

# The Lang-Lit Lab

## Teaching Ideas 4

### Narration in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – Part 2

This is Part 2 of a pair of posts on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both posts explore how aspects of Offred's narration destabilise and undermine any sense of certainty that what she is describing is what actually happened within the world of the story. The two posts use teaching activities drawing on concepts from narrative studies to investigate these aspects of her storytelling. The activities shed light on how these aspects contribute to characterisation and to a sense of Offred's relative reliability or unreliability as a narrator. The first post (Part 1) looked at the two occasionally overlapping aspects of paradoxical, multilinear narration and hypothetical narration. This second post looks at the two related aspects of metanarrative commentary and narrative revision, otherwise known as 'metanarration' and 'denarration'.

#### **Metanarrative commentary**

Offred frequently comments on her act of 'telling' a 'story'. These kinds of comments are forms of 'metanarration'. Metanarration is, most simply, narration about narration. It is commentary within the narration about the act or process of narration itself. Metanarration sometimes has the effect of disrupting the reader's immersion in the story, drawing attention to the act of narration instead. In doing so, metanarration can sometimes strengthen, and sometimes weaken, the impression that the narrator is reliable in the way they tell the story.

Metanarration occurs within Offred's introduction to the story of Moira's escape from the Centre, in chapter 22. Offred starts by saying that that she is 'too tired to go on with this story', and announces 'a different story, a better one'. Metanarration is also involved in Offred's framing of Moira's journey to Jezebel's, in chapter 38. Part 1 of this pair of posts discusses Offred's variably implicit or explicit suggestions that her presentation of these events is embellished and therefore partly hypothetical. As these suggestions of embellishment are comments on the act of telling the story, these also constitute metanarrative commentary.

Metanarration is a significant aspect of Offred's description of her first evening with the Commander, in chapter 23. She begins and ends the chapter with assertions that what she narrates is a 'reconstruction'. At the beginning of the chapter she also refers to 'this all' being a reconstruction, and notes that, should she ever be able to record this story somehow, that will be a further act of reconstruction 'at yet another remove'.

Similarly, metanarration is involved in Offred's description of how her relationship with Nick began, in chapter 40. She introduces it as a 'story' which 'includes the truth' and in which she tries to 'leave nothing out'.

### **Activities for students:**

1. One of the earliest examples of Offred's metanarration is in chapter 7, where she says that she would like to, and even needs to, believe that what she narrates is a story she is telling. She then goes on to give contrary assertions that this is a story she is telling, and also that it is not a story she is telling. (Note, this is therefore both an example of metanarration and an example of paradoxical narration which was discussed in Part 1 of this pair of posts.)

a) How do you make sense of these seemingly contrary assertions? What could they mean?

b) How does this section make you feel about Offred's narration? For example, do you think she is presenting her narrative as fictional, factual, or something in between? Do you trust her narration more, or less, because of this moment of reflection on her storytelling? Do your classmates feel the same way as you?

c) What does she say are her motives for thinking of this as a story?

2. Look at the third paragraph of chapter 23 and consider the long second sentence in which Offred seems to expand on what she means by reconstruction.

a) What do you infer from what she is saying here? It is a complicated and at points ambiguous sentence. Try to paraphrase the different parts of what she is saying.

b) How far does what she is saying here fit with and reflect the ways in which her retelling is a 'reconstruction'? For example, do you think she 'reconstructs' in some ways which are not reflected in this sentence?

3. Given that, as Offred asserts at the beginning of chapter 23, all that she narrates is a reconstruction, why do you think that her first evening with the Commander is the part of her story that she most explicitly frames as a reconstruction? What does this suggest about her feelings about that evening, and about what she needs from, and is capable or incapable of in, her act of telling that story?

4. Compare Offred's metanarrative introductions and endings to the stories about Moira (in chapter 22 and 38), the first evening with the Commander (in chapter 23), and the beginning of her relationship with Nick (in chapter 40).

a) How do they differ?

b) What do these differences suggest about Offred's feelings about telling these stories? Consider her for whom and to whom she is seems to be telling these stories.

5. Why do you think Offred includes so much metanarration? Why do she give so much attention to her act of storytelling?

### **Narrative revisions**

On several occasions Offred explicitly 'revises' something she has just narrated. One example of this occurs towards the end of chapter 23, during Offred's narration of her first evening with the Commander. Offred describes what went through her mind when the Commander said that he wanted her to kiss him. She then interrupts her narrative of that evening to state that she did not think about what she had just described, and that she 'put it in afterwards'. She then reminds us that this is a 'reconstruction'. So, Offred's narration of the first evening alone with the Commander involves not only explicit metanarration but narrative revision too.

Likewise, narrative revision occurs alongside metanarration in Offred's portrayal of the beginning of her relationship with Nick, in chapter 40. Offred describes how they began their sexual relationship, and then interrupts her narration to say 'I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here's what happened'. She then presents a different version, only to end the chapter saying that it didn't happen that way either.

These are instances of 'denarration'. Denarration is the narrative act of denying the reality of something that has previously been presented as real within the world of the story. Because denarration is fundamentally a comment on - and foregrounding of - the act of narration, it can be considered a subtype of metanarration.

Denarration is relatively rare as a narrative strategy and so can be quite startling when it is encountered. It can feel quite confusing, partly because it alerts the reader to the fact that they cannot trust the narrator to abide by the conventions of storytelling. This can have consequences for how the reader approaches and interprets the rest of the narrative.

### **Activities for students:**

1. Have you ever encountered denarration in any films, TV programmes, plays, or other novels? The film *Wayne's World* (directed by Penelope Spheeris) and the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (by John Fowles) are just two examples of film or text which presents an ending and then effectively rewinds and presents a different ending. There are more examples which you might have encountered and/or could find through some research.

2. Consider Offred's small narrative revision towards the end of chapter 23, discussed above.

a) How does this narrative revision make you feel about the rest of chapter 23? Do you feel that this was likely to be Offred's only moment of deliberate invention,

which she has admitted, or do you feel that much of the rest of the 'reconstruction' may be far from the 'truth' of what happened, too?

b) Look at the paragraph in which she describes what she had thought before, which she then admits was not her thinking at the time. Why do you think Offred inserted that particular line of thinking into that moment in the story, afterwards? What might be her motives?

2. Compare the two denarrated versions of how Nick and Offred's relationship began.

a) How does the characterisation of Nick and Offred, and the portrayal of their relationship, differ in the two versions? Make a list of the differences.

b) Why do you think Offred has presented these two versions, in particular, as stories of how their relationship began? What might be their appeal to her?

c) How does the denarration of both versions make you feel? Cheated? Confused? Misled? Do you trust Offred as a narrator more, or less, or the same as you did before reading this chapter? Do your classmates feel the same way?

3. Offred's narration of the beginning of her relationship with Nick in chapter 40 is undermined through her explicit denarration. Her narration of the first evening with the Commander in chapter 23 is undermined through her explicit metanarrative foregrounding of the act of reconstruction with denarration. Her narration of Moira's escape from the Centre in chapter 22 and Moira's journey to Jezebel's in chapter 38 is undermined by her presentation of these as hypotheses, in varying degrees (also known as hypothetical narration and discussed in Part 1 of this pair of posts).

Considering these acts of denarration, metanarrative foregrounding of narrative reconstruction, and hypothetical narration...

a) Which act has the most significant impact on your impressions of Offred as a reliable or unreliable narrator? Rank them in order of most to least impactful, and then compare your ranking with a classmate's.

b) Does each individual act lead you to feel she is more reliable as a narrator, or less reliable, or neither?

#### **Further resources:**

The online resource the *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology* includes an entry on 'denarration' at <https://projects.au.dk/en/narrativeresearchlab/unnaturalnarratology/dictionaryofunnaturalnarratology/#DENARRATION>

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