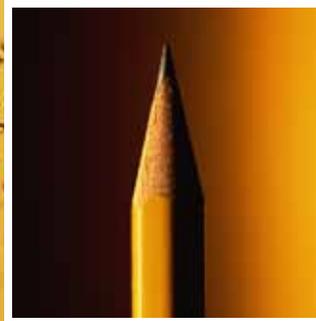


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2009 WRITING AWARDS



Margaret Atwood's *Bread*: A Deceptive Argument against Inhumane Indifference

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General Education

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Margaret Atwood's "Bread" (1983) is an accusation that intends to shame those who facilitate suffering and tragedy through their indifference. Her argument is surreptitious and emotive. Her language is initially sly and goes down smooth, but later renders her unaware reader intoxicated with empathy. The essay utilizes artful literary techniques to accuse her reader of inhumanity, of caring too little about other human beings. She presents her logic slowly and strategically, leading her readers—comfortable and unaware—to self-incrimination: from admitting to seemingly harmless practices of everyday life to being shamed by their complicity in the world's suffering. Atwood's accusation addresses the heart of contemporary global conflict, illustrating that the relationship between the affluent and the impoverished instigates and shapes all war in this era of globalization.

By using a common object such as a loaf of bread as a symbol, one that to those living in the comfort of affluence seems very inoffensive, Atwood is able to lull the reader into a state of agreement. By presenting her argument, which initially does not even appear as an argument, in five collaborative stories, she gradually moves the reader from comfort to guilt in steps of acceptable size, without provoking the reader to adopt a defensive position and reject that which is true.

The first story forces readers to acknowledge that they have an abundance of bread, that it is a trivial commodity, and that they enjoy it carelessly. Atwood creates the readers' attitude towards bread only by making readers conscious of the attitude they already adopt. Compliant, the reader accepts what appears to be a simple statement of the facts, a statement that will evolve into an accusation.

The next two stories are different. They describe two scenarios that the readers view as foreign, initially imagining the bread in these stories to be different from that in the first, their bread. The language is very matter-of-fact, while the scenes she describes are grotesque: "She is starving, her belly is bloated, flies land on her eyes; you brush them off with your hand." This is seductive, as Atwood paints the scenes without immediate explanation of their significance. It is almost as if she is telling a joke, and the reader is waiting for the punch-line, expecting it to be someone else who is embarrassed. The story is also written in the second person, compelling the reader toward empathy and compassion. This is also seductive in that it leads readers to place themselves in a hypothetical situation, which of course turns out to be not hypothetical at all, but rather a description of real tragedy.

For the reader, these second and third stories transform bread into something dangerous, an agent of suffering. This bread causes people to die; it causes people to kill and to allow other people to die and kill. The bread which was, and still is, a commodity for the reader is now also a monstrous symbol of anguish and death. This bread, she says, "is subversive, it's treacherous, it does not mean life." By the end of the third story, the readers have in their mind two polar concepts of bread: the bread in their refrigerator which enhances the comfort of life, and the bread in the prison and in the mud-hut which is a reminder of the monstrosity and shortcomings of life. Atwood has not just informed the reader of different scenarios, but allowed the reader to experience (if only vicariously) each one.

To force readers to understand the connection between their own bread and the bread that kills, Atwood illustrates it with the fourth story. This German fairy-tale of a sister whose greed and

lack of compassion kills her sister's family makes it clear that the reader's bread and the treacherous bread are the same. We--those who have what others do not and fail to understand the truth of those circumstances--are the cold-hearted sister. Atwood is suggesting here that all humans should treat each other as family. As we may ask, "How could somebody do this to their sister?" Atwood is asking, "How could anybody continue to do this to another human being?" The imagery of the fairy tale—"when he made the first cut, out flowed red blood"—evokes guilt and horror. Atwood and all those who have shared this fairy-tale want the cold-hearted sisters and brothers to have no escape from acknowledging the consequences of their greed. Readers want to eliminate the possibility that someone can make themselves fat with bread that could have given life to another.

Atwood uses the last story to openly berate the reader, continuing to employ the bread-metaphor to describe the inhumane denial of the wealthy. When Atwood describes the bread as being floated in the air, with no strings attached, she says that "you proved it by passing your hand through." She is emphasizing that this is real—starvation and suffering in the world are real. It is not an illusion, and we don't have to imagine it, we have only to acknowledge it. That sarcastic request, "imagine," drives the message into the reader. It allows readers to believe that they are accepting an imagined scenario, but it is not imaginary at all.

The description of suffering and its causes has everything to do with war. War is the method by which one people may rise to prosperity while another starves to death along with their children. Greed and deprivation are both the causes and the effects of war. Those comfortable, happy, and complacent individuals living in luxury frequently describe the poverty-conflict nexus while hesitating to apply a syllogism to the situation: if it is true that greed causes poverty and poverty leads to conflict, then greed causes conflict. Their explanations of violence continually fall one logical step short of illuminating their own role in perpetuating war and destruction.

As powerful nations, our militaries dominate the world, securing our luxuries for us from people who don't have enough to eat. While some may argue that the government is separate from the people, such claims ring hollow in a democratic nation. We are as responsible for world starvation as the sister in Atwood's fairy tale is for her sister's death. Every day, when we change the channel to avoid seeing disturbing news, when we decline our right and duty to vote, and when we spend the lives of others to buy conveniences for ourselves, we are shutting the door in the face of our starving brothers and sisters. Inequality is the reason for war. Greed is the reason for inequality. We deceive ourselves when we try to believe that satiating our self-serving appetites does not deprive others of life and well-being. Our greed is directly responsible for world suffering and war, whether the wars are between our imperial police and the suppressed, or between two suppressed and suffering peoples trying to survive. Atwood's most provocative statement, which gains its power from its accuracy in describing an embarrassing truth, is that we "don't want to know, imagine that." How long shall we turn a blind eye to the wake of destruction left by our greed and inhumanity? Let's pass the bread.