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There Was Once A Humorous Feminist: Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyse a selection of Margaret Atwood's short stories, especially the ones which employ black humour and irony to provoke reactions towards her feminist vision of the society. It is unquestionable that Atwood has become one of the most famous Canadian writers and her fiction has imagined societies riddled with misogyny, oppression, and environmental chaos. The purpose of this essay is to analyse those humoristic, ironic and witty elements used by the author in a selection of short stories.

Keywords: Feminism, short story, black humour, irony, misogyny, oppression.

Resumen

El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar una selección de historias cortas de Margaret Atwood, especialmente aquellas que emplean el humor negro y la ironía para provocar una reacción hacia su visión feminista de la sociedad. Es indudable que Atwood se ha convertido en una de las escritoras canadienses más famosas y que su ficción ha ideado sociedades plagadas de misoginia, opresión y caos ambiental. El propósito de este ensayo es analizar los elementos humorísticos, irónicos e ingeniosos usados por la autora en una selección historias cortas.

Palabras clave: Feminismo, historia corta, humor negro, ironía, misoginia, opresión.

1. Introduction

This dissertation intends to analyse the humoristic elements included in some of the short stories written by Margaret Atwood. She is may be known by her dystopian and futuristic novels, especially *The Handmaid's Tale* (published in 1986). However, Atwood is Canada's most eminent novelist and poet, and also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children. She is also rather popular outside her country as her works have been translated into more than 30 languages.

In her novels, Atwood creates strong, mysterious female characters and gives room to the imagination of the readers by leaving the stories open-ended, while analysing the urban life and other contemporary matters. She is particularly interested in analysing the role of women in contemporary Western societies, pointing out their contradictions.

Given the popularity and variety of her work, the main goal of this essay is to provide readers of her short stories with some explanation to understand all those black humour elements incorporated in the stories, which may lead to confusion concerning the female perspective. Taking her short stories into account, she has written about many things and some of them are a critique against a patriarchal society which oppresses women and imposes a specific role to them, but also with women that victimize themselves. Atwood has done all of this with a insightful technique based on her wit and black humour.

This project is, therefore, structured in three main sections. The first one includes relevant aspects of Margaret Atwood's biography and background. This part also gives a broad overview of the role which humour has in the author's literary composition. The second main section is an introduction to her short stories and aims to present the plot and other important details. Lastly, the final part is focused on analysing each story individually and exposing the humoristic elements related to feminism that the role of women in contemporary societies.

2. Margaret Atwood & Her Canadian Context

2.1. Biography

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, on 18 November 1939 to a nutritionist mother and entomologist father who cultivated her love of nature. Atwood spent her early years in Ottawa and in northern Quebec. She moved to Toronto in 1946, but she continued going during the summers to the north of the country with her parents and older brother. "I didn't spend a full year in school until I was 11," Atwood recalls. "Americans usually find this account of my childhood - woodsy, isolated, nomadic - less surprising than do Canadians: after all, it's what the glossy magazine ads say Canada is supposed to be like" (Atwood, 1973, p. 31).



Fig. 1: Margaret Atwood

Atwood's parents were great readers and, although their directions were scientific rather than literary, they supported her in order not to become a writer but to use her intelligence. In this sense, she started to write at the age of five. Then, she suddenly stopped when she was eight and began again at sixteen. "I started again at sixteen and have no idea why, but it was suddenly the only thing I wanted to do" (Howells, 2008, p. 13). Therefore, she realized that she wanted to be a writer while she was at Leaside High School in Toronto.

Wanting to become a professional writer, Atwood entered the honours English Language and Literature program at Victoria College in the University of Toronto in 1957. Before she graduated in 1961, Atwood won the E. J. Pratt Medal for her small collection of poems, *Double Persephone*, which was printed by John Robert Colombo's Hawkshead Press. Then, when she was granted her Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, she began her master's program in English Literature at Radcliffe College in Harvard University.

After two years at Harvard, Atwood returned to Toronto and found a job in a market research company. The following year she gave a lecture in English at the University of British Columbia. Then she returned to Harvard for two more years to complete her doctoral examinations and to work on her thesis on "The English Metaphysical Romance". However, Atwood never finished the dissertation because she immersed herself in her writing career.

She continued to write poetry in her two years away from Cambridge, and published her first full-length volume of poetry in 1966, *The Circle Game*, which won Canada's most important award for poetry. This event led to the publication of further collections of poetry by Oxford University Press Canada. Thus, *The Animals in that Country* appeared a year after and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* in 1970, being the first writer in Canadian literature to bring to mind an artistic figure from the past. Afterwards, the president of the publishing house McClland and Steward was interested in printing her first novel, discovering that she had submitted it in 1965 and that they had not taken a decision about it. Therefore, he suggested some revisions immediately and *The Edible Woman*, the novel she considered as protofeminist, was presented to the public in 1969.

In 1972, Atwood published her second novel *Surfacing*, offering a more optimistic view than her first novel. The nameless protagonist embraced her past, emerges from her ashes and is willing to begin anew, as the author said: "*The Edible Woman* is a circle and *Surfacing* is a spiral" (Sandler, 1977, p. 14). It is a feminist novel and a study of the victimization, theme that appears again in *Survival*, her volume in literary criticism published in 1972. Before this, there was no other book of criticism on Canadian literature made for the ordinary reader.

Lady Oracle (1976) was her next novel. It begins to express the vision of fame that Atwood had. The protagonist makes a mistake in an interview increasing the sales of her books while she is the centre of attention so she ends having a fate worse than death. The author revisited this topic in *Cat's Eye* (1988). The artist attends a retrospective of her work until she can finally accept her past.

The morgue is the place presented in Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996), winner of the Giller Prize, where multiple versions of the truth and lies are closely connected to fame. It shows Atwood's concern with the infamous woman linked to the hostility displayed by celebrities, hostility transformed into a death-force. Furthermore, the recurrent emphasis on the void is related with the incarceration and surveillance in the female body. The author also presents the metaphorical confinement that Iris experiences in *The Blind Assassin* (2000). This matches the state of imprisonment of Offred in her most famous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood shows the degree to which women and their bodies are restrained and watched within patriarchy. The novel won the Governor-General's Award for Fiction.

The Robber Bride (1993) is the story of a beautiful, greedy and evil woman entering the life of three other women to exploit them. This is a novel about a duel to death between women suggesting that the risks they suffer from men are nothing compared to the wounds that their fellow females may inflict on them.

Atwood wrote a dystopian trilogy composed by *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). The three books display a love story and a powerful vision of the future, followed by a disaster that destroys most human life and the definite survival of a small group towards the endurance of a community.

With regard to short stories, the author has published *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* in 1977, followed by *Murder in the Dark* in 1983, *Wilderness Tips* in 1991 and *Good Bones* in 1992.

2.2. Canadian Context

Atwood is fascinated by the history of Canada. In the fifties, the country was not aware of its own cultural identity. Many writers had to find publishing house elsewhere because it was a country with little admiration for literature. This is reflected in Atwood's realization of her writing goal when she was sixteen years old, although "there was nothing at Leaside High School to indicate to me that writing was even a possibility for a young person in Canada in the twentieth century" (Atwood, 1982, p. 398).

She remembered that she was not taught Canadian poetry in her years as a high school student. They just learnt about Greeks, Romans and British Kings, but nothing about the national poets. Furthermore, the writers themselves did not write about Canada as their novels started appearing in the United States. Her poems started being about contemporary customs and sexual politics from an ironic point of view, but, as poetry evolved over time, she evoked classical myths and history. Ondaatje also turned to historical characters in his collection *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), the same year that Bowering did it in his poem "George, Vancouver".

After deciding that she would be a writer, Atwood enrolled the Literature program at Victoria College in the University of Toronto where she began her incursion in Canadian literature. She found it exciting because it meant that Canadians were writing and publishing books so she could follow their steps. Therefore, by the age of 21, Atwood had already found her tradition when she read them.

In the sixties and seventies, the exploration of Canadian identity became much more interesting to the writers and so, when Atwood wrote her first novel *The Edible Woman*, she portrays identity crisis within the contemporary urban life. Moreover, many writers in this period changed their style to a more surrealist, self-reflective, parodic or feminist point of mode, leaving behind a severe realism. In her collection of stories, Mavis Gallant displays isolated characters whose illusions are shattered and some of them stay in the thin line between good and evil. Nevertheless, historical events and the investigation of Canada remained the main topics. Alice Munro explores the domestic lives and relationships between women in Toronto, Ontario and British Columbia.

During the eighties and nineties, writers also presented the self-consciousness and nationalism acquired in previous decades, but they started to break some traditional

limitations concerning the gender and the genre parodying them. For example, Carol Shields's novels show the lives of ordinary women and men in a satiric style and Audrey Thomas expounds the dilemmas confronting women in innovative short stories. Furthermore, attention was centred in the plurality and diversity of voices, together with the exploration of oral traditions, myths, and cultural practices fleeing from the Western concepts of history, nation and narrative. A recurring topic was the painful journey of an individual negotiating with cultures and racial prejudices; these concepts were also presented in a parodic mode as protest literature by authors like Lee Maracle and Wayson Choy.

2.3. Humour

Atwood's comicity does not reside in the matter she is expounding but in the literary techniques she uses to narrate it. She can be presenting the most serious topic and still be able to make it comic with her witty style. Studying the devices of humorous writing, Atwood herself has classified it into three different types: parody, satire and humour itself. She also has distinguished Canadian comicity from the British and American one, stating that the factors of her country humour are located not on the techniques employed but in the reception and sensations posed by the reader (Howells, 2008, p. 114).

The unique humour found in Atwood's texts relies on various forms of bizarreness. It includes techniques such as the burlesque and the carnivalesque, apart from the obvious parody and satire. The author makes a remarkable usage of the grotesque combined with stylistic and rhetorical elements to produce the laughter that accompanies strangeness.

The basis of the grotesque is degradation, the simple fact of degrading important subjects to trivial matters. Atwood employs this exhilarating reversal of a well established order to expose the patriarchy and public prejudices to the prevailing society she is addressing to (Howells, 2008, p. 116). A breach of decorum and usage of colloquial idioms makes her texts even more comical, as it can be seen in her short story "Uglypuss":

This isn't the first phone call like this he's had. Sometimes they're anti-Semites, wanting to cut his Jewish nuts off; sometimes they're Jews, wanting to cut his nuts off because they don't think he's Jewish enough. In either case the message is the same: the nuts must go (Atwood, 1988, p. 87).

The combination of artificial modes of repetition merges with the comical choice of slang. Furthermore, the hilarity mocking ethnic prejudices is directed to mindsets and even literary traditions, which Atwood is criticising from a humorous perspective. In another story of the same collection, "Uncles", the author depicts some objects of laughter as the supporters of patriarchy when the protagonist Susanna joins the male world of journalism. Gradually, these subtle elements were becoming more powerful when she published her novel *Oryx and Crake* a couple of decades after. There, semi-hidden, a satirical attack on nowadays society's abuse of genetic engineering can be found. Crake's description of the side effects of a pill designed to augment the libido is explicitly put in idiomatic locutions and colloquial expressions mixed with some technical terms:

A couple of the test subjects had literally fucked themselves to death, several had assaulted old ladies and household pets, and there had been a few unfortunate cases of priapism and split dicks. Also, at first, the sexually transmitted disease protection mechanism had failed in a spectacular manner. One subject had grown a big genital wart all over her epidermis, distressing to observe, but they'd taken care of that with lasers and exfoliation, at least temporarily (Atwood, 2003, p. 295).

Disfigurement, mutilation, suicidal behaviour and the assault of innocent people are extremely exaggerated and comically soothed illustrating one of Atwood's device: the structural irony. The strategies that she adopts involve three main factors: the combination of understatements and exaggeration; the overlapping of the commonplace and the extraordinary; and the clash between myth and a simulated restoration of reality. This demonstrates that Atwood is aware of how the modernists like James Joyce and William Faulkner are capable of improving the ordinary constituents in local legends and myths.

Her sense of irony relies on the reader's capacity to interpret this rhetoric device grounded in wit. Atwood's strategy can involve ambiguities of polysemy as in *The Handmaid's Tale* where she uses it to criticise the institutional speeches to promote ideology. Moreover, she incorporates equivocation, defamiliarization and recontextualization, but also the inclusion of absurdly meticulous details (Howells, 2008, p. 123). Ironically, in "Weight", a story in *Wilderness Tips*, she compares men to meat reinforcing the comic display of male machismo: "They all have that beefy thing about them. A meaty firmness. They all play something: they begin with squash, progress with tennis, end with golf. It keeps them trim. Two hundred pounds of hot steak" (*Wilderness Tips*, p. 177). This passage demonstrates that the ideological attitude concerning gender and power is recurrent in Atwood's texts. Furthermore, her satiric targets always belong to her generation, region, gender, education and social class.

3. Introducing Atwood's Short Stories Collections

Although Atwood is a major figure on Canadian literature, her short stories have been undervalued and have been considered less important than her novels and poetry collections. She has far published ten short fiction collections (since 1977). Her work in the genre is thematically varied and her exceptional use of several techniques is already clear in her first collection, *Dancing Girls* (1977) which will be further explained later on.

Atwood's second short story collection, *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), moves from individual psychological problems towards socio-psychological topics. Characters are usually represented at home or with their family. This collection contains stories such as "Uglypuss," "The Salt Garden," "The Sunrise," "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother," "Unearthing Suite," and "Loulou"; or, "The Domestic Life of Language," which reveal a warmth different to the dark tone of earlier stories. Atwood portrays relationship in crisis, but keeping some hope in order to provide a source of comfort for the protagonists. For example, "Scarlet Ibis," shows a marital relationship without joy. The couple travels to Trinidad hoping to find a breath of fresh air, but the journey fails to achieve this when the wife's internal monologues replace her dialogues with her husband.

The third collection of short stories, *Wilderness Tips*, was published in 1991 and it is more about the hidden aspects of the protagonists' lives. In these stories, the characters express their needs and are able to surpass the incoming disasters. The collection moves, in this case, from the familiar stories in her previous collection to the portrayal of characters at the workplace. In "Hairball" and "Uncles," talented women climb the career ladder despite the envy of their male colleagues who cannot accept powerful women. In the first of the stories, the money and power of Kat, a dominant fashion designer, leads her lover and pupil to dethrone her. The female protagonist does not retreat into denial, as a character in previous stories would do, but she wants revenge.

Some stories from *Wilderness Tips* are narrated retrospectively. Moreover, in "Death by Landscape," she presents an innovation when placing gender problems in a same-sex context. In this story, the friendship of the Canadian girl Lois with the American girl Lucy has more emotional power than any other of her relationships, including the one with her husband. Here, man-woman bonds seem to be an obstacle in the women's development. These relationships are, however, not enjoyed because the characters tend to recognise their importance too late, after the death of one of the partners. Nevertheless, the stories are a good

example of Atwood's Canadian perspective as they portray landscapes, its unexplored wilderness, making nature a protagonist that affects the plot.

Her short stories are remarkable in their thematic variety and in the innovative literary techniques used. Although most of the stories are concerned with gender issues, other criticise environmental or multicultural aspects, or even study the importance of language. However, what should be highlighted is the mastery and quality of Atwood's work in this genre that has been neglected by the critics.

3.1. *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (1977)

In this collection of short stories, Atwood portrays characters in dysfunctional and unfulfilling relationships. Moreover, they usually confuse their dependence on their partners with love. This necessity is often the outcome of a flaw in a character's personality or of poor self-esteem, which leads them to get involved with harmful and loveless partners as in "The Man from Mars," "Polarities," "Under Glass," "Hair Jewellery," "A Travel Piece," "Training" and "Lives of the Poets." The stories show how the failure to accept oneself is connected to the lack of ability to achieve meaningful relationships because the protagonists are not defeated by their partners but by themselves. The feelings of failure lead many characters in *Dancing Girls* into the type of relations that confirm their negative opinions of themselves and the further retreat into denial because of their partner's lack of interest, dominance or infidelity. Therefore, the stories are covered in desperation and hopelessness.

Some stories in this collection seem to be literary rewritings of Ronald D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, a psychiatric work of the 1960s. This book offers a theory on the schizophrenic behaviour. A remarkable example is the short story "Polarities" (1971). The protagonist is a representation of the schizoid personality, although he seems to be just as ordinary as the rest of the people in his social environment. Atwood allows the reader to take an insight into his mental world through which it becomes clear that there is a conflict between his behaviour towards others and his thoughts. "He saw that it was only the hopeless, mad Louise he wanted, the one devoid of any purpose or defence. A sane one, one that could judge him, he would never be able to handle" ("Polarities", 1971, p. 62).

However, this story also portrays a nationalistic issue. The male protagonist, who thinks in terms of dominance, is an American teaching in Canada so the polarity between the two countries is hinted throughout the text.

“Rape Fantasies” is a short story about a group of women co-workers who spend their lunch break playing bridge and reacting to the report about rape in a women’s magazine. They tell each other fantasies of sexual encounters with strangers avoiding the description of violence. Instead, they are stories about how these women empathize and befriend strange men. Estelle, the narrator, offers opinions on the narratives as well as she provides her own stories. Atwood is presenting an ironical and humorous depiction of a serious topic, but she is also unconsciously making the reader realise the fact that the victim should not remain silent after a sexual assault and let shame subjugate her. Moreover, the bridge game is a metaphor for the interaction between individuals, for Atwood, it symbolises power relationships because society has “a great concern with tactics and strategies” (*Conversations*, 1990, p. 22).

The collection includes some stories about violence too. In “The Resplendent Quetzal,” Sarah makes a violent sacrifice when all her vitality and desire are drained after the death of her baby at birth. Therefore, ability to control life by giving birth that she gained after visiting the sacrificial well is no longer hers with the violent consequences it brings. Removed from the world of sacrifice, with the pain and suffering that death promises, the violence responds to her repression and victimization, evoking the female poet in “Lives of the Poets” whose persistent oppression and rage has led her to imagine her own explosion at the end of the short story: “she will open her mouth and the room will explode in blood” (“Lives of the Poets”, 1977, p. 209).

3.2. *Murder in the Dark*

This collection, published in 1983, takes a different direction. The main subject is writing and Atwood describes it as a deceitful game in which the writer is the murderer, the reader is the victim and, according to the rules, the writer must lie. “Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you’ve turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie. Now: do you believe me?” (Atwood, 2010, p. 50).

The title of the volume refers to a game played in the dark. Everyone has a role and the person named detective must turn off the lights and leave the room while the murderer

commits the crime and messes with the scene. The detective returns and tries to guess who the killer is. Atwood presents the relationship between writing and the game: the murderer/ writer “kills” reality entering the fictional world through writing while the detective/reader is waiting.

When the murder/writer deconstructs the scene playing with everyday reality, the reader/detective is presented with children playing games (“Making Poison”), friends buying popsicles (“Horror Comics”), or making clothes to wear on dates (“Boyfriends”). All of these everyday events are shown in perfect normal ways until the murderer/writer unsettles the scene and deconstructs reality, the writing. Thus, children’s games involve making poison, comic books transform friends into vampires that walk among the undead, and boyfriends melt into unknown shapes.

The collection is divided in four sections and, in the last one, she explores the darkness beneath the page where the writers find themselves between madness and sanity. Furthermore, her inversion on the view of gender conceptions have become sharper and challenging without losing the characteristic humour displaying serious issues. As it may be seen in “Instructions for the Third Eye,” Atwood treats the gender relations addressing both, female and male, readers in order to transcend identity positions and gender roles. However, to surpass this fixed positions and roles, people should open the “third eye”, but opening it means that you cannot “unsee” things again: “After that there are no more instructions because there is no more choice. You see. You see” (Atwood, 2010, p. 114).

In all these short stories, Atwood illustrates writing as a project in which the writer/murderer destroys the traditional patriarchal reality, unsettling the reader and provoking a reaction using an unconventional style. The end, closing with “Instructions for the Third Eye”, is the point where the reader has opened the eye of the imagination and can consider everything different. After that, the detective/reader is open to new interpretations and so is capable of colliding with patriarchal society.

3.3. *Good Bones*

Similarly to *Murder in the Dark*, *Good Bones* is different to the previous collections of short stories. It was published in 1992 and it contains highly varied short texts. Once and again, the portraying of gender conceptions is more defiant, but Atwood still uses humour as a weapon to strike minds. In the prose poem “Men, at Sea,” a retelling of “L’Homme et la Mer”

by Baudelaire (1857, she deconstructs the heroic machismo exposing the gender stereotyping. The inversion of the fundamental relationships is set through the modification of the title. The author states an insecurity, by adding a single comma, which is the result of the female perspective of the writer and which promotes women, neutralized in Baudelaire's poem. Atwood employs clichés, as Baudelaire does, but intentionally and ironically (Howells, 2008, p. 153-155).

Whereas "Men, at Sea" is concerned with the representation of men, "The Little Red Hen Tells All" (1992) represents women. Atwood creates a new version of the original children's tale opening new views of meaning. This short story is also an example of the author's rewriting of popular texts, fairy tales and myths. However, they are not conventionally rewritten as Atwood places them in new contexts and from different points of view. Therefore, popular literature becomes an impressive source of inspiration thanks to the author's witty and humorous style.

"The Little Red Hen Tells All" is based on a children's tale in the English-speaking world. The structures of the original tale are kept, but with some amplifications and comments on the plot, exposing the intellectual implications shown by the tale as the ideology that supports capitalism: "Sobriety and elbow-grease. Do it yourself. Then invest your capital. Then collect" (p. 5).

Nevertheless, the reinterpretation of this story is concerned with gender difference. Atwood emphasises the gender of the female narrator to break with the stereotypes. The egocentric and greedy behaviour shown ("I'll eat it myself, so kiss off" [p. 8]) does conform with the stereotypical female image, which tends to represent women as giving and generous, so Atwood corrects it to depict different portrayals of men (Howells, 2008, p. 156): "Don't believe a word of it. As I've pointed out, I'm a hen, not a rooster" (Atwood, 2014 ,p. 8). The author, then, makes clear the hazards of gender differentiation, to which the "hens" are victims more often than the "roosters." Atwood portrays how the rest of the "farm animals" make the "hen" a victim, only for a single loaf of bread, by accusing her of selfishness, threatening her and saying that everything is her fault and she ends up apologizing for everything even though she has done nothing wrong:

Here, I said. I apologize for having the idea in the first place. I apologize for luck. I apologize for self-denial. I apologize for being a good cook. I apologize for that crack about nuns. I apologize for that crack about roosters. I apologize for smiling, in my

smug hen apron, with my smug hen beak. I apologize for being a hen. (Atwood, 2014, p. 8)

Atwood is also critic with the traditional roles assigned to women in fairy tales (Wilson, 2004, p. 31). In “Unpopular Gals,” divided in three parts, the “ugly” sister, the old woman that lives alone and the stepmother, roughly portrayed in the tales as bad and evil, complaint about this problem. They are always accused of devious crimes, hated and pitied for being represented as that, but nobody thinks about the scarce background. “As for the prince, you think I didn’t love him? I loved him more than she did” (p. 20). “Just because I’m old and live alone and can’t see very well, they accuse me of all sort of things. Cooking and eating children” (Atwood, 2014, p. 21). “It’s true, there are never any evil stepfathers. Only a bunch of lily-livered widowers” (Atwood, 2014, p. 22).

“Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” is a poetic joke. The frivolous narrator invites the “stupid” reader to believe that the dreamer and thick women of patriarchal versions had given us literature (Wilson, 2004, p. 31). However, “Making a Man” focuses on male conditioning when it overturns the sexual practice of “making” women. Although it is easy to miss the irony on “making” men from clothes, gingerbread, wedding cake or marzipan, this story parallels “The Female Body” completely dehumanizing the subject. Men, too, can be reduced to decorative functions as figures on a wedding cake or become “food”.

In this collection, the topic of rebirth and the deconstruction of reality are also present. “My Life as a Bat” is a story in which an unpopular narrator demolishes religious and cultural mythologies that believe in the animal reincarnation being a punishment or light being live and darkness being nothing. It also parodies the popular depiction of bats and vampires, including vampire films and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*: “O Dracula, unlikely hero! O flying leukaemia, in your cloak like a living umbrella, a membrane of black leather which you unwind from within yourself” (p. 95).

4. Dark Humour and Feminism in Four Stories

The four stories that are going to be analysed belong to the previously commented collections. Humour is one of the techniques used by Margaret Atwood in order to criticize the patriarchal society and all its imperfections, but also a method to defend a feminist point of view in literature.

These selected stories are some of the best examples of Atwood's usage of humour to criticise not only society, but also the victimization that women place on themselves. Therefore, the potential of each piece to be analysed, taking into account its main themes, has been carefully considered.

4.1. "The Man from Mars"

In this story, Christine, a little overweight college student, is stopped by an Asian man while walking home. The foreigner asks her for directions and she draws a map to him expecting to fulfil her "duty" as good person. However, the man insists on exchanging names. Christine thinks that "If this had been a person from her own culture she would have thought he was trying to pick her up. But then, people from her own culture never tried to pick her up; she was too big" (p. 15). The girl belittles this strange request, but the man grabs her arm and insists on accompanying her home. Then, she starts to feel frightened and escapes from him.

The mysterious man calls her home, even though she did not give him her number, and Christine's mother invites him to tea believing he is a sophisticated French. The girl is angry at first, but, when she sees how shocked her mother is after answering the door and finding the little odd man, she is pleased. Everything goes perfectly fine until the bizarre foreigner sets a timer on his camera, suddenly wraps his arm around her and squeezes his cheek against hers as the photograph is taken. Apparently, his wish was to send it to his family. Afterwards, the man leaves without further explanation.

While teaching at a summer camp, Christine does not answer his letters and, when she goes back home, she throws them away. Furthermore, the man locates her on the campus and begins to follow her persistently. However, when he is asked what he wants, his answer is that he wishes to talk to her, but he remains silent after being given the opportunity. She is both frightened and embarrassed and tries to avoid him. Nevertheless, all the issue attracts attention to her, from the boys that did not care before and Christine feels more powerful than ever.

After a weekend away, Christine's father calls the police to inform that the mysterious man was stalking his daughter and they tell him that the foreigner will be deported if he gets near the house again. Some time passes and the family receives a call from the police notifying the deportation of the Asian man. However, to Christine's surprise, it was not because he went near her house but because he was following a sixty-year old nun in another city. The girl seemed to be bothered by the fact that she was not the only one to be shadowed by this bizarre man and the attention she attracted before starts to fade.

At the end of the story, an older Christine is obsessed with reading the newspapers concerning the war as she finally learnt the city from which the man was. However, she has to stop reading them because the possibility of finding his obituary makes her anxious.

"The Man from Mars", as any other narrative in *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*, has its victims. One of them is obviously the female character. However, Atwood conceals the fact that "the other" is also the object of victimization. A nameless Asian distorts the calm middle-class life of a character, Christine, that happens to be a woman. Although the story is told from her point of view, the author demonstrate that discrimination is not only a matter of gender. Just as the "Martian", unfamiliar to Christine's customs and cultural reference, does not suit any group she can distinguish, she herself is not identified with any feminine criteria according to her male friends: "she fitted none of the categories [men] commonly used when talking about girls; she wasn't a cock-teaser, a cold fish, an easy lay or a snarky bitch; she was an honorary person" (p. 29). Even though the concept of femininity seems to be far from how she is seen, it is the foreigner "alien", the "other", who restores Christine as female in the eyes of the men around her. It is his devoted following of her around the university that has "rendered her equally mysterious" (p. 28).

By the end of the story, Christine and the man "from Mars" are more similar than the reader initially thought. Both are just unknown in a crowd of normal white people. Both are more interesting when the incident happens. In fact, the peculiar event is the defining characteristic of each of them. Therefore, Atwood examines the situation of the "other" in a foreign culture but also the circumstances of being the "other" in one's own social environment. At their first encounter, Christine tries to be polite smiling and being nice to the foreign man, but their differences are extremely remarkable and he is just totally unattractive to her. Moreover, Christine's dissimilarities with the rest of women makes her also unappealing to men:

They sat weedishly on the benches or lay on the grass with their head on squares of used newspaper. As she passed, their wrinkled toadstool faces drifted towards her, drawn by the movement of her body, then floated away again, uninterested (p. 13).

This difference is even magnified when she is compared to her beautiful sisters. Nevertheless, Christine, the athletic daughter, has “interests” in a world in which beauty is everything, or that is what her mother thinks:

[Her sisters] were beautiful; one was well married already and the other would clearly have no trouble. Her [mother's] friends consoled her about Christine by saying ‘She’s not fat, she’s just big-boned, it’s the father side’... Her other daughters had never gotten involved in activities when they were at school, but since Christine could not possibly ever be beautiful even if she took off weight, it was just as well she was so athletic and political, it was a good thing she had interests (p. 19).

Atwood, then, criticises the perception of female image by other women. The other women underestimate Christine just because she could never be as beautiful as her sisters or have the perfect body. Her own mother states that it is good for her to have interests because she will not be able to have anything else to attract boys with. The concept of her sisters having “no trouble to marry” is an antiquated degradation of the female aptitude to be more than an overshadowed wife.

The situation with her mother and the insecurities rising in her, when she sees that she remains unattractive to most men contrary to her well married sister, make Christine to victimise herself and to lose her confidence. However, when the strange man starts following her and her male friends wonder why, a mysterious aura completely veils her. Furthermore, men begin to invite her on dates, but she rejects all of them:

Now, however, there was something about her that could not be explained. A man was chasing her, a peculiar sort of man, granted, but still a man, and he was without doubt attracted to her... Other men examined her more closely than they ever had, appraising her, trying to find out what it was those twitching bespectacled eyes saw in her. They started to ask her out, though they returned from these excursions with their curiosity unsatisfied, the secret of her charm still intact (p. 29).

This just makes her more desirable and gives her a power that she did not hold before. Therefore, it is inevitable for Christine’s self-esteem to grow immeasurably. The whole situation is a vicious cycle: the more men she rejects, the stronger her confidence becomes.

She starts fantasising with being more and more beautiful: “Christine sensed this. In the bathtub, she no longer imagined she was a dolphin; instead she imagined she was an elusive water-nixie, or sometimes, in moments of audacity, Marilyn Monroe” (p. 29).

Clearly, it is just a matter of self-esteem, not of being chased by a foreigner, which is a humorous situation. Atwood is mocking the wrong perception that Christine has about her increased popularity among men. The protagonist even becomes obsessed with the tracking of the Asian man because she thinks that it is the source of her new prestige: “The daily chase was becoming a habit; she even looked forward to it” (p. 29).

Nevertheless, all fades when the man “from Mars” is stopped by the police. After losing confidence in herself, everyone loses interest in her. Therefore, it was not a matter of being chased by a peculiar man, but of self-esteem. When she stopped believing in her, she returned to her initial own victimization, which is one of the most comical aspects in Atwood’s style. “Christine’s aura of mystery soon faded; anyway, she herself no longer believed in it” (p. 36).

Another humorous thing about “The Man from Mars” is the cyclic dimension of the narrative. At the beginning of the story, two or three squirrels run towards Christine in the park and halt looking at her expectantly. She walks faster because she has nothing to give them. “People shouldn’t feed them, she thought; it makes them anxious and they get mangy” (p. 14). Although, Christine complains about it, she herself becomes just as anxious and miserable as a squirrel at the end of the narrative. The peak of the story is when the police captures the man with her help, but she is slightly declining to betray the man by asking the policemen not to do anything to him. Atwood implies that this will be the most interesting thing which will happen to Christine in all her life, and she is left to fall into an obscure anonymity as does the alien man. Apart from that, the anxiety is consuming her from the moment she discovers that there could be a war waging in the Asian man’s country. Moreover, her life is rather normal by the time she is old and she has not achieved much, not even a good marriage: “she did a good job, and was seldom discriminated against for being a woman because nobody thought of her as one” (p. 36). The words selected by Atwood to describe her situation are strongly critical with the patriarchal society and the position of women at work.

The dark humour behind the alleged liberalism is another topic underneath the external story. Atwood magnificently criticises the Western ideology and the feeling of superiority.

She uses the technique of hiding the man's identity in order to reveal how fast people can judge foreigners. Although the reader may suppose that the man is from Vietnam, and not "from Mars", it is never specified. He does not have a name, age, profession or background so the author only lets the reader know what Christine knows about him (Kapuscinski, 2008, p. 42-43). Therefore, the man remains an alien because Atwood wants the reader to realise the consequences of the limited but influential first impression.

The darkest part concerning humour is when Christine mentally accuses the man "from Mars" of raping her. Atwood writes a sentence as if the girl were quoting from a dictionary to express it and, this exaggeration is a recurring element in the author's witty narrative to create comedy from a serious matter. Maybe this was an occurrence because she felt the same fear as Christine. When Atwood was writing *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*, she was studying at Harvard. She admitted that there she "first learned urban fear. (Before I went there, I always walked around at night, didn't bother about locked doors, etc. If you behaved that way in Cambridge you were dead.)" (*Conversations* 77). Hence, Christine fears the action of this strange man. In the story, it is stated that "She had been afraid he would attack her, she could admit it now, and he had; but not in the usual way. He had raped, rapeo, rapere, rapui, to seize and carry off, not herself but her celluloid image" (p. 25). From this moment, the landscape changes when she walks home because of her irrational fear: "Parked cars, the shrubberies near her house, the driveways on either side of it, changed as she passed them from unnoticed background to sinister shadowed foreground" (p. 30).

In addition, there is a criticism to the open-mindedness. Atwood mocks the image of a tolerant person that Christine's mother has about herself: "She put on the glasses which she wore on a decorative chain around her neck, a signal that she was in her modern, intelligent mood rather than her old-fashioned whimsical one" (p. 18). This subtle but straightforward is a clear implication of the modern attitude of the woman, who removes it and puts it again as she pleases. The mother is using open-mindedness and intelligence just as a decorative element like the chain in her glasses. Atwood is using here understatements to create a satirical image. Moreover, she is portrayed as a proud woman whose fake tolerance makes her brag about herself in terms of superiority by the simple fact of not firing an immigrant girl that got pregnant. However, it is clearly stated that she does it because of the lack of girls that are able to help with the housework:

This girl was from the West Indies... Since that time she had become pregnant, but Christine's mother had not dismissed her. She said she was slightly disappointed but what could you expect, and she didn't see any real difference between a girl who was pregnant before you hired her and one who got that way afterwards. She prided herself on her tolerance; also there was scarcity of girls (p. 22).

The woman is also hypocritical. When the mother thought that the man who called Christine was French, she invited him to tea because she imagined him as a sophisticated Western man. However, she did not look very pleased when she discovered that he was Asian and, at the end, she told the police that he could be a maniac just by the fact that he was a foreigner: "Her mother volunteered that the thing about people from another culture was that you could never tell whether they were insane or not because their ways were so different" (p. 32).

Although this may be true and Christine sees her mother as an intolerant person, she herself is not that different from her and this ironical element makes the situation more comical. She knows people from other countries and thinks she is an open-minded girl, but Atwood shows how limited by the Western ideology she is. She affirms that thinking of one's self as tolerant and progressive does not make you such. The story displays the tense relationship with Elvira, her mother's housekeeper. The barriers between them cannot be avoided because Christine is puzzled by Elvira's coldness towards her. Even though her intentions are good, she is restrained by the leading ideology that limits her vision of foreigners. It could be due to the fact that she sees her mother's actions on a daily basis and she is not able to oppose the woman that criticises her every single day because she is not the beautiful, superficial daughter she wishes. Hence, she agrees with her mother's point of view and copies her fake open-mind believing she is different in many ways.

Christine thought it faintly sinful to have a girl. The only ones available now were either foreign or pregnant; their expressions usually suggested they were being taken advantage of somehow. But her mother asked what they would do otherwise; they'd either have to go into a Home or stay in their own countries, and Christine had to agree this was probably true (p. 18).

Consequently, the story shows the reader the implications of being an outsider. Christine is on the margins of her society because she is not the "usual" girl. However, she is seen differently when she meets someone that is even more marginalised. The presence of this odd man drags her into a social setting where she is spotted and even valued. When he is no

longer around to call that attention to her, Christine returns to her position as an outsider. As Atwood said in an interview, it was Christine's failure to see this man as fully human:

The title... what it means to me is that we all have a way of dehumanizing anything which is strange or exotic to us. In our arrogance, we take ourselves to be the norm, and measure everyone else against it. The man of course is not from Mars; he is from earth, like everyone else. But there's no way of accounting for the atrocities that people perform on other people except by the "Martian" factor, the failure to see one's victims as fully human (Atwood and Oates, 1978, p. 8).

4.2. "Simmering"

The story, included in the third section of *Murder in the Dark*, displays a new trend fashionable among men. It is a satirical image of a future in which gender roles and beliefs have been completely reversed: men are housekeepers and women have to work in offices. Cooking now means prestige among men, who create "exclusive clubs and secret societies" (Atwood, 2010, p. 54) with handshakes called like food and dishes. Meanwhile, women undergo kitchen envy, and dream with a forbidden freedom.

In this witty piece, where men progressively take control of kitchens, finally resigning from their jobs to dedicate more time to cooking, Atwood expounds a rearrangement of perspectives, leaving room for a male point of view as an ironic complement. Contrarily to the main subject of a large part of this collection, which is writing and the writer as a murderer playing a deceitful game with the reader and victim, "Simmering" is a story ironically describing a society in which the reversal of gender roles prevails (Gibert, 2012, p. 211). However, at the end, the situation continues to be unfair for women because men are imposing their judgement. Therefore, cooking becomes an exclusively male activity. The language used in kitchens reflects how men were banning words and making them male exclusive, so some words become taboo for women, who were not allowed to enter the kitchens, making the non-usage of them a comical element:

Indeed, sexual metaphor was changing: bowls and forks became prominent, and *eggbeater*, *pressure cooker*, and *turkey baster* became words which only the most daring young women, the king who thought it was a kick to butter their own toast, would venture to pronounce in mixed company (p. 53).

The beginning of the story reveals a sexual innuendo itself through the choice of words. “It started in the backyards. At first the men concentrated on heat and smoke, and on dangerous thrusts with long forks” (p. 51). At the same time, it is hilarious the lack of interest men show towards cooking something that does not come from a barbecue. The understatement included in the story are humoristic elements used by Atwood in order to emphasise the role reversal. Furthermore, while men are investing time in kitchens, women grow an intense interest in making money and working:

and around that time the wives got tired of making butterscotch brownies and jello salads with grated carrots and baby marshmallows in them and wanted to make money instead, and one thing led to another” (p. 51).

However, the story portrays the severe repression to which they were subdued whereas the dominant male vision of this new trend is applauded and supported. Atwood, then, criticises the imposed opinion that prevails in society. The belief that no matter what men take from women and forbid them to do because they are doing everything right. Consequently, in “Simmering”, what first was a growing desire in women became later a prohibited activity that required sneaking and hiding:

Everyone praised the men to keep them going, and the wives, sneaking out of the houses in the mornings with their squeaky new briefcases, clutching their bus tickets because the men needed the station wagons to bring home the carcasses, felt they had got away with something (p. 52).

Finally, this forbidden activity became an imposition just because men needed it. Cooking was the new tendency and, if men were doing anything else, their pride could be easily hurt by other people’s gossips. Therefore, women were forced into what at first was a free choice. The future suggested by Atwood reminds the reader to the past since a growing wish to do the same things men did became a prohibition and, finally, an imposition by the dominant male gender:

The men resigned from their jobs in large numbers so they could spend more time in the kitchen. The magazines said it was a modern trend. The wives were all driven off to work, whether they wanted or not: someone had to make the money, and of course they did not want their husbands’ masculinity to be threatened (p. 53).

The question of social reputation changed while men were taking control of the kitchens. It was now a question of measures and numbers. The simple use of the word

“masculinity” is a comical element employed by Atwood. “A man’s status in the community was now displayed by the length of his carving knives, by how many of them they have and how sharp he kept them” (p. 54). Furthermore, the female image changes alongside this social status. It is said that “If Nature had meant women to cook... God would have made carving knives round and with holes in them” (p. 54). Consequently, men in control alienated woman with prejudices and made them the subjugated subject of society (Gibert, 2012, p. 221):

It was pointed out to the women, who by this time did not go into the kitchens at all on pain of being thought unfeminine, that *chef* after all means *chief* and that Mixmasters were common but no one had ever heard of a Mixmistress (p. 54).

Denigrated women then retired to their own solitude and nothingness assuming the previous male role, which consisted in doing nothing, but from a new and more repressive perspective. Atwood continues using the writing style and words to provoke laughter in the reader. Women remained silent and unnoticed like another piece of furniture becoming useless objects:

The women in their pinstripe suits, exiled to the living rooms where they dutifully sip the glasses of port brought out to them by the men, used to sit uneasily, silently, listening to the loud bursts of male and somehow derisive laughter from behind the closed kitchen doors (p. 55).

Nevertheless, this humorous story turns horrid when the cooks become aggressive and try to extinguish the internal desire of women, who want to make some space in the kitchens for themselves. Therefore, they begin to imitate the bigger and more oppressive nations, thinking they are visionaries, in order to cure this “women’s kitchen envy” by amputation because respectable magazines recommend this practice (Verduyn, 2017, p. 128):

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 the more advanced nations (p. 54).

Hence, “Simmering” highlights the problems faced by women writing in patriarchal societies (Verduyn, 2017, p. 128). There is a special criticism towards the Victorian period when men were said to write with sense and women were concerned only with the sensibility, although some writers, like Jane Austen, proved it wrong. “The wives said that there were only twenty-four hours in a day; and the men, who in that century were still priding

themselves on their rationality, had to agree that this was so” (p. 51-52). Moreover, the narrator makes clear that the practice of writing or cooking, was forbidden and women had to hide if they wanted it to survive. Subsequently, this is part of history and not just a simple story:

This is history. But it is not a history familiar to many people. It exists only in a few archival collections that have not yet been destroyed, and in manuscripts like this one, passed from woman to woman, usually at night, copied out by hand or memorize. It is subversive of me even to write these words (p. 55).

Nonetheless, similarly to the female writers in oppressive patriarchal societies, women in “Simmering” do not surrender. They continue fighting for what they want and deserve, for their dreams and for being allowed to do the exact same things as men do. “At night they dream, long clandestine dreams, confused and obscured by shadows... They dream of apple; they dream of the creation of the world; they dream of freedom” (p. 55). Either in the past or in the future, female writers’ rights are represented by the dark humour that Atwood displays in her masterful style, and, even though, she is criticising the different societies present through times, she does not stop advocating for the position of these writers in history.

4.3. “Gertrude Talks Back”

This short story belongs to the collection published in 1992, *Good Bones*, and it is a retelling of Scene IV (Act III) in *Hamlet*. In the Shakespearean tragedy, Gertrude does not have much opportunity to speak while her son talks to her furiously. Hamlet’s monologue is complemented in this piece with the things that Gertrude was thinking during her son’s speech.

In the original tragedy, Gertrude is enclosed within a patriarchal society that makes her weak and lustful. On the contrary, Atwood’s Gertrude is exploring female sexuality and motherhood. This revolutionary rewriting of Gertrude as strong and independent is a challenge to gender roles (Thompson, 2013, p. 18). Furthermore, with a straightforward and sarcastic tone that creates an effect of humour, Gertrude demonstrates that she is different from her Shakespearean version, who was dependent and fragile as the rest of the women portrayed in the playwright’s century.

Moreover, Gertrude is not the only character in the play who is rewritten. Through the protagonist's words, the reader is able to realise the notable differences between the original ones and Atwood's portrayal. Hamlet is, therefore, reduced to a disobedient brat devoted to his noble father, who is presented as a hollow and tedious character. King Claudius is no more an evil usurper, but a sweet and funny man. Finally, Ophelia is considered by Gertrude as a prudish and immature girl. Consequently, this alteration of the character's personality results in a comical reply to Hamlet:

Yes, I've seen those pictures, thank you very much. I know your father was handsomer than Claudius. High brow, aquiline nose and so on, looked great in uniform. But handsome isn't every thing, especially in a man, and far be it from me to speak ill of the dead, but I think it's about time I pointed out to you that your Dad just wasn't a whole lot of fun. Noble, sure, I grant you. But Claudius, well, he likes a drink now and then. He appreciates a decent meal. He enjoys a laugh, know what I mean? (p. 9-10).

The humorous answer of Gertrude to Hamlet's angry rant about the handsomeness of his father is deconstructing the myth created around her previous husband. He is no hero, but a dull man. Atwood is understating that beauty is of no importance when a man does not know how to impress her with other qualities. In Shakespeare's tragedy, the reply offered by Gertrude is "O Hamlet, speak no more!" (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 102), which is used several times by the Queen throughout the scene to answer her son.

When Hamlet insults Claudius in the original play with the intention to offend his mother, he says: "Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed" (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 106). To this insolent behaviour, Atwood's Gertrude shows how cheeky mischievous she has become in the retelling by replying wittily: "By the way, darling, I wish you wouldn't call your stepdad the bloat king. He does have a slight weight-problem, and it hurts his feelings" (p. 10). This answer creates an effect of humorousness because of the selection of words and the intention that she has. Gertrude is somehow making less offensive her son's words, but exposing the truth about her new husband.

Another comical part in this story is the use of understatements and sexual innuendos. In the original, Gertrude was seen as a passive sexual subject to male characters, fulfilling the morality of the period. Atwood rejects this limitation of female sexuality by presenting a much more sexual Gertrude (Howells, 2008, p. 157):

No, darling, I am not mad at you. But I must say you're an awful prig sometimes. Just like your Dad. The Flesh, he'd say. You'd think it was dog dirt. You can excuse that in a young person, they are always so intolerant, but in someone his age it was getting, well, very hard to live with, and that's the understatement of the year (p. 11).

Furthermore, "Gertrude Talks Back" defends the liberation of the female body by highlighting her sexuality, which is deduced to be more active than her son's: "And let me tell you, everyone sweats at a time like that, as you'd find out very soon if you ever gave it a try. A real girlfriend would do you a heap of good... Have a nice roll in the hay" (p. 11). Gertrude also talks about Ophelia in these terms, but without mentioning her name. In Shakespeare's version, Hamlet's mother laments the death of the other woman present in the play. However, Atwood mocks the sudden madness provoked in the girl by Hamlet (Thompson, 2013, p. 30). She accuses the girl of being instable and, alongside, of not being a suitable wife for her son. Gertrude also makes reference to her suicide in the original tragedy:

Not like that pasty-faced what's-her-name, all trussed up like a prize turkey in those touch-me-not corsets of hers. If you ask me, there's something off about that girl. Borderline. Any little shock could push her right over the edge (p. 11).

Atwood is humorously mocking Ophelia's weak personality and emotional instability in Shakespeare's work (Thompson, 2013, p. 24). The rewritten character that she has created is strong, independent and freer than ever so the girl and her insane love for Hamlet is everything that Gertrude stands against. Ridiculing the kind of clothes that she wore and the paleness of her face makes Hamlet's mother the empowered woman in the story. Therefore, this narrative is different from the previous tales, where humour lay in the fact that the female protagonists made a victim of themselves and even wanted to be protected by men like damsels in distress. The Gertrude in this story is confident and opposes the male oppression with wit and insolence, which makes her comical and amusing.

Nevertheless, the most humorous effect is produced through the selection of words made by the author, just like in the other stories. Atwood uses this comical element that is language to create a funny situation throughout the narrative. Consequently, not only the representation of the rewritten characters or the replies that she gives to her son are hilarious. Answering Shakespearean Hamlet's "In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 103), she is

making fun of Hamlet's elaborate speech while reprimanding him, exposing her role as mother and as woman at the same time:

The rank sweat of a what? My bed is certainly not enseamed, whatever that might be! A nasty sty, indeed! Not that it's any of your business, but I change those sheets twice a week, which is more than you do, judging from that student slum pigpen in Wittenberg. I'll certainly never visit you there again without prior warning! I see that laundry of yours when you bring it home, and not often enough either, by a long shot! Only when you run out of black socks (p. 10-11).

This comic response transports the characters to modern times, where undergraduates live by themselves while studying. The consequence of this is a humorous reflection of the present day. Atwood makes the reader laugh with nowadays version of this Hamlet. The humour also lies within the techniques used, like this one of taking characters to the modern world. However, it cannot be forgotten that the story is parodically critical with the representation of women and their submission to male characters. As the author herself defended in a speech at the American Booksellers' convention in Miami (1993):

Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone? Gone to Ophelias, every one, leaving the devilish tour-de-force parts to be played by bass-baritones. Or to put it another way: if all women are well behaved by nature —or if we aren't allowed to say otherwise for fear of being accused of anti-femaleism—then they are deprived of moral choice, and there isn't much left for them to do in books except run away a lot.

The twist of the story appears when Gertrude confesses that she killed her previous husband. There is an understatement uncovering Claudius as a weak and sensible man not capable of doing so. However, Atwood's protagonist is more determined and does not seem to hesitate when admitting it. She does not seem to feel any remorse either, which may slightly remind the reader to a colder Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Oh! You think what? You think Claudius murdered your Dad? Well, no wonder you've been so rude to him at the dinner table!

If I'd known that, I could have put you straight in no time flat.

It wasn't Claudius, darling.

It was me (p. 12)

It is clear that Atwood uses humour to denounce the passivity and submission of women like Ophelia and gives more importance to a secondary character from Shakespeare's tragedy. The author also creates the opportunity of imagining what she could have been thinking during her son's monologue, providing her with a confident voice and a strong personality. Gertrude's witty words, loaded with connotations and understatements, produce the perfect humoristic effect in a modern reader who realises the criticism behind them.

4.4. "There Was Once"

This untold story within a story is part of *Good Bones*. The unnamed characters are arguing about a tale. The person telling the story is unknown and wants to be heard, but his listener keeps interrupting him with corrections to make the story more politically correct. Moreover, a third person, who is a middle-aged man, appears in the middle of the tale. At the end, the tale-teller is unable to continue telling this story. Therefore, it can be considered as an anti-fairy tale which parodies genres, techniques and even traditions. It presents the deconstruction of a story in order to reconstruct it again from a realistic point of view (Wilson, 2011, p. 275).

The listener starts questioning the setting of the story. Atwood humorously states that the world has changed and it is not a fantasy where people live in the middle of a forest. "—Forest? Forest is passé, I mean, I've had it with all this wilderness stuff. It's not a right image of our society, today. Let's have some urban for a change" (p. 13). This first comical element, from the very beginning of the story, is already deconstructing the patterns used in all fairy tales.

The storyteller continues by changing the forest with the suburbs. However, the hearer protests because the girl is not actually "poor":

—Poor is relative. She lived in a house, didn't she?... Then socio-economically speaking, she was not poor.

—But none of the money was *hers*! The whole point of the story is that the wicked stepmother makes her wear old clothes and sleep in the fireplace-

—Aha! They had a *fireplace*! With poor, let me tell you, there's no fireplace. Come down to the park, come to the subway stations after dark, come down to where they sleep in cardboard boxes, and I'll show you poor! (p. 14).

There is a subtle understatement about the pitiful tone with which the listener presents the reality of poor people in a modern society. Although this is a serious topic, Atwood is taking advantage of her most prominent technique: using language in order to show humorousness from a very serious modern problem.

The story, then, dives into the feminist vision of tales. The listener interrupts again to make clear that fairy tales are incredibly unrealistic and that women are far too perfect to belong to the real world. Furthermore, there is a hint of anger in the tone used, which provides the discussion with a further humoristic element.

Stop right there. I think we can cut the *beautiful*, don't you? Women these days have to deal with too many intimidating physical role models as it is, what with those bimbos in the ads. Can't you make her, well, more average? (p. 14).

Atwood criticises the influence that unrealistic ideas of beauty can have in young women, who may compare themselves to the beautiful dreamlike princesses in fairy tales (Kim, 2015). The effect caused on kids, to whom these female figures are usually presented as perfect, can be devastating. Therefore, the author is trying to make the reader become aware of this through the hilarious discussion that both characters are having. It is obvious that Atwood's purpose is to create positive and realistic aims among young girls in general.

—There was once a girl who was a little overweight and whose front teeth stuck out, who-

—I don't think it's nice to make fun of people's appearances. Plus, you're encouraging anorexia.

—I wasn't making fun! I was just describing-

—Skip the description. Description oppresses (p. 15).

This other quote shows the struggles that the teller has in order to find an equilibrium between presenting an unrealistic protagonist and mocking her. By giving an extremely serious tone to the person that keeps interrupting the tale, Atwood achieves, once and again, a humorous effect through the use of language. Moreover, she is defending the realistic female

body, not the idealistic image submitted by tales, with a vaguely “description oppresses”. The fact that the person who questions everything does not want to keep correcting the narrator adds even more comedy to the scene because that person is growing tired of trying to make an imperfect tale. This is rather ironical and makes the discussion more comical. The vicious circle creates an effect of humorousness that continues thorough the story.

Atwood’s humour transforms this story into a double critique. On the one hand, she is condemning the eagerness of making everything politically correct in an imperfect world. On the other hand, this piece criticises the critics. Similarly to the short story “Murder in the Dark”, the tale-teller represents the author, who is being constantly interrupted by the critics that are complaining about the narrative. Humorously enough, Atwood characterises the two types of reviewers found nowadays: the traditional who wants the author to write according to old-fashion patterns and the appropriately contemporary who wants the author to include everybody in the narrative. The first one is called “Mister Nosy Parker”, which means inquisitive (Wilson, 2011, p. 278). He is said to be a middle-aged man and complains about the portrayal that the contemporary critic offers of him:

—And throw in some whips and chains. We all know what those twisted, repressed, middle-aged men are like-

—Hey, *just a minute!* I’m a *middle-aged*—

—Stuff it, Mister Nosy Parker. Nobody asked you to stick in your oar, or whatever you want to call that thing. This is between the two of us. Go on (p. 17).

The correct contemporary critic is the person who is constantly interrupting the narrator, or the author. Atwood is portraying critics who analyse literature from a feminist, ethnic or colonial perspective and who are eager to criticise everything that is included in the classical cannon of white male authors writing about white men belonging to a middle-class.

—Then you can scratch the condescending paternalistic terminology. It’s *woman*, pal. *Woman*.

—There was once-

—What’s this *was*, *once*? Enough of the dead past. Tell me about *now* (p. 18).

Consequently, Atwood’s critique to this “nosy” critics, who do not let authors tell the story as they want to, is humorously captured in this comical story.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the history of literature, women have been displaced. Moreover, Canadian writers had been ignored in their own country. However, Margaret Atwood, being both, has been able to find her roots and place herself among the greatest writers giving Canada the space that the country deserves in global literature. She has demonstrated that an author can be critical but with a sense of humour. In this essay, four of her stories have been analysed in depth considering the humour within the surface. It has been proved that Atwood shows the contradictions of the patriarchal society that oppresses women but also women's acquiescence in their own victimization, like Christine does in "The Man from Mars". In "Simmering", it has been confirmed that female writers had not stopped to fight for the rights while "Gertrude Talks Back" and "There Was Once" encourage a fair representation of women in literature. That's why Atwood, as a feminist, is advocating for liberation and equality.

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