

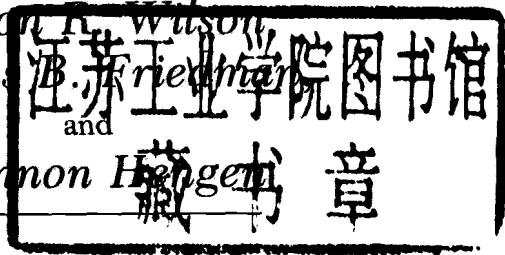
Wilson, Friedman, & Hengen *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*

Approaches to Teaching Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Other Works

Edited by

Sharon R. Wilson
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and

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PREFACE TO THE SERIES

In *The Art of Teaching* Gilbert Highet wrote, “Bad teaching wastes a great deal of effort, and spoils many lives which might have been full of energy and happiness.” All too many teachers have failed in their work, Highet argued, simply “because they have not thought about it.” We hope that the Approaches to Teaching World Literature series, sponsored by the Modern Language Association’s Publications Committee, will not only improve the craft—as well as the art—of teaching but also encourage serious and continuing discussion of the aims and methods of teaching literature.

The principal objective of the series is to collect within each volume different points of view on teaching a specific literary work, a literary tradition, or a writer widely taught at the undergraduate level. The preparation of each volume begins with a wide-ranging survey of instructors, thus enabling us to include in the volume the philosophies and approaches, thoughts and methods of scores of experienced teachers. The result is a sourcebook of material, information, and ideas on teaching the subject of the volume to undergraduates.

The series is intended to serve nonspecialists as well as specialists, inexperienced as well as experienced teachers, graduate students who wish to learn effective ways of teaching as well as senior professors who wish to compare their own approaches with the approaches of colleagues in other schools. Of course, no volume in the series can ever substitute for erudition, intelligence, creativity, and sensitivity in teaching. We hope merely that each book will point readers in useful directions; at most each will offer only a first step in the long journey to successful teaching.

Joseph Gibaldi
Series Editor

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PREFACE TO THE VOLUME

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has established an international reputation as a novelist, poet, and critic, receiving numerous literary prizes. The international Margaret Atwood Society was founded in 1984 and in 1992 became an allied organization that meets in conjunction with the Modern Language Association.

Margaret Atwood's works are widely taught in world literature, comparative literature, humanities, women's studies, Canadian studies, emerging English literatures (formerly Commonwealth literature), American literature, English literature, science-fiction, and communications courses in universities, colleges, junior colleges, and secondary schools not only in the United States and Canada but throughout the world. In addition, *The Handmaid's Tale*, currently the most widely taught Atwood text in the United States, is used in economics, political science, sociology, film, business, and other disciplines outside the humanities, and it has been adopted by several universities (e.g., George Mason, Miami University) as a required text for all undergraduates.

Because of Atwood's popularity, individual works, especially *The Handmaid's Tale*, are often taught outside the context of the Atwood canon, Canadian literature, or even the field of literature. Despite Atwood's initial success as a poet—beginning with the Canadian Governor General's Award for *The Circle Game* (1966)—and the notoriety of *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), teachers and students in the United States are sometimes unaware of her poetry and literary criticism. Often, too, such readers are not trained to approach works with specifically Canadian content (*Survival*; *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 1970; *Surfacing*, 1972). At the same time, some Canadian teachers, failing to recognize or appreciate the extra-Canadian contexts of Atwood's work (e.g., feminism, mythology), undervaluing Canadian literature and culture, or resenting her role as national "icon," see her as only a parochial Canadian nationalist or a one-note self-publicist. Too frequently, cross-disciplinary scholars interested in content are unprepared to examine style and prefer a single, unambiguous message to multifaceted themes, whereas poststructuralists suspicious of authorial intentionality and single meaning may ignore issues students find most significant. Many readers are still unaware of Atwood's published visual art, including book covers for *True Stories* (1981), cover and illustrations for *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and political comics for *This Magazine*, or have never heard of the Margaret Atwood Papers at the University of Toronto.

Nonetheless, Atwood has, as noted, enjoyed both critical and popular

success. Much sought after for readings and often interviewed, Atwood frequently appears on television and has been in several films, including *Not a Love Story*. Critics have addressed such themes as identity, Canadian nationalism, struggle for survival, sexual politics, and shamanism and concentrated on animal, mirror, camera, and other images in Atwood's work. As indicated by the contributors to this volume, scholars have taken a multiplicity of approaches to Atwood's work, including formalist, autobiographical and biographical, thematic, Marxist, historical, phenomenological, existentialist, structuralist, generic, feminist, psychological and psychoanalytic, archetypal and Jungian, mythic, linguistic, hermeneutic, reader-response, cross-disciplinary, comparative, manuscript, ecological, and deconstructive approaches.

Paradoxically discussed as realist or modernist, feminist or antifeminist, often in terms of readers' traditional expectations, Atwood's work poses a number of challenges to scholars, teachers, and students. Atwood's departures from realism into surrealism and magical realism (Irvine, *Sub/version* 44–45; S. Wilson, *Sexual Politics* 295–97) and her denial of expected fiction structures and closures—the sense in which she “writes beyond the ending” (DuPlessis 6)—pose difficulties. As early Surfacing critics illustrate, Atwood's experimentation with a wide range of narrative possibilities (framed and self-reflexive narrative; interior monologue; represented speech; and unreliable, developing, self-conscious, and multiple narrators) and her use of comedy, parody, satire, and irony—especially a subversive, doubled discourse (Hutcheon, “Circling” 170) and a characteristically Canadian self-deprecation—invite careful reading. Some readers undervalue the shifts from third to first person in *The Edible Woman* and *Life before Man* and from present to future tense near the end of *Bodily Harm*.

In addition, scholars and teachers of Atwood texts are challenged by her biblical, mythical, literary, folktale, cinematic, historical, and other kinds of intertexts and allusions; her varied genres and generic parodies (e.g., comedy of manners, the fantastic, fabulation, Gothic, romance, thriller, antinovel, dystopian, bildungsroman, kunstlerroman, life writing); her sensitivity to the nuances and complexities of language and visual image; and her commitment to such issues as feminism, human rights, and Canadian nationalism. Atwood's powerful themes, the focus of much criticism, cannot be fully understood outside genres and techniques (metafiction, antifiction, self-conscious narration, intertextuality, magical realism, parody, irony, deconstruction of national and cultural myths) frequently identified with the discourse of postmodernism (S. Wilson, “Deconstructing” 54–55; Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 1–25, 138–57 and “Circling,” 168–69). Atwood deconstructs phallogocentric narratives and synthesizes the often similar techniques identified with feminist, postmodernist, and postcolonialist theory into a revisionist form (S. Wilson, *Sexual Politics* 28; see also the essays by Brydon, Manley, Merivale, and Wilson in this volume).

Thus teachers and students of Atwood's work need contexts for under-

standing and appreciating it, including discussion of Atwood's complex style. This volume, intended primarily for United States and Canadian audiences, not only provides literary, biographical, Canadian, feminist, generic, and interdisciplinary contexts: it offers varied theoretical, critical, scholarly, and pedagogical approaches to Atwood's work, including a case study of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The structure of the volume, based on survey responses and essay proposals, reflects a progression from pedagogical backgrounds to practical teaching approaches in frequently offered courses to, finally, more innovative teaching approaches and courses. The selection of essays reflects the editors' desire to provide practical guidance and challenges to the kinds of teachers most likely to use this volume. Because of the large number of Atwood texts—among them, poetry volumes that are out of print and thus not available for study in most classes—we have not included essays on *For the Birds* (1990), *Princess Prunella*, *Strange Things*, every short story, many major poems, uncollected work, most of the rare poetry volumes published with Charles Pachter's visual art (see the "Materials" section in this volume), or Atwood's introductions, including those to the volumes she has edited: *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1986) and *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982). In the case of the poetry volumes, we do not discuss *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), published while this volume was in press, but we do offer short references to, or discussions of, one or two poems in *Double Persephone* (1961), *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Animals in That Country* (1968), *Procedures for Underground* (1970), *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), and *True Stories* (1981). Similarly, we make only brief allusions to Atwood's visual art, *Second Words* (1982), *The CanLit Foodbook* (1987), *Good Bones* (1992), *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994), and *The Robber Bride* (1993). Since the survey indicates which texts are taught most frequently, and in what settings, the essays were, to some extent, selected with this information in mind. For comparative purposes, some texts, such as the widely taught "This Is a Photograph of Me" (*Selected Poems*; *The Circle Game*), are, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, discussed from several perspectives. In addition, some essays inform teachers of possibilities they may have overlooked.

Part 1, "Materials," has five sections: Background, Survey Issues, Primary Works, Atwood Criticism, and Teaching Aids. Part 2, "Approaches," consists of an introduction and these sections: Backgrounds; Classrooms; A Case Study: *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its own overview; and Pedagogical Challenges and Opportunities. We thank all our colleagues who completed questionnaires and submitted essays (a list of respondents appears at the end of the volume) and, most of all, congratulate the writers included here for essays both perceptive and practical. The editors acknowledge with thanks the help of former Laurentian University students Patricia Ames and Susan Vanstone in preparing the volume's works-cited list.

MATERIALS

Background

Historical Forces and Political Issues

Atwood's first book, *The Circle Game*, was published in 1966, when Canadian cultural and political nationalism was on the rise. Pierre Trudeau would become prime minister in 1968, immediately following the ^(-E 2 65)centennial year of Canadian Confederation and its attendant festivities, especially Expo '67 in Montreal, ushering in an unprecedented surge of pride in and optimism about Canada. In the present age, with its designations of "postmodern" and "postnational," and with a strong, persistent pull away from federal authority by the province of Quebec, Canadian nationalism may seem a useless sentiment from the past. Yet because it has been a topic of recurring interest to Atwood, it can still help illuminate the historical and political contexts of her oeuvre.

The future of Canada (and so of Canadian nationalism) seems tied to the issues of Quebec separatism and free trade, among others. The richest sources of information about Atwood's position on these issues are the following: the interviews collected in Earl Ingersoll's *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (see especially G. Gibson; M. E. Gibson; Oates, "Dancing"; Davidson; Hammond, "Articulating"; and FitzGerald and Crabbe); *Atwood's Survival*, in which she delineates the notorious victim positions Canadians have adopted to survive in the face of domination by imperial powers; and her *Second Words*. More or less neutral on the matter of separatism, but clearly opposed to free trade, Atwood advocates a Canada worth preserving, a Canada never explicitly defined but based on historical differences between her country's economic and foreign policies and those of the United States (see Hengen). Her witty and brief piece "The Only Position," in *If You Love This Country: Facts and Feelings on Free Trade*, edited by Laurier LaPierre, serves as introduction to her stance on that issue.

As background to Atwood's approach to Canadian culture, her critics agree that Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* is invaluable, particularly his notion of the "garrison mentality" that pervaded early Canadian writing. Her philosophical attitude toward the United States is likely to be clearer to those who have read the Canadian philosopher George Grant's *Technology and Empire* or *Technology and Justice*, in which he warns against worship of progress as the highest human good, at the expense of nature.

More general background sources include a pocket-size book by Kenneth McNaught, *The Pelican History of Canada*; and, Stephen Graubard, editor, *In Search of Canada*. The annual Canada Report in the December issue of *Macleans* magazine would also put readers in touch with major Canadian events and Canadians' attitudes to them. Since the country has not yet conceded that it has entered a postnational age, the most appropriate context for studying Atwood's work remains that of Canadian culture.

Feminist Background and Issues

An appropriate background for understanding the feminist contexts of Atwood's writing is the work of other Canadian feminist critics, particularly Linda Hutcheon, Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, and Barbara Godard, for the movement in Canadian and United States feminist criticism since the early 1970s has been toward valuing difference and acknowledging diversity of race, class, nationality, and sexual identity. But Canadian feminist criticism is of course indebted to that of the United States, Britain, France, and developing countries. For an overview of the feminist critical agenda in the United States since the 1970s, an agenda that has helped to shape its Anglo-Canadian counterpart, see Naomi Schor's "Feminist and Gender Studies" and the earlier work by Elaine Showalter.

Germinal discussions of the feminist critical perspective in the United States, from a poet-critic's point of view, appear in the work of Adrienne Rich, whose poetry and prose are still excellent starting points for novices in the field. Rich discusses *Surfacing* in her *Of Woman Born*; Atwood reviews *Of Woman Born* in her *Second Words*. Four United States feminist critics whose more or less recent monographs include particular, sustained mention of Atwood's writing are Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lorna Irvine, Roberta Rubenstein, and Gayle Greene, among a host of other critics who refer at least in passing to Atwood's oeuvre. And Judith McCombs, in her "Country, Politics, and Gender in Canadian Studies," has examined twenty years of Atwood's reception in Canada and the United States, concluding that the most frequently recurring issue her critics cite is a lack of warmth.

An initiating voice in the recent movement toward specificity in analyses of sexual politics might be Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose *The Postcolonial Critic* broaches such issues of relevance to Atwood's work as identity, postmodernism, and power (see also Spivak's *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*). The Canadian critic best known for analyses of the Canadian postmodern is Hutcheon, whose discussions of Atwood's work (among others) in her *Canadian Postmodern* and *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* are especially valuable for situating Atwood's work in a Canadian cultural milieu.

In the same vein is *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*, edited by Libby Scheier et al., whose opening piece is by Atwood. Finally, two widely referred-to works of Canadian feminist criticism that serve as historical and bibliographical introductions to the field are Godard's *Gynocritics/Gynocritiques* and Neuman and Kamboureli's *A Mazing Space*.

Survey Issues

Responses to the questionnaire show that the pedagogy developing in Atwood studies is thriving and varied. Her work is taught in general education humanities and liberal arts programs, as well as in Canadian studies, women's studies, even business, and, of course, English programs, in formats ranging from lecture to student-led seminars, using traditional, interdisciplinary, and team teaching, with 10 to 150 and more students, in secondary schools, colleges, and universities across North America and in Europe and Asia (see the names and affiliations of questionnaire respondents). The most frequently taught novel after *The Handmaid's Tale* is *Surfacing*, while all the novels have been used, as have the short stories, poems, and literary criticism, especially *Survival*; perhaps the most popular single volume of poetry is *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, followed by any of the editions of selected poems; and *Bluebeard's Egg* is the preferred short story collection.

Respondents provided many suggestions for background reading to prepare the beginning teacher of Atwood's work, the most often noted of which are these: Atwood's *Survival* and *Second Words*, Frye's *The Bush Garden* (as noted above), Grimm's fairy tales, the Bible, New's *Literary History of Canada*, and the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, as well as works by the following, each listed at least twice: Barr, Bartkowski, Chodorow, Gilligan, Hutcheon, Ingersoll, Kauffman, Lauter, Rich. (See the works-cited list for recommended works by these authors and by the following authors, whose works were listed once: C. Allen, Belenky et al., Brady, Brans, Brownmiller, Buss, Cluett, DeShazer, Dooley, Forché, Fox-Genovese, Friedan, Hancock, Jung, Kaler, Ketterer, King, Klinck, Korte, Mandel and Taras, McCarthy, Northey, Ostriker, Petrone, Plaskow, Schreiber, Snitow, St. Andrews, Stewart, Stimpson, and Yalom; also mentioned once were Atwood's afterword to *The Mare's Egg*, by Carole Spray, and the Atwood entry in *Contemporary Authors*.) The most commonly suggested sources of literary criticism for teachers are book reviews and, particularly, interviews, in addition to works by the following: Christ, Cixous, Davey, C. Davidson, Davidson and Davidson, Fetterley, Grace, Grace and Weir, Howells, Malak, Mallinson, McCombs, Mendez-Egle, Moi, Rigney, Rosenberg, and VanSpanckeren and Castro.

The major background and critical works recommended to students include some of those already mentioned, as well as works by de Lauretis, Dembo, Felski, Godard, Irvine, Jones, Keith, P. Miller, Montefiore, Mulvey, Neuman and Kamboureli, New, Ortner, Rubenstein, Scheier et al., Waugh, and Woolf. More general literary theorists such as Bakhtin, Bal, Barthes and Sontag, Beauvoir, Cixous, Foucault, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Turner were also cited, and so were general references to histories of the Gothic romance and of folklore. Most frequently mentioned, however, were Atwood's own works as background to one another.

By far the most often mentioned audiovisual material cited was the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with some respondents using it as an example of comparatively bad art. The National Film Board of Canada documentary *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, an interview with the writer, is highly recommended, as are any of her taped readings. Some teachers show slides of the Group of Seven Canadian artists or of native art, or indeed of Atwood's own watercolors; some classes examine contemporary media images of women. Bringing in related disciplines, some teachers discuss recent feminist debates on pornography (Dworkin) or current film theory (Bordwell; Bordwell and Thompson).

The aspects of Atwood's work that are most likely to be treated in the classroom parallel those addressed in Atwood criticism, discussed below: gender politics and women's roles, women's attitudes to the body, narrative voice and design, language, subversion of traditional literary forms (e.g., dystopian/utopian, Gothic), revisionist mythmaking, history, satire, irony, Canadian nationalism, spirituality, and the environment. Particularly successful assignments are also wide-ranging, from the more familiar techniques of reading journals and holding small-group discussions, to the more exotic: conducting choric readings; copying Atwood's style; writing alternative endings or movie scripts; creating a male dystopia; taking on, in creative writing or skits, the persona of the Commander or other Atwoodian figures; scrambling lines of poetry to consider resolution. Favorite essay topics are Atwood's men, humor, mothers, mother-daughter relationships, and the quest motif.

Respondents note that the elements of Atwood's life and writing that seem most troublesome may actually be most interesting: her feminist anger, her bashing of males and the United States (the latter especially concerning readers in the United States), her public persona and international fame, the coldness and unreliability of her narrators, and her pessimism. Approaches to her work that appear effective are, of course, the feminist (listed by almost every respondent) and the following rich array of methods: psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, archetypal, Canadian nationalist, comparative, historical, formalist, reader-response, generic, New Critical, dialogic, ecological, post-modernist and poststructuralist, narratological, thematic, religious, and Marxist. Discourse theory has also proven useful. In the light of this list, perhaps the respondents who described their approach as eclectic offered the best advice.

Happily, most of the material that respondents wished to see in this volume is in fact included. The bibliography of primary and secondary sources addresses an almost unanimous request, as do Rosenberg's biographical essay, Wilson's introduction, and our sections on background and teaching aids. The volume also includes, as asked for, commentary on Atwood's use of language, genre, gender, and humor. The issue of Atwood's Canada seems to continue to vex her teachers in the United States, and for them