

Book Review

Margaret Atwood keeps myths modern in her 2005 novella “The Penelopiad”

Margaret Atwood's 2005 novella, "The Penelopiad", deserves as much, if not more, positive feedback and attention as any of her other works have received.

"The Penelopiad" employs Postmodern techniques such as metafiction, allusion, and parody, to retell the story of "The Odyssey" through the eyes of Odysseus' faithful and clever wife, Penelope, and her twelve maids.

Additionally, Atwood's witticisms add an element of dark humor to the narrative. Themes associated with "The Penelopiad" include storytelling and contemporary feminist movements, both of which are familiar to Atwood's fans.

Stylistically, Atwood uses first person

narration for Penelope's sections of the novella. Atwood encompasses various styles of writing including an idyll, ballad, sea shanty, lecture, and a courtroom diction to express the twelve maids' opinions regarding their unjust demise.

The plot begins with the spirit of Penelope speaking to readers from the Underworld. She starts by sharing her troublesome childhood which involves her father's attempt to be rid of her by having her thrown into the sea. Her future experiences with men do not get much better.

Penelope spends a great deal of time bad-mouthing her "intolerably beautiful" (Atwood 33) cousin, Helen, and describes how Helen's selfish

actions negatively impacted Penelope's life with her husband, Odysseus.

Penelope describes the maltreatment she and her maids received from the Suitors. She instructs her maids to seduce the Suitors to get information as to what they may be plotting.

However, upon Odysseus' return, he sees the two groups interacting and surmises that the maids are in cahoots with the Suitors. Odysseus displays patriarchal injustice by wrongfully killing the twelve maids without consulting with Penelope.

Near the end of the novella, Penelope comes to an unsettling conclusion that modern society still has yet to reach equality between men and women and that injustices against women still run amuck, "Even with my limited access I can see that the world is just as dangerous as it was in my day, except that the misery and suffering are on a much wider scale. As for human nature, it's as tawdry as ever" (188).

In relation to Atwood's other works, there is one comparison between "The Penelopiad" and "The Handmaid's Tale" that is too glaring to ignore. At the end of "The Handmaid's Tale", Atwood provides a scene involving a fictional

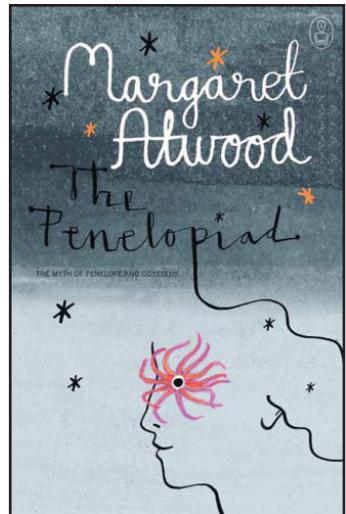


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Professor Pieixoto who delivers a lecture about Gileadean regime. During his lecture, Pieixoto jokes about the cruelties faced by Offred

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and the other Handmaids and finds Offred's tapes of little interest.

Atwood uses this fictional lecture to mock the way historical events are viewed within a patriarchal society.

Similarly, the twelve maids in "The Penelopiad" hold an Anthropology lecture in which they predict the way "educated minds" (168) will overlook their rapes and deaths by viewing the maids as mere symbols, ignoring the injustices done to them.



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