

## **“On Being a Woman Writer”: Atwood’s Canadian and Feminist Contexts**

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When you begin to write you’re in love with the language, the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing—if you follow it—will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me.

(Atwood, *Second Words* 15)

Margaret Atwood began her writing career at a time when Canadian literature did not have a clearly established canon or identity. In fact, she has been credited with helping to “invent” Canadian literature as a critical concept, both because she herself is a prolific poet, novelist and short story writer, but also because she has published books of literary and cultural criticism throughout her long career. As she noted in the early 1970s, “Until recently, reading Canadian literature has been for me and for everyone else who did it a personal interest, since it was not taught, required or even mentioned (except with derision) in the public sphere” (*Survival* 13). That attitude has clearly changed, not only because of Atwood’s own position as a very important cultural icon, but also because of the preeminence of contemporary Canadian writers on the world literary stage. Atwood’s contemporaries include Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Marian Engel, among others; Joan Barfoot and Michael Ondaatje are only a few years younger than she is. With these other writers, Atwood is in the fortunate position of “participating in a developing literary tradition, rather than reacting to an already-established one” (Irvine 242). In order to understand the work of Margaret Atwood, it is necessary to understand her central position in Canadian literature, as well as the way in which she herself creates a critical context for her own work. In addition, Atwood’s work

must be seen as, in some ways, arising from the second-wave feminist movement (the period roughly from the early 1960s to the 1980s, though some argue the second wave continues to this day). Atwood herself does not consistently call herself a feminist. Others do, however, and her work is fully engaged with the reinvention of femaleness and femininity and with the recovery of female agency and female strength. These two strands—Atwood’s engagement with and construction of Canada as a critical space, and her historical positioning as a writer preoccupied with women’s issues (broadly defined) during a period when such “women’s issues” came to the fore—offer two of the most important critical contexts for her work. Thus, these two issues will be the focus of this chapter.

While there are difficulties with assuming that a particular nation produces a particular kind of literature, literary histories often attempt to locate connections between literary works and national authors in order to establish thematic commonality. In a similar way, literary historians may link together various works in establishing a national canon in order to prove continuity of subject across time and space (sometimes to the exclusion of other works that do not “fit” the framework). In her book *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States*, Sarah Corse argues that “national literatures exist not because they unconsciously reflect ‘real’ national differences, but because they are integral to the process of constructing national differences” (12). In other words, there is something imaginary—but very influential—about suggesting that national literatures speak with the same tongue. Of course, Canada’s two official languages and its diverse immigrant population, not to mention its indigenous one, make this singular speaking voice problematic, but it is nevertheless a powerful idea. If, as has been argued, Canada and its English-speaking authors have striven for differentiation not only from their southern neighbor the United States but also from the United Kingdom, then one can see why developing a narrative of “Canadianness” has been seen as a necessary stage in the construction of the nation’s literature.

Atwood has played a significant role in this construction, from her first nonfiction book on Canadian literature, *Survival* (1972), through to her recent collection of essays and journalism, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing, 1970–2005* (2005).

Atwood published *Survival* in 1972, the same year that she published her breakthrough novel *Surfacing*, which in some ways acts as a companion piece to her critical work, though Atwood denies that they were written to bolster each other. In *Survival*, Atwood proposes that Canadian literature is thematically based on victimhood and survival and that Canada's harsh climate (among other things) contributes to this focus. Atwood offers selective readings of Canadian literature that support this stance and develops as well her theory of the four basic victim positions represented in such literature. Part of her aim, as she explains, is to make explicit what she felt was implicit in Canadian literature and culture, for in her view, "if a country or a culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind" (*Survival* 15–16). Images of blindness and sight are common within Atwood's work, and the idea of literature as a reflection (of reality, of a country, of a gender) has been a common, though debated, idea throughout literary history.

Lay readers and students found much of interest in *Survival*, but professional literary critics have taken issue with Atwood's thematic focus, finding it reductive and exclusive. Atwood metaphorically shrugs her shoulders at this, noting that she never claimed to be a professional critic. In fact, in the introduction to the book, she is quite explicit about what the book is and what it is not: "I'm a writer rather than an academic or an expert," she asserts, "and I've taken my examples where I've found them, not through study or research but in the course of my own reading" (*Survival* 11).

Atwood's emphasis on her own reading as a basis for her critical understanding appears to be career-long. In her 2005 collection, *Curious Pursuits*, Atwood continues to use her own reading as the basis for her critical stance. She argues that her own curiosity is as much

a trigger for her reading and writing as anything else: “if something doesn’t arouse my curiosity, I’m not likely to write about it. Though perhaps ‘curious’ as a word carries too light a weight: my curiosities are (I hope) not idle ones” (*Curious Pursuits* xv).<sup>1</sup> The collection covers thirty-five years of essays, analysis, and even obituaries, and it is of interest to readers primarily because it shows just what Atwood has been reading and thinking about. This recent collection of her non-fiction work as well as two earlier ones—*Second Words* (1982) and *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002)—give valuable insight into the contexts for and of her writing, not least because she writes about her own writing experience and details her own critical preoccupations. There is as well some overlap between *Second Words* and *Curious Pursuits* in that the very best of the essays in the former are reissued in the latter. All of the collections deal in some way with Atwood as a *woman* writer, and this context requires further exploration, both in relation to significant essays that she has written and in relation to other critics’ views of her and her work.

Atwood called her early collection of essays *Second Words* not only to indicate her primary focus on creative writing, but also because “a writer has to write something before a critic can criticize it” (*Second Words* 11). Thus, for Atwood, criticism necessarily comes *second* and, in her view, is of secondary importance. Part of what she writes about in this collection is her own sense of being a woman who writes, a topic that continues to preoccupy her. With essay titles like “On Being a Woman Writer: Paradoxes and Dilemmas,” “The Curse of Eve—Or, What I Learned in School,” and “Writing the Male Character,” among others, essays in the collection take issue with—and try to explore—what it means to be a woman writer in the latter part of the twentieth century. In her essay “On Being a Woman Writer,” which was first published in 1976, Atwood explores not only the impossibility of slicing off aspects of one’s identity, but also of the cultural context of women’s work. Thus she notes: “As writers, women writers are like other writers” but, “[a]s biological specimens and as citizens . . .

women are like other women: subject to the same discriminatory laws, encountering the same demeaning attitudes, burdened with the same good reasons for not walking through the park alone after dark. They too have bodies” (*SW* 194). Furthermore, she notes: “categories like Woman, White, Canadian, Writer are only ways of looking at a thing, and the thing itself is whole, entire and indivisible. *Paradox*: Woman and Writer are separate categories; but in any individual woman writer, they are inseparable” (*SW* 195, italics in original). Atwood identifies the ways in which women writers’ work is reviewed; in the 1970s, there was more systematic and overt discrimination than today (though the phenomenon has yet to go away). Women’s writing was often described in “feminine” terms: “She can be bad but female, a carrier of the ‘feminine sensibility’ virus; or she can be ‘good’ in male-adjective terms, but sexless” (*SW* 198)—in other words, she could be seen to *write like a man*, a “compliment” that stripped a woman of her gender and belittled her own contribution to literature.

Atwood also has explored the phenomenon of the interview,<sup>2</sup> where the focus is often on the woman author herself and not on her work. Certainly throughout Atwood’s long career members of the media have attempted to define her or contain her within stereotypes. In the essay, “The Curse of Eve,” Atwood identifies a series of media portrayals of her: “Margaret the Magician, Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater, clawing her way to success over the corpses of many hapless men” (*SW* 227). In each of these media constructions, Atwood is made “other” in some way: she is depicted as monstrous or as super (or sub) human. Atwood’s fiction also engages with such imagery. When, for example, the young Joan Foster in Atwood’s 1976 novel *Lady Oracle* finds herself oddly re-created as a woman poet, she imagines that others see her as “a female monster, larger than life . . . striding down the hill, her hair standing on end with electrical force, volts of malevolent energy shooting from her fingers” (*Lady Oracle* 336). Years later, Elaine Risley, the middle-aged painter in Atwood’s 1988 novel *Cat’s Eye* similarly deals tetchily with fame. On a flyer for her exhibit of

her paintings, “Risley in Retrospect,” Elaine sees that someone has defaced her photo with a moustache. “A public face, a face worth defacing. This is an accomplishment. I have made something of myself, something or other, after all” (*Cat’s Eye* 20), she claims, though she is also deeply uncomfortable with the spotlight. When she is being interviewed, Elaine likens the experience to a trip to the dentist, “mouth gracelessly open while some stranger with a light and mirror gazes down my throat at something I can’t see” (*Cat’s Eye* 89).

Atwood herself is a canny interviewee, with much experience in the media limelight; as a result, she is rarely caught off guard. Lorraine York argues that Atwood maintains “a self-conscious awareness of the terms of her own celebrity,” which she parodies not only within her literary work but through her cartoons and sketches. As a result, she utilizes “critical pre-emptive strikes of a particularly clever sort” (100). In fact, it could be said that she controls any interview she gives, and in an interview I conducted in Toronto in 2007, she laughingly referred to her own appearance and the media’s preoccupation with her curly hair. She told me I needed to include reference to it in the book I was writing: “Now I have the hair criticism. I get criticism of the book, criticism of the ascribed personality and then criticism of the hair. (Laughter) That’s why you have to have a chapter on hair.”<sup>3</sup> In the same way that she (humorously) directed my writing, she directed the entire interview away from my primary topic, her experience of literary celebrity, and onto safer and more familiar ground where she offered up commentary that provided echoes of her previous interviews, including, for example, her (varied) stance on feminism. Atwood’s rather exasperated reply to my question was as follows:

Well, yeah, what is feminist? There we have a very broad range of definitions which I’ve gone over countless times. Do I mean that you have to have hairy legs, wear overalls and boots and kick men off a cliff? No. Do I think that women should have equality under the law? Yes. Does equality

mean exact sameness in all respects? No. How much further do we need to go? (Personal interview)

Atwood did admit to some early negative reactions to some of her work, even by feminists themselves, who were not, it seems, prepared for her intricate analysis of all human relationships and her refusal to set up clear victims and villains:

In the age of high feminism, which took place in 1978 or 9, I used to get attacked for having female characters that were not perfect in every respect, that behaved badly and had emotions such as jealousy, anger, malevolence, and the whole box of tricks, and to those people I say, *I guess you never went to school. I guess you don't remember little Betsy from when you were eleven, who made your life such hell, or I guess you don't remember being little Betsy yourself.* Yes, women are not exempt, and have unpleasant emotions, but that's no reason why they should be deprived of property, identity, their children, their lives . . . it's just that people for a while, in that swing reaction that takes place, wanted to have all women as victims, hard done by, virtuous, pure and nice, kind and gentle, and if they did have bad personality traits it was the fault of the patriarchy, but I think that view has kind of dissipated by now, and anyway it was a view that deprived women of responsibility for their own actions and behaviour. (Personal interview)

Atwood's perspective on creating female characters is that one should be free to imagine their many and varied personalities. As she noted in "The Curse of Eve," one of the problems with trying to do so was the lack of examples of a fictional woman who "makes decisions, performs actions, causes as well as endures events, and has perhaps even some ambition, some creative power." Atwood plaintively asks, "What stories does my culture have to tell me about such women?" (*SW* 223); the answer seemed to be, *Not very many*. A few years later, Atwood attempted to explore the difficulties of "Writing the Male

Character” and argued that in some respects, the critical tables had been turned: now it was the case that critics felt women writers were being unfair in their depiction of men. Atwood has the same response: “it seems to me that a good, that is, a successfully-written, character in a novel is not at all the same as a ‘good,’ that is, a morally good, character in real life” (*SW* 420). Atwood further argues, “Maybe it’s time to do away with judgment by role-model and bring back The Human Condition, this time acknowledging that there may in fact be more than one of them” (*SW* 422)

That Atwood felt the need to respond, in print, to these issues indicates their importance, as well as the historical and cultural contexts in which she was writing during the last few decades of the twentieth century. In the early part of the twenty-first century, Atwood returned to some of these issues in her collection of lectures, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002). In a series of questions extending across several pages, Atwood revisits the question of the role of a woman writer: “If you’re a woman and a writer, does that combination of gender and vocation automatically make you a feminist, and what does that mean, exactly?” (106). Atwood continues, “And even if you aren’t an F-word feminist in any strict ideological sense, will nervous critics wallop you over the head for being one, simply because you exemplify that suspicious character, A Woman Who Writes? If, that is, you put any female characters in your books who aren’t happy, and any men who aren’t good. Well, probably they will. It’s happened before” (107).

It seems, therefore, that questions over a woman writer’s place (and allegiances) remain as important to Atwood in the twenty-first century as they were when she first began writing, despite changes in societal norms. Over the years, Atwood has responded robustly to this issue. Rather than creating the type of female characters lauded by feminists—the good heroine who must struggle against oppressive and victimizing males—Atwood instead has reveled in the creation of female villains and has frequently depicted women’s bad behaviour, including the cruelty of little girls in *Cat’s Eye*. Her most famous female villains

include Cordelia, who, unlike her Shakespearean namesake, is a cruel bully and later a defeated one; Grace in *Alias Grace* (1996), a celebrated murderess (or is she?), who argues that if the general public wants a monster, she will oblige, because “they ought to be provided with one” (*Alias Grace* 33); and Zenia in *The Robber Bride* (1993) who callously and ruthlessly exposes the weak spots of her women friends—Tony, Charis, and Roz—and not only betrays their friendship but steals their men. It is not accidental that in *The Robber Bride*, Roz’s twin daughters go through a childhood phase in which they insist, when an adult is reading fairy tales to them, that all of the characters must be female: thus the big bad wolf is feminized, as are the three little pigs, and the robber bridegroom is transformed into a robber bride, whose victims are all women. The twins “opt for women in every single role” (*Robber Bride* 294), a perspective one senses Atwood offers her approval of, wholeheartedly.

Atwood has also experimented with rewriting apparently virtuous women, rewriting *The Odyssey* from a female perspective in *The Penelopiad* (2005). Having argued that “sinister women act, virtuous women are acted upon,” she felt it was time to explore the story from another angle, as she noted in our interview:

Well, let us just look at the trio, the ancient trio, always brought up as three, of Penelope, Clytemnestra and Helen, all of whom are related, and the ancients always mention them: you know, evil bad Clytemnestra killed her husband; wicked, naughty Helen ran off with another man; but virtuous Penelope stayed at home and wove and wept. So which of the three is most famous? It’s not Penelope.

In fact, Atwood rewrites Helen of Troy as well, making her into a lap dancer in a poem collected in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). In the same interview she suggested:

Well, that's what she'd be doing if she were she alive today. She'd be either that or a movie star, one or the other, but we never heard that she was particularly smart. No, simply this supernatural beauty, and that's all anyone ever says about her. It must have been, at some point in her life, pretty annoying, because that's how I do it as well. Whereas poor Penelope, all they say about her is that she's really smart.

Clearly Atwood is exercised by the place and positioning of women, not only in her own culture, but in previous and distant ones as well. In two of her well-known essays—"Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature" and "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction"—Atwood considers villainesses to be "disruptive to static order" (CP 172) and therefore, by her assessment, *good*. Atwood recalls how, as feminism hardened into an orthodoxy, there were some types of newly discovered and feminist-sanctioned "bad behaviours" available to authors writing the female character: the female character could "rebel against social strictures" and "flout authority" and "do new bad-good things, such as leaving her husband and even deserting her children" (CP 180). Yet even as women writers were able to explore this newly created space, they were, at the same time, constrained by feminist ideology and its insistence that the good feminist heroine had to be "essentially spotless of soul" as she struggled against "male oppression" (CP 179). Atwood utterly rejects the notion that writing about female badness is somehow "antifeminist" and is "tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy, namely the male power structure" (CP 180). Aware that there have always been "spellbinding evil parts for women" in literature, Atwood insists that literature "cannot do without bad behaviour" (CP 181). Indeed, she argues that female villains serve important functions since they can "act as keys to doors we need to open and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face" (CP 182).

Atwood's interest in writing a distinctly Canadian example of the female villain led to her fictional re-creation of a famous Canadian murder mystery in her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, which retells the story of a notorious 1843 double murder case that was widely reported in the news at the time. Grace Marks, who was sixteen when the murders were committed, was convicted as an accessory to the crime. In her essay "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," Atwood remarks that for Canadian writers of her generation, the "lure of the Canadian past . . . has been partly the lure of the unmentionable—the mysteries, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" (CP 218). As Atwood reflects on the appeal of historical fiction, she also sheds light on her own art as she describes the way that historical fiction "appeals to the little cultural anthropologist in each one of us": "It's such fun to snoop, as it were; to peek in the windows. What did they eat, back then? . . . What did they think about? What lies did they tell, and why? Who were they really?" (CP 221). But Atwood also insists that "fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions" (CP 209). Indeed, she insists, "We have to write out of who we are and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may" (CP 210). Thus, even as Atwood insists that she carefully drew on historical documents in writing *Alias Grace*, her foray into historical fiction still has a very contemporary Atwoodian feel to it. And even as Atwood takes the opportunity to act as a cultural anthropologist as she looks into the past in *Alias Grace*, she also examines the shaping power of culture on female identity—an issue that has long interested her. While Atwood is aware that she cannot escape her historical and cultural contexts, she has had the rare opportunity to help reinvent Canadian literature. Something of a cultural historian herself, Atwood has long used her art to examine the ways in which culture (which can sometimes appear invisible) structures the world we inhabit.