Margaret Atwood and Social Justice

Margaret Atwood and Social Justice:

A Writer's Evolving Ideology

By

Theodore F. Sheckels

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Margaret Atwood and Social Justice: A Writer's Evolving Ideology

By Theodore F. Sheckels

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9098-4
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9098-4

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Over the years, more and more critics have turned to the many works of Canadian author Margaret Atwood. Some of us can trace when that interest began to decades ago. Mine goes back to the early 1980s.

I was teaching freshman composition as part of my duties, and, back then, we were still assigning students in this writing class works of literature and having them compose essays in response. (Today, a rather outmoded pedagogy). A common text to use was an anthology, and I stumbled upon one that offered a set of short novels. There were six essays to be written in the course; there were six short novels. Perfect. One of those short novels was Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. I read it in a single sitting: I was truly captivated by it.

Months later, rummaging through a larger school's library, I sought out "Atwood" and discovered that she had authored three other books, *The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle,* and *Life Before Man*. I read them and, shortly thereafter, *Bodily Harm*, which was in the bookstores but not yet in a library.

What drew me to literature was what I saw as its social or political commentary, which *Surfacing* was full of, as was *The Edible Woman*, although that novel did seem much lighter in tone. *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man* were less appealing, but I also enjoyed Atwood's dry wit and the manner in which she handled language. So, I enjoyed them. *Bodily Harm*, perhaps a flawed book, returned Atwood to the more social and political that I had found in *Surfacing*. Then, of course, Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, and her placement in the sociopolitical category of writers was set, even if not every book was quite as sociopolitical as her story (yet to come) about the future before us in Gilead.

I kept reading, and I authored a few papers and essays offering commentary. At some point, I became the president of the Margaret Atwood Society and the founding editor *of Margaret Atwood Studies*, which was initially in print and then went online. I found all of her work fascinating, and I had become convinced that, if we define the term "political" broadly, almost all of her work is such. So, in 2012, I published a book-length study, *The Political in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: The Writing on the Wall of the Tent*. In it, book by book through *The Year of the Flood*, I argued that in several different ways Atwood was indeed a political writer.

Then, theory foregrounded criticism. So, I used what I still find an intriguing theoretical mix to consider Atwood's work. I used Kenneth Boulding's conception of power and how it served different functions in different realms to demonstrate that Atwood was indeed political in the broadest sense. Then, I used the thoughts of Michel Foucault to demonstrate how the power she depicts is created and sustained and how those disempowered resist it. In using Foucault, I was not as alone as in using Boulding, for many had found Foucault's concept of a dominant "discourse", and how it might be resisted, appealing. In that study, I defined "political" as having to do with the allocation of power, recognizing that Atwood is not political if "political" means dealing with elections, legislation, and the like, but is if the term is defined more broadly. *Cat's Eye*, for example, is very much about power, but it is quite remote from anything falling under "political" if that term is narrowly defined.

Social justice, the theme of this book (and a series of books undertaken by this press) is related to the "political" insofar as those with power might establish that as the goal they will use their power to serve or, flipped, which is sadly more often the unfortunate case, what those who possess power might deny. Power can serve or thwart many goals, but, increasingly, social justice has become a major concern of those who choose to examine power's dynamics. So, the question this study asks is to what extent does Margaret Atwood's discussion of power serve the goal of social justice by, primarily, demonstrating how it is very frequently thwarted.

The term "social justice" is a tricky one. In contemporary political or media circles, it seems to have a restricted meaning, being a term applied more often than not to the desired situation—and the denied situation—of people discriminated against on, primarily, the basis of race or ethnicity. But the discussion of discrimination quickly slides into sexual orientation and, then, gender status. From there, it is a short leap to social class, and from social class, it is a short leap to how one is employed (or perhaps not employed). Once the sliding ends, we have a sense of discrimination (i.e. the denial of social justice) that embraces more groups of people and more people than, perhaps, one initially thought.

Recognizing the trickiness of the term is an important first step when applying it to Margaret Atwood, for she is not a writer who stresses race or ethnicity in her work. As will be noted frequently, she writes about the world she knows. Given her subject matter, some might quickly assume that Atwood and social justice are only very loosely connected. However, if one grants how broad the term social justice really is, then Atwood's place as an advocate becomes apparent. This study attempts to trace what that

advocacy is and how it gradually evolved from book to book in Atwood's canon.

Doing so will focus attention on only some dimensions of Atwood's work. Plot and theme will matter more than narratological matters such as narrative perspective or structure, although, occasionally, the study will explore what one might term the "literary" dimensions of a text if they are relevant to how Atwood is offering her social justice commentary. This study, then, attends to make much of the scholarly commentary on Atwood's books, which explores the literary side, peripheral. So, this study takes a somewhat different approach to documentation than, perhaps, normal—certainly different than what I used in the 2012 book. There are some parenthetical references in the chapters that follow, but only when a comment by Atwood or a commentary on Atwood is directly referred to. These references, however, do not cover my debt to other Atwood scholars.

Several months ago, I took on the task with another publisher to survey all of the extant criticism on Atwood and, then, select the "essential" secondary sources. The task was nearly impossible, for the total number of candidates listed by the publisher exceeded 1,600 pieces. And I found, as I reviewed the list, that quite a few items I knew of were missing. There are, relevant to my work here, two consequences of this volume of work on Atwood. First, many fellow Atwood scholars have offered comments on the political issues Atwood raises, comments that undoubtedly have influenced what I review in this study. Second, some insights about Atwood or particular novels are now so widely shared that it is next to impossible to attribute an insight to a particular source. There are, on Atwood's work, many matters simply assumed, although, once, some critic undoubtedly made the observation in print for the first time. So, to acknowledge this wealth of relevant but not directly cited commentary, I am appending a lengthy bibliography to this study. It attempts to list, in general and then book by book, the works most relevant to an exploration of Atwood and social justice.

In reviewing this bibliography, a reader might note how the scholarly community studying Atwood's work is truly global. As editor of *Margaret Atwood Studies*, I frequently received submissions from distant places. As a "fan" of Atwood, I was delighted that her work was drawing interest from around the globe. However, I often found that scholars in some distant places were unaware of seminal work done by scholars in North America. Now, I find that scholars in North America are often unaware of some very interesting work done abroad. The development of online scholarly publication has made matters worse, for some who are writing on Atwood are very aware of what is online while others are not. The upshot is

that my bibliography may well omit work that simply is not coming to the attention of one who is, arguably, more familiar with the Atwood bibliography than most. My apologies to anyone whose relevant work I have omitted. Somewhat surprisingly, only a handful of essays or chapters on Atwood highlight the term "social justice," but I do live in fear that, somewhere out there exists an essay on Atwood and social justice that I most assuredly should have cited if I had only known it existed.

I also make an assumption about audience in writing this book in the manner I have. I assume that my readers are reasonably familiar with Margaret Atwood's work. Therefore, I do not offer extensive plot summaries, for example. I hope I say enough to demonstrate how the goal of social justice is being pursued by Atwood, but I do not cover every dimension of plot or every characteristic of a novel as a work of literary art. I also assume that I do not need to, in any detailed manner, introduce Atwood to my audience or make the argument that she is a significant contemporary writer. In an initial chapter, I quickly review some "Atwood basics." These are probably not unknown to Atwood scholars but might be to those who know of her and, perhaps, only know a few of her novels. That sketch is intended to provide something of a biographical stage for the discussion that follows. That is necessary because, in assessing Atwood's work in conjunction with any global theme such as social justice, one must understand the world she's coming from, which, as would be true of any author, makes her more familiar with certain matters and less familiar with other matters.

Then, as I review Atwood's essays and interviews in Chapter Two as a starting point for understanding her relationship to "political" matters and as I discuss her novels book by book, I think one only just somewhat familiar with Atwood will find blank spaces needing to be filled in. Most will find the terrain familiar. There are, out there, readers who only know Atwood as the author of *The Handmaid's Tale* or readers who believe that Atwood is just—or mainly—a writer of speculative fiction. The gaps in their understandings are, I hope, filled when they realize the range of work Atwood has undertaken—social commentary, historical fiction, an updating of Shakespeare. As for the argument for her significance, I simply note how, almost annually, she ends up high on the list of those being considered for literature's highest honors, including the Nobel Prize.

Like many who have devoted years to studying Atwood, I hope she soon wins that highest honor. One argument to be made for Atwood is the range of her work; another is its high quality. Still another is very much tied to the focus of this particular study: how her body of work is not art for art's sake and not popular entertainment, but an important commentary on how power is abused in our world to thwart social justice for many.

Over the decades, I have taught many Margaret Atwood novels in different instructional contexts such as a class in women's writing or a survey of Canadian literature or even, once, a senior seminar devoted to Atwood (one she visited). So, I need to thank countless students who have shared their ideas about these novels. Also, over the decades, at conferences large and small, I have participated in many discussions with fellow "Atwoodians," where ideas and insights were freely shared. I thank these colleagues—as old as I am or much younger, here in North America or abroad. Finally, I must thank the University of Toronto Library. Not only does the library maintain Atwood's papers, it holds, most often in print, the many, many books on Atwood and Canadian writing as well as the wealth of periodicals in which those twinned topics are discussed. On sabbatical there, I was constantly amazed that a book or journal I needed to consult was on a shelf somewhere in the building.

CHAPTER ONE

MARGARET ATWOOD: SCHOLAR, ARTIST, ACTIVIST

Margaret Atwood's complete biography has yet to be written, but two good stabs have been taken at the task as Atwood's fame increased. However, the most recent one (Cooke) stops before reaching the twenty-first century, therefore missing more than two decades of Atwood's life and work. This chapter is not an attempt to either repeat or extend this earlier work; rather, it is an attempt to set a biographical stage or frame for understanding Atwood's fiction. Anyone who wants to declare Atwood an activist or an ideologue might find some evidence in her life, but that evidence would be drawn, primarily, from her later years, and even that evidence would have to be picked out of a field offering contrary information—contrary in the sense that it pointed in other directions, not in the sense of being contradictory.

Atwood was born in Ottawa, but, because of her father's scientific profession, she spent much of her childhood in rural Canada, where he did his biological research. Then, somewhat like her character Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*, she finds herself in metropolitan Toronto, continuing in that urban space while attending the University of Toronto, receiving a B.A. and an M.A. from that institution. She began her academic career thinking she would major in home economics, but her studies took her into literature and other arts. Those studies also took her from metropolitan Toronto to metropolitan Boston, where she was a Ph.D. candidate at Radcliffe/Harvard. At the University of Toronto, she seemed to become intrigued by the neglected subject of "Can Lit." She also was influenced by charismatic University of Toronto Professor Northrop Frye, as were many literature students then. And—who knows—she may have lived in a dormitory much like the one depicted in *The Robber Bride* and known students like Tony, Karen/Charis, Roz, and even the mysterious Zenia. (In fact, there may be a good bit of Atwood herself in Tony: short, bookish, said by others to be doing a man's work.) At Radcliffe/Harvard, Atwood seemed to become

intrigued by American literature from the Puritan era, but her dissertation was going to focus, not on that, but the Victorian period in England.

While in Cambridge, Massachusetts, besides reading and the like, she wrote. She wrote poetry, and she wrote fiction. She succeeded in getting her poetry published, winning the Governor General's Award for Poetry. She had sent her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, to a publisher, who had misplaced it. The fame of the Governor General's Award, however, helped her get a contract for that book, and her career as both poet and novelist was underway.

Atwood never completed her Ph.D. thesis. Perhaps, her success as a writer caused her to choose writing over an academic career. If that is indeed the case, Atwood did not make the choice because her writing had given her immediate financial security. Far from it. So, the next few years find Atwood teaching low-level classes at Canadian universities and not especially liking the work.

At this point, Atwood is at a juncture in her career, between being a scholar and a writer. With her next published works, she will place herself firmly in the second group, but it is important to note that she never really ceased being a scholar. Throughout her career, she will write many essays on literature as well as a handful of full-length studies, two on "Can Lit" and one on speculative fiction. "Official" scholars have, at times, sneered at this work; however, despite it having a tone far from the stuffiness of much academic work, her studies proved influential. Her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* is a seminal work on the subject and, although she wrote the book as a guide for secondary school teachers, "more serious" scholars were quick to point to what they saw as the book's shortcomings.

Atwood's scholarliness also reveals itself in how she works on a novel. She says that story ideas and character ideas come first, but, along the way, she and her growing staff do a great deal of research. This research shows up in all of her books, even ones set largely in contemporary Toronto, a landscape she obviously knew first-hand, but the digging and searching reveal themselves more in the works that go back in time (e.g. *Alias Grace, The Blind Assassin*) and even more in the works that look to the future (e.g. *The Handmaid's Tale,* the "MaddAddam trilogy").

Quite frequently in this study, I will refer to the boxes in the Fisher Rare Books Room at the University of Toronto Library. Like many writers, Atwood has deposited her "papers" at an academic institution, presumably for others to study. These "papers" are in boxes, and the number of boxes per book increases as Atwood's career progresses. Early, one finds drafts and correspondence with publishers; later, one finds those documents as well as clippings and printouts connected to some of the bizarre material in

her speculative fiction, establishing her claim that there is nothing in her books that is not based on real events. (Exaggerated, yes, but that's what speculative fiction writers do.)

Much of what Atwood wrote early-on was based on what she personally knew. Atwood had worked for a short period for a consumer surveying company just as Marian does in *The Edible Woman*; Atwood grew up in an environment much like that in *Surfacing*; Atwood certainly had felt all of the pushes and pulls of being a female writer as Joan does in *Lady Oracle*; and Atwood knew the neighborhoods and streets of Toronto as do her several characters in *Life Before Man*.

Gradually, Atwood moved away from her immediate experience, occasionally returning to it. This progression might well be thought of as natural for a young writer. So, *Bodily Harm,* which begins in the Toronto Atwood knew, goes off to two fictitious Caribbean islands, and the next novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, goes off into a very scary future.

Atwood's move from what she immediately knew to other, wider scenes and subjects reflects two other biographical facts. First, Atwood began to travel more. Many of the trips were tied to her being invited to read or serve as a writer in-residence. Others seemed more prompted by curiosity about the world outside the rather limited one of eastern Canada and northeastern United States. So, whereas many critics immediately connected *The Handmaid's Tale* to the United States because it was obviously set in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the politics reflected right-wing movements occurring during the Reagan presidency, the book perhaps had its roots in what Atwood had seen on her travels—e.g. in Afghanistan.

Second, Atwood began to become more engaged with what others might term "political" matters. She became involved in the politics of writing in Canada, where writers such as her had many complaints about some of the constraints they were under, and politics in general, taking the leadership in the Canadian chapter of Amnesty International as early as 1981. Atwood very much resisted the term "politics." To her it meant elections and the like, and that was not what she was getting involved in. What she was doing was committing herself to advocacy on behalf of certain domestic and global progressive causes. The core concept in her advocacy at the beginning was "humanity": she was for it and against any denial of it for any group, be that denial based on race, ethnicity, class, or—especially—gender. Atwood did not see this advocacy as "political," but many did and increasingly applied that term to her work.

During the decades that followed, Atwood tried to keep her work as a writer and her work on behalf of causes somewhat separate. The latter she pursued as a citizen—of Canada and of the world. I surmise that she did

so for two connected reasons. First, she wanted her writing to be appreciated as writing. She wanted her characters and storylines to intrigue readers as they had intrigued her, and she wanted these basic narratological elements to speak to readers, to make them think. Furthermore, as a writer of prose fiction, she wanted to "play" with other narratological elements such as perspective and genre, and she hoped that readers would enjoy this "play." Second, she did not want her writing to be categorized as being in line with one ideology or another. Partially, this desire was tied to sales—and she was trying to make her living as a writer. If labeled "feminist" or anything else, she would find her market limited. This desire, however, was also tied to how she hoped her work would be read—not through the lens of an ideology it was assumed, up-front, to have embraced, but on its own terms. These terms, as scholars of Atwood well know, vary dramatically from book to book.

Perhaps the fear of being categorized diminished as Atwood became more successful. A world-acclaimed writer could count on sales, movie rights, invitations to speak, and the like. But, her personal economy aside, Atwood did eventually become more comfortable being thought of as "political" or as an advocate as time progressed.

The change in Atwood is demonstrated by two encounters I personally had with her. The first is in Toronto in the 1990s. The Modern Language Association was meeting there, and the Margaret Atwood Society was staging its annual wine-and-cheese party for members at the St. George Hotel. Atwood and her partner Graeme Gibson were invited, and they showed up—early enough that those of us slicing the cheese and pouring the wine had ample time to chat. The topic that seemed foremost in Atwood's mind was the numerous bookfairs she would soon be travelling to in the United States. I thought of Atwood as a literary figure; she clearly thought of herself as a writer who needed to cultivate a readership, to sell books. There was, of course, nothing wrong with Atwood's perspective: in fact, it made more sense than mine, which would have had her retiring to an attic somewhere—or her farm—and writing in solitude as literary figures (of course) did. Given that Atwood's perspective focused on sales, one can grasp why she did not want labels that might limit her readership attached to her work.

The second is close to two decades later, when she visited my campus to read and to meet with senior English majors who were enrolled in a seminar studying her work. She stayed in the auditorium lobby long after the reading was over to sign books: she was still concerned about her readership—her fans. However, she dedicated her fee to an environmental activist group, and she did not keep that donation secret. She told the

audience where the money was going and why the group's work to protect the creatures in the air, in the sea, and on the earth was important. I would venture to guess that Atwood would not have made such a public declaration two decades earlier.

So, perhaps, Atwood is more comfortable with "political" or ideological labels being attached to the "MaddAddam trilogy" books than she was after *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985. This comfort, however, does not mean that Atwood is fine with readers forgetting that she is first and foremost a writer. And, maybe, what she does on the side is intended to remind readers that she is not writing just to promote a causes or causes. Two "curious" works are included in the survey that begins with Chapter Three: *The Heart Goes Last* and *Hag-Seed*. I call these "curious" because some Atwood scholars might well exclude them from the official Atwood canon. Throughout her career, Atwood pursued writing projects one might label incidental, including the very political lecture/book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, children's books, teleplays and screenplays, and opera libretti. *The Heart Goes Last* and *Hag-Seed* might be put by some in this incidental category and, thus, outside the canon.

The Heart Goes Last, although it does connect thematically with some of what is in the "MaddAddam trilogy" books, is much lighter, a good bit crazier. It began as an online sci-fi story and grew, and, although it discusses the ominous topic of organ harvesting, it also features sex robots that look like Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe. Atwood, I'm guessing, was demonstrating to readers that, yes, although she could be a writer-advocate, she could also just have fun.

Somewhat similar is *Hag-Seed*, in which Atwood offers an updating of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She joined other contemporary writers in the Hogarth Press' project of redoing the bard's classic in twenty-first century, prose fiction terms. Atwood does succeed in making a serious point about those victimized by discrimination, as a later chapter will show, but Atwood is clearly having fun creating her new Prospero and the prison inmates who will become his actors.

So, in these two works, we see Atwood the writer, but, then, she pens the long-awaited *The Testaments*, and we revisit the messages of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is now a Hulu television series. One might well interpret *The Testaments* as an extension of the "politics" of the 1985 novel, but, at the same time as Atwood tilts in a familiar political direction she also tilts toward the fun tasks a writer might take on.

So, what this bit of a biographical sketch demonstrates, I hope, is that Margaret Atwood has a scholarly streak that never goes away and she

has a political or ideological or advocacy position that emerges (with her becoming increasingly comfortable with it), but she is throughout primarily a writer. In searching for what her ideology might be—in this case, how and to what extent she embraces the social justice cause, one must remember that she is primarily a writer. We are not going to be able to transform her work into a treatise with tenets, or a declaration or proclamation. We are, however, going to be able to demonstrate, through the ideas her creative work expresses, that social justice is something she wishes the human race would strive for.

CHAPTER TWO

ATWOOD AND IDEOLOGY, TAKE ONE: ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

Throughout her long career, especially at its beginning, Atwood insisted that she did not have an ideology. She was a writer, she insisted. As such, she created characters and plots. Yes, as her novels unfolded, they did present ideas, but these ideas were not a reflection of any "-ism" that directed her writing. If one traces Atwood's career, one finds that increasing amounts of research go into each novel—helped along by an enlarging research staff. Atwood's papers, stored at the University of Toronto library, occupy an increasing number of boxes, increasing not just because she writes more but because the amount of research per book is increasing. But, although the depth of research increases, no definite ideology emerges—until fairly late in Atwood's writing career. Established, she becomes more comfortable with labels. She positions herself as an environmental activist, perhaps an eco-feminist. Her novels, however, suggest that she is offering a broader ideology in line with the broad tenets of social justice. Later chapters will explore this ideology as it is presented in many of her works of prose fiction. This chapter will trace its evolution as seen in the many interviews Atwood has given and in her occasional non-fiction pieces, which she has conveniently anthologized in three volumes.

Social Justice

First, however, "social justice" must be defined. It is a tricky term because, as the term has been used, it has taken on a narrow definition out of sync with a very important broader one. The narrow definition deals heavily with race; thus, in the United States at least, one hears the call for "social justice" in the many—far too many—cases where African-Americans have been treated poorly by the police or in the courts. The "Black Lives Matter" social movement has "social justice" as its goal. As such, it goes beyond the nation's flawed criminal justice system. "Social justice" is not being served when there are barriers tied to race in the pursuit of decent housing,

nutritious food, good medical care, and well-paying jobs. Such barriers, certainly lower than decades ago, still exist, and the United States will not have "social justice" until the barriers vanish. And the United States is not alone: injustice tied to race occurs elsewhere, but this grave injustice tied to race is not the only injustice the developed world needs to recognize and address.

Atwood very much writes to the developed world and from its perspective. In other words, she sees what this world has done, and she understands how the damage occurred. She is, after all, a product of the developed world. This is not the place to review again her biography, but, as most know, her life (beyond a rural childhood) is tied to urban centers—primarily metropolitan Toronto. Educated there and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Atwood's postgraduate school life has, after a few brief university teaching gigs, been in the greater Toronto area—on a farm in its exurbs and, then, in the heart of the city. She has traveled globally and, therefore, seen other, less-privileged parts of the world—e.g. Afghanistan, but even most of these journeys have kept her within a corps of developed nations where her work is read. After all, as one trying to make a living as a writer, her travels were predominantly promotional. She was not the investigating agent of any international group (although she did join a few).

Atwood's positioning might be considered by some a liability—i.e. not really knowing the privileges she has had. However, what might be a liability can be an asset if one sees not only the issues that make the world a socially unjust place but understands how the world became such. Atwood's career has been a lengthy one. It began when she, as a graduate student in English-language literature, began writing poetry and trying her hand at novels. One should not expect that twenty-some year-old student would be a sophisticated observer of the world's ills. Her sensitivity at that point would probably be more selective—reflecting her gender and what she sees happening in rural Canada, where she grew up, and in the other experiences a young writer might have. So, one should be slow to critique Atwood's early work, even a text as far along as *Bodily Harm*, for not exhibiting the sophistication of the "MaddAddam trilogy." Still, the seeds of Atwood's commitment to "social justice" are apparent even in her early work.

That work—and most of Atwood's—attends very little to matters of race or ethnicity. In fact, if one were to survey her characters quickly, only one, the Asian Oryx in *Oryx and Crake*, is obviously a person of color. Ethnicity does enter other works—Lesje in *Life Before Man* is Ukrainian and Roz in *The Robber Bride* is part Jewish, but Atwood's fictive world does indeed seem white and Anglo-leaning. The reason is simple: Atwood

wrote about what she knew. But, adhering to the known does not mean that Atwood and "social justice" are disconnected because "social justice" means having a society in which all—all people, all creations—are treated justly. "Justly" here means—loosely defined—equally, fairly, respectfully. The word "loosely" is very appropriate in Atwood's case. She is not a sociopolitical commentator; rather, she is a creative artist who is trying, first, to entertain—and sell books; second, to express herself; and, third, to say something about the world she lives in. That 1-2-3 order was undoubtedly the order at her career's onset, although not necessarily all the way through it, for the third goal—commenting on the world—does progress into a place of greater prominence as Atwood moves through the decades.

The progression is evident in Atwood's novels. In her early works, she is aware of the injustices suffered by those gendered female and by the natural world. The novel *Surfacing* is the crucial text. Those concerns will continue, joined by an awareness of the plight of less-developed nations (*Bodily Harm*) and women in gender-oppressive societies (*The Handmaid's Tale*). Eventually, her concern for the natural world will increase, but, before she progresses to that point (seen in the "MaddAddam trilogy"), she will explore how the victims of social injustice—primarily female—are victimized by evil men (*The Blind Assassin*), by an ethnically-biased criminal justice system (*Alias Grace)*, and even by fellow females (*Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*).

With *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's focus seems to shift to science, but the science that proves apocalyptic is mixed with the political and the commercial. And sexism does not vanish: consider Oryx as a sex-trafficked pre-teen in *Oryx and Crake* and the exploited lives of the performers at "Scales and Tails" in *The Year of the Flood.* In the "MaddAddam trilogy," the picture of social injustice is both rich and multi-faceted. But it takes Atwood a while to get there: she is a writer, not a sociopolitical activist. She may end up serving a sociopolitical cause, but her progress to that point is a writer's progress. And what Atwood arrives at, which the final chapter of this study will discuss, does not focus on race in the manner that many who hear the term "social justice" might expect. Atwood is undoubtedly quite aware of the global injustices suffered by people of color; however, she is a writer who writes about the world she knows. She does not reject the emphases other writers who are concerned with social justice might embrace; rather, she offers a broader interpretation of the term, one which embraces far more than just race.

Consider the following four moments in Atwood's fiction, deliberately chosen to span her long career. Each reveals an interest in "social justice," defined broadly.

In the early novel *Surfacing*, the female narrator, her lover, and two friends travel to an island in a lake on the Ontario-Quebec border. The narrator's father had disappeared, and her ostensible mission is to help authorities there discover what has befallen him. Just reading the first several pages of the novel, one discovers that the lake is not what it was when the narrator was younger and living there. Timbering interests have dammed the waterway to assist in moving downed trees onward to mills. The result is a raised water level and dying vegetation all along the lakeside. Pollution is evident, as are dead fish. And the naturally winding road into the lakeside village has been replaced with a straight one that was bulldozed if not dynamited into existence through the rock. The lake—and the life along it and in it—has been abused, not treated as a vital piece of earthly life and thus treated unjustly.

In the later novel *Bodily Harm*, the central female character and narrator, Rennie, is depicted from the beginning as trapped in a threatening, sexist world. Her apartment has been invaded by a man who has left a threatening noose on her bed; her live-in lover Jake is getting kinkier and kinkier in the sexual games he insists that she play; and her magazine's editor has sent her to visit a disgusting exhibit of pornography so that she can write a story on porn from the female perspective. She vomits; she feels oppressed. And it is, of course, her gender that marks her as victim. She is not treated fairly, justly, or with respect.

In a still later novel, *The Blind Assassin*, there is victimization based on gender, but also based on ideas. The narrator, Iris, and her lover must meet secretly—in part because they fear her powerful, rich husband, but also because his ideology has made him a marked man in Canada in the 1930s. His advocacy for workers, which has allied him with the Communist Party, has necessitated his shadowy existence. Rather than consider his ideas and grant the validity of his labor organizing activities, the dominant Toronto business-and-political forces have labeled him dangerous. He is not treated justly.

Finally, in *Oryx and Crake*, we glance at several ways in which the people in some parts of the world are viewed as quite dispensable. Oryx's story is vague, but the reader concludes that she, from an Asian nation where protection of the young and female is limited, has a past involving "kiddie porn" and sex trafficking. When Glenn (or Crake) develops what she is led to believe will be an immensely popular—and lucrative—pharmaceutical, she becomes his agent spreading the disease hidden inside the drug

throughout the less-developed world. She may know about the disease; she may think that "pharma" has the cure and is just trying to create the market for it. What she is not aware of is that the disease has no cure and its spread is Glenn/Crake's maniacal method for exterminating the human race. Annihilating humanity is, of course, not just, but neither is the way that Glenn/Crake—and "pharma"—develop diseases and, then, drugs for them, and the way that the deaths of the world's poorer people are used to create the panic which, in turn, will help to sell the drugs. Glenn/Crake is a misanthropic mad scientist, but, through him we glimpse at a pharmaceutical industry that routinely spreads disease among disposable people in order to sell drugs to those deemed more privileged. Profit trumps justice.

The environment is not respected; neither are women, those with unpopular ideologies, and the world's disposable people. Atwood's emerging commitment to "social justice" embraces these causes and others. Although it does not focus on race or ethnicity, it is nonetheless a "social justice" crusade she eventually embarks on. However, even in her most recent works, she is still foremost a writer, not a sociopolitical advocate. She may now speak more often on sociopolitical matters than earlier in her career, when her reputation was less established and she depended more on sales to live, but she is still a creative artist who creates characters and plots, and who also has fun playing with ideas and forms.

This persona is obvious in the interviews she has given, as well as in her occasional prose pieces. In both of these, we can discern her progress toward a higher measure of activism.

Atwood's Many Essays

Atwood is a prolific writer in several genres. This study focuses on her prose fiction, as do most, but she is also the proud author of short non-fiction pieces. I say "proud" because, rather than treat them as peripheral, she has anthologized them. In 1982, she published *Second Words*; in 2004, she published *Moving Targets*; and in 2022, she published *Burning Questions.* Conveniently for the critic, Atwood chose to organize the three anthologies chronologically.

Second Words

Second Words contains fifty pieces. Most deal with writers and writing, which is what one might expect given Atwood's vocation. In my judgment, five-ten percent for those quantitatively inclined—concern sociopolitical issues. Two, "Nationalism, Limbo, and the Canadian Club" and "Canadian-

American Relations: Surviving the Eighties," deal with how a stronger Canadian identity is emerging among writers and in the academic study of "Can Lit" and how Canada and United States differ culturally. Atwood pursues her topic with a fair measure of neutrality, but that does not prevent her from observing and worrying about the conservative direction the United States had taken with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. (This worry will play a role, although arguably not the determinative one, in her writing in *The Handmaid's Tale*.)

Two others, "On Being a Woman Writer: Paradoxes and Dilemmas" and "The Curse of Eve—Or, What I Learned in School," deal with the gender-specific issues women face in general should they choose higher education or the professions, and specifically should they desire to be a respected writer. These are witty pieces, but the observations do seem to parallel what Atwood depicts in *Lady Oracle*, which is also witty in tone. Atwood will, of course, become something of a crusader for women's issues; here, she treats the subject lightly but seriously.

The remaining piece, "Amnesty International: An Address," marks something of a turning point in Atwood's career. An incident in Canada, the particulars of which are long-forgotten, had catapulted her into the leadership of the Canadian AI chapter. In what we can conceive of as something like an inaugural address, Atwood does not venture opinions on the range of political issues AI addresses. The very term "political" seems to make her nervous. Too many think of electoral politics when they hear the term, and Atwood makes it clear that she is not concerned with who wins and who loses at the polling place. She defines "political" much more broadly as dealing with how those in power treat those who are not. In the address, she argues that a writer should—must—freely write about what he or she sees in a nation or in the world. Doing so is not all that a writer does, but it should be something a writer can do. She calls on AI to defend a writer's freedom. Atwood is very aware in this address that writers elsewhere in the world may not possess the freedom that she has in Canada—to be creative as she wishes and to be political—whatever that might mean—as she wishes.

Moving Targets

Moving Targets anthologizes fifty-one pieces—most on writing and writers. Only three might be considered sociopolitical commentary—six percent, more or less. All of these pieces were composed after Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, but two seem connected to that novel, "When Afghanistan Was at Peace" and "Resisting the Veil: Reports from a

Revolution." From both Atwood's comments and from what is contained in the many boxes of research for *The Handmaid's Tale* available for examination at the Fisher Rare Books Room in the University of Toronto Library, one can discern where Atwood's glances were aimed when she drafted the novel. She began writing the book in West Berlin and finished it in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her eyes were most certainly on what right-wing political groups such as Jerry Falwell's "The Moral Majority" were doing in the United States, but her eyes were also very much if not more on global events including those in places like Afghanistan, where women were being oppressed. In the first piece, she looks back at a better time there, but notes the ominous signs and makes the link between Afghanistan and *The Handmaid's Tale* explicit. In the latter, Atwood pays tribute to writers, primarily women (Marjane Satrapi, Azar Nafisi, Farnoosh Moshiri, Ryszard Kapuscinski, Bernard Lewis, and Amin Maalouf) who are offering the world the true past and the true present of Muslim nations such as Iran. Having set *The Handmaid's Tale* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Atwood might be thought to be writing about where the Reagan Revolution might take the American nation. She may be hinting at this, but her catalogued research and these two essays reveal that she was conscious of and concerned about oppression, primarily of women, throughout the world, heavily in the Middle East, but not just there. Almost all by now know, thanks to Hulu, what a handmaid's costume looks like. That costume is very much indebted to how she saw women so very covered-up in nations in the Middle East, not anything going on in Jerry Falwell's Lynchburg or Pat Robertson's Virginia Beach. And, yes, there is a comic link between the costume and the picture on the cannister of a popular sink cleanser—Atwood admits as much, but there is a more important serious link, which connects the 1985 novel.

Atwood's perspective is then becoming global, but the United States does loom large in Canada. Thus, the third piece, "Letter to America," is not surprising. In it, she salutes its literature, its popular culture, and its political ideals. But she also notes how the United States seems to be changing. As she sees the nation to her South, it is gradually undermining the freedoms encased in its Constitution, it is amassing crippling debt, it is abandoning environmental protection, and it is letting greed rule, resulting in the rich getting richer and richer. Note the breadth of her indictment: yes, it touches on the environmental problems Atwood has pursued and will pursue, but it deals with other social justice matters ranging from the citizens' freedom from governmental observation and control to the poorer citizen's right to a just share of the American nation's immense wealth. This letter could not have been penned earlier in Atwood's career when she was

both unknown and very dependent on her books' sales, but now, with fame and the almost automatic sales that fame brings, she can speak out.

Burning Questions

Burning Questions anthologizes sixty-two pieces. Arguably, twenty-two raise sociopolitical matters. A few do so in passing, but most tackle social justice issues head-on. The earliest dates from 2004. By then, Atwood was an established writer, with the masterful *The Blind Assassin* and the intriguing *Oryx and Crake* behind her. The world knew *The Handmaid's Tale*, and she was short-listed for awards, including the Nobel Prize for Literature. She no longer needed to be at all nervous about being political. And so she is rather political. The freedom to speak out she exhibited in "Letter to America" in the previous collection is here exhibited frequently.

This number of pieces cannot readily be treated one by one as were the ones in the preceding anthologies. Groupings are necessary. There are essays that focus on the oppression historically and which is still being experienced by women: "From Eve to Dawn," "Reflections on *The Handmaid's Tale*," "We Hang by a Thread," "A Slave State?," and "The Equivalents." From this grouping, two points can be extracted: first, that, despite gains, women are still on the verge of losing "it all"; second, that oppression of women is tied in with broader oppression. Curious is a piece not yet noted, "Am I a Bad Feminist?" It deals with an accusation made by several women against a male University of British Columbia professor. Atwood had signed a letter criticizing the university's investigation, an act some saw as betraying women who were coming forward to talk about sexual harassment or sexual assault. In the piece, Atwood defends her action, saying that both women and men are entitled to "due process" and that the university's procedures were horribly flawed. She notes that many women eventually joined in the criticism of the university's quasi-judicial process. The controversy over this incident, although particular to a B.C. university, is worth noting for Atwood's position as it shows that, although certainly sympathetic to the #MeToo movement, she believes in just treatment for both the accuser and the accused. Social justice, although needed by women, is also sometimes needed by men.

A second group not surprisingly deals with the environment: "Wetlands"; "Trees of Life, Trees of Death"; "Literature and the Environment"; "Rachel Carson Anniversary"; "How to Change the World"; and "The Sea Trilogy." Atwood's rhetoric in these essays is interesting. Often, she raises the many issues on the minds of those monitoring and denouncing oppression throughout the globe but, then, argues that

environmental degradation is the most important issue because, without the air and water that sustain human existence, life and its problems disappear. She also, having raised the environmental disasters that await us, backs away from crusading and cites the somewhat limited role writers can play. In essays such as "Literature and the Environment" and "What Art Under Trump?" and even more so in "The Writer as Political Agent? Really?," she straddles the fence between embracing conscious activism and declaring that writers simply write about what they observe. We see, even this late in Atwood's career, a reluctance to act as or be considered an ideologue. She is just a writer, she still insists.

A third group reveals a third Atwood concern: science and technology. This seems to be a new one, raised in the "MaddAddam trilogy" and essays such as "The Futures Market" and "Why I Wrote MaddAddam." Atwood sees tremendous potential but also tremendous danger. And insofar as environmental degradation and scientific-technological abuse run together in the "MaddAddam trilogy," Atwood seems to posit a connection, that connection perhaps being that science and technology are pursuing Crakers and Pigoons and BlyssPluss pills while letting the seas rise and the permafrost melt. Science and technology, then, are not being put to good use. Atwood's interest in what might be thought of as STEM areas surprised some: her previous work had aligned her with feminism and that was tied to other academic realms, many thought. They would not have been surprised had Atwood drifted into philosophy or even the social sciences, but science and technology seemed far afield. What these critics failed to note was how Atwood's family, starting with science professor father, was immersed in STEM. Her many conversations with them did not lead her into a science field when she chose an undergraduate major, but they continued, piquing her curiosity as a writer more and more.

A fourth group, a small but powerful one, deals with oppression broadly: "Greetings, Earthlings! What Are These Human Rights of Which You Speak?" and "Memory of Fire." The former is witty: a visitor from another galaxy lectures earthlings on how they are dangerously close to ignoring all of the human rights that they so pompously declare in document after document. In penning it, Atwood is no longer focusing on a single social justice issue such as how women are oppressed or how the natural world is being destroyed; rather, she makes a global—in both senses—statement. In the latter, Atwood surveys how those with power have oppressed throughout the twentieth century and earlier. Among the earlier instances of oppression, she notes what colonists did to the First Nations people in Canada. That also comes up in "Kiss of the Fur Queen," a tribute essay to Canadian First Nation author Tomson Highway.

And one sociopolitical piece in the anthology fits well in none of these four groups: Atwood's tribute essay to novelist Gabrielle Roy. Roy is praised for her portrayal of the oppression of women in pre-World War Two Quebec, but Atwood's piece is more concerned with how Roy depicts the oppression of the working class in Montreal's slums, of both the women and the men. Atwood is not usually associated with the causes of the working class, but note that *Alias Grace* deals with an Irish immigrant servant and *The Blind Assassin* deals with those who, in households and in factories, are being oppressed by those who are getting richer and richer, buying up worker-friendly family businesses and profiteering as global wars proceed. The rich-poor divide and the plight of workers are social justice issues within Atwood's purview, although other matters may dominate.

A Writer's Evolution

Any writer who has been "at it" for the number of years such as Atwood cannot be accurately described with generalizations that are too specific: what specifics might be noted about an author in 1970 is not likely to be entirely accurate fifty years later in 2020. However, it is safe to say that social justice, broadly defined, has been on Atwood's mind from very early on. But could she have articulated a social justice agenda when she published *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*? No. She did not know enough yet, and, arguably, she was too dependent on pleasing the public whom she needed to buy her books to risk being perceived as overly "political." However, she was concerned about the plight of women in her contemporary society; she was concerned about the environmental damage she saw. These two threads will eventually merge with others, and, over time, the critic can come closer to defining what Atwood's social justice agenda is. But one key to understanding it is to understand that it evolved and how it evolved.

Another key is to remember that, as Atwood tells us over and over, she is a writer and not a sociopolitical advocate. Early in her career, she avoided the latter label because she felt it might cost her the audience she needed to thrive. Avoiding it now that she is very well-established may be seen as ingenuous, but those who study literature must remember that writers are creative artists. How they get to what they create has long been a mystery. Atwood often talks about her creative process—more so than many writers, but in Atwood's account there is clarity and mystery. Something seems to prompt a novel, although the initial creative direction might well be abandoned with a core idea leading to another, different one. Increasingly, research is involved. Atwood talks about her clipping stories from newspapers, and, although she may well still do so, she also—these

days—has a team of assistants helping with the research. As a novel develops, in Atwood's accounts, characters, voices, and stories acquire a dynamic of their own. She may have a plan in mind for a book, but what she has created seems to acquire a life of its own, resulting in the plan sometimes being altered. What Atwood is partially describing is how she, as a literary artist, creates. She wants—needs—an audience; she wants to say something and not just offer tales, but what audiences might want and what she may want to say seem to take a backseat to the creative process involving the characters, their voices, and their stories.

What is not evident in Atwood's accounts of how she writes is an ideology that she is intent upon promoting through fictive means. She sees problems aplenty in a book like *The Year of the Flood*, but she chooses to present them as matters anyone might find in incipient forms if one were just to look about carefully. She is not saying, like some other writers, that she will write a book that advocates thus-and-so. Rather, Atwood is letting an idea lead to characters, voices, and stories that, then, lead to social justice stances one may extract from her writing. So, as Atwood insists, she is a writer. Yes, her writing says something and that something constitutes, as this book argues, a broad social justice stance, but she gets there not by signing on to an agenda but by intelligently surveying the world she inhabits, letting ideas for books strike her and incubate and grow, and then, enjoying the emergence of the characters, voices, and stories as she writes.

In concluding a discussion of her essays and what they reveal, let's consider the "MaddAddam trilogy" for a second. Yes, the three books talk about oppression—of the environment, of women, of those lacking economic power; and the books point to abuse as science and technology join greed and lust as the villainous forces. But Atwood very clearly enjoyed creating the "Crakers," delighting in their particulars; and she clearly enjoyed—and was intrigued by—creating the "Pigoons." Who, when reading *Oryx and Crake*, would have foreseen the possibility of "Crakers" mating with humans (as happens in "MaddAddam")? Who would have foreseen how the "Pigoons," as sentient beings, might be enlisted as a quasi-military force to defeat the renegade "Painballers" and save the day for the supposedly benevolent survivors (as also happens in "MaddAddam")? Atwood not only let the stories take whatever shape they might but enjoyed the surprises. This is apparent from how she talks about these books. She had ideas, yes, but she also let the creative process she embraced as a writer to proceed. And what social justice message does sex between "Crakers" and Ren have? What social justice message is conveyed by the alliance of surviving "God's Gardeners," "Crakers," and "Pigoons"? The answer is probably nothing—

or nothing truly of note. These are moments the characters drifted to. The story drove them there, not an agenda.

So, no agenda, for that assumes a different sort of writer, but, nonetheless, an evolving position consonant with a call for social justice: that is what a reader finds. That call cannot touch on all types of oppression: that would be an unrealistic expectation to impose on any author. But Atwood's call does embrace many of the concerns of those who see oppression in the world and want that oppression addressed.

Atwood's Interviews

Some writers are quite reclusive. Atwood, not so. She does sometimes withdraw a tad from the busy world to write, but she has long played various roles in that busy world. She also has not ducked interviews as some writers do. Maybe she has ducked questions, but not the interviews. From a selfish perspective, interviews may be seen as promotional: you do them to help sell your books. Atwood, however, seems to enjoy talking about many topics, especially writing and, with some reserve, her writing. She is not just promoting her work, but, rather, chatting about a wide range of topics.

Many of her interviews have been anthologized by Earl G. Ingersoll in *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*. These conversations parallel the essays she has written and published and point to her evolving ideology. They reinforce what has already been traced by examining her collected non-fiction.

In 1972, her future life partner Graeme Gibson interviewed Atwood for his book *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. This interview is a good starting point in understanding who Atwood is, for, in it, she insists that she is just a writer and rejects, in no uncertain terms, a social responsibility. Taking that on and advocating or acting, she says, is the job of others (Ingersoll 3). She is less uneasy with the role of female writer, but even that label unsettles her. Some try to make her an "honorary male" because she is becoming established in the male-defined world of Canadian writing; others are trying to make her an inspiring hero for women who are trying to escape societal limitations. Neither role delights her. Yes, she is a female writer, and being so meant overcoming barriers, but she is primarily a writer, she insists (Ingersoll 8-9).

In this interview, she also talks about her early female protagonists. They are victims, yes, but the goal she cites for them—and the men who have oppressed them—is not revolution. Rather, it is "harmony" (Ingersoll 15). A reader might well interpret these characters differently, as revolutionary in different ways. Atwood, however, does not want the label applied to them