Happy Endings

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood is a prominent poet and author from Canada, best known for works such as *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. She is a prolific author, having published seventeen books of poetry, sixteen novels, and many other works of short fiction and critical writing. Because her father was an entomologist, she spent a great deal of time as a child in remote wilderness locations, sparking an early love of reading and nature. After studying at the University of Toronto and Radcliffe College, Atwood embarked upon a career as a poet and novelist, with her first collection of poetry published in 1961. Atwood's works are best known for exploring themes such as feminism, gender relations, Canadian identity, and environmentalism, and for her often experimental literary style. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Man Booker Prize, an Arthur C. Clarke Award, a Nebula award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, among many others.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Happy Endings" was written in the 1980s, when second wave feminism was at its height, and as such it reflects concerns with sex, gender, and relationships that were prevalent at the time. The story also pokes fun at post-war prosperity in its description of "happy endings" that involve home ownership, soaring real estate values, and the suburban nuclear family. Throughout the story, Atwood uses an experimental literary style that has its origins in Modernism, a literary movement that began several decades prior in the early 20th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other short stories and prose poems throughout Atwood's collection *Murder in the Dark* contain similar themes to "Happy Endings," including explorations of storytelling, feminism, and death. Atwood's collection *Good Bones* is another work of experimental fiction dealing with similar themes that was later, along with *Murder in the Dark*, compiled into a volume titled *Good Bones and Simple Murders*. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* also addresses themes concerning gender imbalance and sexual politics, while her novel *The Blind Assassin* tackles similar topics including storytelling, archetypes, and authorship. Atwood was influenced by earlier Canadian literature, such as that by Canadian writer and settler Susanna Moodie, as well as by *Grimm's Fairytales* and other collections of myth and legend.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Happy Endings"
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story, literary fiction
- **Setting:** Canada
- **Climax:** The narrator reveals that the endings of stories are all the same.
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Murder in the Dark: "Happy Endings" is part of a larger collection, *Murder in the Dark*, which features experimental short fiction and prose poetry.

PLOT SUMMARY

Atwood begins the story with a simple setup: "John and Mary meet. What happens next?" The story then proceeds through various plot iterations, describing different ways in which the tale might end. In scenario A, John and Mary marry, buy a **house**, have children, and generally achieve a "happy ending."

In scenario B, Mary falls in love and attempts to pursue a romantic relationship with John, who is noncommittal and uninterested. While Mary attempts to woo him with carefully prepared meals, her impeccable appearance, and sex, John remains unsatisfied and treats her poorly. When Mary finds out that John is seeing another woman, Madge, she commits suicide. John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.

In scenario C, Mary is in love with James, an independent and adventurous young man with a **motorcycle** and record collection. Since James is often away, Mary also engages in a relationship with John, who in this scenario is much older and already married to Madge. When John walks in on Mary and James having sex, he kills them and commits suicide. At the conclusion of the story, Madge remarries to a man named Fred and everything continues as in A.

In scenario D, Fred and Madge brave a tidal wave, while in scenario E, Fred and Madge deal with illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. In scenario F, the narrator attempts to complicate things further by imagining John and Mary as spies and counterrevolutionaries, but concludes that the endings of all of the stories are all ultimately the same.

At the end of "Happy Endings," Atwood meditates on the nature of plot and story, arguing that plot is ultimately less interesting than other aspects of storytelling. The various plot iterations

throughout the story illustrates the ways in which the elements of a story, when broken down into discrete units, are often so interchangeable with one another as to be virtually meaningless. Ultimately, the story concludes that the "what" is not nearly as important as the "How and Why."

CHARACTERS

Mary – The main female character in the story, Mary is introduced along with John in scenario A, and reappears several times throughout the story. In scenario A, she marries John and gets to participate in the "happy ending" consisting of a stable marriage, a **house**, children, career, and hobbies. In scenario B, after unsuccessfully courting John, she commits suicide when she discovers that he has been unfaithful to her. In scenario C, she engages in a relationship with a different iteration of John, who is much older and already married, while also pursuing a romantic relationship with James, who is her own age but often unavailable. When John discovers their relationship, he murders both Mary and James before committing suicide. Throughout the several variations presented in the story, Mary is substituted in as a typical female character, constrained by the expectations placed upon her because of her gender and ultimately defined by her romantic relationships. Unlike the male characters in the story, she is unable to pursue her own sexual and romantic fulfillment without dire consequences. It is notable that in several iterations of the story, Mary's character arc ends in death, whether self-inflicted or otherwise, illustrating the ways in which the lives of female characters are drastically limited in their options—their only "endings" being death or marriage.

John – Like Mary, John is one of the first characters introduced in the story, and serves as a stand-in for a typical male character throughout the various plot iterations. In scenario A, John and Mary succeed in obtaining a "happy ending" consisting of marriage, children, a **house**, and fulfilling jobs and hobbies. In scenario B, after Mary eventually commits suicide, John still goes on to the ending described in A, only this time with a woman named Madge, who is virtually interchangeable with the version of Mary described in scenario A. Scenario C features an older version of John, still married to Madge but also engaging in an affair with a comparatively much younger version of Mary. In this scenario, when John finds Mary engaged in a relationship with another man, he is overcome with despair and frustration and kills both Mary and her lover James before committing suicide. While John's ending is not always, strictly speaking, happy, in each of the scenarios John always ultimately has a sense of agency that Mary lacks, illustrating the ways in which men's freedom when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships greatly outstrips that of women. Even when John has achieved the "happy ending" of marriage with Madge, he still engages in extramarital affairs, an option denied to the various female characters. Ultimately, John is representative of masculine sexual privilege throughout the story.

Madge – First introduced in scenario B, Madge is the woman John is seeing on the side instead of Mary. While ostensibly a different character than Mary, Atwood implies that the two characters are so similar that they are able to be swapped into one another's stories with only slight changes. In scenario C, after her husband John commits suicide, Madge marries a man named Fred and things continue on as in scenario A. In scenario D, Madge and Fred must deal with a tidal wave disrupting their typical happy ending. In scenario E, Atwood further complicates the ending by introducing elements such as cancer and heart disease. Throughout the various iterations of her story, Madge is presented as another two-dimensional stock character, virtually indistinguishable from Mary.

James – In scenario C, James is Mary's young, independent, and often unavailable lover. James, who owns a **motorcycle** and an impressive record collection, is adventurous and desirable, in contrast with Mary's other lover, John, who is older and uninteresting. When James visits Mary, John walks in on them getting high and having sex, and kills them both in a jealous rage before committing suicide. While in many ways interchangeable with John throughout the various other iterations of the story, in scenario C James is representative of the relative freedom enjoyed by men, both in general and specifically in terms of romantic and sexual relationships. While Mary is left waiting for him to return to her, James is able to go off on adventures on his motorcycle, and is implied to have engaged in other sexual relationships.

Fred – In scenario C, Madge marries Fred after her husband John commits suicide. In scenario D, Fred and Madge brave a tidal wave, while in scenario E, they deal with disease and illness. In each of these scenarios, Fred is basically interchangeable with John, a stock male character in a relationship with a stock female character. While the names might be swapped around, Fred's character arc is essentially the same as John in each of the scenarios, with the goal always being to end up at A, the so-called "happy ending."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SEX AND GENDER

In "Happy Endings," Atwood describes a variety of scenarios involving stock characters she calls John

and Mary in order to reflect upon gender and sexuality. Throughout these iterations of character arcs and story stereotypes, Atwood presents sexuality as heavily conditioned by social and gender norms, most often to the detriment of women. In particular, women's sexuality is often socially dependent upon men, whose needs are put first, over and above women's. The story's title itself, "Happy Endings," obliquely refers to sexual acts, a tongue-in-cheek nod by Atwood that "happy endings," in sex and real life, are largely the domain of men. Ultimately, Atwood makes the claim that the gendered expectations surrounding sex often result in situations that benefit men and harm women.

In none of the scenarios is sex in and of itself the source of a genuinely happy ending for women. Even in scenario A, which is in some senses a "best-case" scenario, John and Mary's "stimulating and challenging" sex life is ultimately presented as a minor hobby alongside other parts of their lives such as children, a **house**, vacations, and friends. Listing sex with the litany of other accomplishments belies its importance and fraught nature. Their jobs and hobbies are also described as "stimulating and challenging," a phrase that evokes not so much intimacy and passion, but a kind of sterile, paternalistic view of sex as necessary for a "happy ending," the details of which are unimportant. Thus even when the relationship described is a relatively happy one, the only important thing about sex is, presumably, that they're having it. While this would be the case for *both* John and Mary in this situation, later scenarios complicate the supposedly equal (and equally depressing) depiction of sex for each partner—suggesting that while neither is deeply satisfied, women in particular are unable to achieve or hold onto sexual fulfillment.

Indeed, in scenario B, John only uses Mary for sexual gratification, and while Mary doesn't enjoy sex with John, she consents because she wants John to love and marry her. Here Mary and John's relationship makes explicit the fact that, for men, sex is about pleasure, while for women, sex is fraught with gendered expectations of self-sacrifice. Atwood is explicit about the one-sided nature of this relationship: John "merely uses [Mary's] body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind," and does not reciprocate her care of interest in any fashion. In this scenario, for Mary sex is just a tool, used to get and keep a man who would be otherwise uninterested in her.

When John finds another women he is interested in, Madge, Mary is despondent, and eventually commits suicide, with the thought that maybe John will "discover her and get her to the hospital in time and repent and then they can get married." Even at the end of her life, then, Mary uses her body as a tool to get a man to love her. While her friends tell Mary that John is "a rat, a pig, a dog," and the details of the story certainly bear this characterization out, Mary is stuck in a warped view of the world in which John could potentially "emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon." For Mary, sex is a way in which she might be able to encourage John to change; it is not something she does for her own pleasure or, to echo the story's title, happy ending.

In scenario C, Atwood goes on to underscore how women, unlike men, are in fact punished when they actively pursue their own sexual gratification. In this scenario Mary is in love with James, but also sleeps with John, now presented as an older man who is cheating on his wife. Here, Atwood complicates the gender dynamic in regards to sex, and there is no "happy ending" even for the men. However, Mary still has to navigate the fraught realm of sex and interpersonal relationships, while for the men it's simpler and more straightforward, a purer reflection of their own desires and needs.

Because James is unavailable (as Atwood puts it, "away on his **motorcycle**, being free"), Mary indulges in a sexual relationship with John, although she is not in love with him. Here, the reader sees a distorted reflection of the relationships in scenarios A and B: although John is supposed to be living his "happy ending" as depicted in those stories, in reality he is cheating on his wife with a much younger woman. But John's infidelity isn't what invalidates the "happy ending"—male sexual digression seems permissible within the existing framework. It's only when John finds Mary and James in her apartment, "stoned and entwined," that his narrative begins to unravel. For John, this is no longer a "happy ending" because his sexual and romantic desires are no longer uncomplicated and fulfilled. For James and Mary, a "happy ending" isn't possible either—but only because Mary's infidelity prompts John to take drastic action and kill them all. Throughout the entirety of scenario C, then, Atwood illustrates that the "happy ending" of sexual climax is, throughout the story, largely in reference to male sexual pleasure.

It's clear that female pleasure isn't a concern for most of the male protagonists of the story, except as an afterthought, perhaps a necessary component the "stimulating and challenging" aspects of scenario A. The only men who do not get a "happy ending" are those in scenario C: John, because he squanders his already happy life in a jealous rage, and James, because he is the victim of that rage. In none of the iterations of the story do women have the power to deny men a "happy ending" outright. What's more, they seldom have the ability to meaningfully pursue their own "happy ending."

RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

Throughout the story, the character arcs of John, Mary, and others are all described in relation to one another, most often in terms of romance and eventual marriage. Atwood highlights the way in which these events function less as interesting narrative developments and more as necessary fulcrums in the plot, moving the story along inexorably toward its ending. Once marriage happens, the story's usually over—barring plot-worthy tragedies like natural disaster or disease—and the characters are neatly fitted into place, so similar in their endings that they can be slotted

directly into any other story where "everything continues as in A, but under different names." Marriage is always the ultimate conclusion, no matter what—an "ending" that Atwood critiques as superficial and formulaic, and which reduces the meaningful aspects of the characters' lives to a singular focus.

Scenario A, the first narrative presented in the story and the one to which all other narratives eventually default, concludes with a static marriage, one in which all interesting or significant events have already occurred in the characters' lives. In this scenario, John and Mary have a "happy ending" consisting of jobs, children, a **house**, friends, hobbies, and financial prosperity. Having reached the end of their story, John and Mary get to live a happy life—one that is expected and unchanging. While Atwood doesn't condemn happiness as the ultimate goal, she's quick to poke fun at the cookie-cutter elements of such an ending.

While the other scenarios may have more twists and turns, they eventually end up at scenario A: a man and a woman fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. Whether this means John and Madge in scenario B after Mary has killed herself, Fred and Madge in scenario C after John has committed a murder-suicide, or any of the other iterations is irrelevant. In each of the scenarios, then, Atwood lays bare the empty goal of the "happy ending" of marriage, suggesting that marriage as an end-point is an artificial, perhaps even harmful construction.

In other scenarios throughout the story, Atwood complicates the idea of marriage itself as a "happy ending" by introducing elements such as infidelity, jealousy, and illness. In these scenarios, while the story as a whole ends up at A, various characters must suffer unhappy endings before the story can get there. In scenario B, a lovelorn Mary pines after John even though he is ultimately uninterested in her. Here, as in scenario A, the characters are ultimately defined by their romantic relationships with one another, even when they don't eventually result in marriage. For Mary, the defining element of her character arc is her relationship with John (or lack thereof). Mary commits suicide precisely because she has been denied the traditional "happy ending" of romance and marriage, illustrating the ways in which harmful ideas about what constitutes a happy and fulfilling life can have a negative effect.

In scenario C, Mary is in a similar situation, in love with James, who is often both emotionally and physically unavailable ("away on his **motorcycle**, being free"). Mary bides her time by engaging in a relationship with John, who is older and married on this scenario, although she does not love him. While in some respects Mary complicates the tropes present in the two preceding iterations of the story, she is still ultimately defined by her romantic relationships. Although, in the end, she does not get a "happy ending," the entire arc of her story is still based on her romantic relationships with men. Even when marriage, and romantic relationships in general, are shown to be unhealthy and unhappy, they are still positioned as the ultimate goal of both a story and a life.

In further iterations of the story, Atwood illustrates the ways in which, no matter how one attempts to complicate the plot, it eventually defaults back into the same template of romance and marriage. In scenario D, after Fred and Madge get married, they are threatened by a tsunami, and "the rest of the story is about what caused the tidal wave and how they escape from it." Despite this detour, however, at the end of the story they "they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful, and continue as in A." Fred and Madge are still characterized exclusively by their relationships to one another. Even tossing in wildly different elements, such as spies, ultimately does nothing to change this. While there might be more filler—"a lustful brawling saga of passionate involvement"—in the end the characters yet again default to marriage as the defining element and goal of their lives.

Throughout the story, Atwood illustrates the ways in which conventional storylines ultimately define their characters by their relationships with others. At least in terms of plot, most stories are conventional in their relationship dynamics, and rely on romance and marriage to the point that characters are often interchangeable with one another. Atwood argues that, contrary to traditional belief and established plot structures, marriage is a false ending, one that simplifies characters' goals and motivations and ignores the possibilities of other endings, happy or otherwise.

STORYTELLING TROPES

Beyond illustrating the problematic dynamics underpinning sexual and romantic relationships, "Happy Endings" is concerned with the nature of storytelling itself. "Happy Endings" details the broad plot arcs of a variety of different stories, poking fun at the traditional structure that underpins so many of them. In doing so, Atwood asserts that the broad strokes of a life—who sleeps with whom, who marries whom, who dies and how—as less interesting than the day to day trials and motivations of characters, or as she puts it, the "How and Why."

The various iterations of the stories all start with an initial romance, whether explicit or implied. This is the first building block of the plot of all the stories—as Atwood puts it "John and Mary meet. What happens next?" Scenario A, which establishes the default ending of many of the other subsequent scenarios as well, offers a "happy ending" to the initial romance. Atwood argues that the ubiquity of this ending renders it virtually meaningless—it is uninteresting precisely because of its generic character. One could literally swap the names of the characters from other scenarios into it without meaningfully changing any of the broad plot strokes. Scenario B and C interject tragedy into the plot—they are not simply "happy endings." However, they, too, follow a formulaic pattern, and all ultimately arrive at

scenario A. Whether describing a lovelorn heroine or a love triangle with a violent end, these plots rely on the same tropes and stereotypes, rendering them, for Atwood, deeply boring stories.

Marriage is another foundational plot element to all of the stories that Atwood introduces. While the details sometimes differ, marriage is ultimately uninteresting as a plot development because of its sheer inevitability. Marriage is assumed to be an integral part of the "happy ending," no matter what. Whether in scenario A, where marriage is a happy default, or in any of the other scenarios, where marriage is the goal of the story even if it is never ultimately realized, marriage is seen as the culmination of the romantic plot. Everything after marriage, notwithstanding disaster, is merely denouement. This isn't just a regressive viewpoint that robs other elements of life of meaning, but, in Atwood's estimation, it's simply bad writing. And while all of the characters either succeed in, or tragically long for, marriage, Atwood ultimately describes it as a sterile, uninteresting component of the story. It may be nearly inevitable, and it may provide some measure of happiness, but once one has achieved the goal of marriage, there's really nothing left to do—only sideshows and irrelevant plot filler. Atwood argues that an emphasis on formulaic plot elements such as marriage and "happy endings" ignores the things that make stories important and original.

In all of the stories, the characters also eventually die. Death is the ultimate trope, the inescapable conclusion, and as such is fundamentally uninteresting. On the other hand, stories that attempt to avoid or subvert death are being dishonest: the plot remains the same no matter how creatively one tries to pretend otherwise. Indeed, Atwood asserts that "the endings are the same however you slice it." While it might be tempting to play along with other versions of the story, she reminds readers that "they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality." Death is the ultimate ending, and in all of the stories (albeit with some name swapping) the ending is simple: "*John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*"

Atwood acknowledges that the plots of these stories—and most stories—are formulaic when stripped down to their components: romance, marriage, death, with happy or tragic endings meted out accordingly. For her, what is interesting about stories thus aren't the components of plot, which are "just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what." Instead, what is truly unique to stories are the "How and Why"—those elements which add depth and interest to what are, in the end, basic and formulaic stories about human life.

Throughout the story, Atwood often directly addresses her audience, breaking the fourth wall and letting the audience in on the secret of formulaic plots and typical endings. From the start, she plays on the conventions of a "choose your own adventure" type story, encouraging the audience, "If you want a happy ending, try A." After several more iterations, anticipating a reader's objections to the formula, she suggests wryly, "If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you." At the conclusion of the story she reminds readers, "you'll have to face it," emphasizing that, no matter how inventive or elaborate, plots are ultimately all the same, a collection of stock parts strung together in different orders with varying effects: romance, marriage, death. What is interesting and important about stories ultimately has nothing to do with the plot. Instead, it rests on the "How and Why," the details, motivations, and descriptions that are unique to particular characters and stories.

MORTALITY

Throughout "Happy Endings," the various romantic scenarios and plot features the story describes all end in death. In all of the archetypal plot elements she caricatures, Atwood emphasizes that death and loss are a fundamental part of any story. While marriage may be an ending of a sort, of the "lived happily ever after" variety, it's never the *true* ending: death is the ultimate conclusion of any story, and there's no use pretending otherwise. Accepting and moving beyond this is essential for good storytelling, but, on a more existential level, is also presented as a prescription for living a more meaningful life.

In each of the scenarios that Atwood describes, the ultimate ending is death. While the plots may conventionally lead up to marriage, infidelity, disaster, or other interpersonal conflicts, Atwood illustrates the ways in which these endings are all false, premature endings if they do not include death. In scenario A and the other scenarios that eventually default to this ending, the story concludes with a good death, at the end of a long, fulfilling life. Atwood writes that "eventually they die. This is the end of the story." This death is the ultimate conclusion of the "happy ending" scenario, illustrating the ways in which even stories that ostensibly triumph over tragedy cannot escape death. This underscores the story's broader focus on the unavoidability of mortality.

In other scenarios, a tragic death comes earlier in the story. In scenario B, for instance, Mary commits suicide after her lackluster lover, John, leaves her for another woman. Similarly, in scenario C, all of the characters meet tragic ends, illustrating the central place that death has in all stories. Even in stories with added, sometimes elaborate, details, death remains the final conclusion. Whether characters face heart disease, cancer, natural disasters, or a variety of other deadly ailments, Atwood suggests that these elements can be inserted into the story with little to no change in the overall plot. Death always has the potential to profoundly disrupt the stability of a "happy ending." Adding in elements of a thriller doesn't work either: "If you

think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you." While you might end up with a more superficially interesting story, the plot points are all the same, and death remains inevitable and inescapable.

By the conclusion of the story, Atwood is firm in her insistence that "the only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*" As she writes, "so much for endings." At the same time, however, she indicates that death, while so ordinary and inescapable as to become banal, can be an important factor in stories insofar as it illustrates the "How and Why."

On the face of it, death is ubiquitous and inescapably human. As such, it can inform and motivate characters in interesting ways. What makes a story worth reading isn't *what* happens, but *how and why* it happens. That's why Atwood emphasizes that, throughout any story, it's no use to focus on the inevitable end, whether that means the false ending of marriage or the ultimate ending of death itself. Instead, stories, and life itself, are made meaningful by the characters within them; the bones of the story in the form of plot are less important than the skin and muscle, the organs and scars. By emphasizing that death is the final act of all stories, Atwood reveals certain plot elements to be universal, interchangeable, and without meaning. Thus, she argues that what makes narratives meaningful and significant are the "How and Why": the peculiarities, motivations, and desires of characters.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HOUSES

Throughout the story, houses are used as a symbol of "happy endings" consisting of romantic success and marriage, a suburban nuclear family, and personal and economic prosperity. In scenario A, one of the staples of John and Mary's "happy ending" is that they are able to afford a "charming house." Similarly, in scenario C, John and his wife Madge purchase a house just before real estate values go up, enabling them to continue to live a happy life without economic precarity. In scenario D, the characters must survive a tidal wave, which threatens the "charming house" by the seashore. In all of the scenarios, the house also represents a living situation typical of marriage. Like the institution of marriage itself, the house represents a fixed ending to any story, as it permanently situates the characters in the story not only in terms of their relationships with one another, but also in a physical location from which they will not move. The house symbolizes prosperity both economically and in terms of personal relationships, but it also hints at the suburban sterility of a typical "happy ending."

JAMES'S MOTORCYCLE

In scenario C, Mary is in love with James, an independent and free-thinking young man with a lust for adventure aided by his possession of a motorcycle. Here, the motorcycle is representative of male sexual freedom and control, as juxtaposed with the constraints placed upon women's sexual agency. While James is often "away on his motorcycle, being free," Atwood notes that "freedom isn't the same for girls." Similarly, James is able to pursue sexual and romantic relationships at his leisure, while Mary, in his absence, is forced to settle for the attentions of the much older John. The motorcycle, like James's record collection and access to drugs, is also indicative of youth and independence—although Atwood indicates that this sort of independence is highly gendered and ultimately inaccessible for women of the same age.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Virago edition of *Murder in the Dark* published in 2001.

Happy Endings Quotes

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 get 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 goodnight and three days later he turns up at six o'clock and they do the whole thing over again.

Related Characters: John, Mary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in scenario B, in which Mary pines after a rather indifferent John. Here Atwood illustrates how fundamentally unequal the sexual and romantic relationships between men and women can be: while John is free to pursue his own sexual pleasure and disregard Mary's needs, Mary is stuck trying to please John in every aspect of their relationship, from the sexual to the mundane.

In particular, Mary attempts to use sex "not because she likes sex exactly, she doesn't," but rather as a way to get John to depend on her. She does not focus on sex as an act that she, too, should take pleasure in.

In addition, Mary reveals the ultimately unsatisfying nature of romance and marriage as a "happy ending." While this is the ending that Mary ostensibly wants and strives for, it's clear that her relationship has not brought her happiness. Although within the story Mary is unable to come to this realization herself, Atwood paints an unpleasant portrait for the reader of a typical heterosexual relationship. In this way, Atwood critiques society's elevation of romantic fulfillment as the ultimate goal—or "happy ending"—of life.

❝ Mary gets 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 like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough.

Related Characters: John, Mary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This passage in scenario B reflects the story's preoccupation with the fundamentally unequal roles occupied by women and men in relationships. John upsets and disregards Mary, causing her to become "run down" and prompt the concern of her coworkers and friends. Nevertheless, Mary remains steadfast in her devotion to John, insisting that "inside John […] is another John, who is much nicer." While Mary longs for a real relationship with and eventual marriage to John, he treats he poorly and ignores the effect that he has upon her. Furthermore, there is nothing Mary can do to alter the dynamic of the relationship, which robs her of agency and reduces her to a passive character incapable of change. John, by contrast, is able to do whatever he wants, with little to no consequence. This is reflected in the subsequent development of the plot, as Mary goes on to commit suicide, while John gets the stereotypical "happy ending" describes in scenario A, despite his poor treatment of Mary.

❝ 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.

In scenario C, the narrator continues to discuss the reasons that Mary has settled for a sexual relationship with the older John when she really wishes she could be with James. This passage again illustrates the uneven playing field when it comes to sexual and romantic relationships between men and women. James is able to go off on adventures and be "free," implying not only physical freedom but also the freedom for sexual promiscuity and autonomy. On the other hand, since freedom "isn't the same for girls," Mary has no such options. Instead, she must settle for what is available to her, in the form of middle-aged, romantically unappealing John. While James and Mary seem to be otherwise of roughly equal age and social status, their relationship is a fundamentally unequal one because it is predicated on such a socially conditioned gender imbalance. Even when Mary attempts to assert her own autonomy, and perhaps correct \this imbalance, by engaging in a sexual relationship with another man, she is nowhere close to achieving the level of freedom and autonomy represented by James and his motorcycle.

Related Characters: James , Mary, John

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66-67

❝ 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.

Related Characters: James , Madge, Mary, John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In scenario C, Mary is not interested in John romantically and finds him "boring." She still engages in a sexual relationship with him, however, because she has few other options and because "older men can keep it up longer." This initially suggests that Mary has a stronger sense of agency

and ability to assert her own desires than in the previous scenario. Yet while Mary may be superficially sexually satisfied by an older and more experienced partner, she is still ultimately unable to act in a truly autonomous fashion when it comes to sex and relationships. Instead, she has to settle for what's available, tolerating John's infidelity and ongoing midlife crisis in exchange for a sexual relationship, when in reality she wishes she could be in a relationship with James.

In addition, the passage illustrates the ways in which even the "happy ending" described in scenario A is ultimately elusive and ephemeral, and not actually indicative of true happiness. Even though John has achieved this ending with his wife, and acknowledges that he must stay with her because "a commitment is a commitment," he is ultimately free to engage in extramarital affairs and attempt to soothe his own ego, rather than resting comfortably in the marriage he has already achieved. This is yet another course of action that is only available to men, further underscoring the fundamentally unequal dynamic between men and women.

❝ Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you like, it can be "Madge," "cancer," "guilty and confused," and "bird watching."

Related Characters: Madge, Fred

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In scenario E, Atwood illustrates a potential complication to the standard plot she has established in the form of illness and its consequences. However, even with these superficial plot changes, the story still ultimately reaches the same ending—that is, the one initially produced in scenario A of marriage and death. This demonstrates the ways in which all stories are ultimately formulaic and repetitive. Atwood underscores this point by emphasizing that the details of the plot truly do not matter: one could replace the various plot elements, and even the specific characters themselves, without significantly affecting the overarching arc of the story. This will ultimately support Atwood's ending assertion that it's important for writers to focus less on plot than on deeply specific motivations—the "how" and "why" of a story, as she later calls it.

This scenario also emphasizes the way in which death is the ultimate end to any story. While death is explicitly mentioned in the form of cancer and a "bad heart," it is lurking at the end of every scenario, even the so-called "happy ending" of scenario A. While marriage and its emotional and logistical consequences may be an ending of sorts, death is an ending that every story eventually reaches, one way or another.

❝ 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 of passionate involvement, a chronicle of our times, sort of.

Related Characters: Mary, John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Directly addressing the reader in scenario F, Atwood further illustrates the inherent similarity between all plots, no matter what drastic measures are taken to attempt to differentiate them. Even when adding in seemingly unique elements like making "John a revolutionary, and Mary a counterespionage agent," Atwood challenges readers to "see how far that gets you." By this she means that when stripped down to their essential components, even the most fantastical plots are composed of basically the same elements: romance, marriage, and death. Everything still ends up as does scenario A, the stereotypical happy ending, and, finally, results in death, the great universalizing ending. While on the face of it stories may be superficially different, then, Atwood is arguing that the bones of the plot are always fundamentally the same. No matter how hard someone attempts to make them different or unique, up to and including introducing far-fetched dramatic elements, the basic structure of stories is inescapable. This again supports her ultimate assertion that what really matters in stories—indeed in life—is the "how" and "why."

> 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.
>
> The only authentic ending is the one provided here:
>
> *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*

Related Characters: Mary, John

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Still addressing the reader in scenario F, the narrator highlights the way in which all stories always end in a fundamentally similar way. While different elements of artifice or deceit may be involved, Atwood urges readers not to be "deluded," as superficially different endings are "all fake, either deliberately fake [...] or just motivated by excessive optimism." For Atwood this means that even scenario A, the most commonplace of endings, is actually a false ending, because it ends with romance and marriage, rather than the true ending of death.

Any story that fails to include death, by this metric, is being dishonest or elusive about its ending. "John and Mary die" is the only honest ending available, one that Atwood stresses is inescapable and inherent to all stories. While stories can range from deliberately deceitful to merely sentimental in their choice of conclusions, any story that does not end in death is cutting itself off short.

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

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In the final passage of the story, Atwood reflects that, all things being equal, endings are fundamentally uninteresting. She writes, "so much for endings," implying that by this point the story has neatly summed up what an ending is, and has found it lacking. She argues that "beginnings are more fun," in part because of their novelty. Meanwhile, the "true connoisseurs"—a phrase perhaps in reference to skilled writers, avid readers, or simply self-aware, well-adjusted individuals—are said to prefer the middles of stories, since they are both difficult to "do anything with" and are the only place in which stories may deviate from one another.

Ultimately, however, Atwood asserts that she is uninterested in plots as a whole, whether beginnings, endings, or middles. Instead, she argues that they are just "a what and a what and a what," implying that they are, in the end, composed of universal elements that are so generic as to be without any fixed meaning. What is truly significant and unique in stories is the "How and Why," those elements that add depth, character, and originality to tales, and which enable them to be more than just carbon copies of one another.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HAPPY ENDINGS

John and Mary meet. In scenario A, they fall in the love and marry, and end up with a "happy ending" consisting of a **house** with rising real estate value, children, a "stimulating and challenging" sex life, and "stimulating and challenging" occupations and hobbies.

Atwood intentionally plays with the relationship between story and plot, offering up different stock scenarios, characters, and developments, usually consisting of romance and marriage, in order to illustrate the ways in which storytelling tropes are thoughtlessly perpetuated.

In scenario B, Mary is in love with John, but John is not in love with Mary. John and Mary engage in a sexual relationship, but while Mary hopes for more, John is merely using her for his own pleasure. John visits Mary twice a week, and she cooks him dinner, tidies up after him, and has sex with him with the hope that he will come to love her in return.

John and Mary's relationship reveals the fundamentally unequal sexual and romantic playing field between men and women. While John is free to pursue his own desires and seek out sexual fulfillment, Mary is stuck catering to John's needs rather than her own.

Mary is upset with the state of their relationship, prone to crying and worrying. Mary's friends insist that John is no good for her, but Mary insists that, despite his rough exterior, John is capable of becoming a good person and worthwhile partner.

While John is clearly a less than ideal partner, Mary clings to the hope of a relationship with him because she is convinced that love and marriage are necessary for a "happy ending," no matter the cost.

Through her friends, Mary learns that John has been seeing another woman, Madge. Mary is most affronted that John has been taking the other woman out to dinner, as he has never taken her out to dinner and instead constantly relies on her to cook for him. Despondent, Mary plans to commit suicide. While she hopes that John might find her, rush her to the hospital, and confess his love, this does not happen, and Mary dies.

Because Mary is unable to achieve the "happy ending" described in scenario A—marriage, children, etc.—she chooses the only other option she feels is available to her: death. For Mary, this is the ultimate ending, one that Atwood hints is both more final and more honest than the false ending of marriage.

After Mary's suicide, John marries Madge, the other woman he was seeing. The story then states that everything "continues as in A," implying that they go on to a happy ending of their own.

Here, Atwood again plays with and satirizes storytelling tropes, insinuating that the endings of stories are often virtually interchangeable, able to be swapped into different scenarios with little to no difference.

In scenario C, Mary is in love with an adventurous young man names James, who is attractive and aloof, with an impressive record collection. While Mary is interested in a relationship with him, James is often away on his **motorcycle** having adventures, and so Mary engages in a sexual relationship with John, a much older married man.

In this scenario, while both John and James are free to explicitly act on their romantic and sexual desires, Mary is unable to fully pursue her own. Here, Atwood emphasizes the unequal nature of relationships between men and women, arguing that "freedom" is largely the province of men.

Although John is married, engages in a relationship with Mary in order to mitigate his midlife crisis and feel young again. While he emphasizes how important Mary is to him, he reiterates that he cannot leave his wife, as he is committed to her. While Mary enjoys having sex with John, she remains uninterested in him romantically.

While the "happy ending" depicted in scenario A is ostensibly final, here Atwood illustrates the ways in which it is not—at least for men. Instead, John is free to engage in extramarital affairs, illustrating the ways in which a stable marriage is inherently a false ending.

James returns from one of his adventures and proceeds to get high and have sex with Mary. When John walks in on them, he is overcome with rage and despair, and kills them both before committing suicide. His wife, Madge, subsequently marries a man named Fred and proceeds on to the happy ending described in scenario A.

While in scenario B Mary commits suicide out of jealousy and despair, here John enacts his rage upon others, further illustrating the unequal levels of autonomy in romantic and sexual relationships. Despite the tragedy of John's actions, however, a typical "happy ending" is still available for his wife, Madge, who can subsequently be easily slotted into scenario A under a different name.

In scenario D, Fred and Madge are happily married, but must deal with a tidal wave swamping the town in which they live and nearly killing them. At the conclusion of the scenario, Fred and Madge have survived the calamity and continue on to scenario A.

Even when the scenario attempts to innovate in terms of plot, Atwood demonstrates the way in which all stories eventually end up at the same place. She does this to illustrate the fundamental simplicity and similarity of most stories.

In scenario E, Fred and Madge suffer illnesses such as heart disease or cancer, and the story details the ways in which they deal with this until they die. The narrator implies that it doesn't matter which one of them is sick, and that the plot details are easily interchangeable. The remaining spouse continues to spend their time as in scenario A.

These further complications to the plot are themselves formulaic, and, furthermore, eventually revert back to the stock ending depicted in A. Here Atwood again illustrates the repetitive similarity between stories, arguing that plot points are all the same, and all eventually end in death.

In scenario F, the narrator encourages the reader to attempt to add additional plot details such as making John and Mary revolutionaries and spies, but implies that despite this intervention the plot will ultimately end up the same.

Even when stretched to the furthest extremes, Atwood illustrates the way in which stories never fundamentally deviate from the same essential tropes, always ultimately ending in romance, marriage, and death.

The narrator emphasizes that no matter what complications are added to the plot, the ending is always the same, namely, death. Any story that does not end in death is dishonest about the true ending.

In the final passages of the story, Atwood makes her critique of plot explicit, focusing on the ways in which all endings that do not include death are essentially lying. She emphasizes that death is the universal final ending.


The narrator indicates that, because they are interchangeable and stereotypical, plots are ultimately the least interesting aspect of a story, particularly since they always end the same. Instead, they argue that what makes a story unique and meaningful is not the "what" but rather the "How and Why."

Having dissected and displayed the underlying similarity between all plots, Atwood argues that this makes them fundamentally uninteresting components of story. Instead, she argues that characters' motivations and backgrounds are much more necessary and interesting to stories than mere plot.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Wack, Margaret. "*Happy Endings*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Mar 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wack, Margaret. "*Happy Endings*." LitCharts LLC, March 16, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/happy-endings.

To cite any of the quotes from *Happy Endings* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Atwood, Margaret. Happy Endings. Virago. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Atwood, Margaret. Happy Endings. London: Virago. 2001.