

Legitimizing the Lie? ‘Castrating’ Fiction in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*

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Abstract

*This study is concerned with fiction as an imaginary product therefore a lie. The work runs through the question of what a lie is, and how unavoidable it is. Using Plato’s theory of imitation, the work goes on to suggest that fiction is a lie. While not completely agreeing with Plato that imitation is dangerous, the work explores how Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Washington Irving in *Rip Van Winkle* have blurred the line between fact and fiction through attributing to their work as actual historical events. They have equally subliminally inserted messages in their work to force the reader to believe everything he reads as fact and not fiction. This paper questions why the writers have used this approach and suggests rhetorically that this could be because of Plato’s suggestion that imitative work which is imaginary is divorced from the truth hence dangerous.*

Keywords: Fiction, Truth, Lie, Verisimilitude.

Introduction

What is the relationship between fiction and lies? Are there lies that can be termed ‘true lies’? If they were termed that, what would they be? Is it possible to rid fiction of lies and present it as truth? Can these lies then be more of truths than lies? These questions are examined in this paper in relation to fiction in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1996) first published in 1985 and Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*. The work uses Plato’s view of the relationship between fiction and society, examines the importance of verisimilitude in literature and ultimately, explores Friedrich Nietzsche’s views on lies and society. This exploration of ideas is based on the thesis that fiction is imaginary which could be interpreted to say it is a lie. It is for this reason that Plato is brought into the discussion as he gives his views on lies and morality and the inability of literature to reflect reality.

The paper is concerned with writers’ preoccupation of making their work appear more realistic than fictive. This leads to the question of whether fiction is fictive or not. One is left wondering whether fiction tries to veil reality and make it be seen in false spectacles. The question the paper is trying to answer is: are fiction writers ready to accept that their fiction is fiction or they want to dupe the reader and make him feel that he is reading a work of art based on reality?

Lies and Society

To begin talking about lies, it is important to know what is meant by truth. To what extent can it be said that truth is what is said to be? In fact, what should be asked is how possible is it to state an objective truth? Foucault (1997; 177) states there are three obligations for everyone: “to know oneself, to tell the truth about oneself, and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself.” Here, one would argue that human beings owe the truth not only to themselves but also to the rest of society. It appears that knowledge plays a huge role in people telling the truth as it is shown as the first obligation humans have. But as it has been stated above already, how possible is it to delve into discussing truthfulness or the truth before understanding what it is.

The question of truth has been explored by man for a very long time. Bok (1978) who has done among the most remarkable works on lying says that in ancient time, truth was seen as everything one has experienced. It was viewed as all the knowledge a human being would be said to possess. This would be questioned easily considering the fact that man’s knowledge is quite shallow and one would question the relationship between what man perceives the world to be and what it really is. For example, how much do people know about themselves? Is it possible to say people are fully aware of the world around them let alone their own bodies and lives?

This leads to another question raised by Bok above. She says there is need to establish the relationship between lying and not being inaccurate. The argument raised is that while it can be taken that truth and falsity lie between the reality of the world and that which is not real, it is important for man to tell the difference between one who intentionally deceives and one who has

inaccurate information but believes it to be accurate. What one learns from this is that lying may not be intentional always and should therefore be explored with care.

It is important, in this case, to examine society's view of lies. Why do people tell lies? It is because they do not know that they are lying? Are they able to willfully not tell the truth? If that is the case, why and how do they do it?

Nietzsche (1979; 80) says that man is merely living a lie. He argues that everything one sees about man is not real which one would therefore say should not be trusted.

Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself - in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity - is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them. They are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see "forms." Their senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things. Moreover, man permits himself to be deceived in his dreams every night of his life.

Here, Nietzsche seems to be unable to understand how man is able to strive for the truth if all he is interested in is deception seeing the fact that he has permitted himself to be deceived. This leads to another question; if man permits himself to be deceived, how can he be expected to say the truth? It appears here that man lies because he has accepted, if not encouraged, to be lied to. This recipient of lies will therefore equally be expected to be a fabricator too. Nietzsche says that the liar is someone who "uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real.... He misuses fixed conventions by means of arbitrary substitutions or even reversals of names," (1979; 81). But the argument does not end here. He further says that this deception is usually for selfish reasons. The liar intends to benefit from the lies thus told.

Another interesting side to lies and society is brought in by Barthes (2007) who brings in the suggestion that the truth is determined by the majority, the wise and current opinion among other things. This becomes a very important point in this discussion as it brings to the discussion the whole idea that truth could actually merely be an opinion as advanced by the influential in society. Is it not possible to argue that what the influential say is the state of affairs will be taken to be so by many others? Does truth really comprise the actual state of affairs? It may not be the case. The politics of power come in to contribute to the definition of truth in this case. Truth will therefore be understood, in this scenario, as the current opinion of the many upon being

advocated for by the powerful in society. It can be taken further that, as it has been argued earlier, people tell lies for personal benefits. It therefore follows that if the powerful in society wish to tell lies for their own benefit, their lies will easily be treated as truths and therefore *be* truths. Truths therefore cannot be objectively taken to be what they are claimed to be. A truth can be a lie just as a lie can be a truth.

While belabouring the point of what the truth is, there has not been much said about what the lie is. Bok (1978; 14) has tried to point to the lie. She begins by discussing the broad area of deception before defining the lie. She sees deception as intentional communication of messages that are meant to make others believe in what the communicator may not necessarily believe in. she says this can be done ‘through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence.’ On the other hand she defines the lie as ‘any intentionally deceptive message which is *stated*. Such statements are most often made verbally or in writing, but can of course also be conveyed via smoke signals, Morse code, sign language, and the like.’ She therefore concludes that deception is the larger category, which lying forms a part of.

In concluding this section, it could be said that deception and lying are quite synonymous while lying is actually stating that something is what it may be when in fact it is not so. In the next section, an attempt will be made to examine fiction as a lie.

Fiction and Falsity

What is fiction? This is the starting point of this discussion. Fiction is understood in two ways by academics. Firstly, it is considered to be any literary composition which is imaginary. This includes all the three genres, prose, poetry and drama. In a narrower sense, fiction is treated as only the imaginary prose work that includes the novel and the short story. It has also been referred to as the novel in general, (Abrams and Harpham, 2009). For purposes of this discussion, it is very important to place emphasis on the idea that fiction is imaginary.

Baldick (2001;96) defines fiction as “the general term for invented stories, now usually applied to novels, short stories, novellas, romances, fables, and other narrative works in prose, even though most plays and narrative poems are also fictional. The adjective fictitious tends to carry the unfavourable sense of falsehood, whereas 'fictional' is more neutral....”

From both definitions presented above, it can be said that imaginary works are merely conceived in the author’s mind. However, this statement should not be taken to mean that the imaginary works have no relation to the world; in no way does the statement suggest that imagination is not based on the world. on the other hand, it should be stressed that even though imaginary works are based on reality or are tie to the world, they remain a mere illusion of the mind and not a restating of a fact as would be the case in non-fictional works such as biographies and essays. If that is the case, how far would it not be argued that fiction has an element of the lie in it?

Abrams (1953) in the important theoretical work *The Mirror and the Lamp* identifies two elements that will draw the reader to the pleasure in the text at the expense of truth: conformity of the fiction to popular belief, and self-consistency. It is argued that to be effective, the literary work should be in conformity with popular belief of the time. An example is given that the employing of ghosts ought not to be discouraged in a case where the audience believes in the existence of ghosts. On self-consistency, it is argued that characters, events, and language all have to be consistent not just as independent elements but also in how they are related as individual elements with other elements. In this case, if for instance gods are presented in a literary work, they are expected to inhabit places reserved for the gods, use the language of the gods and be presented in similar light. It is for this reason that it has been said that consistence has to be all-round.

It seems that the above is a prescription to the creativity that enables the writer defy truth yet be accepted by the reader. The implication in this case is that what is most important for the writer is not truth but convincing the reader that the lie is a truth. The reference to the lie here is in relation to the fictive work which has been described as imaginary.

In concluding the discussion on Fiction and Falsity, Plato's theory of imitation will be brought into light. Plato's relevance to criticism cannot be overemphasized as he has identified as one that "gave initial formulation to the most basic questions and problems of Western thought... How do we arrive at truth and knowledge?" (Habib, 2005). Truth being the subject of concern in this paper, Plato becomes a necessary authority to consult and refer to for the reason stated above.

It should be mentioned on the onset that in general terms, Plato's theory of imitation points to the visual and poetic arts (Belfiore, 2006). While acknowledging that this paper focuses on prose, it becomes important to make reference to Plato because imitation is equally present in narrative. Here, mention should be made that imitation in the narrative or fiction is at two levels: the narrator being an imitative character who is not the author, and the characters equally imitating real persons that have existed. It is at this level of imitation being present in fiction that Plato's theory becomes applicable to the discussion.

While it shall be realized later that Plato is against anything divorced from the truth, in Republic, particularly Book Three, he speaks against lying unless it is for the general good and, above all, done by rulers of the state. This creates an impression that only special members of society have the privilege to lie. He says, in part:

Then if anyone at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good. But nobody else should meddle with anything of the kind; and although the rulers have this privilege, for a private man to lie to them in return is to be deemed a more heinous fault than for the patient or the

pupil of a gymnasium not to speak the truth about his own bodily illnesses to the physician or to the trainer, or for a sailor not to tell the captain what is happening about the ship and the rest of the crew, and how things are going with himself or his fellow sailors, (Plato, 2005; 334).

In the preceding paragraphs, this paper has tried to show that fiction is a lie. The fact that fiction is imagined makes it an imitation of reality as opposed to is being reality. Plato refers to tragic poets, like all other artists such as painters and, in the case of this paper, fiction writers, to be imitators who are thrice removed from the truth. His argument is that there is the creator, God who other creators such as doctors, carpenters and others are based on. The artists comes in as a third generation creator who is divorced from the truth and therefore should not be trusted. His only knowledge of whatever he writes about is a fraction of the reality he professes to know so much. He knows only a small portion of his subject.

Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter. (pg 608)

The argument advanced by Plato above creates an impression that imitative arts are dangerous to society. While this work does not wish to take the angle of evaluation and subsequent judging of the imitative arts, it still wishes to draw a conclusion from the above view that fiction being imitation is not truthful hence a lie. Plato's view cements the earlier advanced thesis that fiction is a lie.

In the next section, the discussion shifts to how writers, well aware of the fact that fiction is a lie, try to blur the line between fiction and reality.

Castrating Fiction in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Rip Van Winkle*

This section seeks to show how writers have deliberately tried to obliterate the fiction in their fiction. The works considered are Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood weaves a story about the fictitious Gilead society which falls into the hands of a few militaristic rulers. Told in the first person, the work explores happenings in Gilead in the 1980s until the fall of the regime. While the work shows a vivid possibility of what would happen if religious proclamations were heeded and took over the reality of society, the has gone beyond verisimilitude in painting reality in the work. Verisimilitude should be

understood “likeness to the truth, and therefore the appearance of being true or real even when fantastic.....If the writer has done his work well, then the reader will find the result an acceptable presentation of reality,” (Cuddon, 1999; 962). On reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one would suggest that the writer has done her work well in creating a very realistic piece of work. However, what is of interest in this work is the final chapter of the work dubbed ‘Historical Notes’. In this chapter, the reader is brought into ‘a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, held as part of the International Historical Association Convention, which took place at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195.’ Having left the story incomplete, where the reader does not know what happens to the main character, Offred, in the text, Atwood brings Professor Jame Darcy Piexoto who, in collaboration with Professor Wade, is responsible for compiling the text from audio tape recordings into the work from being read. The presentation by Professor Piexoto is formal and academic leading the reader to seriously question whether the symposium is part of the ‘novel’ they are from reading or is a real appendage from the proceedings of a symposium that really took place.

The novel is set around the 1980s while the symposium takes place about two hundred years later. Atwood’s use of the symposium creates a façade that the fiction that has just been read is not really fiction but an actual recording of a time that really existed. An interesting feature of the symposium is the venue which scholars inclined to literary onomastics would appreciate exceedingly. It is said that the symposium takes place at the University of Denay, (in) Nunavit. The fact that this sounds like ‘deny none of it’ makes it seem that Atwood is subliminally leading her reader into accepting this story to be factual which it is not.

Generally, it would be said that Atwood has not only confused the reader who is unable to tell whether the symposium is detached from the story of the handmaid or not, but she has also made the reader consider the fiction factual hence collapsing the fiction in it.

Rip Van Winkle by Irving is an about the character whose name has shaped the title of the work. Rip Van Winkle goes into the forest where he meets a seemingly ancient Dutch who carries a liquor keg that Rip helps him with until they meet the rest of his company. As the Ditch play a game, Nine Pins, Rip takes a sip of their liquor continuously until he gets drunk and falls asleep. Interestingly, he only awakes after twenty years to find life has changed in his village where everyone believes he died in the forest when he never returned.

Clearly, the story is fantastic as can be seen from the twenty-year sleep. Yet, what prompts this paper’s examining this text is Irving’s attempt at authenticating a story that does not bear any resemblance of truth with the inclusion of the twenty-year sleep.

Both the opening and closing of the story is dedicated to increasing the reader’s appreciation of the factual nature of the work. The subtitle (A posthumous writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker) of

the work takes away Irving's authorship leaving it with the historian Diedrich Knickerbocker. The title is followed with a snippet from Cartwright's poem *The Ordinary*

By Woden, God of Sacons,
From whence comes Wensday, that is Wodensday.
Truth is a thing that ever I will keep Unto thylke day in which I creep into
My sepulcher – (Irving, 1987; 332)

The reference to truth in the poem seems to be the major reason it was included and probably equally intended to subliminally make the reader see truth in the narrative. As if that is not enough, Irving goes ahead to provide a note on the text which intended to authenticate the historicity of the work. The note proceeds as follows:

[The following Tale was found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman of New York, who was very curious in the Dutch history of the province, and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers. His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter,' and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm.

The result of all these researches was a history of the province during the reign of the Dutch governors, which he published some years since. There have been various opinions as to the literary character of his work, and, to tell the truth, it is not a whit better than it should be. Its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has since been completely established; and it is now admitted into all historical collections, as a book of unquestionable authority.

The old gentleman died shortly after the publication of his work, and now that he is dead and gone, it cannot do much harm to his memory to say that his time might have been much better employed in weightier labors. He, however, was apt to ride his hobby his own way; and though it did now and then kick up the dust a little in the eyes of his neighbors, and grieve the spirit of some friends, for whom he felt the truest deference and affection; yet his errors and follies are remembered "more in sorrow than in anger," and it begins to be suspected, that he never intended to injure or offend. But however his memory may be appreciated by critics, it is still held dear by many folk, whose good opinion is well worth

having; particularly by certain biscuit-bakers, who have gone so far as to imprint his likeness on their new-year cakes; and have thus given him a chance for immortality, almost equal to the being stamped on a Waterloo Medal, or a Queen Anne's Farthing.]" (Ibid. pg. 332-333)

This part of the story comes at the opening of the apparently to feed the reader from the onset with information that the narrative is factual. After the story has been told, another note follows at the end. This time the note is actually signed by the historian Knickerbocker. The note reads:

"The story of Rip Van Winkle may seem incredible to many, but nevertheless I give it my full belief, for I know the vicinity of our old Dutch settlements to have been very subject to marvellous events and appearances. Indeed, I have heard many stranger stories than this, in the villages along the Hudson; all of which were too well authenticated to admit of a doubt. I have even talked with Rip Van Winkle myself, who, when last I saw him, was a very venerable old man, and so perfectly rational and consistent on every other point, that I think no conscientious person could refuse to take this into the bargain; I have seen a certificate on the subject taken before a country justice and signed with a cross, in the justice's own handwriting. The story, therefore, is beyond the possibility of doubt.
D.K." (Ibid. pg. 343).

The concluding paragraphs of the story ascribing the work to Knickerbocker reinforces the argument that this is an authentic tale and events described in it all occurred. The objective of the writer, it could be argued, is to lead the reader into believing everything he had read in the work.

Conclusion

Considering both works scrutinized in this paper, it appears that both authors have tried to use the tool of history to beguile the reader who would, if not careful take the work to be a record of factual events.

One would wonder why the authors would wish to mislead readers in this manner when it has already been known that the work is fictitious as can be evidenced from the disclaimer in Atwood's work reading: this is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. Could the writers be subverting Plato's argument that fiction writers should not be entertained as they are thrice removed from the truth? Could this be the reason why they are attempting to appear real so that they are seen to be truthful? Can it not be argued that they are merely attempting to legitimize the lie knowing that once told in this manner it will become truth? In attempting to veil the lie with the truth, the two authors have demonstrated how difficult it is for man to accept that they are telling a lie when both the speaker and the listener are well

aware of it. It can be said after all this that it would be very difficult for one to tell how different the truth is from the lie. Could they not be thought to be the same thing?

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