

## **'Am I a Bad Feminist?', July 9, 2020**



By Margaret Atwood

**Author’s biography:** *Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 40 books of poetry, fiction, and essays, including The Handmaid's Tale. She lives in Toronto, Canada.*

**Warm-up:** Any thoughts about the power of social media? Is it a force for good or does it cause social damage? Can reasonable debate take place on it?

Context
<p>In 2017, as the result of high-profile allegations of sexual assault in America, the #MeToo Movement exploded globally on social media and gave victims of sexual assault and harassment an important tool for coming forward and speaking out against a system that all too often discredited the victims and protected the perpetrators. However, this corrective mechanism, as well as the slogan ‘Believe women’ (i.e. believe the victims), in being played out on social media, bypassed the legal system which functions on the assumption ‘innocent until proven guilty’ and ran the risk of ruining the reputations of innocent people being accused of sexual misconduct. And then Ms Atwood stepped into the fray. The essay below was originally published in Canadian national newspaper <i>The Globe and Mail</i>.</p>

## FIRST READING

Read the essay below. As much as we can, let’s get the facts....	
<b>Who is involved?</b>	
<b>What has happened?</b>	
<b>When did it happen?</b>	
<b>Where did it happen?</b>	
<b>Why did it happen?</b>	
<b>How did it happen?</b>	

## Vocabulary

- Feminist
- Leftie/rightie
- Annihilate
- Agency
- Misogynistic
- Civil rights
- Petition
- Barrage of invective
- Signatories
- Digression
- Salem witchcraft trials
- Vigilante justice
- Lynch-mob
- Wild West
- Heretic
- Squabbling
- Ancillary
- Antithetical

### Margaret Atwood, 'Am I a Bad Feminist?', July 9, 2020.

It seems that I am a "Bad **Feminist**." I can add that to the other things I've been accused of since 1972, such as climbing to fame up a pyramid of decapitated men's heads (a **leftie** journal), of being a dominatrix bent on the subjugation of men (a **rightie** one, complete with an illustration of me in leather boots and a whip) and of being an awful person who can **annihilate** – with her magic White Witch powers – anyone critical of her at Toronto dinner tables. I'm so scary! And now, it seems, I am conducting a War on Women, like the **misogynistic**, rape-enabling Bad Feminist that I am.

What would a Good Feminist look like, in the eyes of my accusers?

My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system.

Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions. If they were, we're back to the 19th century, and women should not own property, have credit cards, have access to higher education, control their own reproduction or vote. There are powerful groups in North America pushing this agenda, but they are not usually considered feminists.

Furthermore, I believe that in order to have civil and human rights for women there have to be **civil** and human **rights**, period, including the right to fundamental justice, just as for women to have the vote, there has to be a vote. Do Good Feminists believe that only women should have such rights? Surely not. That would be to flip the coin on the old state of affairs in which only men had such rights.

So let us suppose that my Good Feminist accusers, and the Bad Feminist that is me, agree on the above points. Where do we diverge? And how did I get into such hot water with the Good Feminists?

In November of 2016, I signed – as a matter of principle, as I have signed many **petitions** – an Open Letter called UBC Accountable, which calls for holding the University of British Columbia accountable for its failed process in its treatment of one of its former employees, Steven Galloway, the former chair of the department of creative writing, as well as its treatment of those who became **ancillary** complainants in the case. Specifically, several years ago, the university went public in national media before there was an inquiry, and even before the accused was allowed to know the details of the accusation. Before he could find them out, he had to sign a confidentiality agreement. The public – including me – was left with the impression that this man was a violent serial rapist, and everyone was free to attack him publicly, since under the agreement he had signed, he couldn't say anything to defend himself. A **barrage of invective** followed.

But then, after an inquiry by a judge that went on for months, with multiple witnesses and interviews, the judge said there had been no sexual assault, according to a statement released by Mr. Galloway through his lawyer. The employee got fired anyway. Everyone was surprised, including me. His faculty association launched a grievance, which is continuing, and until it is over, the public still cannot have access to the judge's report or her reasoning from the evidence presented. The not-guilty verdict displeased some people. They continued to attack. It was at this point that details of UBC's flawed process began to circulate, and the UBC Accountable letter came into being.

A fair-minded person would now withhold judgment as to guilt until the report and the evidence are available for us to see. We are grownups: We can make up our own minds, one way or the other. The **signatories** of the UBC Accountable letter have always taken this position. My critics have not, because they have already made up their minds. Are these Good Feminists fair-minded people? If not, they are just feeding into the very old narrative that holds women to be incapable

of fairness or of considered judgment, and they are giving the opponents of women yet another reason to deny them positions of decision-making in the world.

A **digression**: Witch talk. Another point against me is that I compared the UBC proceedings to the **Salem witchcraft trials**, in which a person was guilty because accused, since the rules of evidence were such that you could not be found innocent. My Good Feminist accusers take exception to this comparison. They think I was comparing them to the teenaged Salem witchfinders and calling them hysterical little girls. I was alluding instead to the structure in place at the trials themselves.

There are, at present, three kinds of "witch" language. 1) Calling someone a witch, as applied lavishly to Hillary Clinton during the recent election. 2) "Witchhunt," used to imply that someone is looking for something that doesn't exist. 3) The structure of the Salem witchcraft trials, in which you were guilty because accused. I was talking about the third use.

This structure – guilty because accused – has applied in many more episodes in human history than Salem. It tends to kick in during the "Terror and Virtue" phase of revolutions – something has gone wrong, and there must be a purge, as in the French Revolution, Stalin's purges in the USSR, the Red Guard period in China, the reign of the Generals in Argentina and the early days of the Iranian Revolution. The list is long and Left and Right have both indulged. Before "Terror and Virtue" is over, a great many have fallen by the wayside. Note that I am not saying that there are no traitors or whatever the target group may be; simply that in such times, the usual rules of evidence are bypassed.

Such things are always done in the name of ushering in a better world. Sometimes they do usher one in, for a time anyway. Sometimes they are used as an excuse for new forms of oppression. As for **vigilante justice** – condemnation without a trial – it begins as a response to a lack of justice – either the system is corrupt, as in prerevolutionary France, or there isn't one, as in the **Wild West** – so people take things into their own hands. But understandable and temporary vigilante justice can morph into a culturally solidified **lynch-mob** habit, in which the available mode of justice is thrown out the window, and extralegal power structures are put into place and maintained. The Cosa Nostra, for instance, began as a resistance to political tyranny.

The #MeToo moment is a symptom of a broken legal system. All too frequently, women and other sexual-abuse complainants couldn't get a fair hearing through institutions – including corporate structures – so they used a new tool: the internet. Stars fell from the skies. This has been very effective, and has been seen as a massive wake-up call. But what next? The legal system can be fixed, or our society could dispose of it. Institutions, corporations and workplaces can houseclean, or they can expect more stars to fall, and also a lot of asteroids.

If the legal system is bypassed because it is seen as ineffectual, what will take its place? Who will be the new power brokers? It won't be the Bad Feminists like me. We are acceptable neither to

Right nor to Left. In times of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn't puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a **heretic** or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated. Fiction writers are particularly suspect because they write about human beings, and people are morally ambiguous. The aim of ideology is to eliminate ambiguity.

The UBC Accountable letter is also a symptom – a symptom of the failure of the University of British Columbia and its flawed process. This should have been a matter addressed by Canadian Civil Liberties or B.C. Civil Liberties. Maybe these organizations will now put up their hands. Since the letter has now become a censorship issue – with calls being made to erase the site and the many thoughtful words of its writers – perhaps PEN Canada, PEN International, CJFE and Index on Censorship may also have a view.

The letter said from the beginning that UBC failed accused and complainants both. I would add that it failed the taxpaying public, who fund UBC to the tune of \$600-million a year. We would like to know how our money was spent in this instance. Donors to UBC – and it receives billions of dollars in private donations – also have a right to know.

In this whole affair, writers have been set against one another, especially since the letter was distorted by its attackers and vilified as a War on Women. But at this time, I call upon all – both the Good Feminists and the Bad Feminists like me – to drop their unproductive **squabbling**, join forces and direct the spotlight where it should have been all along – at UBC. Two of the ancillary complainants have now spoken out against UBC's process in this affair. For that, they should be thanked.

Once UBC has begun an independent inquiry into its own actions – such as the one conducted recently at Wilfrid Laurier University – and has pledged to make that inquiry public, the UBC Accountable site will have served its purpose. That purpose was never to squash women. Why have accountability and transparency been framed as **antithetical** to women's rights?

A war among women, as opposed to a war on women, is always pleasing to those who do not wish women well. This is a very important moment. I hope it will not be squandered.

## SECOND READING

1. What is Atwood's thesis?
2. Identify her main claims and counterclaims.

### Rhetorical Devices (Part 1)

#### 1. Ethos, Logos, and Pathos

##### Ethos:

Appeal to sense of credibility and trust

- Personal anecdotes
- Titles
- Body language
- Vocal variety
- Eye contact

##### Logos:

Appeal to sense of logic, reason, proof

- Arguments
- Facts, figures
- Research
- Characteristics
- Processes
- Methodology

##### Pathos:

Appeal to sense of emotions, values

- Stories
- Positive and negative emotions
- Coherence between language and voice

#### 2. Questions

- **Rhetorical question:** a question asked in order to create a dramatic effect or to make a point rather than to get an answer.
- **Dichotomy:** a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different. Example: *Is it A or B?*
- **Open-ended question:** A question that has many possible answers and approaches to it.

#### 3. Literary language

- Metaphor
- Allusion
- Irony
- Analogy

1. Go through the essay on more time and identify Atwood's use of the rhetorical devices above.
  
2. **Group 1**  
You are in charge of analysing and evaluating Atwood's use of ethos, logos, and pathos. How effective is her use of these?
  
3. **Group 2**  
You are in charge of analysing and evaluating Atwood's use of questions in her essay. How effective is her use of these?
  
4. **Group 3**  
You are in charge of analysing and evaluating Atwood's use of literary language. How effective is her use of this?
  
5. Overall evaluation: How effective is Atwood's use of language? Are you convinced by her argument that she is not a 'bad feminist'?



## Appendix

Literary terms and definitions (Not defined above)	
<b>Allusion</b>	An allusion is a reference, typically brief, to a person, place, thing, event, or other literary work with which the reader is presumably familiar. As a literary device, allusion allows a writer to compress a great deal of meaning and significance into a word or phrase.
<b>Analogy</b>	An analogy is a figure of speech that creates a comparison by showing how two seemingly different entities are alike, along with illustrating a larger point due to their commonalities. As a literary device, the purpose of analogy is not just to make a comparison, but to provide an explanation as well with additional information or context. This makes analogy a bit more complex than similar literary devices such as metaphor and simile. Analogy is an effective device in terms of providing a new or deeper meaning to concepts through the artistic use of language.
<b>Irony</b>	As a literary device, irony is a contrast or incongruity between expectations for a situation and what is reality. This can be a difference between the surface meaning of something that is said and the underlying meaning. It can also be a difference between what might be expected to happen and what actually occurs. The definition of irony can further be divided into three main types: verbal, dramatic, and situational.
<b>Metaphor</b>	A metaphor is a rhetorical figure of speech that compares two subjects without the use of “like” or “as.” Metaphor is often confused with simile, which compares two subjects by connecting them with “like” or “as” (for example: “She’s fit as a fiddle”). While a simile states that one thing is like another, a metaphor asserts that one thing <i>is</i> the other, or is a substitute for the other thing.

## Rubric

	5	6	7	8
Point of View / Purpose	<p>Accurately describes author's/ speaker's point of view or purpose and analyses how that point of view or purpose is conveyed and developed through the use of relevant details in the text to, as applicable, impact the meaning. Explains how author's point of view differs from others, including the limitations or biases of the author's/ speaker's point of view. When relevant, explains how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.</p>	<p>Analyses author's/ speaker's point of view, including its development, limitations, biases, impact on the meaning of the text, and differences from and responses to other points of view. Explains how author/speaker uses rhetoric or differences in point of view to create specific effects.</p>	<p>Analyses author's/ speaker's point of view, including its development, limitations, biases, impact on the meaning of the text, and differences from and responses to other points of view. Analyses author's/ speaker's use of rhetoric or differences in point of view to create specific effects. Analyses the effect of cultural experience on author's/ speaker's point of view.</p>	<p>All of Level 7, plus: Identifies cases where the <b>rhetoric or the development of point of view is particularly effective</b> and analyses how the point of view and/ or rhetoric contributes to the <b>power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.</b></p>

	5	6	7	8
Theme and Central Idea	<p>Identifies a major theme/central idea in a text and provides an accurate explanation of how specific details support the development of the theme/central idea. OR Provides some explanation of how the theme/ central idea interacts with supporting ideas or other elements in the text (e.g., setting, plot, character).</p>	<p>Identifies multiple themes/central ideas in a text, when relevant, and provides an accurate analysis of their development and interaction with each other and with supporting ideas or other elements in the text (e.g., setting, plot, character).</p>	<p>Identifies multiple themes/central ideas in a text, when relevant, and provides a thorough, accurate analysis of their development and interaction with each other and with supporting ideas or other elements in the text (e.g., setting, plot, character). When relevant, interprets theme/central idea through a critical lens or framework.</p>	<p>Identifies <b>multiple themes/central ideas</b> in a text, when relevant, and provides a <b>sophisticated analysis of their development and interaction with each other</b> and with supporting ideas or other elements in the text, including an <b>evaluation of which theme/ central idea is the most significant and why.</b> When relevant, persuasively <b>interprets theme/ central idea through a critical lens or framework.</b></p>