral Ann Howell (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

27 Margaret Atwood, ‘The Road to Utopia’, see www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia

21 Phillipa Berry in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, p.173.
22 This is a common theme for dystopian fiction and its writers: Aldous Huxley experienced a comparable move towards Eastern religion in his writing and his own life.
23 Margaret Atwood, interviewed by Arifa Akbar, *The Independent*, 4 September 2009.
24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp.12–13.

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