

An Analysis of Narrative Time in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Although Margaret Atwood's 1985 classic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has aroused heated discussion and intensive study since its publication, very few studies set their sights on how the narrative of the story unfolds in time and what special effects it creates. This paper aims to lay bare its subtle and elaborate narrative design of time by scrutinizing the way in which the protagonist Offred narrates the story beyond the limit of time, laying an emphasis on Atwood's ingenious arrangement in discourse time by examining its time order, duration and frequency, through which Atwood's unique philosophy of time and her deep concern about the fate of human beings in the future are fully revealed.

Key words: Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; Narrative time; Story time; Discourse time

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INTRODUCTION

The Handmaid's Tale, originally published in 1985, is considered as a magnum opus of the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, which has received great reputation as well as numerous awards around the world. It was adapted to TV-series on Hulu in 2017, which contributed to its second popularity. The success of this American TV-series has once again stirred readers' enthusiasm for reading

and discussing this classic novel. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood fabricates a fundamentalist totalitarian state Gilead in the near future, where fertility has become under severe threat because of the increasingly spread chemical pollution and radiation. With strict hierarchy of social structure, Gilead controls women, especially healthy fertile women (the Handmaids), by constraining their daily activities, controlling their thoughts, closely connecting politics with sexuality, depriving their rights of getting in touch with language, and using women as complicit oppressors for self-surveillance. These handmaids are labeled and distributed to families of the ruling class (the Commanders) so that their value of fertility could be squeezed maximally. Basically, the novel consists of two sections--the story which revolves around the Handmaid Offred who is also the narrator, and a historical note which queries the facticity and veracity of the story in the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195.

As the "Queen of Canadian Literature", Atwood's literary works have never failed to gain extensive attention from scholars around the world. Since 1966, when Atwood's poetry collection *The Circle Game* (1964) won the Governor General's Award, she started to attract western academia's interest. In 1977, the first collection of critical essays concerning Atwood and her literary works *The Malahat Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium*, edited by Linda Sandler, was published, which mainly discussed Atwood's relation to Canadian literary tradition, her ecological and feminist concerns as well as exquisite narrative techniques. The publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* ushered the climax of Atwood's study. The majority of studies centered upon feminist perspectives and its dystopian features. From feminist perspectives, some employed the eco-feminist approach to elaborate the oppression and resistance of nature and females in Gilead (e.g.: I. Diamond, 1990; D. Hooker, 2006; Zhang & Fu, 2008; etc.); others read through a Foucauldian lens and analyzed the control and

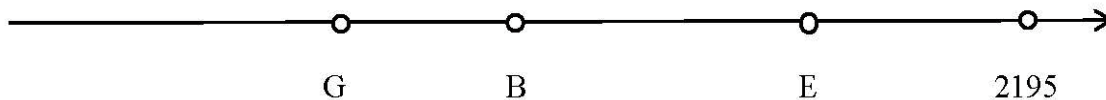
manipulation of women and reproduction in Gilead and women's bodies as political instruments through the relationship between power and discourse or discipline and punish (Somacarrera, 2000; Zhang, 2005; Ding, 2017; etc.). With regard to its dystopian characteristics, various research papers stress on different key points. Amin Malak (1987) suggested that dystopias deal with power as the prohibition and perversion of human potential and the citizens of Gilead are forced to live in such a society. Fu and Chen (1999) explored the gender relations from the dystopian traditions and reflected on how human beings bore environmental disasters with the rapid development of science and technology in the society. However, very few studies investigate the special arrangement of time in narrative and what particular effects it create. The purport of this paper is to lay bare its subtle and elaborate narrative design of time by scrutinizing the way in which the protagonist Offred narrates the story beyond the limit of time, laying an emphasis on Atwood's ingenious arrangement in discourse time by examining its time order, duration and frequency, through which Atwood's unique philosophy of time and her deep concern about the fate of human beings in the future are fully revealed.

1. STORY TIME AND NARRATIVE TIME: SPECIAL DESIGN OF TIME IN GILEAD

Time is one of the most basic dimensions of existence. It is inevitable to cast away time in any human experience, let alone in any narrative fiction. According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), time is the textual arrangement of the event component of the story (p.45). He juxtaposes time with characterization and focalization as three indispensable textual factors in relation to narrative. Atwood herself also lays much emphasis on time and infuses her appreciation of time into her literary works. In *Cat's Eye* (1989), another prominent novel of Atwood, she conveys her understanding of time in the mouth of the character,

"Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space" (p.3). "...time cannot exist without space and space-time without events and events without matter-energy..." (p.115). Matters constitute events, and events fill time, while narration records events to preserve the elapse of time. How do we grasp the mysterious, abstract and ephemeral time? Atwood provides us with an answer, "We don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (Atwood, 1985, p.3). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, she interweaves past, present and future into the story world. Subconsciousness, consciousness, instinct, desire and sundry thoughts mingle with each other in one moment. However, the author still leaves clues for readers to construct a clear time line in the story, which is how she stuns the readers with her ingenious arrangement of time.

Rimmon-Kenan (2002) defines time in narrative fiction as the "relations of chronology between story and text" (p.46), which draws a clear distinction between story time--"a linear succession of events" (p.46) and discourse time or text time--"the linear (spatial) disposition of linguistic segments in the continuum of the text" (p.46). According to Seymour Chatman (1978), story time (also chronological time or plot time) is the duration of the purported events of the narrative, while discourse time (also fictional time or reading time) represents the time it takes to peruse the discourse (p.62). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narration of the story starts from one night in the fifth week after Offred was sent to serve her third Commander as a handmaid and ends at her escape from Gilead, leaving the readers in suspense for unknowing the final fate of Offred. In succession, an epilogue is attached to the novel as the historical notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies on June 25, 2195 is minuted. Consequently, in order to explore the chronological order of the story, a rough time line can be drawn as follows:



G stands for the founding of Gileadean regime. B represents the beginning of Offred narration, i.e. one night in the fifth week after she was sent to serve her third Commander. E shows the ending of her narration, i.e. Nick's engineering her escape and her leaving the Commander's house. Events before the time node B are her past memory, which she uses past tense to narrate, including events before G which mainly revolve around her memory about her mother, Moira, her husband Luke and her daughter, and her experience in the Red Centre exhibited between G and B. 2195 is the time when the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies is held. Atwood

did not set specific time for G, B and E. Nevertheless, several clues have been revealed for the readers in the text. In Chapter 19, when Offred notices the word carved on her desk, she also mentions the approximate time of the close of schools. "J.H. loves B.P. 1954...M. loves G., 1972...There are no dates after the mid-eighties. This must have been one of the schools that was closed down then, for lack of children." (Atwood, 1985, pp.85-86). As a result, it can be inferred that the regime changes around the mid 1980s. Additionally, the seasons and plants in Serena Joy's garden also indicate time. "...a willow, weeping catkins...the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are

opening their cups, spilling out colour..." (Atwood, 1985, p.17), which suggests the coming of spring. Summer: "The good weather holds. It's almost like June, when we would get out our sundresses and our sandals and go for an ice-cream cone" (Atwood, 1985, p. 39); "It's warm for this time of year... Soon we'll be allowed to change into the summer dresses" (Atwood, 1985, p. 47). From summer to fall: "Today there are different flowers, drier, more defined, the flowers of high summer: daisies, black-eyed Susans, starting us on the long downward slope to fall" (Atwood, 1985, p. 195). Winter: "I look out at the dusk and think about its being winter. The snow falling, gently, effortlessly, covering everything in soft crystal, the mist of moonlight before a rain, blurring the outlines, obliterating colour" (Atwood, 1985, p.211). It is reasonable to conjecture that from B to E it spends nearly a year's time. According to the historical notes, the thirty tape cassettes, which records Offred's narration, are "of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc" (Atwood, 1985, p.215), which signify that G, B and E probably take place before 2080s to 2090s. To be concrete, the story time spans over two centuries, roughly from 1980s to 2195, while the discourse time covers Offred's narration from B to E, i.e. in almost one year. Nearly two hundred years' story time has been compacted and compressed into one year's discourse time. In such limited discourse time, Atwood skillfully fuses past, present and future, which presents her superb craftsmanship of writing.

2. ORDER, DURATION AND FREQUENCY: OFFRED'S NARRATION BEYOND THE LIMIT OF TIME

Basically, to study the non-equivalence of story time and discourse time, time in general could be viewed in three respects: order, duration and frequency (p. 35), which Gerard Genette has distinguished in his book *Time and Narrative in A La recherche du temps perdu* (1970). Order refers to "the succession of events in the story and their linear disposition in the text" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p.48). Duration covers "the relations between the time the events are supposed to have taken to occur and the amount of text devoted to their narration" (ibid). Frequency deals with "the relations between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated in the text" (ibid).

Firstly, concerning time order, *The Handmaid Tale* is a typical example of anachrony and flashbacks or analepses are widely applied in the narration. Flashback appears as soon as Offred begins her narration. The words she picks up--"once", "formerly", "remember", etc. and the tense she uses--"had been", "was", "would have been", etc. all suggest that it is a recalling of her past. Flashforward also exists occasionally in the text. For instance, Offred

imagines that her husband Luke escapes successfully and will send her a message, "Any day now there may be a message from him...The message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they've put her" (Atwood, 1985, p.80). According to Genette (1980), "Every anachrony constitutes, with respect to the narrative into which it is inserted—onto which it is grafted—a narrative that is temporally second...We will henceforth call the temporal level of narrative with respect to which anachrony is defined as such, 'first narrative'" (p.48). Hence, it is necessary to specify the first narration of the story in the first place. On the basis of the analysis of story time and discourse time above, the period between B and E can be defined as the first narration of the story. Offred's mind is always flooded with memory of the past and thus her narration is glutted with various analepses. To consider the reach and extent of the anachrony, the story on the whole is well-arranged and enriched by external analepses and mixed analepses. External analepses "evoke a past which precedes the starting point of the first narrative"(Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 49). The starting point of the first narrative is the time node B, i.e. one night in the fifth week after she was sent to serve her third Commander. Accordingly, her recalling of life before Gilead, experience in the Red Centre, life as a handmaid before this night all belong to external analepses. The first day she met the Commander's wife Serena Joy is a typical example of external analepsis.

"We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting. The Guardian from the previous posting brought me to the front door...So, you're the new one, she said. She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so" (Atwood, 1985, pp.16-17).

It successfully and distinctly displays Serena Joy's characteristic and image in Offred's memory, which paves the way for the progression of plot, and it also indicates the specific time of the beginning of the first narration. Mixed analepses cover the period that "begins before the starting point of the first narrative but at a later stage either joins it or goes beyond it" (Atwood, 1985, p.50). The Aunts' indoctrination in the Red Centre can be attributed to this type. Although Offred was brainwashed long before she was sent to the third Commander's house, the voice of the Aunts', especially Aunt Lydia, haunted her intermittently but constantly till the end of her narration. The readers could not even ascertain when the flashbacks of Aunt Lydia will come to an end. These flashbacks are twisted with the first narration. Despite time elapsing forward, it is always shrouded in the shadow of the past. For instance, when she prays, the death of the previous handmaid in the house lingers in her mind and she doubts about knowing the way she could possibly hang herself.

"Temptation comes next. At the Centre, temptation was anything much more than eating and sleeping. Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you, Aunt Lydia used to say. Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know. Maybe I couldn't bear to know. The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge" (Atwood, 1985, pp.144-145).

The "instructions" of Aunt Lydia exert a silent yet transforming influence of her thought. The selecting of one night in the fifth week after she was sent to serve her third Commander's house rather than the first day being a handmaid, the first day being sent into the Commander's house or the founding of Gileadean regime as the beginning of narration is carefully and subtly conceived. On the one hand, night appears as the title of each chapter for seven times in total. Night is suitable and vital for memory, interior monologue and flashbacks. In every chapter of "night", Offred's mind wanders freely from Luke to her daughter, from Moira to the Red Centre, etc. Story-telling, memory and flashback are the only way for her to reconstruct her identity after she is reduced to the role of being a handmaid. Her memory is fragmentary and her narration is tentative and uncertain. She herself suspects or even refuses the veracity of her story.

"I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off" (Atwood, 1985, p.36).

On the other hand, the fifth week in the third Commander's house seems to be casually chosen; however, "the third Commander" shows the inhumane treatment towards the handmaids. They are only tools, belongings and appendages for the Commanders to oppress and exploit their fertility value who can be traded, passed on, used and reused. "The fifth week" indicates that she should have been familiarized with such kind of lifestyle since she has stayed here for five weeks, but in fact just the opposite. All the happy memories about her family and regular life in the past reflect a striking contrast, while "instructions" of Aunt Lydia in the Red Centre becomes her shadow in her narration and follows her from the past to the present.

Secondly, with regard to time duration, ellipsis, deceleration and pause are the distinguishing characteristics during Offred's narration. Using "constancy of pace" as "the 'norm' against which to examine degrees of duration", Genette "discerns two forms of modification: acceleration and deceleration" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p.54). From the time line above, it is obvious that the discrepancy between story time and discourse time lies in the the period before B and the period between E and 2195. The events in the period before B emerge in the form of Offred's fragmentary recall of the past during the

time of the narration, which continuously shows a striking contrast between the current story-NOW and the past. Her recalling is constantly mingled with or interrupted by her description, observation, sense perceptions or interior monologue, which decelerates or sometimes even ceases the elapsing of time. For instance, she crawls into the closet to compose herself from laughter or hysteria.

"I cram both hands over my mouth as if I'm about to be sick, drop to my knees, the laughter boiling like lava in my throat. I crawl into the cupboard, draw up my knees, I'll choke on it. My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter" (Atwood, 1985, p.110).

Such detailed description of her physical and mental state prolongs the story time for the readers to feel empathy for Offred. The description of static scenes or portraits of characters falls in the ambit of pause, which greatly weakens the control of time on narrative and highlights the spatial characteristics of scenes and characters. An example of pause could be the description of the Commander, "The Commander has on his black uniform, in which he looks like a museum guard. A semi-retired man, genial but wary, killing time. But only at first glance. After that he looks like a midwestern bank president, with his straight neatly brushed silver hair, his sober posture, shoulders a little stooped. And after that there is his moustache, silver also, and after that his chin, which really you can't miss. When you get down as far as the chin he looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine, of times gone by"(Atwood, 1985, p.68). In this episode, story time stops and no action actually takes place, but it draws a clear and vivid picture of the Commander and even reveals his characteristics by merely describing his appearance. The narration of the story terminates abruptly with an open ending, deliberately omitting the period from E to 2195, which creates an ellipsis. On the one hand, this absent period of time is crucial to the open-ended narration and aggravates a sense of uncertainty and tentativeness in her narration, which also accords with the title as a "tale". On the other hand, it also forms a distinct contrast between Offred's narration and Professor James Darcy Pieixoto's speech, which sets up several binary oppositions--memory and history, male and female, self and the other, truth and falsehood, center and periphery, etc. In this way, it sheds light on the different way of female and male's narration and questions the limits of male interpretation and the subjectivity of history.

Thirdly, as for time frequency, besides the regular singulative telling, repetitive telling and iterative telling is often applied in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For instance, she narrates her relationship and interaction with the Marthas, "Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before. I don't listen long, because I don't want to be caught doing it...Or we would gossip...Or I would help Rita to make the bread"

(Atwood, 1985, pp.14-15). It is a typical iterative telling to summarize her tedious daily routine, which she “used to despise” but “long for it” now (Atwood, 1985, p.15). By recounting only once, it encapsulates her eager for the exchange of information and contact with the outside world. In addition, it also reveals the Marthas’ attitudes towards the Handmaids. Although the Marthas acts as servants while the Handmaids are said to be “a position of honour” (Atwood, 1985, p.17), they show no sympathy towards the Handmaids and are even contemptuous of the Handmaids. Seven chapters in fifteen are named as “night”. The recalling of Offred’s daughter in these nights is representative example of repetitive telling, especially the fact that her daughter was taken away from her. “I can remember feeling quite calm. I can remember screaming, it felt like screaming though it may have been only a whisper, Where is she? What have you done with her? There was no night or day; only a flickering...She’s in good hands, they said. With people who are fit. You are unfit, but you want the best for her. Don’t you?” (Atwood, 1985, p.36). “She fades, I can’t keep her here with me, she’s gone now. Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five...I don’t have those things any more, the clothes and hair. I wonder what happened to all our things. Looted, dumped out, carried away. Confiscated” (Atwood, 1985, p.54). Offred’s narration of Moira’s escape and Moira herself’s narration can also be classified into repetitive telling, but from different narrators and focalizers. Repetitive telling in general exists in her recollection of the past, the use of which displays that the unforgettable and painful experience can never be erased from her heart even though her memory is fragmentary and her narration is uncertain. She immersed herself in those negative feelings and can hardly recover.

CONCLUSION

As Offred said, “Time’s a trap, I’m caught in it” (Atwood, 1985, p.108). She is trapped in endless time at present without any connection towards past and future. Past has gone and is beyond recognition with fickle memories and unreliable stories. Present leaves no room for future in such a fundamentalist totalitarian society. Centuries

later, history does not record this period of suffering of human beings and act as a warning, but instead questions the authenticity and exactitude of this personal telling. Fortunately, through Atwood’s ingenious arrangement of narrative time in order, duration and frequency, *The Handmaid’s Tale* renders the narrator a chance to blur the boundaries of past, present and future as well as fact and fiction, which leaves the reader in deep reflection. Atwood’s unique philosophy of time and her deep concern about the fate of human beings in the future are fully revealed.

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