

Margaret Atwood (born 1939)

Gale Database: Poetry Criticism

Introduction

Internationally acclaimed as a poet, novelist, and short story writer, Atwood has emerged as a major figure in Canadian letters. Using such devices as irony, symbolism, and self-conscious narrators, she explores the relationship between humanity and nature, unsettling aspects of human behavior, and power as it pertains to gender and political roles. Atwood's authorial voice has sometimes been described as formal and emotionally distant, but her use of allegory and intense imagery informs an intellectual and sardonic style popular with literary scholars and the reading public. Atwood has helped to define and identify the goals of contemporary Canadian literature and has earned a distinguished reputation among feminist writers for her exploration of women's issues.

Atwood was born in Ottawa and grew up in suburban Toronto. As a child she spent her summers at her family's cottage in a wilderness region of Quebec, where her father, a forest entomologist, conducted research. She began to write while in high school, contributing poetry, short stories, and cartoons to the school newspaper. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Atwood met critic Northrop Frye, who introduced her to the poetry of William Blake. Influenced by Blake's use of mythological imagery, Atwood wrote the poems collected in her first volume, *Double Persephone* (1961). *The Circle Game* followed in 1966, gaining critical acclaim for the author. The book won the 1967 Governor General's Award, Canada's highest literary honor. Since 1968, Atwood has produced ten collections of poetry. However, despite their favorable critical reception, these works have been overshadowed by her accomplishments as a critic and novelist. She earned widespread attention for *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, a seminal critical analysis of Canadian literature that served as a rallying point for the country's cultural nationalists, and several novels and short story collections, especially *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel concerning an oppressive future society. Many critics favorably compare *The Handmaid's Tale* with George Orwell's *1984* and other distinguished dystopian novels for its disturbing extension of contemporary trends and its allegorical portrait of political extremism.



While *Double Persephone* demonstrated Atwood's skillful use of metaphorical language, her second volume of poetry, *The Circle Game*, established the major themes of her poetry: inconsistencies of self-perception, the paradoxical nature of language, Canadian identity, and conflicts between humankind and nature. Sherrill Grace commented that Atwood is "constantly aware of opposites-- self/other, subject/object, male/female, nature/man-- and of the need to accept and work within them." Although all of her verse explores the uniqueness of the Canadian psyche, it was in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* that Atwood devoted her attention to what she calls the schizoid, or double, nature of Canada. Based on the autobiographies of a Canadian pioneer woman, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* examines why Canadians came to develop ambivalent feelings toward their country. Atwood further developed this dichotomy in *Power Politics*, in which she explored the relationship between sexual roles and power structures by focusing on personal relationships. The collection *You Are Happy* was praised for its "Circe/Mud Poems" sequence, which recasts traditional mythology to express a feminist perspective.

Criticism of Atwood's poetry has tended to emphasize her political and social views. Many critics identify the poet's use of grotesque, shocking imagery and heavy irony as hallmarks of her style. Because her poems often portray physical and psychological violence in relationships between men and women, some commentators have labeled Atwood pessimistic and dismissed her as little more than an ideologue, but other critics have found her a thoughtful, honest interpreter of feminist thought. The many critics who praise Atwood's work admire her spareness of language, emotional restraint and willingness to examine the harsher realities of both society and the natural world. As Rosellen Brown has noted, "Atwood's voice is low, the world does not assault her (thus she is not strident in self-defense) so much as it sways and melts and comes back together differently, the animal or geological origins of some familiar thing uncovered for an instant. She is much too reticent to confess, she airs no particular angers."