

The Handmaid's Tale - the epilogue

Lucy Webster focuses on the way Margaret Atwood uses the epilogue to raise questions about the nature of narrative.

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new way of beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light. The Handmaid's Tale

So ends one of the most popular set texts at A Level: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The reader is satisfied with the way that the story has been brought to a conclusion: there is just enough uncertainty and ambiguity to offer him or her something to mull over and do what, as literary critics, we know is a waste of time - to speculate about Offred's future. Atwood increases the pace and the tension up to the very last line as Offred is taken into the van which, to the other characters in the novel, signals punishment, torture and likely death: a very final end to her story. The reader, however, has information that these characters don't have. Although we cannot be certain that Offred is safe, rescued by the underground network, we hope that we can trust Nick's assurance: 'It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them.' We hope that Offred's life and story will continue.

There is, of course, another reason for reaching beyond this end to her story. *The Handmaid's Tale* is written in the first person and appears to be some kind of journal. Surely, we argue, anxious for the safety of this fictional creation, she must have escaped Gilead in order to be able to write her tale. And within the logic of the fictional world we are right: the final paragraph of the 'tale' we have just finished reading, cannot be the end of her story.

It is also not the end of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The reader turns over the final page, perhaps expecting to find adverts for other books by Atwood, only to find another text: an epilogue. How does the reader react to the discovery of this text? What did you think? After all, the author has made a deliberate decision not to include this information, or this part of the story, within the main narrative. For some reason, she has decided to present it as a separate text. Some of the questions you might ask are suggested here:

- What is this text?
- What is its status?
- Who is this text supposed to be by and who is the intended audience?
- How does it relate to the story of Offred and the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- What purpose does it serve?
- How might this additional text (or texts) alter your response to and interpretation of the story you thought had been concluded?

The epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale* is the transcript of a lecture about the 'handmaid's tale' - the very text the reader has just finished - and the way in which the historian Pieixoto has painstakingly pieced it together. Although it is presented as factual - an academic lecture - this epilogue is, of course, fictional, part of the imagined world created by Atwood: the date of the conference is given as June 25, 2195 and the society about which the lecture is being given has never existed in this form.

If the epilogue is an invention of the author, then it is there for a purpose and is just as much within her control as the rest of the narrative. It is in the readers' interest to pay attention to this frame text and to consider the contribution it makes to the meaning of the narrative.

At the most straightforward level, the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale* allows Atwood to include additional information both about the lives of her characters and about the ideas explored in the novels: it lets the reader know that Nick could be trusted and that Offred successfully escaped - at least for long enough to record her 'tale' in the safe house in Maine. It also reveals that the era of 'The Republic of Gilead' is over, a fascinating historical aberration. The experience the reader has shared with Offred is now distanced, the focus of academic papers and conventions.

This is an important point. Because *The Handmaid's Tale* is a first person narrative, told by the very person the story is about, the reader is presented with only one perspective on, and interpretation of events. Atwood makes the unreliability of the narrator and the difficulty of presenting a complete and truthful account of events a key theme of her novel. The epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale* confronts these issues explicitly. The reader, emerging from the intense emotional experience of Offred's first person account of the Gileadean regime, is confronted by detached - though enthusiastic - speculation and academic banter. For the first time readers learn that the tale they have been reading is a reconstruction, pieced together from a series of fragmented tape recordings by the (fictional) historian Pieixoto, an expert on the Gileadean period.

'What we have before us is not the item in its original form. Strictly speaking, it was not a manuscript at all when first discovered, and bore no title ... the tapes were arranged in no particular order, being loose at the bottom of the box; nor were they numbered. Thus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are regarded as approximate ...'

The epilogue foregrounds for the reader areas of the novel which on a first reading could be glossed over: Offred's own concern about the possibility (or desirability) of recording the truth, a single version of history.

This is what she says, whispers, more or less. I can't remember exactly, because I had no way of writing it down. I've filled it out for her as much as I can. (page 255)

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 ... (page 144)

In the later stages of the novel, this anxiety develops into a deliberate playing with the reader. Offred offers her reader/listener more than one version of the story of her affair with Nick:

I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened. (page 273)

She does this within the context of a particular literary genre, playing on the reader's expectations of the romance conventions: plot development, stereotypical characters, even the language. In the light of the epilogue with its emphasis on speculative reconstruction and interpretation, the novel's concern with the way we attempt to record history seems even more significant. More, it suggests that words are not only the means by which we make sense of an experience, they are also the way we 'compose' ourselves. There is a sense in which Offred, the fictional character, only makes real her experiences by recording them for a future, unknown audience. As such, the narrative is at one level about the process of writing and of reading. Pieixoto, the 'author' of the reconstructed text of *The Handmaid's Tale* teaches us how to read the text: to be sceptical, to regard it as partial, therefore emphasising the point Offred has been making throughout her tale.

Novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplify much that is characteristic of the modern novel: the emphasis on interpretation, on the impossibility of a single perspective, the way in which they resist closure, the use of additional texts both as part of and as a comment on the main narrative. They can teach us not only about the way we construct narratives in our own lives to make sense of what is happening to us, but also about the process of reading and interpreting texts.

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