Murder in the Dark Short Guide

Murder in the Dark by Margaret Atwood

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Characters

Technically, there are no characters in Murder in the Dark. Rather, there is the allknowing and all-seeing presence of the narrator—the emphatically reinforced "I" of the poems—interspersed with partial characters like "C" in "Horror Comics" or the brother in "Making Poison." The man, the beggar, and the ambivalent You in "Raw Materials" serve only as extensions of the narrative voice that develops throughout the collection. Like the partial characters "C" or the beggar, the "I" and "You" of the poems are metaphorical identities; they are anyone; they are everyone; they could be you.

Social Concerns

It is most difficult to separate social concerns from themes and motifs in Margaret Atwood's work because she is, ultimately, a woman concerned with both social and cultural issues. This is adamantly clear in her poetry, prose, fiction, and critical writings. A Canadian social icon, Margaret Atwood has been called a "committed disabuser" by critics who note her extensive exposition of social and cultural illusions with unusual zeal. Her aggressive skepticism and bitter use of satire is often tempered with escapism and mysticism, all of which work together to form a doubleedged sword between truth and fiction.

Atwood is a devoted feminist and her work reflects a deep-seated honesty whereby she is constantly questioning social roles, mores, attitudes, organization, and convention. While she takes a very definite stand against certain issues (for example the influence of advertising/media on women's body image), she is also a chronic "fence sitter" who enjoys playing devil's advocate with prominent social concerns/issues.

Overall, she is just clever; Atwood plays with language and structure in a covertly subversive way, often double discoursed, inviting careful reading. Precisely because she is so famously passionate about culture, her work is always about a variety of social concerns. Consequently, these are also the major themes in her work.

Techniques

Atwood's principle technique works within the prose poem and its binary nature to convey conflicting messages about important social issues. Her powerful and demanding approach to what she sees as fundamental contemporary problems within Canadian (and indeed worldwide) culture offers much to the reader. Through the techniques of metafiction, antifiction, selfconscious narration, intertextuality, magical realism, parody, irony, and the deconstruction of cultural myths, Atwood demands both introspection and reflection from her reader.

Themes

As Atwood is a prominent collector of themes, those found in Murder in the Dark are also found in her other works in one form or another. The most common themes found in Atwood's work are sexuality, marginalization of women and minority groups, social fears (such as growing old) as well as progression and movement, and the relationship between old and young (and the relationship between being old and being young), distrust of religion, patriarchy, issues of power, gender politics, body image, narrative voice and design, language, subversion of traditional literary forms, revisionist myth-making, history, satire, irony, Canadian nationalism, spirituality, the environment, feminist anger, bashing of males, public persona, coldness/unreliability of her narrators (as both the short story and the name of the book implies), and pessimism.

Murder in the Dark is comprised of four sections with twenty-seven prose poems in total. The first section consists of eight short works: "Autobiography," "Making Poison," "The Boy's Own Annual 1911," "Before the War," "Horror Comics," "Boyfriends," "The Victory Burlesk," and "Fainting." There seems to be a marked progression in theme and tone as the collection moves from youthful naivete toward a more adult-like skepticism. However, as always, her writing also reflects a series of binary oppositions whereby she is both curious but not fooled, skeptical but mystical, and youthful but wise. Thus, in "Making Poison" the child-like narrator reflects, "I can remember the glee with which we stirred and added, the sense of magic and accomplishment. Making poison is as much fun as making a cake. People like to make poison. If you don't understand this you will never understand anything." In "Boyfriends" we learn that the evening smells of both "mud and the full moon."

Atwood is constantly reminding the reader that her narrator is unreliable—"I went to the Victory Burlesk twice, or maybe it was only once and one of my friends went the other time and told me about it." She tests gender boundaries in "The Victory Burlesk": "[it] was quite daring for young women . . . we thought it was funny; it was almost as funny as church," and dramatically juxtaposes the young with the old, escapism with reality: but when she finally turned around, she was old. Her face was powdered dead white, her mouth was bright reddish purple, but she was old. I could feel shame washing through me, it was no longer funny, I didn't want this woman to take off her clothes, I didn't want to look. I felt that I, not the woman on the stage, was being exposed and humiliated.

Forever challenging gender roles and boundaries, Atwood is a consistent oxymoron. In "Fainting" she reflects on a small child's experience with point of view and sight. The final statement "we faint when there's something we don't want to see, can't bear to see" is a comment on social injustices and the inconvenience of perspective. The title poem "Autobiography" is an appropriate one, as all the poems in the section are clearly autobiographical, although in a fictional sense. These poems deal with youth and ageism, life and death, violence and sentimentality, idealism and unfairness.

Section two is made up of one single poem, "Raw Materials," divided into five parts in which there is a definitive change in the narrative voice from child to adult (the narrator, "C," no longer "pinch[es] horror comics books from the racks in drugstores," for instance). Our narrator is, in a sense, more mature (certainly she is older in years), yet she is still searching for the "real experience"—something she believes she will not find. The poem is a series of descriptive travel scenarios illuminating the main theme of growing skepticism evident from the opening lines: "Why do we travel?

In other words, what are we doing here?. . .

The worm could be faked" and the man she sits with "smiles most of the time and has eyes that the naive might think of as candid."

Accompanying cynicism in this poem is the mysticism that always seems to be present in Atwood's binary technique. Thus, when the beggar approaches her dining party the narrator asks "Who can tell what he's thinking, what ill wishes he's sending . . . isn't it bad luck not to give money to beggars?" Similarly, when they trek to visit Jaguar Throne we learn that "Nobody says anything, though the heavy air seems full of whispers." Those same whispers later inspire a moment of mysterious panic where legend and myth suddenly come alive for the tourists until they learn it was "only a spider." Yet for all of this flirtation with mystical happenings and notions, we always return to the skeptic in Atwood— after all, the beggar turns ugly and they shoo him away "as if he's a bird"; and the "Jaguar Throne is kept in here so it can't get out."

The third section, beginning with "Murder in the Dark," illustrates a further increase in skepticism as the tone grows more aggressive and ironic. "Happy Endings" and "Page" include striking commentaries on authorial intention and structure, while "Simmering," "Women's Novels," and "Bread" are highly ironic pieces dealing primarily with both the sex war and gender roles. All of the poems in this section overtly question both patriarchal structures and the possible alternatives offered thus far.

The interest of "Murder in the Dark" lies in the parable of the author and her relationship with the reader: "that's me in the dark.

I have designs on you, I'm plotting my sinister crime . . . I must always lie. Now: Do you believe me?" Similarly, "Happy Endings" and "Page" play with structure with the same cynical and questioning spirit—you can choose from the variety of endings offered for John and Mary's relationship, all of which are unsatisfactory, disappointing, or cruel; you are asked to question the relevance of the page: "Touch the page at your peril: it is you who are blank and innocent, not the page" (italics added for emphasis). "Simmering" poses a thoroughly comical and satirical reversal of gender roles: Psychological articles began to appear in the magazines on the origin of women's kitchen envy and how it could be cured.

Amputation of the tip of the tongue was recommended, and, as you know became a widespread practice in more advanced nations. If Nature had meant women to cook, it was said, God would have made g knives round and with holes in them.

However, while the men become obsessed with cooking in the kitchen, the women mistakenly feel "they ha[ve] got away with something." Thus, while the primary theme of the piece is obvious, there remains an underlying dissatisfaction with the role reversal.

The final section of Murder in the Dark is a culmination of the poetic themes witnessed thus far, fusing self reflection and social politics: "How does it feel to be a god, for five minutes anyway? . . . After you've been serviced, after you've been used, you'll be put away until needed" ("Worship"); "he's just landed and you are the land" ("Him"); "The most important thing is making her.

Over, from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants" ("Iconography"); and finally in "Liking Men," "It's time to like men again. Where shall we begin? . . . To begin with the head and all it contains would be too suddenly painful." The politics of the sex war are most prominent in this section of the collection. Except for the slight flirtation with hope at the beginning of "Liking Men" (quickly dispelled as the poem progresses to men's boots stamping on women's faces and bodies), there is no longer a narrator tempered with a child's innocence in this final section of Murder in the Dark. Rather, an angry distrust invades the text, dominating the tone with black humor.

Key Questions

The international Margaret Atwood Society was founded in 1984 and in 1992 became an allied organization that meets in conjunction with the Modern Language Association. A true Canadian icon of popular culture, Margaret Atwood's fiction and prose leaves the reader with much to discuss. Murder in the Dark is a striking series of prose poems which illustrates both the author's affection for and mastery of the oxymoron. Sketched in five sections, there is a definite progression of anger, disillusionment, and despair, yet there remains a constant nicker of hope and the will to believe. Steven Heighton, in an afterward of Murder in the Dark, writes: "Endless light is like an endless honeymoon: an illusion sold to fools. We believe in this light because we've been underground with the writer, in the caves, the graves, and the cellar of that innocent, sinister childhood game, Murder in the Dark" (1997). While Murder in the Dark can be read in a sequential order, the power of the prose poem and the interconnected theme structure of the poems also suggest that they can be read in other arrangements.

1. Consider the narrative progression in "Liking Men." What do you think is the ultimate intention of the narrator?

Do you think the intention is the same at the end of the poem as it is at the beginning?

2. At what point do you think the naivety of the child-like narrator is lost?

3. "Raw Materials" continually searches for "the real experience." Do you think such a notion exists? Does she? What do you think the "real experience" is for the narrator? Is it different for narrator and reader?

4. Consider the various endings to the John and Mary tale offered to the reader in "Happy Endings." Are any of these options suitable? Why or why not?

5. Atwood is famous for her postmodern use of intertextuality, drawing on vast sources, even her own writing. Can you identify references to other Atwood works in Murder in the Dark?

6. A prominent theme in Atwood's work is the fragmentation of the body—either literally, textually, or both. This is overtly evident in poems like "Hand" or "Iconography." Are there other poems in Murder in the Dark which deal with the same theme, although not as obviously?

Literary Precedents

While Atwood's compelling themes are often the focus of much critical attention, it is important to note that one cannot fully understand them if they are placed outside the genres and techniques frequently identified with postmodern writing. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many of the techniques found in Murder in the Dark are also abundantly available in other examples of prose poetry.

Almost exclusively French in its origin, the prose poem is characterized by a strict use of allusion and metaphor in ordinary prose writing. In addition, the prose poem illustrates a self-conscious composition and an intense use of verse techniques in an altered form. Most critics would agree that the tradition began with the French poet Charles Baudelaire who asked "Which of us, in his ambitious moments, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhyme and without rhythm, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the prickings of consciousness?" (Petites Poemes en Prose, 1869). Baudelaire's vision was followed by further pioneers in the genre, namely Rimbaud, Mallarme, and Valery, who were considered the major poets in verse.

The main property of the prose poem— a strict attention to consciousness—for Baudelaire continues to exist today and is certainly present in Atwood's work. She uses several tones of voice throughout Murder in the Dark which suggests a highly noncommittal relationship to reality. Characteristic of the genre, there is recognition that reality itself is pliable and subject to alteration while toying with the promise of a narrative structure. While prose poems are not narrative in structure, there is quasi narration whereby emotion, perception, and self-reflection are organized into a narrative pattern of sorts. Moreover, the various subsections of Murder in the Dark work at establishing a contract between the author and reader. Indeed, there is a possibility of accomplishment which sets up proto-patterns for each poem, while supporting the binary character of the prose poem.

Related Titles

Like all Atwood fiction, Murder in the Dark calls on various themes that are important to the author and are foregrounded in the female experience. Thus, it is no surprise that other works of fiction by Atwood deal with similar themes to those found in Murder in the Dark. To name but a few examples (in novel form): The Edible Woman reflects disillusionment with academia and rampant consumerism as well as the difficult relationships between men and women; The Robber Bride explores the problematic relationships that can exist among female friends; while The Handmaid's Tale outlines a distopic state where women have no legal rights and are used for reproductive purposes. Atwood has written a large collection of short stories which demonstrate similar irony and zeal: "Dancing Girls" (1977), "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983), and "Wilderness Tips" (1991), as well as collections of poems including Double Persephone (1961), The Circle Game (1966), The Animals in That Country (1968), Procedures for Underground (1970), The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970), and Power Politics (1971). In addition, Margaret Atwood has published several pieces of literary criticism.

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