**Happy Endings**

*1 John and Mary meet.*

 *What happens next?*

 *If you want a happy ending, try A.*

A. *John* *and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and*

*5 remunerative jobs which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children, to whom they are devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life and worthwhile friends. They go on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies which they*

*10 find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story.*

B. *Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary. He merely uses her body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind. He comes to her apartment twice a week and she cooks him dinner, you'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out, and after he's eaten the dinner*

*15 he fucks her and after that he falls asleep, while she does the dishes so he won't think she's untidy, having all those dirty dishes lying around, and puts on fresh lipstick so she'll look good when he wakes up, but when he wakes up he doesn't even notice, he puts on his socks and his shorts and his pants and his shirt and his tie and his shoes, the reverse order from the one in which he took them*

*20 off. He doesn't take off Mary's clothes, she takes them off herself, she acts as if she's dying for it every time, not because she likes sex exactly, she doesn't, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he'll gel used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get married, but John goes out the door with hardly so much as a good-night and three days later he turns up*

*25 at six o'clock and they do the whole thing over again.*

*Mary gels run-down. Crying is bad for your face, everyone knows that and so does Mary but she can't stop. People at work notice. Her friends tell her John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good enough for her, but she can't believe it. Inside John, she thinks, is another John, who is much nicer. This other John will emerge*

*30 like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough.*

*One evening John complains about the food. He has never complained about the food before. Mary is hurt.*

*Her friends wit her they've seen him in a restaurant with another woman, whose*

35 *name is Madge. It's not even Madge that finally gets to Man': it's the restaurant. John has never taken Mary to a restaurant. Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirins she can find, and lakes them and a half a bottle of sherry. You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey. She leaves a note for John. She hopes he'll discover her and gel her to the hospital in time*

40 *and repent and then they can gel married, but this fails to happen and she dies. John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.*

C. *John, who is an older man. falls in love with Mary, and Mary, who is only menty-two. feels sorry for him because he's worried about his hair falling out. She sleeps with him even though she's not in love with him. She met him at work.*

45 *She's in love with someone called James, who is twenty-two also and not yet ready to settle down.*

*John on the contrary settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him. John has a steady, respectable job and is getting ahead in his field, but Mary isn 't impressed by him, she's impressed by James, who has a motorcycle and a fabulous*

50 *record collection. But James is often away on his motorcycle, being free. Freedom isn't the same for girls, so in the meantime Mary spends Thursday evenings with John. Thursdays are the only days John can get away.*

*John is married to a woman called Madge and they have two children, a charming house which they bought just before the real estate values went up, and*

55 *hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging, when they have the time. John tells Mary how important she is to him, but of course he can't leave his wife because a commitment is a commitment. He goes on about this more than is necessary and Mary finds it boring, but older men can keep it up longer so on the whole she has a fairly good time.*

60 *One day James breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid and James and Mary get higher than you 'd believe possible and they climb into bed. Everything becomes very underwater, but along comes John, who has a key to Mary's apartment. He finds them stoned and entwined. He's hardly in any position to be jealous, considering Madge, but nevertheless he's overcome with*

65 *despair. Finally he's middle-aged, in two years he 'II be bald as an* egg *and he can't stand it. He purchases a handgun, saying he needs it for target practice - this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later - and shoots the two of them and himself.*

*Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man*

70 *called Fred and everything continues as in A, but under different names.*

D. *Fred and Madge have no problems. They get along exceptionally well and are good at working out any little difficulties that may arise. But their charming house is by the seashore and one day a giant tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down. The rest of the story is about what caused the tidal wave and how they*

75 *escape from it. They do, though thousands drown, but Fred and Madge are virtuous and lucky. Finally on high ground they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful, and continue as in A.*

E. *Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Freddies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity*

80 *work until the end of A. If you like, it can be "Madge," "cancer," "guilty and confused." and "bird watching.*"

F. *If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A. though in between you may get a lustful brawling saga*

85 *of passionate involvement, a chronicle of our limes, sort of.*

*You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.*

90 *The only authentic ending is the one provided here:*

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

*So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with.*

95 *That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what. Now try How and Why.*

*Margaret Atwood,* Murder in the Dark, *House Press, Toronto, 1983.*

**95**

**GUIDELINES**

1. In "Pop Bottles" **humour** resulted from the transforming power of a child's vision which turned children (Gayla and Charles) into giants, older women into witches or good fairies and a social problem (mugging) into a struggle for candy. Larger than life or smaller than life, the world also assumed another - pink -colour though it stood out distinctly as black and white.

The same **transforming vision** occurs in "Happy Endings" but its origin and effects differ. In the five stories (A.B.C.D.E.) consider the storyline, the main episodes, the characters, the recurrent words and phrases. To what extent do similarities prevail over differences? What effect do the repetitions achieve (cf. 24-25)? Is the so-called life-likeness of fiction set out? Conversely are the moral standards, social expectations and private feelings played up foreign to us?

The enlarging process at work in **exaggerations** is also a common humorous device. Note how a receding hairline can bring about a blood bath (65-68)? Find other examples.

**Incongruous or unusual juxtapositions** or **shifts** have the same effect. How would you interpret the repetition of *it* 1. 57-58 (think of 1. 22)? What is humorous in the juxtaposition of the three adjectives, 1. 76-77: *wet and dripping and grateful* and of the four images, 1. 30-31: *This other John will emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough?* Consider the contrast between figurative and literal meanings 1. 61-62: *James and Mary get higher than you would believe and they climb into bed* as well as the humorous repetition and contrast: *Finally on high ground they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful* (76-77) which also recalls: *He finds them stoned and entwined.* (62). What kind of clash is generated by the blanks and breaks between the different stories and by the numerous comments by the narrator (cf. the parenthesis 1. 66-67 for example or the end of the sentences 1.70 or 76-77)?

**Irony** is also to be found in "Happy Endings", particularly in B where the narrator's coldly objective viewpoint contrasts with Mary's disastrously lachrymose attitude. Analyse the use of free indirect thought and the function of *but* 1. 15-20 and 22-25.

2. Because the tone of "Happy Endings" is one of its main constituent features, humour is a **cohesive** factor in a very **fragmented** text. But there are other such factors, as well. The A. B. C. D. E. F. development does not preclude a somewhat traditional structure with an introduction (I. 1 -3), a development and a conclusion (1. 92-97). And the development itself is not as haphazard as it may seem at a first reading. Consider the function of A and of C, the number of characters, the emphasis on one theme (84). How do all the stories end except the last one (E)?

Nevertheless the **metafictional purpose** and **deconstructive technique** of Margaret Atwood's story combat this conventional preference for cohesion and linkage. Like "Mother", "Happy Endings" is split up into different episodes, graphically and narratively fragmented but the drama generated by distance and misunderstandings in the family is poles apart from the intellectual game Atwood plays. And the reconstruction work the narrator attempts with the remains of the past has nothing to do with the clever puzzle of fiction seen as an arbitrary construct. Consider the first three sentences, their arrangement on the page, their syntax and the contrast between the first two names 1. 1 and the letter A at the end of 1. 3. How do the last lines (90-97) contribute to the estrangement process? What about the recurrence of the same phrases and the same character names in different stories? How do you interpret the choice of these names (John and Mary in A. for example) and the use of letters at the beginning of each story?

E and F constitute a turning-point in the storytelling: instead of the stories proper, what is focussed on from 1. 77-78 onwards?

Does Margaret Atwood's story further the traditional image of the inspired, unerring writer? Consider 1. 66-67 but also 1. 83-84 and 1. 96-97 to work out the definition of the writer constructed by the text.

3. *You* is often interpellated in "Happy Endings". Draw up a list of the different instances. What relationship is built up between **narrator and narratee** by a comment like *you can see what kind of woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey* (37-38)? What kind of narratee or reader is implied by such a remark? Find other similar examples. What different function does the narrator (and consequently the narratee) take on, particularly in the last lines. 1. 82-83. for example?

Narrator and narratee are traditionally positioned at opposite poles in the narrative communication situation, the first as **the teller of the tale or the narrating agent,** the second as **the agent** which is explicitly or implicitly **addressed by the narrator. In** Beckett's "One Evening" which is a soliloquy, the narrator becomes his own narratee. In "Happy Endings", the narratee is distinct from the narrator but the metafictional game also deconstructs the conventional entities and destabilizes the communication model. Determine the position of *you* 1. 80 or 82-83: *make John a revolutionary [...] and see how far that gets you* compared with 1. 84: *you may get a lustful brawling saga...* What is the ambiguity of the first occurrence 1. 3 or of 1. 86: *You'll have to face it...?* What conclusion can you draw about the conventionally fixed and stable positions of narrator and narratee? What implication does it have on the interpretation of the creative process?