The Necessity of Telling Her Story

Narrative Veracity in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This thesis discusses Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale from the point of view of narratorial reliability. Using Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics as a starting point and building on this with Greta Olsen’s Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators and Per Krogh Hansen’s Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator the main character of The Handmaid’s Tale, Offred, is assessed. By examining her reliability from the point of view of intranarrational unreliability, internarrational unreliability, intertextual unreliability and extratextual unreliability it is established that Offred is a fallible but reliable narrator. Fallibility is about her ability to be incorrect, as a first-person narrator she does not have access to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of other characters. This inability to know the thoughts of others makes her fallible. Her emotional honesty and the clarity with which she highlights her own fallibility make her a reliable narrator. Offred tells the story she needs to tell. The essential honesty of needing to tell the story is what makes her reliable.

The epilogue is narrated by Professor Pieixoto who is found to be a far less reliable narrator. He does not contradict the facts of the Offred’s story instead he fails to pass the test of being a narrator who speaks to the morality of the implied reader of the The Handmaid’s Tale. This failure to speak to the truth of Offred’s tale makes him far less reliable from the reader’s perspective. The essay concludes that Offred is to be considered reliable precisely because she is telling the story she needs to tell and not telling a story that focuses on scientific accuracy.

Keywords: Narratorial Reliability, Fallible narrator, The Handmaid’s Tale, Offred, intranarrational unreliability, internarrational unreliability, intertextual unreliability, extratextual unreliability, Margaret Atwood.
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Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian novel set in a not too distant future after a conservative religious military coup has taken place in the USA. Fertile women are at a premium and are treated as property of the state. Religious justifications are found to allow for state sanctioned polygamy where the “Handmaids” are passed between “Commanders” who have infertile wives. Atwood originally wrote the book in 1984, something that she describes as an anti-prediction, meaning that if we talk about it now we can ensure it never comes to pass (Atwood 2017). In the same essay, Atwood argues that her book can be considered to be a type of “literature of witness” a form of literature that seeks to bear witness to events and to communicate them to a wider world. The book’s main character hopes for a reader in the same way as literary figures Robinson Crusoe and Jane Eyre and autobiographical non-fiction writers like Anne Frank and Roméo Dallaire did. Atwood says that now many are worried that the world is becoming a more oppressive place there is a need for literature of witness, and that we shall all have to hope that it is heard now and not found “centuries later, in an old house, behind a wall” (ibid).

The main character of *the Handmaids Tale* is known to us only as Offred, a name that comes from her Commander, he is called Fred, therefore she is “of Fred.” Once she is no longer his Handmaid her name will be changed as she is no longer his property. The system of “Handmaids” in Gilead seeks to dehumanise the women, taking away from them their identity and forcing them to become servants of the state. We only have access to the world of Gilead through Offred’s descriptions of what she experiences. This first-person narrative makes us dependent on Offred to be a reliable witness to the events she describes. She is the only access we have to the facts; but like all witnesses she can be unreliable, posing a problem for the reader as we have no other accounts to turn to. Offred herself repeatedly questions her own reliability as a witness and highlights the unreliability of stories; conversely, she also highlights the necessity of stories for survival and making sense of her daily life. The epilogue goes even further to show the levels of abstraction the story has gone through before reaching us.

We later discover that what we have been reading is in fact a reconstructed account of Offred’s story, crafted from audio recordings a hundred years earlier. The
recordings were in no particular order and the editors in the future have had to piece together what they think may be the correct interpretation of Offred’s words. This retelling of Offred’s story further opens up a discussion of what the truth of her tale is and to what degree interpretation of the story changes the facts. Margaret Atwood uses time throughout novel to highlight the subjective nature of truth and story-telling. Offred’s narrative can be considered true because it is what she needs it to be at the time she is telling it: the truth of the story lies in the intention of the teller.

To examine the veracity of Offred’s tale this essay will consider the narrative structure of *The Handmaid’s Tale*; three different time periods of the novel are identified and how the story is told in each period is examined. It will then study Offred’s role in creating the narrative and her honesty with her audience. The final part of the analysis will look at the role of the researchers in the epilogue of shaping the narrative to tell the story they need to tell. Before considering the story itself, some useful terms and ideas from narratology will be introduced as the basis for this analysis.
1. The Handmaid and Her Tale

Narratology is not a unified field with simple and agreed-upon definitions of what all terms mean. It is therefore useful to first define the terms that will be used in this essay to ensure that reader and writer share the meaning of terms used to examine the role of the story teller. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983) is used as the starting point of the analysis of the narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Her work has been built upon by later narratologists, including both Greta Olson and Per Krogh Hansen, whose work this study draws upon to provide the analytical structure here used to examine Offred and her reliability. It is impossible not to mention Wayne C. Booth who coined the term unreliable narrator. The work of all these authors builds on his original ideas. Hansen quotes Booth as saying, “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (158–9). While Booth’s work has been vital to establishing and developing the discussion of when a narrator is reliable or not this essay uses mostly the work of others building on his arguments.

1.1 The Role of the Story Teller

Rimmon-Kenan divides a novel into three different levels, the text, the story and the narrative (4). The text is the concrete level, that which the reader can hold in their hands or install on their computer. It is the only level the reader comes into physical contact with, and while this affects the reading experience it does not determine the meaning of what is being read. The second level is the story. The story is the chronological tale of what happens, the events and their effects on the characters. The reader is often not presented with the story and must reconstruct it from the text by reorganising the information that is presented. The narrative focuses the story, it gives a point of view. It is always driving forwards and while not chronological it takes the reader with it through the text, and the narrative drive allows the reader to discover the story.

Dino Franco Felluga describes different kinds of narrators in his *Introduction to Narratology*, first-person and third-person. The first-person narrator tells the story from their subjective perspective. The third-person narrator is, on the other hand, often
conflated or confused with the voice of the author, a presence outside the story telling the tale. The third-person narrator may or may not be omniscient. While the omniscient narrator is privy to everything they do not necessarily reveal all to their audience. Felluga says, the first-person narrator “tends to underline the act of transmission and often includes an embedded listener or reader, who serves as the audience for the tale.” Offred is a first-person narrator who is explicit that she is telling the story to someone, even if she does not know to whom. Felluga also notes that first-person narrators tend to be considered more unreliable, given that this kind of narration focuses on the “motivation” and behaviour of the narrator (Introduction).

Mieke Bal examines the layers of who is writing and reading a text. There is on the surface the clear traces of a physical author and physical reader: the person who wrote the text and the person who is holding it in their hands reading it. Bal identifies Wayne C. Booth’s concept of the implied author as important because it allows for a discussion of the morality of the text without having to connect this to the morality of the physical author. The implied author can be created from the text and no other sources. This means that the implied author is the product of the reader and text – not of any other actual physical authors or other textual information (17). Within the text is the narrator who, according to Bal, is always an I. In a first-person narrative, the I is usually easy to identify. Bal maintains that even in second or third person narrative there is an “implied I” who can be inferred even if the reader is unable to identify them. Bal infers that if there is always an I who narrates, there must also be a “you” who is the narratee. The narratee may be apparent in the text – there may be a named recipient – but even if there is not, Bal maintains that it is possible to infer the existence of the narratee. Just as the text itself implies an author, it also implies a reader. The implied reader can be extrapolated from the text, determining what moral values or knowledge the implied author assumes the reader holds. The three levels of author/narrator and reader/narratee lead us to be able to discuss the reliability of the narrative, story and plot which we are presented in the text (20).

Narrative and plot are not the same. While plot is connected to the levels of narrative and story it is not the same as either. The plot demands a causal relationship that are not needed by story or narrative. E.M. Forster exemplifies the difference between plot and narrative. The phrase “The king died, then the queen died” is an example of narrative,
where there is a series of events that are connected and drive forwards. For this to become plot, a causal relationship must be established: “The king died, then the queen died of grief.” The plot establishes a relationship between the narrative events. In this case, the narrative and story are identical. To establish a clear difference between the narrative, story and plot more context is needed, “The queen died of grief, it was a year to the day that her beloved husband the king had died.” The story is that of a king who died, and a year later the queen died. The narrative is one of a queen who died, and this the reader discovers was exactly one year after her husband the king. The plot is one of two people very much in love, the king died, and after a year of mourning the grief of the queen lead to her death (71-72). The three strands of story, narrative and plot are closely intertwined but are not identical.
1.2 The Reliability of a Narrator

The narrator is the voice giving us access to the world of the text. The reader learns about the rules and events of the universe from the narrator. This means that an unreliable narrator makes the world of the story unstable. Readers begin to lose their hold on the reality of the text. Patrick Colm Hogan states that “narratives place narrators in a position of structural authority. Thus, in all likelihood, readers begin with a presumption of narrator reliability and lose trust in a narrator only once they have reason to do so” (155). The reader will generally approach any story believing what they are told by the narrator. Rimmon-Kenan argues that the reader will imply narratorial reliability if the writer does not lead them away from this belief (100).

To establish the reliability of a narrator Rimmon-Kenan first looks at the narrator’s role in the text. The narrator is either a part of the story, homodiegetic, or external to the story, heterodiegetic. Heterodiegetic narrators are often thought of as being more reliable, as they are not part of the story and can be omniscient. A heterodiegetic narrator can be privy to the private thoughts and motivations of many characters in a way the homodiegetic narrator cannot (95-96). Building on this difference Rimmon-Kenan further argues that the relationship between the homodiegetic narrator and the story being told has a clear effect on the reliability of the narrator. Narrators who are biased about the characters they are telling the reader a story about are not as reliable as one who witnesses the events directly or who has no stake in the events of the story (101). Difference in moral judgements between the implied author and the narrator can also be a sign of an unreliable narrator but as Rimmon-Kenan notes, “the values (or ‘norms’) of the implied author are notoriously difficult to arrive at” (101). Rimmon-Kenan provides no definition of what narratorial unreliability is, but discusses the signs of unreliability and merely suggests it can be defined negatively; that is by not finding the signs that it is there.

Building on Rimmon-Kenan’s work, Greta Olson distinguishes between narrators who are unreliable and narrators who are fallible (101-02). The fallible narrator, in contrast to the unreliable narrator, does “not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgements or perceptions are biased” (101). Olson argues that readers forgive the fallible narrator because they recognise their own limitations in the narrator’s failings. The unreliable narrator on the other hand actively seeks to be
disingenuous. This kind of unreliability can provoke different reactions from the reader depending on the situation and the relationship between the reader and the narrator. Olson also notes that a homodiegetic narrator, who is a part of the story, is not necessarily unreliable but may only have a limited access to information. The narrator who is part of the action cannot know the motivation or private thoughts of others nor can that kind of narrator have a metaknowledge of the text. The homodiegetic narrators do not know everything but may do their best to report the truth to the reader; they can therefore, according to Olson, be considered reliable narrators.

Per Krogh Hansen defines four types of unreliability: intranarrational unreliability, internarrational unreliability, intertextual unreliability and extratextual unreliability (241-44). The intranarrational unreliability is detected when the narrator seems to try to hide something from the reader, is equivocal and even self-contradictory. The internarrational unreliability occurs when there are several narrators in a text who contradict each other. Intertextual unreliability is an example of a genre or character type where the reader would expect narratorial unreliability. The final class of unreliable narration is that of extratextual unreliability. This type of unreliability depends on readers applying their own knowledge or values to the text and using these as a basis for doubting the narrator’s reliability.

Hansen’s ideas can be combined with Olson’s. Olson gives us two groups of unreliable narrators, fallible narrators who do not seek to mislead their readers but unwittingly do so and unreliable narrators who purposefully seek to mislead their readers for their own reasons. Hansen’s four types of unreliability give the reader ways to establish if a narrator is unreliable. The evidence for unreliability can primarily be found in the text, the exception being extratextual unreliability which requires that a text can be placed within the realm of knowledge of the reader and questioned by that knowledge. This combination of Hansen’s and Olson’s ideas of unreliability of a narrator will be used to examine the narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. 
2. Analysing The Handmaid’s Tale

As Theodore Sheckels notes, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has three distinct time periods, “the time before, Gilead and Nunavit” (78). Sheckels explains that the time before is the past from Offred’s perspective; it is the time before she was taken to the red centre and the old regime was dominant. Gilead is the time of the red centre and the rest of Offred’s tale. Nunavit is substantially later and only presented in the epilogue of the book. As defined by E. M. Forster, the story and the plot of a novel are not identical. The story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* progresses chronologically from the before the rise of Gilead until after its fall. The plot, however, is built around Offred’s experiences as a “Handmaid” under the regime of Gilead and her narrative of the story is fragmented and non-chronological.

Hansen’s definition of extratextual reliability is the first point to be considered when analysing this text. As the least relevant of his dimensions it can be dealt with before considering the various parts of the text in detail. Extratextual reliability is often not a factor for consideration in science fiction novel. However, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not comfortably categorised as science fiction or as pure political speculation. How *The Handmaid’s Tale* should be classified is the topic of academic debate (Howels) and will not be resolved here. Nonetheless, *The Handmaid’s Tale* exists in a world that is recognisable but not the same as ours. There has been no coup d’état in the United States and the environmental disaster of “the time before” has not occurred – yet the world of the time before is recognisable as being a world that could be ours. We are challenged therefore to believe that this could be our own future. From the reader’s perspective, the whole story is a possible story of the future of our own time. As this future has not yet happened it can be viewed as being unreliable. I would argue that as the future described by *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not impossible to conceive of; the lack of extratextual corroborations does not make it unreliable. Nor does there seem to be a clash in the value structures of the implied author and narrator of most of the book. It is only when we reach the epilogue that the reader is uncomfortable with the narrator’s attitude to women, which makes us question the reliability of Professor Pieixoto as a narrator. This clash of values will be examined further in the chapter on Nunavit.
3. The Time Before

The first of the three time periods of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, chronologically, is “the time before,” when Offred lived with her husband, Luke, and their daughter. The reader learns about their relationship in the form of flashbacks as she remembers what her life was like before Gilead. She describes how their relationship started as an affair and eventually they married. Offred describes some of the events leading to the establishment of Gilead, the assassination of the President and large parts of the government, the rise of restrictions on women and the long period of declining fertility rates. Many of the events of this period are seen through the lens of Offred’s interactions with Moira, her best friend, or with her mother. The main event of this period, which Offred describes from her own perspective, is her and Luke’s attempt to flee with their daughter to Canada. The failure of this attempt to flee leads directly to Offred being taken to the Red Centre and the beginning of her experiences in the time period of “Gilead.”

From Hansen’s intertextual perspective we have no reason to expect Offred to be a particularly unreliable narrator, we therefore assume that she is reliable as suggested by Rimmon-Kenan. The events she describes in the time before also lead us to expect her reliability. Moira is a constant presence in Offred’s life and one of the few women in the text that the reader gets to know by name. Moira and Offred were friends at collage and Offred describes them drinking and smoking together, acting in the way that the reader would expect young women to do in college: “Moira rummages in my purse. You should throw out some of this junk, she says. I’m giving an underwhore party. A what? I say. There’s no point trying to work, Moira won’t allow it, she’s like a cat that crawls onto the page when you’re trying to read” (66).

The descriptions of life before Gilead are also filled out by descriptions of Offred’s relationship with her mother. Offred’s mother was a feminist activist and like many mothers she is a source of embarrassment for her teenage daughter: “I went into my bedroom, to be out of their way. They were talking too much, and too loudly. They ignored me, and I resented them. My mother and her rowdy friends. I didn’t see why she had to dress that way, in overalls, as if she were young; or to swear so much” (190).

Offred describes in quite simple terms that the government was assassinated and they blamed it on Islamic extremists. The focus of what she tells us is not on the large
geopolitical changes but on the small changes in her life; it is a story told from her perspective. She describes being too shocked by the assassination of the government to react but quickly moves on to focus on being fired when women are no longer allowed to work, and her bank account being frozen when women are no longer allowed to own property. Offred is a narrator who is part of the story; she is a homodiegetic narrator. As Ohlson points out, the homodiegetic narrator can be considered reliable. Offred has gaps in her knowledge. She can only tell us what she knows and experiences but that does not make her inherently unreliable. She is still telling us the truth as best she knows it. The way she describes her interactions with her mother and Moira gives us the impression that Offred is reminiscing about events she remembers. The events are coherent with the way the characters are presented and do not contradict other facts within the text. We have no reason not to assume that Offred’s descriptions of “the time before” are anything other than accurate to the best of her abilities.

The other main event described from the time before is Offred’s attempt to flee with her family to Canada. Offred describes her fear, and Luke’s elation. The escape attempt doesn’t go as planned, they are forced to make a run for it and become separated. Offred has her daughter and tries to hide but the little girl is too confused and frightened to be quiet. They are captured and as her daughter is taken away Offred describes, “I can see her going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away” (85). The description is a little confused, first it seems as if Offred’s daughter is leaving by choice, it is only at the end of the sentence it is confirmed for the reader that she is being carried away against her will, this highlights the importance of the words Offred chooses and how they affect the understanding of the reader. As the events of the text come closer to the time of Gilead the descriptions that Offred offers us become more subjective and more speculative.

Offred does not know what has happened to Luke. She says, “I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken” (114). “I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair” (114). “I also believe that they didn’t catch him or catch up with him after all that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border” (115). The reader knows that not everything Offred believes can be true, but like Offred we do not know what is the truth. She says that, “This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the
only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it” (116). Offred
is not seeking to mislead the reader, she is still a reliable narrator, but she is making us
aware that she has needs from the story she is telling, she is not just imparting a tale.
Offred’s need to simultaneously believe Luke is dead, captured and free makes her
readers aware that the story is real to her, it is her life not events that are distant or
unemotional for her. The emotional nature of Offred and her descriptions of her life in
“the time before” makes her a round character, she is a human being with her own
thoughts and feelings not just a “Handmaid” to be passed around for reproductive services.

The question of Offred’s veracity in telling her tale comes into focus when she
starts presenting alternative versions. This also serves to reinforce her humanity for the
reader, psychological studies (Kassin et al, and Woocher) have shown that human
memory is highly fallible. Facts are often changed to suit the needs of the individual at
the time. By making it clear that she is telling the reader about her hopes and fears she is
not trying to deceive us, but she is making it clear that the events she is describing are not
necessarily true. Offred’s account of these events is inherently unreliable. The emotional
veracity of what she is saying is however increased. She is allowing the reader access to
her hopes and fears. As Offred is a first-person narrator understanding her motivations
and feelings is essential to understanding her telling of the story. Gaining access to her
innermost feelings makes her version of events more emotionally honest giving veracity
to her account.
4. Gilead

The events of Gilead take up most of the book. Offred describes her day to day life as a Handmaid. Her roles include shopping, where she is in the company of another Handmaid. The Handmaids are never left alone they are constantly under the supervision of other people or each other. She describes the ceremony which is hoped will lead to her bearing the Commander’s child. She also describes the less common events such as a birth, where all the Handmaids gather to support and celebrate with the Handmaid who is bearing the child. The child will then be taken straight away from the Handmaid and given to the Wife. The Commander and the Wife will be the parents of the child, the Handmaid will not be allowed contact though she will be spared being declared an unwoman. Unwomen are sent to the colonies and a certain yet slow death from disease or radiation poisoning. Offred describes the horrible events of the particicution, where the Handmaids are expected to execute a ‘traitor’ with their bare hands.

Offred also describes the unofficial events of her life in Gilead. She is propositioned by the doctor who examines her; he offers to help her get pregnant. Serena Joy, the Wife of Offred’s Commander, arranges for her to have sex with Nick who works as their chauffeur. The Commander breaks the rules, spending time alone with her playing scrabble, and eventually takes her to Jezebels, a night club in a style totally forbidden by the regime he is part of. The official and unofficial events of Gilead are narrated by Offred as if it is happening to her at the time. Chronologically her experiences of Gilead begin in the Red Centre. The Red Centre is where she is trained to be a Handmaid, where the Aunts try to indoctrinate her into the ideas of the regime. From Offred’s descriptions the reader understands that her time at the Red Centre is over.

The Red Centre is a repeated theme throughout The Handmaid’s Tale, Offred comes back to her experiences there many times. She reflects upon how helpless she and the other prospective Handmaids were and how it was the last time she was in a context where female friendship meant a supportive relationship. Moira was also at the Red Centre, but unlike Offred, she did not follow the rules. Moira launches an escape bid, overpowers one of the Aunts and gets out. Throughout her time at the Red Centre Moira is a constant force against the Aunts. When describing the films that the prospective Handmaids were forced to watch Offred notes that, “Moira said later it wasn’t real, it was
done with models; but it was hard to tell” (128). Offred tells the reader stories of Moira as a type of protest, it is a way for her to draw strength to face her daily life and to rebel against the restraints of that life. When Offred meets Moira again at Jezebel’s she asks her to tell her what has happened. “This is what she says, whispers, more or less. I can’t remember exactly, because I had no way of writing it down. I’ve filled it out for her as much as I can: we didn’t have much time so she just gave the outlines” (255). Offred is quite clear that she is not retelling Moira’s story exactly as she told it to her. Offred is telling what is her truth of Moira’s story. The exact facts and details are not what is important for Offred; the emotional truth of Moira’s story is however vital to Offred. Offred needs to believe that escape and resistance are possible and can be successful, otherwise there is no need for her to go on living. If she herself can’t escape perhaps Luke did or her daughter will. Offred is not seeking to deceive the reader but she may not be telling us everything. What she tells us of Moira’s escape does not contradict the facts within the text, it has intratextual reliability. However, Offred as a narrator is also a character with her own needs something which must affect how the reader treats her narrative.

Offred considers why she is telling her story and who she is telling it to.

I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and a real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn’t a story I’m telling.

It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else.
Even when there is no one.

(Atwood 49)

The story has power for Offred, she tells it to try to take control over her situation, or to make her situation more bearable. She remembers as a child seeing a documentary about the mistress of a Commander at a Nazi death camp. The woman denied knowledge of the death camp but also denied that her lover was a monster. Offred speculates about the small facts and ideas she would have held onto to make him not be a monster. “All this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living” (156). Offred tells us these stories to allow her to keep on living. She is finding ways to make meaning out of the world around her and her memories of the time before. The veracity of Offred’s tale doesn’t lie in the factual accuracy; though the text does not often present the reader with factual problems. The reliability of the tale lies in its emotional honesty. Offred is not seeking to lie to us anymore than she seeks to lie to herself. When she tells lies it is because they are necessary for her own survival. She is constructing her world though her story. The only part of her world she has any control over is that inside her head. To deny the veracity of that would be to take Offred’s final shred of power or control and give it to the authorities in Gilead.

Offred warns the reader that, “context is all” (154) and that the story she is telling, “is a reconstruction, too” (150). This does not mean she should not be trusted moreover that the reader needs to be aware of her role in the story and the impact that has on the way she tells it. In many ways Offred is a more honest as a narrator than is usually found in literature. She is constantly aware she is telling a tale. The telling and the teller are intertwined, the emotional life of one has a direct impact on the content of the other.
5. Nunavit

The epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a different narrator to the rest of the text. It is no longer Offred who is describing her life and experiences to us. It is also temporally and physically distant from the rest of the book taking place in 2195 and after the fall of Gilead. Two new voices are added to the text, Professor Crescent Moon introduces Professor Pieixoto who will give his talk on, “Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid’s Tale***” (312). It becomes apparent that what the reader has just read is to be understood as a historical document in the frame narrative of the world of Nunavit and not just a recollection of Offred’s life. It is a text of academic interest to be dissected and discussed by academics.

Professor Pieixoto describes that the text was found in the form of audio tapes recorded and hidden. The tapes were in no apparent order and had to be reconstructed to give the text that is now known as *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Offred has already warned her reader/listener that this is a reconstruction, the reader of the text discovers in the epilogue that this is a reconstruction of a reconstruction. It matters to the readers understanding of the veracity of Offred’s tale that it has been reconstituted by Professor Pieixoto. Offred is telling a story of a woman who is the victim of misogyny in its most brutal form. Professor Pieixoto begins his talk with a sexist joke at the expense of Professor Crescent Moon. He then instructs his audience that they, “must be careful about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific” (314). If we accept his admonishment at face value and say that it is not possible for the audience in Nunavit to pass judgment due to differences of culture and time, it is still possible for the reader to pass judgement. Gilead grew out of our time, it is a response to the world of the reader, we are by Professor Pieixoto’s own definition able to pass judgement. This makes his distancing from the moral questions raised by Offred’s tale problematic, we must ask ourselves if we as readers can trust his version of her version of events. This dichotomy highlights the different moral values of the implied author and the narrator, thus by the standard of extratextual reliability making the reader suspicious of the motives and reliability of the narrator.

Professor Pieixoto attempts to verify Offred’s tale by finding the historical figures that her characters represent. He finds it very difficult to identify the figures but believes
he may have found the Commander. There is some intratextual ambiguity here however, the man identified as most likely being the Commander never had a Wife by the name of Pam or Serena Joy, the names that Offred uses for the Wife of her Commander. The professor speculates that this may be, “a malicious invention by our author” (321). Professor Pieixoto questions Offred’s motives in changing the name of the Commander’s Wife, he does not ascribe malicious intent to pseudonyms for Moira, Janine or any of the other characters. He does not consider the possibility that she may not have known their real names, she was after all just a Handmaid in their household not a trusted confidante. It could also be that Offred is seeking to dehumanise her oppressors in the same way they had sought to dehumanise her. This interpretation fits with the character that the reader has learnt to know through the text, she is a human being with passions and feelings. That Professor Pieixoto doesn’t think of Offred as a real person could explain why he is not capable of understanding this sort of motive for Offred’s behaviour. It is possible that Offred had a malicious intent in changing Serena Joy’s name, but it is equally possible she did not. It could also be part of her way of taking control of the story. The reader of the text does not and cannot know the answer to this.

Professor Pieixoto complains that Offred did not take the opportunity to present the scientist of Nunavit with information that would really be of value, such as accessing the Commander’s computer. He laments that Offred did not have, “the instincts of a reporter or a spy” (322). The previous text has given the reader a chance to get to know Offred. Offred is someone the reader has spent substantial amounts of time with and sympathises with. Pieixoto’s rather petty complaint about the lack of useful historical information seems out of proportion with the suffering Offred has gone through. This predisposes the reader to believing in the reliability of Offred’s tale, and rejecting the complaints of Professor Pieixoto. As previously stated Offred has been clear with her own limitations as a narrator. She has incomplete access, she is telling a story not for the readers benefit but for her own and she is dependent on being able to control the story. The emotional balance of the text is that we should believe Offred, Professor Pieixoto has been presented to the reader as less sympathetic than Offred herself, he is a boorish academic who questions the veracity of a character the reader has bonded with. The reader chooses to believe Offred, because that is more pleasant than having to question everything she has told us and assume that she is manipulating us for her own benefit.
The end of Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents a summary of the discussion of whether Offred is a reliable narrator within the broader context of what stories can tell those who hear them at a distance:

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.

Applause.

Are there any questions? (324)

The provocative final four words can only be met with a resounding, yes, there are many questions. There are however few answers in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The epilogue and the distancing effects of Nunavit create uncertainty about the veracity of the text as is. It does not, however, detract from the emotional veracity of the reader’s experience and the bond that is forged with Offred as narrator.
6. Conclusion

The question of narratorial veracity in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is complex. Offred is a likeable narrator, who does not seem unreliable, except when she explicitly tells her audience that she is contradicting herself because she needs to believe many things for her own sanity. In Greta Olson’s definition, Offred is a fallible narrator. She is not seeking to mislead but lacks facts or information that could make her story more correct or complete. This is something that frustrates Professor Pieixoto but does not lead to the reader losing trust in Offred’s story. The essential truth of Offred’s tale is that it is emotionally honest to her needs and thoughts at the time of her telling it. Professor Pieixoto assumes she has recorded the tapes to provide evidence to the future. He has not considered that the tapes have been recorded by Offred simply to provide catharsis to a traumatised woman.

Using Per Krogh Hansen’s scheme for testing the reliability of a narrator, we can conclude that Offred is reliable. She does not contradict herself other than when she explains to the reader why she is doing so. The self-contradictory passages actually give her narrative more veracity. She is open with her own failings as a narrator and her own stake in the progression of her story. This gives the reader a greater trust in the tale she is telling. From an intertextual perspective, Offred is not the class of character nor is *The Handmaid’s Tale* the genre of text that the reader would expect to have an unreliable narrator. Margaret Atwood describes *The Handmaid’s Tale* as being a type of witness literature, the characteristics of this genre are that the narrator must be reliable, the narrator must tell the truth as they see it. Witness literature can be incomplete or fallible but it must be true to the emotion of the teller.

Professor Pieixoto invites us to reject the possibility of establishing extratextual reliability as moral judgements are subject to their own time. The setting of *The Handmaid’s Tale* within a modern frame means that we are able to make these judgments. The modern reader shares Offred’s disgust with the regime of Gilead and can easily identify with the motivation and ideas of characters from the time before. The ideas of Gilead are not accepted today, but as Margaret Atwood herself notes, they are not foreign. They are all based upon things that have happened. Thus, there is no extratextual conflict
that means that the narration of Offred should be rejected as being incomprehensible or outside the moral understanding of a modern reader.

The final and most problematic of Hansen’s classes of unreliability is internarrational unreliability. There is a certain tension between the narration of Offred and that of Professor Pieixoto. The time of Nunavit questions the veracity of Offred’s tale. The focus of Professor Pieixoto is on the facts and details of Offred’s descriptions. His aim is to identify the ‘real’ figures behind her tale. Offred is, however, not concerned with the reality of her situation, but is seeking to make meaning out of her own life. She is, by her own admission, telling her tale in the hope that someone will listen, but she is equally telling it for her own benefit. She is taking control over the one area of her life that the state of Gilead has not. Her emotional honesty is the key to her reliability. She is not telling her reader the facts and details of her life, but rather expressing the emotional state she is in, and her emotional responses to the world around her. Professor Pieixoto is uninterested in her as an emotional being. Instead, he wishes for her to be a historian, a conduit for facts that he can use to explain events that were much larger than the life of a single woman.

The question that cannot be answered by the text is how much Professor Pieixoto and his team have edited Offred’s tale. The reader is left to speculate how much of her tale is her own words and how much has been left on the cutting-room floor. Historical documents often reflect the needs of their own time and are not a simple description of events. The reader knows very little about Nunavit and thus cannot draw conclusions on what material Professor Pieixoto has excluded from Offred’s story. The frustration of Professor Pieixoto indicates that he has not found the material he wants, but the inclusion of so much material that does not support his aims leads the reader to think that most of Offred’s tale is intact. The modern sensibility of academic honesty also gives an impression that even in Nunavit academics are going to try to present evidence and facts rather than create a story that suits their needs.

The truth of Offred’s tale is emotional. She is a woman who suffers greatly at the hands of a repressive regime. The story she tells is essential to her survival and possibly even her escape from Gilead. The process of storytelling is for Offred a process of making sense. The emotional truth of her story means that the reader trusts her to tell the truth.
Her narrative is verified, not by checking external facts but by her emotional responses and the characters she describes. Her story is essentially true because it is her story and the story that she needs to tell.
Works Cited


