

# 'Don't ever ask for the true story': versions of reality and life stories in Atwood's short fiction

Emilie Péneau

School of English, UCC

---

## Introduction

My research focuses on Margaret Atwood's short fiction and intends to explore how Atwood uses this particular genre in order to challenge ideological discourses. It highlights the use of this genre in order to convey or subvert ideas and considers its place in literature. It then explores the function of storytelling in Atwood's short stories. Finally, it examines the representation of gender, Canadian identity and global issues in these stories. Storytelling has a key role in my thesis, as Atwood draws attention to the subjectivity of any narrative in order to emphasise the ideological aspect of these narratives. Therefore, this article considers the politics of storytelling in Atwood's short stories and uses two stories to illustrate how Atwood's writing is self-reflexive: "Giving Birth" and "Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother".

Much of Atwood's work is concerned with the fact that any writing, even those claiming to truth such as autobiography or historical narratives, is always a version of reality and not an expression of an absolute truth. This article therefore explores some of the techniques used by Atwood in order to draw the reader's attention to the fictionality of any story; that is to the fact that a story is always a construction and not an objective reflection of reality. It considers in particular Atwood's concern with language and its inadequacy to represent reality accurately, the self-reflexive, or metafictional, literary devices Atwood uses to highlight the fact that all stories are subjective and only constructions of reality. Finally, it emphasises the role of the writer and the reader in the construction of a story.

## Metafiction

Metafiction plays an important role in Atwood's fiction. According to Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, "metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality;" it involves "the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and

the laying bare of that illusion.” Therefore, a metafiction, or self-reflexive fiction, will use some devices that draw the reader's attention to the way a story is written and constructed, and consequently to its subjectivity, which often results in a blurring between fiction and reality.

A famous and obvious Irish example of metafiction would be Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which O'Brien uses the technique of story-within-story. In this novel, the author writes a story told in the first person by a narrator who writes a story about a writer who writes a story in which the characters live their own lives when their author is asleep. Similarly, in Atwood's story “Giving Birth”, we can see the narrator in the act of creating a story: she is sitting at her desk writing the story we are reading and explaining at the same time the process of writing: “This story about giving birth is not about me. In order to convince you of that I should tell you what I did this morning, before I sat down at this desk. . . Now. . . I am writing this story.” The narrative then moves on to the story the narrator is writing but the story is often interrupted by commentaries in parentheses that address the reader directly with the pronoun “you”. Such techniques break the illusion that what is represented is reality as it is clearly shown that the story is just that: a story, a fiction, a construction.

Furthermore, the narrator's ironic comment that “Jeanie isn't real in the same way that I am real” also draws our attention to the fact that if Jeanie is not real, then the narrator of the story we are reading is not real either; what we are reading is only a fiction. It is evident from these examples that by drawing the reader's attention to the process of writing, the author also leads us to consider the fact that any story, even if it pretends to be true, is a construction.

## Language

The fact that any story is a construction of reality is reemphasised by the use of language. Many of Atwood's short stories are concerned with the arbitrariness of language and the discrepancy between the word and what it represents, and draw the reader's attention to words and their meaning directly. Indeed, language can be seen as the expression of someone's perception of reality and will construct a different reality in the receiver's mind. People rarely question language; they tend to consider words as expressing the concept or object for which they stand. However, language is just another human construct and cannot be considered as an accurate representation of reality.

For instance, in “Giving Birth”, the story starts with a discussion of the words related to the experience of giving birth and how they are inadequate to represent this experience: “And *delivering*, that act the doctor is generally believed to perform: who delivers what? Is it the mother who is delivered, like a prisoner being released? Surely not; nor is it the child delivered to the mother like a letter through a slot. . .” These considerations on

language emphasise the fact that language is somehow inadequate to represent reality, but also that it is through this use of language that a reality will be created in the reader's mind. Therefore, both the author or narrator and the reader have a role to play in the creation of a story. The author represents a picture with the use of words, which will create a different picture in the receiver/reader's mind.

## Unreliable narrators

Most of Atwood's writing reveals the fact that an author and a narrator are unreliable. Atwood famously wrote in "Murder in the Dark" about the writer playing games with the reader. Through this story, we are presented with a game involving a murderer, a victim and a detective. Soon, the game becomes a metaphor for the game played between a writer, a book and a reader or a writer, a critic and a reader. In this metafictional story, the murderer/narrator becomes a metaphor for the writer "plotting [a] sinister crime", which highlights how stories are carefully planned and constructed. Moreover, the narrator tells us: "by the rules of the game, I must always lie;" therefore, we should never trust the narrator and we should not consider the story as being the truthful expression of the writer.

In "Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother", we can observe such an unreliable narrator telling the reader about her life story or, more exactly, moments in her mother's life that are the occasion for her to tell about her own life. Autobiography is, like any story, characterised by a selection and ordering of events. This is evident in this story as we can observe a double choice being made: what the narrator decides to tell us and what her mother had decided to tell her. The word "significant" in the title can then refer to each of these choices. Indeed, the narrator notes that all the stories her mother recounts are exciting, that she chooses these stories carefully. The story clearly highlights how a life story is a construction, how certain facts are turned into events while "the long stretches of uneventful time" are not mentioned, thus leading the narrator "to think that [her] mother, in her earlier days, led a life of sustained hilarity and hair-raising adventure." Thus, biography or autobiography should not be considered as a necessarily truthful representation of one's life events since the writer's subjective choice is involved.

Moreover, two persons relating the same event will often give two different versions as each person will have a different perception of the event, a fact also emphasised in the story. The mother's version of some stories from the narrator's childhood differs from the narrator's version, which is "the real truth" according to her, but, as a reader, we can never be sure which version to believe. Furthermore, events related retrospectively are highly dependent on memory, which is not always reliable. Indeed, in "Significant Moments", we can notice how often the narrator repeats the word "remember" and even acknowledges the failure of her own memory. All these elements combined together highlight how unre-

liable a narrative told in the first person can be, even if it is meant to be a representation of reality.

## Interpretation

Finally, the reader, or listener, also plays an important role as s/he is the one who will receive the story, interpret it and thus give it a certain meaning. This meaning will depend on the reader's context, but also on her/his life story. Atwood also draws attention to this process of interpretation in "Significant Moments" as the narrator, who is also the receiver of a story, keeps trying to interpret the stories her mother tells her: "Possibly this story is meant by my mother to illustrate her own stupidity, and also her sentimentality. We are to understand she wouldn't do such a thing now." Moreover, the term "significant" in the title can also represent the significance of these stories but, despite the narrator's best efforts to find a meaning for each story her mother tells, "Some. . . stories defy analysis." Whatever the mother/author meant, it is ultimately the reader who interprets the story and gives it meaning and this is something the author does not have full control of. Therefore, the meaning originally intended can be lost through the process of transmission of the story.

## Conclusion

All these elements show that any story, even a "true" story, is always a construction or reconstruction. A story can never be an objective representation of reality; it will always only be a version of reality. As we have seen, Atwood, through the use of various metafictional devices, draws the reader's attention to the fictionality of stories, thus challenging the idea that the written word can be the representation of an absolute truth. Her writings invite readers to question narratives and not to accept them as an objective representation of reality, but rather as the biased expression of an individual's perception of reality.

Emilie Péneau is a first-year PhD student in the School of English under the supervision of Dr. Lee Jenkins and Dr. Alan Gibbs.