

Offred's Unreliability as a Narrator

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the whole story is told from the first-person point of view of Offred, the main character. Throughout the story, the reliability of Offred as a narrator can be questioned. She even questions it herself in some places. Specifically from page 244 to page 250, her reliability can be questioned.

This section of the story is Offred recounting her old friend Moira's recount of what happened after she escaped from the Red Center. "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive." (page 244) Before Offred even begins the story, she brings up the questionable nature of the story she is about to tell. Offred is changing her recount of the story slightly to make it more correct in her mind, but in reality the most accurate version of any story does not have personal changes to it.

Immediately after beginning the story, Offred quotes Moira saying something that Offred had previously said she would say. Offred claims Moira said, "I wanted to kill her." This was in reference to the Aunt she tied up in order to escape. Closer to the beginning of the story, when Moira first escapes, Offred tells the readers how she thinks the escape went and she says that she would like to think Moira wanted to kill the Aunt even though she didn't. Offred brought it up more about the amazing fact that Moira had the ability to kill an Aunt, but I think this fact connects back to Offred's unreliability as narrator.

The whole *The Handmaid's Tale* is written in the past tense. It is an account of Offred's experience while Gilead is coming about. When she was writing her first reaction to finding out about Moira's escape she also had already met with Moira in Jezebel's Club and heard her story. Offred is writing this whole story from some period in time after all of the events in the book take place. Because of this, while writing either part she could be mixing up the two. She could have thought Moira said she wanted to kill her, but in reality that is just what she imagined all those years ago. Or also the reverse could be true. When Offred is writing down the moment when Moira escapes from the Red Center, she could think that she thought Moira might have wanted to kill the Aunt, but in reality she just remembered that fact from the time Moira actually told her that.

Towards the end of this section (page 250) Offred acknowledges her power to change the story to what she'd like. "Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say that she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty commanders inside it." Offred goes on a little more to say how she would like to end the story. At first glance, this might make her seem more reliable, but upon a close reading of the past section you can begin to pick out obvious points where Offred adds her own opinion, or adds things the way she thinks they should be. The worst part is, Offred clearly thinks that it is harmless. Adding a little Offred to the Moira story. I wonder if Atwood is trying at all to make a point with this

tool? It could be some sort of reference to censorship of media. It relates to the question, *When does a government decide to restrict citizens freedoms?* At first some things can seem harmless. But can any restrictions of freedom be harmless? (freedom from vs. freedom to)

From these examples, I want to draw the conclusion that *The Handmaid's Tale* is written as a diary, a reflection of sorts, by Offred. She is writing this all down after the fact. Not only after the fact, but many years later. This would make Offred's unreliable narration make sense. It seems strange that Margaret Atwood would have such a confusing story, plot, and setting, as well as have an unreliable narrator. I really cannot come up with a good reason for it and I think that making Offred an unreliable narrator is a mistake in the craft of this book. It is, stylistically, a choice that weakens the message and themes that emerge throughout the story and therefore I think that *The Handmaid's Tale* would be a better book without an unreliable narrator.