

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY  
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# Margaret Atwood

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MARGARET ATWOOD

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WRITERS AND THEIR WORK

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## Introduction

The 2007 Edinburgh International Book Festival was attended by Margaret Atwood, but her fellow Canadian, author Alice Munro, could not be present in person since she is reluctant to fly long-distance. So, Munro used Atwood's now famous invention, the LongPen, a device that utilises remote book-signing technology to provide signatures. Employing video-conferencing the author is able to converse with his or her fan and then to write a dedication on a small touch-pad computer screen. The computer at the book-signing venue then uses a remote electronic arm to trace the author's words onto the page of the book.<sup>1</sup> The technology is exciting and innovative, but what is particularly revealing is how Catherine Locherbie, the director of the festival, described its impact:

We are extremely proud to have created a programme of truly global reach this year and to have discovered entirely new ways of including the world's greatest writers.<sup>2</sup>

The words 'truly global reach' refer to the Festival's wide remit, but they also infer the technological 'reach' of LongPen's computerised arm, and, more especially, the global nature of Atwood's identity as an international twenty-first century author.

To appreciate how 'global' Margaret Atwood has become it is necessary only to glance at one of the many potted biographies that appear on the web pages of the Margaret Atwood Society, her publishers' Bloomsbury and Random House, her own official webpage, OWTOAD, and, indeed, at the front of this book.<sup>3</sup> Although she was born and has spent most of her life in Canada, Atwood has also lived and travelled in Europe (England, Scotland, Italy, France and Germany), in the United States of America (Boston, New York, Alabama and San Antonio, Texas) and Australia (Sydney). She has also visited numerous countries, including Iran, Afghanistan, India, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Ireland, Spain, New Zealand (*CP*, 4-5, 130, 237-8). Some of these journeys figure in Atwood's writing in relation to her work for Amnesty International and others in her capacity as President (1984 – 1986) of PEN International Canadian Centre (English Speaking). Both Amnesty and PEN have an international remit, the former

working for human rights for all, and the latter fighting for jailed and oppressed writers. In her article for *The New York Times* in 2001, 'When Afghanistan Was at Peace,' Atwood recalls how putting on the chador during her visit there in 1978 influenced the outfits worn by women in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; CP, 245-247). In parallel, in 1987 Atwood compiled *The CanLit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate – A Collection of Tasty Literary Fare* the proceeds of which were given to PEN. Atwood's work has been similarly lauded across a global spectrum; she has been awarded the and the UK Booker Award for *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the Italian Premio Modello for *Alias Grace* (1997), the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit (1996), the French Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1994), the Swedish Humour Association's International Humorous Writer Award (1995) and the Spanish Prince of Asturias Literary Prize (2008). Atwood's works have been translated and published in more than thirty-five languages, including: Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic, French, German, Italian, Urdu, Estonian, Roumanian, Serbo-Croatian, Catalan, Russian, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Portuguese, Greek, Polish, Spanish and Hebrew. Perhaps even more significantly, the themes of Atwood's books have become increasingly global, as she continues to engage with issues that are immediately and internationally relevant. The early focus on the militaristic and consumer-driven influence of the United States in *Surfacing* (1972) became a much more stringent critique in Atwood's two later dystopic novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). She responded to the 1960s agenda of the Women's Movement in *The Edible Woman* (1969), expanding the exploration of gender roles to include acute observances upon the way in which both men and women may be repressed, as in *Life Before Man* (1979) and *The Robber Bride* (1993). Atwood's close involvement with Amnesty International and PEN saw her expose the violence and inhumanity of totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes, as in *Bodily Harm* (1981) and, again, in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She is acutely aware of the benefits of, and threats to, multiculturalism, as in *Cat's Eye* (1988). Her acute awareness of ecological concerns and her fear for the survival of the planet and human beings occurs in her books for children and, most effectively, in *Oryx and Crake*. Power politics, feminism, international terrorism, multiculturalism and global warming are the central

thematic tenets of Atwood's fiction as well as being issues relevant across the twenty-first century world. Today, Atwood certainly has a 'truly global reach,' but such internationalism developed steadily from her original interest in Canadian nationhood and politics, in women's rather than gendered identity and in tracing the history of the wilderness rather than the globe.

The following chapters in this book are arranged chronologically in order to explore the ways in which Atwood's interests and the form of her writing has developed since the publication of *The Circle Game* in 1966 to the start of the twenty-first century with works such as *Moral Disorder* (2006) and *The Door* (2007). In each analysis Atwood's critical writing is set alongside her literary output, since the dominant themes of her writing are replicated in both. Chapter 2 takes the idea of survival from Atwood's critical work of the same name and interrogates the ways in which victim positions are represented and challenged in the poetry and fictional works from 1966 to 1978. At this early stage in Atwood's literary career, she focussed on Canadian identity; *Survival* (1972) is intended to demonstrate that Canada had a literary tradition and *Surfacing* explores the fraught relationship between her country and the United States as well as its emergence from a colonial past dominated by Britain. In terms of gender, Atwood's female characters, in particular Marian in *The Edible Woman* and Joan in *Lady Oracle*, are shown to challenge traditional patriarchal values. The dominance of history and place in Atwood's writing is, to a certain extent, confined to Canada, with the mythic wilderness in *Surfacing* and *The Journals of Susannah Moodie* (1970), and contemporary Toronto in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*. The major themes of Atwood's writing thus emerge in her early work – national identity, political tension, gender roles, historical and geographical locations – apparently categorised and confined by the dual characteristics of 'Canadian' and 'female.' The importance of these themes to Atwood's early agenda cannot be underestimated – she has always written with conviction – but even at this point certain disquieting features emerge in her writing that suggest a more complex interpretation was becoming necessary. Already the central characters of her prose works and the voices adopted in the poems work at a point of transition and destabilisation, and the explorations beyond the known necessitated by this fragmentation offer no clear answers.

The chronological remit of Chapter 3 runs from 1979 to 1987 and traces how the main thematic strands of Atwood's writing develop during this period. The most significant shift in Atwood's remit occurs in her engagement with political issues; this is the period in which she was active in Amnesty International and PEN with a resulting expansion into a worldwide frame through her concern about violence and injustice. Her novel *Bodily Harm* is set in the Caribbean and draws upon new knowledge about contemporary wars, atrocities and despotic regimes. Indeed, Canada's self-satisfied disregard for the realities of world issues is satirised, so that *Bodily Harm* incurs a revisionist reading of the earlier novels, especially *The Edible Woman* through the parallel between Rennie and Marian - the former's brutal experiences on the island of St Antoine serving as an ironic comment on the latter's self-consumption. The need to expose how the political inertia of the West cannot be separated from the atrocities committed in other parts of the world led Atwood to portray, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopic future in which the right-wing fundamentalist groups in the United States have gained supreme power. In parallel, Atwood began to develop more complex male characters, and even though Nate, in *Life Before Man*, has been criticised for being uninteresting, the choice to explore individual male subjectivity alongside female identity demonstrates a move away from the woman-centric narratives of the earlier work. Even *The Handmaid's Tale* in which the totalitarian state of Gilead has denied women freedom and independence, includes male characters able to signify a variety of roles, from the patriarchal, but bemused, Commander, to the chauffer, Nick, who may, or may not, provide the central female protagonist, Offred, with her ultimate liberation. This period of Atwood's writing also witnessed an expansion in her temporal and spatial settings. Atwood's interest in international politics demanded a wider geographical remit that found expression in both her prose and poetry, with the Caribbean setting of *Bodily Harm* and the war zones that act as a backdrop in *True Stories* (1981). The synchronicity of these immediate concerns is, however, counterbalanced by Atwood's sense of mythic continuity that constructs an epic vision into both past and future. The diachronic elements in Atwood's work from this period stretch back into prehistory (*Life Before Man*) and forward towards a dystopic future (*The Handmaid's Tale*). The intersections of these spatial and

temporal lines are firmly embedded in the texts' themes, alerting the reader to the relationship between contemporary politics and the threat to future existence. And it is perhaps this tension and the need to warn that denotes the most significant development in this period of Atwood's literary productivity, as she interrogates the role of the writer to see and to report what has been seen. The need for authorial perception across an international frame and the necessity for moral, social and political responsibility is dealt with explicitly in *Bodily Harm* and implicitly in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the act of writing, of recounting, of recording engage directly with political discourses.

Between 1988 and 1999 Atwood returned to the themes of her earlier writing in a dramatic revisionist reframing of gender, politics, time, space and the role of the author. Chapter 4 examines the novels, prose and poetry of this period, in particular, *Cat's Eye*, *Wilderness Tips* (1991), *The Robber Bride*, *Strange Things* (1995) and *Alias Grace* (1996), tracing that typical Atwood combination of introspection and a reworking of expected paradigms. Through one character alone, the archetypal 'bad girl' Zenia from *The Robber Bride*, Atwood could have overturned the gendered identities of her earlier writing, but in this phase of her writing such 'spotty-handed villainesses' (*CP*, 171) abound. These challenges to the ideals of feminist solidarity include, in addition to the faithless and seductive Zenia, Cordelia the schoolgirl bully and the self-righteous Mrs Smeath from *Cat's Eye*, and Grace Marks the supposed murderess from *Alias Grace*. In these representations Atwood draws upon archetypes from an array of mythological and literary tradition, including children's fairy stories, but she undercuts expectations by transforming wicked women into attractive, sympathetic and realistic characters. In parallel Canadian identity is interrogated and exposed as fragmented through the single story of the Franklin expedition (repeated in *Strange Things* and *Wilderness Tips*) in which the traditional interpretation of bravery in the face of the wilderness is shown to be the folly of human commercial enterprise, as we discover the men perished through lead poisoning from the cans that contained their food. Moreover, just as the accepted wilderness narratives are shown to be a fabricated realisation of space, so temporality is dislocated in *Alias Grace*, Atwood's excursion into the true crime genre.

The story of Grace Marks combines historical material with artistic constructs in order to produce a metafictional deconstruction of authentic accounts, unambiguous interpretation and reliable narrators. This final destabilisation had its origins in Atwood's early fiction, for example in the unstable narrator of *Surfacing*, but in this later period Atwood reworked the authorial voice through a incisive interrogation into the relationship between autobiography and fiction. The moral, political and social imperatives that drove author's voice in earlier works are replaced by uncertainties, dislocation and, yet, a conviction and belief in the power of literature itself.

In *Alias Grace* the combined thematic shifts act as a redemptive force, allowing the reader to forgive the titular protagonist, just as she absolves the reader through the fictionalised happy ending, the image of the Tree of Paradise quilt and her very name – Grace. Chapter 5 pursues the idea of redemption in Atwood's most recent period of creativity, 2000-2007, through novels (*The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake*), other works of fiction (*The Penelopiad* (2005) and *Moral Disorder* (2007)) and in her most recent poetry (*The Door* (2007)). In this phase of her writing, the narrator/author not only has a duty to speak, but is compelled to do so, and the stories/texts they produce are transformed from being unreliable and fragmented into being dangerous, as the role of the listener/reader is questioned and exposed. Irrespective of gender or sex, narrators adopt duplicitous and destructive positions in the narratives: the sisters, Laura and Iris in *Blind Assassin* combine to collapse ethical dichotomies, while the moral inadequacy of Jimmy and the crazed omnipotence of Crake in *Oryx and Crake* together both destroy and create life, civilisation and art. Their narratives are, like those of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* and Nell in *Moral Disorder*, trapped by a compulsion to relate events, to uncover the very duplicity/artifice that they themselves have constructed and to prophesy an unstable future. In many ways, therefore, this most recent period of Atwood's writing returns to the concerns of her early writing: the focus on women's roles as in Penelope's revisionist account of the Odysseus story; the rehearsal of politicised warnings in *Oryx and Crake*; the juxtaposition of space and time from the Canadian past of *Moral Disorder* to future global destruction in *Oryx and Crake*; and finally the continued and developing interrogation of the nature and purpose of the authorial voice. Yet, there is one distinct element in these works, the



persistent recurrence of death, negation and silence. Atwood has never shied away from death as a topic or theme, from the search for the dead father in *Surfacing*, through the political executions in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to the murder of Grace's employers in *Alias Grace*, an awareness of mortality is more foregrounded, more omnipresent, more personal than in any of the earlier periods of creativity. Both *The Blind Assassin* and *The Penelopiad* begin with the death of a central character, in the latter case of the narrator herself; *Oryx and Crake* traces the mass murder of the human race; while old age and death are the focus of *Moral Disorder* and *The Door*. Indeed, 'the door' represents the final transition from life to death. This book concludes, therefore, with a treatment of Atwood's late style, of a maturity that allows for in Edward Said's words, the ability to 'render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them.'<sup>4</sup>

Before consigning Atwood to the disintegration and silencing she evokes in her own most recent works, however, we have to acknowledge that she remains as prolific as ever, and that those other exponents of late style identified by Said, such as Shakespeare, wrote some of their finest work towards the end of their artistic careers. The conclusion of this book looks forward to further literary activities. Indeed, Atwood's experimentation continues, as is evidenced by the development of LongPen, which represents a confluence between Atwood's artistic creativity and scientific interests of her family, and her transformation of the prose work *The Penelopiad* into dramatic form for production at Stratford Upon Avon in July 2007. The ability of the author to move between creative genres is an enduring characteristic of her career: she wrote television scripts such as the life of Grace Marks (*The Servant Girl*, 1974) and an account of the Barnardo children's travels from the United Kingdom to Canada (*Road to Heaven*, 1987); she was interviewed in films and television programmes for an account of her own writing/life (from *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, 1984, to *Turning Pages: The Life and Literature of Margaret Atwood*, 2007), as well as for her comments on other writers and social issues, such as her praise of Carol Shields in *Life and Times: Carol Shields* (2001) and her comments on the abuse of women in *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (1981). Atwood's works have often been made into films, from the early, but unsuccessful attempt, *Surfacing* (1981), through the film and opera of *The Handmaid's Tale*

(1990 and 2003, respectively), to contemporary versions of *The Robber Bride* (2007) and *The Blind Assassin* (forthcoming). Although film must be recognised as an essential element in the twenty-first century process of globalisation, the productions of Atwood's works have not been pivotal in assuring her worldwide reputation; they have been, on the whole, faithful to the texts but lacking in the vibrant experimentation that Atwood herself excels at. The imaginative power of the dramatised version of *The Penelopiad*, with which Atwood was closely involved, suggests that if *Oryx and Crake*, say, should be filmed, its generic transformation would be aided by allowing the author freedom to experiment.

Critical writing on Atwood has followed the same trajectory as her artistic output, initially focussing on Canadian identity and the role of women, but gradually expanding to, and acknowledging, the widening remit of her work, in particular, the development of an international reputation. This book cannot do full justice to the considerable and growing output of scholarly material on Margaret Atwood, so that the purpose here is to suggest key works in the history of Atwood criticism and to suggest works that will help expand further study.<sup>5</sup> The earliest and, therefore, one of the most important works to focus exclusively upon Atwood was *The Malahat Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium* (1977), which was edited by Linda Sandler. The work is renowned for recognising and locating the key themes and elements in Atwood's writing, such as the role of women, Canadian identity, satire and the fluidity of genre; its remit served to guide Atwood studies into the twenty-first century and it both heralded and established Atwood as one of the most important writers of the age. Other early works often tended to concentrate upon Atwood's investment in Canadian and North American identity, such as Arnold and Cathy Davidson's *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism* (1981) and Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro's edited collection, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms* (1988). The shift to a postcolonial perspective may be seen in Colin Nicholson's *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays* (1987), while a comprehensive account of primarily North American Atwood criticism may be found in Judith McCombs' *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* (1988). Development in Atwood scholarship continued with works focussing on specific genres,

developing themes and using different forms of critical theory to investigate her work; analyses of these include: consideration of the sometimes neglected poetry and short fiction in Lorraine York's *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels* (1995), the thematic focus on disjunction and fragmentation in Sharon Rose Wilson's *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction* (2003), and Eleonora Rao's theoretical approach in *Strategies for Identity. The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* (1993). By 2000 the international impact of Atwood's writing had been fully recognised and, on the preparation of *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* by Reingard Nischik, 'on the occasion of Margaret Atwood's sixtieth birthday...to take stock of the full breadth of her works and international impact.'<sup>6</sup> It includes essays that cover biographical debates, genre, images and theoretical approaches. In particular, it includes as a final section, discussions of creativity, transmission and reception, with contributions that range from, an interview during Atwood's 1994 visit to Germany, through descriptions of Atwood's work with publishing houses across the globe, to a brief note from her German translator. This last work affirms that Atwood's reputation had become fully established on an international level. The companions, guides and biographies that were published alongside the more directed critical debates have been unusually perceptive and informative; in particular Coral Ann Howells's two works, *Margaret Atwood* (1996) and her edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (1996; 2006), as well as Nathalie Cook's *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (2004) provide analyses that are sufficiently wide in scope for new students of Atwood, while at the same time offering intriguing new perspectives for those more familiar with the writer's work. Finally, even though Atwood rejects biographical readings of her work, Rosemary Sullivan's *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (1998) is informative, enjoyable and includes some interesting photographs.

One of the images included in *The Red Shoes* is Margaret Atwood's entry in her high school yearbook where it states that her ambition is 'to write THE Canadian novel,' a desire that I would like to set against Catherine Locherbie's quotation about 'truly global reach...[and] the world's greatest writers.' Margaret Atwood achieved her desire to write 'THE Canadian novel,'

indeed she has written a number of novels, poems, criticisms and shorter fiction that engage with and interrogate Canadian identity. But today she is recognised as a writer who has moved far beyond national boundaries, earning international acclaim for her skill, imagination, humour, intelligence, breadth of vision, linguistic dexterity, and ethical integrity – a list of accomplishments too long for a yearbook, but easily within the scope of a LongPen.

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