

The Lang-Lit Lab

Teaching Ideas 3

Narration in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – Part 1

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, aspects of Offred's narration repeatedly destabilise and undermine any sense of certainty that what she is describing is what actually happened within the storyworld. Some readers may feel that these aspects of her narration create the impression that Offred is an unreliable narrator. Others might see them as reflective of the difficulties involved in attempting to reconstruct and convey a traumatic experience, and feel that they therefore add to the novel's realism.

This is the first of two posts which explore some of these destabilising aspects of Offred's narration through teaching activities using concepts from narrative studies. These concepts help to explain some of these features of her storytelling. They also shed light on how these features contribute to a sense of relative reliability or unreliability, and also on how these features contribute to the characterisation of Offred, Moira and Luke. This first post looks at the two occasionally overlapping aspects of paradoxical, 'multilinear narration' and 'hypothetical narration'.

Narrative paradoxes

Offred presents a series of paradoxes at several junctures in the novel. For example, at one point, when talking about the Commander within chapter 15, she gives a quick succession of opinions about what it must be like 'to be a man, like that'. In sequence, these sentences assert that it 'must be hell', it 'must be just fine', and it 'must be very silent'. The first two of these sentences seem wholly paradoxical, and the third seems to contradict the second.

At another point, in chapter 18, she presents, one after the other, three different versions of where Luke might be and what might have happened to him. These three paradoxical stories are mutually exclusive (that is, no two versions can both be true). Offred overtly asserts that she believes each of the versions to be true at once, explaining that believing in contradictions is now the only way she can believe anything.

The presentation of contradictory narrative paths is a form of 'multilinear narrative' or multilinear narration. The closing line of Offred's narration is also arguably an example of multilinear narration. This kind of narration can have the effect of challenging conventions of and conventional expectations about storytelling and linearity, and is just one example of the ways in which Offred's narrative style is arguably radical.

Activities for students:

1. Look at Offred's seemingly paradoxical statements about what it must be like 'to be a man, like that' at the end of chapter 15.

a) Do you think these statements reflect Offred's ongoing thought process during which she is changing her opinion (i.e. first she believes X to be true, but then she changes her mind and believes Y to be true), or do you think Offred believes each of these statements to be true simultaneously (i.e. she believes both X and Y to be true)?

b) What Offred means by 'to be a man, like that' is not quite clear – she could mean to be a man in Gilead, or to be a man like the Commander, specifically. If we consider the former implication, in what ways do you think it 'must be hell' to be a man in Gilead, in what ways do you think it 'must be just fine', and in what ways do you think it 'must be very silent'?

2. Which of the following statements do you agree with, and why?

a) Offred's simultaneous belief in three paradoxical versions of what has happened to Luke is a sign to the reader that she is going mad.

b) Offred's simultaneous belief in three paradoxical versions of what has happened to Luke is evidence that she has learned that she has to believe things that she knows are not true in order to survive.

c) Offred's simultaneous belief in three paradoxical versions of what has happened to Luke suggests that other parts of her narration may be shaped by her need to believe certain things which may not be true, and therefore her narration may be unreliable.

3. Read the explanation of 'doublethink' in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eight-Four*, part 1, chapter 3. This is available online via Project Gutenberg at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100021.txt>. You can use 'control + f' to search the document, enter the term 'doublethink', go the fifth use of the term (out of 31) and read this paragraph (beginning 'Winston sank his arms to his sides').

Read the interview 'Orwell and Me', published in The Guardian online, in which Atwood talks about how Orwell has influenced her writing, and in which she refers to doublethink:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/16/georgeorwell.artsfeatures>

How is Offred's paradoxical thinking similar to Orwell's concept of doublethink, and how is it different?

4. Do some research into feminist narratology and *l'écriture féminine*, and, in particular, rejections of linearity and certainty/closure as conventionally masculine ways of understanding and representing reality. Bearing this in mind, consider the following questions:

a) Is Offred's paradoxical thinking and multilinear narration a feminist narrative strategy, and/or is it a reflection of and response to oppression and indoctrination?

b) Given that the oppression and indoctrination within this dystopian world is explicitly patriarchal, are the two possibilities essentially connected?

Narrative hypotheses

The paradoxical versions of what happens to Luke are presented explicitly as hypotheses. This is 'hypothetical narration'. Hypothetical narration involves presenting segments of narrative as, to a greater or lesser extent, not actually or not conclusively 'real' within the world of the story.

Three other significant instances of hypothetical narration involve Moira. Two of these instances are complicated by the implication that they are partly factual within the world of the story, but readers cannot tell to what degree they are factual and to what degree they are hypotheses. Offred's narration of Moira's escape from the Centre (in chapter 22) and of Moira's path to the place nicknamed Jezebel's (in chapter 38) are both presented as acts of 'telling' a 'story', and as acts which require Offred's own embellishment through hypothesis: Offred is explicit about her need to 'fill in' parts of the story of Moira's escape, and is similarly open about how she fleshes out Moira's 'outlines' of her journey to Jezebel's.

The third instance is at the very end of chapter 38, at which point Offred also offers hypotheses about what ultimately happened to Moira. These final hypotheses are presented as stories Offred would like to tell, and which are, like the versions of what happened to Luke, entirely imagined by Offred.

Activities for students:

1. Look at the short instance of hypothetical narration at the end of chapter 19, involving Serena Joy, the Wives, and Janine. What does this instance of hypothetical narration tell us about Offred's attitude to the Wives and to Janine?
2. Consider the way in which Offred frames her hypothetical narration about Luke in chapter 18 and Moira's escape in chapter 22. What does she suggest are her motives for telling these stories in the way that she does?
3. At least two further alternative versions of what might have happened to Luke are plausible based on the story so far: that he survived but didn't cross the border, and is instead part of the underground resistance within Gilead that Ofglen refers to, and alternatively that he survived but only by agreeing to become part of Gilead's oppressive regime.

a) Why do you think Offred does not include these versions within her hypotheses?

b) Write a paragraph telling the story of either of these further alternative versions of what happened to Luke, in the style of Offred's narration, and then write a short account of why you made the creative and style choices that you made.

4. How much of your impressions of the characters Luke and Moira are based on narration about them which is presented as wholly or partly hypothetical, and how much is based on narration about them which is not framed as hypothetical? Does this matter?

5. In clarifying that she has fleshed out Moira's story in chapter 38, Offred explains that this is because she is narrating this from memory, partly because she had no means to record it at the time. The same is true of Offred's flashbacks to the era before Gilead, but these flashbacks are not presented as embellished. Bearing this in mind, consider the following questions:

a) Sometimes the act of destabilising some parts of the narrative, such as through explicit hypothetical narration, can help to make the other parts seem more certain or 'real' within the storyworld by comparison. Do you think Atwood creates this effect with these instances of hypothetical narration?

b) Some readers might feel that Offred's inclusion of hypotheses and embellishments proves that her narration is unreliable. Others might feel that because Offred is very explicit about when she does this, this in fact proves that she is a very honest and reliable narrator. Which do you believe, and why?

Further resources:

The online resource the *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology* includes entries on 'endings', 'feminist narration' and 'multilinear narrative' at <https://projects.au.dk/en/narrativeresearchlab/unnaturalnarratology/dictionaryofunnaturalnarratology/>

The online resource *The Living Handbook of Narratology* includes entries on 'gender and narrative' and 'unreliability' at <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/contents.html>

Activity 3b in the section on hypothetical narration is an act of 'textual intervention'. For more on this, see Rob Pope, *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996).