

Questioning the Postmodern Narrator in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and Iain Banks's 'The Wasp Factory'

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HPEN7014 – Shifting Times and Worlds: Modernism and After

Questioning the Postmodern Narrator in Margaret Attwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*

Postmodernism is a body of thought to which no clear definition can be aligned. The term was introduced in 1979 by Jean-François Lyotard who in simple terms, described it as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.¹ More broadly, the term is used to encompass the artistic, philosophical, architectural, cultural and literary movement that developed and evolved in the mid- to late 20th century.

Gregson argues that the 'dominant attitude in postmodernism is disbelief',² and that the term means 'entirely different things to different disciplines'.³ He adds that the 'key background of literary postmodernism is poststructuralism',⁴ underpinned by the thinking of 'Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault amongst others'⁵ which in turn 'constitutes the crucial premise of deconstruction'.⁶

Postmodernism can therefore be perceived as a reaction against the thinking of The Enlightenment, the preceding Modernist movement and World War II, along with a response to other important societal changes. Gregson notes:

There were historical and social changes which caused radical shifts in cultural perceptions and therefore caused the break away from modernism: the end of empire; the rise of the women's movement, black power and gay pride; the hugely increasing importance of popular culture; the enormous expansion of secondary and further education.⁷

¹ Along with developing the term 'Postmodernism', Lyotard also introduced the concept of 'grand' or 'meta' narrative, which include examples such as progress, The Enlightenment and Marxism. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Excerpts From The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge', in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. by Joseph P. Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 70-90, p. 72.

² Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature* (London: Arnold, 2004), p. 1.

³ Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

⁵ Ibid. p. 3.

⁶ Ibid. p. 3.

⁷ Ibid. p. 1.

Hutcheon describes Postmodernism as a 'contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concept it challenges'.⁸ Malpas adds further context to this argument, in stating that finding:

A simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term 'postmodern' is all but impossible...this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets to challenge.⁹

He notes that whilst the term 'postmodern' can be 'traced back to the 1950s and 1960s'¹⁰ ...it was in the late 1970s, the 1980s and the early 1990s that the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' became pervasive'.¹¹

Whilst Postmodernism is associated with subjectivity and scepticism, the features of literary Postmodernism can be more clearly defined. In 1987, Ihab Hassan identified Postmodern characteristics and their direct relation and/or opposition to Modernism.¹² These include elements such as play, chance, anti-narrative and schizophrenia and the techniques of irony, anti-form and the scriptable (writerly)¹³ approach. Hassan identifies the individual relationships with Modernism, which include the Postmodernist themes of

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics Of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 3.

⁹ Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (Routledge, 2004), p. 18.

¹⁰ Malpas, *The Postmodern*, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

¹² Hassan defines this list of Postmodern characteristics as follows: 'Pataphysics/Dadaism, Antiform (disjunctive, open), Play, Chance, Anarchy, Exhaustion/Silence Process/Performance/Happening, Participation, Deconstruction/Deconstruction, Antithesis, Absence, Dispersal, Text/Intertext, Rhetoric, Syntagm, Parataxis, Metonymy, Combination, Rhizome/Surface, Against Interpretation/Misreading, Signifier, Scriptible (Writerly), Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire, Idiolect, Desire, Mutant, Polymorphous/Androgynous, Schizophrenia, Difference-Difference/Trace The Holy Ghost, Irony, Indeterminacy, Immanence.' The essay also includes how these relate directly to Modernism. The table within the book shows the direct correlation to Modernism. Ihab Hassan, 'Toward A Concept Of Postmodernism', in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays In Postmodern Theory And Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987).

¹³ Readerly and writerly (lisible and scriptable) - French literary theorist Roland Barthes proposed these terms in *S/Z* (1970), translated as *S/Z* (1974) to distinguish between literary works that because of their specific formal qualities either constrain the reader to adhere closely to the text with little or no room for interpretive manoeuvre (readerly), or, demand that the reader work hard to make sense of the text and effectively contribute to its very writing (writerly). Ian Buchanan, *The Oxford Dictionary Of Critical Theory*, 2nd edition online (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018). Listing under 'Readerly'. Ian Buchanan, *The Oxford Dictionary Of Critical Theory*, 2nd edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: OUP Oxford, 2018).

text/ intertext, rhetoric and metonymy as opposed to the corresponding Modernist themes of genre/ boundary, semantics and metaphor.

between the movements(?)

Similarities can be identified, such as the use of metafiction and unreliable narration, but conversely, shifts away from Modernist techniques are also recognised, in for example the use of collective voices, irony, parody and pastiche. Hutcheon explains that this relationship is 'typically contradictory...it marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither'.¹⁴

Woods refers to a set of key characteristics of Postmodern fiction which can be summarised as: a preoccupation with systems of representation; the decentering of the subject and multiple fictive selves; narrative fragmentation and reflexivity; open ended play with formal devices and artifice; interrogation of ontological bases and relationship between narrative and subjectivity; embracing both high and popular culture; exploring narrative in relation to history and the displacement of the real by simulacra.¹⁵

Postmodernism's preoccupation with fragmentation, distortion and multiple 'truths' relating to meaning, encourages the reader to come up with varied interpretations both in relation to specific texts and the literary form itself. Nichols poses a number of questions in relation to Postmodern fiction, to which there can be no definitive answer:

To read post-modern fiction is to be invited to ask: what *is* fiction? What does reading it involve? Why do we read? Why for that matter do novelist write? Why do they create innovative, experimental forms rather than just sticking to traditional ones?¹⁶

Peter J. Rabinowitz's presents a model that shifts the focus to the reader, stating that there is an actual audience 'over which the author has no guaranteed control'¹⁷ and an implied 'authorial audience' in which the author makes 'assumptions about his readers' beliefs, knowledge and familiarity with conventions'.¹⁸ Rabinowitz suggests that most

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics Of Postmodernism*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 65–66.

¹⁶ Bran Nicol, Preface: Reading Postmodern Fiction in *The Cambridge Introduction To Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. Xiv.

¹⁷ Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination Of Audiences', *Critical Inquiry*, 4.1 (1977), 121–41 (p. 126).

¹⁸ Rabinowitz, *Truth in Fiction*, p. 126.

authors are concerned simply with being read and therefore attempt to 'minimise the distance between the actual and authorial audiences'.¹⁹ The author engages the narrator as a literary device to facilitate this process; which is worthy of exploration in more detail within the context of the Postmodern literary form; within which the first-person narrator is commonly used to deliver narratives, plot, meaning and thematic ideas. This essay will explore the role of the narrator within Postmodern fiction, specifically looking at Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Iain Bank's *The Wasp Factory*.

The role of the narrator within Postmodern fiction is pivotal and can be assessed by the reader to determine fallibility, reliability and trustworthiness. Whilst this theme can also be considered characteristic of literary Modernism, (for example, the omniscient narrative style of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, conveying the perspectives of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe);²⁰ the Postmodern narrator can be found to apply layers of irony and schizophrenia, along with establishing multiple voices. (This will be explored further, in closer reading of the named texts). Wayne C. Booth coined the term the 'unreliable narrator' in 1961 calling the 'narrator reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not'.²¹ Booth argues that 'one of the most obvious artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart'.²² He adds that irony is used as a narrational device, with a dependence on the reader to be able to interpret ironic meaning.²³ Riggan discusses the 'phenomenon of unreliability' with regards to the first-person form of narration, subsequently categorising 'four distinct types of unreliable first-person, protagonist-narrators --- the *pícaro*, the clown, the madman, and the naïf'.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 126.

²⁰ An omniscient narrator is used in Virginia Woolf's 'To The Lighthouse' using the 'stream of consciousness' technique to explore the thoughts and feelings, primarily of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. The reliability of the narrator can be questioned by the reader due to the individual perspectives applied. Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, Wordsworth Classics, 2002.

²¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric Of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 158–59

²² Booth, *The Rhetoric Of Fiction*, p. 3.

²³ Ibid, p. 304.

²⁴ William Riggan, *Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs And Clowns: The Unreliable First Person Narrator* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 16.

The picaresque is prone to exaggeration and bragging, whilst the clown fails to take their role as narrator seriously; game-playing with the truth, the expectations of the reader and traditional conventions. The madman/ woman uses mental defence mechanisms and/or suffers from severe mental illness, displaying associated behaviours. The naïf, as the description suggests, demonstrates naivety and limited perception, which could be due to immaturity or the restrictions of the environment within which they are positioned.

Signs of unreliable narration can be intertextual, involving the narrator or narrators contradicting themselves, lying, exaggerating and having gaps in memory. Extratextual signs can include opposing the reader's knowledge, portraying the impossible as truth and challenging the reader's literary competence. Nünning states that:

Such signs as textual inconsistencies, the verbal habits of the narrator, and the discrepancies between the fictional world presented by a text and the reader's world-knowledge and standards of normality provide the basis for establishing a narrator's reliability.²⁵

Olsen challenges both Booth and Nünning, differentiating between fallible and untrustworthy narrators: 'fallible narrators do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgements or perceptions or are biased'.²⁶ This is a significant point, as whilst both types of narrator can be described as 'unreliable' there are particular factors which separate them and they 'differ as to whether and to what degree they are fallible or untrustworthy'.²⁷ Olsen asks 'Why do we fail to trust some narrators, and why do the tales other narrators tell strike us as incomplete?',²⁸ a question which will underpin the review of the texts detailed in this essay.

²⁵ Ansgar Nünning, "But Why Will You Say That I Am Mad?" On The Theory, History, And Signals Of Unreliable Narration In British Fiction', *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 22.1 (1997), 83–105 (p. 84).

²⁶ Greta Olson, 'Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible And Untrustworthy Narrators', *Narrative*, 11.1 (2003), 93–109 (p. 101).

²⁷ Olson, *Reconsidering*, p. 104.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 93.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been described as a 'cultural phenomenon',²⁹ and an example of 'speculative fiction',³⁰ spanning a number of literary styles. Whilst commonly identified as a 'feminist work', Thorpe argues that Atwood is 'not exclusively interested in gender' and that 'her work has also been critiqued in the light of environmentalism, Canadian nationalism and Postmodernism'.³¹

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the tyrannical,^d Dystopian world of The Republic of Gilead (the former USA) in the 1980s; during the enforcement of a strict, totalitarian regime, based on extreme patriarchal and fundamentalist Christian doctrines, enforced by a hierarchy of 'Commanders'. Boundaries between reality, fiction and history are blurred, through the oppressive characterisation of Gilead and the narrative function of distortion, through flashbacks to 'normality':

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counter-attacks; but this is the centre where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore and the University is closed.

The Handmaid's Tale challenges metanarratives of patriarchy and Christianity. Thorpe argues that Atwood issues strong cautions about patriarchal dominance and 'heavy-handed theocracy',³² the reader's word-knowledge is also questioned, through the literary tool of first-person narrative; as the narrator can be seen to passively but pragmatically, protest and rebel against the incarceration of women and enforcement of oppressive rules and laws. Whilst the world can be deemed one of Dystopian fiction, alarmingly it is based on representations of historical events and is convincing enough to evoke reader identification. Atwood explains in her 2017 introduction to the novel, the basis on which the text is founded:

²⁹ Rachel Thorpe, 'Margaret Atwood's Ambiguous Worlds', *Cambridge Papers Towards A Biblical Mind*, 22.1 (2012), 4 (p. 1).

³⁰ A term used to describe a genre of fiction that is set outside what is considered to be the 'real' world. 'Speculative Fiction', *Oxford Reference*, p. 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100522440>>.

³¹ Thorpe, *Margaret Atwood's*, p.1

³² Ibid. p. 1.

If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real. One of my rules was that I would not put any events in the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available'. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities.³³

The narrator within the Gileadean and 'former time' sections of *The Handmaids' Tale* can essentially be perceived as trustworthy, but also ³³fallible as opposed to unreliable. Atwood's narrator is initially nameless (due to female names being outlawed), but later labelled Offred (of Fred) in line with the Gileadean patriarchal naming system relating to the Commander, to whom the woman is aligned. In this new society women are stripped of their rights and re-established as either a Commander's Wife, Aunt, Martha, Econowife, Handmaid, Jezebel or Unwoman. In an environment where fertility and reproduction has been compromised due to chemical warfare, the Handmaid's specific job is to reproduce and provide a child for a stream of Commanders and their wives. Through Offred, Atwood provides the reader with a non-linear, non-chronological, narrative detailing fragmented experiences; schizophrenically consisting of two parts, pre (the former time) and during, the new regime. The third section of the book the 'Historical Notes' – refers to a time 200 years later, which takes the form of a 'Gileadean History' seminar.

It is through the 'Historical Notes' section that the reader is informed that Offred's narrative has been transcribed from a number of recordings from 'approximately thirty tape cassettes, of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties'³⁴ and is therefore oral in nature. Whilst the reader is not made aware of this initially, it is an important feature in understanding and assessing the credibility of Offred's narrative, suggesting it can be read from a 'storytelling' perspective, reflective of everyday speech. This is further exemplified when Offred questions herself and the validity of her own narrative within the body of the text: 'it is impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact'.³⁵ Offred therefore begins to be

³³ Margaret Atwood, Introduction in *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Classics, 2017), p. x.

³⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 313.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 144.

observed as self-reflective, amiable and trustworthy; if somewhat fallible due to gaps in her memory and unintentional omissions. Stillman and Johnson argue that 'as she tells the tapes about her life, she presents herself appealingly'.³⁶ In contrast, there are instances where Offred is quick to judge and dismissive; in response to the rape of Janine she states she 'told the same story last week, she seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true'.³⁷ Offred describes the character Serena Joy as a 'malicious and vengeful woman, [she] knew that'.³⁸ Later, in the 'Historical Notes' section it is suggested by the proceeding narrator, that Serena Joy did not exist and 'appears to be a malicious invention'.³⁹

There are self-reported gaps in Offred's memory, leading to ambiguity. Attwood uses repetition to highlight the significance of memory and potentially, to question reliability. Offred uses phrases such as: 'I can't remember the name'⁴⁰ and 'I can't remember',⁴¹ 'then I remembered something I'd seen and hadn't noticed, at the time',⁴² 'It's my fault, I'm forgetting too much'.⁴³ Wagner-lawler argues that 'Offred's narrative is famously indeterminate, its very structure is characterised by ironic provisionality, the refusal to commit to any one version'.⁴⁴

Attwood deploys verbal irony through the voice of Offred, who responds to questions posed in a manner opposing her true feelings, as a mechanism for protection against repercussions from the Gileadean rule. Thorpe argues that 'Atwood is ironic and self-aware, playing with ideas through a humorous and detached authorial voice'.⁴⁵ Examples are identified within the text as responses to questions relating to the weather

³⁶ Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson, 'Identity, Complicity, And Resistance In The Handmaid's Tale', *Utopian Studies*, 5.2 (1994), 70–86 (p. 72).

³⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 81.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 170.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 321.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 173.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 173–75.

⁴² Ibid. p. 189.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 203.

⁴⁴ Jennifer A. Wagner-lawlor, 'From Irony To Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45.1 (2003), 83–96 (p. 86) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111610309595328>>.

⁴⁵ Thorpe, *Margaret Atwood's*, p. 1.

and happiness, which include 'which I receive with joy'⁴⁶ and 'yes we are very happy'.⁴⁷ Verbal irony is used to address the doctor who asks Offred if she would like a child. Firstly, what is implied by the question is not whether Offred would like a child, but whether she would like to doctor to impregnate her. She replies "Yes" I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. Give me children, or else I will die'. This can also be perceived to be ironic, as it suggests a 'longing' or a decision to have a child but in reality, Offred's choice has been removed, as it has become a requirement for her to reproduce. Taken literally, if she cannot bear a child under the new regime, it is possible that she will be sanctioned and sentenced to death. The doctor also uses irony, stating 'I hate to see what they put you through' whilst offering to impregnate Offred, which is an example of the doctor manipulating the circumstances he claims to 'hate' to commit an oppressive act that females are forced to endure, for his own benefit. Dolitsky argues that 'irony is what characterizes the tone and texture of *The Handmaid's Tale*'.⁴⁸

Situational irony is also used throughout the text:

The way to the river are the old dormitories, used for something else now, with their fairytale turrets, painted gold and blue. When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that.⁴⁹

The description of the environment as a 'fairytale castle' can be perceived to be a polar opposite of the experience of the Gileadean regime, which Offred portrays as oppressed, confined and comparable to imprisonment. Garlick draws attention to the novel as a pastiche of the 'fairy tale' and highlights the ambiguous interpretation of the narrative:

⁴⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 39.

⁴⁸ Marlene Dolitsky, 'Irony In Offred's Tale', in *Lire Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale*, ed. by Marta Dvorak, Interférences (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016), pp. 113–26 (pp. 113–116 (p. 113)) <<http://books.openedition.org/pur/30527>> [accessed 7 May 2021].

⁴⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 40.

The Handmaid's Tale is Atwood's most concerted attempt to reappropriate the tale, not through the authoritative narrative voice, but by demonstrating and engaging with the equivocality of narration.⁵⁰

It is of importance to note that Offred repeatedly refers to her narrative as a reconstruction, inferring that the oral relaying of the story may have taken place sometime after the events: 'this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed, rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said'.⁵¹ Offred offers her own reconstructions of events relating to other characters, despite not being present, identifying that she makes assumptions: 'Aunt Lydia did not actually say this, but it was implicit in everything she did say'.⁵² She portrays multiple experiences of her romantic encounter with Nick, leaving the reader to come to their own conclusion, or perhaps even to decide that reaching a conclusion is impossible: 'I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction'.⁵³ As much as the narrative is about Offred, it can also be perceived to be a comment on the romance plot, through the relationships experienced between Offred and Luke, the Commander and Nick. Miner argues that in 'following the rules, the narrator enjoys love's loneliness and its pains – and never does she stop to ask if this game is the only way love can be played'.⁵⁴ Morrison adds that The Handmaid's Tale 'employ[s] the conventions of romantic women's fiction in a heavy handed and nonparodic fashion even while displaying a sophisticated awareness of the implication of [it's] use'.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Barbara Garlick, 'The Handmaid's Tale: Narrative Voice And The Primacy Of The Tale', in *Twentieth-Century Fantasists: Essays On Culture, Society And Belief In Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature*, ed. by Kath Filmer (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992), pp. 161–71 (p. 162) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22126-4_13>.

⁵¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 144.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 154.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁵⁴ Madonne Miner, "'Trust Me': Reading The Romance Plot In Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 37.2 (1991), 148–68 (p. 166).

⁵⁵ Sarah R. Morrison, 'Mothering Desire: The Romance Plot In Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's The Madness of a Seduced Woman', *Tulsa Studies In Women's Literature*, 19.2 (2000), 315–36 (p. 315).

Offred provides the reader with evidence that her mental health is in decline, which can potentially be perceived as an alignment to Riggan's 'mother' (woman); moreover, whilst she is intelligent and educated, she is compromised by her surroundings and circumstances so can also be read as 'the naïf': 'It is all very well for me to think these things, quick as staccato, a jittering of the brain, an inner jeering. But it's panic. The fact is I'm terrified'.⁵⁶ In this instance, Offred may be responding to the trauma she is suffering and through desperation, hopes that her current situation is of her own construction: 'maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion. Not a hope'.⁵⁷ However, she remains able to differentiate reality from her 'own illusion, a hangover from a version of reality I learned in the former time'.⁵⁸ Stillman and Johnson argue:

Within this vortex of fear and vulnerability, this contrast of "blank time" and intense interactions with powerful, inscrutable, individuals the handmaid fails to maintain her identity.⁵⁹

The narrative shifts in the 'Historical Notes' epilogue, decentralising the character Offred, as it is taken over by Professor Pieixoto. This change dramatically impacts the reader's perception of the novel, as the setting moves to 2195, providing an unexpected, retrospective view of the Gileadean rule.

Pieixoto's narrative can be recognised as biased; therefore untrustworthy, unreliable and fallible. Atwood invites the reader to question, establishing doubt around authenticity of Offred's narrative from the outset; initially through Pieixoto's naming of the talk 'Problems of Authentication in Reference to the Handmaid's Tale'.⁶⁰ To reinforce his view, Pieixoto argues that 'the tapes might be a forgery'⁶¹ and 'if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her'.⁶² The reader

⁵⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 147.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 119.

⁵⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 212.

⁵⁹ Stillman and Johnson, *Identity, Complicity*, p. 74.

⁶⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 312.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 314.

⁶² Ibid. p. 315.

also learns that the tapes were not numbered, so the order of Offred's narrative was based on 'guesswork'.⁶³

Pieixoto is a patriarchal figure, who can be perceived as patronising and sexist, undermining the suffering of women in the Gileadean period by making jokes about the sexual exploitation that was experienced: 'all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic, vulgar signification of the word *tail*'.⁶⁴ Pieixoto devalues Offred's recorded experience, claiming that there was 'no hope of tracing the narrator herself directly',⁶⁵ instead, focusing on the potential identity of the male Commander.⁶⁶ He speaks to a complicit audience 'that applauds frequently, asks no questions and raised no objections to his (quite objectionable) interpretation'.⁶⁷ Grace supports this argument, stating that:

The 'Historical Notes' are discontinuous and disjunctive; they invite us to question, rather than accept, the authenticity of what we have just read. These factors discourage suspension of disbelief, rather than encourage it. They invite an active interrogation of the text.⁶⁸

Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*, like *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in the mid-1980s, during what McHale calls 'The Major Phase: Peak Postmodernism'.⁶⁹ Banks's world differs from that of Atwood; the setting is non-speculative, providing a more realistic representation (and perhaps relatable from the perspective of the reader's world-knowledge) of the time in which it is set. Like Atwood, Banks incorporates elements of a range of literary genres (science fiction, gothic, horror, adventure, allegorical and dystopian fiction) through the use of intertextuality. Schoene-Harwood

⁶³ Ibid. p. 314.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 313.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 316.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 319.

⁶⁷ Stillman and Johnson, *Identity, Complicity*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Dominick M. Grace, "'The Handmaid's Tale': 'Historical Notes' and Documentary Subversion", *Science Fiction Studies*, 25.3 (1998), 481–94 (p. 483).

⁶⁹ Brian McHale, 'McHale, Brian. 2015. "The Major Phase: Peak Postmodernism, 1973–1990," in *The Cambridge Introduction To Postmodernism*, Cambridge Introductions To Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Pp. 62–122, Title <<http://Dx.Doi.Org.Ezproxy.Uwtsd.Ac.Uk/10.1017/CBO9781139108706.004>>', in *The Cambridge Introduction To Postmodernism*, *Cambridge Introductions to Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 122AD), p. 62.

notes that 'Banks's novel reverberates with allusions to a wide variety of classic literary masculinities—from *Frankenstein*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Turn of the Screw*, to *Lord of the Flies* and *A Clockwork Orange*'.⁷⁰ Conversely Banks states that the text was 'supposed to be a pro-feminist, anti-militarist work, satirising religion'.⁷¹

It is through the grotesque, black humour of the narrative that the Postmodern form is conveyed and as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Lyotard's metanarratives are challenged.

Schoene-Harwood notes:

The neo-Gothic design of Banks's novel, its macabre celebration of violence, horror and death, is not an end in itself but aims to unmask the fraudulence of the old order and, ultimately, to demolish the Law of the Father by probing the subliminal turmoil that both upholds and potentially subverts it.⁷²

The first-person narrative deployed by Banks in *The Wasp Factory*, like that of Atwood's Pieixoto in *The Handmaid's Tale*, can be considered untrustworthy, unreliable and fallible. It can be argued that the protagonist, Frank, emulates all four of Riggan's unreliable narrator types, in some instances concurrently.⁷³ Frank's narrative is imaginatively descriptive; seemingly on the surface educated and seeped in self-assurance. Whilst the narrative itself could be deemed convincing, the events Frank relays, such as the murder of his cousin by tying her to a kite,⁷⁴ cannot; revealing the 'pícaro' element of his character and subsequently destabilising trust. Frank can be

⁷⁰ Parallels that can be drawn by the reader in the novels include the following: *Frankenstein* – scientific experimentation in relation to the human; *Heart of Darkness* – capacity for humankind to commit evil acts/savagery; *The Turn of The Screw* – horror, ambiguity and the unexplained; *Lord of the Flies* – rules and systems of ordering, violence and brutality; *A Clockwork Orange* – ultraviolence. Schoene-Harwood also refers to similarities to the 'boys tale'. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Dams Burst: Devolving Gender in Iain Bank's "The Wasp Factory"' in *Ariel*, 30.1 (1999), 18 (p. 132).

⁷¹ Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, 25th Anniversary Edition (London: Abacus, 2009), p. xi.

⁷² Schoene-Harwood, *Dams Burst*, p.132.

⁷³ Riggan, *Picaros, Madmen*, p. 16.

⁷⁴ Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, pp. 117–18.

perceived to be arrogant and braggart in nature, trivialising tragic events (albeit as they occur at his hands) and presenting the macabre as 'matter of fact':

Quite apart from the ones I killed (and they were all about the same age when I murdered them) I can think of at least three of our family who went to whatever they imagined their Maker was like in unusual ways.⁷⁵

Riggan's 'madman' develops as Frank's narrative becomes more gruesome: 'that's my score to date. Three, I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through'.⁷⁶ This blasé declaration of murdering three people and not getting found out shocks the reader to disbelief, positioning Frank as the 'liar'. As the novel progresses, Frank's thinking becomes more debauched; he implies he has a menacing reputation locally and appears to be proud of this: 'I know some mothers tell their children to behave or 'Frank'll get you,' but it doesn't bother me. I can take it'.⁷⁷ Frank's minimisation of events shows that he does not take his role as a narrator seriously through game-playing with the reader, which is identifiable to Riggan's 'clown'.

Frank's narrative can be described as schizophrenic in style, exploring plurality of voices and embedded narratives, particularly with regards to his brother Eric, who is portrayed as a depraved 'madman', which seemingly, moderates Frank's own 'madness'. Eric appears through a series of telephone calls and attempts to destabilise Frank: 'I just told you my name's Frank. Why are you calling me "Eric"? Come on, Eric, I recognise your voice'.⁷⁸ McVeigh argues that Eric could be a construct of Frank's imagination, in parallel to Atwood's Serena Joy: 'If Frank is an unreliable narrator, what evidence do we have for Eric's existence within the narrative?'⁷⁹ Eric's embedded narrative is comprised of 'games, paradoxes and confusion of identity'.⁸⁰ Schoene-

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 29.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 49.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 63.

⁷⁸ Ibid. pp. 126–27.

⁷⁹ Kev McVeigh, 'The Weaponry Of Deceit', *Performative Utterance*, 2012, p. 1.

<<https://performativeutterance.wordpress.com/2012/02/08/the-weaponry-of-deceit/>> [accessed 9 May 2021].

⁸⁰ McVeigh, *The Weaponry Of Deceit*, p. 1.

Harwood adds to this argument, stating that 'only superficially does Banks perpetrate a confrontation of two different discourses: one of heroic normality, the other of psychopathic madness'.⁸¹ Despite 'authority as the novel's first person narrator, the brothers appear in fact to be equally disturbed'.⁸²

Like Atwood's epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the conclusion of *The Wasp Factory* is both shocking and disturbing; it is revealed that Frank's gender has been manipulated by his father, as he finds out he was born female and has been fed male hormones. Frank experience an identity crisis through discovering the 'truth': 'I am not Francis Leslie Cauldhame, I'm Frances Lesley Cauldhame...the tampons and the hormones were for me'.⁸³ Banks subverts and deconstructs the Modernist epiphany,⁸⁴ layering further doubt in relation to narrational reliability, which challenges assumptions formulated by the reader:

Believing in my great hurt, my literally cutting off from society's mainland, it seems to me that I took life in a sense too seriously, and the lives of others, for the same reason, too lightly. The murders were my own conception, my sex. The Factory was my attempt to construct life, to replace the involvement which I otherwise didn't want.⁸⁵

Brewster notes that Frank's 'willed separation can turn suddenly into a destructive isolation and madness that in the end must be resisted'.⁸⁶ However, Frank's fate is characteristically (of Postmodernism) left open interpretation by the reader.

In answer to Olsen's question, this essay has identified how first-person narrative within Postmodern fiction can be assessed in relation to reliability, fallibility and trustworthiness, specifically in relation to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and

⁸¹ Schoene-Harwood, *Dams Burst*, 136.

⁸² Ibid. p. 136.

⁸³ Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, p. 240.

⁸⁴ An example of a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation in the form of an 'epiphany' from a Modernist perspective, can be seen when Lily Briscoe achieves her artistic vision in Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, p. 154.

⁸⁵ Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, p. 243.

⁸⁶ Scott Brewster, 'Beating And Retreating: Violence And Withdrawal In Iain Banks and John Burnside', in *Ethically Speaking: Voice And Values In Modern Scottish Writing* (Rodopi, 2006), p. 180.

Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*. Atwood provides contrasting narratives via Offred and Pieixoto which ^{suggest?}install varying levels of trustworthiness and fallibility. In addition, Atwood uses the 'epilogue', to destabilise what the reader thinks they already know, questioning Offred's authenticity and challenging the multiple 'truths' of the text. Whilst Atwood's characters embrace elements of Riggan's four 'unreliable narrators', it is Banks who manages to create a 'deranged' narrator who can be perceived to personify the pícaro, madman, clown and naïf.⁸⁷ Banks' revelatory conclusion and subsequent dark, epiphany can potentially help the reader to understand Frank's external and internal world. As Connor argues, 'some postmodernist narratives appear...to depend on the voice, rather than the eye, or, more precisely, to make the voice hard to encode either as a way of seeing or as itself something seen'.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Riggan, *Pícaros, Madmen*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ Steven Connor, 'Postmodernism And Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion To Postmodernism (Cambridge Companions To Literature)*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 63.

Questioning the Postmodern Narrator in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and Iain Banks's 'The Wasp Factory'

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

68/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

You offer a determined and detailed overview of postmodernism, focusing your enquiry down well to questions of narrative fallibility. You then apply these ideas to two well-chosen texts, moving well beyond simple understandings of unreliability.

Your close readings are good though they do at times tend to think about Offred in particular as if she were a real person or a character in realistic fiction at least -- this position could be argued but it would then sit at odds with your main point. Generally in the text analysis part of the essay it would have been helpful to remind the reader and yourself of wider links to the po-mo thought you outline at the start a little more -- see comments.

Try too if you can to develop the habit of linking across the chosen texts more.

PAGE 1

PAGE 2



Comment 1

do you find this helpful?



Comment 2

why this in particular?

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

Text Comment. between the movements(?)

PAGE 5



Comment 3

Not really a singular form

Text Comment. s

Strikethrough.

PAGE 6

PAGE 7

Text Comment. d



Comment 5

what would reality mean in this context?



Comment 6

say more about this.

PAGE 8

Text Comment. as



Comment 7

Link to wider discussion with po-mo?

PAGE 9



Comment 8

assuming that she is a 'person' with a memory(?)

PAGE 10

PAGE 11

Strikethrough.



Comment 10

Again link to wider po-mo arguments and ideas even if only in footnotes

PAGE 12



Comment 11

and therefore to self-exposingly to textual types?

PAGE 13



Comment 12

as with first essay more thematic linkage across texts would be good

PAGE 14

PAGE 15

Strikethrough.

PAGE 16

PAGE 17

Text Comment. suggest?

Text Comment. F