

‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’ by Margaret Atwood...

The next prescribed text you will consider is Margaret Atwood’s speech, ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’.

You can familiarise yourself with the speech by reading the notes below.

Once you have done this, read ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’. As you are reading the speech, think about the way Atwood uses the following devices to encourage her audience to think about the important role of female literary characters who are neither wholly good or wholly bad:

1. Literary reference
2. Metaphor and extended metaphor
3. A humorous and discursive style



Margaret Atwood
Source: Larry D. Moore, via Wikimedia Commons

Author: Margaret Atwood (1939-) is a Canadian writer, literary critic and academic. Since 1969 she has written sixteen novels, many of which have won prestigious literary awards, and seventeen volumes of poetry. She has also authored children’s fiction and several non-fiction works. She is perhaps best known for her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

From 1964-1989, Atwood held various university positions as an English literature academic, Lecturer in English and Writer-in-Residence. Her writing and academic careers have spanned the second-wave and third-wave feminist movements and the female protagonists of many of her novels are viewed as significant contributions to the place of women in literature.

Often considered a controversial writer, Atwood is known for campaigning against the oppression of women and for the equal rights and equal perception of women in society. In much of her writing, she examines the roles of women in society, using literature as a means of contributing to a broader civic discussion concerning the way women are viewed in popular culture.

Where can you find ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’?

You can find a copy of Margaret Atwood’s speech on the NESA website:

[‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’](#)

About ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’: Atwood delivered this speech in 1994. As noted in the subtitle of the transcript, the speech was delivered to different audiences on several different occasions. Some of these occasions included: bookseller conventions, women’s luncheons, and other literary events.

At this time, the Feminist Movement was experiencing a transition into its third-wave. This gave rise to some friction between second-wave feminists (1960s and 1970s feminists) and this emerging group of younger feminists who sought to embrace diversity and destroy gender expectations and stereotypes. In her speech, Atwood uses this as a timely opportunity to reflect on the benefits of second-wave feminism on literature, as well as some of its adverse consequences.

In doing so, Atwood makes her audience think about the important role that ‘bad’ women play in literature. She does this by challenging the idea that it is “somehow unfeminist to depict a woman behaving badly”. In response to this claim, Atwood suggests that it is not so much bad female behaviour that is “unfeminist”, but the inclination to view bad behaviour as ‘problem’ behaviour that detracts from the preferable image of women as flawless and ‘good’ that is the real unfeminist point of view.

By being unable to accept and own female bad behaviour, Atwood argues that the writer does nothing more than create new versions of the Angel/Whore dichotomy that perpetuates binary thinking about women that is divisive and limiting. As an alternative, she encourages writers to create morally complex female characters that readers will find interesting, thought-provoking, and true-to-life.

As you read ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’, focus on the ways Atwood uses literary reference, metaphor and extended metaphor, and a humorous and discursive style to encourage her audience to think about literature as a space where the complex beliefs, motivations, and actions of women can be explored.



It's OPTIC-AL!

Now, read 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses' a second time.

As you read, complete the *It's OPTIC-AL* routine. This routine will help you to make close observations and draw conclusions about the way Atwood uses literary reference, metaphor and extended metaphor, and a humorous and discursive style in her speech.

O	<i>Observe</i> Atwood's use of literary reference, metaphor and extended metaphor, and a humorous and discursive style. Record one example of each device here.
P	Now, use the <i>parts</i> of each example you have chosen to explain how each example works. For instance, what character or story does a reference call to mind? How is this character or story significant to Atwood's purpose?
T	Next, think about the <i>title</i> of Atwood's speech. How does it relate to the speech as a whole? How does her use of literary allusion and metaphor in the title help her to engage the audience on an intellectual level?
I	How does the <i>interrelationship</i> between these rhetorical devices help Atwood to achieve her purpose?
C	What can you <i>conclude</i> about the effectiveness of using these rhetorical devices as a way of encouraging the audience to think critically about the consequences of writing that upholds a preference for flawless female characters?

Applying Your Knowledge!

Now that you have considered the way Atwood uses literary reference, metaphor and extended metaphor, and a humorous and discursive style, it is time to practice using these devices in your own writing.

To do this, look at the exam-style question below, and complete the activities that follow.

'Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.'

David Foster Wallace

Question Deconstruction: Part A

- The phrase: **stimulus for a short discursive piece of writing** means that you need to use the David Foster Wallace's lines as inspiration for the topic of your piece.
- It is also a good idea to use the exact quotation at some point in your piece.
- This task requires you to write in a **discursive** style.
- This question requires you to use **TWO literary devices**. In your study of 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses', you have examined 3 literary devices: literary reference, metaphor, and humour. You can use two of these to complete this part of the question.

a. Use this line as the **stimulus for a short discursive** piece of writing.

In your piece of writing, you must include **TWO literary devices** that you have explored during your study of the prescribed texts for Module C.

[10 marks]

To get to grips with this type of question, be sure to read the question deconstruction in the box on the left-hand side of the page.

Once you have done this, read the notes below on how to write a discursive piece.

Writing in a Discursive Style

Discursive writing blends together a combination of personal insight, anecdote, argument, humour, a rhetorical structure, and many other devices that make it a text that engages us on both an intellectual and emotional level.

When you write a discursive response, it does not need to use such a wide range of techniques and devices. But it does need to be expressed in clear and distinct personal style that engages the reader intellectually and emotionally.

Be sure to remember that discursive writing requires you to:

- Explore the topic you are given by offering a personal insight, perspective or opinion. In the case of this question, the topic that informs David Foster Wallace's remarks is

the capacity of literature to draw attention to what makes us human, even in the context of a very dark and disturbing world.

- Balance your personal insight with the perspectives of others. For this question, this could be David Foster Wallace, Margaret Atwood, or any other writers or public intellectuals you have encountered that have made remarks that are relevant to the topic.
- Communicate your position by expressing yourself in an engaging, authentic and personal manner.
- Use literary devices to effectively convey your position.
- Write in first person.
- Write in a style that is conversational and thoughtful.

Composing Your Response

For this question, you are only required to write the *opening part* of a discursive piece.

Be sure to pay close attention to the stimulus text. Notice that it introduces the idea that good fiction sheds light on the ways we might retain our humanity, even if the story depicts a dark and dehumanising world. This establishes the topic of your piece.

And yet, the stimulus also leaves room for you to decide on the direction you will take. Notice also that the stimulus begins with the subjective phrase: “Really good fiction...”. This is David Foster Wallace’s opinion of what constitutes ‘good fiction’.

But, what do you think?

Deciding on your position in relation to this topic will help you to arrive at the purpose of your piece. Once you have a clear idea of your purpose, you will be in a much better position to select the literary devices that are best able to communicate your purpose to the reader.

For this type of response, we recommend that you aim to write approximately 450 words, divided into three paragraphs. This will allow you to develop your use of the two literary devices you choose to include, whilst also demonstrating your ability to write in a discursive style.

Use the space on the following page to begin planning your response.

Now, it is time to look at part (b) of this question.

Question Deconstruction: Part B

- The phrase: *explain how* means that you need to make the relationship between your own writing, the **TWO literary devices** you have used, and the influence of **ONE prescribed Module C text** clear.
- To communicate a clear cause and effect relationship, you need to identify specific parts of your own writing from part (a) – including citing the examples of the literary devices you have used – and relate these examples to your prescribed Module C text.

b. *Explain how ONE* of your prescribed texts in Module C has influenced the way you have crafted your response in part (a). In your response, focus on the **TWO literary devices** that you have used in part (a).

[10 marks]

To get to grips with this type of question, read the question deconstruction in the box on the left-hand side of the page.

Once you have done this, take a look at the notes on how to compose a reflective commentary below.

Writing a Reflective Commentary

A reflective commentary is a piece of writing that explores the details of another text you have written. The purpose of this type of writing is to explain, evaluate, or justify:

- Any language devices, aspects of textual form, or stylistic choices you have made as a writer.
- The influence other works of fiction or nonfiction have had on the choices you have made in your writing.

To compose a successful reflective commentary, you need to make sure your writing is clear, logical, specific, and well-supported by examples from your part (a) response.

You can achieve this by using the following structure and types of sentences:

- In my discursive piece in part (a), I chose to use a literary reference to... *[identify the specific literary device you have used]* because *[offer a reason for your choice of device, which also demonstrates knowledge of what the device does]*.
- In my writing, this reference to... *[explain your use of the literary device as it relates to the topic of your piece]*. Examples of this literary reference from my piece include: *[cite 2 examples from your writing]*. By calling to mind the story of... *[provide details of the literary reference]* readers are encouraged to think about... *[relate back to the topic of your piece]*.

- I also chose to use metaphor in my piece as well. This is because... *[follow the structure of the above two bullet points]*.
- The inspiration for my use of literary reference and metaphor *[the TWO literary devices]* is Margaret Atwood’s speech ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’. In this speech, Atwood refers to... *[cite an example of literary reference from the speech]* in order to *[explain the purpose of Atwood’s use of this device]*. In a similar way, my reference to... *[cite an image you have created]* in my discursive piece allows me to communicate *[explain the purpose of your piece]*.
- Moreover, in ‘Spotty-Handed Villainesses’, Atwood uses metaphors of bad female characters as both “keys to doors we need to open” and “mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face”. These metaphors highlight the important role that bad female characters play in extending moral and thematic territory for writers. Using this as a model, my metaphor... *[explain a metaphor you have used]* suggests *[explain the effect of your use of metaphor and relate this back to the purpose of your piece]*.

Composing Your Response

For this question, we recommend that you aim to write approximately 350-400 words, divided into 3-4 paragraphs.

Use the space below to begin drafting your response.
