MOTIFS OF TRANSFORMATION IN FOUR NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for any degree.
It is my own work.
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ABSTRACT

The dominant theme that Margaret Atwood foregrounds in her writing is that of victimisation, whether she is writing of the victimisation of a country, of a minority group, of animals or of an individual. She adopts the position that through acknowledgement of that victimisation, and a refusal to accept the role of victim, it is possible to become a creative non-victim.

It soon becomes evident from Atwood's writing that victimisation of one kind or another is what underpins the powerful patriarchal constructions of society.

In each of the four novels discussed in this thesis Atwood's female protagonists, all victims of patriarchy, transform themselves, through accessing their creativity, using it transgressively, and overcoming the strictures of patriarchy upon their lives.

Atwood's own strategy in telling the stories of these women is itself transgressive. In its narrative experimentation she employs the postmodern with its shifts in time and space, its tantalising elusiveness, and its multiple challenges to the reader. Atwood further undermines the expectations of the reader by employing elements of fairy tales, particularly the gothic elements of these traditional tales, as a means of attacking the ramparts of entrenched patriarchal systems.

The chronological range covered by this thesis starts with Atwood's first novel and ends with her latest published novel.

Following the modern trend, none of these novels has a conclusive ending. The protagonist in each has found her means of salvation, but for her the process of challenging patriarchy will never be over. In the tradition of postmodernist writing the reader is left to continue engaging with the text as (s)he ponders on what the future will bring for each of the heroines.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood was born in November, 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War, one month after I was born. She became a prizewinning poet at a very early age, a writer of short stories, and a novelist of international standing.

I became a mother of three children, living in small towns where there was very little in the way of intellectual stimulation, and where even the libraries stocked nothing more challenging than popular fiction.

When I went to work at the University of Cape Town Libraries in the mid-1980s, I discovered that there was a whole generation of influential women writers, my contemporaries, of whom I had never heard. One of those whom I discovered was Margaret Atwood, several of whose novels I read. But then came the publication of *Cat's Eye*.

This novel had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and, for me, was a revelation of why Atwood was as highly acclaimed as she was. In *Cat's Eye* I was reading about the experience of a woman of my age, and of similar cultural background, whose story was told with wit by an astonishingly accomplished writer.

I went back to Atwood's early novels, I read her poetry in all its terrifying harshness. I was in turn charmed and puzzled by her short stories. All in all, I was captivated by this witty, perceptive, clever, perspicacious woman who could see life in such sharp focus and could translate what she saw into language and images to which I could respond. The more I read, the more I wanted to tell other people about the insights I was gaining from reading this powerful literature, hence this dissertation.

The most remarkable appeal of Atwood's writing is its non-polemical, non-didactic quality, and the fact that there are almost as many readings of her work as there are readers. Writing about texts such as Atwood's short story, *The Sin Eater*, James B Wiggins describes them as "poly-valent and plurisignificative" which he says "is amply

indicated by the diverse readings provoked by them".[1] Atwood herself seems to demand and allow for divergent readings of her work. In an interview with Jan Garden Castro she says that she has never done academic criticism of her own work. "The reason I never have and never will is that once authors start making pronouncements about how people should read their work, in a dogmatic kind of way, it eliminates other readings".[2] But even she must be astounded at the variant readings that one encounters in the large body of critical literature that her work has generated.

Each reader comes to a text with all the inherent attitudes, preconceptions and agendas that (s)he has accumulated over the years. A feminist, expecting Atwood to take a much more radical feminist stance that would be in line with her own attitudes, might possibly criticise her for liking men too much.[3]

J Brown Bouson,[4] on the other hand, writing about *Cat's Eye*, wonders what it was in Elaine's early childhood that "predisposes her to assume the victim's role". He argues that her family is dysfunctional, and blames her mother. Although he talks about the "social construction of feminine identity" and the "culturally constructed differences between boys and girls" (164) the reading of Elaine's victimisation *as a result of patriarchal constructions* has entirely eluded him. Perhaps this is because he reads from a male perspective that does not fully comprehend the consequences of patriarchy, especially for little girls.

Other male critics read Atwood with a similar incomprehension of feminine issues. Bruce King, for instance, glosses over the significance of the protagonist's eventual remembering of the abortion in *Surfacing*, and has missed completely the role of

[1] Detweiler, Robert and Doty, William G (eds): *The Daemonic Imagination:Biblical Text and Secular Story*. Scholars Press. Atlanta. 1990. ix.
[2] Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Castro, Jan Garden: *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Southern Illinois University. Carbondale. 1988. 216.
[3] Atwood speaks about this attitude in a video interview with Hermione Lee. *Margaret Atwood.. Writers Talk.. Ideas of our time.* From the series Writers in Conversation The Roland Collection. Northbrook. Illinois.
[4] Bouson, J Brooks: *Brutal Choreographies*. University of Massachusetts. Amherst. 1993. 164.

patriarchy in her "madness". He describes her characterisation of David as "grotesque". This indicates his lack of empathy with the protagonist and with the preoccupations of *Surfacing*.[5]

Keith Garebian cannot accept that the *Surfacing* protagonist has been victimised. His interpretation is that "As a woman she feels biologically handicapped in a man's world ... such an outlook on life tempers her romantic escapes into art and fantasy ... her morbidity is intensified by self-pity and self-remorse ... The heroine is obsessed by the scapegoat archetype which, of course, has a connection with her victim complex ... [and thus] her own neuroses and phobias [lock] her into a preoccupation with the victim motif".[6] In his reading Garebian reinforces everything that Atwood is interrogating in patriarchal constructions.

My own original response to *Cat's Eye* in particular was strongly influenced by what Bouson describes as "a formidable mass of accumulated detail ... the narrative's remarkable specificity ... an atticful of memorabilia"[7]. Atwood skilfully builds into the text the small details that evoke the era in which Elaine grew up. Some of the details are very era-specific and would thus not be recognised by people of a later era. However, it is not only in the specifics of her own period that Atwood is so particular. *Alias Grace*, set more than a century ago, abounds in details of dress, behaviour and household management of the period. If Atwood's bibliography for *Alias Grace* is anything to go by, her research has been thorough and painstaking, ranging from Canadian quilting and Victorian household management to medical and psychiatric trends of the time.

The most important aspect of all the specificities, however, is that they are so visual. It is the visual in Atwood that makes her writing compelling and vivid. She creates word pictures which the reader cannot fail to recreate in her own mind as graphic

[5] King, Bruce: "Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*". *Jnl of Commonwealth Literature*. 12:1. 1977. 23- 32
[6] Garebian Keith: "*Surfacing*: Apocalyptic Ghost Story". *Mosaic*. 9:2.1976. 1-9.
[7] Bouson, J Brooks: *Brutal Choreographies*. University of Massachusetts. Amherst. 1993. 160.

images. The visual is also significant in another way, however. For Atwood art in one or another of its manifestations is the means through which many of her protagonists attain their selfhood and break free from the victimised lives that are inevitable in a patriarchally constructed society.

For example, the visual in *Surfacing*, the dramatic pictographs, are the key for the protagonist in her breaking free of patriarchy and her quest for her selfhood. In *Cat's Eye* the protagonist's paintings are not the only visual aspects of the novel. The cat's eye marble, the recurring red hearts and the various depictions of the Virgin Mary are all vivid pivotal images in the unfolding of the novel. When we come to *Alias Grace* the quilting patterns and the quilts themselves are a visual depiction of Grace's story, or stories, an integral part of Atwood's scheme for the novel.

Atwood agrees that she is a very "visual" writer, and in many interviews she mentions the fact that, if she had not been a writer, she would have been an artist. In the video interview with Hermione Lee[8] she says that she designed and made posters when she was a student, and that she is very involved in the creation of the dust jackets for her novels. Sharon S Wilson in *Sexual Politics in Atwood's Art*[9] gives us some revealing insights into the close relationship between Atwood's art and her poetry, also giving details of how Atwood has been involved in the design of dustjackets for the original editions of many of her books. In South Africa we are never privileged to see these original editions with their Atwoodian dust jackets and so are deprived of the combined visual and literary impact of Atwood's talent. Some of Atwood's paintings are reproduced in this same article by Sharon S Wilson.[10] Her art work has been deposited with the University of Toronto.

In her interview with Hermione Lee Atwood says that she painted the dust jacket for the original version of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a study in stark black and

[8] *Margaret Atwood. Writers Talk. Ideas of our time.* From the series *Writers in Conversation* The Roland Collection. Northbrook. Illinois.
[9] van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. South Illinois University Press. 1988. 206.
[10] van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. South Illinois University Press. 1988. 206-207.

white, but the publishers changed it and added some red — in her opinion, not an improvement. This reminds one of the illustrator in *Surfacing* whose editor left out frightening stories, such as the "*loup garou*" story, from his version of *Quebec Folk Tales*, and was prescriptive about the sort of illustrations that he wanted. All of this was in the interests of financial profits and indicated a crass disregard for literary and artistic integrity.

The first of Atwood's novels which I have chosen to discuss is *Surfacing*.

Although *Surfacing* was not the first of Atwood's novels to be published, it was the first to be written. Nearly thirty years later the scope and profundity of the novel are still astonishing. It is a novel in which the ground is constantly shifting so that the reader has to be actively involved in the unravelling of the protagonist's journeys into the past and into her own psyche.

The issue at the crux of the novel is the role of patriarchy in the destruction of human beings, literally in the case of the aborted foetus, and emotionally in the case of the young woman protagonist. Patriarchy is at the root of much that is destructive and victimising in society. The extinction of the indigenous people of much of Canada is symbolised in the submersion of the spiritually-based rock paintings, obliterated in the interests of enlarging the lake for the logging industry. The other local people, those who had come in a century or more earlier as immigrants from France, seeking a better life cultivating the land, have also become complicit in the rape of the land. Their co-option starts first with the logging, escalates with the development of the hydro-electric scheme, and finally involves them in the servicing of American tourists from the south. Paul is a symbol of the past, still growing his own vegetables and living close to the land and the lake.

Even the father in the story, bringing his children up in the wilds, out of the

context of the modern world and its selfish ways, has unwittingly and inadvertently set his daughter up for victimisation, in that her subsequent adaptation to an artificial urban life is made more difficult. Her desire to establish her identity in the past is frustrated by the death of her parents, but she re-invents herself after deliberately obliterating her past in the destruction of the cabin. She even destroys her father's old survival guides, as these are no longer of use to her, and she has to transgressively create a means of survival that is her own.

I have looked at *Surfacing* as a classic quest tale, bearing in mind the fact that Margaret Atwood delights in fairy tales and often uses fairy tale elements in her writing. She is also a great exponent of modern gothic, and some of the gothic elements of fairy tales are particularly emphasised in this novel.

She has not only drawn on traditional western fairy tales, but has delved into the not so familiar world of the traditions of the Canadian first people, the Indians, as they were known at the time of the writing of this novel. The natural outcome of exploring these traditions is a journey into the world of spirits and into the phenomenon of alternative healing by means of shamanism and altered states of consciousness.

I have not had access to material dealing with the Canadian first people and their healing rituals, but have found that it is widely accepted that, because all shamanism is based on altered states of consciousness, the research done in South Africa into these phenomena, by David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson,[11] has a worldwide application. This is the premise from which I have worked and it is spelled out more fully in Chapter Two.

Bruno Bettelheim[12] has been my guide into the realm of the fairy tale and its

[11] Lewis-Williams and Dowson are acknowledged as authorities in the interpretation of South African Bushman art, as set out in Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas: *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art*. Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989.
[12] Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Thames. London.1976.

therapeutic potential for children and adults. He believes that fairy tales are part of humankind's age-old heritage of deep insights into life and how to live it. He believes that they teach children and adults how to grapple with life's vicissitudes, to risk themselves and to live life to the full.

Surfacing was a phenomenon of its time, a word spoken at the right time for the burgeoning feminist movement, especially on the North American continent. An astonishing amount was written about it at the time and it continued to generate debate in literary journals for more than a decade. Many feminists of various persuasions arrogated Atwood and her novel to their particuar causes, but two of the critics whose work in this area I have found helpful are Sherrill E Grace[13] and Elizabeth R Baer.[14] Their ideas, though original and fresh, are always based on close reading of the text.

The next novel I discuss is *Cat's Eye*, published sixteen years after *Surfacing*. For me this novel contains so many echoes of *Surfacing* that it conveys the sense that a more mature older woman has come to the same subject with a wealth of experience with which to illuminate it.

Bildungsroman is the genre for both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*. Through the author's use of the concept of time, however, they are both set in a shifting, unstable world and can both be described as postmodern. Both novels also belong in that most elusive of categories, the fictional autobiography. Atwood is often vehement in her denial that what she writes is autobiographical. But in direct contradiction of her disclaimer, she uses and re-uses images, events, and experiences which are part of her own life, making it difficult for the reader to disentangle reality from fiction. It is true that most writing is autobiographical in essence, as one writes

[13] Grace, Sherrill E: "In Search of Demeter: The Lost, Silent Mother in *Surfacing*". Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* South Illinois University Press. 1988.
Grace, Sherrill E: "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I'". Nicholson, Colin (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity.* St Martins. New York. 1994.
Grace, Sherrill E: "Articulating the 'Space Between': Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings". Grace, Sherrill E and Weir, Lorraine (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System.* University of British Columbia. Vancouver. 1983.
[14] Baer, Elizabeth R: "Pilgrimage Inward: Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*". Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan, eds: *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* South Illinois University Press. 1988.

best about what one knows best. The fact that both these novels are written from the position of the first person narrator makes them seem very personal and immediate, and establishes a rapport between the reader and the main character from the start.

Every woman or girl has had experience of the manipulative playground bully, either personally or as a witness to the process in relation to another girl. The psychic violence and victimisation perpetrated by girls among themselves has its origins in the gendered roles that are acted out and reinforced even in the games they play. In *Cat's Eye* Atwood emphasises the role of patriarchy in the construction of gender stereotypes.

Elaine, the victim in this case, has a gift which she practises, develops and refines diligently, over many years, and uses to overcome her early innurement to the state of victimhood. But it is only as she grows older and discovers that bullies lurk in every part of one's life, and that they are all by-products of the legacy of patriarchy, that she develops a strategy of using her art subversively as a means of overcoming the stifling and destructive manifestations of patriarchy in her world.

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*[15] has served as a *vade mecum* in my unravelling of Elaine's journey from girlhood to adulthood in the constant fear of being looked at and found wanting. Berger shows that down the ages being looked at by male voyeurs has been the lot of women, but that in the world of art this indulgence reached its peak at the height of the era of oil painting. This was a time when rich merchants bought or commissioned paintings as a means of conspicuous consumption, a consumerist display of their wealth. The paintings depicted what the merchants owned or wished to own, and many of these paintings were of nude women. It is in reacting against this form of gender exploitation perpetrated in the name of art that Elaine discovers her own means of expression and trains herself in the medium through which she attains it.

[15] Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin. London. 1977.

The main positive icon in *Cat's Eye* is the figure of the Virgin Mary in its diverse manifestations. The Virgin and her development from the anaemic Virgins which Elaine experienced in Art History classes to the lion-headed Virgin with a lion cub on her lap and a gnawed bone at her feet, as painted by Elaine, epitomises Elaine's own development from victimhood to selfhood. Marina Warner's[16] entertaining but scholarly work on the cult of the Virgin Mary is a treasury of insights into the role of patriarchy in the repression of women and young girls through manipulation of this most "feminine" of all icons.

The Robber Bride, the third of the novels discussed in this thesis, is written from the point of view of the omniscient third person, with Atwood once again employing in her writing the shifts and changes of that most elusive category, the postmodernist genre, of which she is a masterly exponent.

As time was a major concept in *Cat's Eye*, so it is in this novel. The narrative constantly shifts from the present, exploring the pasts of the protagonists, and of their parents, and presenting the many lurid pasts of Zenia, the shape changer.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan[17] in her discussion on text-time in narrative, and Brian McHale[18] in his analysis of representation and *de*-presentation of text, and the significance to the reader of the erasures of highly-charged texts, have been enlightening and helpful in my reading of Zenia and her constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions of her self.

In *The Robber Bride* each of the protagonists has been a victim of war, one way or another, and within the time frame of the Gulf War, they wage a hidden but no less destructive war, the war of the sexes. The difficult part of this particular battle, however, is that it is against one of their own sex, Zenia, who has literally been sleeping with the enemy and has become the enemy. Zenia is a construction

[16] Warner, Marina: *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador. London. 1985.
[17] Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith: *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge. Londodn. 1994.
[18] McHale, Brian: *Postmodernist Fiction*. Methuen. NewYork. 1987.

of patriarchy, physically and psychically, and as such has become the all-devouring destructive witch of the *femme fatale* variety.

Once again Atwood takes us into the realm of magic and fairy tales as the reader finds that each of the other protagonists is equipped with her own brand of transgressive magic which makes her a witch in her own right, wielding anarchical power against Zenia and the patriarchal system that has constructed her. Here I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Shahrukh Husain[19] and her celebration of the witch in every woman in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Witches*.

Not much has been written about *The Robber Bride*, so that there has not been much criticism to guide or challenge my thinking on this novel. This lacuna has made me wonder about the reasons for it. It is obvious from the first page of both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye* that they are serious novels. But the postmodern gothic genre employed in *The Robber Bride*, including its move into the realm of popular culture, could lead critics to feeling ill at ease with its intentions. In this novel the seriousness of its moral and social purpose is disguised, as it seems to be nothing more than a "thriller".

Similarly *Alias Grace*, the fourth novel to be discussed in this thesis, has not engendered much critical writing. The two articles that did seem of interest are not accessible in South Africa, and some of what I have read indicates a complete lack of understanding of the novel and its clever use of postmodernist techniques of narration.

Alias Grace is based on a true story, the story of the real life Grace Marks, a servant girl in Toronto in the mid-nineteenth century, who was convicted of murder at the age of sixteen.

[19] Husain Shahrukh (ed): *The Virago Book of Witches*. Virago. London. 1993.

But there is no "true" story. No one except the people who were present during the murders knows what really happened. One of them, McDermott, was hanged for his alleged role in the murders, while the other, Grace Marks, claims complete amnesia concerning the events on the day of the murder.

What more suitable scenario could a writer find around which to construct a postmodernist novel in which each of the characters, historical and fictional, appropriates Grace's story and adapts it? The possibilities for various transformations of Grace, her story and the narrating characters themselves are endless. Atwood, with her usual transgressive skill, has made full use of the possibilities offered by such a configuration of narrative and historical possibilities.

Atwood has daringly used, as one of her means of retelling Grace's story, the interest that people at the time were showing in new theories of mental illness. At this time there was what Atwood describes as intense curiosity and excitement about phenomena such as memory and amnesia, somnambulism, trance states, and the significance of dreams. Psychology, in its various manifestations, was a growing field, and was, in the popular mind, associated with the craze for spiritualism, mesmerism and other similar phenomena practised by showmen as a form of entertainment.

Atwood has also taken what might seem to many people to have been an insignificant female domestic skill, that of patchworking, and shown the transgressive possibilities for women in using this skill which gains acceptance because it is "decorative" but which unnoticed enables their subversive interpretation.

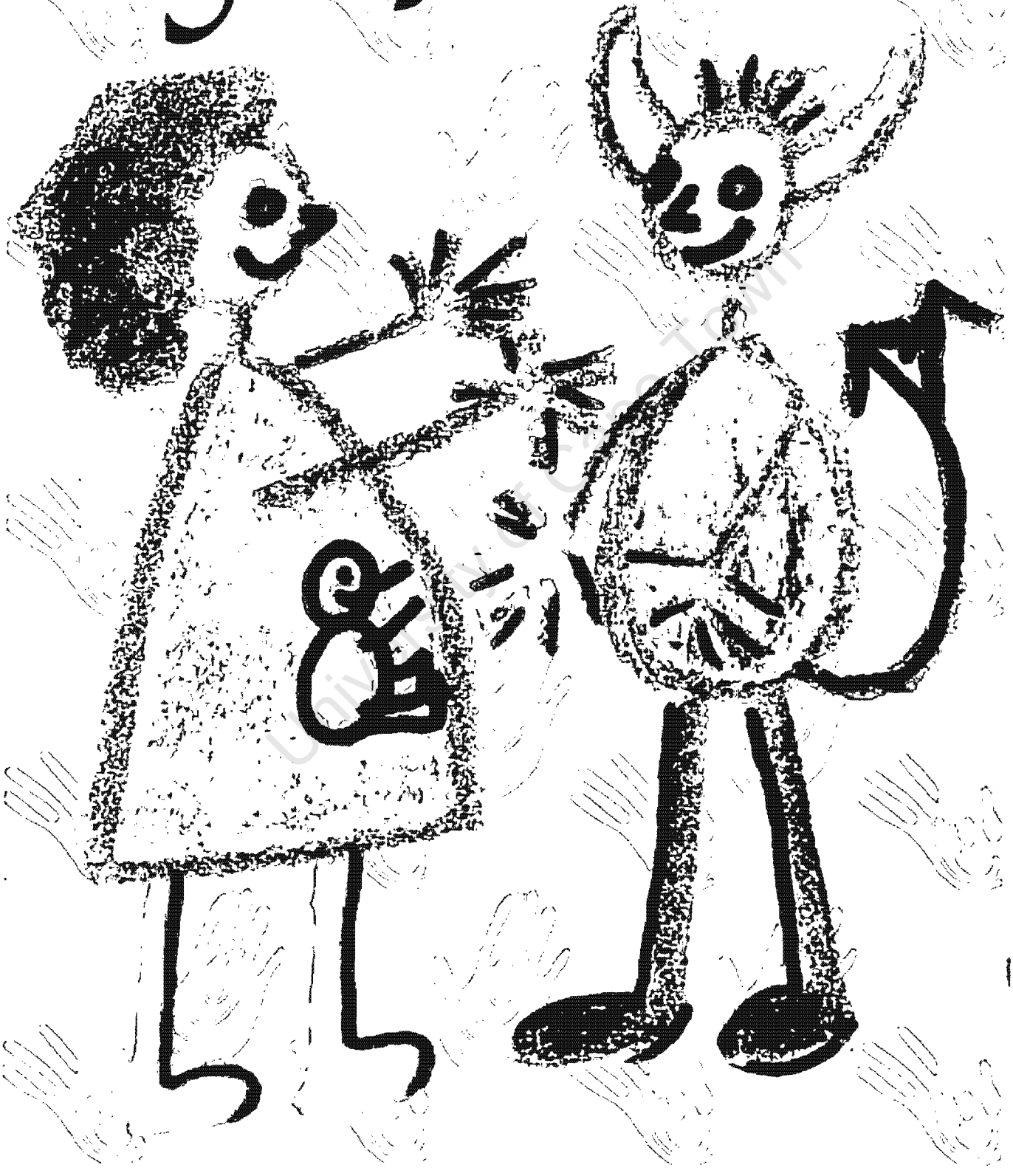
It is interesting to note that patchwork and textile art of various kinds have been adopted by serious artists in our own time and are being employed as a versatile form of challenging patriarchal stereotypes of women's roles, as well as reinforcing the way in which women can transform whatever it is they do into something creative and liberating.

The chronological range covered by this thesis starts with Atwood's first novel and ends with her most recent novel to date. My discussion of patriarchy as an overarching and constantly recurring preoccupation in Atwood's fiction thus takes into account her deployment of multiple genres.

Atwood's protagonists in these four novels are very different from the heroines of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, "sexually vulnerable female protagonists whose entire futures turn on ... a successful marriage".[20] They are also not heroines in the dictionary sense of the word, demi-goddesses or heroic women. Atwood's heroines are indeed subject to the powers of patriarchy, but they are, to misquote St Paul, not conformed to this world, but have effected multiple transformations of themselves in relation to the world of patriarchy.[21] Each of them stands up in her own transgressive strength, as does the heroine of *Surfacing*, and proclaims to the world, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (185).

[20] Hite, Molly: *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative.* Cornell University. Ithaca. 1989. 5.
[21] Romans 12:2. Authorised Version.

Surfacing



CHAPTER ONE

Surfacing

The Relevance of Ghosts, Fairy tales and Witches for *Surfacing*

Margaret Atwood, in an interview with Josie Campbell,[1] has described *Surfacing* as a ghost story: "For me the interesting thing about that book is the ghost in it, and that's what I like ... you can have the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off and that to me is the most interesting kind and that is obviously the tradition I'm working in".

But *Surfacing* is not only a ghost story. It is a gothic tale containing strong elements of fairy tales and myths of various kinds. The narrator is on a quest, the classic plot of such tales, but this quest draws on not only the tradition of western fairy tales but has links with the traditions of the First People of the area, as well as delving into the world of spirits as we explore altered states of consciousness and shamanism.

Bruno Bettelheim[2] says "Fairy tales are unique, not only as a form of literature, but as works of art which are fully comprehensible to the child, as no other form of art is".

The protagonist of the novel has been employed by a male editor, more interested in profits than in authenticity, to illustrate a book of *Quebec Fairy Tales*, but she finds herself unable to depict the stylised giants and fairies that he requires of her. He has appropriated the tales to his own ends, commodifying them, making them incomprehensible not only to his illustrator but to the children for whom they should be vehicles of pleasure and enlightenment. One of the illustrations with which she is

[1] Campbell, Josie P: "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*". *Mosaic* 11:3 (1978). University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, 1978. 17-28.
[2] Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of fairy tales*, Thames, London, 1978. 12.

struggling is that of a phoenix rising from the ashes. Here her inability to depict this in a drawing possibly not only reflects her conflict with her editor, but seems symptomatic of her own inability to rise above her personal circumstances.

The quest on which the protagonist has embarked has a threefold purpose. Her obvious and stated search is for her missing father, but she is also searching for her dead mother from whom she had become alienated, and for herself and her missing past. Towards the end of the novel she has a vision of her dead mother which enables her to come to terms with her death. She has always regarded her mother as having a particular affinity with nature and wild creatures[3]. In the vision, she sees her in a familiar pose from the past, feeding the wild jays, "one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (176). The birds fly away and the mother disappears, leaving the daughter looking up at the jays, "trying to see her, trying to see which one she is" (176). Elizabeth R Baer[4] suggests that the mother is, in fact, a kind of phoenix. The protagonist, unable to get the image of the princess (herself) and the phoenix right in her illustration, is able in looking up at the jays to "acknowledge her mother's and her own transformation".

The protagonist feels that a "*loup-garou*" story is essential in a book of the *Quebec Folk Tales,* but the editor, afraid that parents might not buy a book containing such a frightening story, has not included this genre. In writing her own story, however, the protagonist, using her wits as the heroine of any good fairy tale would, undermines and subverts the manipulative intentions of the editor. That *Surfacing* itself "is the *loup-garou* story the narrator feels is missing from her anthology", is a suggestion made by Baer[5] in the same article. For Baer the narrator comes to identify her father

[3] Sue Thomas in her article "Mythic Reconception and the Mother/Daughter Relationship in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing"* (75) reminds us that birds are "Christian emblems of humility and grace", characteristics which, to my mind, the daughter would most certainly ascribe to her mother

[4] Baer, Elizabeth R: "Pilgrimage Inward: Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*". Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan, eds: *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* South Illinois University Press. 1988. 176

[5] Baer, Elizabeth R: "Pilgrimage Inward: Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing.*" Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan, eds.: *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* South Illinois University Press. 1988. 25.

with the vision of a wolf that she experiences, a vision which helps her to come to terms with her father's death.

In her portrayal of the protagonist as vehemently defending the credentials of the fairy tale genre Atwood may be reacting to a trend in educational and childrearing circles during the middle years of the twentieth century, a tendency to condemn fairy tales and myths such as Bible stories, as unsuitable for children. In an education system based on a theory of experience-based learning, in which moving "from the known to the unknown" in the child's experience was the rule, tales like these were anathema. They were regarded by certain educationists as far beyond the comprehension of young children and therefore not only educationally unsound, but harmful to the developing child.

A personal observation by this writer is that my own children, who were born in the 1960s, had their early upbringing under this philosophy. But as soon as they could read for themselves they devoured fairy tales, and myths and legends of all kinds, from African to Scandinavian. My son, a professional man in his thirties, still loves fantasy tales.

This proscriptive and negative attitude towards fairy tales is in direct contrast to Bettelheim[6] when he says that the use of fairy tales and magic is to help the child, (or, for that matter, the adult protagonist of this novel) to work out its own problems at its own level:

> "Fairy tales ... direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity

[6] Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of fairy tales.* Thames. London. 1978. 24, 25, 26.

— but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search, benevolent powers will come to his aid, and he will succeed. The stories also warn that those who are too timorous and narrow-minded to risk themselves in finding themselves must settle down to a humdrum existence — if an even worse fate does not befall them".

He explains that "in a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events". Bettelheim tells how "in traditional Hindu medicine a fairy tale giving form to his particular problem was offered to a psychically disorientated person" so that "the patient could discover not only a way out of his distress but also a way to find himself, as the hero of the story did". He points out the close connection between fairy tales and myths, including the religious myths of any society, and claims that "these tales are the purveyors of deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence, a heritage that is not revealed in any other form as simply and directly, or as accessibly... ".

Clarissa Pinkola Estes[7] suggests that many fairy tales begin with a dying mother giving her daughter a gift. Estes identifies this gift of the dying mother as intuition to see the daughter through her initiation into the world. Estes retells the story of Vasalisa, which she describes as "a story of handing down the blessing of woman's power of intuition from mother to daughter ... [the power of] inner seeing, inner hearing, inner sensing , and inner knowing". "The initiatory process begins when the dear and good mother dies ... The psychic tasks of this stage in a woman's life are [those of] ... [t]aking on the task of being on one's own, developing one's own

[7]Estés, Clarissa Pinkola: *Women who Run with the Wolves*: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman, Rider, London, 1992. 80,81.

consciousness ... [b]ecoming alert by oneself ... [l]etting die what must die. As the too-good mother dies, the new woman is born". Vasalisa is given a small doll by her dying mother and told to keep her a secret, to nurture her and to consult her in times of trouble. When, inevitably, the cruel stepmother and stepsisters set Vasalisa a series of impossible tasks, hoping to rid themselves of her, it is the doll in the pocket of her apron that comes to her rescue. As her guide in successfully completing these tasks, the doll embodies her own new-found sense of being a person in her own right.

In *Surfacing* the mother is already dead but the daughter knows that she has left her a token, (the drawings which she eventually discovers), to help her find her way. In *Cat's Eye* the dying mother enables Elaine to find the cat's eye marble stored in the old trunk, and in which she is able to "see [her] life entire" (398). None of the mothers in *The Robber Bride* has left the three friends this vital gift and so it is to Zenia, who seems to offer them what they lack, that each of them turns. Grace inherits her mother's cups and teapot, and the three sheets, more by default than as a gift. The crockery breaks and the sheets disappear, but it is from broken pieces that Grace gradually comes to piece together her quilt, her own story.

Sherrill E Grace[8] identifies the mother and daughter of *Surfacing* as Demeter and Persephone, pointing out that the figure of Persephone has been of interest to Atwood even in her early work, such as in *Double Persephone*, published in 1961. Grace sees the roles of mother and daughter reversed, the daughter seeking the lost mother in this case, and perceives this female quest as "'muted' within a 'dominant'[male] discourse, a daughter's search for her mother/self within the wilderness quest for a father".

[8] Grace, Sherrill E: *In Search of Demeter: The Lost, Silent Mother in Surfacing* in *Van Spanckeren et al.: Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms.* South Illinois University Press. 1988. 43.

This is an interesting point of view, but for me the quest does not fall into "dominant" and "muted" categories. I read the novel as essentially a quest for a lost self, within the framework of a search for lost parents whom the protagonist herself had alienated. The three dislocations, from self, from father and from mother, are all part of the same problem, the problem of the protagonist's denial of the abortion, the real dislocation that has affected all her relationships.

Mention of Demeter, or Ceres, the Mother Goddess, leads naturally to her counterpart whose presence sometimes dominates fairy tales — the witch. The Jungian analyst, Marie-Louise von Franz[9], believes that "In fairytales which, in the main, are under the influence of Christian civilization, the archetype of the Great Mother, like all others is split into two aspects". If the Virgin Mary represents only the positive, the good, the valued aspects of the mother image, all the negative, evil and destructive aspects became projected onto Eve and all her sex. Thus all women became stigmatised as being inherently evil, an assumption which would lead male society inevitably to the creation of the concept of the destructive and evil witch.

What were these women who were designated destructive witches but women who dared to flout the conventions of patriarchal society, who were creatively transgressive, thus subverting the patriarchal status quo.

And who is more transgressive in her writing about women creating their own space in society than Atwood? She celebrates a transgressiveness that is liberating and positive for women as she writes about the kinds of women whom Shahrukh Husain[10] describes in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Witches* as the wise women:

> The incidental helpers, ... the canny guides, the riddlers, the healers and the givers of gifts ... They represent the essence of the feminine mind, teaching us

[9] Franz, Marie-Louise, in Husain, Shahrukh (ed): *The Virago Book of Witches*, Virago Press, London. 1993. xviii.
[10] Husain, Shahrukh: (ed): *The Virago Book of Witches*, Virago Press, London, 1993. xv.

> their ancient wisdom, their wiles and their guiles and the truth that every woman must learn about her own magic. All witches possess formidable magic and this, from the beginning, has caused them to be driven out of society, cloaking them in the unalienable garb of Otherness.

It is Otherness, in its many manifestations, that is grist to Atwood's creative mill at all times.

And so in *Surfacing* the protagonist uses the wisdom or guile available to her sex to achieve her transformation, helped by her "canny guide" (her unconventional mother) and the legacy of feminine wisdom that she has bequeathed her.

Steeped as she is in fairy tales and myths Atwood knows and not only uses witch stories, but draws on that other powerful symbol of femaleness often associated with witches, the moon. Husain[11] points out that the moon represents three facets of female existence — virginity, reproduction and death, and is closely linked with female sexuality, with "menstruation, tides, seasonal cycles and darkness". The crescent moon represents the virgin, wilful and vital, the full moon is the mother, full and fecund, while the waning moon is like the old woman, intimate with death and guarding its secrets. Thus it is that in *Surfacing*, when the protagonist of the novel wishes to draw her lover into an act of procreation, by which she hopes to restore the life within her that had been destroyed in the abortion, she does this under the moon, the goddess of fecundity.

Another female archetype called to mind in the quest for selfhood in this novel is the Lady of Shallott. The Lady of Shallott is the archetype of female passivity and separation, locked up in her tower and forbidden to see the world outside, except as reflected in her mirror. But at last the Lady rebels against the strictures of her

[11] Husain, Shahrukh: (ed): *The Virago Book of Witches*, Virago Press, London, 1993. xix.

confining proscribed world of victimisation, and dares to look at a real knight passing beneath her window. The mirror cracks and she exchanges her imposed world for a watery grave as she lies in her barge and floats out into the wide world. Atwood subverts this tale of female passivity. For the Lady of Shallott this escaping meant death, but for the narrator of this novel part of her escape from her past is attained as she lies in the bottom of her barge, her canoe, and becomes one with nature, but with nature that is regenerating itself all the time. Atwood replaces passivity with active agency in her protagonist.

Bettelheim[12] says that in fairy tales "[t]he forest ... symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be". Often this discovery is helped along by the agency of certain animals in the forest. How the heroine relates to these animals, whether kindly or contemptuously, will influence the outcome of her quest. The protagonist of *Surfacing* has been horrified by the wanton destruction of the heron, but she also marvels at the herons who have rebuilt their colony on the tip of a submerged hill in the lake, epitomising the will to survive. She develops an aversion to catching fish, even for food, and releases the frog that she has captured for bait. Often in fairy tales the animal helpers in the forest will come from the three elements of earth, water and air, such as in *The Queen Bee* illustration used by Bettelheim.[13].

So the protagonist of *Surfacing* leaves behind the cabin which signifies safety and her links with her happy childhood, and enters the forest to become one with nature — "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning" (175). Here she comes to identify herself and her parents with creatures of the forest from the three elements; the frog, the

[12] Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of fairy tales.* Thames. London. 1978. 93.
[13] Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of fairy tales.* Thames. London. 1978. 78.

wolf and the jays, what Margaret Laurence[14] describes as a "return to the sources of life".

But it is Atwood who has the last word on the significance of fairy tales. "I would say that *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was the most influential book I ever read", she tells Linda Sandler[15] in an interview. To Catherine Sheldrik Ross and Cory Bieman Davies[16] she explains that she had read *Grimm's Fairy Tales* very early —

> the unexpurgated complete version which my parents bought by mistake, not realizing that it was full of people being put into barrels of nails and rolled down the hill into the sea. ... I found it quite fascinating ... I have only the vaguest memories of Dick, Jane, Spot, and Puff. I know we had them at school, but they didn't leave much of an impression.

In another interview, with Joyce Carol Oates,[17] she talks about the transformations in these tales, and the fact that "the heroines of these stories show considerable wit and resourcefulness and usually win, not just by being pretty virtuous, but by using their brains. And there are wicked wizards as well as wicked witches". She also says that she believes that the fact that "the princess will be rescued, and the prince will be restored to his right mind ... is very reassuring for kids" so that they have "a foundation of happy endings in childhood" (156) to help them deal with anxieties in later life. Her real reason for finding fairy tales so fascinating is "not the gore ... but the transformations".

Atwood, however, does not limit her exploration of transformations to the genre of

[14] Laurence, Margaret: "Review of *Surfacing*". McCombs, Judith (ed): *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood.* Hall & Co. Boston. 1988. 46.
[15] Sandler, Linda: "A Question of Metamorphosis". Ingersoll, Earl G (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Conversations.* Virago Press. London. 1992. 46.
[16] Ross, Catherine Sheldrik and Davies, Cory Bieman: "More Room to Play". Ingersoll, Earl G, (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Conversations.* Virago Press. London. 1992. 152-153.
[17] Oates, Joyce Carol: "My Mother Would Rather Skate Than Scrub Floors". Ingersoll, Earl G (ed),: *Margaret Atwood: Conversations.* Virago Press. London. 1992. 71, 156.

western fairy tales. Another mystical and decidedly gothic realm into which she ventures in *Surfacing* is that of the First People of Canada and their religious beliefs, including their shamanistic rituals of healing and transformation. The drawing of the therianthropic God, (half man and half animal) which the protagonist's father left for her to find, leads her into this realm. This drawing is a tracing of one of the rock paintings found by her father. These rock paintings, in turn, are reminiscent of the rock paintings done by South African Bushmen,[18] paintings which relate to their shamanistic trance dances, the healing medium for the ills of the community.

David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson,[19] in *Images of Power,* point out that the healing trance rituals of communities throughout the world follow similar patterns and stages, as the shamans enter altered states of consciousness. In some communities the trance is induced by hallucinogens, while in others this state is brought on by means of sensory deprivation such as hunger, by pain, rhythmic movement or sound, or hyperventilation. Laboratory tests done by Ronald Siegel in the course of neuropsychological research into altered states of consciousness indicate that the stages experienced by volunteers using hallucinogens, such as LSD, produce the same sort of effects as those experienced in shamanistic trances, and that these effects are universally similar.

According to Lewis-Williams and Dowson "[a]nother metaphor for trance is 'underwater' ... Numerous accounts of trance experience show that the Bushmen link trance with being underwater".[20] In the light of the title of this novel, *Surfacing*, and the significant role that immersion in water plays in the protagonist's quest for

[18] Finding the politically correct word with which to designate certain groups of people can be like negotiating a minefield, not least with respect to the Bushmen. The integrity and authority of Lewis-Williams and Dowson on a matter such as this can hardly be doubted, thus, for my use of the name Bushmen, I cite as my textual authority Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas: *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art*. Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989

[19] Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas: *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art*. Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989. 60.

[20] Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas: *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art*. Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989. 54.

selfhood and healing, this observation is very significant.

Quest, Self-Identity and Transformation in *Surfacing*

The assumptions about any quest, then, are that some kind of dislocation has taken place in the life of the protagonist, and thus restoration or transformation are the desired outcomes of the quest.

From the first page of *Surfacing* we are aware of major dislocations in the life of the protagonist, who is also the narrator. We see dislocation of the narrator from herself, her lover, her friends and her parents, as she sets out on her journey, a journey literally and figuratively towards restoration and healing; towards transformation, as she slowly uncovers the cause of her alienation in the past that she has buried.

Symbolically, she experiences dislocation in many facets of her life as the story unfolds.

She experiences dislocations of time and place in her journey to her childhood cabin, where her quest must start, and in her relationships with the friends who accompany her. An inability to communicate, experienced by all the characters, exacerbates the dislocation.

The narrator's journey to the cabin is filled with a confusing mixture of memories from the past and images which dramatise her separation from the past. The car in which they are travelling, David's car, is a lumbering relic with its fins and chrome strips, an anachronism. Another anachronism is the fact that she is in the wrong car with the wrong people on this familiar and often-travelled road. She does not know the way any more, as the new road crosses and recrosses the old road, bringing echoes of past journeys. She remembers the inevitable car sickness brought on by

her father's fast driving, and her belief that to get to this place she always had to suffer, but she cannot evoke the nostalgia of those journeys.

Although the Surfacer knows that she is on home ground, having spent her summers here as a child, she nevertheless also feels that she is in foreign territory, in a French-speaking province where the language and customs of the people are so different from her own: border country. Although she can speak some French, the French she knows is a foreign language here, schoolroom French, the language of the classics, and she is embarrassed when she attempts to use it. She recalls her parents' visits to Paul and Madame when she was a child, how the men had the common language of gardening with which to communicate, while her mother and Madame had to endure the ordeal of filling an afternoon with their limited knowledge of each other's language. She also recalls that her mother was considered peculiar in the community, not only because of her unorthodox behaviour and her lack of religion, but because her family was, "by reputation, peculiar as well as *anglais*" (14).

Fairy tales frequently figure severed heads and dismembered bodies, and Atwood often uses images of dismemberment and fragmentation to indicate dislocation. Here the narrator is preoccupied with broken things and missing body parts.[21] She recalls what Anna once said about her hands (reading palms is Anna's little bit of magic, her party trick). Anna raised the question of a missing factor in her life by pointing out that some of her lines were double, possibly indicating a twin, and pointed out a funny break in the lines after a happy childhood. This is our first indication that there is a part of her life which the narrator has buried and does not wish to face. Back in her childhood milieu, the narrator remembers the woman who used to run the shop, a woman who had only one hand. As children they were forbidden the penny candies which she sold, "inaccessible in their glass reliquary" (21), and these somehow

[21] Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, is also preoccupied with broken things and missing body parts. This is dealt with in Chapter Two.

became associated with the missing hand and imbued it with a sense of the miraculous, like the "cut off pieces of early martyrs" (21) and other horrors remembered from art history.

After her first unsuccessful attempt to find the rock paintings, the narrator wakes in the night with the sense that her hand is beside her, not part of her, and that it has "the cured hide smell of wood-smoke mingled with sweat and earth, fish lingering, smell of the past" (119). A smell that needs to be scrubbed out of it. However, once she has discovered the picture that she identifies as her mother's gift to her, and begins to formulate in her mind what she needs to do to effect her healing, she unclenches her fist, "releasing, it becomes a hand again, palm a network of trails, lifeline, past present and future, the break in it closing together as I purse my fingers" (153).

One of the drawings left by her father, (which she later realises are copies of rock drawings,) is of a stiff childlike figure minus face, hands and feet. In the same collection are many drawings of hands. Handprints are a worldwide phenomenon in rock art, and many meanings have been attributed to these handprints. David Lewis-Williams[22] believes that among Bushman shamans potency was associated with the hands, cures being effected by the laying-on of hands which drew sickness out of the patient into their own bodies. Thus hands are associated with potency and healing and would be an important element in Bushman shamanism and rock art. Of course one can mention here the importance of the laying-on of hands in Christian ritual, especially in connection with healing and the endowing of power or special gifts, as in the rituals of confirmation and ordination.

Another body part that worries the narrator is the head. The separation of her head

[22] Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas: *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art.* Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989. 108.

from the rest of her body, that is, of head from heart, is what the narrator has succeeded in achieving by erasing the memory of her pain. She constantly draws attention to this dichotomy, and feels she needs to identify with creatures such as frogs and fish which have no neck and whose heads are not merely attached but are part of their bodies. Being merely attached implies that the head could easily become detached, like that of the figure in the rock painting.

The narrator thinks of Anna's head as being separate from her body, the face being painted on and the "neck dividing body colour from applied face colour" (99). Anna's artificial face has become her natural one. This impression is reinforced when Anna forgets to take her make-up on their little safari into the wilds and is panic-stricken because David will not forgive this omission and will withhold his love. She thinks of Anna's face as imprisoned in the mirror of her powder compact and later wishes she had destroyed the compact, realising that it is in the gold compact that Anna's soul is trapped.

As a child brought up in the wilds she had no idea what money was and found coins a curiosity, with leaves on one side and a man's head chopped off at the neck on the other. She remembers how, when she and her brother collected berries for her mother as children, they were rewarded with a cent a cup. She sometimes thinks that Joe looks like the buffalo on the United States nickel coin, shaggy, once dominant but now extinct. Her former lover is also described in terms of a head on a coin — as having a noble profile like that on a Roman coin, but his motives and actions turned out to be far from noble.

Sometimes the narrator feels as if she has come apart completely, like the circus woman sawn in half, only in her case there had been an accident and she had come apart. "The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal" (102), like the severed thumb trick that children used to play at school; numb. When the narrator finds the childhood scrapbooks she

is disappointed to find hers pasted with figures cut out of magazines, women's dresses from mail order catalogues, with no bodies in them — empty women as she feels she has become, mere products of consumerism.[23]

She is alienated by the need of some people, like those she identifies as the Americans, to kill for the sake of killing, and thinks of "horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies" (111). She has to cut off the head and tail of the fish they have caught, a task that someone else had always performed for her before, but later she cannot bear the thought of taking the life of a fish even for food. She burns the bones on the fire and buries the innards in the garden where they become fertilizer, part of the earth and the natural scheme of things, restoring the balance of the cycle of nature.

It is mainly from the people in her life that the narrator has become disconnected. Because of the awful thing in her past, she has cut her parents out of her life, feeling that they will not comprehend her way of life. Unlike Paul they do not have their clan surrounding them in their later years. She convinces herself that her father has opted for solitude, and that her mother would not allow her close to her, even when she was dying. After her mother's death she had searched for a message in her diary, but had found it to be only a garden diary, containing no mention of her daughter.

Similarly her friends do not have very much in common with her. She says that Anna is her best woman friend, but she has known her for only two months. She and her lover, Joe, find it increasingly difficult to communicate with each other, and she remembers that the thing that attracted Joe to her in the first place was her apparent lack of emotion after the first time they made love. The truth was that she had indeed felt nothing, was emotionless.

[23] Consumerism, as it is imposed on females, even when they are little girls, is discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Elaine. In *Cat's Eye* Elaine rebels also against the overtones of consumerism in the oil paintings which she has to study at art school.

Futility and fragmentation seem to be the main features of the lives of the four characters.

Joe throws huge pots with great skill, a particularly difficult thing for a potter to achieve. He then proceeds to mutilate them, putting great holes in them, making them totally useless, a denial of his talent and ability to relate to the rest of the world.

The narrator, having been told by her art teacher and former lover that there have never been any great female artists, becomes a commercial artist on his advice. She finds herself illustrating books, in a world in which she feels alien. She describes her career as being "strapped to [her] like an artificial limb" (46).

The aimless futility is epitomised in *Random Samples*, the film that David and Joe are making. They have no idea where the film is going or what it is about, and it consists of arbitrary pieces of irrelevant, incoherent footage. Most of the items that are filmed are examples of dislocation of one kind or another, such as the bottle house, made of empty bottles, which serves no purpose and is completely out of place in its setting.

In fairy tales the characters are sometimes rendered incapable of speech, thus making their quest more difficult. Sometimes this inability to communicate is brought about through enchantment, sometimes by a stricture upon the character not to speak or communicate, or, as in the case of someone like Cinderella, because of her lowly social status. The narrator of this novel is rendered incapable of communicating, not only because of the hidden thing lurking in her past which inhibits communication of any kind, but also because she has come to the point of distrusting words and speech of any kind.[24]

[24] In *Cat's Eye* Elaine is disempowered when Cordelia's cruel strategies deprive her of her voice and of her means of communication. Elaine's brother, Stephen, chooses to move away from "the imprecision of words".

We gradually come to the realisation, as does the narrator, that her reason for distrusting words and speech is the treachery perpetrated by her former lover. He had told her he loved her, while forcing her to kill the fruit of that love, the living being within her, his child. "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (41). For her the concept of love has become sullied, tainted with death, and the words of love have become not only meaningless but dangerous and treacherous. Thus her ability to communicate, especially with those whom she loves, has been destroyed. As she has been unable to relate to her parents since that dreadful event, so too she is unable to respond to the love of Joe.

The Surfacer's ideas about love have become warped to such an extent that she can convince herself that David and Anna have a good marriage, balancing each other like the wooden figures in the barometer house. She hears the banter between them and believes they are communicating with each other. But nothing could be further from the truth. David, ironically, teaches communication at night school and is very verbal, but his utterances are more often than not clichéd slogans that seem to express vehement emotions but are empty. She thinks of his inane banter as "a habit, like picking your nose, only verbal" (92). His remarks are often crude, sexist and cruel, and he controls Anna by means of oblique and cryptic remarks which she is left to interpret. He switches on the radio to silence her when she is singing. Anna sings unrelentingly, sentimental popular songs to cover up the lack of communication between them. She admits that her palm reading, her little bit of magic, is what she does at parties as a substitute for conversation.

When David tries to trap the narrator into having sex with him, she has to enter his realm of thinking to find the right vocabulary to convince him to leave her alone. When she finds the right words she is empowered and he is annihilated. As the power flows into her eyes she sees him as "an imposter, a pastiche" (146), beyond any help that she could give him.

Joe, on the other hand, communicates by means of non-verbal signals: "He feels me watching him and lets go of my hand. Then he takes his gum out, bundling it in the silver wrapper, and sticks it in the ashtray and crosses his arms. That means I'm not supposed to observe him; I face front" (2). Joe speaks very little, as if speech would commit him to emotional involvement. Feeling obliged to ask after her father,"'Any news?' Joe asks, in a neutral mumble that signals he'd prefer it if I kept from showing any reaction, no matter what has happened" (22). Joe has nightmares and talks in his sleep and the narrator wryly comments that he says more when he is asleep than he does when he is awake. But she envies him the ability to dream, that is, to have feelings at all, and wishes she could remember how.

Joe needs to talk to the narrator about their relationship, but "speech to him was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time" (71). Finally, when they are alone, he says "We should get married" (80). Although these are the words she had needed to hear from her former lover she responds to Joe as if this were a trap. Her ability to interpret feelings has become warped and she feels as if he is threatening her. Her responses to him come out "like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding, everything in order, a spool" (81). Joe becomes more silent and morose, and finally comes out with the vital question, "'Do you love me, that's all,' he said 'That's the only thing that matters'" (100).

Now it is not his inability to communicate that is the problem, but hers. She finds that this is a language which she is unable to use, ("it wasn't mine"), love is an "imprecise word" (100) and she tries to will herself into a response. She wants to be able to love him, but "I hunted through my *brain* for any emotion that would coincide with what I'd said" (100) (my emphasis). Words and feelings remain separated, thus feelings cannot be expressed.

The narrator remembers the constriction in her throat when, as a child, she

discovered on hearing a foreign language, that "people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing" (5). This fear returns as she re-enters the territory that holds the secrets of her past and meets Paul, her father's friend, again.

Another of the things about words and communication that had puzzled and impressed her as a child was that some words were clean and some were dirty. It had struck her that the worst words are about those things that you fear the most: for some it is religion, for some it is sex. And so, of course, the words that tell about her most frightful experience are so bad that she has banished them from her vocabulary and her memory. It gradually comes to her that language itself is a problem: "My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I want to be whole" (140).

She listens to the monosyllabic communication between David and Anna as they play solitaire, (choosing solitaire as the card game to play also indicates non-communication). Joe takes no part in the game and she observes "For him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words" (153). But Joe wants a word from her that she cannot give: "It's love, the ritual word, he wants to know again; but I can't give redemption, even as a lie. We both wait for my answer" (156).

In her growing distrust of language the Surfacer has abandoned her own name, moving closer to the plants and animals. Many readers find it irritating that the narrator of this novel has no name and that she has to be constantly referred to as "the narrator" or "the protagonist". But Margaret Laurence,[25] Marge Piercy,[26] and

[25] Laurence, Margaret: "Review of *Surfacing*". McCombs, Judith (ed): *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood.* Hall & Co. Boston. 1988.
[26] Piercy, Marge: "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood". McCombs, Judith, (ed): *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood.* Hall & Co. Boston. 1988.

Joan Larkin[27] all regard this as a natural outcome of the fact that the woman has lost her identity. Thus the fact that the protagonist has no name can be regarded as a deliberate choice and a central strategy of the author in the construction of this novel. Several times reference is made to Joe or one of the others calling her name, but she does not respond, and finally, when she has decided to remain on the island and work out her own redemption, she says "I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (162). It is only as she finds the truth about herself, as she rediscovers her true self, that she can begin to re-create her name and her self.

Out in the forest she finds she remembers the form and the uses of plants that her father had taught her, but their names have faded. Language has failed her here too, but animals do not need language, "animals learned what to eat without nouns" (144). As she proceeds with her purifying ritual, language becomes less and less important and she remembers hearing of a language that had "no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment. The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning ... I am a place" (175). When Joe returns with some people to search for her the language between these people as they search for her has become meaningless to her, "ululating, electronic signals ... hooo, hooo, ... they talk in numbers, the voice of reason" (179).

Later when she stays behind on the island she begins to face the truth about her feelings for her parents and her need for them to communicate with her. The process starts as she finds "I am crying finally, it's the first time, I watch myself doing it" (166), and when she calls out to them she admits to herself "the terror of hearing no answer" (166).

If, in the fairy tale, Vasalisa was given a doll as a symbol of her creative intuition, the

[27] Larkin, Joan: "Soul Survivor: *Surfacing* and *Power Politics*". McCombs, Judith (ed): *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood.* Hall & Co. Boston. 1988.

gift of creativity and communication given to the protagonist is her art. But she has lost this precious gift, too, in the devastating experience that has warped her whole existence. So serious is this loss that, although she and Joe are both artists and their art should be a common language between them, a special form of communication, it has failed them and become a destructive force instead.

In Joe's wanton destruction of his own art the narrator perversely finds "a kind of purity" (51), although Joe is convinced that she considers him a loser.

As an illustrator she is also a failure as an artist. "I can imitate anything" (47), she says. In her work she is never giving expression to her own ideas, but trying to interpret the ideas of others. She is further hamstrung by the editor who is more interested in sales than in imaginative art. The very fairy tales which Bettelheim sees as so necessary for the development of creative problem-solving in children have become the destructive means of gagging her even more effectively. The narrator cannot relate to these particular tales as art, and her own artistic integrity is compromised, thus making her incapable of interpreting them in her painting. She describes her work as a "caseful of alien words and failed pictures" (158). Perhaps it is the repeated compromising of her artistic talent by self-serving males that gives her a sneaking satisfaction at Joe's failure.

She remembers that even at school Art was a sterile subject for her. She was expected to do exactly what the other children were doing, thirty-five maple leaves, preserved in wax and strung along above the blackboard. But at home on rainy days, encouraged in their creativity by their mother, she and her brother would sit at the table and draw in their scrapbooks, "anything we liked" (47).

She believes that her parents must have left her some message, as parents do in fairy tales, and seeks first among her father's papers where she believes she has found nothing. Then, remembering her mother as the nurturer of creativity, she

searches for the scrapbooks and photo albums which she knew her mother had saved. However, on finding her early scrapbooks, she is shocked to discover the sort of thing that she had been drawing at that time: rabbits and Easter eggs (fertility symbols banished from her memory by her own unwilling abortion) and ladies with sausage roll hairstyles. Her brother's drawings are also disturbing: explosions, "soldiers dismembering in the air" (84), swastikas, scary comic book characters. She remembers the pornographic graffiti on the wall of the abandoned steamer cabin; "you draw on the wall what's important to you, what you are hunting" (114).

Although she expects to find the truth in these messages from her parents she is shocked and frightened when she later discovers her father's drawings of the hands and the horned creatures. She interprets these as the ravings of a madman and decides to abandon her search for her father.

She had hoped to find out when the change in her had occurred by looking through the photographs in her mother's album, but these also convey nothing to her as she sees herself growing bigger but remaining shut in behind the paper, looking like a finished product in the glossy prints of her in layered tulle formal dresses. But still there was a part of her missing, as emphasised by the last pages of the album, blank and incomplete.

A frequently-used symbol in fairytales is a key, sometimes a magic key, or a golden key, a lost key or a key that is taken on a quest and is the only means of discovering the treasure, or of unlocking the captive princess.

The key in this story has been hidden after the princess has been locked up. But the princess is the only one who can unlock the door behind which she has been incarcerated. Her immediate task is to find the key, and in her case the key to her dreadful self-destructive incarceration is the abortion she had undergone at the insistence of her former lover.

The truth about the abortion has been obliterated as a means of avoiding the pain, but as the story unfolds, hints and associations keep popping up and obtruding themselves on the narrator's consciousness. Anna's question about whether she had a twin finds an echo in her, related as it is to the broken line on her palm: "You had a good childhood but then there's this funny break" (2). To camouflage the truth she has invented a past for herself which is an inversion of reality: that she had been married and that having a child had been her husband's idea, that he had nurtured the unborn child in her at her expense, and that she had been the one who had abandoned the child without even having named it. Consequently she castigates herself with having committed the unpardonable sin. This sin is not that of having aborted the child, but of having abandoned it and her "husband". Thus she is trying to unlock the door with the wrong key.

She has never told Anna, or Joe, for that matter, about this imaginary baby. But now she becomes confused and thinks of the baby as having been taken away from her, "sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled" (42), an inkling of the truth beginning to surface in her thoughts. Other triggers impinge on her consciousness. She remembers, or thinks she remembers, her brother's near-drowning before she was born. She is sure that, as an unborn child, she had witnessed this event, "through the walls of [her] mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (26).

When the friends arrive on the island she remembers that "camouflage was one of my father's policies" (26). The cabin and other indications of human habitation are concealed, but she has remembered landmarks to guide her into "[her] territory" (25). In her personal life she has followed the same policy in obscuring the truth, and needs landmarks to guide her back to acknowledging the past. Her memories of her "wedding" are carefully constructed to camouflage what she was actually remembering, namely the abortion. The wedding was in a post office, before a

It is not only in fairy tales but also in mythology and in many of the world's religions that water is regarded as a redemptive element. And so it is that water becomes the redemptive element in the story at this stage, the first means of seeking redemption and transformation suggested to the protagonist by her newly-discovered intuition.

The island, surrounded by water, is a symbol of her isolation. She has isolated herself from the truth, and thus from reality. And it is into this isolating element that she has to plunge, both literally and figuratively, to find what she is seeking. The first recognisable step in this part of her quest is the fishing expedition. What happens on this expedition prefigures what will happen later on when she goes off alone in the canoe in search of her father.

The four characters paddle out in the canoe to fish. Opposite the cliff where, later, her father's map will indicate the rock paintings to be, they cast the line twice, using worms, but are unsuccessful. The narrator takes out the little frog which she had caught and put in a jam jar "as an emergency weapon" (58) and which she regards as the "ultimate solution" (58). She fastens it to the hook, the frog "goes down through the water like a man swimming" (58), an amphibious creature that can live in both the elements, air and water. Baiting the hook is not pleasant, and she remembers that in the past "other people always did that for me" (58). This suggests that there are going to be many things from now on which she has to do for herself as she starts taking responsibility for her own life.

The frog in the jam jar is like the foetus in the womb which (she believes) witnessed her brother's drowning. It is also like the confused memory she has of the baby being taken from her body: "they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (74).[29] Released from its jar the frog dives down, not realising its fate as fish

[29] Evelyn J Hinz and John J Teunissen point out that "the narrator's obsessions with the killing of fish and the characteristics of frogs consequently fall into place as symbolic respectively of the earliest stages of gestation and the amphibious nature of the foetus" . They refer the reader to a "primitive depiction of the foetus as a frog in the

bait, just as she is going to have to dive into her past, not knowing what she might find, in her search for her father and her search for her whole self. The frog dive, the third attempt to hook a fish, is successful, and in the same way she will have to dive into the lake several times before she will fulfil her quest for her own truth.

As the four return in the dusk there is a feeling of infinite space, the water like an "absence" between themselves and the island. They drift home as if suspended on air. "The canoe's reflection floats with us, the paddles twin in the lake" (61), symbolising the reflected double unknown world below, where the narrator will start to find the answers to her quest.

But the path of the princess on a quest never runs smoothly, and even those who should be assisting her sometimes seem to become a hindrance. The protagonist has decided to abandon the search for her father because she thinks his drawings indicate that he has become a raving madman. But her decision to leave the island as soon as possible is taken out of her hands, when her friends choose, without consulting her, to extend their stay on the island.

In the scheme of things this decision ends up having good consequences. She now sees that her conclusions about her father's insanity had been based on incomplete evidence, the strange pictures which she had misinterpreted. But now she has time to look more carefully for evidence about her father, in her own mind disguising her search as a search for his will and property title.

The first drawing, of a half-moon with four bulbed sticks coming out of it, when looked at the right way up, becomes a boat with people in it (the four of them fishing from the canoe?). The next drawing, of a creature like a snake or a fish, with four limbs, a tail and branched horns, looks like an animal when held lengthwise, but like

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belly of its mother" in a North Western American woodcarving of the "Sea Mother". *Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's "Nymph Complaining". Contemporary Literature*. 20. 1979. 227.

a human when held upright. The thin, soft paper, "like rice paper" (95), and the numbers in the corners of each sheet should have suggested to her that these were tracings. The prosaic truth is revealed as the next page she uncovers is a letter from an academic, acknowledging the tracings of rock paintings and the corresponding map, and including an academic hypothesis on the interpretation of the drawings.

"The secret had come clear, it had never been a secret, I'd made it one, that was easier. My eyes came open, I began to arrange" (97). Her father is not insane. But, she is now able to acknowledge, he must be dead, and therefore the nature of her search changes. It is as if it were a "puzzle he'd left for me to solve" (98). The map, marked by her father, suddenly reveals itself as a kind of treasure map. She has been unable to identify the places on the map because the English names have been translated into French, another problem of interpretation. Once she realises this and is able to read the map in the right language it becomes a treasure map for her. Significantly, the Indian names on the map remain the same, an indication that part of the solution to her quest is to be found in going back to the first people.

She proposes a second fishing expedition. For her it is a trip to find the rock painting. However she is unable to find it where the map indicates.

It dawns on her, on further investigation, that the drawings are indeed on the cliff face, but below the water. The area had been flooded years before to enlarge the lake, and it is under the water that she would be able to find the drawings.

She sets off for the third time, this time alone in the canoe. What she is doing, diving alone, is risky, but, recalling her childhood, "I thought I remembered how" (135). The cliff faces east and the morning sun is on it, casting her shadow on the water as she is poised to dive, — "My other self was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, ... rays streaming out from my head" (135). This harks back to the image, breathless with promise, of the boat and the paddles reflected in the water in the

evening light and symbolising the unknown world below. The image of the rays streaming from her hair recalls one of her father's rock tracings and prefigures Joe, with the moon behind his head, when the narrator later inveigles him into her orchestrated procreative act in the forest.

The first dive reveals nothing and she rises, "letting air out like a frog" (135), towards the canoe which hangs "split between water and air, mediator and liferaft" (135). After the third dive she comes up elated, believing she has seen something, and dives again. "Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, ... pinprick lights flicked and darted, ... It was wonderful that I was down so far, ... the fish ... swam like patterns on closed eyes,[30] my legs and arms were weightless, free-floating" (136). It is as if she is in a nurturing, healing element, the female element, the amniotic fluid of the womb, but at the same time the horrible truth reveals itself. "It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there is no life, a dark oval trailing limbs ... but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (136). She has come face to face with her other self, her shadow which she saw in the water, and with the aborted foetus, or is it her dead father?

The canoe is above her, "sunlight radiating around it, a beacon, safety" (136). As she surfaces, there are now two canoes, Joe in one of them, a helper come to her aid. Back in the safety of the canoe she revives the ghastly memory, the death planted in her, which she had carried around inside her, disguised, layer upon layer, like "a black pearl" (139). The images which have haunted her have all been part of this disguise. Her brother had never drowned — it was the foetus that was dead; the image of a creature in a bottle, a frog, a foetus, was an attempt to disguise the truth,

[30] The pinprick lights and the patterns on closed eyes suggest the entoptics seen by people in the first stage of altered consciousness. "These are luminous geometric shapes ... experienced as incandescent, shimmering, moving ... patterns", as described by Lewis-Williams, David and Dowson, Thomas in *Images of Power*. Southern Books. Johannesburg. 1989. 60. See also Footnote 19 on the underwater metaphor in trance experiences.

to preserve the child that "I didn't allow" (137). The truth was that it had been disposed of "through the sewers ... back to the sea" (137), whence human life came originally. It was the reality that she had not been able to accept, "that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version" (137), including an imagined wedding.

The healing, however, has only started.

Just as there were three attempts at catching a fish, and three canoe trips before the protagonist found the rock image she was seeking, so there have to be three immersions in water to complete the watery stage of the transformation.[31] Although Joe appeared in the second canoe after her solitary dives near the cliff, the protagonist knows that hers is to be a solitary quest. Thus, when the motorboat arrives to fetch them on the day arranged for their departure, she avoids returning to the mainland with her friends by escaping in the canoe as the boat arrives.

She has a perception that "I've been planning this, for how long, I can't tell" (161), as it seems the right thing to do. The water has become her element to such an extent that she feels, as she paddles away, that she is one with the canoe, "amphibian". The "water closes behind me, no track" (161), collaborating in her escape.

The water which flooded the forest and transformed it into a lake is the element of metamorphosis for many forms of plant and animal, harbouring or nurturing "colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew the insect-eater, its toenail-sized leaves sticky with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals now, metamorphosis" (161), reminiscent of the primordial

[31] Atwood's constant use of tripartite structures is particularly evident in the novels under discussion in this dissertation. In *Cat's Eye* Elaine frequently finds herself in groups of three friends, and it is when the group is invaded by a fourth that it leads to trouble for her. Many of the paintings on her retrospective are tryptychs, signifying a completeness of idea for her. When, however, she becomes involved in triangular male/female relationships these always prove disastrous for all concerned. In *The Robber Bride*, similarly, the three friends complement one another and present a strong front to the world. But this solidarity disintegrates whenever Zenia

forest. She remembers too that "[t]his is where I threw the dead things and rinsed the tins and jars" (161) after the fishing expedition. She thinks of the heron, which by now will be "insects, frogs, fish, other herons" (162), no longer a victim but an agent for lifegiving change: transformed.

She lies in the bottom of the canoe in the swamp, amid the "energy of decay" and senses the "green fire" (162) changing her body too, conscious of the new life she believes she carries in her body which "sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (162).

She returns to the cabin, but a further step in this redemption by water awaits her the next day.

This time there is no canoe to mediate between her and the watery element. She lies down in shallow water at the edge of the lake, then peels off her clothes and lies, with nothing between her and the natural elements of water, sand, rock while the "sun pounds in the sky, red flames ... searing away the wrong form that encases me ... I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes" (171, 172). When she first arrived back on the island she had lost the ability to identify the calls of different birds, but as the days passed she began to be able to identify birdcalls and animals on the island, and now she sees a loon which lifts its head and calls, ignoring her, accepting her "as part of the land".

"When I am clean I come out of the lake, leaving my false body floating on the surface" (172), like one emerging from the symbolic purging of baptism, the ritual completed. That night, sleeping out in the open, she hears "the small waves talking against the shore, multilingual ~~language~~ water" (172).

enters and subverts the group. The protagonist of *Alias Grace* is also surrounded by threes. Reference is made to the significance of this number in *Alias Grace* in Chapter Four.

The many complex issues explored in this novel are connected by the common thread of victimisation. The traumatising abortion undergone by the protagonist is but one example of the many ways in which Atwood examines this frightening subject.

The most obvious forms of victimisation all turn out to be patriarchal constructions.[32] There is male domination in its various manifestations throughout the book, such as war in its many forms, and what is euphemistically called progress and development of the land. This euphemism usually masks what is in reality the destruction of Canada. The rape of the country's resources, forests, rivers and lakes, animals, birds and fish, as well as the destruction of its original people, are legitimated by greedy colonisers (personified by the Americans) in the interests of "development".

The victims are those who are weaker, smaller, defenceless, afraid or innocent. The victimisers are those who have the power. How is it that the victimisers are able to maintain such power over the victims that they have no recourse to help of any kind? Atwood reveals to us the horrible truth that, very often, a victim is guilty of complicity in her own victimisation. As this story unfolds we find that the pattern of victimisation goes back a long way, to early childhood, when the narrator and her brother played cruel games and carried on small wars between them, unbeknown to their parents who taught them that "fighting was wrong" (129). If they were caught fighting both sides were punished so "we battled in secret, undeclared" (129). It was here that the pattern of complicity was started because "after a while I no longer fought back because I never won" (129). Flight or invisibility being the only defence, she retreated into either one or the other of these positions.[33]

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[32] In all the novels discussed in this dissertation patriarchy and its resultant victimisation are predominant motifs. The strong female characters in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* wage outright war on patriarchy, while in *Alias Grace* the protagonist has her own subtle and creative means of resisting what the patriarchal system has imposed on her all her life.

[33] Atwood describes four basic "victim positions", moving from denial, through acknowledgement, to refusal to accept the role of victim by becoming a creative non-victim. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*: Anansi. Toronto. 1972. 36-39

In the Surfacer's childhood, during the Second World War, Hitler was the embodiment of evil, the arch victimiser, although she was protected from knowledge of him and his atrocities until her brother went to school where he learnt about "explosions ... soldiers dismembering in the air ... and swastikas" (84). When their father burnt weeds on the bonfire they would throw sticks on the fire, chanting "'Hitler's house is burning down, My Fair Lady-O' ... But Hitler was gone and the thing remained" (123). Fires were used by the children not only for ritually burning Hitler but for burning "bad" leeches from the lake. The brother arbitrarily labelled the leeches good or bad. The mottled ones were the bad ones and they would throw these on the campfire "when [their] mother wasn't watching, she prohibited cruelty" (126). The leeches would writhe out and crawl painfully towards the water, "coated with ashes and pine needles" (126) only to be caught and thrown back on the flames. The children once dismembered and disembowelled their "least favourite doll" and threw her into the lake out of sheer cruelty, although they had been taught that killing was wrong and that "only enemies and food could be killed" (124).

In a secret place in the forest her brother stored in jars various creatures which he had trapped. On one occasion she found the secret hiding place and released the poor dead and half-dead creatures. He was so incensed at her interference ("'They were mine,' he said"), indeed, at her compassion, that when she found his new hiding place she was too afraid to release the creatures again: "Because of my fear they were killed" (125). (Perhaps her releasing the frog caught for bait is an unconscious way of her making up for her lack of moral fibre all those years ago). All she wanted was for "everyone to be happy" (125), and so through her complicity she became a potential victim. As for her brother,"he was a realist, that protected him" (125).

She remembers the dissection lessons at school and realises that "anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practised on them first" (114). Later

in the story the narrator feels revulsion at having to kill the fish that David has caught and feels like an "accessory, accomplice" (115) to a murder, because they have enough food in tins. She sees the fishing as a "violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it, these were no longer the right reasons" (114). The irony of "recreation" involving the taking of an animal's life becomes repulsive.

Another factor leading to her propensity for victimisation lay in her upbringing. Her father had effectively "split [his family] between two anonymities, the city and the bush" (53); he had taught them as children the art of survival in the wilds. But when they lived in the cities in the winter and went to school she, particularly, had no survival skills. Her brother, having prepared himself thoroughly for war, seemed to survive better than she did at school, although he was permitted by his parents to fight "only if they hit first" (66). At school she was exposed to the cruelties of the schoolyard where the innocent "who didn't know the local customs, like a person from another culture" (66), were made to suffer for the entertainment of the initiated. When she thought back to the inquisitors in the schoolyard she realised that they were not any worse than she and her brother had been as small children, but they just had different victims. She found herself at birthday parties wearing "pew-purple velvet dresses with anti-macassar lace collars" and being obliged to play pointless games in which "there were only two things you could be, a winner or a loser" (65).

In a milieu where female roles are predetermined, she learned to play with paper dolls, dressing them up in paper dresses to participate in the "slavery of pleasure" for which they were destined. These paper dolls and the ladies she drew ("when I was ten I believed in glamour") were a world away from "the old gray leather jacket" with "sunflower seeds in the pockets" (36,37) which her mother had worn in the wilds. Being "socially retarded" in the city aroused in others the desire "to torment or reform" (66). And so she was set up to be a victim in this kind of world where the rules of survival that she had learnt were of no use, where she would later have no

gone with [her] to the place where they did it; his own children, the real ones, were having a birthday party" (138).

She has had no part in the abortion, except that of an acquiescing victim; "he made me do it" and behaved as if it were "like getting a wart removed" (138). He said it was "only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. *I could have said no but I didn't*" (138,139) (my emphasis).

When he fetches her after the abortion he projects his own sense of relief onto her, "'It's over,' he said, 'feel better?'" (138), not concerned in the least about her true feelings of being "emptied, amputated ... they had planted death in me like a seed" (138). She does take a stand at this point, however, and "he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him any more ... he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me" (139). But although she seems to have taken charge of her own life, "I won't let them do that to me ever again" (74), another side of her is in control of her memories, and this is how she survives.

For him it may well be over, but for her it is only just beginning, her amputation from love and life, from her parents. "I couldn't go there, home, I never went there again, I sent them a postcard. They never knew, about that or why I left" (138). It is the beginning of her inability to love herself or any other human being because the word love now smacks of treachery and destruction. It is also the beginning of her hiding the truth from herself, of inverting reality to try to cover up her pain and confusion.

At the back of her mind the narrator knows that memories are not always reliable. When she finds herself thinking how safe she feels on the island, even at night, "'*That's a lie*' my own voice says out loud" (67) and she has to remind herself of how

terrified she often was on the island. "I have to be more careful of my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said" (67). Her other self, however, is the one who changes her memories and invents a new past for her, until she is able to live in a world without feeling.

And this is how she and Joe come together — it was her lack of emotion, as we have mentioned earlier, which Joe found fascinating, "cool he called it" (22). Being able to live with Joe without committing herself to any show of feeling suits her, thus she is able to exploit this relationship to her ends. For Joe "chewing gum and holding my hand ... both pass the time" (2). He communicates silently and asks no personal questions. "It's unusual for him to ask me anything about myself" (29). At times Joe is "off in the place inside himself where he spends most of his time" (39).

This apparent lack of involvement suits them both, but perhaps their lack of involvement masks a relationship of mutual destructiveness. She "fed him unlimited supplies of nothing" until "he'd became used to it, hooked on it" (78). Joe, in mangling his beautiful pots, is destroying his own progeny, just as she has done; she admits that perhaps what she likes about him is his failure, feeding off of his failure the way her former lover fed off of the failure which he imposed upon her. But Joe has become "an addict" (78) to this strange relationship and moves to make it permanent.

We have already seen that this move, a suggestion that they should get married, is seen by her as a trap, an attempt at colonisation, "a victory, some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head" (81), and her reaction is to want to "pack and move out" (81), a reversal of the roles experienced with her former lover. She wants a love that demands nothing and therefore thinks that "the only time there could be anything like love [is] when he is asleep, demanding nothing" (118). A discussion between the narrator and Anna leads her to the conclusion that for a woman "[l]ove

is taking precautions" (74) so that men can experience "[l]ove without fear, sex without risk" (74). Her final exploitation of Joe is to use him as her means of restoring the lost and destroyed life within her, literally and figuratively, by making her pregnant.

The tragedy of the victim is that she can find no way out of the situation, has never been taught strategies for dealing with victimisation, and this is how she becomes an unwilling accomplice in her own victimisation. Anna is another of these victims, demeaned by the domineering and crude Dave, but afraid to stand up to him or resist because she has no one else and is afraid of being alone. The relationship between David and Anna is built on deceit and subterfuge. On the surface they banter with and tease each other in what seems a light hearted manner. "She's teasing him, she does that a lot" (23), says the narrator, but she also notices that they need an audience to keep up these "skits" (38). David bombards the company with his crude sexual innuendoes which are aimed at humiliating Anna, but the constant use of his favourite means of communication, the *double entendre*, indicates his dubious motives in all things.

Anna seems to be obsessed with her appearance, with her make-up, clothes and her sunbathing, but she confides in the narrator that it is for David that she has to keep her make-up perfect otherwise he will notice and punish her. They both pretend that he does not know that she wears make-up but "he wants [her] to look like a young chick all the time" (116) and we "glimpse the subterfuge this must involve, or is it devotion" (38). Underlying this is the threat that if she does not keep looking like a young chick he will leave her and find a young chick. "Anna ... was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if ever she surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war" (147,148).

David plays games with Anna, but keeps changing the rules without telling her, and

she is constantly in fear of breaking the rules unwittingly. She describes marriage as being like skiing, "you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had to let go. Let go of what, I wanted to ask her" (41). Anna has had to let go of being herself to mould herself to David's demands. For Anna sex with David is a dangerous exercise; he wants her to "go back on" the pill so that *he* can have "sex without risk", regardless of what it might do to her health — "next time it could be the heart or something ... I'm not taking those kinds of chances" (74). As it is, sex is not a pleasure for her but more like being an animal in a trap, "pure pain ... an animal's at the moment the trap closes" (76). Part of the trap is that she had "started to really love him" and he "can't stand having me love him" (117), but they are inextricably linked in the fierce hatred of victim and victimiser.

The narrator and Joe eventually find themselves drawn into this battle as unwilling collaborators when David involves them in his cruel sexual games, propositioning the narrator while Anna seduces Joe in retaliation, giving credence to the claims of each that the other is sexually unfaithful. David is the arch manipulator, trying to implicate the narrator in his attempted seduction of her by employing the time-honoured trick of the victimiser, saying "You wanted me to follow you" (145).

At one stage the narrator referred to herself as being cut in half. Anna is often described by the narrator as being seen through the trees, like a woman cut in half, a victim. Anna's final humiliation, with Joe as an accomplice, is viewed by the narrator through the trees. Anna is forced to kneel in front of David and finally to take off her bikini and be filmed naked for the awful *Random Samples* travesty. The narrator watches without intervening, "I wanted to run down to the dock and stop them, fighting was wrong" (129), as the scene of the leeches in the fire is replayed. Anna's skin is "brown-red with yellow fur and white markings like underwear" (130), mottled like the leeches chosen to be the victims. Anna escapes into the lake, humiliated, and crawls out and back to the cabin, "[h]er pink face ... dissolving, her skin ... covered with sand and pine needles like a burned leech" (130).

When they are about to leave the island the narrator, remembering the water as a liberating element for herself, opens the cans of film and the camera and pours the contents into the lake, watching as the "invisible captured images are swimming away into the lake like tadpoles ... hundreds of tiny Annas are no longer bottled and shelved" (160). But just as her attempts to release her brother's captive creatures many years before met with no success, she sees no change in Anna whose "green eyes regard [her] unaltered from the enamel face" (160). The only transformation that Anna seems able to achieve is by means of her make-up and her clothes, "changing her shape, performing the only magic left to her" (159). "'They'll get you," she says, doleful as a prophet. 'You shouldn't have done it'" (160). The narrator is still guilty of complicity while Anna, watching her, "can't decide whether or not to tell: if she keeps quiet they'll treat her as an accomplice" (160), so innured is she to complicity.

Another of the manifestations of patriarchal domination is the rape of the land that is apparent all around as the protagonist and her companions proceed on their island journey.

It is David who says that Canada "is founded on the bodies of dead animals. Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to the United States. Not only that, in New York it's now a dirty word, beaver. I think that's very significant" (34). From the beginning of the book we are made aware of the rape of the country and its resources, the Americans being seen as the epitome of the greed which lies at the bottom of this form of colonisation. The threat of warfare as a means of colonising is also not far from the surface of the narrative.

The drive to the island abounds in examples of greedy colonisation, but we are reminded, too, that the local inhabitants, the Canadians, are implicated in their own

colonisation by their avaricious willingness to be colonised for the sake of profit. The first sign that all is not well with the land comes in the first sentence of the book, as the travellers pass the lake where "the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (1). Then the travellers pass what looks like "an innocent hill, spruce-covered, but the thick powerlines running into the forest give it away" (3). It is a rocket-launching site established by the Americans, but whether they are still there no one knows "because we aren't allowed in" (3). However, the "city invited them to stay, they were good for business, they drank a lot" (3).

The dam wall was raised for the benefit of local industry, to provide enough water to flush the logs downstream to the mill, but not much logging is done these days and the lake, which is controlled by the dam, has become a tourist attraction where "businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages" come to "play at fishing" (11). The local population, no longer involved in the logging industry, run shops or "process the tourists" (11). The narrator notices "summer cottages beginning to sprout here, they spread like measles, it must be the paved road" (24). Once on the island and entering the forest she remarks on the "gigantic stumps, level and saw-cut, remnants of the trees that were here before the district was logged out. The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales" (40).

Out on the lake in the canoe the party come to an "archipelago of islands, tips of sunken hills, once possibly a single ridge before the lake was flooded. None of them is big enough to have a name; some of them are no more than rocks, with a few trees clutched and knotted to them by the roots. On one of them ... was the heron colony" (79). On one of their expeditions the party stop for lunch on an island where they find "trash strewn around ... the tracks of humans ... like dogs pissing on a fence, as if the endlessness, anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature, ... and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with" (104). Farther along the lake they hear the sound of a chainsaw, "two men in yellow

helmets" leaving "a trail, trees felled ... into the bay ... surveyors, the paper company or the government, the power company ... indifferent ... The lake didn't matter to them, only the system" (107).

On a fishing expedition on the lake the party is accosted by two men in a motorboat which displays American flags fore and aft. The men are nattily dressed "irritated-looking businessmen" (60) with their guide, Claude, from the motel, who scowls "as he feels we're poaching on his preserve" (60). The Americans have "teeth bared, friendly as a shark" (60) as they ask if they have caught any fish. The narrator lies about the fish they have caught because, as she explains, "They're the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it" (60). She recalls the ineptitude of Americans they had met in the forest in the past. At the time they seemed funny, with their love of gadgetry, "automatic firelighter ... detachable handles ... and ... collapsible armchair" (61).

A pair of young Americans whom they meet on a later fishing trip are more competent, using a silver canoe instead of a motorboat and claiming to have caught their limit each day. They were "younger, trimmer, with the candid , tanned astronaut finish valued by the magazines" (115), and they had "a starry flag ... a miniature decal sticker on the canoe bow. To show us we were in occupied territory" (115). But for the narrator "guilt glittered on them like tinfoil" (115) as she remembered the stories of illegal fish stuffed in the pontoons of seaplanes, or in false bottoms in their cars, of men who tried to bribe the game warden, who got drunk and chased loons "until [they] drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades. Senseless killing, it was a game; after the war they'd been bored" (116).

The next morning they meet the Americans again, the narrator thinking that their armour is their "bland ignorance" with which "they could defend themselves against anything. Straight power, they mainlined it ... The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, ... there is ... no conscience or piety; for them the only things worthy of

life were human, their own kind of human, framed, ... laminated" (121,122). And then the horrible truth emerges that these "Americans" are not Americans but fellow Canadians. The narrator is furious because they seem to have "disguised themselves" (122), but the flag on the boat turns out to be a Mets sticker. One of the men is a Mets fan, and he and David shake hands; David is also a Mets fan.

But "they are still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into ... they get into the brain and take over the cells ... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, ... you speak their language, a language is everything you do" (123). When they were small and the origin of evil was Hitler, "he was the swastikas on the tanks, if only he could be destroyed everyone would be saved, safe" (123). Now the decals on canoes are replacing the swastikas on the tanks.

"But they'd killed the heron anyway" (123), is the unshakeable conviction of the narrator. The heron becomes one of the central images of the book, representing the crass pointlessness of the killing and destruction wrought by mindless people. The heron lives in all three of the elements and so it represents the creatures of water, earth and air; it also represents survival, the way nature clings tenaciously to what is left after the destruction, the herons having established a colony on one of the tiny footholds left when the lake was flooded. The killing of the heron is the last straw in the growing sense that the narrator has that killing things is wrong.

In the traditional fairy tale, animals are the helpers of the humans on their quest in the forest, if the humans are kind and helpful in their turn. Harming or killing an animal would be anathema, except for the animals that represent evil, such as the ravening wolf in *Red Riding Hood*.

The signs of the exploitation of animals start with the carved wooden fish holding up the bar counter at the local motel, where the room is an imitation of someone's

distorted memory of a gentleman's shooting lodge, "the kind with trophy heads and furniture made from deer antlers" (21,22). Here the party learn that "business is bad" because "the lake's fished out" (22), but David decides that he nevertheless wants to get a fishing licence, while Anna teasingly calls him "a great white hunter" (23). It is during the fishing expeditions on the lake that the narrator becomes convinced that she has no right to take a life; she begins to identify with all the exploited creatures as fellow victims. She remembers the rhyme that children sang at school at recess,

> Nobody loves me
> Everybody hates me
> I'm going to the garden to eat worms

the song of the victim.

But the animal victims are not passively acquiescent as she is. Even the worms that she has dug out of the garden for bait try to escape, "they're nudging with their head ends, trying to get out" (55), and the leopard frog which she captures as "an emergency weapon" (56) jumps up and down in its jar trying to escape. When she has to bait the hook she remembers that, as a child, she told her brother that she fished "by prayer", pleading with the fish to be caught, and could convince herself that the fish she caught were therefore "willing" (58). The fish which David hooks is magnificent "as it jumps clear and hangs in the air" (59), trying to escape, then diving and doubling back, unwilling to be a victim, even as food. The narrator hears the joyful victorious laughter of her friends after the kill sounding "like the newsreels of parades at the end of the war, and that makes me glad" (59), but a little later she feels sick with complicity at having killed something, although she knows she is being irrational. "If we dived for them and used our teeth to catch them, fighting on their own grounds, that would be fair, but hooks were substitutes and air wasn't their place" (120).

The mindless killing of the heron by the "Americans" brings her antipathy to a head. She can only imagine that they had killed the heron because, not being able to be "tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have with a thing like that was to destroy it" (112). Once she has decided to dive to seek the solution to her quest, she begins to see the heron as a form of sacrifice. Seeing a plane overhead she remembers a heron flying over them like a "winged snake" (57), a "bluegrey cross, and the other heron, or was it the same one, hanging wrecked from the tree" (134) with its wings fallen open, and she thinks of Christ's dying, concluding that "anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ" (134). And so she becomes aware of the cyclical nature of life and death, some creatures dying and others living off them, of death and regeneration, transformation, both physical and spiritual, a prefiguring of the episode in which she lies in the canoe amid the decaying matter in the swamp and is regenerated (161).

At the same time as the narrator is becoming more aware of the innocence of the animals and of identifying with them in their victimhood she becomes more and more suspicious of men and their motives. She remarks repeatedly on the hairiness of Joe, "[h]is back is hairier than most men's, a warm texture, it's like teddy-bear fur" (35), identifying him with the animals, and she remembers her mother in her leather jacket, close to the birds and animals. At the same time she remarks on the fact that David is concerned about losing his hair, "he combed it that way to cover the patches where it had once grown" (87), indicating that he is not to be trusted.

When Malmstrom arrives on the island with an offer to purchase it, he is brought by Paul, her father's friend. Paul arrives with a "huge wad of vegetables from his garden" (87), thus identifying himself to her as on the side of nature. But Malmstrom has "trimmed grey hair and an executive moustache like the shirt ads, the vodka ads" (87,88) and although he claims to represent "the Wildlife Protection Association of America" (88) he arouses feelings of mistrust. Even David, reverting to his conspiracy theory, thinks he is a CIA agent in disguise wanting to use the island as a "snooping

base" (90).

But the narrator has reached a point of trusting no one at all, even her friends. When the men arrive on the island to inform her that her father has been found drowned she is paranoid, believing that they and her friends are conspiring against her.

It is in this frame of mind that she finds the childhood drawing which she identifies as her mother's gift to her, her talisman and her guide to wholeness. This means a transformation has to take place. She needs to get away from the world as she experiences it, as a place of deception and lies. She begins to see the people around her "turning to metal" (153) like the false Americans, but believes that for Joe "truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words" (153). Thus to achieve her transformation she needs to identify closely with the animals and with nature and cast off language as she knows it, which is as a tool of deception — "first I had to immerse myself in the other language" (152).

The narrator's quest for wholeness and the truth is twofold. She needs to remember the buried past so that she can go into the future a whole person, and this she has partly achieved. But she also needs to find her parents, in her father's case both literally and figuratively, having shut them out of her life after the abortion. Here I refer again to Bruno Bettelheim's assertion that the use of fairy tales and magic is to help the child, or adult, to work out its own problems at its own level, as the protagonist sets about solving her problems by such means. Is this the language that will help the narrator attain transformation?

She has discovered, however, that the conventional fairy tales that she knew as a child are not the key for her. Her attempts at illustrating the book of fairy tales, as we have mentioned earlier, are disastrous. As she paints, the icons take on a life of their own and become something other than they are meant to be, they transform themselves into something tame — the giant becomes a football player, while the

wolf with fangs bared becomes a fat collie, and the phoenix simply refuses to look like a phoenix. These tales from her childhood have lost their significance for her. She re-reads the story about the king who learnt to speak with animals — is this what is missing, does she need to get closer to the animals, to nature?

Another fairy tale icon in childhood is the magic bean. While trying to tidy up her parents' vegetable garden that has run wild the narrator remembers that, as a small child, she knew that if she could get some of the split-open purple-black beans in the garden and keep them she would be all-powerful. But when she was tall enough and could reach the beans to pick them it did not work. There was no magic in them. "Just as well," she thinks," ... if I had turned out like the others with power I would have been evil" (31).

Conventional religion, too, has been no help to her. Her father had been against religion, saying there was no God. She and her brother had felt alienated among the French children who went to Mass and who whispered that someone who did not go to Mass would turn into a wolf. This idea had had some appeal, relating as it did to the *loup-garou* stories of humans who became wolves or vice versa, slipping in and out of their skins "as easily as getting undressed" (50). There is a connection here with the repeated references to the hairiness of Joe, his resemblance to the bison on the coin and his lack of skill in using words; Joe is closer to the animals, less contaminated by being human than the rest.

At one stage she believes that the tracings of rock paintings that her father has left behind are the clues to the answers she is seeking, "like a puzzle he'd left me to solve" (98). Her father had come to live in this place, remote, and isolated by the water of the lake, close to nature, a botanist, a pacifist, seeking "freedom from interference" (53). Here he had become involved in his own quest after the ways of the "earliest ones" (53), not even his own ancestors but the first people of the land. Her father was always logical, he had taught them arithmetic and strategies for

surviving in the wild; he "gave only knowledge; his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain" (147). Her father's legacy helps her to find part of the answer to her quest as she dives in search of the paintings, and rediscovers her past.

But there are more gods than those of the head that her father had acknowledged. Not finding any paintings, she begins to think that her father must have found more than just paintings. She believes he must have found the sacred places of the Indians, "the places where you could learn the truth ... new places, new oracles ... true vision" (139). She believes that she ,too, has found these gods who "were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed, and freely" (139). After her successful dive into the lake, remembering what she had seen in churches, "candles in front of statues, crutches on the steps ... gratitude for cures" (140), she leaves her sweatshirt on a ledge as a thank-offering to those gods. "I didn't know the names of the ones I was making the offering to; but they were there, they had power ... feeling was beginning to seep back into me" (140).[36]

Now she needs to discover "[n]ot only how to see but how to act" (147).

Their mother, who had taught her and her brother to read and write, communed with animals. We know that the jays perched on her shoulder and her wrist, unafraid, but when a bear had invaded their camp she raised her arms and yelled "Scat!" at it, and the bear "thudded off into the forest" (73). Their mother never explained things, as their father did, "which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell" (68). The narrator is convinced that her mother must have left her a message before she died, some object or token, the dying mother of the fairy tales leaving a legacy for her daughter. During an earlier search the narrator had found nothing in the

[36] These tokens remind one of the Virgin of Lost Things in *Cat's Eye* whom Elaine discovers in a little church in Mexico, and whom she identifies as the Virgin who had helped her out of the ravine.

scrapbooks her mother had kept[37] except the disappointing insipid drawings of bunnies and Easter eggs, but after the cataclysmic revelation of her past in the depths of the lake she has resumed her search.

This time she finds the right scrapbook, containing pictures of "first people" (152), with rays coming out of their heads, (like the rays from her head before she dived into the lake, and like the rays behind Joe's head when she inveigles him into procreating with her in the moonlight). Now, on a loose page, torn at the edges, she discovers a picture of hers, in crayon, a picture which she recognises and with which she can identify. This is the picture of a baby within the mother's round moon stomach, looking out, not at her drowning brother, as she had incorrectly remembered it, but at a "man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail" (152). The baby was herself, before she was born, and the horned man was God. Her brother had told her that the Devil had horns and a tail and so she had endowed God with these attributes which she regarded as "advantages".

Although the "first meaning [of the pictures] was lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings" (152), they were her "guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs" (152), the new meaning of which she had to work out, immersing herself first in "the other language" (152). From now on she develops her own mythology, incorporating into it suitable elements of the other religions, as well as myths and fairy tales from her past, which will enable her to effect her own transformation: "everything is waiting to come alive" (153).

Her first step on this road to recovery is to restore the life within her, literally and figuratively, which she had destroyed. She encourages Joe to make love to her, but on her own terms and for her own purpose. Thus she reverses the roles of exploiter

[37] Barbara Hill Rigney, in her book *Margaret Atwood*. Macmillan, London. 1987. 43, points out that the mother, "[i]n preserving her children's drawings in volumes of scrapbooks ... has, in essence, given them their past. Having destroyed her own past, the protagonist is sorely in need of such a 'gift' from her mother".

and exploited that she had experienced at the hands of her former lover: "he's given me the part of himself I needed" (156). They have sex outside in the dark, under the trees, keeping the moon on her left and the absent sun on her right. The moon symbolises firstly Diana, goddess of the hunt (this time she is the hunter not the hunted), and secondly fecundity. In invoking the moon the narrator calls upon primordial female helpers to achieve this part of her plan, the witches or female helpers, symbolised here by the moon. As Joe is silhouetted against the moon, hair and beard like a mane, she can "feel my lost child surfacing within me" (155,156).

The next part of the quest is her search for her parents, a quest which, in the tradition of fairy tales, is really a quest for her own selfhood. She needs to find her parents so that she can free herself from them and become an adult in her own right. She has never gone through this rite of passage, as she rejected them, not allowing them into her world. "I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs" (171). The heroine in traditional fairy tales needs to break away from the family ties, the parents, to establish her selfhood, but here the narrator needs to find her rejected parents before she can break the ties in a more appropriate manner.

She goes out into the forest where, to quote Bettelheim again, "inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be" (93). We remember too that it is in the forest that the traditional heroine will meet wild animals who will probably become her helpers, and that these animals will often represent the three elements of earth, water and air. In the Grimm brothers' tale of *The Queen Bee* the youngest brother, who has shown compassion towards the ants, the ducks and the bees, is helped by them to perform the tasks necessary so that "those who had been turned to stone received once more their natural forms".[38] And so we expect that the

[38] Grimm, The Brothers: *The Brothers Grimm: The Complete Fairy Tales*. Wordsworth. Ware. 1997. 319.

narrator, who has become very sensitive to the need for a compassionate attitude towards animals, will be helped in her quest by the animals of the forest.

The creatures which she encounters are the wolf (her father), the frog (her lost self) and the jays (her mother). The wolf, her father, represents the down to earth part of the personality (he believed in logic and survival). The jays, her mother, represent a freedom of the spirit, a desire to aspire to higher goals (the children believed she had all the answers but would not tell). And the frog represents the double hidden part of the narrator's nature which she has had to dive deeply to explore.The frog is interesting as it starts life in a watery element, as we do, but evolves and changes its form as it develops into an amphibious creature. The narrator has spoken about being "split ... between two anonymities, the city and the bush" (53), and the frog points her to the possibility of discovering who she is in both milieus. Frogs in fairy tales also often stand for the awakening of sexual awareness or maturity,[39] and here the narrator begins to undergo healing in that damaged part of her psyche.

The narrator continues evolving her own form of myth which will lead to her own transformation and to reconciliation with her parents. As she stays behind on the island in isolation, a system evolves in her mind which entails the discarding of everything that ties her to the past.

Seeing herself in the mirror in the cabin she realises that she needs "[n]ot to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me" (169). In the traditional fairy tale a mirror represents the need to find one's identity, and until she has found her identity the mirror is a distraction and a false representation. In the cabin she destroys, burns, slashes everything that symbolises her false past: her paints and brushes, the *Quebec Folk Tales*, the fake wedding ring,

[39] *The Frog-King* is probably the best-known example. In this story the princess is obliged to allow the frog to sleep on her pillow after he has rescued her ball from the well. In one version she is later obliged to kiss him, upon which he turns into the inevitable handsome king.

the scrapbooks, the childhood drawings representing her false peace and her brother's wars, "the miraculous double woman and the god with horns" (171), her guides, her own clothes. Then she destroys the things relating to her parents: glasses, plates lamps, her father's books on survival, blankets, sheets and even her mother's leather jacket.

After the purification by water, referred to earlier, she is hungry and finds she may eat only foods that are red, yellow and blue, the basic primary colours.[40]

After this purification of the cabin she finds she has to avoid anything that has any connection with human beings. She can no longer abide being in any space that has been worked on by human beings with tools, not even the garden enclosure, and has to depend on the survival techniques taught her by her father, eating wild plants, a bird or a fish she could catch with her own hands, "that will be fair" (171), to sustain the creature growing within her body. She has to sleep in a lair like the animals until, as she believes will happen, "the fur grows" (171). In order to find her parents she has to "approach the condition they themselves have entered" (174), a condition in which there are no borders, no enclosed spaces.

The guide, her own drawing of the therianthropic God, leads her to her next step. This drawing is reminiscent of the tracings of rock drawings made by her father, typical of universal depictions of shamans, those who bring about healing through altered states of consciousness. She resorts now to seeking healing through the means used by the first people of the area, people who were close to nature and the

[40] Compare with Atwood's poem *Spelling*. The plastic letters with which the daughter learns to spell — "to make spells" — are "red, blue & hard yellow". Atwood, emphasising the power of words in this poem, ends with a re-iteration of the three primary colours:

> "How do you learn to spell?
> Blood, sky and the sun,
> Your own name first,
> Your first naming, your first name,
> Your first word".

world of spirits. The narrator, having left the cabin and destroyed all the accoutrements of her contemporary existence, goes into the woods and eats presumably hallucinogenic mushrooms, with the intention of submitting herself to the healing experience of an altered state of consciousness.

She finds herself "several inches from the ground" (175) as her eyes and feet are released, while her body takes on a new dimension, the trees "shimmer" and "boulders float, melt, everything is made of water" (175)[41] and she is one with the animals and the earth and the forest, "I am a tree leaning ... I am a place" (175).

It is during this experience that she sees her mother feeding the jays, and feeling begins returning to her previously numbed psyche. "At first I feel nothing ... Then ... I'm afraid, I'm cold with fear, I'm afraid it isn't real, ... if I blink she will vanish" (176). As the jays fly away her mother is indeed gone, like one of the jays.

When, on the next day, a group of men come to the island in a powerboat to look for her, the narrator is not yet ready to be seen by them. She has not yet completed the exorcism of the past and the restoration of her selfhood. She still cannot relate to the outside world — they speak a language which she cannot comprehend and are fake men, metallic, wearing "false skins" (178). But they hear her laughter which she cannot contain, a partial restoration of her silenced voice.

When they have gone she experiences another hallucination, this time induced by hunger. She sees her father in the shape of a wolf, "although it isn't my father it is what my father has become ... I knew he wasn't dead" (181).

Fitting her feet into the footprints of this creature after it has disappeared, she discovers that they are her footprints, she is one with the creature and with her

[41] The "underwater" metaphor for the trance experience is repeated here. See Footnote 19.

father. After seeing her mother feeding the jays she approaches the feeding tray and finds that the food they were eating was the food that she had put out for them earlier. Thus she assimilates her parents into herself, restoration has taken place, and she is able to let go of them.

That evening, in her final coming to terms with her parents, she dreams that they leave the island. She sees them "the way they were when they were alive ... they are in a boat, the green canoe, heading out of the bay. When I wake in the morning I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them (182).

In the morning she finds that "[t]he rules are over. I can go anywhere now, into the cabin, into the garden, I can walk on the paths. I am the only one left alive on the island" (182). She has found peace and release from the past and is able to see her friends, even her former lover, in proper perspective. She realises that her parents, too, were only human, "[s]omething I never gave them credit for; but their totalitarian innocence is my own" (184).

Turning the mirror in the cabin round she sees a creature, "neither animal nor human", the stereotype of insanity, "talking nonsense or not talking at all" (184). She resists the notion of being stereotyped in the future. "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing" (185). The Surfacer realises that she can no longer withdraw from life, "I enter my own time" (185). She prepares to nurture the new life, in both senses, within her; "it must be born, allowed" (185).

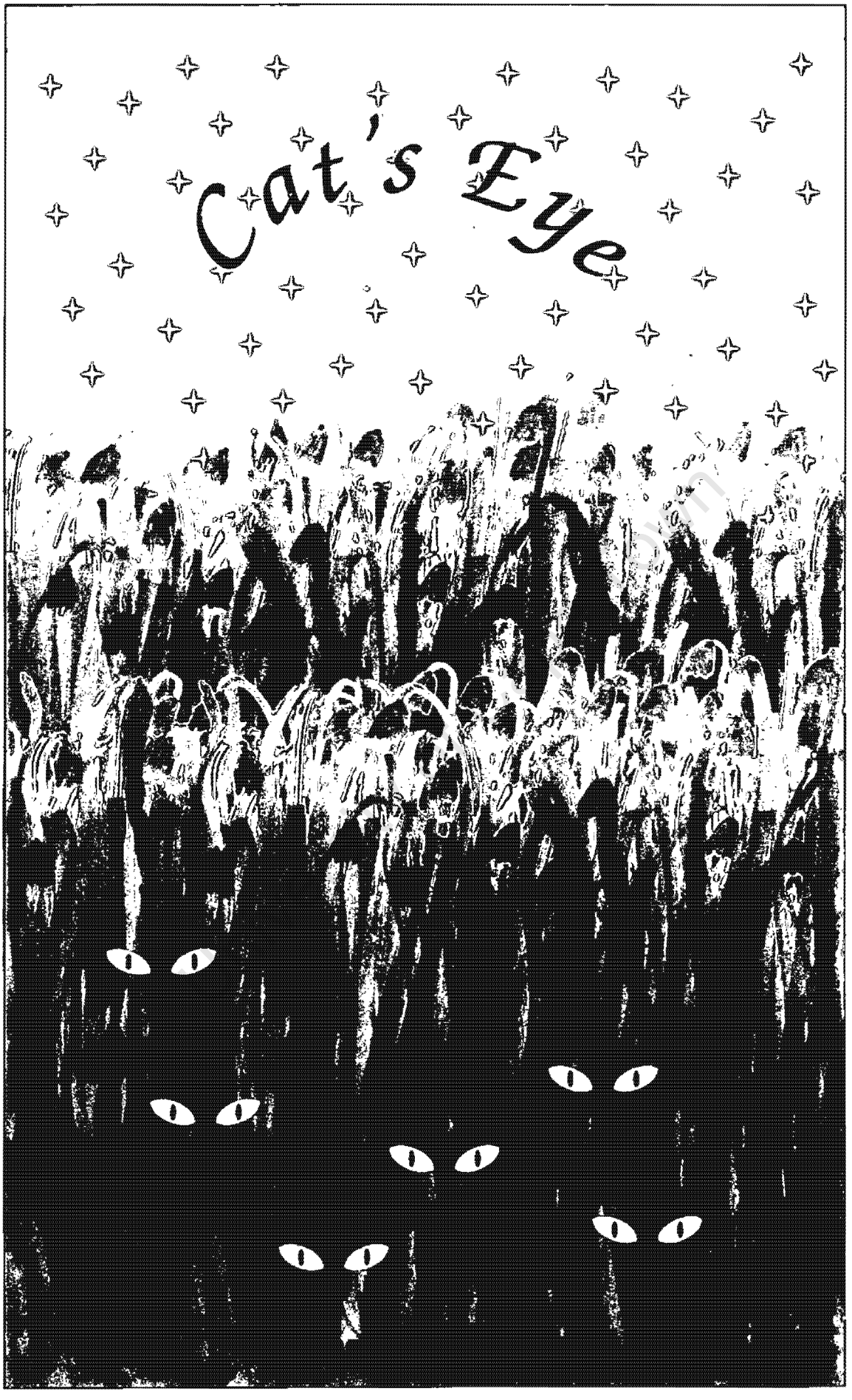
When Paul and Joe return to find her they come in Paul's slow old boat — "he built it himself" (186) — different from the mass-produced speedboats of the Americans so destructive to the environment.

Joe calls her name, he is "a mediator, an ambassador, offering me something" (186),

and she knows that if she goes with him "the intercession of words" (186) will be necessary, and they "will probably fail, sooner or later" (186). But she has insight enough now to acknowledge that that is normal. She sees Joe as "only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (186).

He waits for her, "balancing on the dock which is neither land nor water" (186), a creature of two elements as she is too, in the process of transformation.

The Surfacer has used her innate wit and intelligence to undo the patriarchal past that has held her in thrall. In true fairy tale style she has been guided by her parents, and by a return to the forest and its creatures. She has also had the daring to enlist the help of spirits from a different realm when those of her own milieu seemed to fail her. She has not only rediscovered herself but has been able to restore broken relationships with her alienated parents as she has discovered who they really were. As Joe waits, balancing, so we, the readers, wait too, but in the knowledge that the transformation has begun and new life is growing in and through her. She is no longer passive but has actively worked out her own transformation.


Cat's Eye

CHAPTER TWO

Cat's Eye

"But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (3).Thus Elaine Risley, the protagonist of this novel, propounds her own theory of time, based on the information given to her by her scientifically-minded brother, that time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space.

Through Elaine's theory of time as a dimension Atwood brings into play the postmodernist questioning of linear narrative. Under the section headings of the novel the fragments of narrative initially appear to be random and arbitrary, but conceal significant connections which make up the whole. "Atwood's narratives realize [the] potential for spatialization by interlacing past and present occurrences, so that even when reading sequentially the reader feels past and present coexist (in space and time) together".[1]

The flexibility of time is the basis of the construction of this novel. But there is, paradoxically, a set time frame for the novel, namely a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Elaine Risley. A retrospective implies a selection of chosen moments from the entire repertoire of an artist, reflecting her development. Thus the concept of a retrospective opens wide the potential for the flexibility of time to be thoroughly exploited in the construction of the novel.

Each section of the novel is a perfect poetic unity which, except for the first section

[1] Deery, June: "Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge". *Twentieth Century Literature.* 43:4. 1977. 478.

and the last, starts in the present, or in her adult life, and then looks back to Elaine's childhood. In the present, which she describes as being "the middle of my life ... halfway across, halfway over" (13),[2] Elaine is back in Toronto where she spent part of her childhood and youth, for the opening of the retrospective exhibition of her paintings. These paintings reflect her past (the painful experiences of her childhood, particularly in respect of her friendship with Cordelia) and the development of her art. They are her means of resolving this past.

The titles of the most important paintings on her retrospective exhibition provide the titles of the sections of the novel. The first and very short section, Iron Lung,[3] is set almost entirely in the past, during a time when her relationship with Cordelia seemed at its best. The last section, Bridge, is set entirely in the present as she exorcises her worst childhood fears, thus bringing herself to the realisation that she will never experience the joy of a carefree relationship with an *alter ego*. She recognises that for her this experience is "not something that is gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea" (421).

In the sections between the first and the last Elaine's reflections on the past bring us a chronological story of her childhood and youth, starting at a time when her brother was her only friend, moving on to her first friendships with girls when she went to school and to her fateful friendship with Cordelia. Finally we move into her young adult life where she breaks with the past and grows into a person in her own right.

[2] As June Deery reminds us this is "a time and a place". "Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge". *Twentieth Century Literature*. 43:4. 1997. 478.

[3] The image of an iron lung refers to a wordwide epidemic of poliomylitis during the early 1940s, the timeframe of Elaine's childhood. No one knew at that time what caused the disease, and it struck arbitrarily, killing or crippling its victims, who were mostly children. As a child at that time I can remember the fear that stalked us, as if we were being watched and judged, and that inappropriate behaviour might lead to one's contracting poliomylitis and being crippled for life, or dying, or ending up in an iron lung, as did the unlucky ones among us. The trouble was that since the cause was unknown, no one knew which behaviour was inappropriate. In the same way Elaine feels restricted and judged as a girl, and later as a woman, because there are patriarchally constructed rules which she might unwittingly be breaking. (There are echoes here of the power games played by David with Anna in *Surfacing*). These contraventions might lead to her falling into the ravine, or worse. She experiences the same feelings of impending disaster, helplessness and confinement as are implied by the prospect of life in an iron lung.

The novel is thus a *bildungsroman*, combined with fictional autobiography.[4]

The past and the present flow into each other and cannot be separated. The day after the opening of her successful retrospective Elaine walks down to the bridge over the ravine. Much has changed since the days when the children crossed the ravine on their way home from school and Elaine nearly drowned in the icy stream that flows through the ravine. The old school has been demolished, the bridge is now concrete, the willow trees have grown, the debris has been cleared away, joggers' paths built, and all is "pruned and civic" (417). But some things have not changed; "The smell of fallen leaves is still here ... a rustling, a rank undertone of cats ... We remember through smells" (417). Stephen's "jar of light is buried down there somewhere" (418), while a discarded halloween pumpkin lies below the bridge. And the memories are still there, the feeling of being disliked, the shame, the wish to be loved, the fear and loneliness, which Elaine is able to recognise as having been Cordelia's emotions all along, and therefore no longer emotions that can drag her down in the present.

If the construction of the novel is based on the flexibility of time, its great preoccupation is that of looking down through time, of seeing the past of the main protagonist, the artist Elaine Risley. The point of a retrospective exhibition of an artist's work is to look back at how her vision of life, as reflected in her paintings, has changed and developed. This is what this novel does with Elaine's past, as she looks back over it, or down into it. Elaine explores not only how she has seen herself at various points in her life, but how others have seen her. Ingersoll sees in her retrospective "testimony to the transformative power of art".[5] We witness the transformations, negative and positive, that have been wrought in Elaine as we look

[4] It is important to note here that Atwood vehemently denies that any of her writing is simply autobiographical. In several interviews in Ingersoll, Earl G: *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Virago. London. 1990. 28-29, 47-48, 71-72, 167, 169-170, 173, she makes it very clear that she dislikes reductive readings that explain her fiction in terms of her biography.

[5] Ingersoll, Earl G: "Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Re-Viewing Women in a Postmodern World". *Ariel*. 22:4.1991. 23.

down through time with her.[6]

As the title suggests, the novel is about seeing, and this seeing implies discovering one's identity. At first Elaine tries to find her identity through the medium of words. Her brother Stephen, her mentor in her early years, has already discovered the "imprecision of words" (3) and is gradually moving away from words into new dimensions of time and space. But for Elaine this process of moving away from words and into seeing takes a long time. She finds her learning to see influenced by many other people, and she gradually has to find her own way of seeing herself and the rest of the world. It is through her painting, her visual expression of the way she sees the world, that she is eventually able to find her identity.

It is significant to note here that Atwood herself is a painter. Much of her writing is visual, and she understands at first hand the concept of self-expression through the means of painting.[7]

"Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (21). Elaine remembers her early childhood and how the family's move to Toronto, when she was nine years old, changed her life.

Before the move to Toronto the family's way of life was nomadic. Because her father was an entomologist the family lived close to nature, almost harking back to the way of life of the first people, before the colonisation of the country. Her memories of this period are happy ones. Of assisting her father, happy among his bug infestations in the forests. Of her mother, restricted not only by their way of life but by wartime

[6] In her poem *Man in a Glacier* Atwood tells how she and her brother found a box of slides in a cellar, and how, looking at these slides, they discover their father, "alive or else preserved, younger than all", and compares this discovery with the man in a glacier, preserved for two thousand years. The narrator in *Surfacing* sees her alienated parents as "mammoths frozen in a glacier". Looking through time is like looking down through water.
[7] Several of Atwood's own paintings are reproduced in van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. South Illinois University Press. 1988. 206-207.

shortages and rationing, providing makeshift meals. And of accommodation of various strange kinds, none of which was very luxurious or comfortable.

Elaine's only friend in her early years is her older brother, Stephen, and because all her games are boys' games she gains an insight into the world of boys. Stephen's games revolve around war, to a considerable extent. He has guns whittled from wood, as well as swords and daggers "with blood coloured onto the blades with red pencils" (24), and he often sings a song about a wartime pilot "Coming in on a wing and a prayer". Elaine learns to play dead when he tells her to, even though he can see the enemy and she cannot. When they fight with each other, as they sometimes do, she never wins. When they fight they do so secretly, in whispers, as they are not allowed to fight and will be in trouble if their parents hear them. In all these games of apparent violence and secrecy there is no evidence of peer oppression, unlike in the secret and apparently more civilised games that Elaine later discovers among girls, games which are based on gendered roles and in which girls unleash psychic violence against each other. Here Atwood emphasises the role of patriarchy in the construction of gender stereotypes.

Stephen teaches Elaine to see the secrets that he has discovered in the wilds. He teaches her to see in the dark (with cats' eyes), that the secret of seeing in the dark is to wait until your eyes become accustomed to no light. The children play in the forest at night, creeping up on their parents sitting in the flickering shadows of the campfire. He teaches her other secrets of the forest, as they turn over logs and stones and watch the creatures under them scurrying for shelter before they replace the logs.[8] They never harm the creatures or try to collect them in jars as they know they will just die. At a later stage Stephen collects butterflies, but not by mounting

[8] In an article Atwood likens inspiration to poking around under a rock to see what might be there, One might find nothing or, in ascending order "worms, millipedes, spiders, beetles, ants' nests, toads, snakes, mice, newts and salamanders. Newts and salamanders were the ultimate; they were extremely rare". She goes on to say that if what is under your rock is not a salamander "there's no point trying to turn it into one" and that "you can either follow where it leads or not". This interview in *The New York Times Book Review*, 8 May 1997 is quoted in the *Reader's Digest*. July 1998.

them on boards with pins the way other people do.[9] He is happy just to see them and identify them, and list those he has seen in the back of his butterfly book. Elaine's favourite is the luna moth, and he finds one to show her, a huge moth, pale green with crescents on its wings, but warns her not to touch it "[o]r the dust will come off its wings, and then it can't fly" (144).

In the world of boys some of the secrets are disgusting secrets. Elaine and Stephen take delight in colluding in the use of forbidden and subversive words like "bum" (25). Among themselves boys cultivate a culture of being disgusting, as their nonchalantly dishevelled appearance proclaims that "dirt is ... almost as good as wounds. They work at acting like boys ... draw attention to any extra departures from cleanliness ... Wipe off the snot ... Who farted?" (102-103). Later, when Stephen goes to school, he discovers the value of having a father who has ox-eyeballs in bottles in his laboratory

When the family moves to Toronto for their winters many things start to change for Elaine, as even the way she looks undergoes a transformation. There had never been much difference in appearance between Elaine and her brother, as she had worn his cast-off clothes, his old pants and sweaters. But in Toronto girls are not allowed to wear pants to school and she has to wear a skirt, tucking it into the pants of her snowsuit when the winter comes. At their new school the separate entrances to the school building marked BOYS and GIRLS indicate the socially enforced change that will occur in her relationship with her brother.

Stephen immediately slips happily into the world of boys at school. He is involved in the requisite new-boy fights with fellow schoolboys, or joins in the fights with the boys from the Catholic school who are reputed to be tough. He is at home in the

[9] In not wishing to collect the butterflies, to kill them and pin them down, Stephen epitomises the antithesis of the consumerist need to commodify even the creatures of the forest. Compare with the discussion later in this chapter on the commodification prevalent in the oil paintings of the eighteenth century.

culture of disgusting secrets, a culture where younger sisters and mothers and new clothes are not acceptable. Boys are teased about these. They dirty new clothes as soon as possible and will not walk with mothers or sisters. In front of his friends "[f]or me to contact him, or even to call him by name, would be disloyal. I understand these things" (46). Stephen, as a boy, is able to maintain his appearance, while Elaine starts discovering how to look the part of a girl.

"So I am left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh" (47). This prospective change seems exciting to Elaine. Up to now she has played some girls' games of her own, collecting silver paper from cigarette packets, and cards from Nabisco Shredded Wheat which can be coloured in and folded into little houses. She has longed for girl friends, like the ones she reads about in books, and has visions of little girls like the one she sees in her school reader when she does her lessons with her mother. The children in these stories have a life nothing like her own, living in a "white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn and a picket fence" (29), wearing pretty dresses and patent leather shoes instead of "pants, baggy at the knees, and a jacket too short in the sleeves" over a "hand-me-down brown and yellow striped jersey of [her] brother's" (27) and never peeing in the bushes. While her brother draws his pictures of wars and explosions she draws pictures of romantic old-fashioned girls in long dresses, pinafores, puffed sleeves and bows in their hair. "This is the elegant, delicate picture I have in my mind, about other little girls" (29).

When Elaine enters the world of "real girls at last, in the flesh" (47) she finds herself at the disadvantage of not knowing the language of this world. She knows "the unspoken rules of boys" (47) but in the world of girls she feels herself "always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (47). It is this insecurity which Cordelia senses and is able to exploit in her persecution of Elaine. She recognises it as the same sort of insecurity that she experiences in her relationship with her father.

In the world of girls, however, it is necessary to learn not only how to see and

understand, but also how to be seen. Before the advent of Cordelia it is Carol who befriends Elaine and teaches her how to see and be seen in the world of girls, unwittingly positioning herself as a collaborator with patriarchal demands and expectations of women. Carol, her partner in line, at lunch and on the school bus, initiates her into these mysteries. Elaine learns that Carol, who is a honey blonde, has her hair cut and shaped every two months by a hairdresser into its pageboy shape (47). Elaine, whose mother wears her hair long and clipped back with bobby pins, whose own hair, she realises, has never been cut, is an alien in this world. Then there are the matching outfits Carol and her sister wear to church on Sundays, the cupboard with her clothes hanging in it, more girls' clothes than Elaine has ever seen in one place. Carol shows her the furnishings of the living room, a room into which they peep from the doorway but are not allowed to go into. This is a world of consumerism, of naming and displaying the external, and of secrets.

Elaine finds that she is expected to reciprocate and reveal the secrets of her home to Carol. She expects scorn from Carol when she reveals the unfinished state of their house, the lack of furnishings and the lack of girls' clothing in her cupboard, and suspects that "more might be required" (49). But to her astonishment Carol conveys these idiosyncrasies to the girls at school as if they were "exotic specialities ... true but incredible" (49), wanting to bask in the reflected glory of her strange new friend. Elaine finds Carol's delicacy and revulsion when she shows her the animals and "jars of lizards and ox-eyeballs" (50) in her father's laboratory reciprocally exotic, although she cannot help thinking Carol is a sissy.

Not all things are openly displayed and seen, however. Elaine finds that there are other secrets in the world of girls. There are not brash secrets about dirty words and bodily functions as there are in the world of boys, but furtive secrets about something hidden, not nice, spoken about in whispers and never defined, attesting to the psychic repression that is part of female gender conditioning. Atwood makes the reader aware of the problem of guilt by association which is instigated by patriarchy

and becomes part of the female psyche. Of Elaine's friends it is Carol who seems to possess this secret knowledge to the greatest extent. Carol initiates Elaine into a world of household secrets such as the awesome sight of the glass in which her father keeps his false teeth at night. She shows Elaine the twin beds in which her mother and father sleep, but also the wet mark on her mother's sheet in the morning, and the contraceptive device in her mother's drawer. "There seems to be nothing she won't tell" (48).

Another subject for furtive whispering is that of boys and men. Carol regards males as exotic and strangely thrilling too. Carol bewilders Elaine by claiming that all the boys at school are in love with her. The number of Valentine cards she receives is very important to her, whereas Elaine understands that the large number of cards she has received are from boys who regard her as one of themselves. She decides not to talk about them. Carol implies, by whispering when she speaks about them, that men are a "special, thrilling joke" (48).

Carol is sometimes beaten by her father when her mother reports her bad behaviour to him, such as when Carol puts a smudge of lipstick on her lips. Her mother calls her cheap, "'Making a spectacle of yourself,' as if there's something wrong in the mere act of being looked at" (164). Elaine comes to the conclusion that for girls there are ways of being looked at that are bad. Atwood draws our attention to female internalisation of this most insidious aspect of the control mechanisms imposed by patriarchy.

The girls play doctor, with Carol and her burgeoning breasts as the patient. Elaine is gripped by nausea as she touches what feels like "a balloon half filled with water" (165). Carol is the first to wear a training bra and hangs around at school near where the boys are until two or three of them chase her. She runs so that they can catch her, tie her up with a skipping rope (a girls' plaything being used for her own oppression), or rub snow in her face. "She isn't much liked by the other girls" (202).

These half-told female secrets seem to connect somehow with the fact that the girls are not supposed to walk home across the ravine, with its decaying wooden footbridge, because of men who might lurk in the ravine, "the shadowy, nameless kind who do things to you" (48). What they might do and why they are dangerous is never revealed to the girls, and so it is with much of the transgressive knowledge that females are supposed to possess — it is all as mysterious to most of the girls as it is to the frightened males. For girls the ravine is the symbol of the unspeakable secret terrors that lie in wait for girls, while for Stephen the ravine is a good place to bury his marbles, his jar of light. He even draws a map to show where he has buried them.

Elaine and Cordelia do not possess this secret knowledge. But Cordelia knows *about* it. She has her elder sisters, Perdie and Mirrie, to learn from, but they only dangle interesting bits of conversation within her hearing, giving her no guidance in interpreting their meaning. Perdie and Mirrie are examples to the girls of what happens to the female form as womanhood approaches, and the girls are frightened as they begin to look at women in the streets in a new way. They cannot even ask their mothers about these things — "it's hard ... to think of [mothers] as having bodies at all, under their dresses" (93). Their job is to deal with so much dirt in the world as they clean and wash for their families, that they would surely not welcome the "grubby little questions" of little girls. And so a "long whisper runs among us, from child to child, gathering horror." (94).

But it seems that mothers do know about these things. Carol's mother maintains the outward appearance of respectability, as indicated by the twin beds in her bedroom. But the wet mark on her sheet and the contraceptive in her drawer indicate that she too possesses the secret transgressive knowledge of women. Elaine's mother is taken off to hospital in the middle of the night, and in the morning there is a huge oval splotch of blood on her mattress. Stephen, who was up watching stars in the night and saw his mother being taken away to hospital, says that the blood was caused by

a baby that came out too soon. Elaine cannot believe this and everyone, including her father, is frightened, especially when her mother comes home weak and tired and has to rest and is preoccupied for some time. It would seem, therefore, that Elaine's mother, too, is privy to the secret knowledge held by women. Many years later the bloodstains on Susie's bed caused by the abortion are a frightening reinforcement of this episode, magnified many times over.

For Elaine and Cordelia women's monthly blood is unspeakable — they cover up their fear by thinking it is funny (229). Elaine remembers that "'Those days' was the accepted, official phrase" (343) at school. She remembers how one of the girls fainted in health class when a teacher spelt "B-L-O-O-D" (343). But she also comes to know the power of female blood. On one of the occasions when she fainted at school to get away from Cordelia's torments she cut her forehead and the "sight of my own blood on the white washcloth [was] deeply satisfying to me" (172) (and, incidentally, frightening to Cordelia). Years later when she slashes her wrist with the Exacto knife it is the blood on the floor that tells what she has done. When her husband, Jon, comes home, he is unaware of her attempted suicide "until he turns on the light" (373) and sees her blood. Blood remains a terrifying part of her life as a female.

Cordelia tries to deny the horror of the secret transgressive female knowledge by being scornful of the hypocritically discreet adverts in the Eaton's catalogues at Grace's house. While the other girls obediently page through these catalogues of women's enslavement, as Grace requires them to do, Cordelia laughs at the attempts to find euphemisms for what she calls "big bazooms" (92). She draws moustaches on the faces of the models, and hair on their chests between their breasts. She is transgressing into the world of boys. During her dressing-up and play-acting phase Cordelia is the only one of the girls who is willing to play male roles, drawing a moustache on her own face for the role. But for Cordelia this world of boys is one in which she does not know the rules as Elaine does. As a result she goes too far and is doomed to disaster. At her new school she draws a penis on the bat that the male

teacher has drawn on the board, and labels the drawing with the male teacher's name. She is expelled from the school and her steady decline begins. It is paradoxical that it is this very quality of subversiveness after which Cordelia strives that she has a need to suppress in Elaine. Surely a patriarchically constructed pathology is at work here.

Elaine remembers this drawing of hair onto faces when she sees her own face on posters of her retrospective "defaced" with a moustache. She connects this sort of action with Cordelia. Drawing faces over their real faces is something that women do, perhaps trying to reinvent themselves because they are brought up to be dissatisfied with themselves. Elaine recalls the faces of the old women on the streetcars of their childhood. Those who are determined to remain gay have dyed hair and blotchy make-up. When she was young she saw them as having escaped from something, having become free to choose. But Elaine finds that as she gets older she is not sure what sort of face she is drawing over her own when she does her make-up — "eye problems ... too close to the mirror and I'm a blur, too far back and I can't see the details" (5).[10]

Even more horrifying is that there seems to be "something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women" (77), in particular, their teacher, Miss Lumley. Miss Lumley is rumoured to wear heavy navy-blue wool bloomers, and the "aura of [these] dark, mysterious, repulsive bloomers clings around her and ... makes her more terrifying" (78). Elaine feels fear and guilt by association when she thinks about Miss Lumley and her sacrosanct yet deeply shameful bloomers. "Whatever is wrong with them may be wrong with me also" (83) because Miss Lumley is also a female. There is, however, no explanation as to what is wrong about bloomers.

Even the rhymes of the skipping games that the girls play, rhymes passed down from

[10] One of the many uncomfortable manifestations of presbyopia for a woman is the inability to apply eye make-up. Without glasses one cannot see clearly, and with glasses on one cannot get to the eyes to apply the make-up.

generation to generation, their origins lost in the past, are heavy with a load of secret transgressive knowledge. The undercurrent of suggestiveness, of the not quite nice in these rhymes makes Elaine feel uncomfortable, although on the surface. "[w]e look like girls playing (140):

> "Salome was a dancer, she did the hoochie kootch;
> And when she did the hoochie kootch, she didn't wear very mooch" (60).

As Elaine intones this rhyme while turning the rope, pictures of glamorous movie stars, of "gaiety and excess" (60), fill her mind. But staid solid Grace in her pleats and wool can wipe out all that as she skips to the rhyme and solemnly wiggles her bum with complete decorum. Another of the skipping rhymes even carries a threat of menace, and "hints at an obscure dirtiness" (140):

> "Not last night but the night before
> Twenty-four robbers came to my back door
> And this is what they said ... to ... me!
> Lady turn around, turn around, turn around,
> Lady touch the ground, touch the ground, touch the ground;
> Lady show your shoe, show your shoe, show your shoe,
> Lady, lady, twenty-four skiddoo!" (140).

The concepts behind these suggestive and menacing rhymes are introduced very early into the lives of little girls. They convey attitudes of patriarchal constructions which continue to loom over girls and women with a sense of menace throughout their lives.

Lady originally meant the bread-maker, hence the female head of the house. But in the days of chivalry "lady" designated the counterpart of a knight, and later the counterpart of gentleman, or was the title given to the wife or daughter of a titled

male such as a lord. Thus it became a term of respect. But it was a title given to a woman, not in her own right, but as the beneficiary of her father or husband's position. Even in the chivalric context, however, the word "lady" often had the negative overtones of implying a "mistress". The word has suffered the same fate as the females to whom the title is given — an ambivalence on the part of the males who bestow the title but actually do not want women to maintain the chaste attributes that the title would imply. The word has become subverted and undermined. Nowadays lady is used interchangeably with woman, but there are still hints of ambivalence and disrespect in phrases such as lady of the night, lady luck, old lady, lady's man, lady-killer. Or it carries the suggestion that women are addressed as lady when someone is being obsequious or wanting a favour from them. Lady is often used for the Virgin Mary and later I shall discuss the ambivalent attitudes surrounding this idealised icon of femaleness.

Elaine imagines all kinds of dire fates for the lady in the skipping rhyme, even to imagining her "dangling from the crab-apple tree, the skipping rope noosed around her neck" (141) and the old small mean and ancient voice of female collaboration in the victimisation of her own sex, as in the case of Susie, surfaces: "I'm not sorry for her". (141). The subtext here is that of female guilt and sexuality.

Even Elaine's father uses the word lady as a kind of hidden threat of dire retribution when he reprimands her during her "mean mouth" stage. This is a stage during which Elaine intentionally hurts people with what she says to them. "'Your sharp tongue will get you in trouble some day, young lady'", he warns. "Young lady is a sign that I've gone too daringly close to some edge or other ... I've come to enjoy the risk, the sense of vertigo ... that I'm walking on thin ice" (235).

During her visit to Toronto for her retrospective many years later, Elaine is brought face to face with these same ambivalent feelings about women's need of each other and the meaning of the word lady. She sees the crowd on the street ignoring a

drunken old woman lying on the pavement and she identifies, as a woman, with this inert body. But at the same time she is aware of not wanting to be involved with her, especially when the woman calls out to her "'Lady. Lady' ... the final word of appeal" (152). The woman has blood on her forehead, and women's blood is repulsive but a common tie. She is needy and Elaine has a history of being in love with the need of another. "In the clutch of the helpless I am helpless" (152). There is a connection for her between bleeding hearts and her purse and she feels compelled to give the woman money. But she and the woman know that she is buying her off and the woman's blessing changes from "Our Lady bless you" to "You're our Lady and you don't love me" (153). She walks away, not willing to be caught up in the web of guilt that she knows only too well and to which she can so easily fall prey. Nevertheless Elaine's old self reasserts itself, all the baggage from her past, as she has to admit that she does not love the woman and feels guilty for it, "I know too much to be good ... I know myself to be vengeful, greedy, secretive and sly" (153).

It is not only the awful secrets about being a female that are being revealed to Elaine. Carol and Elaine have swopped secrets about their respective homes, but the homes of the other girls have their secrets too. If Carol is the girl who likes secrets, Grace Smeath is the girl who is manipulative and likes to be in control. Grace is a year older and a grade higher at school and thus another of Carol's "object[s] to be admired" (51). The main secret of Grace's home is her mother's "bad heart". Grace tells about this "smugly, as if she has something, some privilege or moral superiority" (57) which is bestowed by this bad heart. The other object about which she has the same attitude of superiority is the rubber plant on the landing of their stairs. This is the only plant in their house and has to have special care, like Mrs Smeath's heart. The bad heart does indeed grant privileges. Her heart condition not only entitles Mrs Smeath to manipulate those who come into her home, but obliges the girls to do as Grace tells them, like tiptoeing when her mother is resting on her chesterfield, covered by her afghan rug, as the girls see her doing every day. "Bad hearts have their uses" (57), and Grace uses her mother's bad heart as an agent of drawing the

other girls into a web of complicity and collaboration with her need to control and manipulate.

Female invalidism is another aspect of patriarchal conditioning. An ailing woman is acceptable in the patriarchal scheme of things, but the ailing woman syndrome can become a double-edged sword as the ailing female uses her weakness to manipulate males and females alike. Daughters will obviously perpetuate a system that works so well for their mothers, and so it is with Grace.

It is not only in her own home that Grace uses the bad heart phenomenon as a means of controlling her friends. Even when they play at someone else's home she dictates what they play. When the other girls try to play games she does not like she "says she has a headache and goes home ... She never ... gets angry; ... she is quietly reproachful, as if her headache is our fault" (52). One of her favourite games is playing school and she is always the teacher. She does not allow any fun in her school, such as drawing or being naughty, as she dislikes disorder. She allows the girls to colour in her colouring books as long as they stay within the lines and use the colours she tells them to.

She allows them to play with her movie star paper dolls, but restricts them to putting on and taking off of their clothes. She never allows them to cut them out. What they are allowed to cut out are the coloured figures in the piles of Eaton's Catalogues in her bedroom. This they do "with reverence" (53), pasting the figures into scrapbooks, calling them "my lady" (53) and surrounding them with household objects such as pots and furniture also cut from the catalogues.

To Elaine this all seems very strange, as her previous experience of Eaton's Catalogues has been as toilet paper in the outhouses up north — perhaps a more appropriate use for these purveyors and reinforcers of hypocritical gendered roles. The other part of the game that she finds difficult to understand is the pretence at

modesty that is expected of each of them as they admire each other's scrapbooks. The little girls practise the hypocritical roles they will have to play as adults: "Mine's awful" they say in "false and wheedling voices ... But it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too" (53).

So Grace reinforces patriarchal constructions of women as passive and controlled, as objects and consumers. She also conspires with the system in the role of a controlling female. She not only manipulates the girls around her but has also learned strategies of controlling her father by pleasing him. When Grace and her sister beg to be taken to the railway goods yard after church to watch the trains, Elaine understands immediately that the little girls are playing their father's game in order to please him, as it is really he, and not they, who wishes to watch the trains (100).

Elaine is beginning to discover that in this new world of girls the way one is seen is more important that the way in which one sees. She is gradually being transformed into someone else, against her better judgment, in order to make herself acceptable to her friends and to conform to what is expected of girls in her new context. It is important to "stay within the lines" (52). At first she feels self-conscious, as if she is "doing an imitation of a girl" (52) but she gradually gets used to it. She is becoming aware of the necessity of being seen to be displaying possessions in the world of consumerism.

Up to now she has lived a life on the move and no one in her family has been able to accumulate things. But gradually she begins to want things as Grace and Carol do, "braids, a dressing gown, a purse of my own" (54). Among other things, she is given a red plastic purse in which she puts her nickel for Sunday school collection. But her giving is without any heart. The negative competitiveness of assuming an attitude of false modesty while displaying the accumulated objects, of hypocritically insisting that one has done badly at whatever one has done, is the only form of competitiveness she needs to display (54). She realises that this world of girls is much easier than the

competitive world of boys, a passive way of existing. This passivity can, however, also be a powerful tool as girls and women use their apparent weakness, headaches and bad hearts, to manipulate and control. She no longer goes to her father's building on Saturdays, the place of jars of lizards and ox-eyeballs.

Elaine finds that in order to be seen as acceptable she needs to be reformed in many ways. In the Smeath household she discovers her ignorance of things to do with her soul, things about which the Smeaths are in the know. The Smeaths set about reforming Elaine but it is obvious that in all this Mrs Smeath is more pleased with herself for what she is doing than she is with Elaine. Elaine tries very hard to do all that is required of her at Sunday school only to discover that Grace watches her every move and reports to Cordelia that she is a "goody-goody". She discovers that it is "wrong to be right" (124) and that "[t]hinking you are too good is bad" (123).

Another and even more negative way of having to see herself is imposed on Elaine when Cordelia comes into her life after the next summer.

In the spring Elaine is "wrenched away form [her] new life, the life of girls" (64), dressed in her corduroy pants and her brother's old jersey, when her family take to the road again. After some time back in the world of forests, lakes, insect infestations, fishing, blueberrying, bear turds, of eating fried Spam and drinking powdered milk, Elaine finds it hard to believe in the world she has experienced in the city, and can hardly remember what her friends look like, as her former way of seeing life reasserts itself.

As her family drove off with her in the spring, Elaine watched through the back window of the car the two figures of Grace and Carol standing under the apple trees "in their skirts" (64) disappearing in the distance. When they return to the city, their house looks different. The wild flowers have taken over in the garden while it stood empty, in the same way as nature had worked its healing balm in Elaine's life during

this period back in the forests. But standing under the apple trees are three girls, not the two she saw fading in the distance when she left.

The third is a girl Elaine has never seen before and she looks at her "empty of premonition" (69). This is Cordelia, the girl who has not only replaced Elaine in the circle of three friends, but is about to become her *alter ego* and the person who affects her life as a negative transforming force and becomes her victimiser. At first her victimisation at Cordelia's hands nearly destroys Elaine, emotionally and physically. But eventually Elaine is able to transform this negative force into something positive and constructive. Gradually, as Elaine moves towards self-individuation through both voice and painting as she grows and matures, her negative experience of victimisation becomes the goad towards a positive life-affirming transformation.

Elaine's first encounter with Cordelia holds promise of something different from what the other girls have to offer. For one thing Cordelia is dressed in corduroys and a pullover. She also behaves disconcertingly like an adult. Suddenly, however, she drops the adult facade and tells Elaine she has "dog poop" on her shoe. When Elaine retorts that it is only squashed apple Cordelia says "It's the same colour though, isn't it? ... Not the hard kind, the soft squooshy kind, like peanut butter" (71). This is the world of ox-eyes and toe-jam that Elaine understands: "[Cordelia] creates a circle of two, takes me in" (71) (a prophetic play on words on Atwood's part).

Elaine sees people as fitting into two categories which she calls wild and tame and she sees Cordelia as "wild, pure and simple" (130). It is Cordelia who dares to lean on the railings of the bridge over the ravine instead of sticking safely to the middle, and it is she who identifies the thing that they find near the ravine as a condom, although she doesn't know what it is for. She tells them that the stream through the ravine is "made of dissolved dead people" (75) because it flows from the cemetery, and she dares the girls to go down into the ravine to the stream. When they pick the

enticingly pretty berries of the deadly nightshade, "red as valentine candies" (74) she warns them to wash their hands thoroughly as "one drop [of the poisonous juice] could turn you into a zombie" (76). The ravine and its unspoken terrors for girls is a construction of patriarchal control which Cordelia flouts magnificently. But all of this behaviour is a hollow role she is playing, and it soon becomes apparent that her wildness is ambivalent.

Cordelia shows off her home, which is more modern and looks more sophisticated than the homes of the other girls. They see her mother arranging real flowers in Swedish glass vases: "Swedish glass is the best kind, [Cordelia] says (71). The family eat boiled eggs out of egg-cups, not mashed up in a saucer as the other families do. "'After you eat the egg,' Cordelia tells us, 'you have to put a hole in the bottom of the shell ... So the witches can't put out to sea.'" (72). "Cordelia's mother has a cleaning lady" (71), who is called "the woman".[11]

Cordelia has two older sisters, Perdita, who takes ballet, and Miranda, who plays the viola which is seen "lying in its velvet-lined case" (72). She tells the girls that their names are all from Shakespeare "as though it's something we should all recognise" (73), and that it was Mummie's idea. Cordelia says her sisters are "gifted" but when Elaine asks if she is gifted too she turns away without answering. Herein lies the crux of Cordelia's problems. She does not measure up to her father's expectations of her, and no matter how hard she tries to please him she only makes matters worse.

Elaine realises that what he wants from Cordelia is some give and take. Although Cordelia is loud-mouthed and wild with her friends she is abject and tongue-tied with her father and can never come up with her cockiness in his presence. She is frightened of him and of not pleasing him. She is the "wrong person" (249) for him.

[11] It is interesting to note the use of this word to denote a female of inferior position in the household. The debasement of the term "lady" (discussed earlier in this chapter) has led many women to prefer being addressed as "woman".

In *The Robber Bride* Charis's grandmother says that some people are born to the wrong parents. Charis recognises that she is one of those people. But in this novel Cordelia is unable to recognise this possibility, and her floundering attempts to please her father make him even more displeased with her. Mummie, too, has miscast Cordelia in choosing her name, that of Lear's favourite daughter, the one endowed with wisdom.

Mummie is small and fragile and they all humour her. She takes painting classes and some of her paintings hang in the "upstairs hall" (a form of humouring her; presumably they are not good enough to be hung in the public part of the house). Perhaps Mummie's attempts at art are her way of trying to find her own means of expression,[12] but, like Cordelia, she has chosen something that is not really true to who she is — she has long since forgotten who she might have been. "The girls have spun a web of conspiracy around Mummie" (73) and do not tell her certain things. But Cordelia is less agile at deceiving Mummie and often evokes her angry response: "I am disappointed in you" (73). In saying this Mummie is the father's voice and messenger, having no real or valid life of her own in the household. When Mummie is very disappointed she calls in their father and that is serious. "He is large and craggy, charming, but we have heard him shouting upstairs" (73).

Thus it is that Cordela emulates the behaviour of her parents, her father, who is charming but is heard to shout upstairs, and her mother who calls in her father when she is very disappointed in Cordelia. Cordelia has no originality and relies on mimicking the adults in her world, echoing her mother's "I am disappointed in you" in a vain attempt to assuage her guilt at being the unloved, untalented member of the family, by transferring it to someone else.

Because Cordelia has disappointed him, her father invites Elaine's collusion against

[12] Compare her attempts at art with those of the Governor's wife in *Alias Grace*.

his family, as he mockingly describes himself as hag-ridden in his household of women, (incidentally enacting a role which appears to diminish him, just as his wife enacts a role of helplessness in having to call on his support).

When Elaine has meals with the Smeaths on Sundays, their father, shadowy like most fathers during the week, emerges and tries to engage Elaine in his subversive jokes at his family's expense. He refers to their boring wartime meal of pork and beans as "musical fruit" (179) and after grace, he calls out "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" (179). Although Elaine does not understand his jokes and is unable to collaborate with him, perhaps these fathers of all-girl families recognise and acknowledge something of the ox-eyeballs and toe-jam in Elaine.

Because she is a disappointment to both her mother and her father Cordelia tries to create a new character for herself by dressing up and acting out roles. She has a large collection of dressing-up costumes, old clothes of her mother's, handed down via her sisters, and tries to encourage the friends to put on plays with her. As mentioned before, she even agrees to take the boys' parts from time to time because nobody else wants to take these parts as there are no clothes for them. Perhaps she even feels that she might be come more acceptable to her father if she were a boy. She takes on the male role,"drawing a moustache on herself with Perdie's eyebrow pencil" (74), the use of an item of female make-up to create a male role adding to the irony of the transformation. But Cordelia's attempts at transformation are inept and inadequate. In her choice of acting as a means of expressing who she is she has chosen an art form that compels her to be someone she is not, the antithesis of Elaine's eventual creative self-realistion through her painting.

Cordelia would like to rebel against the constraints that the world places upon females, the hypocrisy, the conformity and the passivity. But when she cannot sustain the role of rebel she succumbs to the role imposed on her by patriarchal society, casting herself in the role of a victim. She then falls into one of its most

devious traps, the trap of actively participating in the victimisation of another member of her own sex.

John Berger points out that the role of the mirror in paintings of nudes is "to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight".[13] Cordelia holds a mirror up to Elaine at school, saying disgustedly "'Look at yourself! Just look!'" (158). Cordelia reflects her own disgust at herself by projecting it onto Elaine, until Elaine is unable to see herself, except through the eyes of Cordelia's projection. Laura Mulvey makes the point that "the sexualised image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected onto the female image".[14] If we accept this theory it becomes evident that Cordelia's victimisation of Elaine is a direct result of her father's feelings of inadequacy as a male.

Argyle and Cook, in their study of the significance of "gaze", point out that in social interaction too much gaze produces anxiety.[15] And so it is that when Elaine spends time away from Cordelia's influence, on holiday with her parents, she notices that her face in the the mirror begins to seem rounder and she looks happy (146). She has been able to walk for a while "without seeing how I look from the back" (143), (that is, without being judged). But even many years later when she meets Cordelia and Cordelia recalls episodes from their past she finds she does not want to remember. "I catch an image of myself, a dark blank" (302), and she sees herself reflected in Cordelia's sunglasses "in duplicate and monochrome, a great deal smaller than lifesize" (303).

Even much later in her life Elaine is uncomfortably aware of the treachery of mirror images. When shopping for clothes she admits that, whatever else women want to

[13] Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. BBC. London. 1972. 61. Berger's comments on nudes in eighteenth century oil paintings are discussed more fully at a later stage in this chapter.
[14] Mulvey, Laura: *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Indiana University. Bloomington. 1989. xiii.
[15] Argyle, Michael and Cook, Mark: *Gaze and Mutual Gaze*. Cambridge University. Cambridge. 1976. 165.

see in a mirror, it is not themselves but a transformation. She tries to see her rear in the mirror, still concerned about how she is seen from the back.

Cordelia sets about completely depriving Elaine of her ability to see or speak.

"Cordelia is digging a hole" (106), a hole that she says is to become a clubhouse. She is being frighteningly singleminded about this hole.[16] It is just after Remembrance Day, commemorated on the streets with red poppies and at school by three minutes of silence and the memorising of a poem about the dead. Elaine has been made very aware of those "who died for us" (107), although she has never known any dead people. This hole of Cordelia's, which starts off as a game, has overtones of death, especially when the first game is that of entombing in it the beheaded Mary Queen of Scots, in the person of a suitably dressed up Elaine. Boards are placed over the hole and soil is shovelled onto the boards until Elaine is in total darkness and total silence. Elaine feels absolute terror.

The games in the dark played with her brother were to teach her to see in the dark, but there is a malevolence about this game that is real and terrifying. Elaine remembers it as no learning experience but as "[t]he point at which I lost power" (107), the point at which Cordelia took over. Elaine becomes incapable of seeing at all, let alone in the dark, and can see herself only as Cordelia allows her to be seen. It is from this point that Elaine starts to bury her memories of this period, memories which are too painful to live with. She knows that soon after this she turned nine but can remember nothing of her birthday. All she can remember is a "sense of shame and failure" (108).

[16] Years later (when Elaine has deliberately expunged this hole from her memory) Cordelia recalls that she was actually digging the hole for herself. She needed a place where she would be safe from her father's temper (252). This is the version she prefers to remember and is no doubt also true, but Elaine's victimisation sprang from Cordelia's substitution of Elaine for herself. This is an interesting instance of misremembering, or re-creating the past. Zenia, in *The Robber Bride* and Grace in *Alias Grace* are the great exponents of this strategy, as discussed in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

Whose shame and whose failure is this? Cordelia has buried her own shame and sense of failure by immolating Elaine, whom she recognises as her *alter ego*, and transferring her feelings of inadequacy to Elaine, just as Elizabeth I had Mary Queen of Scots beheaded to make herself secure in her sovereignty. The burying of a beheaded Elaine conveys the sense that Cordelia is denying Elaine the capacity of independent thinking, a concept that she proceeds to reinforce through her ruthless persecution of the disempowered Elaine. Cordelia, the victim of her father's expectations, has become the victimiser.

Of course the decapitated female is a symbol of the male vision of women as passion not reason, body not mind, but in this novel it is not only the males who perpetuate this patronising and destructive concept. Although it is Elaine's ex-husband, Jon, who specialises in mutilated bodies in his special effects work, there are echoes of mutilation and decapitation throughout the novel. But in these other episodes it is women who have cut off heads, sometimes the heads of other women. Elaine herself has cut off the heads of some of the women from the Eaton's Catalogue or exchanged their heads for those of others. Jody, one of the collaborators in Elaine's first group art show, does "store mannequins, sawn apart" (347) and glued back together with their heads in strange places, while Cordelia herself precipitates the episode of the bouncing head in the production of *Macbeth*.

Not only does Cordelia transfer her shame and guilt to Elaine, her victim, but she deprives Elaine of her voice. She torments her by constantly suggesting that she has said or done something wrong. Cordelia's voice, as we have mentioned before, is not authentic, but a mimicking of the voices of those in authority over her in an attempt to transfer her helplessness and guilt to Elaine. She enlists the collusion of Grace and Carol and the three of them banish Elaine, not in the physical sense, but into a conspiracy of silence: "It's something I said wrong, but I don't know what it is because they won't tell me. Cordelia says it will be best for me to think back over everything I've said today and try to pick out the wrong thing. That way I will learn

not to say such a thing today" (116). The technique of self-policing is utterly disempowering as it paralyses the victim who fears making a mistake and therefore does nothing. The victim becomes as culpable for sins of omission as for sins of commission. If Elaine speaks she is wrong, if she does not speak she is being impolite and will "have to be punished". "'What have you to say for yourself?'" asks Cordelia "And I have nothing to say" (117).

On the first page of the novel Elaine says that her brother is moving "away from the imprecision of words" (3) and during this time she and Stephen find various means of communicating without talking directly to each other. They make a "walkie-talkie from two tin cans and a piece of string" (46) to use between their bedrooms at night, or they write notes in code, "the cryptic language of the aliens, which is filled with x's and z's and must be decoded ... sentences without vowels" (46). Or they tie their shoelaces together under the dinner table and communicate by means of tugging, "the Morse of the feet" (46).

This is not the same as the loss of language that she is forced into with her girl friends. When she first takes Carol to her father's building she finds herself, in Carol's company, unable to join in the usual game with her brother of making up revolting food such as toadburgers or leech chewing-gum, but also unable to bring herself to make squeamish sounds in response as Carol does, "[s]o I say nothing" (50).

For those close to Elaine her lapsing into silence is not interpreted for what it is. Elaine's father asks "Enjoying the parade, girls?" (116) as he passes through the room, and her mother does not realise that her desire to stay at home and help with the domestic chores is a cry for help, a need to stay in the protective environment of her home, close to her mother. Although her mother realises that something is amiss she is unable to break the barrier of silence which Elaine has raised. Girls are brought up in the convention of secrecy which links to their gender socialisation and the sexual guilt with which they are connected in patriarchal society. (The adult Elaine

wonders how she would recognise signs of victimisation in her own daughters, or discern whether they were perhaps doing "it" to someone else. "Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (118)). The other adults, Cordelia's sisters and her mother, do not notice the misery that Elaine is experiencing.

Her unhappiness is not hidden from all the adults. Not everyone is unaware of what is happening. One day, overhearing Mrs Smeath discussing her with Aunt Mildred, Elaine realises that Mrs Smeath is aware of what the other girls are doing to her and, far from doing something to stop it, she approves and feels that Elaine deserves what she is getting. Elaine suddenly knows that Mrs Smeath has God "all buttoned up" (180) and he is on her side, meting out punishments. Elaine knows that she is excluded from his love, and she sees him as "hard, inexorable, faceless and moving forward as if on tracks. God is a sort of engine" (180), (the Sunday activities of the Smeath family coming together as one in her mind). This blatant betrayal by an adult leads Elaine to refusing to go to Sunday school again, one of her first stands against her persecutors.

What fuels and drives Elaine's compliance in her own victimisation is her need to be accepted by the other girls, and especially by Cordelia. "I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please" (120). She wants to be a real girl like those she had imagined when she read about them in books. At times Elaine is drawn into the group and made to feel loved. She feels a kinship with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer when the song is sung on the radio before Christmas, because he also had something wrong with him, but he gives her hope "because he ended up beloved" (128). She constantly feels the need to make atonement, even though she has no idea what she has done wrong, such as when she uses the money earned from looking after Brian Finestein to buy sweets for her friends. "In the moment just before giving, I am loved" (135).

Elaine would not dream of telling, partly because she is afraid of losing her friends,

but partly because of a misplaced sense of loyalty to Cordelia: "Telling the truth about Cordelia is ... unthinkable for me" (191). This ambivalence in the victim entails a need to speak but a fear that doing so will lead to rejection, and so the victim loses her voice instead, and her victimisation remains hidden.

All girls' games are surrounded by an aura of watchfulness and judgment, of words that mean something other than what they purport to mean"(140). This aura of watchfulness is so different from the openness of boys' games, like marbles, a game that returns to the playground when the sun shines, a game in which the parameters are fixed and you risk your marbles, pit your skills against an opponent and either win or lose.

In this judgmental milieu Elaine finds that, not only has she lost the power of language, but words are becoming dangerous to her.

Cordelia tricks Elaine into calling her own father, the entomologist, a man whose work entails catching bugs, a "bugger". She knows that this is a dirty word and she does not know why, but it "reeks of ill will, it has power" (135). "I have betrayed, I have been betrayed" (135), she thinks. This happens in the context of her looking after Brian Finestein, and she immediately tells Mrs Finestein that she can no longer look after Brian. Knowing she has "only a limited ability to say no"(135) she is afraid that, having betrayed her father, she might not be able to keep Brian safe from harm when he is with her.

More and more Elaine begins to feel judged as inadequate. "What have you got to say for yourself? Cordelia used to ask. Nothing, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (41).

This feeling of being a nothing begins to produce physical manifestations, one of which is the self-mutilation of Elaine's feet and fingers. It is as if she is completing

Cordelia's task of destroying her, through self-immolation. She constantly, and without thinking, chews the cuticles around her fingernails until they are raw and oozing, but never the fingernails themselves "because why bite something that didn't hurt". "But the feet were deliberate ... [t]he pain gave me something definite to think about ... something to hold onto" (114), as she carefully peels the skin off the bottom of her toes and the balls of her feet in narrow strips, secretly at night in bed in the dark.[17]

Sometimes at meals at home she has trouble getting her food down because of the tightness of the anxiety in her stomach and sometimes, watching the breakfast toast in the morning, she has the urge to put her finger "onto the red hot grill" (119) of the toaster. At other times the question of what it would feel like to put her hand through the wringer of the washing machine becomes a compelling thought, and she imagines that "a whole person could go through the wringer and come out flat, neat, completed, like a flower pressed in a book" (123) — improved?

In the context of words that are letting her down more and more, Elaine takes another step on the journey to self-destruction. Even the written word is letting her down, as her handwriting has become "spidery, frantic, and disfigured" (127) and Miss Lumley tells her she must "try harder" (127), reinforcing her feelings of being useless. She used to love making words with the noodles in her alphabet soup, or eating the letters of her name one by one, but now they are just letters that taste like nothing. Her body physically rejects words which have become useless to her as, one day when she is obliged to go out and "play" with the other girls, she vomits up the alphabet soup onto the snow and is taken home ill. At home she lies in a fever, cosseted and protected from the dangerous world about her; she has learnt a means of escaping into her own body where nothing can touch her. "I feel safe, small, wrapped in my illness as if in cotton wool. I begin to be sick more often" (137).

[17] The protagonist in *Surfacing* mutilates herself in a similar fashion because feeling pain is better than feeling nothing.

From now on being sick becomes a regular refuge from the anguish of being judged for not being good enough. The female invalidism that she sees being practised by Mrs Smeath and Grace becomes a strategy of escape for Elaine. But even in bed she is assailed by the responsibility of having to live up to things, of being watched. The women's magazines that she cuts up while in bed are filled with women feverishly cleaning and killing germs, or being watched in all they do, "This is a Watchbird watching YOU" (138). Even on the radio she hears the Happy Gang expecting everyone to be happy and healthy and she is filled with anxiety at the expectation: "What happens to you if you aren't happy and healthy? They don't say" (139).[18]

Even more ominous is her growing obssession with death. By the end of the school year Elaine has reached a point at which people around her seem to be unreal, more like bright animated dolls whose words are mere sounds conveying no meaning to her and arousing no feelings in her. She herself feels "I am alive in my eyes only" (141), and that if she has to stay in the city any longer "I will burst inwards ... implode. [The word] has a dull final sound to it, like a lead door closing" (142). Elaine's obssession with death and self-destruction is a frightening commentary on the dreadful consequences that some women and girls have to face because of the need for compliance in a system that holds up patriarchally structured norms of appearance and conduct as the requirements for acceptance in society.

The family's summer departure for the forests of the north is a relief as she leaves behind the three watching figures of Grace, Cordelia and Carol. But even as they travel north to her old haunts she has no sense of belonging and feels that, as they pass people at the side of the road, "I'm a blur to them" (142). The blackflies are out and are biting her. She watches them crawling up the car window, jumping down and

[18] In an interview to commemorate fifty years of the BBC4 programme, *Women's Hour*, the presenter of the programme, Jenny Murray, spoke about the early days, in the 1940s and 1950s, when programme content was restricted to an extremely narrow patriarchially constructed set of norms, to do with the home and a woman's personal appearance. During the War women had taken over men's roles and work, but now the need was to get women back into their prescribed domestic roles. Interview on SAFM's *Woman Today* programme (13 October 1999) by Nancy Richards.

then crawling up again and possibly recognises in them the futility of her own struggle for existence. With what seems like perverse satisfaction she says "I squash them against the glass, leaving red smears *of my own blood*" (143) (my italics).

During the summer in the forests she gradually finds herself becoming less anxious. The mutilation of feet and fingers stops, she can be free of words, she enjoys the sense of swimming in the dangerous lake without fear, and she is glad that "there are no other children" (143). But the images of death are ever present to her.

Along the road she had seen a raven picking up a porcupine that had been run over by a car, the porcupine a mess of quills and scrambled pink guts. Later, walking through the forest she finds a dead raven looking "bigger than they look alive"(144). Although she has often seen dead animals this raven seems deader, and she thinks "No matter what I do to it, it won't feel a thing. No one can get to it" (144). Perhaps an enviable position in which to be? Her mother makes jelly from the red translucent chokecherries which Elaine picks. To her the beautiful red jars of jelly look poisonous. Then she dreams about the raven, that it is alive, hopping about and flapping its wings, but that it "still looks dead" (145), its wings decaying as it flaps them. The rest of the dream is about herself, shaming and terrifying. It ends with her chokecherries turning out to be deadly nightshade berries, "filled with blood, like the bodies of blackflies. As I touch them they burst, and the blood runs over my hands" (145).

When the family returns to the city Elaine feels the return of the oppressive feelings. This time, instead of noticing that wild flowers have taken over the garden, she finds that the house smells stale inside, that the water in the pipes has gone rusty. Her body begins to stiffen, "emptying itself of feeling" (154). Cordelia has become relentless in her persecution so that Elaine feels as if she is being backed towards a cliff, "another step, and I'll be over" (154). She considers trying to become invisible to the three girls who wait for her on the bridge by "eating the deadly nightshade berries from the bushes beside the path. I think about drinking the Javex out of the

skull and crossbones bottle in the laundry room, about jumping off the bridge, about smashing down there like a pumpkin ... I would come apart like that, I would be dead, like the dead people" (155). She hears Cordelia, speaking in her kind voice, urging her to do all these self-destuctive things, "Do it. Come on. I would be doing these things to please her" (155).

She describes herself as being "enthralled" (155). She cannot talk about what is happening to her, not even to her brother — there are no obvious signs of bullying such as he would recognise, "no black eyes, no bloody noses" (155). Her mother signals that she is aware of the fact that something is happening between her and the other girls but signifies that she is powerless, "I wish I knew what to do" (156). Several critics, among them Chimnoy Banerjee,[19] make much of the failure of the mother. For me, Atwood signifies the apparent failure of mothering, one of the basic female instincts, but Elaine's mother is unable to help her daughter who, under the subtle onslaught of patriarchy, has lost her ability to communicate with her mother. All her mother can do is to encourage her not to be "spineless". But it is Elaine who must work out her own salvation and find her own voice. She remembers the backbones of the tinned sardines which "crumble between your teeth, and she knows that she has to fight her battle on her own, "If I give in to it, what little backbone I have will crumble away to nothing" (156).

Quite by chance Elaine discovers a way in which to escape temporarily from Cordelia's imperative voice. She finds a new technique for survival, a form of temporarily stepping aside from the problem for a brief respite, but also a dangerous step closer to complete oblivion.

The episode with the dead turtle on display at the Conversat in her father's building is the start of this process. Elaine has become acutely aware of others who, like her,

[19] Banerjee, Chimnoy: "Atwood's Time: Hiding Art in *Cat's Eye*". *Modern Fiction Studies*. 22. 1990. 518.

seem to be under surveillance and are helpless to step out of the role of being a victim. She identifies passionately and painfully with the turtle, apparently dead as she seems to herself, but its heart still functioning as hers is. The voice of the turtle is no longer its own but the sound of its heartbeat rigged up to a loudspeaker for all to hear, the sound of its life seeping away. "Soon the turtle will be empty of life" (170) and this is what she feels will be the result for her too.

She is hemmed in with this terrifying sound by the crush of people in the room and faints in the claustrophobic atmosphere. As she comes to she realises that she has "discovered something worth knowing. There's a way out of places you want to leave but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body" (171).

The next time she can no longer tolerate what Cordelia is meting out to her she faints in the school playground. She becomes adept at fainting at will when she feels she cannot cope, but this coping mechanism soon changes to an ability to "spend time outside [her] body without falling over" (173). She feels "as if there are two of me" (173). She can see and hear what is going on around her but she does not have to pay any attention: it can in no way affect her. This seems frighteningly like a near-death experience and is a commentary on the paradoxically self-destructive schizophrenic means to which which females sometimes have to resort in order to survive the patriarchal constructs imposed on them.[20]

The real benefit of this coping mechanism, this ability to "spend time outside [her] body without falling over" (172) is greater than merely escaping from the present. The significance of her learning this skill is that it enables her to step aside and look at her situation from the outside. "I can see what is happening, I can hear what's being said to me, *but I don't have to pay any attention*" (172). (my italics).

[20] This is similar to the desperate strategy adopted by Karen in *The Robber Bride* to escape the sexual abuse of her uncle.

Elaine is beginning to learn to see again, even if it is from the safety of an out of the body experience. In the dark, as it were.

She has reached the stage of recognising that there are two parts of her, one part which is the *alter ego* of Cordelia, the suffering, punished side of her, the part that "needs improving", and another part of her that is herself, that can step aside and observe dispassionately what is happening to her. It has been a long process for her to have reached this position, and it is not long after this realisation that she is a separate being and not the one that has to suffer Cordelia's torments, that she is able to break away and assert who she really is.

Finally, it is a visual image, a visual depiction of what it is she is suffering but cannot express, which helps her break the cycle of destruction in which she has been caught.

On the way home from school one day she picks up a picture of the Virgin Mary, obviously dropped by a child from Our Lady of Perpetual Help school. The sadly-smiling image, with seven swords in her heart and her hands stretched out as if in welcome, speaks to her. The damaged heart of the icon on this picture speaks the same language to Elaine as the damaged heart of the turtle, a language of compassion, in the true sense of that word, of "suffering with". This is quite unlike the damaged heart of Mrs Smeath, which speaks of judgment and manipulation and knows nothing of pity. These symbols of damaged hearts evoke in Elaine the despairing recognition of helplessness in the face of mortality and lead her to a decision to break all the rules and pray to the Virgin Mary. She is not sure what to expect or how to do it, but in her desperation and determination she is rewarded with a vision of a bright red heart as she prays.

Spring is approaching and winter loses its hardness and glitter. The girls have fun in the remaining snow and Elaine allows herself to laugh like the others, "trying it out.

My laughter is a performance, a grab at the ordinary" (185). But Cordelia punishes Elaine for her laughter, for trying out her voice, by throwing her woollen cap over the railings of the bridge into the ravine. She tells her that she will be forgiven if she goes into the ravine and fetches it.

Cordelia recognises within Elaine a previously unknown "core of resistance", and a brief battle of wills ensues. Elaine wonders what will happen next if she dares to resist. Where will her defiance end, and what will Cordelia do next? There is no telling what Cordelia might do if seriously challenged. Up to now she has done Elaine no physical harm, but Elaine is afraid of what might happen if Cordelia is pushed too far. Elaine ventures into the ravine where her hat lies on the ice over the creek. She hears the water of the creek under the ice, the water of the dead people, coming from the cemetery, and she steps out onto the ice to fetch her cap.

The ice breaks and she falls into the icy water, up to her waist. Her boots are heavy and full of icy water. She realises that if she stays there much longer she will freeze to death in the water made from the dead people, "dissolved and clear" (188). The idea seems quite appealing, as she imagines herself "peaceful and clear, like them" (188). She painfully struggles out of the water and empties the freezing water out of her waterlogged boots. The other girls have run away and she wonders how she will manage to get up the steep slope of the ravine. She experiences the same sense of being hemmed in by many people as she did in the room with the turtle, but this time they are the dead people gathering around her. At this point Elaine faces the ultimate choice between self-destruction and regeneration as she almost succumbs to the numbing effects of hypothermia. The numb, remote feeling is one she has experienced before and she finds herself succumbing to the desire to step aside from her body, finally.

She is rescued from herself by a vision of the woman with the warm red heart, the Virgin with the damaged heart, standing on the bridge above her and then wafting

down as if on air and holding out her arms to her. She feels "a surge of happiness" (189) and experiences the woman as "a small wind of warmer air" (189). She cannot hear a voice but she knows she is being told "You can go home now ... It will be all right" (189).

Even in this time of crisis Elaine cannot tell her frantic mother, who has come to the ravine to look for her, the truth about Cordelia. The voice of Cordelia over the telephone, apologising, is not Cordelia's true voice. The apology has been exacted from her and Elaine knows that she will have to pay in some way.

When she returns to school, having recovered from her ordeal in the ravine, Elaine finds herself able to counter Cordelia's accusations. "I didn't tell" (193), she says, with no sinking sensation in her gut, and in a voice that is "flat, calm, reasonable" (193). She dismisses Cordelia's taunts with "'I don't know and I don't care'" (193) and turns and walks away from her.[21] She feels buoyed up, as if on air, like in the dream she had after being rescued from the ravine. In this dream she is being helped out of reach of people chasing her. "They're still shouting but I can no longer hear them. Their mouths close and open silently, like the mouths of fish" (192). Her enemies have lost their voice and can no longer reach her.

So Atwood reminds us that the process of victimisation can be halted by resistance from the victim.

While Elaine grows into the realisation that she is no longer susceptible to the enticements of her former friends, she seeks an escape from reality as she immerses herself in the world of comic books, the boys' world of action and fantasy which holds no threats for her. She feels empowered as she imagines herself climbing

[21] J Brooks Bouson, in *Brutal Choreographies*, reads Elaine's walking away as "a defensive behaviour she will repeat again and again in her adult relationships — she does not escape" (174) and not as a positive affirmation of her selfhood. It has already been noted in the Introduction that by my assessment Bousson's reading of Elaine's position of victimhood is radically flawed.

skyscrapers, flying with a cape, seeing through walls and dealing with criminals with the magicically powerful words of the comic books, "Kapow. Krac. Kaboom" (194), as Grace, Cordelia and Carol grow "paler and paler every day, less and less substantial" (194). Even their names begin to lose meaning for Elaine as she makes other friends. They become "footnotes" with "no emotion attached" (201).

At high school, the past buried in forgetfulness, Elaine and Cordelia become friends once more. Cordelia has spent a year at high school elsewhere and knows the language of high school, the current jargon, the right words. But her voice is still inauthentic, borrowed from other people. She failed her year and was obliged to leave her other school. "'I was too young for it'" (205), she explains, in a voice that is very obviously that of her mother.

Cordelia's newest means of expression is stealing from shops. Some of the stolen items are comic books with frightening stories of shape-changing and other metamorphoses of an unpleasant kind. But Cordelia cannot cope with these stories. Her attempts at a foray into the world of boys leaves her shaken and afraid, whereas Elaine has always drawn strength from this commercialised source of male power.

During the summer holiday Elaine goes off with her parents as usual, while Stephen has a job at a summer camp from where he writes letters to Elaine, in pencil on torn-out pages of workbooks. His letters ridicule the way his fellow camp instructors are obssessed with girls and live in a state of "permanent, girl-inspired imbecility" (221). His words inspire Elaine with a sense that she has a kind of power because she too is a girl. Cordelia's letters, on the other hand, are in "real ink, black in colour" (221), but convey nothing of herself to Elaine, the reader. They are "full of superlatives and exclamation marks" (221) and laced with exaggerated clichés and "her burbly style does not ring true" (221). On a previous summer holiday Elaine was thankful for the absence of children and for the fact that she could be "free of words" (143) for a time, but this time she is surly because there is no one her age with whom to talk.

Although she is once again on good terms with language, her own voice is still subdued. "In school I am silent and watchful" (228), while Cordelia becomes more raucous. Out of school Elaine joins in Cordelia's loud games, singing a radio commercial referring to "some unspeakable female thing" (229) and shrieking with mirth about a topic usually shrouded in mystery and silence. Cordelia had always been able to frighten Elaine talking about the cemetery and its dead, but suddenly, perhaps something to do with the frightening stories in the stolen comic books, Elaine finds that she can frighten Cordelia with hints of vampires. She tells Cordelia that she is a vampire and that it is her twin sister who walks around in the daytime. She says "I'm really dead. I've been dead for years" (233), unconsciously stating the truth about the effect that Cordelia had had on her for so long. Cordelia is frightened and Elaine experiences a "malevolent little triumph" as "energy has passed between us, and I am stronger" (323).

In Grade Eleven Elaine develops "a mean mouth" as a means of wielding power. The cruel comments that issue from her come almost unbidden. She knows where people's weak spots are and walks the school "surrounded by an aura of potential verbal danger" (234). On the surface she has more friends because girls are afraid and know that closest to her is the safest place to be. She inflicts no unintentional hurt on anyone: "I want all my hurts to be intentional" (235). And Cordelia is the person she uses for target practice, demolishing her opinions and mocking her, deriving a thrilling sense almost of vertigo, of walking on thin ice,[22] when she realises that she has exceeded acceptable bounds. This is when her father warns her that she will land herself in trouble.

It is the girls against whom she takes these verbal defensive measures. She has no problems with boys. As a teenager she finds that the boys accept her as one of themselves. "My relationships with boys are effortless ... it's girls I feel I have to

[22] The connection with the ravine is made here, the vertigo and the thin ice, but now the roles of Elaine and Cordelia are reversed.

defend myself against" (237). Elaine needs to get away from adults and other girls, and the boys need to escape from adults and other boys. She spends hours on the phone listening to their monosyllables, disjointed words and long "silences between the words" (237). Among other boys they have to use "prove-it words ... to show they are strong and not to be taken in" (237), because "they're fearful about their own bodies, shy about what to say" (237). Elaine knows that the tough words, which boys apply to girls, are meant to reduce them, "cutting them down to size so that they can be handled" (238), and that the trick for a girl to avoid them is "to walk in the spaces between them, turn sideways in your head, evade" (238). Elaine is learning to dismantle degrading verbal stereotypes of females, a skill which she later applies as she continues dismantling these stereotypes through the medium of her painting.

It is the boys' bodies that fascinate Elaine; "[m]y love for them is visual" (240). Part of it is also sexual, but even when she touches their bodies it is more an exploration of energy than anything else, as she feels "the backbone tensed and strung to breaking ... the body is pure energy, solidified light" (240). These physical explorations, often carried out leaning against the railing of the new cement footbridge across the ravine, bear no relationship to the dark hidden sexual mysteries for which the ravine has become a symbol in the lives of young girls. Anyway, by this time Elaine has begun to think of the bad men in the ravine as a "scarecrow story, put up by mothers" (241). Elaine's explorations of the boys' bodies, although emotional and sensory, are closely related once again to her ways of looking at life as a scientist and an artist, as was her way of looking at the drawings of biology specimens and appreciating their accuracy, but also enjoying the colours of the drawings.

Cordelia and Elaine are both trying to find their means of expression, their voice, and it is during this time that Cordelia tries her voice out in the theatre, something that did not succeed when she tried it as a child. She has a small part in a visiting

production of *Julius Caesar* in which her voice part consists of saying "rabble rabble" during the crowd scene of, significantly, Mark Antony's "Ears speech" (244). Later, taking part in *Macbeth*, in her excitement she does the unforgiveable and speaks the theatrical taboo word, "*Macbeth*", out loud. Her roles in this play are confusing as she plays both a serving woman and a soldier, neither of which is a speaking part.

After leaving school Cordelia gets bit parts in the local Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Elaine perceives her as "making herself up as she goes along. She's improvising" (301). She has a speaking part in *Measure for Measure* but she has trouble not getting the words of her short speech confused:

> Then, if you speak, you must not show your face,
> Or, if you show your face, you must not speak (302).

She still has not worked out the relationship between voice, appearance and identity. Speaking without understanding is insidiously suggestive of what patriarchy allows for women. When Elaine goes to see her in *The Tempest* she cannot recognise her "behind the disguise of costume" (303), a fate that will always be Cordelia's. She has transformed herself into an unrecognisable nothing.

At the same time Elaine is beginning to find her means to her true identity.

It is during her final Botany examination at school that Elaine first realises that she wants to be a painter and not a scientist. The difference between drawing sections of dead creatures and the life cycles of "tubers, bulbs and legumes" (255) and the "life" which Josef later says she needs to learn to draw with passion, dawns on her "like a sudden epileptic fit" (255). She sees clearly what it is she wants to do with her life. She remembers that when she was a child and her father showed her his students' drawings of cross sections of worms and insects, it was the colours and the beauty of the creatures that pleased her more than anything.

Elaine has had a long struggle with finding her voice, and even when she has identified painting as her means of expression, as her means of transformation, she finds many obstacles to the emergence of her authentic voice. She remembers the funny stylised girls she drew as a child, before she moved into the world of girls. She harks back to her years at school during which art consisted of images chosen by teachers who wished to impose on the children their particular bias or focus in life. There are the unlifelike cut-outs pasted on the window panes to mark the progression of the seasons of the year, the snowflakes, Valentine's hearts and springtime tulips that have to conform to the teacher's way of seeing and are always symmetrical. "[E]verything has two halves, a left and a right, identical" (128); the creative right side of the brain has to conform to the logic of the left side and not step out of line.

There are, however, a few glimmers of hope for passion and creativity that affirm Elaine's creativity during her childhood. When Elaine finds herself in the class of Miss Stuart, who likes art, and the children are asked to draw themselves involved in an after school activity, Elaine draws herself in bed, and colours the whole picture with black crayon. To Elaine's astonishment Miss Stuart accepts her explanation, "Because it's night" (162), without a qualm, and Elaine experiences her affirming touch on her shoulder like the brief glow of a blown-out match. Dr Banerji, Elaine's father's colleague, conspiritorially fuels Elaine's thirst for knowledge, which is really her thirst for beauty, when he keeps her supplied with slides to study under the microscope. She draws what she sees, "bacteria coloured with vivid dyes, hot pinks, violent purples, radiant blues, ... lit up from beneath ... like stained-glass windows ... though I could never get the same luminous brilliance" (247).[23] Another window to beauty is provided by her neighbour, Mrs Finestein, whose own appearance, with her gold earrings, is so different from that of the other women Elaine knows, and whose home provides glimpses of the exotic, branched gold candlesticks and bowls of oranges.

[23] The same fascination with luminosity prompts her interest in the mirror in Jan van Eyck's painting and leads to her discovering her own special technique and style of painting. This is discussed later in this chapter.

These three people are exotic, from other countries, displaced people, as Elaine feels herself to be, exiles, and Elaine is comforted by their compassion towards her. She later celebrates them, and the gifts they unwittingly brought her, in her painting, *The Three Muses*.

The next obstacle to Elaine's being transformed by her painting evidences itself, of all places, at art school. Here she finds she has to work through centuries of baggage in her Art and Archaeology course, a course which is supposed to orientate the students, significantly, in time. They spend much time looking at slides of works of art and Elaine finds herself "writing obscure words in the dark" (274) as she attempts to take notes. She will remember the Classical period as "bleached out and broken ... general armlessness, leglessness and noselessness ... greyness and whiteness" (274), all the colour missing. In this fragmented world even the lecturer seems unreal, a dislocated "dry voice from the darkness" (283) which draws attention to the specific details of the paintings in, among others, the Renaissance period, which abounds with[24] Virgin Marys. A later period specialises in Biblical subjects, especially violent ones; "Judith cutting off the head of Holofernes is now popular" (325). Elaine suffers from intense feelings of dislocation at this time.

She attends Life Drawing classes at night. The teacher, Mr Hrbik, is a refugee from Europe, a displaced person. His comment about her portfolio, which consists of drawings of sections of insects, is that she can draw objects very well, "[b]ut as yet you cannot draw life ... You are an unfinished voman" (272, 273). In the Life Drawing class the students turn out "rendering after rendering of breasts and buttocks, thighs and necks, and some nights nothing but feet" (281). In this setting of fragmentation Elaine finds that she can describe Susie, the other young woman in the class, only as a catalogue of body parts, and cannot accept her as a person.

[24] I have chosen to use the preposition"with" instead of "in"here, as the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition, gives "abound with" to mean "teem or be infested with", which seemed to me to be more appropriate in the context than "abound in" which means"be plentiful, be rich".

Elaine's whole life becomes dislocated, divided as it is into two distinct sections.There is her daytime life among the conventional students in Art and Archaeology, while "[her] real life, takes place at night" (284) among the more interesting Life Drawing students and their teacher. She even moves out of her parents' home and into their cellar, setting up "a realm of ersatz squalor" (287) as she surrounds herself with shadowy theatre posters and some of her own carefully drawn feet. She has even "excavated one of the army-surplus cots and a lumpy khaki sleeping bag" (287) from the family's old camping equipment. The life of the house filters down to her through the floorboards, while her mother finds her posters gloomy and "doesn't understand the feet at all: feet should have a body" (287).

And so Elaine has regressed to her days of being buried in the dark and of trying to learn to see on the dark. A disempowering position in which to be, and hardly one from which to continue discovering her painter's vision.

Another aspect of Elaine's choosing to be buried in the dark is her descent into a period of deliberate amnesia about her painful past. While she is unable to transform the past, her solution is to bury or to forget the unpleasant or disturbing aspects of her life, especially those relating to the unhappy period of her victimisation by Cordelia.

Although she has buried so much she still carries with her a sense of something that is missing, something that is lost, something that is in need of transformation. Her habit of going into churches to look at the depictions of the Virgin is an expression of this need, although she "didn't know [she] was looking for something" (197). When she finds the Virgin of lost things she recognises her and knows that this is the one she has been looking for. But she cannot remember what it is that she has lost. At the same time memories of Cordelia surface unbidden.

Her deliberate amnesia has started during her high school years when she forgets

many aspects of life in her previous school. Although she sees Cordelia and Grace and Carol nearly every day she has no recollection of the details of their earlier relationship. "There is no emotion attached to their names ... Time is missing" (201). Even her resentment of the Smeaths and the Sunday school have been buried along with the other bad memories. Sometimes her mother tries to talk to her about these events, referring to "'That bad time you had'" (201). Elaine will not allow herself to admit that there were bad times — "I have good times only" (201). The evidence is to be seen in her broadly smiling face in the Grade Six class picture in which she is smiling broadly, "Happy as a clam" as her mother would say: "a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed" (201), thinks Elaine.

When the dangerously rickety bridge over the ravine is pulled down for rebuilding Elaine goes down to watch the demolition. She has the uneasy feeling that "something's buried down there, a nameless crucial thing, or as if there's someone still on the bridge ... up in the air ... unable to get to land" (202). Although the murder of a girl their age in the ravine stirs up "something, like dead leaves" (242) in Elaine's memory, she will not allow the real, frightening memory to surface.

Before starting high school Elaine clears out the relics of her past from her room. She finds the cat's eye marble rolling around at the back of her drawer and puts it inside the red plastic purse which she rediscovers. She has also found her old photo album but cannot recall having taken any of the pictures in it. All these items are put into the cabin trunk in the cellar in which her mother has stored other relics of the past. This trunk remains the repository of forgotten things and goes with her parents, even when they move to another house in their later years. The cellar is the place for storing things, including memories and things rather forgotten. Elaine does not like looking at things "connected so closely with my life as a child ... I can do much better now" (203).

Stephen tries to enthuse Elaine with his ideas of travelling back in time, but she is not

sure she wants to travel back into the past. Stephen has also buried some of the past. Elaine reminds the adult Stephen of some of her memories of their childhood, the song he used to sing during the war, the bottle of marbles that he buried in the ravine, but he has difficulty remembering these things which she remembers so well. "If he's forgotten so much, what have I forgotten?" (334) she wonders, and feels disturbed.

The ravine remains for Elaine the place of forgotten, nameless horrors, a place whose associations she is unable to transform. Even years later, when she is living safely in Vancouver, happily married to her beloved Ben, she is aware that behind the mountains "Toronto lies ... burning in thought like Gomorrah. At which I dare not look" (382).

The horrors of this place have connections with her conviction, born of Cordelia's cruel projections onto her of her own inadequacies, that she is not good enough. But what is at the bottom of this conviction is the received myth of patriarchal society that women are not only inferior, that they are not creators but only consumers of male creations, but even more, that they are born with transgressive knowledge and are thus doomed to fail, and thus figuratively to fall.

There are repeated references in the novel to falling or fallen women. The antithesis of the fallen women in the novel is the Virgin Mary and her regular appearances in Elaine's life. The Virgin's undoubted virtue transforms and negates the references to fallen women.

Marina Warner,[25] in her detailed and scholarly study of the cult of the Virgin Mary describes the growth of this cult over the centuries. She describes the aspirational ideal presented by the Catholic Church to young females, that of the pure, innocent

[25] Warner, Marina: *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador. London. 1985.

and chaste Virgin Mary, implying that anything sexual in the female is sinful. But juxtaposed with these ideals of chastity are the expectations imposed on these same young females that they will be childbearers and mothers. And so today Western women have become trapped in a social model of femininity based on these male-imposed criteria.

It is not only Catholic women who are caught up in this misogynistic web; "[u]nder the influence of contemporary psychology — particularly Jungian — " writes Warner in the Epilogue of her book, "many people accept unquestioningly that the Virgin is an inevitable expression of the archetype of the Great Mother. Thus psychologists collude with and continue the Church's working on the mind" as Jungians conclude that "all men want a virgin mother".[26]

But the Virgin Mary, as she is presented today in her many guises, the Virgin Mother, the Immaculate Conception, Mater Dolorosa, Maria Regina, is not an "immutable absolute".[27] She is the result of an historical process. She is the sum of an accumulation of centuries of accretions to the cult, according to the needs or thought of a particular time. Thus, ignoring the historical and social process and imposing this symbol on the lives of modern women leads to distortions, to "assumptions about role satisfaction, sexual differences, beauty, and goodness",[28] which modern women reject, but which are nevertheless still present in society.

It is because Elaine has been brought up without any religion and is unaware of all the ramifications of the Marian tradition that she is innocently able to re-invent and recreate the Virgin. As her perceptions of the Virgin grow and change with her exposure to her various aspects, mainly through art, she is able to use and adapt the Virgin to effect her own salvation from those very trammels that the Marian Cult

[26] Warner, Marina: *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador. London. 1985. 335.
[27] Warner, Marina: *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador. London. 1985. 334.
[28] Warner, Marina: *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador. London. 1985. 336

would impose on her. The versions of the Virgin that Elaine recreates for herself are no longer constraining, but are made up of the nurturing aspects of the whole Marian persona.

Possibly the most nurturing aspects of the Virgin would be combined in the Mater Dolorosa, or Virgin of the Seven Sorrows. These are the sorrows that Mary suffered during her lifetime as a result of being the mother of Christ. She is depicted with seven swords in her heart and, although Elaine is ignorant of the symbolic meaning of the picture of the Mater Dolorosa, she recognises her own suffering in this dramatic picture. She knows that this is the woman who can empathise with her and help her save herself.

When the Virgin comes to Elaine's help in the ravine, she does not look like the Virgin on the picture but is dressed in a dark hood and cloak. Elaine nevertheless recognises her by the glimpse of red she sees inside her half-open cloak, the unmistakable glimpse of her heart. The redemptive act which she is about to perform in saving Elaine from her fate in the ravine is illustrated by the fact that she comes down into the ravine as if walking on air, not succumbing to the unavoidable fate of women, of falling into the ravine. In her later painting of this experience Elaine combines her picture of this redemptive Virgin with her memory of the Virgin of Lost Things, in her black cloak dotted with pinpoints of light. This Virgin is holding in her hands, "at the level of her heart ... an oversized cat's eye marble, with a blue centre" (408).

The Virgins with whom Elaine comes into contact during her Art and Archaeology course are very different from the Virgin who helped her out of the ravine. These Virgins tend to illustrate the trends in the development of Western art. At first they are carved in wood or painted; pale elongated flat Virgins with gold-leaf haloes, often depicted as ascending to heaven. Later, they are portrayed as "dough-faced and solemn" (283), with gold tendrils of hair and thin haloes as they sit in Italian settings. At a later stage there is much baring of breasts and breast-feeding, not something

which meets with the approval of the other students or the lecturer. But Elaine recognises the humanity of the breast-feeding Virgins. The babies never look like real babies, their legs and arms are too spindly. Here Elaine indicates her interest in the practicalities and realities of life, seeing the mothers and babies through the eyes of a scientist, as biological drawings.

As her own art develops during the period after the birth of her own child, she boldly paints her version of the Virgin, the traditional Virgin in blue and white but "with the head of a lioness ... fierce, alert to danger ... A gnawed bone lies at her feet" (345). The Christ child is represented as a lion cub in her lap. This seems to Elaine a truer picture of motherhood than the insipid Virgins of art history. She paints another version of the Virgin as a tired woman shopper, laden with bags, descending to earth in the snow and slush and wearing a winter coat over her blue robe: "Our Lady of Perpetual Help, I call her" (345).

The men in her life during this period try to transform Elaine into the image of their own desire and need, while she is desperately trying to escape from her buried memories of a female who did the same to her. When Josef Hrbik describes Elaine as "unfinished", and says that "here you will be finished" (273), she thinks of the word as meaning "over and done with" (273), and the relationship he starts with her could very well have led to her being over and done with. He initiates the stereotypically patriarchal and potentially degrading teacher-student affair with her, even having her down on her knees the first time he caresses her (293).

She soon finds that "Josef is rearranging me" (304), turning her into what she recognises as a Pre-Raphaelite woman, "cloudy hair, pensive eyes in a thin white face" (304), romantic and unreal, a recipient of his projections and desires, with no will of her own. He describes her as mysterious, and "very silent" (305). She feels herself to be not mysterious but vacant. She is in thrall to him, "in love with his need" (295) and "made spineless by love" (306). But when he asks her, "Would you do

anything for me?" (305), she feels as if she is about topple off a very high building, echoes of her ravine experience, and finds herself, to her surprise, saying "No" (305). She discovers again that resistance is the beginning of freedom, that just as being able to say no to Cordelia had been the end of that thralldom, this is the start of her being able to break with Josef.

Elaine has had to share Josef with his other mistress, Susie. Susie becomes pregnant and aborts the foetus, sending for Elaine to help her as she finds herself bleeding uncontrollably. Thus Elaine finds herself involved indirectly in what is the ultimate dislocation that could be suffered by a woman. She is saved from a similar fate, as she sees Josef as he really is, "weak ... clinging, gutted like a fish" (322). She finally breaks her ties with him.

When she attends the Life Drawing classes Elaine is accepted as one of the boys by the men in the class. She expects nothing of them, and they find her useful as their passport to the Ladies' and Escorts Bar. Jon, in particular, is her friend, but her decline in this friendship starts when it becomes a sexual relationship. From here her role deteriorates from her being a participant in the friendship to her losing her own power to speak.

Elaine's involvement with Jon becomes destructive. At first it seems less complicated than her affair with Josef, until Jon begins to indicate his loss of interest in her by leaving small visual clues to his infidelities instead of being honest with her. His own inadequacies are reflected in his art, in his constantly changing styles and media, his trivialisation of his art in subscribing to whatever is the fashion of the moment. His eventual descent into special effects, including headless females, indicates not only his lack of respect for his own abilities but his attitude to women's abilities.

Jon objects to Elaine's painting and mocks her taste as unfashionable, ignoring the fact that what she is doing is real experimentation with different challenging media

and techniques. These she has to teach herself and practise over and over in order to perfect them. To avoid his criticism she takes to painting at night when he is not there, once again putting into practice what she has learnt from her brother: learning to see in the dark, but this time to positive ends. The time she spends at night is a time of real learning to see herself and her art for what they are.

Elaine moves into her own apartment and continues to paint seriously at night in the second bedroom of her own new apartment. She finds Jon gradually moving his painting paraphernalia into her living room, showing his resentment of her growing skill and dedication by colonising her space for his painting. She will not be intimidated — "I ... keep the door closed" (329). It is during this period that she discovers she is pregnant and, considering the possible outcomes of this situation, remembering Susie's "wings of red blood" she knows she will not do the same as Susie: "I refuse to end up like her" (336). Elaine finds herself unable to tell Jon that she is pregnant and, in her isolation and fear, she finds her painting making a gradual shift.

She is still painting domestic objects but she is now painting "things that aren't there" (337), a silver toaster with the red hot grill showing, a glass coffee percolator, a wringer washing machine with a fleshtone pink wringer, three sofas and a giant egg-cup with a broken eggshell in it, a glass jar containing a bouquet of deadly nightshade amongst whose tangled glossy leaves the eyes of cats are visible. Of course these are the household objects associated with the dreadful period of Cordelia's victimisation but, having buried her memories of this period, she cannot relate to these objects although she knows they are "suffused with anxiety" (337). She feels like a victim all over again, and feels that what has happened must be her fault. She has never outgrown the conviction imposed by Cordelia that there is something fundamentally wrong with her.

Feeling disgusted with her own body which has betrayed her, she moves in a limbo of

unreality, biting her fingers once again so that the pain can restore to her the feeling of being in the physical world. Unbidden she begins to paint Mrs Smeath, painting after painting of her, cruel paintings, all different but all with the accusing eyes that follow her around, as if these paintings will help to exorcise her feelings of guilt and blame: "Mrs Smeath knows [what is wrong with me]. She isn't telling" (338).

When she finally tells Jon about her pregnancy they get married. He starts objecting to her painting at night, when he is home. His solution to this problem is "*Don't do it at all.* But he doesn't say this" (345). Jon, meanwhile , has ceased to "see". He is no longer painting and is scornful of painting. He makes constructions out of things from junk heaps or whatever he can find — a prelude to his career in special effects for horror movies.

His infidelities become too much for Elaine until one night, when he doesn't come home, she hears a voice that is not her own, a persuasive voice harking back to her childhood days and to Cordelia. "The voice of a nine-year-old child" (374), a voice that says "'Do it. Come on. Do it'" (373), and brings her closer to self-destruction than she has ever been, to the edge of the ravine, as she slits her wrist with the Exacto knife from Jon's worktable.

It is the fear of what this voice might tell her to do next that makes her decide to leave Jon. She and her daughter, Sarah, leave Toronto for Vancouver, where she works for an antique dealer, refinishing furniture, because "furniture can't talk. I am thirsty for silence" (377). Words are a phase through which Elaine passes en route to finding her identity. Meanwhile her painting continues to transform her.

In her conscious working towards achieving her painter's vision Elaine has deliberately chosen styles of painting and media with which she can identify. She has rebelled against painting in oils because of the overtones that she perceives in the paintings of a certain period when oils were in their heyday. The paintings that repel

her are of "plates of fruit and cuts of meat, with or without lobsters ... Naked women ... presented in the same manner as the plates of meat and dead lobsters, ... with ... the same lusciousness ... They appear served up" (326). There are echoes here of the issues dealt with in *The Edible Woman.*[29]

In these oil paintings there are other overtones against which Elaine rebels, probably unconsciously. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing,*[30] points out that "Oil paintings often depict things. Things which are in reality buyable" (83), and the paintings themselves are "objects which can be bought and owned" (85). The sort of man who bought paintings in the seventeenth century when oil painting was coming into its own was the merchant or the coloniser, the sort of man for whom "the world was there to furnish [his] residence within it" (96), owners and objectifiers. The paintings and what they depict are commodified by this attitude and become mere consumerist objects.

Because the "market made more insistent demands than the art" (88) much cynical "hack" work resulted and the period, though producing great masters and their masterpieces, saw much that was inferior purporting to be art, a result of the contradiction between art and the market. There is an echo of this attitude in the commodification that females, including Elaine, were subjected to in the mail order catalogues and the women's magazines of her childhood. Elaine has seen Jon being seduced by the lure of the commodifying market, thus prostituting his art, producing things that are trendy and fraudulent until there is nothing left for him but a vulgar consumerism of a pretty debased kind — horror movies.

Elaine instinctively recognises another overtone in the oil paintings of this period. Not only were the paintings commodified, but so were the subjects of the paintings. The buyers of the period wanted to colonise and own not only buildings, places, objects

[29] Atwood, Margaret: *The Edible Woman*. Virago. London. 1980.
[30] Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. BBC. London. 1972. 83, 85, 88.

and testimonies to the conspicuous consumption of their lifestyle but they commissioned paintings of women, nudes, which, having bought, they could enjoy along with all their other consumer objects. John Berger expands on the theme. "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen to be naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude ... [it] is placed on display"[31] The principal protagonist in the average European oil painting of a nude is the male viewer, the spectator, but although everything in the painting is addressed to him he is never painted into the painting. The object of the nude painting is on display, and very often the woman is made to connive in the "treating of herself as a sight"[32] by being depicted as looking back at us looking at her, by being depicted as vain as she looks at herself in a mirror, or by being seen as perfectly passive and without thoughts or feelings of her own. (Berger points out that nakedness in non-European art is never passive — the female protagonist of much African, Indian or Persian art is as active as the male, and the art shows sexual activity between the two).

"[M]en act and women appear", says Berger.[33] "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at". This therefore determines the way women look at themselves. A woman has to constantly watch herself, from the time she is a small child, to monitor the way she looks and the way she behaves, and thus she finds herself split in two. She becomes the surveyor and the surveyed and often her sense of being exists only in as much as she is appreciated by another. In order to conform to the expectations of society she "turns herself into an object". This is what her father has done to Cordelia and she defends herself by turning the mirror on Elaine. Elaine, who has lived a life away from this sort of society, in a family in which everyone has individual worth, has no means at her disposal of recognising what is happening to her and is thus easily turned into Cordelia's whipping boy (or girl).

[31] The paintings by Elaine of Mrs Smeath are of a naked woman, not of a nude.
[32] Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. BBC. London. 1972. 54, 52.

[33] Berger, John: *Ways of seeing*. BBC. London. 1972. 47.

The pictures that belong to the halcyon days of oil painting are for Elaine "shadowy, viscous" (326), and what she wants to paint are pictures that are more alive, that "exist of their own accord ... breathe out light; a luminous flatness" (326). Elaine's rebellion leads her to start experiments in developing her own style and she returns to the "coloured pencils" of childhood, then to the humble egg as she struggles to teach herself the technique of using egg tempera. This medium was the first recorded use of any kind of oil as a binding agent for pigments, using the most natural of oils, the lecithin in the yolk of an egg. Eggs have many connotations : the almost primordial source of life, the source of nourishment for people and animals, connotations which remind us of the basics of life. (It is of interest to note the significance of the egg symbol in the life of Charis in *The Robber Bride*.). So Elaine is going back to the the basics of oil painting in her revulsion at the debased forms that it later took.

The period in which egg tempera was used was a time in which artists strove to convey the spiritual to the masses through their paintings. The paint was applied to walls and wooden panels, producing clear, bright and long-lasting frescoes of important events in the Christian experience. One of the greatest painters of frescoes, Giotto, born 1266, was also an illuminator, and the jewel-like clarity of his colours is still remarkable today. Giotto was an innovator. The figures in his frescoes, though monumental, are "full of human feeling".[34] He believed in painting from observation, a new and experimental concept engendered by the Franciscans in what could be called the early scientific age. He and those who came after him stressed the "preeminence of the faculty of sight in gaining knowledge of the world" and laid the ground upon which empirical science would later be formed. He insisted that "the visual world must be observed before it can be analyzed and understood",[35] a most

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[34] Janson, H W and Jane: *The Story of Painting*. Harry N Abrams. New York. 1977. 36.
[35] Gardner, Helen: *Art Through the Ages*. Harcourt. London. (rev)1975. 413.

appropriate starting point for Elaine, therefore, in her process of learning to see.

No one teaches these methods of painting any longer and so she has to research the subject in the library and experiment at home, mucking up her "mother's kitchen floor and pots, cooking the gesso" and taking the left over egg whites upstairs to her mother "who makes them into meringue cookies" (326). She is unable to separate the domestic from her attempts at developing her own style. She also paints by the light from the "picture window upstairs" during the day, a harking back to the pictures of domesticity in her earliest school readers. She is using the familiar and the commonplace of the domestic scene to grow into her art, but keeping in mind her ideals, the coloured plates she has seen of Leonardo da Vinci's "hands and feet and hair and dead people" (327).

However, when she first sees Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* it is not the accoutrements of domesticity depicted that attract her to this particular painting. It is of interest here that Helen Gardner points out that Jan van Eyck is traditionally "credited with the invention, a century before Titian, of oil painting".[36] She describes how the Flemish painters used this new technique of applying layers of translucent paint on a "drawing upon a white-grounded panel of wood". Although using oil in paint had been known in the Middle Ages, as in egg tempera, a new ingredient enabled the Flemish painters to create colours "seemingly lit from within and richer than had previously been possible" producing a "deep, intense tonality, glowing light, and hard enamel-like surfaces" quite different from egg tempera finishes. Elaine pores over the painting minutely with a magnifying glass, but what she sees in this domestic scene is very different from what she saw in the magazines that her mother remembers her as having pored over when she was a child (397). The subject of this painting is a rich man and his wife but the objects portrayed in the painting have nothing to do with the consumerism of later oil paintings. The painting, according to

[36] Gardner, Helen: *Art Through the Ages.* Harcourt. London. (rev)1975. 534.

Gardner, is "charged with the spiritual",[37] and every object depicted is symbolic of the holiness of marriage. The artist, who was also a miniaturist and illuminator, used his rich style to "proclaim his optimistic message of human salvation".

At a later stage when Elaine begins to paint domestic objects, toasters, washing machines, coffee percolators, these are for her not mere domestic objects but are symbolic of her spiritual struggle to overcome and to see in the right perspective the repressed fears connected with her period of persection and self-annihilation. The domestic objects have been transmuted into symbols of transformation.

Elaine has become interested in glass and the effects of other light-reflecting surfaces and is fascinated with the convex mirror[38] (not a pier glass, as Atwood calls it) on the wall behind the main figures, reflecting, significantly for Elaine, the backs of the two figures. But this is not all that it reflects. This mirror, unlike Cordelia's mirror of restriction and deception, shows more than is apparent, hinting at other people in the picture and at endless possibilities in its reflections.

Elaine's fascination with glass and reflective surfaces has a link with the past, as indicated by her remark that the round mirror is "like an eye ... that sees more than anyone else looking" (327), the cat's eye of her childhood, forgotten for the time being but still of significance in her subconscious. The painting on her retrospective that is called Cat's Eye is a self portrait with a convex mirror in the sky behind it reflecting the back of her head, and in the distance are three shadowy condensed figures of little girls against a snowy background — Elaine's retributive use of her powerful mirror image to put Cordelia and the other girls into perspective.

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[37] Gardner, Helen: *Art Through the Ages.* Harcourt. London. (rev)1975. 545.

[38] Atwood describes this mirror as a "pier-glass" (327), but a pier-glass, as I understand it, and as defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, Sixth Edition, is a large mirror used to fill up the space of masonry between windows, that is, usually tall and thin. I thought that perhaps a pier-glass was something different on the North American continent, but I recall that my introduction to the word was in O Henry's *The Gift of the Magi.* He describes the pier-glass in James and Della's $8 per week flat as one in which a "very thin and very agile person may, by observing his person in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks". (Jepson, R W (ed): *Short Stories of the Twentieth Century*: Longman's. London. 1954. 55.)

For want of a convex mirror in the house to practise on she paints other domestic objects with a similar surface: ice cubes, pearl earrings, the glazed teapot. She is conscious of the fact that her paintings might look like something out of the Housewares Department of the Eaton's Catalogue but they are different. In these paintings of domestic objects she is discovering herself and not conforming to the patriarchal stereotypes reinforced in the Eaton's Catalogues of her childhood.

In the other course that she does at night, Advertising Art, she is taught how to paint smiles (so that the teeth look natural) by the man who once created the famous illustration for canned pork and beans, another harking back to her wartime childhood, to domesticity, and to her Sunday visits to the Smeaths. A curious sidelight is provided by Berger on the subject of painting smiles. He points out that pictures of a sentimentalised version of "low life", the poor, were quite popular with those who so prolifically bought oil paintings in the seventeenth century. It is interesting that the rich were never painted smiling and showing their teeth (perhaps teeth, in those days before dental hygiene, were not always one's most attractive feature), but the poor are often depicted smiling ingratiatingly, showing their teeth, as they offer what they have for sale to the better-off.[39] Once again Elaine is subverting the control mechanisms of the male-dominated commodified world to her advantage. Her skill at painting smiles, teeth and all, means that, apart from the artistic techniques mastered in these courses, what she is learning serves a practical purpose. The commercial art which she produces during the day provides the financial means for her to continue working at her real painting at night.

In Vancouver she starts growing back into her painting and is accepted among the local female artists, who are in ferment as many women are at this time. Elaine's legitimacy among these women is based on her reputation gleaned from reports of the group exhibition in Toronto, the ink-throwing episode, the snotty reviews. She is

[39] Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. BBC. London. 1972. 104.

rendered legitimate by other people's reports of her and not by anything she has said or shown them herself. She finds that among these women it is not enough to give "lip-service" to the principle of equal rights. "Confession is popular" (378), confession of the pain you have suffered at the hands of men. But Elaine has suffered more at the hands of females than of males, and she feels that with the men in her life she has given as good as she has got.

She sadly recognises that it is men who seem to have lost their voice at this time. Epitomising this idea, Jon's voice, when he phones Sarah long distance, is heard "on the phone fading in and out like a wartime broadcast, plaintive with defeat" (378).

The women pressurising her to conform and confess make her feel guilty of not being enough like them. She feels as if they are an inquisition and that she will be "burned at the stake" (379) for being too conformist to the old conformities: "I still shave my legs" (379). The irony of her feeling that women will burn another woman at the stake for too much conformity gives a quirky twist to the problems she is wrestling with. The crux of the problem for Elaine is, however, that she feels these women "want to improve me ... what right have they to tell me what to think?" (379), and her past experience of being improved by another female was nearly fatal for her. Elaine continues her painting and finds that, as happens in the world of art, what she does is suddenly in demand and her paintings sell for higher prices. She is finding a voice that is being heard.

Soon after Stephen has died in a plane hijacking, her father dies, and her mother becomes ill. Elaine, visiting her mother, ends up helping her sort the things in the trunk from their original cellar. Her mother seems to want to talk about what happened in Elaine's childhood, as if she needs forgiveness from Elaine, but Elaine still cannot remember the awful events that she has buried in her unconscious. "I don't want to talk about Cordelia. I still feel guilty about walking away from her and not helping" (395). It is when Elaine discovers her blue cat' s eye marble in the old

red plastic purse in the trunk that she remembers. Her mother recalls all the marbles that Stephen used to collect.

> *'Yes', I say. But this one was mine.*
>
> *I look into it, and see my life entire* (398). (my italics)

And from here her healing begins.

Other voices have always informed her search for her own authentic voice and they continue to do so. The first was her brother's. Although she gradually ceases to communicate with her brother after he moves away from "the imprecision of words" (3), he continues sending sporadic postcards from all over the world. He tries to communicate to Elaine who he has become by sending Sarah, at different times, a stuffed toy dinosaur or a solar system mobile, or stars to stick on the ceiling that light up at night. Attending a lecture he is giving in Toronto, Elaine finds the language he uses "sounds like English ... but ... I can't understand a word of it" (332). They have nothing to say to each other after the lecture. She hears after his death that the hijackers of the plane, who killed him, spoke "heavily accented but understandable English" (390) but were nevertheless unable to communicate what it was they wanted.

After her father's death she recalls his warnings at the dinner table, warnings of global ecological disaster, words that washed over the children's heads, words that were "prophecies" which have come true"only worse" (396), leaving them living in a nightmare of snuffed-out species, suspect air, ruined water and poisonous trees. She remembers her mother's words too, tentative, trying to get at the truth of her past, but unable to get past the barrier between them, a barrier of resentment that Elaine has set up. Elaine is not sure of the "something" that has brought about this resentment (397).

The comments of the art critics about Elaine's paintings do not reflect her work as she sees it. She rejects words and phrases like "fame ... your generation of women

artists ... seventies generation ... female mentors ... feminist painter" (88-90) that are meant to stereotype her. She feels as if the interview with the newspaper reporter has overtones of Cordelia's "what have you to say for yourself?". She is aware of the "witch-and-succubus" (90)[40] pieces that male critics have written about her. The first group show, on which much of her past reputation is based, was represented by inappropriate language in the publicity and reporting surrounding it because of the ink-throwing incident: "Henfighting ... FEATHERS FLY AT FEMINIST FRACAS" (354) scream the newspaper headlines. The words and the tone dishonestly denigrate the all-women exhibition and feminism in general in a display of the worst kind of sensationalist journalese.

The ink-throwing incident is in itself an example of an honest and valid voice speaking back, the ink symbolically signifying the written word obliterating the painting that is the source of the outrage. Since the ink is "Parker's Washable Blue" (353) "[i]t will come off" (354) because of the varnished wood medium that Elaine has used — voices speaking back and forth to each other. At this point Elaine is not ready to hear the message that the obliteration of her cruel paintings of Mrs Smeath is conveying. She reads the attack on her work more as a kind of vindication, and finds it "deeply satisfying" (353), as if "[s]ome dimension of heroism has been added to me" (354).

On her return to Toronto for her retrospective she sees the transformations that have been taking place in the once familiar streets of the city. She notes the new names that trendy shops and boutiques have acquired. The gallery in which she is exhibiting is called Sub-Versions, the sort of pun, she thinks, that used to delight before they became fashionable. Josef's old house has been converted into a shop selling expensive antique rocking horses and other "[o]netime throwouts, recycled as

[40] In an interview with Karla Hammond Atwood refers to some critics who label her a witch because she "doesn't use words in a soft, compliant way". ("Articulating the Mute". Earl G Ingersoll (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Virago. London. 1992. 118.)

money" (364). No price tag on the goods indicates outrageous prices, like a silence that speaks volumes. Even the old comic books with their Krac, Kapow, have become collectors' pieces and are worth a fortune. She reads words on the front pages of newspapers that never used to be said, let alone printed — "sexual intercourse, abortion, incest" (313), and is reminded of the terror that these unmentionable words engendered in her as a young girl.

At the retrospective it is Elaine's own paintings that speak back to her, enabling her to discover that they are indeed her true voice. Elaine, still hankering after being re-united with Cordelia, wonders if Cordelia will read the piece in the newspaper about her retrospective and she speculates on how Cordelia might respond to it. She gazes at the only picture she ever did of Cordelia, the one called Half a Face. She remembers how difficult she had found it to tie Cordelia down to any one age. She had wanted to capture her at thirteen, with her defiant thirteen-year-old eyes, but the "eyes sabotaged me" (227), and the eyes that look out at her from the painting are frightened eyes. She realises that she and Cordelia have changed places and that it is Cordelia who is afraid of her. She is not sure when it happened, but what frightens her is the thought that she has become Cordelia, the victimiser.

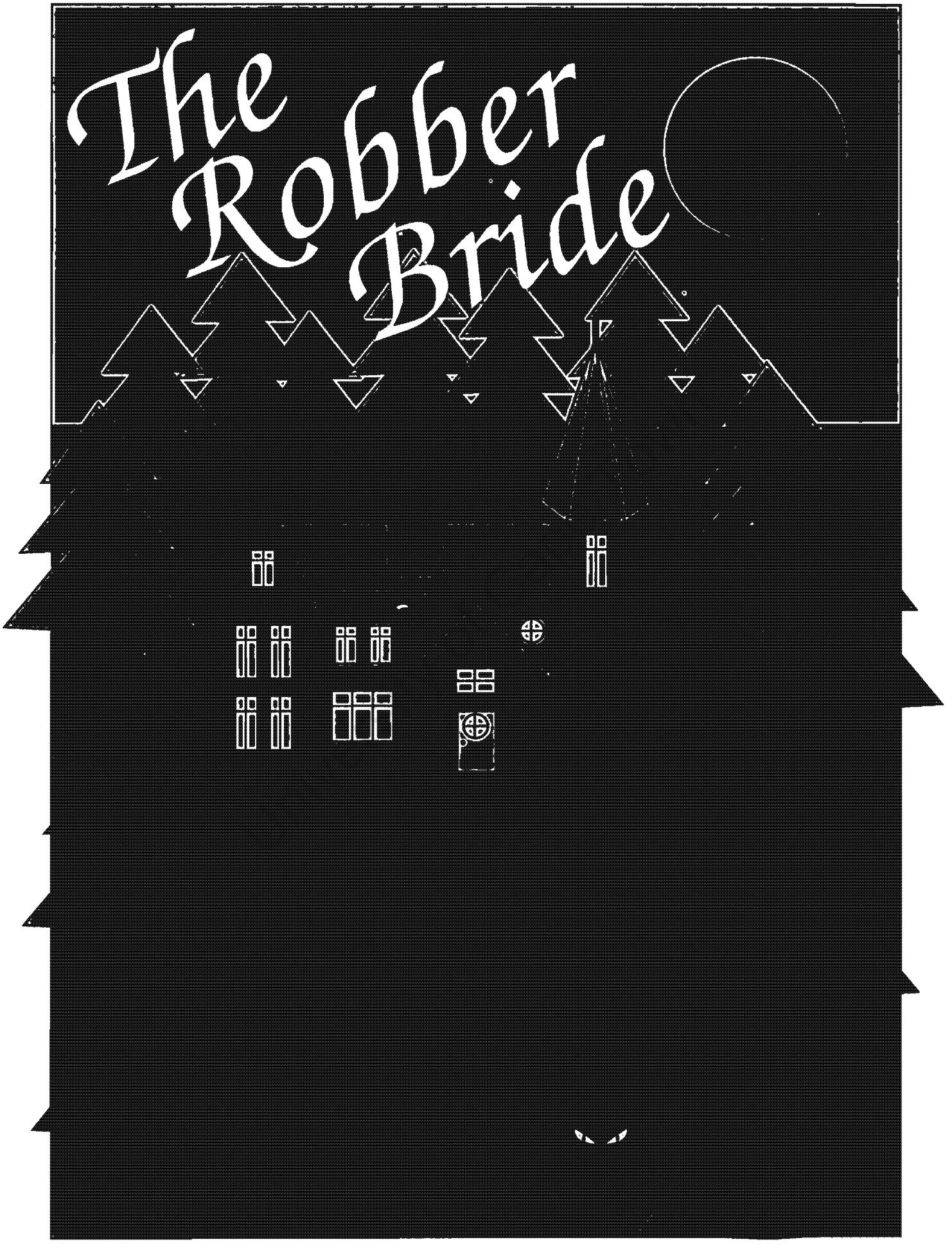
Just before the opening of the retrospective show she inspects her paintings. As she looks into the eyes of the Mrs Smeath which she had painted as self-righteous, with such cruelty and vengeance on her part, she sees the eyes as "defeated ... melancholy, heavy with unloved duty" (405), the eyes of a "displaced person; as I was" (405). But she sees too the eyes of compassion of the woman who, in her own way, took her in and tried to redeem her. "I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance" (405). She recognises that in painting Mrs Smeath in this way she has denigrated both herself and Mrs Smeath, using her art as a means of victimisation.

The art, however, speaks back and, when Elaine is ready to recognise the truth,

shows her the truth about herself and Mrs Smeath. She remembers that there have been other times when she was secretly pleased when other girls, her rivals in one way or another, "came a cropper", how she secretly said "'It serves her right'" (320). She was secretly pleased when Susie was the one to come to a disastrous end in their dual relationship with Josef. When Cordelia begs her to rescue her from the nursing home in which she has been incarcerated, Elaine gently explains to Cordelia that she can't do it, but within she is furious with Cordelia and wants to "twist her arm, rub her face in the snow" (359) in revenge for the past.

From the point of recognising her propensity for vengeance, and seeing the truth about these women portrayed in her own art, she is able to return to the bridge over the ravine. Here she relives her childhood experience of nearly dying in the icy river, and of being rescued by the woman with the exposed heart and the blue cat's eye marble, the symbols that convey to her strength and compassion. She realises that the emotions of shame, weakness, the loneliness, the fear and the longing to be loved are no longer her emotions. "They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (419). She is able to release the Cordelia of her past and say, as the Virgin had said to her, "It's all right ... You can go home now" (189,419).

Elaine has realised her self-identity in the unfolding creative process of her painting, and with this discovery has come not only freedom from thraldom to Cordelia, Mrs Smeath and Josef, but the compassion to recognise that they too are all victims, acting out patriarchally defined paradigms of victimisation as they struggle to come to terms with their own victimhood.


The Robber Bride

CHAPTER THREE

The Robber Bride

In the first few lines of *Cat's Eye* the protagonist, Elaine, warns us of other dimensions into which we shall be venturing in the novel: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If ... you knew enough you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once" (3). She goes on to describe time as a "series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time, but down through it like water" (3). Her brother, who suggests these ideas to her, moves away from the "imprecision of words" (3) and into the realm of quantum physics as he grows up, into the even more imprecise world of the insubstantiality of matter, a world having a close affinity with the shifting, opalescent world of the postmodernist novel.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan[1] argues that text-time is linear, consisting of a linear configuration of signs which convey meaning or information. But the narrative contained in the text does not have to be linear. The construct of time as a series of liquid transparencies is developed by the metaphor of looking down into water: "Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (3)

Time, in *The Robber Bride*, certainly does not move along a straight line. The narrative constantly shifts from the present, delving into layers and layers of the past of each of the protagonists, and into pasts beyond their own, bringing to the surface those things which have not gone away, but have perhaps been temporarily hidden.

The most complex of these narratives of the past is certainly that of Zenia. No one can be sure which of her accounts of herself, if any, is true. She reconstructs herself for every occasion and for every person with whom she interacts. In this respect she is a precursor, in Atwood's novels, of Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, whose narrative is explored in Chapter Four. All of Zenia's pasts are lurid, even gothic, in content.

In the text her erasures of these pasts, her unnarrating and reconstructing the past,

[1] Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith: *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge. London. 1994.

is a postmodernist device for creating tension in the reader. According to Brian McHale[2] texts that are erased in this genre are often those with "highly-charged sensationalistic content" in which the reader has made an emotional investment and "... resents it when the representation is *de*-presented, erased", creating a "tension between (desired) presence and (resented) absence" (102). The use of this device suggests the tension that Zenia's presence creates in the narrative, a mixture of admiration and distrust.

Meanwhile the action of the novel remains very firmly set in a specific and contained contemporary historical setting.

It is this historical setting which leads us to another dimension which this novel explores, namely that of War, past and present, and the significance of War.The action of the novel takes place around the period of the Gulf War of 1991 and continues into the months following. It starts during the build-up to this war, which was truly a war of what Tony calls competing technologies, and ends on Armistice Day 1991. This is a very significant date in terms of Tony's pre-occupation with words that read backwards, as it is a double palindrome, 11-11-1991, and is the date on which the action is resolved.

As a child born at the beginning of the Second World War Margaret Atwood would have experienced the profound effects of this cataclysm on all aspects of her young life, and on the lives of others around her. It is therefore not surprising that war (and its effects in the short and long terms) is frequently one of Atwood's preoccupations, not least in this novel. In her poem *The loneliness of the military historian*, she has the speaker say

> ... I deal in tactics.
> Also statistics:
> for every year of peace there have been four hundred
> years of war.

War affects everyone, directly or indirectly and, as Tony remarks, "sometimes wars take a long time to kill people" (466).

[2] McHale, Brian: *Constructing Postmodernism: Postmodernist Fiction*. Methuen. New York. 1987.102.

Whether it has killed them or not the Second World War has affected all the main characters of this novel fundamentally. But it is another kind of war, a war fought not with guns, that occupies the attention of the protagonists. They are all waging that most insidious and pervasive of all wars, the war of the sexes, but not only against the members of the opposite sex.

The problem for the three main characters, Tony, Charis and Roz, is that their battle of the sexes has to be waged against a member of their own sex, Zenia, the *femme fatale* who devours the men in their lives. Although for Tony, who can read, write and speak mirror language, words that read differently backwards seem more powerful than palindromes, (they are empty of meaning and can be given any meaning one chooses), she nevertheless sums up the war between the sexes as "the *raw sexes war*. A perfect palindrome" (406). There is no doubt that Zenia is a witch of the *La Belle Dame sans Merci* kind, the kind who lures men to her with her obvious sexual charms, sucks them dry and abandons them to repine unto death.

But each of the other women, Tony, Charis and Roz, also has at her disposal her own special magic which empowers her and enables her to wage war against Zenia. Each of them has developed strategies for survival, fighting her own particular battle over the years. In the setting of the Gulf War we find the quirkiness of these magical powers juxtaposed with the sophisticated and terrifying technology harnessed in this war, technology with which the reader is only too familiar, having been exposed to it nightly on television for the duration of the war. This magic, or witchcraft, with which each of the women is endowed, is an important element of the novel.

As Stephen in *Cat's Eye* moved into the world of the insubstantiality of matter as he studied quantum physics, so Atwood leads us in *The Robber Bride* into yet another realm of the insubstantial, a realm in which not only Zenia but all the significant female characters of the novel are witches. *The Robber Bride*, like *Surfacing*, is a gothic tale containing strong elements of fairy tales, but in this novel the strongest fairy tale element is provided by the presence of witches at every turn.

How do we define a witch?

Atwood talks about reviewers who imply that *she* is a witch. Reviewing her work in "the most viciously sexist way", these people attack her because she is a woman who

"doesn't use words in a soft, compliant way". A woman who is not soft and compliant in her actions as well as in her words must be "an evil witch".[3] Is it not this fear of women who are strong, who do not conform to the norms prescribed for them, which, over the ages, has led to their being branded witches?

Through the ages there have been women who have had special talents for healing and helping others. Their independence and initiative have not sat well with the established patriarchal ideals of womanhood: obedience, industry, meekness and modesty. These women have often been driven out of society, their "magic" defining them as "other", and therefore a threat to the established male order. It is of these women that Shahrukh Husain[4] writes in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Witches*.

Another commonly held view of a witch is of a woman whose strong sense of anarchy leads her to challenging authority, while establishing her own set of rules. In this novel the twin daughters of Roz most fully fit this description. Atwood draws on archetypal fairy tale elements as she creates this delightful pair who live by their own system, created by themselves. They are intimidated by no one, and have a way of subverting any role stereotypes that others might wish to impose on them.

It was Tony (who never talks down to them and whom they accept as someone their own age) who had given them a book of authentic fairy tales, tales which are set in "the dark wolfish forest, where lost children wander and foxes lurk, and anything can happen" (293).[5]

And what does happen is that the children "fight ... for control of the stor[ies]" (293), not only changing the victim in the story by boiling one of the little pigs instead of the wolf, but insisting that all the characters, victims and victimisers, are females, revealing "what a difference it makes changing the pronoun" (294). They change *The Robber Bridegroom* to *The Robber Bride*. When Roz suggests that perhaps the three little pigs and the wolf could make friends, and save anyone having to be boiled, the twins are scornful of her suggestion, insisting that "[s]omebody had to be boiled"

[3] Hammond, Karla: "Articulating the Mute". Ingersoll, Earl G (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Virago. London. 1992.118.
[4] Husain, Shahrukh: *The Virago Book of Witches*. Virago. London. 1993. xv.
[5] Bruno Bettelheim, the prominent child psychologist, stresses the importance he attaches to the use of fairy tales in the development of a child. His ideas are discussed in Chapter One, *Surfacing*.

(294).[6] They enjoy dressing their Barbie dolls in bridal outfits, but then "hurl them over the stair railings or drown them in the bathtub" (294), thus subverting the culture represented by Barbie dolls, and also, incidentally, prefiguring the death of Zenia, *the* Robber Bride.

Because Tony is a military historian the novel is also about history, the history of Tony, Charis and Roz and their encounters and relationships with Zenia. It is as if, via Tony as historian, the novel links together the individual stories of the characters with the grand narratives of the history that she studies. Their histories with Zenia will show that "nothing begins when it begins" (4) and that "'All history is written backwards'. We decide whether an event is significant or not" (109). Thus, the possibility of historical revisionism exists as we, the readers, and the three protagonists in the novel look back over the events of the novel and assess the real meaning of Zenia's intervention in the lives of the protagonists.

Returning to the significant influence of war on the lives of the characters in this novel we take note of the fact that war, of course, implies victims, and it was as victims of war that the ancestors of the three protagonists arrived in Canada. As Charis says, "that's how we ended up here ... [b]ecause of wars ... of one sort or another" (65). Her ancestors were Scottish, English and Mennonites, fleeing from persecution. As she wryly comments, the Mennonites "never kill people; they only get killed, instead" (65).

Roz, too, can never shake off the knowledge of the Irish and Jewish refugees in her past, and sometimes feels "just off the boat, head wrapped in a shawl, wiping her nose on her sleeve ... Everyone she's descended from got kicked out of somewhere else, for being too poor, too politically uncouth or having the wrong profile or accent or hair colour" (305). She remembers that on her mother's side "[f]amine caused by landlessness caused by war drove them out" and they "came steerage" (305) to seek refuge in another land where merely to survive would entail bitter struggle once again.

Tony's mother was not escaping from famine and persecution when she came to

[6] Perhaps the three little pigs represent the three friends in the story, while the wolf represents the marauding Zenia who ends up falling headlong to her death, not into a cauldron of boiling water, but into the hotel fishpond. In this case it is really a matter of who will survive and who will be "boiled", Zenia or her victims.

Canada. She had come from England, having married a Canadian soldier during the Second World War. When Tony was a small child her mother, Anthea, would tell how she had been "through" (144) the war. Anthea's own parents had been killed in the Blitz, bombed in their home. Anthea would describe how she had come home to find "nothing but a crater, one standing wall, and a pile of rubble; and her own mother's shoe, with a foot in it" (144). Tony's memory of her mother is not very clear; it is "composed of shiny fragments, like a vandalized mosaic" (135), but the one thing that is clear is that her mother had been a war bride. ("A *raw bride*, thinks Tony" (145)). Anthea tells people this ruefully, implying that she had "fallen prey to an old trick, an old confidence trick" and that Tony's father, Griff, "took advantage of her in some way ... that it was the fault of the war", that he "forced, ... coerced" (145) her and carried her off like the spoils of war from her home in England to this foreign country.

It was not only their ancestors whose lives had been affected by wars of various kinds. Each of the protagonists has had her childhood blighted by the effects of the Second World War, and from these experiences each has developed her own special coping strategies or life skills.

The first whose experiences relating to war are narrated is Tony. Tony is made to feel "a foreigner, to her own mother" (145) because she speaks with a Canadian accent which her mother detests, and she learns to tread warily in order not to upset her mother. "Like a foreigner she listens carefully, interpreting, ... keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gestures" from her mother, and "like a foreigner she makes mistakes" (145). Anthea is an unhappy person, and the war, according to her, is to blame for her unhappiness, and thus for her eventual desertion of Tony and Griff.

Tony's father is also an unhappy person, also as a consequence of the war, but he "never complains about not having [happiness]" (143). Although Griff was in the war he only came in at D-Day, "the easy bit, says Anthea. The winning" (145). Tony likes to think of her father as winning, and to hear that "[h]e liberated a gun" (145), which she knows that he keeps in his study. Griff is disappointed that Tony is "not a boy" (145) but he tolerates her in his study and he allows her to sharpen his pencils, a jarful of which he keeps very sharp. Tony imagines she is "preparing his arrows" (143). She knows that the war, which was a decisive factor in her life and his, is something he will not talk about, a "raw place" (146) for him, although he admits

that if it had not been for the war "he wouldn't have had an education" (146). At a later stage Tony realises that she had been "a catastrophe in his life" (157), "a pregnancy, a hasty war marriage. Her mother was a war bride, her father was a war husband, she herself was a war baby. She was an accident" (158). Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis sums up Tony's position as being "perceived as an alien by both her parents, having the wrong accent for her mother, the wrong gender for her father".[7]

The war destroys both of Tony's parents: her unhappy mother runs away to California and is eventually drowned in a boating accident, and her father, after seeing Tony through her high school graduation, covers his study carpet with newspaper and shoots himself with "his liberated gun" (158), a Luger pistol that was a souvenir of the war. Having worked out strategies for her own survival in the midst of the war games played by her parents, and later for escaping the attentions of her father, after her mother had left, Tony has become an expert strategist and War, or "Raw" (129), as she tells Zenia, becomes her obssession.

Karen's problems relating to the Second World War started before she was born, as we are told that her father "was killed in the war when Karen wasn't even born yet" (234). Whether her parents had actually been married or not is a matter for conjecture, but having to bring up Karen, a war baby, on her own causes her mother to suffer from "nerves" and it is accepted by the family that "her nerves were the fault of the war" (234). Karen realises from something in Aunt Vi's voice that she herself is "an embarrassment, someone who could only be spoken of obliquely. She wasn't quite an orphan but she had the taint of one" (234).

When she was a small child the framed photograph of her dead father appeared and disappeared from the mantelpiece according to her mother's mood, "a sort of weather report" (234) and a guide to Karen to keep out of her mother's way when trouble was brewing. And so Karen became perceptive of warning signs around her, the "colours and other things she needed to listen to ... she heard the pain gathering in her mother's hands ... hearing past the words; she heard faces instead, and what was behind them" (235). When her mother hit the backs of Karen's legs with whatever came to hand, screaming obscenities and threatening her with worse if her father had been alive, "thick red light would pour out of her body and get onto Karen

[7] Perrakis, Phyllis Sternberg: "Atwood's *The Robber Bride*: The Vampire as Intersubjective Catalyst". *Mosaic*. 30:3. 1997. 157.

and Karen would squirm and scream" (235). Calling Karen "You hard girl!" her mother would expect signs of remorse from her, and reconciliation would take place in a welter of tears and remorse on her mother's part. "Karen would stop crying then, she would try to smile, because her mother loved her. If someone loved you that made it all right"; after all, "It was her nerves" (236).

If the effects of war had caused her mother to behave in this way and had led to the eventual destruction of her mind, her personality and her life it is no wonder that the adult Charis is so against war in any form. Thinking about all the men like Julius Caesar who became famous for killing people Charis concludes that if they "stopped giving medals ... parades ... making statues out of them ... those men would stop ... all the killing. They do it to get attention" (66). Charis believes that even thinking about war is "carcinogenic" (25).

Roz spent the war years growing up in the rooming house run by her respectable cliché-ridden Irish Catholic mother, Aggie, who worked her hands to the bone, her "hard hard hands with enlarged knuckles, red from washing" (319), and who led Roz to believe that scrubbing toilets gladdened the heart of God. Roz attended the local Catholic school where her inappropriate behaviour was the despair of the nuns, and where she realised that "there was something that set her apart, an invisible barrier, faint ... but strong nevertheless" (324). It was not as if she was a Protestant or a Jew or a Displaced Person, those sectors of the community who were generally persecuted, but even the nuns made her feel that she was not quite what she should be. At school she was shown pictures of war orphans standing on piles of rubble, with appealing eyes "because their parents had been killed by bombs" (318).

Roz's father was away from home and had been away as long as she could remember, "because of the war" (318) and Roz imagined him "[s]omewhere over there, behind the piles of rubble" (319). Although they had met "just as the war began" (340), Roz's parents, unlike the parents of the other protagonists, had not been brought together by the war itself but by a fight outside a bar, in which Roz's father was being beaten up. In a move which was completely out of character the silent prim Aggie, walking home carrying her shopping, had waded into the pavement brawl to rescue this stranger, "screaming her head off ... and [swinging] her grocery bag, scattering apples and carrots, until a policeman came in sight and the thugs ran

off" (340).[8]

Like the Good Samaritan, Aggie had taken in the bleeding stranger, who said he was on his way to join the army, tended his wounds and washed his clothes. And soon, through a combination of complicated emotions, they ended up married "although it was not a Catholic wedding; which meant that in the eyes of the church they were not married at all. For her father's sake, her mother had placed herself in an unremitting state of sin" (341). No wonder the nuns despaired of Roz.

Roz could not remember her father, and the photo her mother kept of him "was just of a man, a large man ... whose face Roz could hardly make out because it was in shadow" (320). Once the war was over Roz began to wonder why her father did not come home, although there "was a third chair always placed ready at the kitchen table for him" (319). Her mother said that he was doing "important, secret ... war things, even though the war was over" (320). Roz ascribed quasi magical powers to her father, but meanwhile she and her mother ground out their dreary existence in their "clean, respectable house" (320), waiting for his return.

When Roz's father finally does return from the war it is plain to her from his speech that he is the epitome of a Displaced Person; a "DP", one of the categories of people despised by the children in the neighbourhood. Soon he and his two disreputable friends, the uncles, change the whole tenor of the house. Her mother "bends ... abdicates" (332), and the respectable rooming house is no longer so respectable. But Roz adores her father. She starts turning away from her mother and the nuns and the side where it is the "women who have the power" (332), and turns to him more and more, even when she learns to her dismay that not only is her father a "DP" but he is half Jewish (another of the despised categories).

She discovers other things that have been hidden from her when the uncles tell her the horrors of war, of the six million who were murdered "over there", Jews, "Gypsies and homos" (334). To protect herself from these horrors she takes to reading murder mysteries in which "there's a reason for every death, and only one murder at a time

[8] Atwood frequently brings the drudgery of the domestic lives of women into the foreground. Here the woman and her shopping bags full of groceries open a new chapter in the lives of the characters involved. In *Cat's Eye* Elaine starts her new life as a painter painting the Virgin Mary with the head of a lioness, and then another version of the Virgin descending to earth carrying shopping bags full of ordinary groceries. This painting she calls *The Virgin of Perpetual Help*.

... and the murderer always gets caught" (335).

When everyone is home from the war another kind of waiting ensues, the uncles, and sometimes her father, smoking, drinking, playing poker, and teaching Roz to play poker. "'Don't show what you're thinking,' they tell her. 'Play close to your chest. Know when to fold ... Never bet more than your stake'" (342), lessons that will stand her in good stead in the business world. Then"[a]ll of a sudden there was a lot of money ... 'The ship came in' said her father" (342) and her life changes for ever. Although Roz knows it is not a real ship she imagines it to be "like a galleon, a treasure ship ... its sails golden in the sunlight ... Something noble" (342).

She discovers that her Jewish identity has been hidden to protect her, because of "the war" (343). Much later, when she is a married woman and her parents have both died, she "found out about the money" (347), from a dying Uncle George who reveals that during the war her father had been "a fixer ... a crook ... a hero, too ... He helped the Nazis" (348) but he also "took out Jews" (349). Uncle George's philosophy is that during a war "people steal ... a war is stealing. Why should we be any different?" (348). And so Roz has had to live with the knowledge that the ship that came in was far from noble, that her money, ill-gotten during the war, "is dirty money" (349). She ponders the question whether all money is in fact dirty, even the old money of her husband Mitch, "at several removes" (349). "Wash your hands when you touch [money], her mother used to say. It's riddled with germs" (349).

Each of the female characters has her own special means of dealing with life, her own particular means of wielding power, her own magic or witchcraft. This power or witchcraft has grown out of the experiences of each of the characters and out of the uniqueness of who each of them is.

Tony grew up in a household where there was constant warfare between her parents and she developed strategies for surviving in this household. She has learnt to be inconspicuous, to camouflage herself and to appear non-threatening. Her appearance and small stature are assets in this respect, and she builds on these assets by having her hair cut very simply in a Chinese style. In fact, among the people in Chinatown she "feels the right height" and the people in the hairdresser's "tell her she is almost Chinese" (36). She dresses in clothes from "the children's section at Eaton's", in what

Roz describes as "floral-wallpaper print", and what Tony explains as "camouflage" (17). At home she wears racoon slippers like those she gave to Roz's twins when they were little, but she has never outgrown them as the twins have. She also hides behind her glasses which act as a "sort of barrier" (155) against the rest of the world. In the History department at the university, where Tony teaches, she finds her small stature makes her less threatening to her male colleagues who may feel she is trespassing on their preserve, because Tony has studied History and, in particular, War.

For Tony it is undoubtedly the wars that interest her, "despite her lace-edged collars. She likes clear outcomes" (4). Charis finds it hard to understand Tony's preoccupation with wars. She sometimes thinks that perhaps in a previous life Tony was Julius Caesar, that maybe "Julius Caesar has been sent back in the body of a woman to punish him. A very short woman so that he can see what it is like, to be powerless" (66). But Tony is far from powerless. She regards herself as "a human being with power. There isn't much of it, but it's power all the same" (22). She has created a domain of her own, giving lectures which are filled to capacity with enthusiastic (mainly male) students, the appeal of her lectures being the "mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed" (3).

This contradictory image could perhaps be regarded as central to the whole novel; the move from the narrative of grand themes such as a World War to the micro-narratives of how ordinary soldiers (and civilians, including the characters of the novel)) experience their lives in wartime. Her lecture on "the dynamics of spontaneous massacres" begins with an image from weaving or knitting, "*Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled*" (3). Her lectures concentrate, not on kings and generals and their strategies, but on more mundane matters such as "lice and fleas ... Faulty boots. Mud. Germs. Undershirts. And fly-front fastenings (24)". These are the seemingly unimportant domestic kind of considerations that have played an enormous role in the winning or losing of battles.[9]

Tony wields another kind of power, re-enacting famous battles of history in the sandtray in her basement at home, working out other possible outcomes for famous

[9] Compare with the patchwork in *Alias Grace* which is used subversively to undermine patriarchal authority right under the noses of those very authorities (Chapter Four). What appears to be domestic and trivial connects significantly with history on the grand scale.

battles. (Another example of the combining of the domestic and the bloody, as well as her strategiy for hiding behind the perception that she nurtures for the consumption of other people that she is a child). The armies and populations in her battles are represented, not by coloured pins, but by "kitchen spices, a different one for each tribe or ethnic grouping ... cloves ... red peppercorns ... green peppercorns ... coriander seeds ... dill ... lentils ... and for each major king, chief, emperor, or pope, there's a Monopoly man" (111). She uses tweezers to move the spices around, especially since some of the lighter spices are kept in place with a "touch of hairspray" (112).

When Tony visits battlefields of the past she likes to keep a souvenir of her visit, usually a small "flower for her scrapbook" (112), another of her feminine and domestic touches to the apparently all male subject of the study of war. We have already referred to the subversive appeal of this mixture of the domestic image and warfare in the irony of the meeting of Roz's parents when a woman with a bag of shopping intervenes in a barroom brawl, hitting out with her shopping bag and sending fruit and vegetables flying, an appealing and comically touching juxtaposition of warring domesticity.

There is a measure of conflict in her life which Tony is unable to avoid completely. The department in which she works at the university is filled with the whisperings and treacheries of a "Renaissance court" (21) and because Tony tries to stay out of the intrigues she has "no particular allies and is therefore suspected by all" (21). The women staff members feel she should be "studying birth; not death" (22) and that she is "letting women down" (22). If she has to study war, they feel, she ought to teach the course "from the point of view of the victims" (21). "They are all victims!" is Tony's response, "Actually, they took turns trying to avoid being the victims. That's the whole point about war ... War is there ... I want to see why so many other people like it" (21).

Male colleagues tolerate her, although they feel that she is invading their territory and "should leave their spears, arrows,, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes, and bombs alone" (22), she should be "writing social history" (22), not meddling with

male implements and, to use a South African phrase, "cultural weapons".[10] Tony gets away with meddling in male matters only because she is so tiny. If she were large, "if she had hips ... she'd be threatening, then she'd be an Amazon. It's the incongruity that grants permission" (22). This reminds us of how Tony's father tolerated her presence in his study and allowed her to keep his pencils sharpened.

But Tony has "cultural weapons" of her own. As she sits marking her students' work she has a quiverful of sharpened coloured pencils in her right hand while she marks with her left hand,

> "red for bad comments, blue for good ones, orange for spelling mistakes, and mauve for queries. Sometimes she reverses hands ... to combat boredom she occasionally reads a few sentences out loud to herself, backwards. *Seigolonhcet gnitepmoc fo ecneics eht si raw fo ecneics eht.* How true. She has said it to herself, many times ... Today ... [h]er left hand knows what her right hand is doing. Her two halves are superimposed" (8).

Tony has another secret magical power in her lefthandedness and ambidexterity. She develops a concomitant ability to read, write and speak backwards, her own private language, a source of great power to her.

Learning to stand for who she was and what was important for her, without creating too much conflict, or without drawing attention to what she was doing, was more or less imposed on Tony from early childhood.

It all started when she was a child and she was forced at school to use her right hand, her left hand sometimes even being tied to the desk by a teacher. Her left hand was not to be used for doing anything that was important, although she could do things more easily with her left hand than with her right; "despite its good performance her left hand was scorned" (138). But for Tony it "was the hand she loved best all the same" (138) and she subversively continued to use it. Her mother moved her from school to school when the teachers said Tony had difficulty with

[10] In the recent history of South Africa certain groups of men insisted on carrying dangerous weapons such as spears and axes when they demonstrated, or assembled at a political meeting. They refused to be disarmed, claiming that these were "cultural weapons" and essential in the maintaining and displaying of their manhood. In some quarters the term took on a jocular connotation relating to the need of some males to display visible proof of their manhood.

numbers and spelling and reversed letters. Her mother, who was never able to accept Tony as she was, wanted her "changed, fixed, turned right side up" (138).[11]

Tony kept a diary and every year she would write her name in it, TONY FREMONT, with her right hand, but "under it she would write her other name: TNOMERF YNOT" (WHYNOT?) with her left hand. This sounded like "the name of an alien or a spy" (137), or sometimes Tony thought of it as "the name of a twin, an invisible twin, ... the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing" (137), a twin who was "[t]aller, stronger, more daring" (137) than Tony herself.

She learned to resist her mother's will to change her into an acceptable daughter by means of this wonderful mirror language. In the episode about the tobogganing, when Anthea climbed on the toboggan herself and went careering down the hill to show Tony how it was done, Tony found herself screaming "No! No!" as her mother "diminished down the slope, into the dusk ... vanishing ... But inside herself she could hear another voice, also hers, which was shouting, fearlessly and with ferocious delight: *On! On!*" (137).

Tony used her special language to express her rage against her mother, while appearing to be the conforming and submissive daughter. As Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis puts it, "Tony uses her left-handed writing to reveal her inner world",[12] but only to herself, of course. When she was supposed to be practising the piano while her mother was out (an extremely civilised occupation for a dutiful daughter to be engaged in) Tony would breathe on the cold glass of the window, making a foggy patch and then write on it with her finger "*Kcuf* ... a word too bad even for her diary. *Tihs*" (138-139). Writing "with fear and awe, ... with superstitious relish" (139) Tony felt the Ynot words making her feel "powerful, in charge of something" (139). Tony would breathe, write and rub out over and over again until she saw her mother coming up the road returning from her bridge club, *bulc egdirb*, and then would return demurely to her piano piece, a Gavotte, or *Ettovag*. Anthea would come in and

[11] There are echoes here of Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*. Cordelia tried desperately to be what her father wanted her to be and ended up destroying herself and trying to destroy Elaine too. Tony, however, refuses to be changed. She appears to submit to those who wish to change her but she quietly and subversively uses these setbacks to grow and develop her own individuality and strength, her magic.

[12] Perrakis, Phyllis Sternberg: "Atwood's *The Robber Bride*: The Vampire as intersubjective Catalyst". *Mosaic*. 30:3. 1997. 156.

put her leather-gloved hands[13] on Tony's shoulder and say "Mother truly, truly loves you" (140), never "I", and Tony would shrink away inwardly and think "*Rethom, Evol*" (140), turning her mother's meaningless words into her own powerful tool.

Tony had been hardened off early, like Charis's seedlings. She had been a premature baby and had spent her first days motherless, in an incubator, "a glass box", and her mother would come and look at her through the glass. "Nor ... did things improve" (135), thinks Tony, after she had come out of the incubator and her mother had taken her home. The distance between Tony and her mother remained and Tony feels she constantly has to atone to Anthea for "failing to be English" (149). But if Tony's English is alien to her mother, the language of the warfare conducted between her parents is incomprehensible and frightening for Tony. Griff's bitter sarcasm, Anthea's "bright enamelled cheerfulness" (149), or the broken glass in the mornings after one of their rows, all leave her with a feeling of being disregarded and of needing to fend for herself.

Thus she takes refuge in her own world, where Tnomerf Ynot leads her barbarian hordes galloping across the plains yelling *Bulc egdirb!*, or "drinks from a skull with silver handles where the ears used to be ... to the war god of the barbarians: *Ettovag!* she yells, and the hordes answer, cheering: *Ettovag! Ettovag!*" (148).

Or she reads the cereal box at the tense breakfast table the morning after a fight between her parents, decoding the coyly esoteric language on the box and transforming it into something powerful for herself. While she surreptitiously "spoons [cold cereal] into her mouth, with her left hand because nobody's watching: ... *Sekalf narb. Ytiraluger*, Tony whispers to herself. They never come right out and say 'constipation.' *Noitapitsnoc*: a much more satisfactory word" (149). Tony has a "collection of palindromes ... but the phrases she prefers are different backwards: skewed, odd, melodious. They belong to another world, where Tony is at home because she can speak the language" (149). Part of the excitement of saying words backwards was that "the meaning emptied out and then the word was vacant. Ready for a new meaning to flow in" (154).

[13] Throughout her writing Atwood uses body parts, such as missing hands and feet, to denote fragmentation and dislocation. The leather gloves here also suggest lifelessness in the touch of the mother. Compare with the hand of the manipulative lover in a leather glove in *Surfacing*.

Tony feels that fundamentalists might regard her special language as "evil", but it is nothing so dangerous. "It's her seam, it's where she's sewn together, it's where she could split apart" (19). But Tony does cast spells with her special language: she sees West as needing protection from the world and she repeats his name to herself "from time to time, silently, like a charm" (14). His name, West, is also one of her backwards words created when he told her many years before how much he hated being called Stew, short for Stewart, "so she reversed him" (14), changing the order of the letters slightly so that he would not be Wets. "But that's what happens when you love someone ... You cheat a little" (14). People sometimes use other people's coffee mugs at work, but Tony has written on her mug in "red nail polish, on black ... *Gnissapsert On* ... [and] nobody uses hers" (20). Her magic works.

Tony's interest in warfare and its history is a natural extension of her fascination with language. From her own experience of life with her parents Tony believes that "[w]ar is what happens when language fails" (39), and that "history, ... when it's really taking place [is] enraged people yelling at one another" (414). Having a language of her own creation is therefore both a powerful weapon and a mighty defence.

An extension of Tony's interest in warfare, and an extension of her magical power, is the house she owns, a Victorian house with a fake tower from which her study window looks out. Roz, who encouraged Tony to buy the house, thinks of it as "Tony's red-brick Gothic folly" (290). "[T]he Victorians loved to think they were living in castles" (18), and Tony regards her solid, reassuring house as "a fort, a bastion, a keep" (19). Tony, in a reversal of stereotypical fairy tale roles, is able to keep her beloved and frangible West "safe from harm" (19) in this castle of hers.

If being the unwanted child of a "war bride" and a "war husband" (158) has taught Tony her strategies for survival, Charis has developed very different but equally efficacious means of survival. She had also been born to a mother who could not cope with being a mother, and who had taken out her anger at being a war widow on the hapless child.

Charis "remembers her own mother calling her hard" (41), when she was still Karen, and her mother would hit her legs with whatever came to hand. But Karen was "soft, too soft. A soft touch. Her hair was soft, her smile was soft, her voice was soft ... there was no resistance. Hard things sank into her, they went right through her, and

... out the other side. Then she didn't have to see them or hear them, or touch them even" (41).

Charis's gentleness and her respect for all things, living and not living, are the tenets by which she lives, believing that "[we] are all part of everybody else, ... all part of everything" (56). She stopped eating bacon at the age of seven when she realised that it came from the succession of pigs that her Grandmother kept as pets before slaughtering them, and stopped eating other meat later. She has a tendency to bump into things, not because she is clumsy in the usual way because of poor coordination, but "because she wasn't sure where the edges of her body ended and the rest of the world began" (63).

Because of her belief in the unity of all things Charis believes that people do not die, that what we call death is "a transition, ... a learning experience" (48), and sometimes in the process people do not "get as far as the light, ... get lost ... could be quite dangerous because they could get into your own body ... like squatters, and then it would be difficult to get them out again" (49).

Charis has developed her own rigorous attitude about the need for purity and honesty. When she was a child her Grandmother taught her that "there's clean outside and there's clean inside ... and clean inside is better" (44) but Charis is scrupulous about her own body, showering and scrubbing herself, eating healthily, examining herself regularly for breast cancer, exercising her body. She tries to be scrupulous about her mind as well, allowing herself only positive thoughts. She believes, for instance, that even thinking about war is "carcinogenic" (25). She "gave up Christianity a long time ago ... the Bible is full of ... animals being sacrificed ... too much blood ... too many slaughters, too much suffering, too many tears" (63). She tried Buddhism until she "discovered how many Hells they had" (63): "Her God is oval" (214). Charis's attitude to life is mirrored in her appearance, "healthful, but verging on the antique" (28), looking the way one might imagine "Ophelia ... if she had lived ... or the Virgin Mary when middle-aged — earnest and distracted, and with an inner light. It's the inner light that gets her in trouble" (28). Her mission in life is to help other people, especially women. And it is this need to help others and put others first that is sometimes her downfall, as with both Zenia and Billy.

But Charis is not only wholesome and healthy in body and mind. She has other

talents too. When she was a small child and her mother would fly into rages and beat her, Charis learnt to anticipate these episodes by training herself to be very perceptive and sensitive to her mother's moods. During the beatings she would see "thick red light ... pouring out of her [mother's] body" (235). She began to be able to see the auras of people around her and to be able to interpret the meanings of the auras and to be able to see and hear things before they happened. "Hours before a storm, when the sky was still windless and blue, she would feel the whisper of the distant lightning running up her arms" (235). Sometimes she walked in her sleep as a means of coming to terms with her troubled spirit, a phenomenon that frightened and angered her mother.

When Charis is seven her mother takes her to stay on her Grandmother's farm. Her mother tells her on the journey to the farm that she is "a lot like [her] Grandmother in some ways" (233). Charis, or Karen, soon discovers what her mother means.

When Karen meets her Grandmother for the first time the Grandmother's appearance is pure witch: her hair a

> straggly whitish grey nest, ... [h]er big, crinkly face ... with a beak of a nose and two small bright blue eyes under wiry eyebrows, and her teeth ... large too, and unnaturally even, and so white they were almost luminous. She was smiling. 'I'm not going to eat you,' she said to Karen. 'Not today. You're too skinny, anyway — I'd have to fatten you up (237).

She is surrounded by her familiars, a black-and-white collie, named Glennie, and a brown-and-white one, named Cully, a flock of hissing geese ("watch-geese" (242), her Grandmother explains), and Pinky the pig, who comes into the house with the dogs.

Seeing her mother and her Grandmother together Karen realises that her mother was born to the wrong mother whom she had regarded as a "crazy old bat" (233) and from under whose thumb she had escaped as soon as possible by running away from the farm when she was sixteen. Karen has always believed that *she* was "born to the wrong parents" (233), something that her Grandmother tells her later "could happen ... Such people have to look for a long time, they have to search out and identify their right parents. Or else they have to go through life without" (233). It is in her

Grandmother that Karen finds the stability that had been lacking in her life. Her Grandmother "is a safe place for her, although hard. Or because hard. Not shifting, not watery. She doesn't change" (251). When Karen's mother departs, leaving her alone with her Grandmother she studies her Grandmother more closely and sees around her head a faint blue aura, a sign that she is endowed with the same sort of gifts as Karen herself, special magical gifts.

Karen first experiences her Grandmother's magical powers on her first day alone with her on the farm. They go out to collect eggs from the henhouse, Karen refusing to wear shorts because of the lacerations on her legs which her mother had said "were a secret between her and her mother ... or there would be trouble" (240). She is entranced with the farm, "thistles and Queen Anne's lace, smelling deeper and greener than anything Karen had ever smelt before, mixing in with the sweet pungent barnyard smells ... so powerful and rich it's like being smothered" (243). She is delighted with the potatoes, lettuce, beans and with the hens, "sparkles of many-coloured light [running] off their feathers, like dew" (243), and with her first experience of a new laid egg, the beginning of her romance with hens and eggs, the beginning of her new life. The egg is glowing, "a little damp ... warm ... soft in her hands" (244) and as her painful legs throb in the heat so the egg becomes too hot and she drops it and presumably faints. This is how she discovers her Grandmother's healing ability, as she wakes up to find herself in bed while her Grandmother washes her legs. She then puts "her large nubbly hands on Karen's legs" which feel "warmer and warmer, and then cool" (244), and after that Karen goes to sleep.

Later, when she sleepwalks she wakes up to find herself in the light of "a half moon" (244) and surrounded by a

> deep sweet smell, a glimmering of flowers, ... and a fluttering of many moths, the white flakes of their wings kissing against her. Somewhere near was running water ... something brushed against her ... The two dogs were with her ... they would know the way back" (244). [She wanted to be] "outside in the night by herself. She wasn't sick any longer (244).[14]

[14] In this section about Karen's Grandmother and her magic powers I have quoted large sections from the text of the novel. For me Atwood's evocative language is part of the means of imparting the sense of wonder and discovery experienced by the young Karen, and has to be quoted verbatim to do justice to the sense of the text.

Instead of having to face her mother's usual frenzied response to her sleepwalking she sees her Grandmother standing in her nightgown holding the door open, and she "simply nodded at Karen" (244) as she went inside, feeling "welcomed". "Karen knew now that her Grandmother walked in her sleep, too, and that her Grandmother also could see in the dark" (245). In the morning her legs no longer hurt and the sticky welts have healed. Thus the new laid egg, and, by association, the chickens, have become for Karen the symbol of her entry into a new life where she is accepted and understood.

It helps Karen to grow within herself when she finds that her Grandmother can sense things the way she can, can "feel the rain in her bones" (247), and that she is known in the surrounding countryside as having healing and other supernatural powers. She is undoubtedly one of the wise women referred to by Husain[15], the healers, possessed of ancient wisdom and formidable magic, all of which causes them to be driven out of society as they are cloaked in the garb of Otherness. Although their gifts are respected they are also feared.

When Ron Sloane, the neighbour, arrives on the farm badly injured, the Grandmother staunches the bleeding of his wounds by means of her special power before rushing him off to hospital for the necessary treatment. It is to the Grandmother that people come when they are in dire need, but when Karen and her Grandmother sit at Mrs Sloane's kitchen table after the incident Karen can sense that, although the Sloanes are grateful, they are afraid of her Grandmother: she can see the fear "all around their bodies, like grey icy shivers" (250). But Karen is not afraid. She realises that "she would like to touch blood too" and "be able to make it stop" (250).

When the injured Ron Sloane arrives in the yard she is able to smell his "sweat and fear" (249) and see the hurt coming off of his arm "in shock waves of brilliant red" (249). She calls to her Grandmother "inside her head" (249) and as her Grandmother touches Ron's arm she sees "light, a blue glow coming out from her Grandmother's hand ... and the blood has stopped" (249). Her Grandmother's only response to the thanks she receives is to say "It isn't me does it" (249).

Karen is being toughened up on the farm, learning to cope. She is learning, through a

[15] Husain, Shahrukh: *The Virago Book of Witches*. Virago. London. 1993. xv.

mixture of warmth and understanding, that in some things she is just like her Grandmother. Through challenges that come her way, or that are deliberately put in her way, she has to face up to realities such as the fact that the bacon she is eating came from a previous pet pig. She realises that her Grandmother shoots or slaughters for the pot, and, having witnessed a chicken being slaughtered, she thinks that she could never kill things the way her Grandmother does.

Besides the practical things, she learns about matters such as the power of wishbones and saves those that her Grandmother gives her "for when you need them" (252). She learns to ride on the back of the truck with Glennie the dog "while the air whirls round her ... it's like flying" (249), like a witch on a broomstick. She discovers her affinity with nature, not washing the earth off of newly-pulled carrots before eating them because "she likes the earth taste" (248).

Another of the tools of her Grandmother's trade as a wise woman was her ritual with the huge family Bible every Sunday. She would move the Bible from the front parlour to the kitchen table and "poke between the pages with a pin, and then open the page that the pin had chosen" (248). Then Karen would hold the pin over the page "until she felt it pulled down" (248) and her Grandmother would "read the part where the pin had stuck in" (248). Sometimes the chosen verse seemed appropriate but at other times the meaning would seem puzzling, but only one verse each Sunday would be read.

It is not long before Karen has to start putting into practice some of the survival skills she has acquired during her time with her Grandmother. Her mother has to go to hospital and Karen goes to live with her Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern. Because of her heightened perception she realises that her mother is very ill in spite of the attempts of the adults to hide this from her. As her own confidence and lifeskills grow, so her mother weakens and wanes. When Karen visits her in hospital her mother seems as if she is sleepwalking and has the appearance of someone who is only half alive: there is "no red light around her mother now. Only a faint mauve-brown shimmer" (255). Later Karen can discern her illness spreading through her like filaments of lightning, only very small and slow. Like grey mould spreading through bread" (256) and she knows that when it has spread through her whole body she will die. When her mother dies Karen knows intuitively that she has died before anyone else knows or tells her.

Karen goes to school while she is living with her aunt and uncle, and at school she learns different strategies for surviving, similar to those which Tony thought of as camouflage. In this context she learns to "make herself invisible ... to suck in the light around her body" (256), so that no one notices her. Her hands do "whatever was required: long rows of neat a's and b's ... She got gold stars for neatness" (256).

Uncle Vern has taken to ruffling Karen's hair, to her discomfort, and she begins to notice that his hands have "a heavy luminescence around them, thick like jelly, sticky, brown-green" (257) and she wonders if this has come off on her hair. When Uncle Vern starts sexually abusing Karen she tries hard to believe that he loves her, as he says he does, remembering from her experience of her mother "that people who love can do painful things to you" (260). Her relations with her aunt are not improved when, at her aunt's urging her to say what is bothering her, she tells her "I don't like Uncle Vern touching me" (261). Aunt Vi accuses her of lying and dismisses her words as something both of them would do best to forget. Trapped and betrayed once again by the adults who have power and control over her she has to find a means of surviving.

First she finds herself sleepwalking more and more, but the first time Uncle Vern actually rapes her, a more powerful escape mechanism comes into play. Karen feels herself splitting in two, literally and figuratively, like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is as light as a feather, light as air. There is no pain in it at all. She flies over to the window and in behind the curtain, from where she is able to watch in a detached way what is happening to her body.[16]

> Charis doesn't know she is Charis, of course. She has no name yet. (262) ... After the third time Karen knows she is trapped. All she can do is split in two; all she can do is turn into Charis, and float out of her body and watch Karen, left behind with no words, flailing and sobbing ... Aunt Vi will never hear her, no matter what she says (263).

She has fantasies of killing both her aunt and her uncle, as her Grandmother chopped

[16] Elaine in *Cat's Eye* discovers that she can step outside of her body and watch what is happening to her when she can no longer tolerate Cordelia's persecution. Her detachment from a sense of reality comes close to being a death wish and nearly proves fatal in the ravine episode.These strategies for survival which involve loss of consciousness are therefore dangerous and destructive as well as offering protection.

off the heads of the chickens, and watching the "grey smoke of their lives twist up out of them. But she knows she could never kill anything. She isn't hard enough" (263).

It is at this point that she resorts to using her wishbone which has been secreted in the hem of her bedroom curtain waiting for the right time. She closes her eyes, pulls and wishes for her Grandmother and when she opens her eyes

> her Grandmother is there, coming into the room through the closed door, wearing her overalls and frowning a little, and smiling also ... Karen feels a cool wind against her skin, and the Grandmother holds out both of her knobbly old hands, and Karen puts out her own hands and touches her, and her hands feel as if sand is falling over them. There's a smell of milkwood flowers and garden soil. The [Grandmother's] ... eyes are light blue, and her cheek comes against Karen's, cool grains of dry rice. Then she's like the dots on the comic page, close up, ... and then she's gone (263).

Karen has been imbued with some of her Grandmother's power. "Her healing power, her killing power ... enough to keep her alive. She looks at her hands and sees a trace of blue" (263). Soon after this Karen's Grandmother dies, passing on her magic power to Karen. But, as she had said to Karen once, looking almost ferocious, "I don't intend to die ... Only the body dies" (251) and Karen knows "there isn't any death really. The Bible arrives ... addressed to Karen and she puts it in her suitcase under her bed for when she can leave" (263).

The aunt and uncle, becoming more and more like the wicked stepmother and wicked stepfather of fairy tales, have control of the farm which Karen has inherited, until she is twenty-one, and they have control of Karen too. But once Karen reaches puberty the uncle leaves her alone and a space has grown between them, a space that "isn't like an absence. It's a presence" (264). Karen is learning another strategy of survival, to be hard, the way her mother had always told her she was, and Uncle Vern is afraid of her because "her eyes are no longer timid ... Her eyes are stone" (264).

She seals off the awful things that have happened to her, splits in two, and now has a name for the "cooler ... clearer part of herself ... she is Charis. She picked the hint for her new name out of the Bible with a pin: 'The greatest of these is Charity.'

Charity is better than Faith and Hope" (264). Uncle Vern hopes that she has forgotten everything, but Karen, who is in storage in the suitcase under the bed, "remembers everything ... Karen is still little, but Charis is growing up" (264).

When Charis turns twenty-one nothing is said about her Grandmother's money, and she knows that to get it will entail a fight, but she feels that once it has been in their hands it is dirty[17] and she is not prepared for a fight. She leaves the farm and goes her own way, keeping the love of the farm which "was still inside her ... because places belonged to the people who loved them" (265). She discards her old self, the Karen side of her, dumping the name and in her mind filling the grey leather bag that was Karen with everything she did not want, the old wounds and poisons, and sinking the bag in the lake. "But the lake was inside Charis really, so that's where Karen was too. Down deep" (265).

The lake plays a significant role in Charis's life, providing her with yet another coping strategy. We are told the lake is in Charis, and the adult Charis lives on the island in the lake. Thus the lake separates her from the mainland, from the city which she finds "so abrasive" (199). She finds the air of the city "turgid ... full of chemicals, and ... the breath of other people" (55).

There is, however, one advantage to working in the city for Charis, namely her friendship with Shanita. Shanita is the person in Charis's life who is most like her Grandmother. She lives as she chooses to live and has contact with the realm beyond what people generally consider normal. She herself seems to have numerous Grandmothers and, because of her dark hair and skin, is able to change her identity whenever it suits her, like a shape changer. She is proficient at reading Tarot cards and is also intuitive about people's needs, individuals as well as the general public, hence her success in business as she changes the mood of the times. She is a great source of strength to Charis.

Nevertheless, each day Charis cannot wait to board the ferry and return to her island after her work in the city is over, "leaning on the railing, facing backwards, watching the wake rise and subside into the notoriously poisonous lake" (200).

[17] Roz has also had scruples about using the dirty money inherited from her father. But she has come to terms with the problem, and it is she who later retrieves the money from the wicked aunt and uncle when Charis is pregnant and has been abandoned by Billy and Zenia.

Tony has her turreted house for a haven, Charis has her little house on her magical island. "She loves the house and, even more, she loves the island ... from the very first Charis knew it was right" (202), everything about it "is alive and aware, and her along with it" (202). The island allows Charis to enjoy some of the features she treasured so much about her Grandmother's farm, such as being able to grow apples and vegetables, and revel in the greenness of everything, but above all she has her beloved chickens. The chickens "fill her with joy" in spite of the fact that she knows all their shortcomings, but she "excuses [them] everything. She adores them ... She thinks they are miraculous. They are" (206). On the island she is more easily able to access the sort of power she learnt from her Grandmother.

Even the city seems mystical from the island. The view of the city from her island "is mysterious, like a mirage" (43). In the early morning mist it is transformed, and in the evening it reflects the colours of the sunset in its myriad windows, while at night it lights up like a funfair. But at noon the city looks just what it is, even from here, "brash and assertive" (43), reminding her that she would rather look at the city than go to it and she plans a small treat for herself each day when she is obliged to go there for work. From the island Charis can also see in the far distance another shore, that of the United States,[18] another place that holds threats of violence and alienation for her. Islands have connotations of magic and mystery, and it is on her island that Charis finds restoration for her soul from the destructiveness of the city.

Tony and Charis have transformed the negative aspects of their childhoods and their damaging relationships with their parents to create the strengths in their adult lives, but what Roz has brought from her chilhood is slightly different.

Roz has inherited two things from her father which have stood her in good stead and have created her power base: his money and his business acumen. Having discovered quite early on that her money was "dirty money" (349), she sometimes feels that it is a burden to her, a huge responsibility. It is always present between herself and Mitch, but is nevertheless something he could not do without, and something that she could use towards good ends: "you couldn't give without getting

[18] For Atwood the United States often symbolises aggression, as in *Surfacing*. In this novel it is from the United States that Billy, the biggest threat to Charis's peace, comes. Ironically, he is billeted with Charis via the Peace Movement, as a draft dodger, which at that time often denoted "pacifist". Billy however, is no pacifist, and has fled because he is in trouble with the law in the United States for attempting to perpetrate some kind of violence which is never clearly defined.

first" (349) her father had said. Money is also her protection and this thought urges her to make more. Money is her power base.

And then there are the business skills, both inherited and acquired, from her father and his cronies. Roz has learned from her father's business wizardry and turned it into her own witchcraft.[19]

Her father believes that everyone "should start at the bottom and progress up to the top" (306) and so Roz works at menial tasks in the business, "watching her father's style" (307) which is "[o]utrageous but effective ... Drive, cut, these verbs had an appeal for him" (307). She knows that she can be good at this sort of thing but that "rope was not given by him, it was earned, so she was putting in her time" (307).

He said that she would become his "right hand man" (306) but Roz did not want to be a son and knew that she could do the job without having to be a man. It had always seemed that business was something that men did, "that girls were forever too dull-witted to understand. But it was just a bunch of men sitting in a room, frowning and pondering ... trying to fake each other out" (93). Sitting in on her first business meeting, Roz realises that "she can do it better, better than most. Most of the time" (93). The skills she had learned from the poker playing uncles, "Don't show what you're thinking ... Play close to your chest. Know when to fold...Never bet more than your stake" (342) and the fact that her poker playing, unlike theirs, had been serious, stand her in great stead. "This little lady's a killer", (342) Uncle George had said admiringly of her.

In the business world Roz is a "quick learner, ... a tough negotiator" (86) with very definite rules about her way of conducting business. Although she has what Boyce describes as "a gourmet's taste for the underbelly" (94) she has two mottoes by which she works: "Never make a deal on the same day" (94) and "I never invest in anything I can't control" (351).

Roz's childhood experiences in the streets of her neighbourhood have taught her "street smarts" (103). As a child she would sometimes join in the persecution of a person from a minority group, "would join the shouting packs" (325), or, when she

[19] It is interesting to note the difference in connotation between the words "wizardry" and "witchcraft". This is the sort of shift in tone that occurs in spite of the efforts of society to move away from patriarchal attitudes.

was at the receiving end of abuse from other children, she could respond with "a Chinese burn ... Or else she would kick them, or else yell back" (325).

But always Roz felt that she "wasn't like the others ... she wasn't part of them. So she would push and shove, trying to break her way in" (325). Charis sees Roz's aura as "golden and many-coloured and spicy" (63), an indication that with her air of command there is "also that undercurrent of exile" (63), a feeling that Roz has had to come to terms with her past. Roz herself knows that, although to others she may appear to be "unbreakable. Roz the Rock" (76), she is vulnerable in places.

Tony has her turreted house and Charis has her island retreat. Roz, like her mother before her, does not feel really at home and comfortable in her designer house, although it is in a part of town that speaks of old money. Her true domain is her "corner office ... on the top floor ... there's nothing higher on the totem pole" (289). The head office of her firm is in a converted brewery with a carved lion's head over the entrance. It was her father's first big investment, conserving and converting the building instead of pulling it down — conserved old money, in fact. Roz can see much of the city from her windows, the lake, the Island, the university and, behind it, Tony's house. Standing in the angle of her corner windows she sees that, from the air, their three havens would form a triangle, her office forming th apex.

Although her view gives the impression that she is "[m]onarch of all she surveys" (289), she knows this is far from the truth. Sometimes "being a woman of power" means that she "has to tread more softly ... apologise for her success" (351). She remembers too that "[i]t's complicated, being a woman boss. Women don't look at you and think *Boss*. They look at you and think *Woman ... like me*" (88). "Which is why she hired Boyce" (89).

Boyce might be considered one of the "magical children" in this novel. These children provide an extra dimension of magic in the lives of the three main protagonists.

Boyce is "studiously formal ... impeccable ... a masterpiece of understatement [in his dress] ... reserved ... brings out the lady in her ... a lawyer by training, smart as a whip, and gay" (90). He dealt with his gayness at the job interview, saying that it saved time-wasting speculation, described himself as "gay as a grig" and went on to explain that a grig was either "a short-legged hen or a young eel. I prefer the

young eel version, myself" (90). Boyce pampers and protects her and advises her on her stocks, and quotes his adaptations of appropriate literature at every opportunity, his version of word wizardry. She wonders what she would do without him, he is becoming indispensable. "Sometimes she thinks he is a surrogate son; ... he might be a surrogate daughter" (91), but he is definitely a part of her magic powers.

When she was small Roz felt the lack of a brother or sister, being an only child, and "intended to have both kinds when she grew up" (321). Her three magical children are her greatest source of power: Paula and Erin, the androgynous twins, setting off for school in their regulation kilts, fear nothing, while Larry, her son, her firstborn, seeks to please her in every way he can. Thinking about the twins Roz is overcome with wonder that it was she who gave birth to these wonderful, gorgeous creatures: "One such creature would have been unlikely enough, but two!" (75).

She nurtures her children, trying to make up to them for the lack of a father, and is the one who wants to nurture and protect Tony and Charis, "to spread her hen wings over them, reassure them" (103). But sometimes she tires of this role, and the Roz who, to the outside world, seems to be "unbreakable. Roz the Rock" (76) even longs for her own "once-scorned, long-dead mother ... she wants to be a child for a change. She missed out on that" (76). And the twins who "know she has a breaking point", mother her and nurture her in their own teasing, joking way. "They are so wonderful! [Roz] gazes at them with ferocious love. *Zenia*, she thinks, *you bitch! Maybe you had everything else, but ... [y]ou never had daughters*" (78).

What is it about Roz's children that makes them so special, so magical? They, like the three main characters, also have about them a power that protects them, a refusal to be anyone's victim.

The twins, Erin and Paula, act as one person, calling themselves Erla, completing each other's sentences, complementing each other. They are living examples of the sense that Tony has expressed that she had once been one of twins, and that she would be a more complete person with both her right and her left halves. They have never let anyone push them into moulds, having outgrown their mother's taste in books and clothes, creating strange hairstyles and concocting revolting-looking blue "smoothies" to drink, mocking the sexist television shampoo commercials, delightedly bombarding each other with obscene, often sexist, insults, turning the

power of boys to hurt them with such insults into a nothing. As mentioned earlier, they have a way of subverting role stereotypes and turning everything that happens to their own advantage, having imbibed these skills from the fairy tales that Tony introduced to them.

Roz worries about Larry who never liked the frightening fairy tales, whose mind she could always read, who was always dutiful and loyal to her, but whose mind has now "become opaque to her" (81). He is the firstborn, "[f]ingered for sacrifice, he would have been, once" (77), never resilient like the twins, and she fears that he will become the victim of a ruthless female and end up "a sucked out shell" (82).

But Larry is working out his own sexuality and resolving the situation that his mother fears for him. He subverts the stereotypical role that she, in her protectiveness, has assigned to him. In his realisation that he is gay, he has freed himself from his mother's worst fears for him, from potential victimisation by the ruthless women of this world. The twins, with their own unambiguous attitude to sexuality, are not in the least surprised to learn of their brother's sexual proclivities, think it's "cool" that he is gay. Nor is the reader surprised, as there have been several hints to this effect in the text. For instance, Roz's thinking that Larry has the "look of a lost traveller, as if he's stuck in some no man's land, between borders and without a passport ... Wanting to do the right thing" (83). Also, Roz cannot imagine Larry ever being a father. Then the twins tell her that Larry is in the kitchen "'Eating bread and honey,' says Paula. 'That's the Queen, stupid,' says Erin. They giggle" (452). And finally Boyce sums up the situation with "'You're not losing a son, you're gaining a son'" (454), echoing Roz's own thoughts about Boyce as her surrogate son, or daughter (91).

August, Charis's daughter, or Augusta as she prefers to be called, also has strengths of her own. Unlike Charis, who is so innocent that it makes Tony ache, Augusta "is a hard girl ... hard for Charis to please" (40) and Charis wonders if it would have been easier if she had had a father, having "two parents she could find inadequate, and not just one" (40). Augusta finds fault with Charis's Victorian taste in decor, having a taste herself for "leather chairs, ... for tubular chrome and glass coffee tables, ... minimalist opulence like that in a corporate lawyers' offices" (40). Augusta goes in for polish; lacquered nails, gelled hair, neat suits, little boots and seems to Charis like a "butterfly hardened into an enamel pin while still half out of the chrysalis" (41). Even the name she chose for herself is hard, Augusta resonating for Charis with

marble statues, Roman noses and tight lips, unlike August which felt languorous like the soft winds of that month in which she had been born.

Augusta knows where she is going and has enrolled in a business course on a scholarship, independent of her mother's limited and limiting financial means. Augusta tidies up her mother's house and finds fault with her random housekeeping, already planning her own white and functional kitchen, with "everything in drawers" (42). (Roz, the great business woman, has a kitchen designed by a decorater, white, with everything in drawers, and hates it, can never find things in the drawers). Augusta's sharp speech and graphic comments make Charis wince. "It's too sharp, too bright, too jagged: shapes cut from tin" (42).

On one occasion, to her horror, Charis had mistaken Augusta for Zenia. She had been expecting Augusta for the weekend but had expected her to phone from the mainland. Suddenly, as she looked up from her stove, it was to see a white face with dark hair sleeked down by the rain "framed in the glass panel of the door" (46), the same glass pane in which Zenia had appeared on a similar rainy night all those years ago. Charis had been shaken that she had confused her own daughter with Zenia, "but hadn't really been all that surprised" (46). Charis knows that Augusta is nothing like Zenia at all, "not completely lacquered yet; she does have moments of soft guilt" (49), bringing her mother small gifts and appropriate peace offerings from time to time.

There is a vital connection between Augusta and Zenia, (the A and the Z). Some time after Zenia's arrival on Charis's island, pretending to be ill and needing the healing care that Charis is only too willing to provide, the evening arrives when Zenia disabuses Charis of her belief that Billy loves her for herself. Zenia points out to the incredulous Charis that Billy is interested only in sex and, in fact, is itching to get his hands on her too. Once Charis has been convinced that this is true she "clutches Zenia's hand ... across the tableful of dirty dishes" (230), thus creating a kind of sisterly pact against Billy and his kind.

That night when Charis is asleep Karen comes back out of the lake and across the water and re-enters her body. This is not Karen the small child but the grown-up Karen, "tall and thin and straggly" (266), with dark hair and dark sockets for her eyes; in fact, she "looks like Zenia" (266). Karen brings with her the ancient

shame associated for Charis with the sexual act, but this time when Billy turns over and takes her in his arms she "doesn't float away ... She's in the body too. She can feel everything" as she has never allowed herself to feel before, the pleasure "unfold[s] in a hundred colours, like a peacock's tail on fire ... Everything in her has been fused together" (266). And in this fusion, she believes, her daughter August has been conceived. From now on when she makes love to Billy she thinks about being Zenia. Charis knows, of course, who the father of her child is, but, in yet another reversal of the gender roles, she often wonders about the mother. Was it she and Karen? "Or was it Zenia too?" (266).

The influence of the wicked witch on the baby August is tempered and made up for by the riches which are hers from her fairy godmothers, Roz and Tony. These godmothers care for the abandoned Charis during her pregnancy. Roz gets her inheritance back from Uncle Vern so that she can buy her house, buys an oak table for the house, and buys the layette at bargain prices. Tony helps her with her physical preparations for the birth, in the absence of the baby's father. When Charis expresses regret that her baby will have to grow up without a father Tony, who had one, assures her that it "was a mixed blessing" (283).

August is born with a "golden halo" (284) which only Charis can see, and Charis, remembering her own mother's excesses, vows never to touch her in anger and "almost never does" (284). The godmothers promise, in a ceremony invented and performed by Charis herself with the aid of her Grandmother's Bible, to watch over August and protect her spirit. And Charis knows that, with them behind her, her daughter will grow up able to stand up for herself. To negate the bad influence of the third, invisible, godmother Charis prays that August will be able to "cast enough light, from within herself, to wash it away" (285). And so she does, growing up with an aura that is "daffodil yellow, strong and clear" (285).

Having children to protect and defend gives Charis and Roz an extra measure of power, the strength born out of their fierce love for their children. Tony does not have children, but is godmother to her friends' children and also has her beloved innocent West to protect and look after, to give her a reason to defend what is hers. Tony feels that being a godmother has suited her better than being a mother, "it's more intermittent" (402). The three girls have grown up so confident that she is almost afraid of them. "They have none of the timidity that used to be so built-in,

for women" (402), and she proudly visualises them galloping across the plains, hair flying, riding astride, and "giving no quarter" (402).

Another aspect of the magical powers of the main protagonists of this novel is their power to effect transformations of themselves. All the main characters of *The Robber Bride* have shown themselves capable of transformation, including a change of name to suit the new persona.

Tony (originally Antonia) has taken on the boldness of her mirror image, her unborn twin, literally, by adopting the power she finds in her own mirror language, in her world of war and in the secret name which challenges the world, asking "Ynot?".

Charis has abandoned the pain of her previous existence by choosing a new name inspired by herself, and by getting rid of the Karen part of herself.

Roz has undergone several permutations, from Rosalind Greenwood, hag-ridden by her mother and the nuns, to Roz Grunwald, the new Jewish girl, trying so hard not to show how frightened she is of life that she convinces all her schoolmates that she is bold and unafraid. From the Rosie O'Grady of the telephone directory, trying to escape her father's notoriety, to the warm, loving, confused Roz, business woman, mother and friend.

The children have also assumed their own identities by adopting new names. Erin and Paula have become Erla, strong and intimidated by no one in their oneness. August has become Augusta, hard like marble instead of gentle like a warm breeze, while Tony's protégé has changed from Stew to West, via a loving small adjustment in Tony's mirror spelling.

In spite of this accumulation of powerful magic available to each of the three friends, Tony, Charis and Roz still feel the lack of something in their lives. They are all too nice, too easily exploited, particularly by the men in their lives, too easily victimised. Deep down each of them has a secret yearning to be like Zenia, the arch enemy whose evil machinations in their lives have welded them into a trio of loyal friends. Zenia is exploited by no one, in fact, "in the war of the sexes ... Zenia [is] a double agent ... on no side but her own" (185).

Who is Zenia?. What can be vouched for about Zenia is that she is clever, hard, beautiful, a liar, a deceiver, a confidence trickster, a thief, a shape-changer, enjoys creating chaos and turbulence, but is also a courageous fighter. No one can doubt that she is "bad business, and should be left alone. Why try to decode her motives?" She is "a puzzle, a knot" (3). And is, of course, undoubtedly a witch.

Zenia's entrances into the novel are always dramatic and tinged with magic and otherness. When Zenia makes her grand entry back from the dead Tony sees her first, in the smoky mirror on the wall of the Toxique. She is wearing black and her hair floats around her, blown about by the "imperceptible wind that accompanies her everywhere" (33) rustling the air; she is beautiful, but "waves of ill-will flow out of her like cosmic radiation" and her perfume trails behind her like the smell of scorched earth. Charis wonders why Zenia bothered opening the door — she could have walked right through it — and wonders if the waitress will see her or walk right through her.

Later Charis, watching and waiting for Zenia to leave the Toxique, is aware of "a rustling of dry wings" (71) as she passes. As she follows her down the street she feels that if she takes her eyes off her Zenia will vanish, "turning herself into a bunch of dots and dashes and beaming herself off to some other locale" (197). She seems to have control over matter, knowledge which could only have been gained by sinister means "involving chicken blood, and the eating of still-alive animals ... pins driven in. Pain for someone" (197). It is significant that it is as Roz thinks of the final name for her new lipstick range, Styx, the river of Hades, that Zenia appears, back from the dead. For Charis this moment has been foreshadowed by Shanita's reading of the Tarot cards that morning, the Priestess, the Empress, Death and the Moon had all featured, and Charis's head had started to crackle as soon as she entered the Toxique.

At her first encounter with Zenia Tony experiences her as a disembodied white creature "swimming in the darkness" (126) of the black-painted flat, glowing like the moon. Tony feels sucked into the blackness, obliterated by Zenia, until she utters what Zenia recognises as her magic word, "Raw!", giving her entry into Zenia's world, a world of spells and magic. When Zenia climbs through the window to visit Tony in her residence room at night to blackmail her, Tony wonders how she got in through such a high window, reminding us of Roz's feeling at another time that Zenia could

be climbing up the wall of her office building with suckers on her feet like a fly. Tony mistakes Zenia for a visitation from her own mother's ghost on this occasion.

When Zenia returns to claim West after his marriage to Tony, Tony answers the door holding a skewerful of lamb kebabs and has a vision of herself plunging the skewer into "where [Zenia's] heart should be" (181), but instead she says "Come in" (witches cannot cross one's threshold unless invited), while lamb blood from the kebabs drops on the floor, a portent of West's and therefore Tony's sacrificial victimisation once again.

The day on which Zenia enters Charis's life is a day of thick mist on the island, mist which gives the illusion of one's being able to "walk through a solid barrier" (205). Zenia walks through the mist and appears at Charis's back door framed in the glass pane, looking ill and like a spectre, waiting for Charis's invitation to cross her threshold and enter her home and her life.

Zenia's presence is always felt as a "malign vitality" (10), larger than life and, perhaps, as an other form of life. Her physical appearance is overwhelming, and her constant transformations or shape-changing are disconcerting and alarming manifestations of her power to dissemble. She engenders in people feelings that she might vaporise and later reassemble herself in another place. Roz feels that she can "infest the woodwork of a room" (95), and the need of an excorcist springs to mind. She finds herself "reduced to a swirl of black-and-white zits" (103) which have to be reconstituted, when in Zenia's presence. Because Zenia, like Roz, is a street fighter Roz believes herself to be the one who will have to deal with her, to go straight for the jugular. But "the difficulty is that Zenia doesn't have a jugular" or a "discernible heart" (103) and probably has pure latex flowing in her veins. She imagines Zenia as an "incandescent Venus, ascending not from a seashell but from a seething cauldron" (106).

For Charis she has "an angry dark aura" (66) with "only her eyes gleaming, red as in car headlights" (231), her eyes which go deep down into Charis. The atmosphere of wine fumes, cigarette smoke and stale city air in the Toxique, which Charis finds stultifying, seems like the perfect native air for Zenia.

Being with Zenia is for Tony like a "game of tag played with cobwebs" (129),

ensnaring, but seemingly gentle and harmless. She watches Zenia plying her skills as a cook, as she measures and blends and stirs, using the herbs from the little pots she grows on her windowsill, "full of secrets ... she pulls more secrets out of her sleeves and unfurls them behind her back" (161). Undoubtedly, Tony and West are in thrall to her and when she has gone West is like a man "sucked dry of any will of his own ... [h]e will dwindle and fade, as in the ballads. He will pine and wane" (176,177). When Zenia returns he becomes like a zombie again, following her, as if "it's Zenia talking from inside his head" (183). Tony visualises her returning to claim him "with her bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair" (193).

"[T]he witch constantly challenges definition, remaining baffling and enigmatic to the end" says Husain.[20] With Zenia we find that the consequences of her potentially destructive actions are not always what one might expect. Although Zenia's malevolent intentions are undoubtedly to seduce the men in the lives of each of the protagonists, the paradox is that, as the patriarchically constructed *femme fatale*, she ultimately delivers the other women from the patriarchal roles in which they are trapped. Her intervention in their respective lives has shown Tony and West the importance of their love for each other, and has freed Roz and Charis from exploitative men who were destroying them. She has enabled each of the protagonists to speak about and be freed from her past. Thus each has been able to recognise her own strengths and her unique capacity for creating a new life of her own, having developed powerful new insights through her struggles with the malevolent Zenia.

How has each of the protagonists experienced Zenia?

Tony's first meeting with Zenia starts inauspiciously for her as she feels out of place and conspicuous at the revenge party to which West has invited her. The scene is pure gothic. In a flat painted entirely black, a demonstration of the ruthless ends to which Zenia will go for revenge, among people all dressed alike in student black, Tony, in her own typical clothing, is very different. The only other person to stand out

[20] Husain, Shahrukh: *Virago Book of Witches*. Virago Press. London. 1993. xxi.

in the room, but in her case it is calculatedly and from choice, is Zenia in a white smock over dark pants. She seems to swim against the darkness of the room, face and hands and torso as if disembodied, and to "glow in the dark ... like the moon" (126). Tony feels "sucked back ... obliterated ... non-existent" (126), especially when Zenia puts on a display of possessing West. She feels patronised when Zenia talks down to her, speaking about her in the third person as her mother used to do.

But when Zenia asks her what her "obsession" in life is Tony uncalculatingly responds with her own version of gothic, her powerful mirror language, and answers, "Raw", the magic word. Zenia is delighted with this accidental-intentional code word from Tony. Unconsciously Tony has connected with the person she has always longed to know, her mirror image, her missing twin, the bold, fierce warrior that she aspires to be, the person who is her complement. "Rubicon! The die was cast" (130), and Tony feels "replete ... involved" (130), but also as if "she's being dragged along on a rope, behind a speeding motorboat ... These are perilous waters" (134). At the same time she recognises echoes of the toboggan story with herself shouting "On! On!" instead of "No! No!"

A result of Tony's recognition of her other self is her complete absorption with this new self, as reflected in Zenia. Tony becomes more and more isolated and alienated from both West and her friends in the university residence. There is no room for West in Tony and Zenia's friendship, and the residence girls have backed off as Tony has become more friendly with Zenia. Tony's bold new self is able to face her past. Tony has never told anyone about her mother but the first thing that Zenia wants to know about is Tony's mother. Zenia "pulls Tony inside out like a sock" (135) making sure that no details are missed, thus not only giving herself the power of knowledge over Tony, but enabling Tony to face and come to terms for the first time with her childhood and its meaning for her.

An indication that Zenia is Tony's missing twin, her complement, is the connection between their names. Tony is really Antonia, and so she and Zenia represent the A and the Z in the alphabet, a symbol of completeness, similar to the connection mentioned earlier between Augusta and Zenia. In the same way perhaps we can identify Tony's mother, Anthea, as the counterpart of Zenia.

There is an ambivalence about everything that happens to Tony in her

friendship with Zenia. Zenia even persuades Tony to part with her mother's ashes which have been on the shelf beside her sweaters for four years, but the ceremony does not work out quite as it should. As if Tony's keeping the ashes among her sweaters all these years were not gothic enough, Anthea's ashes, in their metal cylinder, do not sink into the lake as they are ceremonially thrown from the ferry, but float, bobbing along in the wake of the ferry. The contents should have been emptied out of the cylinder and sprinkled. This scene prefigures Zenia's return from the dead when the three friends realise that they should not have taken the burial of Zenia's "ashes" at face value but should have insisted on the cylinder's being opened and the contents exposed for all to see, and perhaps scattered.

When it is Zenia's turn to tell her story she produces for Tony the first version of her invented past, a past that stirs Tony because of its setting in the brutal realities of war; hunger, prostitution, victimisation; after all, "[w]ars are Tony's territory" (163). But interestingly enough all of Tony's wars are theoretical and here is someone who can relate lurid first hand experiences of war in the raw, things Tony has heard of "only in books" (165), and Tony is enchanted.

She is fascinated when she realises that she and Zenia have so much more in common, that they are both orphans, both war babies, only children, and have both had to rely on their scant wordly possessions — their brains — to get them by in the world. Tony chooses to interpret Zenia's mocking smile as "a touching gallantry" (167), and pictures her on a horse, cloak flying, sword-arm raised", a replica of her own picture of herself as Tnomerf Ynot, queen of the barbarians. The other picture of Zenia that she has, that of a bird rising triumphant and unscathed from the cinders of war, is a little more ominous in the light of Zenia's later return from the grave after supposedly having been blown up by a bomb in Lebanon. Zenia tells Tony, with more than a little irony, "You can be whoever you like" (167) and Tony, seeing her reflection in Zenia's blue-black eyes, her mirror image, sees herself "as she would like to be. Herself turned inside out" (167).

However Zenia's lessons for Tony have only just begun. In order to be Tnomerf Ynot Tony has to learn to be tough in other respects. Zenia starts borrowing money from Tony to feather her love nest with West. This is a double betrayal, because Zenia has long since realised that Tony loves West, something of which Tony herself is quite unaware.

The ultimate treachery is to get Tony to compromise her intellectual and academic integrity. As Tony says about Theophano's murder of Nicophorus "the most important element of any act of treachery is surprise" (170), apart from which Theophano wanted her victim to "see how duplicitous she was, and how mistaken he had been about her. She wanted him to get the joke" (170). So Zenia, with tears "rolling fluently" down her cheeks, persuades Tony to write her term paper for her. Bewildered by the tears Tony not only agrees, but believes it is right for her to do so. "Tony will be Zenia's right hand, because Zenia is certainly Tony's left one" (169).

Shortly after this Zenia, her task with Tony completed, grows restive and bored and, appearing through Tony's window one night like an apparition, demands money, threatening to expose Tony as an academic cheat and to destroy West in one of the many ways within her power. Tony is trapped into giving Zenia the thousand dollars she demands, but is also shocked into the deed by the fact that she had mistaken Zenia's appearance in her bedroom for that of her dead mother come back to exact some kind of retribution.

And so Zenia vanishes with Tony's money and West's precious lute. Her farewell letter to West is a look-alike of Anthea's letter to Tony all those years ago, but West clings to her empty promises. Tony becomes, by default, West's support and lifeline, finding his pawned lute and ransoming it for him, making cups of tea, (at last someone needs her cups of tea) walking him, holding his hand, all the time only too aware of how bad she had been at it with her father, and how West's depression and his drinking can lead only one way. "It leads downwards and ends abruptly in a square of bloodstained newspaper" (176). He will "dwindle and fade as in the ballads. He will pine and wane. Then he will blow off his head" (177).

Roz is the one to come to Tony's rescue, suggesting that Tony provide West with the comfort of sex. Tony is aghast, never having seen herself in that role with anyone and terrified of sex, but for the sake of rescuing West "grits her teeth and sets out to seduce West" (178). It takes months to accomplish and when the time comes she feels that it is "like seeing the ants on a falling boulder just before it crushes you" (179). But Tony finds West to be (like his unredeemed name, Wets)"a long drink of water" (179), what she has needed for years, someone who truly needs her for something and she discovers, too, that "she is bigger inside than out" (179).

Her tending of the war-wounded West leads to eventual marriage, a marriage of gentle love which, "if it were a plant would be a fern, light green and feathery and delicate" (180). But West's love is strongly tinged with gratitude, a dangerous emotion, and Zenia continues to hover, unmentioned by either of them, "like the blue haze of cigarette smoke in a room after the cigarette has been put out. Tony can smell her" (181).

Zenia's next foray into their lives and into their marriage is unexpected and swift. She arrives and is over the threshold before Tony can stop her, eating the chocolate bought for Tony by West and manipulating West with her "blandishments and prestidigitation" (183) and has soon reclaimed West. West's defection devastates Tony, "a familiar enough term in the literature of war" (185). She removes her wedding ring, contemplates her father's gun among the box of old Christmas decorations and its bullets in a metal cough-drop tin, and miserably curls up to sleep under West's newly-acquired spinet (though not before considering taking the meat cleaver to it as a means of assuaging her emotions). West's music is the manifestation of his deepest passions, his obsession, and his musical instruments are the symbols of this passion. On a previous occasion Zenia had stolen West's lute and pawned it. Tony had found it and redeemed it, keeping it until his return.

The next arrival on Tony's doorstep is Roz who takes control, comforting Tony, assuring her that West will come back, that Zenia "will just take one bite out of him and throw him away" (187), pampering and feeding Tony and "being the most mother that Tony had ever had" (187). Through Zenia's treachery Tony has indirectly become the recipient of the mothering she had so much desired. It is as part of this healing process that Roz talks Tony into buying a house, her special house with the turret, and it is in the warmth of Roz's friendship and the security of her precious house that Tony begins to try to live again.

But it is only once she has been able to cry that this can happen. Tony dreams that she is swimming around inside her own brain, and the description of this dream is very reminiscent of the final descent into the lake by the protagonist in *Surfacing*, the descent in which she realises the truth about her abortion and is able to start the long painful journey of healing and transformation. The swimming metaphor reminds one of baptism, a going down into the water, however frightening, and a rebirth to new possibilities. It is in this dream that Tony sees someone walking away from her

and she is unable to follow, like a goldfish bumping its nose against aquarium glass (also reminiscent of her first days of life, in an incubator, like a guppy behind glass, as her mother had described her, making no contact with the outside world or with human love). She calls out in her dream, but there is no air to call with and she awakes "gasping and choking ... her face streaming with tears" (189).

This separation from West is the longest so far and lasts almost a year, during which Tony holds captive in her castle West's lute and spinet, working late at night in her turret room, thinking of it as a beacon, a lighthouse, but remembering that turrets have other uses, such as for pouring boiling oil onto anyone at the door below.

At each of Zenia's appearances she attacks Tony at her point of greatest vulnerability, bringing Tony face to face with the things that are important to her: making her realise first her own "intellectual vanity" (404), then her love for West and the importance of her marriage to him, showing her the value of her friendship with another woman who is loving and nurturing, and leading to the acquisition of her precious house with a turret.

This time when West eventually returns, spat out by Zenia once again, Tony takes him in and cares for him, but she knows she will never be able to trust him again: "Zenia was his addiction" (190). But suddenly the apparent demise of Zenia, blown up by a bomb (could anything seem more final than that?) and her interment under the mulberry tree sweep aside all Tony's fears for her own happiness and West's safety. "Zenia was no longer a menace ... She was a footnote ... She was history" (191).

Zenia's work with Tony is not complete yet. The strong gothic component of their relationship cannot be brushed aside, even by Zenia's apparent death. Tony and Zenia both recognise that Zenia is the necessary missing part of Tony, her unborn twin, the strong part of her, her left hand. When Zenia returns from the dead Tony believes that it is for her blood, she believes that Zenia hates her: "It's the rage of her unborn twin" (191). Comparing her battle with Zenia to Otto's battle against the Saracens Tony realises that "[s]trength and cunning are both essential, but each without the other is valueless". Tony, lacking in strength, would "have to rely on cunning. In order to defeat Zenia she will have to become Zenia" (191).

On Zenia's arrival at the Toxique it is Tony who sees her first. "She looks up, and into the mirror ... Zenia is ... in the smoke, in the glass" (32). Thus Tony identifies Zenia immediately as her own mirror image, but this time she asks "What is she doing here, on this side of the mirror?" (34). As the three friends leave the Toxique and Zenia (beating a retreat, is how Tony sees it), Tony's response is to want to walk out backwards because her research has shown that "the casualty rates go up when you turn tail" (35). Each of the women has a reason to wish Zenia permanently out of her life and each in her own way sets out to find a way to accomplish this.

Tony is able to find out where Zenia is staying because of a telltale cryptic message on a scrap of paper near West's phone, a scrap of paper which strengthens her need to dispose of Zenia. She sits in the hotel lobby, waiting for Zenia to appear. None of the weapons in the female armoury seems to work with Zenia who, anyway, is the expert in that sort of warfare. So Tony has armed herself with male cultural weapons, her father's Luger, oiled and loaded according to the instructions photocopied from the library, and with a cordless drill with a screwdriver attachment which she has purchased via one of the catalogues of men's tools that constantly litter her lawn. She has thought at times that all these tools that men buy must be "substitute weapons; maybe they're what men go in for when they aren't waging war" (18). She is not at all sure how she will use these weapons, but she is here to destroy Zenia this time.

She is here alone because neither of her friends would condone violence, but she believes that "in order to protect the innocent, some must lose their innocence. This is one of the rules of war" (405). She will have to do "hard man-things. Hard-man things" (405) in her role as Tnomerf Ynot, queen of the barbarians, she resolves, as she clenches her teeth and "invokes her left hand" (405).

When Zenia does appear she is as disarming as usual. But Tony is not to be distracted this time, although the temptation to be lulled back into Zenia's spell is great, as Zenia weaves a web of intrigue designed to capture Tony's imagination. She tells how she has been involved with Project Babylon, the Supergun for Iraq, and Gerry Bull, the ballistics genius who was murdered, and tries to convince Tony that she needs somewhere to hide, perhaps in West's study. It is the mention of West that re-alerts Tony to the danger of Zenia's wishing to break into Tony's castle, and she resolutely stands up to leave. Only then do Zenia's true colours emerge, as if her "suave velvet cloak has dropped away" (414), revealing "raw brutality ...

freewheeling malevolence, she wants wreckage, she wants scorched earth, she wants broken glass" (414). Tony knows that the only solution this time is to turn tail, dignified or not, and retreat. She expects "feral growling" (414) as she says "Goodbye", opens the door and leaves, but to her astonishment nothing like this happens. On her way down she picks a piece of the dried arrangement in the hotel lobby for her scrapbook, to commemorate this battle, and moves dazedly out into the cold air. "There was so much smoke up there" (415).

Charis is the next person to experience Zenia's intervention in her life.

Charis had not encountered Zenia at university except as some figure in the distance. Her first encounter is when Zenia comes looking for her at the centre where she teaches yoga. Charis has Billy living off her, exploiting her, and she teaches yoga to earn some extra money to keep them both, but also because she wants to help other people, especially other women, who yearn for lightness in their lives. On this particular day Zenia appears in her class wearing dark glasses, looking very thin, her skin as "white as mushrooms" (216) and having a glimmer around her "like the sheen on bad meat. Charis knows unhealth when she sees it" (218). Charis feels the glasses are a "barrier to inner vision" (218), but soon discovers the woman will not remove them because she is hiding a black eye.

Zenia identifies her as "Karen", and, as Tony and Zenia sat cosily drinking coffee, so Charis and Zenia end up at the juice bar, drinking papaya and orange juice, with a dash of lemon and some brewer's yeast. Charis's diagnosis of a lack of vitamin C is later proved correct when Zenia tells her that she had made herself look ill by depriving herself of vitamin C.

In the case of Tony and West the consequence of Zenia's intervention in their lives is to make them realise how important they are to each other. Both Charis and Roz, however, would be better off without the men in their lives who are exploiting their inherent goodness and undermining them. Zenia's intrusion into each of their lives, and her seduction of the men they love, is calamitous for Charis and Roz. But with hindsight they eventually realise that she has indeed saved them from being completely sucked dry by their respective parasitic men, Billy and Mitch. Zenia's motives in seducing the men are purely selfish, malevolent and destructive. But Atwood uses her, the supreme female product of patriarchy, to effect

inadvertant transformations in the lives of the other women, women who are trying to find their way out of the patriarchal maze by means of their own creativity.

The obvious route into the home of Charis, is through her need to care for other women in need. In the version of her story that Zenia tells for her special consumption "Charis finds in Zenia an abused child",[21] with whom she can identify with fellow feeling. It is while Charis is ensconsed in her little house with a fire burning against the fog outside that Zenia appears at her kitchen door, "her head framed in the wet glass square of door like a photo under water" (222). Charis holds out her arms while "Zenia stumbles over the threshold and collapses into them" (222). Witches, like the dead, "can't cross your threshold unless you invite them" (50) or unless they are carried across it, and here Charis has welcomed the wicked Zenia literally with open arms.[22]

Earlier that day Charis had broken the egg stowed in her pocket for Billy's breakfast, a portentous reference to the broken egg which had led to her discovering her Grandmother's healing powers, the start of things to come.

Charis is soon beguiled into a close circle with Zenia, a circle that excludes Billy in the way that West had been excluded from Tony and Zenia's circle. Billy is infuriated. But Zenia nevertheless manages to diminish Charis by apparently being unable to remember her new name and therefore accept her new identity. Zenia plays her usual double game, eventually revealing to Charis that she has been having sex with Billy. It is when Charis tells the pair about her pregnancy (which is also connected with the breaking of the egg) that they desert her, killing her chickens with the bread knife and disappearing across the bay together on the ferry.

Charis is the only one of the three friends who is not surprised to see Zenia back from the dead, for several reasons. Charis believes that dead people do not disappear from the earth but hover, waiting to return in some other form, especially if they have unfinished business to clear up. It is as if Zenia "went away without getting what she

[21] Perrakis, Phyllis Sternberg: "Atwood's *The Robber Bride.* The Vampire as Intersubjective Catalyst". *Mosaic.* 30:3. 1997. 161.

[22] Coleridge, in his lyrical ballad, *Christabel* has the witch, posing as the Lady Geraldine, sinking helpless to the ground as she comes to the threshold of the castle she wishes to bring under her thrall. The virtuous Christabel, daughter of the castle, lifts her over the threshold. Once inside the castle the witch suddenly recovers and is able to proceed on her evil way.

wanted ... she'll be back" (50). Charis also thinks that perhaps it is she who is holding Zenia to this earth, that it is Charis who has something to say to Zenia — Zenia is the only person who knows what happened to Billy. Charis believes that Zenia has stolen not only her past but her future as well in spiriting Billy away, and she is determined that when Zenia appears on her threshold again she will invite her in and, although she will be afraid, she will not back down this time and will ask boldly,"What did they do with Billy?" (50).

An unpleasant thought strikes Charis, that if everyone is part of everyone else, as she believes, "then she herself is part of Zenia" (56), and indeed, when Zenia walks into the Toxique (why does she bother opening the door?), Charis feels as if Zenia is blotting her out, and she has to struggle to regain her body, as if she is coming apart. "It's as though energy has been drained out of her ... in order for Zenia to materialize ... A chunk of Charis's own body [has been] sucked ... into herself" (68), as if Charis is giving her the power over herself. After leaving the Toxique Charis goes across the road to Kafay Nwar where she uncharacteristically drinks coffee (with two lumps of sugar) to regain her equilibrium, and she writes in her special handbound marbled notebook with the burgundy suede spine and delicate lavender pages, with her special pearl grey pen filled with grey-green ink "*Zenia must go back*", like a rune, a spell, one letter at a time in her best italic script (69).

She thinks "Zenia isn't happy", but it is not an insight, it is more like "a charm, an incantation" (70). It would not be fair if Zenia were happy. Then, being Charis, she remembers that she should feel compassion for all living things, and Zenia is alive. However she has to acknowledge to herself her own emotion, that she feels no compassion for Zenia, and has a mental picture of herself "Pushing Zenia off a cliff, or other high object ... Zenia makes no sound. She merely falls, her dark hair streaming behind her like a dark comet" (70). All her life Charis has had intimations of a fallen woman, usually Jezebel, and here she finds the appropriate object of this vision.

Charis feels compelled to follow Zenia when she finally leaves the Toxique, accompanied by a young man (not Billy, as Charis had first suspected, but Larry) because her story with Zenia has no ending yet. At least Roz and Tony's stories with Zenia have conclusions, but Charis has never known what happened to Billy or why he should have gone off with Zenia, or who killed the chickens and why. She has to not let Zenia out of her sight "because she feels that if she takes her eyes

off Zenia, even for an instant, Zenia will vanish ... If you knew enough about matter you could walk through walls ... knowledge [which] must have been acquired ... in a sinister way" (197), involving pain for someone else. And so she follows Zenia and Larry to the Arnold Garden Hotel but leaves them there and goes home to plan her strategy.

She realises again that Billy's and Zenia's stories are inextricable and that she will have to confront Zenia and not be intimidated. Taking her Grandmother's Bible down from the shelf and choosing a verse with a pin, as she usually does, she finds "*Kings Two, Nine, Thirty-five,* she reads. *And they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.* It's Jezebel, thrown down from the tower, Jezebel eaten by dogs. *Again*, thinks Charis. Behind her eyes is a dark shape falling" (286). To prepare herself spiritually for the encounter Charis borrows some armour from her friends; she needs Tony's clarity of thought, from Roz she needs her energy, her planning ability and her smart mouth, from her Grandmother "her hands, her blue healing light" (418).

Placing objects associated with these three people on her small table in the downstairs window, with her amethyst geode, a lump of earth and some marigold petals, she meditates on them twice daily for twenty minutes.

She also has a Tarot card reading from Shanita, the other spiritual influence in her life, and surprises Shanita by asking, for the first time ever, whether she will win in the encounter that will ensue. The cards indicate that this is the day for confronting Zenia, as had her Bible verse that morning, speaking from Revelation, as it did, about the Whore of Babylon, whom Charis can equate only with Zenia.

Charis phones Larry, pretending to be dithery, to find out Zenia's room number, and noting that Zenia drags one down to her own level — here she is lying to and being devious with Larry. The significance of the room number is obvious, 1409. Because hotels do not usually have a thirteenth floor the fourteenth floor really is the thirteenth floor, but "nine is a Goddess number" (423) and this ought to balance out the bad luck of the thirteen for Charis. She moves up to Zenia's room at exactly noon, and sees a reddish-grey light oozing from under the door. Zenia looks tired and the room is in a mess, as things always were in the house when Zenia was around.

Charis is about to succumb to the story Zenia spins her, about having AIDS and needing somewhere peaceful like the Island to regain her equilibrium, when she sees Zenia regarding her like a "bird eyeing a worm" (426), intently, head on one side. Zenia is infuriated when Charis rejects her and her new story. She becomes brutal and tells her that she originally pretended to be ill so that Charis would let her into her house. Charis feels "defrauded of her own goodness" (426), but there is more to come. Because Charis has had the strength to withstand Zenia she is now strong enough to hear the truth about Billy, that he was using Charis, and that Zenia had come to "turn him around" (427), to get him to turn informer on his draft-dodger friends. Zenia's advice to Charis is to give up her memory of Billy, that he "wasn't worth it" (427), and to point out to her that she has been using Billy as an excuse not to get on with living.

Charis feels helpless. Her wish to be good is more like "an absence, it's the absence of evil" (428), and she needs something more positive to face Zenia's evil. When Charis asks Zenia why she killed her chickens Zenia's response that Billy killed them and enjoyed killing them fills her with rage, the emotion that she needs to feel against Zenia. She feels herself being taken over by the Karen side of her, the side of Charis that might be capable of murder, and she has a vision of Karen lifting Zenia up as if she were "light,... hollow, ... riddled with disease and rotten, ... insubstantial as paper — and [throwing] her over the balcony railing" (429). As Charis watches her fall down from the tower and hit the edge of the fountain and burst she calls "No! No!" (429) (Tony's "On! On!"), as she thinks of the dogs eating Jezebel in the hotel courtyard.

The good in Charis comes to the fore and she recognises that Zenia has a soul, a "pale moth" (430) fluttering, and needs spiritual help. Her response is to hear herself saying "I forgive you" (430), a response which drives the incredulous Zenia to tell her to get a life. Seeing her life as Zenia must see it, empty, with nobody in it, Charis "invokes her amethyst geode" (430) and is able to say "I have a life" (430) and turn and walk out of Zenia's life for good.

As Charis leaves the hotel it strikes her that all that Zenia has told her might have been lies, about Billy, about the chickens. She has lied so often before. But Charis has freed herself of Zenia, and of Billy, and whether Zenia was lying or not hardly matters now.

Zenia's entrée into the life of Roz is through the insecurity which Roz still experiences, aware of the questionable past of her father, and the origins of the money she inherited from him.

In spite of her success in her career Roz has never quite come to terms with her past, with her background. She recalls her father who was a scoundrel and a philanderer, and her mother who kept a boarding house. She cannot escape the feeling that people must be able to tell that she was of refugee stock, hardly off the boat, a Displaced Person. Her ancestry meant that she was "a big-boned girl, a raw-boned girl (her mother's words) ... a full, mature figure (the dress shops). Dainty she would never be" (308), and she was very self-conscious about her appearance. In marrying Mitch was she seeking her alter ego in him by seeming to defy all she had inherited from the past? He was gorgeous, in fact, "simply too good-looking ... too good to be true" (309). His ancestors came to Canada cabin class, not steerage as hers had. His money was old money, or older money, although even old money must have been new money at some stage, gained through exploitation of someone in the past. He was very different from her father but turned out to be no less of a philanderer and manipulator of women than her father. His own father had committed suicide having squandered the family fortune, and Roz was under no illusions that he would not have married her had it not been for her money.

Considering Roz's paranoia about being just off the boat it was not without dismay that she found herself having to accompany Mitch sailing, in the yacht which she had bought him, the *Rosalind II,* pretending to be enjoying herself. It brought back memories of her experience at Jewish summer camp where never having been on a boat was one of the social disadvantages she had to try and hide from the other girls. And it was from this very yacht that, like his father, Mitch had committed suicide, jumping into Lake Ontario, wearing his life jacket. But, like Tony's mother, did he jump or was he pushed? Because of the life jacket Roz is able to assure the children that it was an accident.

Because her mother was no nurturer, Roz has moved in the opposite direction and has become a mothering person, a superb nurturer. Thus it is Roz who comes to the rescue of both Tony and Charis and mothers them after their encounters with Zenia. She is nevertheless quite blind to Zenia's obvious wiliness, and completely

forgets Zenia's devastating effect on both her friends, when Zenia pushes the right buttons for her.

Zenia finds her vulnerable points, as she has done with the others, and Roz is putty in her hands. For Roz Zenia's point of entry is to tell her that she knew her father, that her father had saved her during the war, the third version of herself that Zenia has created. While Zenia and Roz are having preliminary small talk on Zenia's first visit to her house Roz uncomfortably remembers her reputation, the "aura of green poison that encircled Zenia" (358) and the histories of Tony and Charis, but the pull of hearing good about her disreputable father is too great to resist.

An ominous note is picked up by the reader in the discussion about swimming pools, as Roz expresses her concern that they are "one step too close to the great outdoors. Wildlife falls into them" (358), prefiguring Zenia's demise, as well as the death by drowning of Mitch. There are other warning bells too, such as the fact that it was through a visit to a restaurant with Mitch that contact was made with Zenia. A restaurant where the decor consisted of paintings of naked nereids, where Mitch seemed at home, where the waitresses were "long-haired, scoop-necked lovel[ies]" (314) with whom Mitch flirted, and where Mitch ordered the catch of the day!

Roz who is unable to change in spite of her wealth and power, who, in spite of her voluptuous bedroom and nightclothes (297), still wears her landlady slippers and orange dressing gown around her house built in an area that had "the authenticity of well-worn money" (87), who uses the back stairs into her "sparkling austere white [designer] kitchen" (75), should have been warned that Zenia was a shape-changer, not to be trusted.

She should have been warned of this when she notices that Zenia has had both her breasts and her nose changed, "the former have swelled, the latter has shrunk" (315). Later she refers to Zenia not only as *The Robber Bride* but as *The Rubber Broad* because so much of her is "manufactured" and fake. But the worrying thing is that, as Roz knows only too well, "[w]hen you alter yourself, the alterations become truth: ... Such things are not illusions, they are transformations" (102). And there are transformations for the better and transformations for the worse. Tony, commenting on Zenia's new breasts, warns Roz "She's upping her strike capability ... watch your back" (354).

Even Mitch, perhaps trying to get Roz to intervene and save him at an early stage from the inevitability of Zenia, warns her that Zenia is an adventuress and that whereas adventurers live by their wits adventuresses live "[b]y their tits" (366). In retrospect Roz ruefully admits that Zenia had wits as well. Roz later sees her taking up with Zenia as the beginning of the end of her marriage. "Or maybe it was the end of the end ... These things are not sudden" (366).

And herein lies Roz's greatest weakness and trammel, her inability to face up to Mitch and his exploitation of her. She has always played his game and helped to bail him out of his sexual exploits when he tired of them, but later developed a knack at playing Mitch's game, and then a taste for it. "It's the same as a business negotiation or a poker game" (300) and she had become good at it. But in the case of Zenia he is completely bewitched and even leaves home, the haven to which he had previously always returned and found the loyal Roz waiting for him. Finally it is Zenia who spits *him* out, leaving him devastated and bereft. He even follows her to London, his persistence being part of the reason for her having to stage her death by a bomb in Lebanon.

When Mitch does finally crawl home for Roz's sympathy, wearing the sheepskin coat she bought him, she is inclined to think "Poor lamb" (381) but hardens herself against being fooled by him again. He really is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and she remembers the three little pigs and the wolf who, with ulterior motives, tried to enter their houses. They were not fooled. In the end there are no compromises and "somebody always gets boiled" (295). Zenia's abandonment of him and Roz's refusal to let him move back in with her leads to his drowning and, in truth, Roz's liberation from her bondage to him.

Having survived Zenia's destructive invasions of their lives the three friends join in a celebratory lunch meeting at the Toxique once a month. "They've come to depend on it" (29) and to value the loyal friendship they share with one another. The choice of the Toxique as the place in which to meet, and Zenia's choice of the Toxique as the place in which to stage her return to life, is not surprising.

The Toxique has an air of danger and mystery that makes the three feel "younger, and more daring, than they are" (27). The costumes of the waitresses, which

seem to suggest orgies, unholy rites, human sacrifices" (99), give even Roz a feeling that they are "fascinating, but also a little scary" (99). The friends gather in this den of witches, as it were, like survivors of a catastrophe, aware of a special "*esprit de corps*" (29) between them, but there is no denying that, in spite of their determination not "give her the air time" (29), Zenia is always present at their table. They cannot let her go, they all need her.

The first meeting at the Toxique in this novel takes place during the build-up to the Gulf War and the conversation is about war, a suitable subject to be discussing as Zenia, their common enemy, resurrects herself, enters the Toxique, and re-enters their lives.

Charis hates the topic of war and switches off from the subject under discussion. She identifies too closely with the victims of wars for the subject not to distress her severely.

For Roz the subject of war has almost a positive outlook. As the prospect of war sets the whole business world rippling, so all is grist to Roz's business mill too. A remark that Saddam Hussein has already crossed the Rubicon sets her off on a new idea for a range of cosmetics named after significant rivers of the world: Rubicon, ... Jordan ... Delaware ... Zambezi ... Styx.

As she thinks with satisfaction of the impact of this last name in her cosmetic range, she sees the horrified look on Tony's face that signals the arrival of Zenia in the Toxique, back from the dead. "If Tony had hackles they'd be raised, if she had fangs they'd be bared" (101). So the battle lines have metaphorically been drawn.

In Zenia's previous life Roz had made herself vulnerable through allowing Zenia to infiltrate her business. Now, however, there are new overtones of war and death in Roz's thinking about her business. Roz, like Charis, is not all that surprised that Zenia has come back to life — "if anyone would ... it is Zenia" (101). Roz sees her like the man in the black hat striding into the saloon, staking out her territory, twirling her pearl handled revolvers, trailing her perfume after her "like the smoke from an insolent cigar" (102), on the prowl.

Roz wishes for "a magic word — *Shazam!*" (102)[23] that could make Zenia disappear or undo all the manufacturing, "where the Frankenstein doctors have been at work" (102) on her. *Shazam!* could "make the caps on Zenia's teeth pop off to reveal the dead stumps underneath, melt her ceramic gaze, whiten her hair, shrivel her amino-acid-fed estrogen-replacement skin, pop her breasts open like grapes so that their silicone bulges would whizz across the room and splat against the wall" making her "[h]uman, like everyone else" (102), but also revealing her to be the worst category of witch, the hag.

Although she feels herself equipped only with "a basketful of nasty adjectives" (102),[24] Roz nevertheless believes herself to be the one who is best able to deal with Zenia. Her friends are innocents in the ways of the world but she is street smart, and also, she has nothing more to lose now that Mitch is dead. Or so she thinks. The question that bothers her is what loot is Zenia after this time? She tries to take Charis's advice and goes home to take a long relaxing bath with one of the concoctions from Charis's shop. But every time she lies back in the water, imagining herself in a warm ocean, "there are sharks" (106).

Roz, using her usual (female) private detective, finds out not only where Zenia is staying but also that her own beloved Larry has been seen going to her room almost every day. Roz realises that she still has much to lose. There is only one solution: to confront Zenia in her den and, as Boyce advises, "[s]hout and yell. Tell her what you think of her. Clear the air; believe me it's necessary" (436). Feeling like a tigress defending her young, but mixing her metaphors, Roz inwardly rages "I'll huff and I'll puff ... and I'll blow your house down! Except that Zenia was never much of a one for houses. Only for breaking into them" (436).

When Roz confronts her Zenia is, as usual, more than a match, even for Roz in direct confrontational mode. She manages to bring the conversation round to Mitch, making Roz face the realities about Mitch that she could never accept. "You should have given me a medal for getting him off your back ... you always saw him as a victim of women ... Mitch did what he wanted to do" (440), and one of the things Mitch did

[23] The powerful magic word of Captain Marvel in the comic books.

[24] It is important to remember the significance that Atwood attaches to the power of words, language, especially for women. In her poem *Spelling* she makes a connection between the daughter's learning to spell words and her learning to make spells and concludes: "A word after a word / after a word is power".

was to drown himself. According to Zenia he had been waiting all his life for an excuse to kill himself.

Then with her usual sleight of hand Zenia convinces Roz that Larry is a drug pusher and tries to elicit a bribe from Roz, threatening to sell this information to the press. Roz, for once, is stupefied and cannot think straight, but she recalls that Zenia is a liar and remembers to follow her own precept and never clinch a deal on the same day. She leaves Zenia's hotel room feeling sick and promising to contact Zenia.

Of all the friends Roz is the one who has no serious thought of killing Zenia, except for a brief imaginative foray into the possibilities offered by the plot of one of the trashy novels she likes to read. She does notice in passing, however, the hotel fountain beneath the French windows in Zenia's room. Of all the friends Roz is the one who still has much to lose at Zenia's hands, or so Zenia has convinced her, and fear, instead of the rage or anger experienced by Tony and Charis in Zenia's hotel room, is her prevailing emotion. But she has not actually succumbed to Zenia's wiles.

Up to now Tony, Charis and Roz have been those left behind when other people have walked away from them. But now each of them has had the strength and courage to walk away from Zenia, literally and figuratively. Although each of them might have held a secret desire to be like Zenia in some ways, none of them has succumbed to it in any way. Killing her, or believing her and letting her in the door once more would have been succumbing to her, becoming like Zenia. In learning to resist the blandishments and threats of Zenia each has learnt to resist the temptation of succumbing to her own destructive personal weakness.

This time the friends meet for dinner at the Toxique, which is different at night, "more outrageous" (401). Charis persuades her friends to give thanks, during their dinner date, for this gift of strength, and for the fact that Zenia is going away. It is while they are offering an impromptu thanks libation of leftover white wine, and sprinkling salt on the candle flame on their table that Charis has a vision of Zenia "'falling.[25] She was falling, into water. I saw it! She's dead.' Charis begins to cry"

[25] The image of falling women is extensively used in *Cat's Eye*. For Atwood this image always carries overtones of women as victims of patriarchal constructions. It brings to mind the cynical conclusion of Oliver Goldsmith that "When lovely woman stoops to folly" her only means of redemption when she is betrayed by the man she trusted " — is to die".

(444). Charis has also seen Zenia being pushed, "someone pushed Zenia, over the edge" (445), and she is sure that Karen pushed her, that she, Charis, is responsible for her death because she wished Zenia dead. "A spiritual act and a physical one are the same, from a moral point of view" (445). When Zenia's body is indeed found in the fountain, "floating face down among the dead leaves, her hair spread out like seaweed" (445) Charis knows that the prophecy has come true and that she, Tony and Roz "*are the dogs, licking her blood. In the courtyard, the Jezebel blood*" (446). (Atwood's italics).

Metaphorically speaking it is the power of three friends to resist her, and their combined resistance to her evil wiles, that has "pushed Zenia, over the edge" She and her power for evil can no longer exist for women who are no longer willing to be her victims. Ironically the vengeful Zenia turns out in the end to have exercised a transformative influence on the lives of all those on whom she has preyed.[26]

But this time the ritual of disposing of Zenia's remains must be thorough. Nothing must be left to chance. November is the "[m]onth of the dead" (465), when the "French decorate their family graves with chrysanthemums, the Mexicans with marigolds" (466) on the first day of the month, All Souls Day, the day of "returning" (465) of the dead. November is also the month of red poppies. "Remembrance Day. Blood Poppy Day" (466). And it is on this day, at the eleventh hour of 11-11-1991, dressed in black, each with a red poppy stuck in the front of her coat, that Tony, Charis and Roz set out to consign Zenia's ashes to the bottom of the lake.

This time there are real ashes, although, transferring them from their tin box to a ceramic vase donated by Shanita, the friends find them to be "stickier" than expected. As the friends lean over the rail of the ferry to consign the ashes to the water, the vase "splits in two" (468) in Charis's hand, and the ashes trail off "in a long wavering drift, like smoke" (469) across the water of the lake, amidst a slight blue flickering tinge. Charis is comforted. She sees it as a token of continuation, of Zenia's freedom to be born into another, possibly more fortunate, life. Roz feels that when

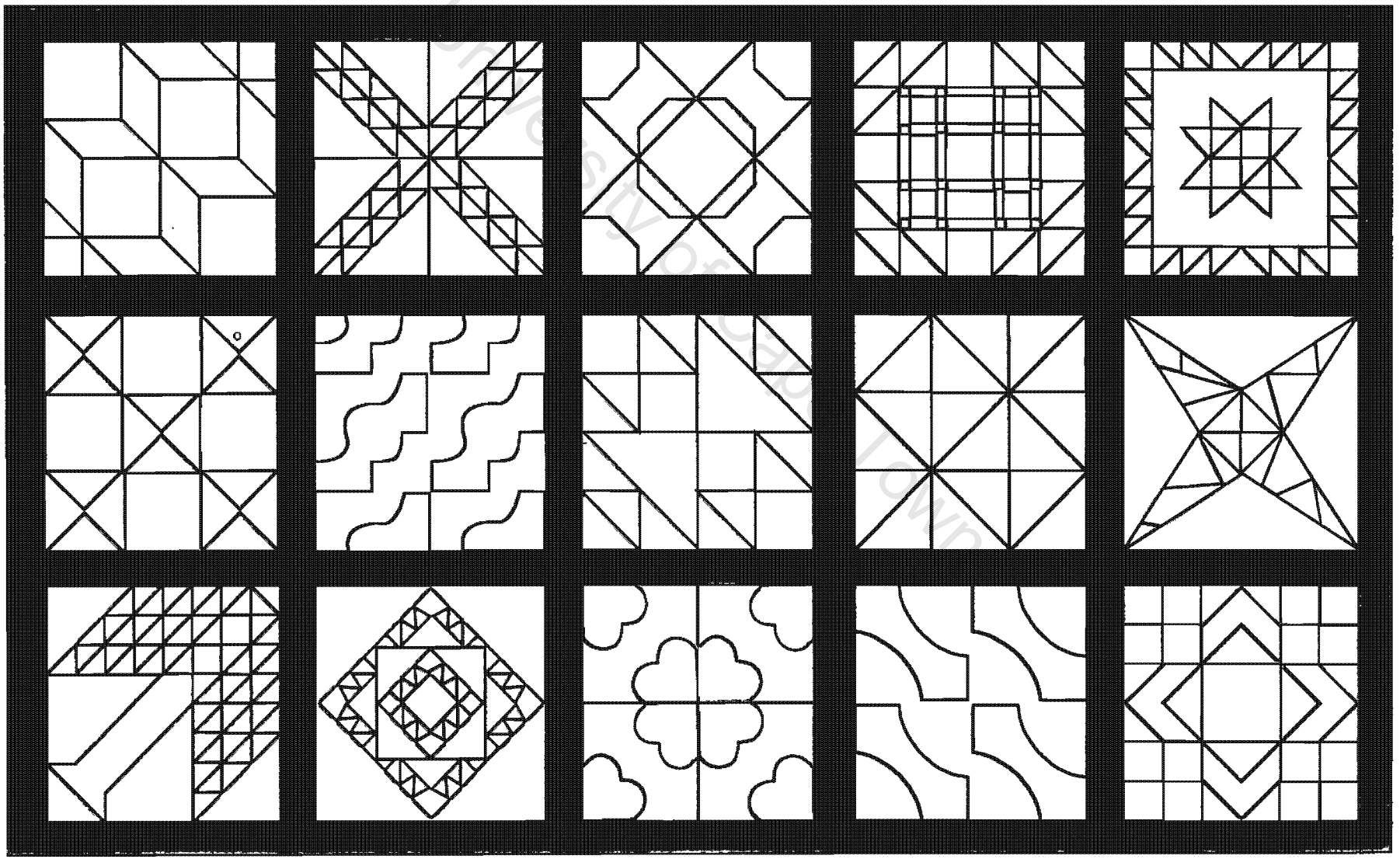
[26] Lynn Z Bloom and Veronica Makowsky in their article, "Zenia's Paradoxes" base their essay on the premiss that Zenia is "a good witch, disguised as a bad witch … she used evil, … became evil herself, to accomplish good". Their argument is interesting but does not coincide with my reading of the novel, in which Zenia truly plays the role of a female version of the Grimm's Robber Bridegroom, cannibalistic, ruthless and cruel.

Zenia goes into the lake "Mitch will go too, finally; [she] will finally be a widow (467). She is surprised to find herself oddly filled with gratitude to Zenia.

For Tony another battle has ended. Zenia had been at war all her life. Perhaps she had not known it was a war or who the enemy was or what past wrong she was seeking to avenge. Tony feels she deserves a ceremony befitting a soldier. She picks a flower from Charis's garden to paste into her scrapbook, for Zenia, "at the very end, after Tallinn, after Valley Forge, after Ypres" (469). Whatever else she was, Tony thinks, Zenia was courageous.

As Tony tells her students, "*Time is not solid, like wood, but fluid, like water or wind. It doesn't come neatly cut into ... decades and centuries. The end of any history is a lie in which we all agree to conspire*" (465). Perhaps there is no end to Zenia as the embodiment of everything patriarchy constructs in the woman as witch. While the raw sexes war continues, there can only be an end to each battle, but never an end to the war until the time when all patriarchal constructions have been dismantled and the thinking of the world has been transformed.

Alias Grace



CHAPTER FOUR

Alias Grace

The narrative of *Alias Grace* follows neither the first person autobiographical style of *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye* nor the omniscient third person style of *The Robber Bride*. Because the novel is based on a true story the author is able to pose the question: "But what is the true story about any true story?".

Atwood uses contemporary press reports of the murder and the trial, court records of the trial, eye-witness accounts of some of the events, the reported words and confessions of Grace and McDermott, as well as fictionalised accounts from various role players in the drama, and the fictionalised first person account of events as told by Grace herself.

Following a convention adopted in much modern writing Atwood uses no quotation marks almost throughout the novel. The use of this technique emphasises a blurring of the lines of distinction between the speakers, between direct speech and reported speech, and between what is being thought or reported and what is being said.

At a particular point in the narrative, however, quotation marks are introduced for two of the sections of the novel only.

These sections, Solomon's Temple and Pandora's Box, are the only sections in which the lines between who is speaking, and between what is thought or reported and what is actually said, are not blurred. In other words, because these are the only sections of the novel in which quotation marks are used, one can be sure that what the characters are saying *is* what they are saying, and not an interpretation of their words by someone else.

This is the point in the novel at which Simon comes to the final realisation of the truth about himself, and probably the truth about Grace as well. He hears from

the lawyer MacKenzie himself that he believed Grace to be "guilty as sin" (378), he hears from Grace herself that she murdered Nancy and was as good as McDermott's paramour, and he finds himself being enveigled into a parallel situation by the web of circumstances his landlady has woven about him.

Even within these sections in which quotation marks are used, no quotation marks are used when Grace is alone, describing some of the prison routine, or telling what Annie Little says to her about her "young doctor" (380), or when Dora tells the domestic staff about Simon and his landlady. Similarly there are no quotation marks in the text as Simon, having visited Mackenzie, Richmond Hill and Mary Whitney's grave, muses on whether Grace could possibly be a "*Murderess ...* " (389).

And so perhaps the most important clue to whether we are witnessing the truth or not is hidden once again in the text itself. If one reads these sections conscious of the significance of the quotation marks the story takes on a new dimension and interpretation. The omniscient third person narrator has taken over in no uncertain terms and executed the *coup de grâce* (no pun intended).

It is not only the text itself that plays a role in interpreting this novel. It is also through the characters in the novel that the reader's interpretation and understanding of the events are influenced.

Each of the characters appropriates Grace's story and adapts it, resulting in a welter of transformations of Grace, her story and the narrating characters themselves. The historical Grace endorses the trend by giving three different versions of her story in three different confessions, "one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after her death sentence had been commuted, yet a third" (78).

In all these versions she consistently denies having harmed Nancy Montgomery, but in *Life in the Clearings*,[1] published in 1853, ten years after the murders, Mrs Susanna Moodie quotes Grace as having told MacKenzie the lawyer that she had helped to kill Nancy: "Since I helped Macdermot (sic) to strangle [Nancy] Montgomery, ... those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me" (347). But MacKenzie later dismisses Mrs Moodie as having a "tendency to exaggerate" (376).

One way of looking at these different versions presented by Grace is to imagine the reality of a young girl of sixteen surrounded by authority figures, each of whom demands an answer concerning her actions. As a female and as a servant she has been trained to please those in authority and to say what is expected of her, to say what will please the person in authority, not to say what she believes or what she knows to be the truth. In the fictionalised story, for example, Grace is expected to give the official version of Mary Whitney's death although she was the only witness to the real truth. She is also paid by Mrs Alderman Parkinson to forget the name of the man concerned.

The fictional Grace has developed a cynical philosophy, obviously born of her experiences, concerning the truth about herself and her story. She believes that no one comes to see her "unless they want something" (38), and so she has developed a "stupid look, which I have practised" (38) to fend off the curiosity of sensation-seekers. She has learnt to hide her true feelings and any need that she may have because, if "you have a need and they find it out, they will use it against you. The best way is to stop from wanting anything" (40).

She sees people as collectors, as wanting to collect her story for their own uses, and says that the "lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men ... seem to know my story better than I do myself" (41). Of those who say they have come to offer her help she has found that "help is what they offer but gratitude is what

[1] Moodie, Susanna: *Roughing it in the Bush, or Life in Canada*. Beacon. Boston. 1987, as quoted in *Alias Grace*. 347.

they want", and that a kind voice is only that on the surface,"with other desires hidden beneath it" (41).

Some of those who have appropriated Grace's story, especially the journalists from the newspapers, have commodified her and commercialised her for their own financial gain.

The words attributed to her, especially in print, are never her own words — even her confession was not her own but "what the lawyer told me to say" (101). She has discovered that once she has said something her words become common property and she could never take them back, that they could be used and "twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place" (68). She emphasises her experience that just because something is written down "does not mean it is God's truth" (257). She sometimes wonders about all the contradictory things that have been said and written about her and how she could possibly be "all these different things at once" (23). At times she even considers behaving grotesquely to live up to some of the opinions about her — "If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one" (33). But, afraid of being labelled mad again, she concedes "I never do such things, however. I only consider them" (33).

In true postmodern style these various representations, accounts, verbal constructions of Grace's story are all only versions of the truth. Even Grace allows herself to present her story, when it suits her, in different ways to different people and on different occasions. Just as Zenia in *The Robber Bride* re-invents herself for every person or situation, so Grace tells her story to suit her audience, fitting in with the need of each of the characters to experience her story in a different way.

Let us look at the ways in which other people represent Grace.

First of all there is the press who are motivated by profit. A good story sells more newspapers and, in spite of the perceived nature of the society of the time as

being very decorous, the more salacious and sensational the details, the more the public enjoyed a story. The sensational press report of Mc Dermott's hanging implies that no one truly accepts the received wisdom of the delicacy and refinement of "ladies".

In the pamphlet containing the ballad about the event Grace is portrayed as bold and ruthless, fully deserving of the years she was to languish in prison. The moralising tone of the last few stanzas, recommending to the guilty creature that she repent, reveals the heartless, and hypocritical, attitude of moral superiority adopted by the writers.

The Kingston *Chronicle and Gazette* of August 12, 1843, reporting on the arrest of the murderers, portrays Grace as frivolous and lacking in conscience, concerned only with what had become of her clothes and her box.(347)

Another writer, however, recollecting the events in 1908, thirty-six years after Grace's release from prison and more than sixty years after the murder and the trial, describes her as being "of a lively disposition and pleasant manners" (183) and can find nothing in her personality that could have made her develop into an "embodiment of concentrated iniquity" (183) as she was portrayed by McDermott. This same writer again questions McDermott's version of events, citing Grace's exemplary conduct in prison over the thirty-year period of her incarceration as hardly that of a "female demon incarnate" (417).

In sharp contrast to this almost lyrical writing about Grace's virtues are reports by the prison Warden in his Daybook in which he describes Grace, in 1863, as a double murderess, lacking in sensitivity and gratitude and having an "unfortunate disposition" (417). Some months later he finds she has become a "dangerous creature" (417) and implies that she is a liar.

Another of the officials dealing with Grace during her incarceration is Dr Samuel Bannerling, for many years the head of the Asylum where she was sent after

showing signs of "madness". He regards Grace as a sham, describing her as an "accomplished actress and a most practised liar" (71). But if the implication by Grace that he had taken advantage of her and abused her in the dark cell, when she was tied up and her hands in mufflers, is to be accepted, it would suit his book in more ways than one to have her branded a liar. His own words imply that he regards her as a *femme fatale*, likening her to the Sirens who would have ensnared Ulysses and his sailors. He thus lays the blame on her for any attraction he may have felt for her. She, in his opinion, is "as devoid of morals as she is of scruples" (71) and of "degenerate character and morbid imagination" (72). As Atwood mentions in her *Author's Afterword* "Attitudes towards her reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime ... or was she an unwilling victim?" (463). Dr Bannerling has no sympathy with his patients who *were* found to be suffering from mental disorders, regarding them as incurable, with the "taint of insanity in the blood" (70) and is thus only too willing to describe Grace, whom he regards as a sham, in the worst possible terms.

At the other end of the spectrum is Dr Joseph Workman, the historical real-life Medical Superintendent of the Asylum in Toronto, whose reports on Grace are gentle and positive, describing her as having recovered from any degree of insanity with which she might have been afflicted. He regards her as behaving with propriety, industry, and kindness to other inmates, "a profitable and useful inmate of the house" (48). Here is a man with no agenda of his own and therefore no need to use Grace for his own purposes. His stated policy is to provide "sanitation and good drainage" (47) in his Asylum, so that the diseased minds might be ministered to in a physically healthy atmosphere and thus more easily regain their mental health.

Rev Verringer, although not a scientist, and insisting that a clear distinction should be maintained between the body and the soul of any person when it comes to medical matters, is nevertheless the only figure of authority who makes the

distinction in Grace's case that she "denies the *memory*" (78) of the murder, not that she denies or admits having committed it.

He is the chairman of the committee that is petitioning for Grace's pardon or release from prison, and has identified Dr Simon Jordan as the man who is on his way to becoming a leading expert in the field of amnesia. He thus feels that he and Simon might have interests in common in telling Grace's story from the same perspective. Simon suspects that Rev Verringer is possibly in love with Grace Marks, something that he is able to recognise because he, although unaware of it, is well on his way to being in love with her himself.

Rev Verringer's agenda is first of all a political one and he is able to interpret the opposition to Grace's being released only as politics, his own life being very much influenced and coloured by politics.

He has around him a committee of people who regard themselves as progressive thinkers, but who are in reality slightly cranky, who all consider Grace to be a wronged creature and are active in petitioning for her pardon. There are Mrs Quennell, the "celebrated Spiritualist" (82), the Governor's wife and her daughter Lydia, and Dr Jerome du Pont, the Hypnotist, who turns out to be Jeremiah in his latest manifestation. The reader has met Du Pont as Jeremiah the pedlar in Grace's account of her early life, and at another time he asks her to become his partner and work the fairs with him as a medical clairvoyant. He is probably the only person in the group who really has Grace's personal interests truly at heart. The others are there for their own interests first of all, using Grace's story to rewrite their own.

Let us consider the women around Grace, who represent the sort of lives led by the average respectable woman of the time.

One can accept to some extent that Grace, as a convicted criminal, should have her life dominated by the patriarchal strictures of those who run the prisons. But

Grace is not alone in her being prescribed to by the controlling and repressive males in the society of the time. There are very few options open to women, apart from marriage and child-rearing, and women are obliged to marry in order to maintain social respectability. When Lydia goes a bit wild after Simon's sudden departure she is hastily married off to an older, respectable man, probably having ruined her chances of the choice of a more suitable partner by her frustrated and rebellious breaking out of the conventional mould.

A woman on her own is not respectable and is fair game for the lewd comments of men in general — widows being a case in point. But widows are looked down on by the women as well, obliged to wear widow's weeds, use black-bordered writing-paper and make a public show of grief(162-163). Mrs Humphrey, Simon's landlady, dresses like a widow and, having been deserted by her husband, is open to the same sort of disrespect as a widow might expect from society. Simon himself regards her as available.

The most prominent of the women in Grace's life is the Governor's wife. She has no name or position or standing of her own, and it is only in relation to her husband's position as prison Governor that she has any life at all. Her life is circumscribed by her circumstances: as the family of the prison Governor, she feels, "we are virtually prisoners ourselves" (24). And so she makes the best use she can of the opportunities presented to her by these circumstances.

She is a moving force in the matter of Grace's pardon and all the meetings of the committee take place in her parlour. Perhaps in trying to obtain Grace's release from prison she is unconsciously working out her own redemption from virtual incarceration, physical, spiritual and emotional. As a member of various committees on such matters as the Woman Question or the emancipation of this or that, she sees herself as a reformer in taking Grace into her home as a servant. She regards Grace as one of her "accomplishments" (22). Grace is in her home by day, intimately involved with the Governor's wife's daughters in particular as she sews for them and mends their clothes. But at night it is back to prison for her: "I

would not have her in the house at night ... One cannot take chances ... the keepers ... lock her up properly ... a leopard cannot change its spots" (24).

At the time of the novel Grace has become a figure well-known in the Governor's wife's parlour and, as a "celebrated murderess" (22), an object of curiosity and fascination to the repressed and delicately-nurtured ladies who frequent the house, adding a *frisson* to their otherwise dull social round. Lydia tells Grace that they see her as "a romantic figure" (25).

But it is not only the Governor's wife who is circumscribed by her circumstances. The presence in the parlour of copies of *Godey's Ladies' Books*, the Victorian equivalent of the Eaton's Catalogues in *Cat's Eye*, speaks of the commodification of women. Grace sees these ladies as locked up themselves, as much prisoners in their own way as Grace herself. They look like swans, drifting along in their full billowing skirts, or like jellyfish floating gracefully in a rocky harbour. But when the jellyfish are blown up onto the beach and dried out in the sun there is nothing left of them. Grace sees the ladies as "mostly water" (22). Their story is one of repression and incarceration in a male world. Underneath those apparently soft and graceful skirts are wire crinoline hoops, caging in the ladies' legs like birdcages, keeping their legs from ever "accidentally" pressing against those of a male. The word legs would never be uttered by the Governor's wife, but in the newspaper report of the trial is printed in black and white that Nancy's legs were sticking out from under the washtub.

And not only has the Governor's wife read about Nancy's legs but she has the story pasted in her scrapbook. The scrapbooks kept by ladies of the time are derivative and unoriginal. They are filled with scraps of cloth from their dresses,[2] sentimental poems and pictures of famous people and places that they have never seen and are never likely to see. But the Governor's wife has a more worthy reason for keeping a different kind of scrapbook. Hers is filled with cuttings about

[2] A more original use might be found for these in the making of a quilt, as described later in this chapter.

hangings and famous criminals, not least of whom is Grace. As Lydia explains to Simon, keeping the scrapbook helps her mother to decide "which among the prisoners may be worthy objects of her charity" (86). Thus the Governor's wife transforms her prurient and ghoulish interest in murder and crime, and legitimately escapes the strictures of her world, through her scrapbook.

The scrapbook is set out in the parlour on a table draped with an Indian shawl imbuing it with an air of the exotic. Grace's story has been rewritten over and over in these newspaper cuttings, presenting her variously as an inhuman female demon or an innocent victim, as having a quarrelsome temper or a pliable nature until, reading these descriptions, Grace wonders how she can be all these things at once. But this is what is so pleasing about Grace's supposed story: she can be all things to all people, and the ladies can choose whichever version of her they wish to identify with. While guests are invited to read the worst about her in lurid press cuttings Grace serves tea or sits demurely among them with her (murderer's?) hands decorously folded in her lap the proper way.

At other times she sews for the ladies of the family or makes quilts for them. As we shall discuss later, quilts at this time were a very personal item for many women, giving scope for them to tell their intimate stories in a creative way. And so the stories of Grace and the Governor's wife and daughters are subversively being interwoven as Grace sits quietly in the sewing room creating quilts for these women to sleep under. In fact, while Simon Jordan is trying to get Grace's story out of her, her hands are often busy telling another story as she completes the next square for the Governor's wife's quilt.

The Governor's wife herself has evidently attempted some kind of creative sewing of the obligatory kind, the creation of cross-stitch samplers or pictures having been one of the necessary achievements of accomplished young women of the time. One of her less successful framed cross-stitch pictures is hanging on the wall in the sewing room, behind Simon's head, rather than in a more prominent place in the house, somewhat reminiscent of the fate of the artistic dabblings of

Cordelia's Mummie in *Cat's Eye*. These are examples of the unsuccessful attempts at finding a means of expression by women who have no life in their own right.

As Grace explains to Simon, she has no reputation to lose: "I am beyond that" (90). She has already been judged. The story presented as her past has defined her as being "devoid of morals [and] scruples ... degenerate" (71-72) and thus subject to whatever construction anyone might like to put on her character.

As a prisoner, as a madwoman, and a female at that, her life is controlled and institutionalised. Simon has recognised that, as a doctor, he is "one of the dark trio — the doctor, the judge, the executioner — and shares with them the powers of life and death" (82). And this is how it is for institutionalised people: they are at the mercy of those who have the power of life and death over them, in prison and even more so in the Asylum. There is no consultation with them about their own welfare and they are literally and figuratively "rendered unconscious; to lie exposed, without shame, at the mercy of others; to be touched, incised, plundered, remade" (82) at the whim of those in authority, usually males, or their surrogates.

The Governor's wife makes sure the door to the sewing room is open at all times when Grace is with Simon so that there will be "no impropriety behind closed doors" (66) in her house, but out of doors is a different matter. The Governor's wife is pleased that Grace is taken back to the prison at night. But in order to comply with the Governor's wife's wishes not to have her sleeping in the mansion, Grace is subjected to the unbridled lascivious verbal banter of her two keepers twice a day. Grace's daily walks from the prison to the Governor's house and back, accompanied by her two keepers, tell yet another version of her story — a version that would horrify the Governor's wife.

Legs, which are not mentioned in the Governor's wife's house, feature prominently in the keepers' lewd remarks. They suggest that Grace's demeanour is so high and mighty that you would think she has no legs at all. They make constant references

to her legs being up in the air, suggesting ultimately that they should pull her skirt up over her head and tie it to prevent her making any noise while revealing "the only thing of use" in a woman, which is the part of her "below the waist" (240).

As a rule Grace says nothing to them, commenting to herself that "[t]hey are a low class of person" (64), but sometimes she allows the voice of Mary Whitney to surface in her and matches their low class talk with her own, threatening to bite out their tongues — a reversal of their desire to keep women silent. However she remembers that whatever she says to them or anyone else will be "twisted around" (68) and that they are showing off and "talking to each other all this time, not to me" (64), objectifying her.

In absurd contrast, after they have delivered Grace to the mansion she spends the morning "mending some blonde lace of Miss Lydia's, that she'd torn at a party" (242).

Lydia,like the other young ladies of her time, has not only her legs caged in so that they might not accidentally rub up against those of a male, but has her view of life severely restricted in other ways. Not only does her skirt restrict her but a bonnet confines and restricts women's vision (208). Much of what she sees is seen "slantwise, ... through veils, and window curtains, and over the tops of fans" (229). Many of her experiences of life come to her obliquely and Grace is one way in which she can experience things quite out of the usual scheme of things for a young lady in her position. Grace even makes it possible for her to pop in and become acquainted with Simon in the propriety of the sewing room but away from her mother's eyes.

As a young lady Lydia is expected to have a refined nature, whatever that might be, but she quite openly tells Simon that she would go to a hanging, given the opportunity, likes to surmise about the sex life of Grace and McDermott, and wishes Grace would tell her what it is like to go mad. She hopes Grace will never be released from prison, as having Grace in her home, not only to sew, wash and

mend for her, but to titillate the more prurient side of her nature, helps her to rewrite her own story in secret. But Lydia's story goes wrong when Simon turns out to be a philanderer and her mother takes over her story, marrying her to the unlikely Rev Verringer.

Susanna Moodie should be able to mediate for the reader between truth and fiction. She is an historical character, someone who saw the real-life Grace Marks and spoke to her, someone who interviewed Grace's lawyer, MacKenzie, and wrote about Grace and her story as a contemporary woman. She was well-known in the Canada of the time for her personal and very "discouraging account of pioneering life" (464), *Roughing it in the Bush*.[3] But it is the fictional Rev Verringer who casts doubt on the credibility of her account of Grace. He points to discrepancies in her report that "are beyond dispute" (190). She gives wrong names and titles to people, she gets the location of the murders wrong, has a body cut up into pieces in her version and ascribes to Grace a motive for the murder that she herself has invented. Her version is clearly not a factual account of events by an impersonal observer. She conflates her narration with the story of another Nancy, the dead female in *Oliver Twist,* and would have the dead Nancy Montgomery's bloodshot eyes following the terrified and demented Grace. Rev Verringer describes her as a literary lady who is inclined to "embroider" in order to pander to a public who "prefer a salacious melodrama" (190).

Reference to *Oliver Twist* brings us to another way in which the text of the novel comments on and influences the way in which we read Grace's story, namely, through the prevalence of many forms of intertextuality. In some instances the intertextuality is obvious, such as when texts are referred to by name. In other instances there are implied nuances that suggest connections or references to well-known texts.

It is interesting to note that Atwood's particular field in her post-graduate studies was nineteenth-century English literature. She mentions too, in an interview with

[3] Moodie, Susanna: *Roughing it in the Bush, or Life in Canada.* Beacon. Boston. 1987.

Catherine Sheldrik Ross and Cory Bierman Davies,[4] that as a child she read an inordinate amount of what she calls "classical Victorian fiction" (154). It is not surprising then that in Grace's own telling of her story Atwood has exploited the romantic conventions of popular literature prevalent in Victorian times. We know that Grace has read *The Lady of the Lake* more than once. Mr Kinnear had mocked the tragic females in Sir Walter Scott's tales as Nancy read aloud from *The Lady of the Lake* and Grace listened outside the door. Mary Whitney had also read this tale to Grace, and both Mary and Nancy had ended up dead as a result of an unequal and exploitative relationship with a man in a higher social position. According to Kaye England[5] Sir Walter Scott's heroic tales were "especially interesting to men and women of pioneer instincts" on the north American continent. As Tom LeClair[6] puts it, Grace's tale is of the "victimized heroine who endures, overcomes, settles into her own dignity and sews for herself". But tales of a deprived childhood and its heroic survivors are a never-fail formula in our own time too. In Grace's descriptions of her family's miserable life in Ireland and their subsequent sea voyage to a new land are shades of Roddy Doyle's bestsellers and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*.

Some of the characters point to direct associations of Grace with other types of literature, such as the classical sagas, some of survival and some of destruction. Dr Barnnerling mentions Ophelia, the woman betrayed and driven to madness in *Hamlet*, but to him Grace's is an impersonation of madness and he does not trust her. He refers also to the saga of Ulysses, but it is to the deceiving and duplicitous Sirens in this saga that he likens her(71). Discussing the quilting pattern Pandora's Box with her Simon asks if she knows the story of Pandora(146). Grace knows the story only too well and at first hand, having experienced more of the trials and the ills that humans are prone to in her short life than most, and, in her situation, being left entirely without Hope, as what is there left in life for a convicted murderess, "celebrated" or not. Kenneth MacKenzie, Grace's lawyer at the time of

[4] Ross, Catherine Sheldrik and Davies, Cory Bieman: "More Room for Play" in Ingersoll, Earl G (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Virago. London. 1992. 154.
[5] England, Kaye: *Voices of the Past. A History of Women's Lives in Patchwork*. ME Publications. Santa Monica. 1994. 13.
[6] Le Clair, Tom: "Quilty Verdict". *The Nation*. 12 September 1996. 2.

the trial, likens her to Scheherazade (377), not in terms of the woman cannily fighting for her survival by means of the tales she spins, but in terms of a scheming woman spinning a yarn to enmesh the unwary male, in this case Simon. Concerning Grace's story, each of the characters subverts the literary texts to suit his or her ends, just as Atwood and her characters continually subvert the text of this novel to different ends.

An interesting *visual* representation of a text is found in the painting of *Susannah and the Elders* in Kinnear's bedroom. This painting harks back to the voyeurist age of oil painting so vehemently rejected by Elaine in *Cat's Eye* as she seeks to find her own medium of expression. This particular version of the oft-painted subject is, however, not an oil painting but an engraving, coloured by hand, a copy of a famous masterpiece. Kinnear tells Grace the story of the young woman who was accused of a sin she had not committed, by two men who desired her. These men were caught out by their own lies as they gave contradictory evidence to a clever lawyer (Daniel, in the actual text) who came to her defence after she had been sentenced to death. Kinnear also points out that the story of Susannah, which is often believed to be a Biblical story, is found in the Apocrypha and not in the accepted Biblical canon. This apocryphal tale of a righteous and beautiful woman unjustly accused of adultery, represented by a hand-coloured engraving of a famous painting is an apt oblique commentary on Grace's story — a tale adopted by whoever felt like it to be adapted and retold in whichever way they pleased.

In Mary Whitney's "*Let me in*" (178) are echoes of the ghost of Catherine at the window in *Wuthering Heights*, another gothic tale of exploitation and death, as Lockwood first viciously sheds her blood and then builds a barrier to make sure she cannot enter through the window. The red peonies of Grace's nightmares and the pale blue Love in the Mist on the kerchief used to strangle Nancy remind one of the red and blue flowers connected to Clara and Miriam, the two women in *Sons and Lovers*. In many ways Simon Jordan is reminiscent of Charles in *The*

French Lieutenant's Woman. He is like that ambitious young man, also a scientist following a career in a controversial field, in his inability to see himself for what he truly is, and in his exploitation of a lonely defenceless woman. Simon's mistress, the landlady, adds to the effect by taking solitary walks by the lake dressed in black like a widow, echoing the tragic figure on the Cobb at Lyme Regis.

Even the references to *Godey's Ladies' Books* comment on the story. Firstly when these books are seen in the Governor's wife's parlour they comment on the commodification of the females in that context, and secondly when Kinnear brings the books home to Richmond Hill, ostensibly for Mary Whitney to read, it is so that he can look at the women's underwear advertised in its pages, a prurient activity for a Victorian male, surely.

As Grace sits silently sewing her quilts, she gathers together the other women of literature and myth who sewed, wove, knitted, spun, not of their own free choice but as victims of repression in their sequestered circumstances: the Lady of Shallot, the miller's daughter in Rumpelstiltskin and the faithful Penelope. There is also Madame Defarge, of course, who kept an account of other people's wrongdoing in her knitting, and sat beside the guillotine to witness their just demise.

Of course it is in response to his questioning in the name of scientific research and of a possible pardon for Grace that Grace tells the main story of the novel to Dr Simon Jordan. And so Simon Jordan's own story is also told through the story of Grace Marks.

Dr Simon Jordan's father was a self-made man, but "his mother was constructed by others, and such edifices are notoriously fragile" (56). As we shall see, Simon himself is not as clever and independent as he likes to believe, but is also a character constructed by others, and therefore fragile. Although not averse to inheriting his father's self-made fortune he needed, as a young man, to make a pretence of independence and do a little dabbling of his own before settling down,

hence his medical studies. He was not to know that his father would lose his fortune and he would indeed be thrown back on his own resources and have to be properly independent when his father died.

For some reason his plans for himself never seem to come to fruition, and the script for his life seems to be written by various women. Perhaps there were too many doting women servants, as well as his doting mother, in his early life and he has never really learned to survive without them. He constructs plans and scenarios for himself but inevitably some woman will come and deconstruct his scenario.

First there is his mother who has a very definite plan for his life and uses the ploy of her ill-health to try make him feel guilty enough to fit in with her plans. But her plans do not succeed because her cloying possessiveness drives him further and further away, literally, as he goes on study tours to Europe and finally finds a research position in Canada, far from his home in the southern United States.

The research entails trying to find out the truth about Grace on behalf of Rev Verringer and his committee. His plan is to use Grace and her amnesia, or her gap in her story, to rewrite his own story, to prove his theories on amnesia to the breathlessly-waiting scientific world through her case. But it is Grace who rewrites his story — she simply does not respond as the subject of a scientific study should, but is an attractive human being who is able to make him dance to her tune by telling him just enough of what he wants to hear, but not the full story.

His frustration with Grace leads him into an affair with his landlady, Mrs Humphreys. But even this is not his own idea and has been orchestrated by Mrs Humphreys and her circumstances.

Simon is an intelligent man and is not unaware of what is happening in his life, although he seems unable or unwilling to do anything to change it. He constantly steps back and looks at his life and comments on what is happening, how he is

feeling and what he is doing, bemusedly deconstructing his own life, as it were. This is usually done in his letters to his friend, Dr Edward Murchie. Even Simon's name lays itself open to all kinds of interpretations — Simple Simon, Simon the fisherman who became a fisher of men (and women), whose name was changed to Peter, who walked on water, and who betrayed the man to whom he was devoted. And Jordan, of course, is the river we all have to cross sooner or later, the line between life and death, between seeing through a glass darkly but then face to face: the subject of Simon's keenest research. He is sometimes whimsically self-deprecating, as when he introduces himself to Grace as having been "going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it" (38), a self-conscious reference to Satan's response to God in the Job story, which Grace recognises but declines to respond to because she thinks she sees in it a trap for herself.

Although Simon likes to believe that he is in control of his life and is writing his own story he is deluding himself in this belief. He tells Grace about the female factory workers in his father's mill who were taught to read and write and who published a small journal of their own, telling their own stories under their own names. Grace expresses astonishment at the freedom this allowed them, "and made-up things at that" (68), as she exclaims. But she realises that once these young women got married they "would be too busy to make up any more stories, because of all the children" (68). But, more like Grace in their resourcefulness than like Simon, their master's son, they had acquired the means to continue telling their own stories.

Simon constructs the women in his life to suit himself. He remembers, and even dreams about, the maids in his childhood home into whose domain upstairs he deliberately strayed, whose personal belongings he touched and one of whom gave him his first kiss. But guilt feelings about his motives and his actions continue to plague him in his adult life when he thinks about these servants.

Simon plays a private mental game with various women he encounters, imagining them as prostitutes, a means of mentally relegating them to a level beneath himself.

With Grace he makes the mistake of going to the other extreme, going against all he has heard about her and creating his own mental image of her, a "Magdalene" (58), the redeemed prostitute. Thus when he sees her for the first time he sees what his mind has prepared him for, "a nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon, awaiting the next day's burning at the stake" and sees himself as the "last-minute champion come to rescue her" (59). He is brought up short when she turns out to be someone quite the opposite, self-possessed and "frankly assessing him" (60) with her eyes.

And this is how the story continues to be told — Simon believes he is in control and persists in his intention of getting Grace to remember what happened in the cellar through the means of association with root vegetables and other objects which he considers might trigger her memory. Grace's inability to make the connections that Simon wants her to make is a deliberate choice on her part. When Jeremiah sends her a button she is quick to make a connection and to understand that he wishes her to keep their secret "closed up", to keep silent about "certain things we both know of" (428). For once Grace is happy that what someone is writing down is in fact what she is saying, but she manipulates her interviews with Simon, partly to protect herself and partly to continue to please him, because his visits to her have become the centre of her existence. She no longer counts time from her birthday, or from her first day in the country, or from her first day in prison, but the most significant day in her life now is "the first day I spent in the sewing room with Dr Jordan" (97).

Right from the start she mentions that she takes the initiative and changes the subject when she finds the current topic distressing and that she finds it easy to talk to him and "think up things to say" (68). In the general course of things Simon is wary of women who want to tell him their symptoms, but Grace, whose

innermost symptoms he is dying to get at, keeps him at bay in a reversal of his usual position. When he asks about the sort of quilt she would make for herself she prevaricates and fobs him off with a version of what she really would like to make. Having realised, from the sort of dreams that he sometimes has, that dreams are often a reliving of the past, and wondering if amnesia might not be "a sort of dreaming in reverse" (141) he asks her to talk about her dreams. But here again she invents dreams shocking enough to please him but never tells him her real dreams because she knows that "I need to keep something for myself" (101) and her real dreams might be too revealing. What is going on between them is "a contest of wills" (322) in which she tells him only what she chooses to tell, and what he wants "is what she refuses to tell" (322). Grace also remarks that "he does not understand much of what I say" and that often "he wants a thing to mean more than it does" (243).

At first her story is a diversion, distracting him, like the tales of Scheherezade told to "keep the Sultan amused" (377). But he knows that he has never been very good at maintaining his objectivity, that he never possessed the "detachment necessary to be a surgeon" from whom a patient requires "skill, not compassion" (186), and he finds himself more and more entangled in her story, a story which has begun to seem like a Pandora's box — harmless at first sight but opening up an unasked-for and uncontrollable welter of emotions and conflicts within him.

Simon's observation that Rev Verringer is in love with Grace begins to seem like some kind of projection of his own emotions on the part of Simon. Instead of being the subject of his objective research, it is she who directs almost every aspect of his existence as the story she is unfolding draws nearer to its heart: the actual murders and what Grace might or might not remember. Simon finds himself going off to Richmond Hill to see for himself the scene of the crime. In his mind this is part of his scientific research, but the responses of the local people make him realise that he really is just another "voyeur", one of the many "idle gawkers" who have visited the farm. Even mentioning that he is a doctor does not cut much ice with the housekeeper who seems to have had more of those than "the other

sorts" of visitors (285). When he visits MacKenzie, the lawyer shocks him by suggesting that Grace would have thrown herself into his arms at the slightest encouragement, remarking that "[f]ear is a remarkable aphrodisiac" (378). While indignantly branding MacKenzie a lecher and a calculating voluptuary he recognises in himself the same kind of thoughts about Grace. It is not only fear that is a remarkable aphrodisiac but the same applies to vicarious suffering, the plight of a victim. Towards the end of the novel Grace tells of how Jamie Walsh would want to hear "a few stories of [her] torment and misery" (457) before making love to her, and she realises that what he is doing is no different from what Simon was doing. Simon's eyes would light up whenever she could pique his flagging interest with a detail of her trials or hardships, and not only that, "but [he] would write them down as well" (457).

As Grace tells her romantic story in which she is a victim, but a plucky one at that, battling gamely against the odds, Simon is drawn willy nilly into its entanglements, making himself a willing victim of desire. He fantasises about having Grace as *his* housekeeper and secret mistress, hidden and under a different name. She would be "grateful to him, albeit reluctantly" (388), the reluctance creating more of a challenge for him. He is sure she has hidden passion, besides which, ironically, she is probably the one woman who would satisfy all his mother's requirements as far as accomplishments in a wife for him are concerned. Her being a murderess adds allure to his "perverse fantasy", and he is titillated by the prospect that one day she might reveal "more than he might care to know" (389).

It is in this frame of mind that he becomes a party to Du Pont's proposed demonstration of hypnotism to be performed on Grace. Simon's role is that of a scientific observer, but he really is "as eager as a schoolboy at a carnival" (395), carnival perhaps suggesting what is really happening in Mrs Quennell's library. In this way he is setting himself up as a willing dupe. While he thinks he is about to hear Grace's story in a different way, what transpires is more than he bargained for. As Grace is led into the room he realises that the expression of "pale silent appeal" with which she fixes Du Pont is exactly what "he has been hoping for in

vain" (396). As Grace, in her assumed identity as Mary Whitney, tears Simon apart, revealing his hidden motives to himself and all in the room, and telling a version of her story that he does not wish to hear, his story is rewritten in such a way that he will never again have credibility of any kind in this place.

Meanwhile Mrs Humphreys, Rachel, has been writing Simon's story for him as well. His repressed and unacknowledged desire for Grace leads him to conflating the sleepwalking landlady with the amnesiac and sleepwalking Grace. Rachel has ensnared him into enacting with her a role reversal mirror image of Grace's story, with her, the owner of the house, in the role of the seductress and Simon, the lodger, being transformed into the servant role as he goes out shopping for her, prepares and cooks the meals for her, and becomes her paramour. He even digs a hole in the garden, the equivalent of the cellar in Kinnear's house as it turns out when Rachel suggests he kill her returning husband and bury him in the garden. Rachel's plans for killing her husband are like Grace's murder scenario, like a scene from a "third-rate shocker ... bloodthirsty and banal" (410). Simon is being written into a story similar to the one he has been trying to ferret out of Grace, and he knows he has to flee to save himself and what is left of his reputation.

In the Biblical story Jacob gets Leah when it is Rachel that he really wants; in Simon's story it is Rachel that he gets when it is Grace whom he passionately desires.

There is another version of this story too, the one that Grace hears as told by Dora, Rachel's servant, to the other servants when she helps in the kitchen at the Governor's wife's house.

Simon has always told his own story from the point of view of his being an earnest scientist, in the forefront of research into what was then a very new field of medicine, mental illness. One of his reasons for fleeing from Toronto is that his having participated in Du Pont's experiment has compromised his scientific and professional position. Verringer and his committee expect his report on the

experiment and what they think it tells about Grace, but if Simon, a medical man, were to report on these events not only would the report be rejected by the legal fraternity, but he would become the laughing-stock of the established medical world. He has allowed others to write his script for him and it is one in which he cannot play a role. But worse is to come. When he disappears, first to Europe and then to join the Civil War in the United States where he is wounded, Verringer, impatient because his report has not been forthcoming, writes his own version of Simon's medical report and sends it to Dr Bannerling whose response is just what Simon had known it would be. So Simon's story, written from someone else's perspective once again, destroys his medical reputation.

Simon has identified with his own home town and his own country to such a small degree that he tells Mrs Quennell that he holds no opinion on the Abolitionist question, the question that is so important to Americans that it is to spark off the devastating Civil War between north and south. Although by his own admission this question is not his story Simon uses the war as a seemingly noble excuse to escape from the women of his past and the women of his present, his mother and the admirable Faith. Simon has always believed that he has had his mother under control, flattering her, lying to her, mollifying her one way or another. But when Simon returns from the war an invalid, presumably with brain damage, his mother finds herself in complete control of him. She reads and deals with his mail, organises his life and places him in the tender care of the longsuffering Faith Cartwright. It is ironical that Simon's worst imaginings that being married to Faith Cartwright would be like being "imprisoned in an armchair by the fire, frozen in a paralyzed stupor ... like a fly snarled in the web of a spider" (293) have come literally true.

His own method of "association" is used to try to restore his lost mind as his mother and Faith take him to familiar places and show him familiar objects, hoping to elicit some response that might spark the restoration of his memory. Some part of his memory is there still, the part he wants to keep for himself, as he persists in believing that it is Grace who is looking after him, not Faith, as if in an

ironical re-interpretation of the words of St Paul, "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves...".[7]

By his own admission Simon has sometimes cast himself in a Byronic mould, romantically gloomy and gothic (424). He has also deluded himself into believing that in his association with various women he has held the upper hand. With Grace he is the doctor who will find the answers; Rachel he defines as "an interesting study" (75) at the start of his lodging with her, and even while he is rolling in the bedclothes with her he sees a side of himself standing aside and "merely observing", wondering "[h]ow far in" (366) he would be prepared to go with her. He remembers the "better class of French whore" with whom he had consorted on his visits to Europe, purely as part of his "duty to his vocation" (75), or the sense of largesse and compassion he felt as he paid some shopworn streetgirl for her services, as if he were conferring a favour on her. But he later comes to realise that all these women whom he considered at the time should have been grateful to him probably secretly despise him — "[w]hat contempt they must have all kept hidden, under their thanks and smiles" (363).

And this is what he has come down to — the truth about himself: no longer even seeming to be in charge of the situation, but at the mercy of some women who simperingly minister to him, keeping him in his place, right where they want him, and helpless.

The story that Grace has told to Simon, as we have seen already, is the story he wanted to hear. But hidden in the text are other subtexts, possibly some that even Grace had not intended.

Jeremiah Pontelli, (or Jerome Du Pont, or Geraldo Ponti, or Gerald Bridges) is indeed Grace's bridge between different worlds. He intervenes at crucial points in her story, usually in a constructive way. Not only is he himself a shape-changer but he is an agent of change and transformation for Grace.

[7] Ephesians 2:8. Authorised Version.

He first appears when she is about to make her transition into the household of Mrs Alderman Parkinson. She has been scrubbed clean by Mary Whitney and has been sent to purchase material for a new dress. Jeremiah, the pedlar, arrives on the scene and sells Grace the four bone buttons for her dress. From the start it is obvious that he is a shape-changer, as he could be taken for a Jew or a gypsy, but claims to be a Yankee with an Italian father. He entertains the servants with his imitation of a gentleman. He is the bridge for people such as the servants in various households, between their humdrum world and his world of constant change, between the world of reality and the world of illusion, a touch of glamour and freshness, bringing them a small bundle of the endless possibilities that the world might have to offer them in consumer goods.

He is able to be all things to all people, flattering the cook and the housekeeper and trading with the maids and the stable boy. He has even co-opted the street urchins into providing a fanfare for his arrival instead of tormenting him and trying to steal from his pack. He is also a fortune-teller and a conjuror, entertaining the servants with his sleight of hand, but not being allowed to tell their fortunes by looking at their hands for fear of what the mistress of the house would think. He does manage to look into Grace's hand, however, as he gives her a fifth button (four is an unlucky number and uneven numbers are better), whispering to her that "there are sharp rocks ahead" and that she is "one of us" (155). Grace cannot imagine what he means by this, but her very story shows her to be a shape-changer, to be able to be all things to all people.

His next appearance, after Mary's death, is very brief and sombre for Grace as she sells him the best dress and the box she has inherited from Mary. He gives her money for Mary's gold ring, to pay for her funeral. Grace is not sure, however, of the efficacy of the prayers which Jeremiah promises to say for Mary.

Grace next encounters Jeremiah as she makes the transition to her new life at Richmond Hill when he rescues her from the unwanted attentions of her travelling companion and then disappears. But Jeremiah's visit to the farm two weeks later

is portentous. He warns Grace about Kinnear's reputation for "hankering after the servant-girls" (265) and startles Grace by hoping that she will not end up like Mary Whitney. He has "the air of being able to see more than most could", saying that the "future lies hid in the present, for those that can read it" (265).

Not only is Jeremiah a shapechanger but he can pass through borders "like passing through air" (266): he not only crosses between the States and Canada with ease but changes his nationality at will, from Italian, to Spanish, to French, to English by using a bit of sleight of hand with his name and face. When he shows Grace the lucky X on the palms of both his hands, she can find no such sign of good luck on either of her palms.

For Grace this visit of Jeremiah's to the farm could have been a turning-point in her life if she had taken him up on his suggestion that she should come away with him. She could become his partner in his proposed new venture into working the fairs as an illusionist, take a new name, possibly a foreign name to add mystery. Jeremiah convinces her that to change one's name in order to help people who "wish to believe a thing, and long for it and depend on it to be true, and feel the better for it" (268) is not cheating, but rather a charity. But Grace remembers Mary's admonition not to go with a man until one is married to him, and recalls what happened to Mary when she did not follow her own precept.

Jeremiah's words have fallen on fertile ground, however, because, not many days later, after the murders, Grace takes another name and flees across the border. She does not have the experience of a Jeremiah in slipping across borders and in and out of various identities and is caught and tried for the murders committed in the situation from which Jeremiah had tried to rescue her. His other words about pleasing people by telling them what they want to believe also bear fruit of a disastrous nature as she spends the rest of her life giving people versions of her story that she thinks will please them, at one stage nearly ending up on the scaffold as a result of too many versions of her story.

It is Jeremiah who sells McDermott four shirts on the day of the murder, four, the unlucky number. One of the shirts plays a role in the conviction of McDermott of Kinnear's murder and possibly saves Grace from the gallows.

Jeremiah next appears as a "gentleman" with the respectable title of doctor. Lydia tells Grace of the gentleman who admires her and says she has had a remarkable life. The gentleman is Jeremiah, doing the gentleman act to perfection, and in real life this time. He indicates to Grace by a familiar gesture that she is to "button my lip" (305), and the two of them slip into their roles of illusionist and assistant as he proposes to her that she should allow him to hypnotise her. Grace, taking her cues from Jeremiah, plays the part to perfection. "I could have laughed with glee, for Jeremiah had done a conjuring trick ... and made a pact with me before their very eyes" (306).

There are two crucial questions in the novel which remain unanswered to the end. The first is whether the historical Grace participated in the murders of Kinnear and Nancy, a question that is unanswered in history as well as in the novel. The second is whether the fictional Grace was party to the illusion that Du Pont created through his hypnosis of her, or whether Grace was indeed under hypnosis and was truly unaware of what had transpired. The reader is given no help in deciding this. Grace remains silent about her possible complicity with Jeremiah, or reverts again to the amnesiac state which has protected her before. Thus her narrative contains unbridgeable gaps in this respect as in other respects. The only clue she lets fall is that, after the pact made under the eyes of all, the fictional Grace wonders whether Jeremiah, having plied the trade of mesmerist at fairs, "really did know the arts of such things, and might put me into a trance" (306).

The essence of illusion is that those involved can choose to believe whatever they like about what they have witnessed. Simon is the one most affected by the event. On a personal level he thinks he has heard what he believed he wanted to know about Grace's relationship with McDermott, on a scientific level he is not sure whether he has witnessed the phenomenon of "double consciousness" about

which he has heard or whether he has been duped. But it is Grace who still eludes him and it is in this mood of frustration with Grace that he goes home to Rachel, the Grace substitute. Here he is forced to make a decision about his future, thus his life is influenced indirectly by his encounter with Jeremiah. He wishes to "lose himself completely" (366) in a world where he would have no responsibilities, an ironic forshadowing of his eventual fate.

Lydia's life is radically changed. She goes wild after Simon's disappearance, and, to save face, her mother hastily marries her off to the dreary Rev Verringer, a far cry from the dreams of a romantic young woman. The Governor's wife believes that she has been deceived by Grace but is obliged to face the fact publicly that she has deceived herself. Rev Verringer seems to want to believe what happened and later sends his own version of a report, as we have seen, to a scornful Dr Bannerling. Du Pont is not mentioned again and Grace seems to be the only one whose life is not radically changed by the events, although she feels that people in the Governor's house are kinder to her and she is re-instated to her former position of trust. She seems to be unaware of what happened at the hypnotism and her demeanour is calm and gentle, if her letters to Simon and Jeremiah are anything to judge by.

The last appearance of Jeremiah is as Gerald Bridges, the celebrated medium, a man who is "distinguished ... in the world, but with his mind on the higher truth" (456). He is performing in the United States town where Grace has settled after her release from prison and her marriage, having done "all the running away I have time for in this life" (456). They discreetly acknowledge each other, both of them having successfully crossed the border into a new life, and leaving behind the past.

Perhaps it is the influence of Jeremiah, and his mention of lucky palms, that makes Grace, throughout the novel, very concerned with her hands and the story they tell. She seems to express the need to have her hands covered because of

what they might tell others about her. The story that her hands can tell is another of the subtexts hidden within the text of the novel.

In *Surfacing* the protagonist is concerned with the broken life line on the palm of her hand, the hidden truth of her past that has to be brought to the surface, the true story of her life that has to be told. Tony, the protagonist of *The Robber Bride*, is left-handed, but has made herself ambidexterous and so is able to write her own history for herself while holding down a place in the historically male domain of the history of war.

On the very first page of her narrative Grace describes her hands as "chapped, the knuckles reddened. I can't remember a time when they were not like that" (5). When she is being interviewed for her work at the Parkinsons' residence the housekeeper inspects her hands and is satisfied that they are the hands of a working girl (128). After the murders the popular ballad of the time about Grace and McDermott describes repentance as the only means by which her bloodied hands will be washed (15). She tells how she would sometimes rub some of Mr Kinnear's "good soap from London" (37) on her hands when she emptied his shaving water in the mornings and so "have the smell of it with me all day, at least until it was time to scrub the floors" (37).

In the first of many references to her desire to own gloves Grace describes herself as sitting in the Governor's wife's parlour with her hands "folded in my lap the proper way although I have no gloves" and desiring gloves "smooth and white" that would "fit without a wrinkle" (21). She is part of the gathering in the Governor's wife's parlour but as an object of curiosity, a "celebrated murderess" (22), a creature about whom each of the ladies present might romanticise and fantasise in her own way, her hands revealed for each of the begloved ladies to interpret her story as she likes.

Dr Bannerling, at the Asylum, was determined that Grace's insanity was a fraud. He would examine her when she was tied up in her room in the dark "with

mufflers on my hands" (32), calling her a liar, until she "stopped talking altogether" (32) except for "Yes Ma'am, No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir" (32), and was sent back to the Penitentiary.

Other people, like the ladies in the Governor's wife's parlour, wear gloves to camouflage the truth about themselves. When Grace perceives the phrenologist as someone who is not there for her good, when he jokes about having the "appearance of virtue" (29) she confuses him with the doctor who performed Mary Whitney's fatal abortion, she sees him as having "a hand like a glove, ... stuffed with raw meat" (29). Nancy Montgomery often wears gloves, implying her status is that of a "lady", the lady of the house, while her true status is still that of a servant and, into the bargain, the mistress of the master of the house.

When Grace goes to church with her Nancy lends her a pair of gloves which "did not however fit as they should" (252), and Grace notices that the people in church, although they all have their hands washed and are wearing gloves, are lacking in charity, snubbing Nancy and, by association, Grace. At this stage Grace is naively unaware of the fact that Nancy is Kinnear's mistress and is thus censured by the local community. She is nevertheless sensitive to the fact that the sermon on "Divine Grace" and the unworthiness of all people to receive it, has passed over the self-righteous congregation unheeded. (Perhaps the association with her own name has made her more receptive to the sermon's implications?)

At the end of the novel, when Grace is taken to meet and subsequently marry Jamie Walsh, Janet, the Governor's daughter, gives her a pair of "summer gloves, almost new" (446) for her own. She is wearing these, the first gloves she has ever owned, when she is finally released from prison. Her marriage to Jamie is a marriage of convenience for both parties, but she nevertheless has to remove her glove, her disguise, in order for him to place the ring on her finger. No one in town knows about Grace's background — she has a new name now, not an alias — and so when she goes into town she always wears her gloves. It is in the town that she once again sees Jeremiah and recognises him in spite of his latest alias

and another change in his appearance. She knows her secrets are safe with Jeremiah, just as his are safe with her, and she discreetly acknowledges him by waving her hand at him, "just a little, in its glove" (456). Jeremiah and Grace are both shape-changers, re-inventing and transforming themselves as opportunities present themselves, and both improving their status with each transformation.

What about Grace's own verbal narrative — how do we read that? There are two optional ways of reading it: either she is the innocent victim of circumstantial evidence and the lies of others, or she is the wicked and ruthless murderess, saved from hanging by a clever lawyer, and deserving of the years of incarceration she suffered.

As a victim of poverty and later, as a servant, she has no right to speak for herself. As a servant with no voice she has adopted the reverse role and become "skilled at overhearing" (5) what others say, often about her. During her trial she also has no real voice, as we have seen already, with everyone else appropriating her story or telling her what to say. During her years of incarceration, both in the Penitentiary and in the Asylum, she is not allowed any voice of her own and is subject to the decisions that others may choose to make about her. The patriarchal and dogmatic medical system of the time makes decisions affecting the lives of patients without any consultation with or explanations to the patients.

When Grace tells her story to Simon she is not telling him the whole story but has the wit to discern what it is he wants to hear, as we have already seen — she is "skilled in overhearing" the unsaid things as well. So what is her true story? Could it be that the voice of Mary Whitney is the authentic voice of Grace Marks? Is Mary Whitney a real person or the alter ego, the true side of Grace, whom she has learned to hide during the years of being deprived of her real voice?

The first oblique reference to Mary is in Grace's reaction to the phrenologist who comes to measure her criminal head. Grace has hysterics as he pulls a glinting

metal implement out of his bag and she thinks she recognises him in this action (29). Later she explains to Simon that he looked like the doctor who had performed Mary's abortion (175). But she was not in the room when Mary had the abortion and would not have known about the "bagful of shining knives (29). Had it in fact been Grace who had undergone the abortion, had survived in spite of losing blood and coming close to death, and who was told by both the abortion doctor and her employee, Mrs Alderman Parkinson, to forget the whole story and not to speak about it? The protagonist in *Surfacing* creates a new life story for herself to blot out the memory of her abortion, and perhaps Grace has done a similar thing, but in her case creating a surrogate or scapegoat to bear the consequences and die in her stead.

Soon after her arrival at the Parkinsons' Grace is scrubbed from top to toe, has her hair washed and her clothes committed to the "scrap bag", possibly to be incorporated into a quilt at some time — but the quilt would not be Grace's and whoever made it would be using pieces of her clothing to tell their story. In other words she has abandoned her past life. Hidden in this apparently ordinary episode is a world of portentous meaning: Mary lends Grace one of her nightdresses to wear while hers dries, wraps her in a sheet to wear back to her room, laughingly saying she looks "just like a madwoman" (152). When Mary dies Grace lends one of her nightdresses to dress her in while her blood-soaked one is being washed, Grace's mother was buried at sea, wrapped in a sheet, and Grace ends up a madwoman in an Asylum. In this episode Grace is dying to her past and being given a glimpse of her future.

Most of what the reader knows about Mary comes from Grace's quoting things that she has said, very often daring things, things that slightly shock Grace, or things that Grace would like to have said if she had the courage. We witness Grace, deprived of her ability to speak by the Asylum and the Penitentiary, being "examined" by Dr Bannerling and feeling that he is abusing her by touching her where he should not. All she can say to fend off the doctor is "Oh no, oh no" (34), whereas Mary would have said "Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard"

(34). Deprived of words she bites the doctor in retaliation and thus ends up in solitary confinement on bread and water. We witness a similar scene when Grace manages to find her voice and answer back to her escorts to and from the prison, threatening to bite off their tongues: she manages to find her voice when she thinks of what Mary would have said to them.

Mary, who has strong democratic views and expresses anger that "some people had so much and others so little" (150), teaches Grace her radical political ideas, perhaps the seeds of the envy that Grace felt regarding Nancy Montgomery, ideas which could have led to her murder. But when Grace's father comes to the house to take all her wages it is Mary who sets the stable hands on him, in spite of Grace's mild reservations, and sends him packing. Mary also reminds Grace that servants are not slaves and could rise above their position, "it was just a job of work" (157), and whether one felt oppressed in a situation depended on the way one looked at it.

Just as Grace could often think of what Mary would have said in a particular situation but could not bring herself to say it, what Mary herself said and did were not always the same. It was Mary who warned Grace about the gentlemen "who think they are entitled to anything they want" and "start promising things" (165) but do not fulfil their promises, who warned her that even a ring was not enough — "there must be a parson to go with it" (165). But it is Mary who accepts a ring from a man whom we presume to have been the son of the house, and loses her life because of his empty promises. As Grace observes "it is not always the one who strikes the blow, who is the actual murderer" (178). Mrs Parkinson, who surely knew the truth about her son, could only exclaim "Under my own roof" (177) — echoes of Lady Macbeth's "What, in our house".[8]

[8] As it was the disease from the south, the United States, that was blighting the trees in *Surfacing*, and the Americans who were blamed for raping the land in the same novel, so it is the characters from the States who are rapacious and destructive in *Alias Grace*. Mrs Parkinson was from the States, and her son, who, the reader assumes, was Mary's exploitative lover, attended University there. Simon Jordan, who wished to exploit Grace in the furtherance of his own career, and his manipulative mother, who would replace the creativity of hand sewing with investment in the sewing machine, are also from the south, from America.

But is it Mary speaking in all these situations, or is it the real voice of Grace, the voice that would like to be heard but has to be repressed in order for its owner to survive in her circumstances?

Mary and Grace share a bed and share almost everything else in their daily lives in the big house. We have already mentioned that Grace seemed to know more about the abortion than she would admit, and it is Grace's savings for her new dress that are added to the five dollars given by the man responsible for Mary's pregnancy, to pay for the abortion. That night Grace separates herself from Mary, sleeping on the floor and not in the bed with her, and wakes up to find Mary dead. This is reminiscent of the way in which Charis in *The Robber Bride* separates herself from the dreadful abuse of her uncle by splitting herself in half — one part of her is in the bed while the other half of her hovers outside of her body.

When Mrs Parkinson is called to see the dead Mary she looks at *Grace* when she speaks about what a deceitful girl she has been, and asks *Grace* who the man was. And it is Grace, off her own bat, who says "you would not like it at all, if you found out who it was" (177). It is Grace whom Mrs Parkinson swears to secrecy about the man's identity.

Grace hears the dead Mary saying quite clearly *"Let me in"* (178) and runs to open the attic windows to let her spirit *out*, remembering that no windows had been opened to allow her mother's spirit to go free. But Grace has not made a mistake. Mary was saying *"Let me in"*, and Mary's spirit and hers have become one, whether they ever were separate people or not.

Once the washing of the bloodied bedding and the re-arranging of Mary's body is complete Grace falls into a "dead faint" (179) in which she lies for ten hours. On waking from this she asks "where Grace had gone" and cries, saying that "Grace was lost" (180) before falling asleep again. This episode, the conflating of the persons of Grace and Mary, is blotted from her memory in the first of her episodes

of amnesia. The second spell of amnesia occurs before Grace consciously takes on the name and identity of Mary Whitney in an attempt to escape after the murders.

Sharing a bed with Mary, Grace dreams one night that her mother's winding sheet has come undone in the cold water under the sea. She cannot not see the face of the person in the sheet; she knows it is not her mother's face, as the woman has darker hair than her mother's, and is alive. With this premonition the deaths of Grace's mother and of Mary begin to conflate, as have the lives of Grace and Mary.

That her mother had not received a proper burial has continued to haunt Grace.

According to John Gribble, Maritime Archaeologist at the South African Heritage Resources Agency, Cape Town,[9] seafarers and travellers of days gone by had a horror of their remains being disposed of at sea. Portuguese seafarers especially, who were predominantly Roman Catholic, dreaded not being buried in consecrated ground. Thus many Portuguese ships carried a layer of soil in their holds as ballast in which sailors who died at sea could be temporarily buried, then exhumed and given a proper burial once they reached land again. In fact "the dictates of canonical law prescribed against French and Iberian mariners' disposing of their dead at sea".[10]

Thus Mary's burial near the paupers, but still within the churchyard, a "proper burial with dirt on top" (198) is doubly significant for Grace as she, in small measure, makes up for her mother's having been "tossed into the sea" (198).

When Simon goes to find Mary's grave it brings him no nearer to the truth. All it has on the headstone is her name, but no date. It could therefore have been the grave of any stranger whose name Grace took, and the truth about Grace still eludes both Simon and the reader.

[9] In an informal conversation, but later substantiated in Simmons, Joe J III: *Those Vulgar Tubes*. Chatham. London. 1989. 8.
[10] Simmons, Joe J III: *Those Vulgar Tubes*. Chatham. London. 1989. 8.

When she first sees her Nancy Montgomery reminds Grace of Mary, and Grace goes off to Richmond Hill with the notion of becoming her close friend. If we subscribe to the version of Grace as scheming and ambitious, she later intends usurping Nancy's place in Mr Kinnear's household (and in his bed). When it suits Nancy,[11] she and Grace share a bed, as did Mary and Grace, and Grace, after the murders, runs away wearing Nancy's clothes, the first step towards becoming Nancy, as she had become Mary.

As we have seen, the truth about the fictitious Grace lies in the events in the library when she is hypnotised. But although Grace can see in the dark on this occasion, the reader is left groping in the gloom with the other characters, arguing back and forth about the evidence which could point in whichever direction one wishes the story to move. Is Jerome playing a part when he says that what happened took him by surprise, or did he really hypnotise Grace and bring to light her other persona? Was Grace deliberately taking revenge on the people around her, about whom she had learnt so much by keeping quiet and observing them, or was she undergoing a cathartic experience under hypnosis? An important clue lies in her words after coming out of the "trance", "I dreamt about my mother. She was floating in the sea. She was at peace" (403). She has both spoken openly in the voice of Mary Whitney and has released herself from the web of complicated guilt about her mother.

Has Jerome, the pseudo-scientist, in fact, achieved through his hypnosis, what Simon, the serious and dedicated scientist, had been trying to achieve through his application of his understanding of the psychiatry of the time? Atwood, in her *Author's Afterword*, says that she has based Dr Simon Jordan's theories on contemporary ideas, and at this time the medical world was in a ferment of interest in new beliefs about "phenomena such as memory and amnesia, somnambulism, ... trance states ... and the import of dreams" (466).

[11] That is, when Nancy is not sharing the bed of Mr Kinnear. In Nancy's bed Grace is one step closer to Mr Kinnear's bed.

That the word mesmerism was derived from the name of the Viennese physician, Franz Anton Mesmer, is misleading for two reasons — forms of hypnotism had been practised from early Egyptian times, and what Mesmer used in the treatment of his patients was not hypnotism. He developed a treatment which he called animal magnetism but which, in the end, seems to have been no more than an elaborate form of treatment by means of suggestion. He was discredited by a French Royal Commission in 1784, but in the same year one of his disciples, de Pységur, accidentally stumbled upon the sleeplike trance which became known as artificial somnambulism and later as hypnotism.

The interesting phenomena associated with hypnosis were soon discovered by various European researchers until, in 1837, John Elliotson, the first professor of medicine at the University of London "began mesmerizing patients in an effort to find a new treatment for certain nervous conditions".[12] His scientific findings caused an uproar and led to his resignation from the University. But the seed had been sown and the use of the practice grew and was expanded as a form of anaesthesia.

The word hypnosis was coined by James Braid, a Manchester physician, to free the practice from the negative connotations that had accrued to the words mesmerism and animal magnetism. In the novel Du Pont claims to be "a trained Neuro-hypnotist, of the school of James Braid" (83), whose methods, he says, have "produced astounding ... and very rapid results" (83) in cases of amnesia.

Judith Knelman[13] would argue about the thoroughness of Atwood's research with regard to medical and psychiatric matters. She argues that Atwood has presented us with "a misleading and indeed anachronistic reconstruction of nineteenth century theories about multiple personality". She claims that it was not until 1876 that the concept of multiple personality disorder was written up and the term

[12] Coleman, Andrew M: *Facts, Fallacies and Frauds in Psychology*. Hutchinson. London. 1987. 113.
[13] Knelman, Judith: "Can We Believe What the Newspapers Tell Us?". *University of Toronto Quarterly*. 68:2. 1999. 682.

"*dédoublement*" popularised by a French surgeon, Eugene Azam. Atwood, in her Author's Afterword claims, however, that "'Dissociation of personality', or *dédoublement*, was described early in the [nineteenth] century; it was being seriously debated in the 1840s, although it achieved a much greater vogue in the last three decades of the century" (466). Knelman also says that there was "no suggestion at the time that hypnotism could be used (as Grace's doctor, Simon Jordan, does) to recover memory". Atwood describes her invented character, Dr Simon Jordan, as "a specialist in mental disorders" who has "studied in London and Paris; thus he had access to the most advanced thinking of his time".[14] Atwood is therefore not claiming what she presents in the novel as psychiatric fact, but, in the context of the shifting truths of a postmodernist novel, she is experimenting with ideas, as is her character, Simon Jordan.

Although much of what Simon attempts with Grace seems to be based on Freudian principles, Freud was born in 1856 only, three years before the relevant action in the novel takes place, and he published his first work in 1892. Many of the principles and much of the practice which he brought together and documented had been applied successfully by a succession of practitioners before him, but he was the one to distil and encapsulate what are popularly known as Freudian principles.

It may be of interest to mention that hypnosis was not accepted into the mainstream of psychology until Clark Hull published his *Hypnosis and Suggestibility: An Experimental Approach* in the United States in 1933.[15]

Jung, the other great practitioner and innovator in the development of psychology during this period, was born in 1875. It is apparent, throughout her writing, that Atwood has been greatly influenced by Jung — her fascination with dreams, myths and archetypal figures is an indication of this. The postmodernist form of the novel provides Atwood with the freedom of having her characters firmly rooted in the

[14] Atwood, Margaret: *Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For*. Stratford Festival. September 1997. 6. Margaret Atwood Website. www.web.net/owtoad/ophelia.html.
[15] Coleman, Andrew M: *Facts, Fallacies and Frauds in Psychology*. Hutchinson. London. 1987. 114.

scientific context of the Victorian timeframe of the novel, while she is able to explore the Jungian significance of, for example, her characters' dreams. Grace's dreams about red peonies and blood, about her mother floating among the icebergs, and Simon's dreams about his father, as well as his sexual dreams about various women, are very Jungian. Tom LeClair's quibble about these dreams being too Modernist for the novel[16] misses the point that in a postmodernist text nothing is fixed, everything is shifting, including the author's position.

Another possible Jungian application in the complex web of Grace's story is Jung's belief in archetypes: the shadow which is the undeveloped aspect of our personality, the persona or the mask behind which we hide, the anima and animus, or our male and female sides present in the unconscious. There are examples in mythology of figures which stand for the eternal feminine, such as Helen of Troy, Venus or the Virgin Mary. Hadfield[17] interestingly cites the Lady of the Lake as a female archetype. As we have mentioned earlier, this Lady appears at regular intervals in Grace's history: as Scott's poem, as the lake steamer Lady of the Lake, and as a quilt pattern depicting a pinwheel for the ship's paddle. According to England[18] Lady of the Lake is the one patchwork design which has never had any other name. Perhaps for Grace this is her anima, the unchanging point in an otherwise shifting and uncertain world, and perhaps Jeremiah, constantly changing but always remaining the same, a fixed point of reference in her uncertain existence, is her animus.

A further means by which Grace tells her story is hidden in the way the novel is constructed.

Although, as a woman of her period, Grace has more opportunity than most to tell her story by virtue (or vice) of her being a "celebrated murderess", Grace has yet

[16] Le Clair, Tom: "Quilty Verdict". *The Nation*. 12 September 1996. 3.
[17] Hadfield, J A: *Dreams and Nightmares*. Penguin. Harmondsworth. 1964. 44.
[18] England, Kaye: *Voices of the Past: A History of Women's Lives in Patchwork*. ME Publications. Santa Monica. 1994. 77.

another means of narrating herself. The hidden narrative of this novel is in its construction, with sections of the novel named after particular Canadian quilting patterns of the period and indicating by this means another aspect of the story. The section headings are an indication of the deeper significance of what is being narrated in that section, a commentary or classical chorus relating to the action.

In the art of patchwork the immigrant women of the North American continent invented for themselves a means of creative expression within the necessary activities of their humdrum daily domestic round.

Although her book, *The Perfect Patchwork Primer*, refers to the patchwork tradition in the United States of America, Beth Gutcheon's remarks about the historical roots of patchwork and quilting apply equally to Canada:

> Patchwork, the art of making whole cloth from bits and pieces of scraps and clothes that had been worn — a craft born of the harshest necessity, a symbol of a life of hardship in which money was scarce, material goods were scarcer, and all one had to give was labor (sic) and time. Patchwork is really the blues of the American woman ... created by and for suffering — the blues is the feeling and the blues is what makes it bearable ... Patchwork became both the symptom and the cure for what life demanded of the American woman.[19]

As times improved the women were able not only to quilt and pad their bedcoverings for extra warmth and to line them, but had the time to plan their patchwork and create patterns. Patterns, consisting of geometrical shapes in different configurations, evolved, and were named according to the physical features, such as log cabins or snake fences, of their surroundings or the life experiences of the women concerned. The quilts began to tell the stories of the women's lives.

[19] Gutcheon, Beth: *The Perfect Patchwork Primer*. Penguin. USA. 1973. 14.

The patchwork squares were of a convenient size for being picked up and worked on during odd spare moments and in small rooms, but the actual piecing of a quilt became a festive occasion when all the women from the surrounding isolated farms would be invited to a quilting party. The men and children would come too and have their own social gathering, while the women worked and talked together, sharing their stories with one another while piecing together the story of one of their number.

Even in the city this tradition would be observed, and when Grace finished the squares for the Governor's daughter's quilt a group of ladies would gather in the evening to piece it together. Grace tells Simon that she would not be included in this group as "it is in the evening, [when she would be back in prison] and it is a party, and I am not invited to parties" (98) — a delicious irony to exclude the person who knew the story better than anyone else through her quiet observation while she sewed.

It is Grace who remarks that although one thinks of a bed, and therefore the quilt over it, as a peaceful thing, it is really a very dangerous place. One is usually born in a bed, "our first peril in life" (161), and for a woman childbirth itself, a most perilous experience, takes place in a bed. Then there is the sex act which, for some women, especially those who have had no say in the choice of a husband, is a thing to be endured and suffered through, not enjoyed. Sleeping and dreaming are also dangerous, while the last act of all, death, is often in a bed. Grace probably remembers the quilt that was pulled up over Mary Whitney's body after the evidence of her horrible death had been removed. So quilts are involved with and witness to the whole gamut of human suffering, particularly for women.

As a means of telling the stories of women, who were marginalised people in the society of the time, quilts can be seen as having had a subversively transformational role. But an even more actively subversive role was played by the quilts made by slaves in the southern states of the United States. In a recent book Jacqueline L Tobin, a professor of oral history at the University of Colorado, and

Raymond G Dobard,[20] a professor of art history at Howard University in the United States, uncover the role that quilts played among the most marginalised and oppressed sector of north American society in the nineteenth century.

Just as Grace, a servant, was taught to quilt so that she could make quilts for her mistress, so the slaves of the south were taught quilting for the same purpose. But they, too, made quilts for themselves as well as for their mistresses, and some of their quilts were used to subversive ends. An elderly American black woman, Ozella McDaniel Williams, related to Tobin the oral history of her quilts, as passed down through several generations of women in her family. These memorised "codes" that she recited indicated that slaves had used quilts, embedded with intricate codes, to guide each other along the Underground Railroad, an informal but intricate network of safe houses and people who helped fugitive slaves pass from slave states in the south to freedom in the north.

Quilts hung out on a fence, ostensibly to air, would serve as a roadmap to passing fugitives, or indicate a safe house where they could take refuge and rest on their journey. In these slave quilts certain quilt symbols took on specific meanings. The Flying Geese pattern (geese fly north as did the fleeing slaves) could serve as a compass; the pattern consists of four sets of triangles, indicating north, east, south and west. By altering the colour of the fabric of one of the sets of triangles this set of triangles could be used to indicate the right direction to take, for example, west. The traditional Log Cabin design would have a red square in the centre, representing the hearth of the cabin. But a yellow or black centre square replacing the traditional red square would indicate a safe house. Intricate running stitch done in a pattern could represent a topographical map, while a quilt covered with star patterns of different sizes in an apparently random pattern could represent an actual constellation in the local sky, indicating to the fugitive how to navigate by the stars at night.

[20] Tobin, Jacqueline L and Dobard, Raymond G: *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret History of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Bantam Doubledy. USA. 1999. As quoted in National Post, Toronto. date omitted.

Tobin and Dobard point out that in West Africa handicrafts would often be embedded with mnemonics to assist the keepers of oral history, and that these traditions could easily have been adapted as the slaves appropriated the handcraft of their American mistresses to their own ends.

It is an irony that Simon, the southerner who vehemently rejects attempts in the drawing rooms of Kingston to draw him on the Abolitionist question, saying he has no interest in it, should have fled so far north to escape his roots, only to become embroiled in the fate of an incarcerated female doing slave labour in the home of the prison Governor's wife. His quest for a life of freedom and independence from his southern past is brought to a sudden and ironical end when he is incapacitated, defending the very system from which he tried to flee and in which he professed to have no interest.

An interesting observation about quilting is that the patterns are created by means of juxtaposing dark and light pieces. Because of this a pattern can be seen in two different ways, depending on whether one is looking at the light pieces or the dark ones. This connects with the classic perceptual tests in psychology, consisting of a dark figure on a light ground, or vice versa. And that is what this novel is all about — perceptions and interpretation. Grace explains, for instance, that the pattern Attic Windows if seen one way, consists of open boxes, but if seen another way, the boxes are closed (162). She also remarks that "things have a design to them, if you only pondered them long enough" (340). In this way a patchwork quilt is an apt metaphor by which to describe most lives, and in particular Grace's life which is interpreted and re-interpreted in so many ways, emphasising either the dark or the light.

Dreams, like patchwork, can also be interpreted in more ways than one, and so we find Grace loth to tell Simon the true content of her dreams and embroidering another version for him.

Another feature of the quilting patterns is that the same pattern might have a different name in different parts of the country, or the names of the patterns might change with changing circumstances. Both these features make the art of quilting a very apt means of communicating the story of Grace and her fellow characters in a visual rather than a verbal mode. Just as words and language can change and be re-interpreted, so the quilting patterns can be seen and interpreted in many ways, or used by the quilter to say what she wants to say in her own way.

Mary Whitney tells Grace that every girl should have made for herself, with her own hands, at least three quilts before marriage, quilts of the fancier kind that require skill in the making, not the easy ones like Log Cabin or Nine Patch. Grace passionately loves the Tree of Paradise quilt owned by Mrs Parkinson and hopes to make a similar quilt for herself one day.

Over time the tradition of *masterpiece* quilts gradually evolved, a quilt possibly taking up to forty years of a woman's life, being created in the brief spells of leisure available for such work. For these pieces of creativity a woman's needle was "her mode of self-expression ... she was making a statement about herself: her skill, her patience, her ability to endure endless days of hard work and tedium for the sake of the pattern of the whole, and ultimately of her sense of her own value as a human being" (12).[21] For these women their quilts were works of art and a means to self-expression in their restricted lives, such as are not available to the likes of Mummie and the Governors' wife and the many disempowered women of the world.

It is perhaps interesting to note, at this point, that Simon's mother, Mrs Jordan, is very interested in a new invention, the domestic sewing machine. At various points in her correspondence with Simon she suggests that he take out shares in this new gadget, as it is sure to be a success and make money for him. She tells him that "Mrs Henry Cartwright has purchased one of the new domestic Sewing

[21] Gutcheon, Beth: *The Perfect Patchwork Primer*. Penguin.USA. 1973. 12.

Machines, for the use of her servants; and Miss Faith Cartwright ... has tried it herself ... to hem a petticoat" (292). Mrs Jordan and Mrs Cartwright are women who would deny the possibility of having a story of their own to tell, and would try to stifle the creativity of lesser females, such as servants and daughters, by commodifying any latent creativity that might be lurking in their souls.[22]

Grace's story is told by the patchwork pieces depicted at the head of each section of the novel, from Jagged Edge, representing Grace's teetering on the edge of insanity, to Rocky Road, her setting out to tell the story of her road to ruin, a ruin that had been predicted by Jeremiah. Eventually it seems that in Pandora's Box all has been told, but, as in the original Pandora's Box, something has been left behind and shut up in the box. The truth about Grace, instead of being revealed, has been made even more complicated by Dr Jerome Du Pont's experiment. Finally we move on to the Tree of Paradise of Grace's years of grace. According to the ballad at the time of the murders, it is only in "Paradise at last" (15) that her bloodied hands will be washed, and here, in the making of her quilt, Grace is creating her own version of Paradise to suit her particular ends.

Grace's family left their home in Ireland with only three sheets to their name, the new sheet given by their aunt, and two sheets which were worn and had been "turned". One of the turned sheets was used as a shroud for Grace's mother at sea, and the best sheet was sold by her father to finance his drinking once they had landed in Toronto. From the disgrace of owning only a mended sheet Grace was to move on to learning how to create quilts from scraps, what Beth Gutcheon describes as "making whole cloth from bits and pieces of scraps".[23] These quilts were made for her employers at first, but eventually she is able to create her own quilt, the Tree of Paradise.

In a discussion among the men after the hypnotising of Grace, Du Pont says "we are what we remember". "[W]e are also — preponderantly — what we forget",

[22] Women are ever resourceful and ever transgressive, and today sewing machines are widely and effectively used in the sewing of patchwork and other creative forms of textile art.
[23] Gutcheon, Beth: *The Perfect Patchwork Primer*. Penguin. USA. 1973. 14.

adds Simon. The horrified Rev Verringer protests that "[w]e cannot be mere patchworks!" (406), thus implying that some kind of psychic unity is both possible and desirable. Grace, in whose life there has been no wholeness of any kind, has the capacity and skill, as a woman and as a quilter, to create a whole for herself from the pieces, from the "broken dishes".[24]

We have seen that if the quilting squares named in the section headings were laid out in the form of a sampler quilt they would tell Grace's story as recorded in the novel. But if they were placed in different configurations, perhaps even leaving out some of the sections, they would tell Grace's story differently. This is the sort of possibility that a postmodernist novel provides for, and thus we could have Grace's salvation worked out in different ways. One of the ways is suggested by considering the significance of Grace's name, and the title of the novel, *Alias Grace*, (remembering Atwood's delight in playing with words).

Grace, as a theological concept, and as the means of salvation, is reflected in the Christian Holy Trinity. Considering the strict Christian lines along which the penitentiary was run, Grace's redemption from her past through the Christian means of Grace would seem to be the obvious and conventional ending for the novel. According to the popular ballad of the time her only means of redemption would be through repentance at "her Redeemer's throne" (15), through Grace.

There are three direct references to the significance of Grace's name in the novel.

The first is when Grace goes to church with Nancy, and the sermon is on Divine Grace. The preacher explains "how we could be saved by [Grace] alone and not through any efforts of our own", and that Grace "was a mystery, and the recipients of it were known to God alone" (252).

[24] Broken Dishes is the name of a quilting pattern and is one of the section headings in this novel.The other legacy, besides the sheets, that was left to Grace by her mother was the teapot and cups which broke on the voyage to Toronto.

The second time is when Grace sings in her prison cell

> "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now I'm found,
> Was blind but now I see" (379).

She hopes she was named after the hymn because she would like to be found, to see, and to be seen, "*face to face*. If it is face to face, there must be two looking" (379). Is it God, the dispenser of Divine Grace, with whom she would be face to face?

"Face to face" is a reference to I Corinthians 13:12, an exposition of divine unconditional love which extends even to the point of bringing us face to face with a loving God. Grace has never been on an equal face to face footing with anyone, having been first a servant and then a prisoner. She has always been the object of the intrusive gaze of other people. In the Penitentiary and in the Asylum she was under surveillance all the time, but was also subjected to the public gaze as a "celebrated murderess", objectified and humiliated in every respect by patriarchal structures.[25]

The third reference to Grace's name is in the context of the nursing of the afflicted Simon by the longsuffering Faith Cartwright. In his confusion and partial amnesia Simon persists in referring to Faith as "Grace". Both his mother and Faith are convinced that this is because, even in his confused state, Simon is aware of the connection made by St Paul between Christian Faith and Grace — "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God".[26]

Thus, Grace's salvation could come about through the Divine Grace of which she is aware, the Amazing Grace for which she yearns, through Faith, as the gift of God.

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[25] Attention is drawn to the intrusive male gaze, with reference to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, as discussed in Chapter Two.
[26] Ephesians 2:8. Authorised Version.

Postmodernist texts, however, cry out for alternative endings, and what better place to find an alternative ending for this novel than to return to the transgressive context of Grace's quilts. In creating her own quilt Grace continues to re-invent and transform, but this time it is to suit herself.

She has worked out that there was only one tree in the Garden of Eden, not two. This would mean that the same fruit could be the fruit of Life as well as the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. "And if you ate it you would die, and if you didn't eat it you would die also" (459). If the former, at least one would not die ignorant.

Her quilt is thus different from the conventional Tree of Paradise quilt, having only one tree instead of the traditional four. Instead of the traditional border of vines around the Tree of Paradise quilt, Grace has made a "border of snakes entwined" (459), but disguised, having very small eyes. Snakes, she believes, are essential to the "main part of [her] story" (460), and also to the story of the Tree of Paradise.

Incorporated into her tree are three special triangles of fabric, from the three main parts of her life — from Mary Whitney's petticoat, from Nancy Montgomery's dress that Grace was wearing after the murders when she was arrested, and from her own prison nightdress. These are all embroidered round with red feather-stitching "to blend them in as part of the pattern" (460).

It is significant that not only are most patchwork designs made up of triangles or combinations of triangles, but that Grace's story moves throughout from one triangular relationship to another.

A third person broke into her friendship with Mary Whitney, in the person of the man who ruined Mary's life, while her friendship with Nancy Montgomery was spoilt by Nancy's pre-occupation with Kinnear. Jamie Walsh was jealous of McDermott, and, in her confession under hypnosis, Grace claims to have been keeping both Kinnear and McDermott on a string. There is the absurd triangle

formed by Simon, Grace and Rachel, and the triangle that Grace creates which enables Lydia to see Simon in the sewing room. Grace and her two keepers form a most unpleasant triangle, but even more horrible is the triangle, (or was there one?) of Grace and McDermott strangling Nancy with the triangular neckerchief.

Sharon S Wilson [27] reminds us of Atwood's interest in *female* trinities. In each of the novels I have discussed, triple configurations of female figures have been of great significance. There is the fertility trinity that is restored to the protagonist of *Surfacing* in her rediscovery of her mother and her awareness of the growing foetus within her, as she comes to healing and transformation. Grace, too, completes the circle with her dead mother, herself, and the infant she believes she is carrying, after her release from prison and her marriage of convenience to Jamie Walsh. In *Cat's Eye* there are various groupings of three women throughout the novel which are important in the growth of Elaine's creativity. The three friends in *The Robber Bride* sustain and complement one another, except when the group is infiltrated by a fourth, Zenia.

In *Alias Grace* the most significant triangle is the female trinity formed by Grace, Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery.

Grace sings another hymn in her prison cell, the hymn to the Holy Trinity,

> Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
> Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee,
> Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
> God in three persons, Blessed Trinity (33).

"A hymn to the morning", she calls it, a celebration of sunrise.

[27] Wilson, Sh:aron S: "Sexual Politics in Atwood's Art". van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Garden, Jan (ed): *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. South Illinois University Press. 1988. 212.

Grace attains her own celebration of sunrise in the creation of her own Holy Trinity. For the patriarchally constructed Tree of Paradise that entrapped Eve and all her sex she has substituted her own version of the Tree of Paradise, and for the male Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit she has substituted her own Female Trinity of Grace, Mary and Nancy.

Thus Grace has transgressively worked out her own salvation.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has set out to investigate motifs of transformation in four Atwood novels. Together they encompass a wide chronological span from *Surfacing* (1972), her first novel, to *Alias Grace* (1996), her most recent. Demonstrating Atwood's mastery of many generic forms, from first-person narration in fictional autobiography *(Surfacing, Cat's Eye)* to the mixing of modes in postmodern gothic *(The Robber Bride)* or postmodern historiographic reconstruction *(Alias Grace)*, these divergent novels display a remarkable thematic consistency.

The threads that bind together the rich tapestry of Atwood's fictional world may be discerned in her novels, her poetry, and her criticism. They are best understood in the wider context of her relation to Canadian writing. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* the most dominant theme Atwood foregrounds is that of victimisation. As mentioned in a footnote to Chapter One of this thesis, Atwood identifies four "victim positions" in Canadian literature, which move from denial to acknowledgement to refusal of victim status by becoming what she calls a "creative non-victim". Whereas she contends that most Canadian writers are fixated on the subject of victimisation, I have maintained throughout this thesis that Atwood's novels always dramatise and celebrate the creative non-victim. In every case the creative non-victim is female; in every case the common enemy is patriarchy, a cultural construction that limits the development equally of males and females. It is Atwood's focus on the *creative process* itself that liberates her protagonists and generates the multiple transformations and transfigurations that characterise her fiction.

I have argued that Elaine Risley, the artist in *Cat's Eye*, is able not only to rise above being a victim but, through her insights as a painter, to develop the faculty of compassion. This enables her to recognise that the protagonists who have persecuted her are themselves victims.

Whether Atwood has set out to incorporate in her novels what she describes in *Survival* as uniquely Canadian themes, or whether, as a Canadian, she cannot but write about these themes, the four novels discussed in this thesis are strongly located in the culture of Canadian writing as she analyses it.

Discussing the evocations of nature so prevalent in Canadian writing, Atwood believes that they "are often descriptions or maps of interior landscapes or states of mind" (49). In my chosen four novels landscapes play a significant role, and are indeed a metaphor for states of mind. In both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye* the narrator, having had a happy childhood in the forests, finds herself alienated in a city environment. In *Surfacing* the narrator returns physically to the wilderness to find her identity, attaining this by becoming almost one with the trees and wild creatures of the forest.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley's summers are spent idyllically in the healing milieu of the wilderness, while her winters are endured in the snowy landscape of the alienating city. "Snow is the pervasive element in the [Canadian] natural landscape, overwhelming in its pervasiveness. Deaths by snow, water and bushing are frequent", writes Atwood. Even in the city Elaine almost succumbs to death by snow and water at the hands of her persecutors. But, as Atwood points out, "nature is a monster only if one ... fights its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them. Instead of being a victim of nature and the landscape man can become part of the process". This becomes true for Elaine as she achieves a level of understanding of her past traumas in the cityscape of Toronto.[1]

The lake is the significant landscape in *The Robber Bride*, with Mitch drowning in its icy waters, the ashes of both Anthea and Zenia being strewn over it, and, in spite of its poisonous polluted state, the sense of protection and safety that it

[1] References in this paragraph are to Atwood, Margaret: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi. Toronto. 63.

affords Charis on her little island. Atwood's characters co-opt the hostile forces of nature to their own creative ends.

In *Surfacing* the lake is transformed into a generative element for the protagonist as she dives into it to discover the truth about her past, and as she lies in its shallows absorbing its elements into herself. The herons, too, cling to a small island in the lake, rebuilding their colony in spite of man's destructive manipulation of the elements in the flooding of the lake.

The "victim positions" operate on the macro level of a victimised country, or a victimised minority group and on the micro level of a victimised person, according to Atwood. To this list might be added a victimised animal, as the theme often finds expression in Canadian stories of animals under threat. Atwood explores the affinity between hunter and hunted, victimiser and victim, the Canadian hunter who recognises the stag as his brother in the moment of death. It is because of feelings of this kind that Brian the Still-Hunter, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, bears the scars of his own suicide attempts. Elaine in *Cat's Eye* also identifies strongly with a victimised animal, the dying turtle at the Conversat. This strong identification leads to her fainting, the discovery that she can step sideways out of her body whenever she feels she can no longer cope. Although this in itself is not a solution, it initiates the process of learning literally and figuratively to walk away from her victimisers.

From her initial anger and hostility towards the victimisers of the dead heron the protagonist of *Surfacing* comes to see the decomposing heron as a source of new life. It becomes a metaphor for her own regeneration, which she finds in discarding and destroying her old life and becoming one with nature on the island.

First People, "Indians" or "Eskimos", are perceived in two different ways in Canadian writing. As indigenous people they can be seen by new settlers as victimisers, an extension of cruel nature, and therefore a threat. Other writers regard them as victims of foreigner incursion. Atwood tends to that view, in

Surfacing, of the disinherited First People. Her protagonist describes the family of Indians gathering berries, resenting her family's intrusion. She also allows for the healing value of Indian religious practice as discovered by the Surfacer. Charis, in *The Robber Bride*, has a constructive and empowering relationship with her employer, Shanita, whose grandmother could have been Ojibway, or might have been something else, but who rejects being racially stereotyped by people who try to victimise her in this way.

There is no Wild West in Canada as the Mounties imposed order in the form of garrisons and pallisades, according to Atwood. Settlers try to change what they perceive as chaos in the new country. Western man sees organised society in terms of straight lines and squares, and tries to squeeze nature into this rigid mould. Nature is perceived by Atwood as "labyrinthine, complex, curved", while the "civilising" straight lines destroy the human "life force".[2] Nature is often identified with the female principle, thus its domination is doubly patriarchal in its destructiveness.

The settlers arriving off the ship in Toronto, in *Alias Grace*, find the climate inhospitable. Grace is soon absorbed into the rigid Victorian household of the Parkinsons, the rules having been imported and imposed in the new surroundings. Even when she goes to work on the farm the household rules are rigid for the servants, and the farm itself is divided into corrals by means of fences. McDermott, who spurns authority, adapts his Irish dancing agility to enable him to dance along the top of these fences, showing his disdain for the constraints they are meant to impose. Soon Grace, although hardly more than a child, is incarcerated within the straight and tall walls of the prison and the asylum, patriarchal means of control transposed into a new land.

The quilting patterns of the women settlers in the North American continent were often based on what they saw in their surroundings. These were not, however, objects in nature, which were alien to them, but reassuringly familiar domestic

[2] Atwood, Margaret: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi. Toronto. 1970. 120, 122.

objects such as fences, log cabins and hearths, that provided them with a sense of security in hostile territory. Grace, however, and many women like her, soon adapted even these comforting symbols of patriarchal authority, using them transgressively to tell their own unheard and disregarded stories.

For the main character in *Surfacing*, entering a man-made enclosure of any kind becomes taboo during her process of healing and of identifying with nature. She may also not eat processed food, or food such as fish which has been caught by means of any technological means however simple, nor may she eat vegetables that have been planted. She has to subsist on the forest and what it can provide for her, or what she can catch with her own hands. She had noted, on first arriving on the island, how nature had taken over her parents' vegetable garden, and at first she tries to re-impose order there. Similarly, when Elaine and her family, in *Cat's Eye*, arrive back from their summer in the forests, wild flowers have taken over in the garden of their city house.

Another of the models of Canadian literature defined by Atwood is that created by the reluctant immigrant,[3] who has either to transform uncleared land in the wilds, or finds patterns of urban society in the city which he has no hope of transforming. There is no "Canadian identity" for the immigrant to embrace, and he merely imposes qualities from the European past on a Canadian background. His sacrifices end in failure, or, at best, in endurance or survival, but there is no victory for him.

An extension of this model is the family portrait model. These stories are usually three-generational, and derive from immigrant struggle. The first generation, setting out on a new venture, has charm, wisdom and vitality, the second generation fights for success, while the third has a chance to enjoy a fuller life as Canadians. Underlying these stories is sometimes a picture of entrapment, as

[3] These are usually portrayed as male, while any females toiling alongside them are merely incidental and of no importance to the story. Atwood gives some idea of the woman's role in *The Journals of Susannah Moodie*. OUP. 1970.

embodied in Atwood's own writing by Mrs Finestein and Mr Banerji in *Cat's Eye*, and the mothers of Roz and Charis in *The Robber Bride*.

Roz, Charis and Tony in *The Robber Bride* are examples of the generation of immigrant offspring, fighting for success each in her own way, while the children of Roz and Charis are the generation who enjoy a full life. But in Atwood's writing the characters in this generation are special, having overcome not only the immigrant past of their ancestors, but boldly challenging any form of oppression that patriarchal society might try to impose on them. Male and female, they face the world on their own terms, confident in their personal strength.

Of course heroes in Canadian literature are male, and, according to Atwood, they usually die, and death is by accident. Respect for law and order, as personified by the Mounties, precludes rebellious heroes.

There are women too in Canadian writing, but, for Atwood, these are women of the Ice Maiden or Hecate variety, the timid young maiden or the ugly old crone. Atwood perceives, hidden in these stereotypes, the triple goddess, struggling to free herself: Diana, the maiden, and Venus, sexual and fertile, trapped inside the body of a Hecate. Atwood gives free rein to the trapped triple goddess incarnated in her heroines.

What reply can a female author make to the Canadian model of the all-male conventional hero who dies by accident? Atwood counters this negative tradition by celebrating survivor-heroines who overcome patriarchal oppression through courage, wit, and, above all, creative ingenuity. Since patriarchy is structured to keep females in their places – places where they are submissive, subservient and non-creative – Atwood's heroines accomplish their personal survival, and the potential transformation of their society, by subversion or transgression.

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