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**Re-Constructing Identity through Language and Vision  
in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye***

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's work examines the individual's struggle for identity within a prescriptive Western society that tends to divide the world into binary categories. One side of the binary is considered powerful, while the other side is less powerful. Often, those on the weaker end of the spectrum are victimised. Because the fundamental principles for these binary categories are based on patriarchal ideologies, women are the victims.

The rules that govern men's and women's actions within this patriarchal system are conveyed through language and vision. Women learn social rules through communication, and these rules are reinforced through vision. Visual reinforcement may take the forms of advertisements and beauty magazines, as well as observation and surveillance. Eventually, victims internalise the dominant ideology; they become self-policing, enforcing the rules within themselves and in other victims.

Atwood's novels show women as victims and their journeys towards becoming "creative non-victims". *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*, two novels in which the protagonists are both artists, effectively demonstrate the relationship between language and vision and how they are used to reinforce patriarchal ideology. Initially, the Surfer and Elaine Risley use language and vision to reinforce patriarchal ideology. Gradually, however, they use language and vision to move towards becoming "creative non-victims", reclaiming their voices and bodies as Hélène Cixous urges women to do.

Although the novels' endings are not definitive as to how successful these victims are in becoming non-victims, Atwood shows that it is possible for an individual to change the way [s]he views the world. The acts of recognising and voicing victimisation enable victims to work towards becoming non-victims.

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Re-Constructing Identity through Language and Vision in Margaret  
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## Introduction

Human history is riddled with struggles for power. Some of these struggles become bloody battles with many casualties. Others, however, are waged silently but with equal ferocity. Margaret Atwood is the documenter of one of these silent battles: the struggle between men and women. Although she refuses to define herself as a feminist writer “because of her conviction that a writer’s work should remain outside the narrowing framework of all ideology,”<sup>1</sup> her poetry, novels, and essays capture the struggle that plays out on various levels and places all over the world.

In 1978, Atwood delivered a lecture entitled “The Curse of Eve—Or, What I Learned at School”. In this lecture, she talks about the preconceptions that women faced about their capabilities as homemakers and professionals, focusing particularly on women as characters in literature and as creators of literature. The general consensus both in literature and life was that women could either be homemakers or professionals. If a woman chose to be a wife and mother, she had to relinquish all other aspirations. If a woman chose to be a professional, she could not be a homemaker, and thus she was abnormal, a monster. This belief was “no doubt... a remnant of the Angel/Whore split so popular among the Victorians”.<sup>2</sup> This stereotyping has been the primary way in which patriarchy has kept women under control. The “Angel/Whore split” can be linked to “patriarchal binary thought”<sup>3</sup> in which “each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance”.<sup>4</sup> Other examples of binary oppositions are day/night, head/emotion, father/mother, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ozdemir: p. 53

<sup>2</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 171

<sup>3</sup> Cixous in *Moi*: p.104

<sup>4</sup> *Moi*: p. 104

former category is always considered more powerful than the latter.<sup>5</sup> Because of the power and acceptability associated with the first half of the opposition, it is considered more desirable than the second. To all intents and purposes, it is this type of binary oppositional thought on which women's subjugation is based because society approves of the role of the angel more than it does the role of whore. If they choose the role that is less attractive socially, women become a cipher in patriarchal society. It is the unquestioning acceptance of these categories and the need to fall into one end of the spectrum that is more rewarding on a social level that Atwood focuses on and problematises in her texts.

Through her characters, Atwood questions and attempts to break down the restrictions that require that women be 'perfect' creatures. An important factor that influenced the restrictions that women endured can be traced to the supposed difference in male and female biology:

Victorian physicians believed that women's physiological functions diverted about twenty percent of their creative energy from their brain cells. Victorian anthropologists believed that the frontal lobes of the male brain were heavier and more developed than the female lobes and thus that women were inferior in intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

The acceptance of male biological superiority led to an acceptance that women's supposed inferior brain capacity was inscribed in the works that they produced.<sup>7</sup> This constraint was placed upon women when "in patriarchal Western society"<sup>8</sup> men monopolised power. More to the point here, however, is the monopoly men had on the creative power of language. This was achieved by perpetuating the belief that "the text's

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Showalter: p. 17

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert and Gubar: p. 6

author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis”.<sup>9</sup> Quite simply, then, as long as women were not similar to men biologically, they would not be able to enter into the creative sphere.

Because of the emphasis on the male as the ultimate creator, there is “a notion of ‘ownership’ or possession... embedded in the metaphor of patriarchy”<sup>10</sup> which means that the author becomes “a master or ruler and an owner”.<sup>11</sup> This belief kept women away from creating texts in which they would be able to portray their histories and experiences. With their creative control, men were able to create an impossible image of women who were never “wan with waiting,” but ever “a saint, an angel”.<sup>12</sup> These descriptions bring to mind a person who is never given to outbursts of passionate feeling, and so the created woman was as flat in affect as the page or canvas that held her.

Paragons of patience and womanly virtue, like Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura in male texts led to women chasing the saintly ideal because that was what was valued, and, for a long time, “women [in literature were] merely [...] examples of a gender”.<sup>13</sup> Men were recognised as unique human beings while women became “Woman”,<sup>14</sup> a generalised ideal. It is this capitalization of “woman” that has led to the victimisation and the decentralisation of feminine power. “Woman” with its capital “W” had been made concrete in literature, and with it the Angel/Whore dichotomy. The solution that Atwood offers to this problem is for people to realise that “it is time to take

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<sup>9</sup> Gilbert and Gubar: p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert and Gubar: p. 7

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rosetti: p. 1027

<sup>13</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 34

<sup>14</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 35

the capital W off Woman”.<sup>15</sup> By allowing the capitalisation to fall away, women can spread out into all three dimensions again.

It is the pressure of conforming to a picture of ‘perfection’ that leads to a fragmentation of the self in Atwood’s protagonists. In the absence of an option outside of the restrictive binary categories - the idea of an imperfect human being with positive and negative qualities - these women project a façade of acceptability. They act in ways that show conformity to patriarchal expectations, so they might be categorised as angels. *Surfacing*’s nameless narrator, for example, pretends to be married so as to be acceptable to Paul and his wife when she goes to talk to them about her father because she assumes that they would think that a man should deal with the practicalities of her father’s disappearance. The female protagonists’ thoughts, however, paint a different picture. They often question the way things are done, and society might view such thoughts as those belonging to a monster because they question the status quo. This duality with its acceptable surface and its questioning undertones can show that “[the monster] may actually turn out to reside *within* the angel”.<sup>16</sup> By rejecting “the monster inside” rather than embracing it, the woman’s identity can become fragmented. Accepting the questioning aspect can cause the opposing categories to combine successfully, resulting in a new kind of woman. This woman stands outside of the dichotomy, and it is for her whom Atwood pleads:

If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having emotions all human beings have – hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy – without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if

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<sup>15</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p 34-35

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert and Gubar: p. 29

necessary for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of Atwood's novels, her protagonists have, to some degree, achieved success in creating this new, uncategorised woman. By looking for an option outside of oppositional thought, Atwood seeks to create a voice that is neither superior nor inferior but merely exists, allowing the reader to "[question] stereotypes of ... gender, exposing cultural fictions and the artificial limits they impose on our understanding of ourselves and others as human beings".<sup>18</sup> Without questioning these limits, women are relegated to the realm of the powerless in terms of how they are portrayed in, and perceived by, society.

Through her work, Atwood presents the stories of how women try to piece together their fragmented psyches to reclaim their power and reconstruct their identities. When Atwood first presents her protagonists, they are often in a state of psychological turmoil. Patricia Goldblatt calls Atwood's protagonists "exiled little girls, from weak, absent, or cruel families, made vulnerable by their early situations".<sup>19</sup> The early circumstances leave these women open to influences that lead them to become victims, and the protagonists have to go on a quest towards achieving an integrated self so that the victim becomes a survivor and allows a glimpse of how it would be possible to integrate the dichotomy of victor/victim, a theme that runs through the varied genres of Atwood's work.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of victor/victim has been present in Atwood's work for a long time. In fact, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood's Canadian literary

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<sup>17</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 34

<sup>18</sup> Howells: p. 2

<sup>19</sup> Goldblatt: p. 276

<sup>20</sup> Piercy: p. 53

critique written in 1972 focuses on the country's tendency towards victimhood. Atwood wrote *Survival* in an attempt to define a literary tradition for Canadians, which, up to that point, had not been attempted before.<sup>21</sup> Not everyone appreciated her efforts, and many critics attacked Atwood<sup>22</sup> for her work even though, at the outset, she states that she did not mean for it to be a definitive guide to Canadian literature. The position for which she came under such heavy attack was that most English Canadian works revolved around the protagonists who struggle in their daily lives. These characters either remain trapped in an unhappy lifestyle or die by the story's end, an idea Atwood demonstrates quite well in a gloss of a few literary works.<sup>23</sup>

However accurate or inaccurate her assessment of the Canadian situation was, one thing about *Survival* is clear: it sets forth those issues that concern Atwood most, the notion of victimhood. Atwood's exploration of victimhood and survival comes from her belief that one could "[s]tick a pin in Canadian Literature at random, and nine out of ten times you'll hit a victim".<sup>24</sup> While *Survival* deals with other authors' literature, it provides insight into Atwood's own work and what she is trying to achieve. Many critics have used the thematic concerns that Atwood outlines to approach her work. Marge Piercy "find[s] in *Survival* a license to apply it to [Atwood's] own work, as she argues that discovery of a writer's tradition may be of use, in that it makes available a conscious choice of how to deal with that body of themes".<sup>25</sup> Like Piercy, many critics use the basic victim positions that Atwood outlines, to look at how successfully Atwood breaks

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<sup>21</sup> Lecker: p. 656

<sup>22</sup> Schleuter: p. 3-4

<sup>23</sup> Atwood glosses a few works to demonstrate the Canadian survivalist mindset that starts with surviving a hostile landscape and is evident in Canada's culture and economy as well (32).

<sup>24</sup> Atwood, *Survival*: p. 39

<sup>25</sup> Piercy: p. 53-54

out of the victim mindset of which she accuses fellow Canadian authors. There is some debate as to whether Atwood's protagonists are any less victims of their circumstances than the ones that she notes in *Survival* when their stories end since she does not offer any certainty about the characters' decisions or experiences. As the reader leaves the protagonist on the page, uncertainty remains as to whether or not she remains powerless.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, Atwood's readers seem to be divided into two camps: those who are optimistic about the characters' fates and those who "are troubled by the implications of Atwood's closure".<sup>27</sup> The point of contention seems to stem from the fact that the protagonists are not able to share their insights with the world. Piercy asks specifically of *Surfacing's* ending how the refusal to be a victim can be implemented practically in "an oppressive society other than as a stance in one's head?"<sup>28</sup> It seems that what is being questioned is not the protagonists' resolve; rather it is their ability to keep their insights and resistance fresh and active in the face of the society that was the cause of their problems in the first place.

Atwood seems to counter this concern in the fact that survival as she portrays it is not a passive outcome of a trial that has been endured as is implied in the word's accepted meaning. Rather, survival is an active process during which a person moves from being defined wholly by society to defining herself despite society, and this movement is achieved through a creative act. In other words, the characters do not reach a final point of resolution, but they have to work continuously at their definition of the self. To do so, Atwood's protagonists usually resort to some or other creative act, like writing or painting, that allows them to construct an identity outside of patriarchal

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<sup>26</sup> McCombs in Bouson: p.59

<sup>27</sup> Bouson: p. 59

<sup>28</sup> Piercy: p. 65

society. In this way, Atwood's protagonists realise that "[t]he creative aspect that fortifies each woman enables her to control her life: it is the triumphant tool that resurrects each one".<sup>29</sup> By channelling her childhood trauma into creative projects, Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye* becomes a successful painter, the Surfacers create a new understanding of her circumstances, and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates her story in an effort to create an identity not based on her biological function in Gilead. The creative act allows the victim to regain a sense of mastery of her life because she produces the work that contains her essence. Once the victim acknowledges and accepts her power to create, she reclaims the power that society has taken from her by dictating what she should be.

By creating an identity that pleases them, Atwood's women seem to take up Hélène Cixous's call to action:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.<sup>30</sup>

Cixous's call urges women to move away from male-generated texts to create feminine texts that tell their stories. Cixous's vision may seem like the sort of definitive categorisation that Atwood avoids, though, because it asks for "a specifically female discourse in which the female body and female difference are inscribed in language and text".<sup>31</sup> This theory "risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past"<sup>32</sup> since it seems to rely so much on the

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<sup>29</sup> Goldblatt: p. 281

<sup>30</sup> Cixous: p. 875

<sup>31</sup> Davies: p. 59

<sup>32</sup> Showalter in Davies: p. 59

biological difference on which the theory of male superiority is based.<sup>33</sup> It seems then to boil down to the essentialism that Atwood herself seeks to avoid. The best example of this avoidance is voiced by *Cat's Eye's* Elaine: "I am not Woman, and I'm damned if I'll be shoved into it".<sup>34</sup> Elaine effectively demonstrates Atwood's own resistance to being co-opted by any particular cause or group. Throughout her work, Atwood's fictional women echo Elaine's sentiments. They demonstrate this resistance in their attempt to step away from the way that patriarchy tells their stories and claims their bodies. Atwood's women write and paint their own stories, re-claiming their right to creativity and discovering the truth of their subjugation. The male ideologies present in their lives and thinking are acknowledged and addressed because the feminine point of view cannot fully emerge if the old text's beliefs are not recognised. *Lady Oracle's* Joan Foster, for example, revises her definition of her self once she allows herself to identify with the fallen woman who is banished from the text in traditional romance plots rather than identifying with the innocent young woman who falls for the hero's charms and relies on him for rescue. Once Joan integrates the fallen and innocent identities in her Gothic romances, she is able to inhabit her self more fully than at any other time in her story. Therefore, survival is an active process of re-creation, and the victim becomes "a creative non-victim."<sup>35</sup>

The "creative non-victim" is the final position of four that describes various attitudes that a victim can hold about his/her position in relation to society as outlined by Atwood in *Survival*. The first position is one of total denial of one's victimhood, as in

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<sup>33</sup> In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter also mentions the social implications of a creative life for a woman. Because it is so self-centred, it is not a fitting profession for a female.

<sup>34</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 379

<sup>35</sup> Atwood, *Survival*: p. 36

*Surfacing*'s protagonist who denies her status as victim so well that she cannot even bring herself to acknowledge it. In the second position, victimhood is recognised but blamed on an external force bigger than the self, such as biology or fate. Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s protagonist, is in this position. She, and others like her, are victimised by society because they are women in a time and place where fertility has declined, and women with viable ovaries are subjected to ritual rapes to increase the population. The third position is one in which victimhood is recognised but not accepted as inevitable. This position does not seem to be held by any of Atwood's protagonists initially, but sooner or later, they progress to this point. They realise that they do not have to be what society expects them to be, and from here they can move into the fourth position by rebelling against society. The third position is the one that is most likely to lead to the fourth, although Atwood does mention the possibility of backsliding into positions one and two. The fourth position is the one towards which Atwood's characters move:

In Position Four, creative activity of all kinds becomes possible. Energy is no longer being suppressed (as in Position One) or used for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimization along to others ... as in Position Two; nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of Position Three. And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors).<sup>36</sup>

The fourth position is the most desirable for Atwood's protagonists, then, because in this position it is possible to establish one's own sense of self. The position's practicality is questionable, though, as the former victims who do achieve this state of non-victimhood still have to interact with society.<sup>37</sup> It does not seem possible, therefore, to remain in position four indefinitely. Rather, this is a dynamic state that has to be re-evaluated and

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<sup>36</sup> Atwood, *Survival*: p. 38 -39

<sup>37</sup> Piercy: p. 65

achieved constantly, or else social expectations may start to threaten the newly established self again.

Before Atwood's protagonists' journey to the fourth position of creative non-victim can be discussed, it is necessary to look at how they become victims and develop fragmented selves in the first place. The answer seems to lie in language and vision. These two factors show in which position of victimisation and, if applicable, at which point of restoration Atwood's characters find themselves. Both language and vision are closely linked to creativity, and Atwood places great emphasis on these media in relating her protagonists' tales.

The way in which a protagonist uses language can tell the reader which position of victimisation she is in. In the first two positions of victimisation, she will echo patriarchal language and ideas. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, the handmaids speak in the required ritual language, deviating from the scripts only in rebellious moments. The ideas expressed in that language are not the speaker's own, and so it is not possible for a woman to express her self. The victim may also become silent, losing the ability to express her thoughts and ideas. In the third position, however, silence may be a manifestation of the realisation that all is not as it should be. This silence allows the woman to question the ideas and beliefs that are espoused by other characters, as the Surfacer demonstrates with her retreat from her companions and language into the wilderness, silence, and madness. To move beyond this questioning silence into the fourth position, a new language must be forged before a new, integrated self can be created because the ideology that underpins the old language needs to be overwritten. On the surface, the new language may not seem different to the old one in terms of the words

that are used. In other words, linguistically speaking, the language appears to be the same. Ideologically speaking, though, the protagonists have gained ideas and knowledge that subvert the patriarchal ideology of the language that they have abandoned.

Atwood's approach to subverting language, then, is not through changing linguistics despite the fact that the very ideology that the protagonists are trying to escape is encoded in language, which the protagonists still need to function within society. Another way has to be found to identify patriarchal ideology before it can be addressed. The solution that Atwood seems to offer is vision. This may seem contrary to the idea that "if an individual or society was in danger, self-deception or symbolic blindness was the usual major cause."<sup>38</sup> Despite this and the fact that "Atwood's early texts often focus on protagonists' distortion of vision, especially through mirrors and cameras",<sup>39</sup> vision can reveal certain truths that language distorts once the distortions are recognised. It is also true that mirrors and cameras offer the same strategies of manipulation as language as they are ways in which vision is influenced. They capture and reflect those ideas that are important to the person holding the camera or the mirror. If the individual is not in control of the manipulation of these media, she cannot see what could be her truth; she sees what she is shown.

The camera and mirror work in slightly different ways to keep their victims in line. Because the camera needs an operator, the view presented is one the victim cannot control. In the mirror's case, though, the victim perceives her self in a socially acceptable way as she is in control of what the mirror reveals. This is why the Surfacer remarks that she should have destroyed Anna's mirror instead of the camera David used to film

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<sup>38</sup> Wilson: p. 177

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

“Random Samples”. What Anna sees in her mirror is interpreted through the filter of ideology put in place by the dominant power structure. The truth of vision can also be hampered by blindness. For example, when the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* talks about how Gilead came to be and why no one stopped it, she says: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it”.<sup>40</sup> By becoming blind to a problem, it is possible for an unnatural order to be imposed on people and for the protagonist to be trapped in a world that is reflected and distorted by the ruling culture’s ideology. Not all of Atwood’s work portrays the same extreme as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and, more recently, *Oryx and Crake*, in which the world as we know it ends completely and is replaced by an entirely new world order, but the same blindness that leads to national or global misery can also lead to suffering in the characters’ everyday lives as *Cat’s Eye*’s Elaine suffers at the hands of her friends because she does not perceive the malevolence in their actions.

While vision is affected, the protagonist cannot perceive an authentic version of the world. The distorted vision becomes internalised, and the protagonist is forced into a position that places her at the dominating power’s mercy. As it were, turning a blind eye leads to the blind “I”, and thus the “I” becomes a victim. This may lead to the protagonist accepting the world as she has been shown it and her complying with what is expected. The notion of distorted vision, then, is one of the ways in which Atwood explains the lapse into the role of victim.

When this distorted vision is experienced for long enough, it becomes the norm in the viewer’s eyes. The viewer internalises the ideology that accompanies the distorted sense of the world. Thus, women such as the office virgins in *The Edible Woman*, who

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<sup>40</sup> Atwood: p. 66

only seem interested in working until they can marry, and Anna in *Surfacing*, who stays in what can only be described as a torturous marriage because David ‘completes’ her, “express themselves within the confines of domesticity”<sup>41</sup> that are acceptable in patriarchal society and see nothing wrong with the rules to which they adhere. Atwood has termed this particular phenomenon as the Rapunzel syndrome, named for the girl who is imprisoned in a tower by a witch in the brothers Grimm’s fairy tale, in *Survival*. This syndrome is of concern because:

More disturbing than the mechanisms of coping with or adapting to social constraints, in some instances, ‘*Rapunzel and the tower are the same*. These heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons’ (p. 209; emphasis in the original). When such conflation characterizes the structure of a woman’s life, the social-cultural reality may be said to inhabit her as she inhabits it.<sup>42</sup>

Victims internalize socio-cultural expectations, acting according to rules and norms as dictated by society. Internalizing these norms causes the protagonists to become separated from a self that they themselves create and to inhabit fully the self dictated by patriarchal society. The self that the victim projects while she carries the tower within her is false because part of it is denied its right to existence; the self is not whole. Atwood's work shows what happens when the self is fragmented, looking at the point at which the fragmented self reaches a certain level of stress or critical mass, rock bottom so to speak, before it can reclaim the power that has been ascribed to the patriarchal society.

The self of whom the tower forms a part may expect a knight in shining armour to rescue her. The knight, though, is an integral part of the patriarchal system as he helps to reinforce the stereotype of the damsel in distress who is powerless. To exorcise the tower, the victim has to realise the knight is part of the patriarchal structure, and that any rescue

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<sup>41</sup> Gubar: p. 249

<sup>42</sup> Barzilai: p. 231

he mounts would probably lead right back to the tower. The victim needs to see that probability, to circumvent it, and to become the rescuer herself.

Before she can become her own rescuer, though, Atwood's protagonist needs to be able to create an identity that knits together the 'self' and the 'other' created by patriarchal society in her psyche. The fragmented self is a phenomenon that is connected to Gothic fiction in particular, and "[i]mages of erasure and void also testify to the crises of identity suffered by Atwood's protagonists, whose uncertain sense of subjectivity repeatedly produces split selves, doppelgangers, counterparts, and complements..."<sup>43</sup> Doubles and twins are found throughout Atwood's work, and it is often these counterparts and complements that allow the protagonist to see the mistakes that she makes and the ways in which patriarchal society undermines women's identities. The reflection provided by mirrors and often other characters allows the protagonist to come to an understanding of her loss of identity and puts her on the path to healing her fragmented self. It is in recognising the flaws in the system that the protagonist will be able to turn "the transforming eye"<sup>44</sup> on herself. Instead of "[becoming] aware of [potential male rescuer's] heroic qualities",<sup>45</sup> she comes to see the heroic qualities that she herself possesses. When the victim comes to realise her part in what is happening to her and refuses to take part in the power play, the victor/victim relationship starts to fall apart, and the patriarchal binary categories are deconstructed. Without the victim, there cannot be a victor; without a victor, there cannot be a victim. The system that allows for a predetermined identity, either that of the victim or the victor, falls away for the individual who realises that the system is, in fact, artificial and constructed.

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<sup>43</sup> Davies: p. 62

<sup>44</sup> McMillan: p. 49

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

It is only in being able to see through the lies and manipulation that the mirror and camera can inflict that Atwood's protagonists can reach a new vision and new language. It is the ability to see and recognise their complicity that will lead to healing the fragmented self and that will lead to a new language for women and perhaps, in time, men. This new language may be the first step towards "invent[ing] the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes".<sup>46</sup> This new language would make it possible to rewrite the grand narrative in which men are all-powerful in terms of creativity and women allow themselves to be turned into artefacts. By recognising the flaws in the dominant power's ideology and bringing propaganda contained in its language to light, women can move towards a language that is not entirely new but revised enough to provide alternatives to those who have been disempowered by patriarchy. That means that tales that reinforce female stereotypes along the lines of the Angel/Whore can be revised and rewritten to do away with these oppositional binary categories. The need for a new vision can especially be seen in Atwood's protagonists who are artists, as with the Surfacer and Elaine, and whose primary way of comprehending the world is through what they see.

Atwood's protagonists who will be discussed here, *Surfacing's* nameless narrator and *Cat's Eye's* Elaine Risley, are victimised because they stand outside of society and are uncomfortable with social norms and values. During their formative years, patriarchal society does not influence their way of seeing and comprehending the world. They do not understand how to conform to social expectations, and therefore they cannot be angels. The Surfacer, for instance, is not married and does not understand how marriage works. Elaine, on the other hand, is married, but she does not let marriage and children define

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<sup>46</sup> Cixous: p. 886

her completely. It is also not possible for them to be devils because their behaviour is not deliberately outside of the accepted social schema since these protagonists do not enter 'civilised' society until their formative years, during which they could have been inducted into social norms and values, are over. Elaine's family move to the city permanently when she is a teenager, and the Surfacers seem to move to the city when she goes to college. They express bafflement at social rules time and time again, merely imitating the people who become their role models but are never comfortable with the roles that they are playing. They are, as it were, trapped in a no man's land, with no identity within society that can be ascribed to them or that they can claim as their own. It is this lack of identity, the uncertainty of where they belong and how they should act within society, that allows these particular characters to be victimised and causes their notions of self to fragment.

When they are young, these protagonists are shown images found in catalogues selling home appliances and fashion magazines that conform to social ideals but are very different from the experiences that they had when they were growing up in the wilderness without influence from 'civilisation'. Being the budding artists that they are, these images would have had a profound effect on the girls who, up to that point, had not been aware of a patriarchal view of the world because they had been raised in a natural environment with a father who is a scientist, a mother who is a non-conformist, and a brother who is the only other companion the girl knows. For the Surfacers, these images find their way into the drawings she creates as a young girl and are still present in her work as an illustrator when she is an adult. These images conform to the notions of feminine beauty and decorum as sanctioned by the patriarchal authority represented by the publishers of

the fashion magazines and fairy tales that the Surfacer is busy illustrating when she goes to look for her father. For Elaine, the Eaton's catalogues with its perfect homes and appliances provide a glimpse of the kind of domesticity that other little girls' mothers have but her own cannot provide. These images are reinforced by the language used in society in terms of what is praised and what is condemned. The girls are, therefore, provided with a falsified view of the world. Atwood's protagonists have to reject these images and the language that enforces the patriarchal ideology that they contain. These women combine a different vision and a different language to create "visionary language"<sup>47</sup> that allows them to view the world as "creative non-victims" and to express themselves in a way that enables them to step outside of and subvert the patriarchal ideologies that caused the fragmentation of the self that afflict them.

The movement towards a visionary language makes sense as Atwood's protagonists, especially the Surfacer and Elaine who are both trained artists, show a deep distrust of language and become silent in an effort to work through the trauma that they experience. At some point, they seem to disconnect from language, immersing themselves wholly in the images and memories that they carry around with them. These memories, combined with the retelling of their stories, are more authentic representations of their lives than the counterparts and complements that society presents to them, and the re-visioning of the memories and stories seem to restore to the protagonists their sense of self. The protagonists experience a truth that conventional social language is unable to provide because of the way in which it is used and interpreted by the people who surround the protagonists and, initially, the protagonists themselves. If language can be manipulated continuously to keep women confined to a position sanctioned by a

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<sup>47</sup> Clark: p. 12

patriarchal world, then that world and its language needs to be approached in a different way: a creative, image-driven way. It seems crucial that, for Atwood's protagonists to survive and recognise that power that they have lost, they have to reject the patriarchal underpinnings of conventional language, immerse themselves in images, recognise the truths these images reveal about society, and apply the truth revealed by those images to their language. This is the quest for a visionary language that leads to the recognition and reclamation of their identities. In this process, language and vision are reintegrated, creating a visionary language that allows them to reassemble the fragmented self.

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## Chapter One: *Surfacing*

*Surfacing*'s nameless narrator embodies the fragmentation of self that social demands cause within an individual. This first-person narrative reveals society's hypocrisy with which women were treated during the time the novel was set. Women were told they were free to do as they pleased, yet they were still expected to pander to male demands.<sup>48</sup> This discrepancy between what they were told and the implied rules leads to psychic distrust in this novel's protagonist, causing her to become alienated from society and her self. To the Surfacer, it feels as if she is closed off in her head: "At some point my neck must have closed over, [...] shutting me into my head; since then everything has been glancing off me".<sup>49</sup> She feels as if she has been fragmented, like a woman who has been cut in two for a magic show, leaving her unable to process events emotionally. The reasons for the protagonist's fragmentation are revealed gradually as she reminisces about her life.

The Surfacer's story is a seemingly simple one. She has received news that her father, who has been living alone in the Quebec wilderness since her mother's death, has disappeared, and she returns home to look for him. David and Anna, a married couple, and Joe, the Surfacer's lover, accompany her. As she searches for her father, the Surfacer reveals more and more about herself until, finally, it becomes clear that she is searching for her self, which has been fragmented by an abortion that she has had. Isolated in the wilderness with her friends, the Surfacer "becomes aware she has lost her identity – her

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<sup>48</sup> The Surfacer summarises this dilemma neatly in her response to Joe's proposal: "You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory, some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head" (81).

<sup>49</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: pp. 99 – 100

self – [and] comes to experience herself as a victim, and finally rejects that state”.<sup>50</sup> As she pieces together the fragments of her story and identity, the Surfacer realises that she is not who she thinks she is and seems to be to her friends.

The Surfacer’s façade is expressed via her language and the story that she tells, which is closely connected to her vision and ability to see. At first, her language is largely stripped of emotive words. As she becomes gradually immersed in the wilderness, she finds that she cannot use language to say what she means, and, finally, at the height of her isolation where she is physically and mentally separated from humans, she becomes completely silent. The more trouble the Surfacer has with language, though, the better her vision becomes. The gradual clarification in vision allows her to reconstruct her identity because she can access her memories, which are a visual storybook of her trauma that has been relegated to her unconscious. By the novel’s end, the Surfacer is still isolated, but she is not as fractured in identity as she was at the beginning as she has reconnected with her lost self through her memories.

Atwood describes *Surfacing* as a ghost story similar to Henry James’ “The Turn of the Screw”.<sup>51</sup> In this story, there is a logical explanation for the ghost, connected “a particularly unstable or vulnerable frame of mind”.<sup>52</sup> The Surfacer falls into this category as the reader discovers she is haunted by her past. *Surfacing*, then, is a story “in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one’s own self which has split off”<sup>53</sup> as the Surfacer reveals her past and present selves as she tells her tale of trauma and fragmentation. For the Surfacer to reclaim her identity, she needs to become submerged

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<sup>50</sup> Piercy: p. 54

<sup>51</sup> Gibson: p. 16

<sup>52</sup> Cooke: p. 70

<sup>53</sup> Gibson: p. 16

in her memory and the images that tell her true story to rectify the fragmentation. Only then can she move beyond her difficulty with language and fragmented psyche to reconstruct her identity and begin to write her self.

### *Isolation*

As the story opens, the Surfacer seems to fit in well with the friends who have travelled with her to look for her father; the group is the “quintessence of modernity: cool, hip, unflappable”.<sup>54</sup> There are occasional hints, though, that the protagonist does not belong to this group as much as she seems to. Anna is the Surfacer’s best woman friend, but she has only “known her two months”.<sup>55</sup> She also observes that “[her] friends’ pasts are vague to [her] and to each other also, any of [them] could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn’t notice”.<sup>56</sup> Her assessment of their relationship reveals indifference to her lover, Joe: “I am fond of him, I’d rather have him around than not”.<sup>57</sup> He, in his turn, is impressed by her coolness the first time that they have sex. What the companions know of one another amounts to surface knowledge, revealed by what they choose to present to the outside world. They believe one another’s façades and accept the “artificial face [as] the natural one”.<sup>58</sup> Towards the end, though, it seems that everyone could be as “curiously battered”<sup>59</sup> under their façades as Anna is without her makeup. As it will become clear throughout this chapter, Anna, David, and Joe all show signs of psychological distress as they act out society’s prescribed roles, but only the Surfacer’s hidden depths are revealed.

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<sup>54</sup> Clark: p. 3

<sup>55</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 4

<sup>56</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 24

<sup>57</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 36

<sup>58</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 37

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Because none of them knows much about the others, the characters come across as isolated. However, they all seem to connect to the world by doing socially acceptable things: Anna is David's perfectly made-up wife, and Joe and David are 'Renaissance men' creating "Random Samples", a film with no central conceit, consisting of random images taken during the trip. The Surfacer seems to be a part of this world because she is a commercial artist, who "can imitate anything: fake Walt Disney, Victorian etchings in sepia, Bavarian cookies, ersatz Eskimo for the home market".<sup>60</sup> Just as she creates fakes for her work, she has created a fake life story that allows her to fit into this group. Her story is that she has a husband that she has divorced and a child she has abandoned. Because her companions seem initially to reject social norms, the Surfacer's fiction allows her to connect with them as she too seems to live outside those norms. This fiction is for the Surfacer's benefit, though, because no one in the group knows about the marriage and the baby.

During the course of the story, the Surfacer becomes an outsider because she can no longer keep her artificial face in place. She refuses to play the power game between the genders when she says no to Joe's marriage proposal and snubs David's sexual advances, offending both men. The Surfacer's realisation that Anna, too, is insulted by her refusal to sleep with David saddens her, while her friends all stand in judgement of her, "a ring of eyes, tribunal",<sup>61</sup> and Anna's verdict is that the Surfacer "really is inhuman".<sup>62</sup> They do not understand that it is precisely because the Surfacer instinctively sees their inhumanity, which she does not recognise consciously until her breakdown, that she separates herself from the group and their 'civilised' actions.

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<sup>60</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 47

<sup>61</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 148

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

This sense of isolation that surrounds her during her adult life is not unfamiliar to the Surfacers, and she has been forced to find ways of surviving the consequences of that isolation. When she was "the one who didn't know the local customs, like a person from another culture"<sup>63</sup> and became the victim of the local children's more vindictive games, the boys leaving her tied up on more than a few occasions, she had to become "an escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots".<sup>64</sup> At birthday parties, she would escape by not taking part in the games the other children played. As an adult, her ability to escape manifests itself in her relationship with language.

She uses language in a way that allows her to disconnect from her surroundings and her emotions. As she tells her story, the Surfacers make a concerted effort to place distance between herself and her family. As she remembers the family's journey to the lake, she talks about how "*they* used to go over it as fast as possible, *their* father knew every inch of it".<sup>65</sup> The distancing will not work, and she cannot "call them 'they' as if they were somebody else's family".<sup>66</sup> This failure to separate herself from her family emotionally sets her apart from her companions yet again because "they all disowned their parents long ago, the way you were supposed to".<sup>67</sup> The Surfacers have failed to do the socially acceptable thing by her friends' standards by going to search for her father. Her "reason for being here embarrasses them";<sup>68</sup> her actions contradict the lack of emotions that her words express. Even though she knows the custom that would help her to blend

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<sup>63</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 66

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 8 [emphasis mine]

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 11

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

smoothly into the group, she cannot bring herself to implement it. Thus, her isolation is reinforced as she is torn between belonging to her friends and family.

As she becomes more immersed in nature and her past, the Surfacer realises that her feelings that she is fragmented are valid. Her fragmentation is a survival mechanism with “one half [as] an image of convention, of acceptability in society”<sup>69</sup> that allows her to function in society. There is another half, though, and it is the half that she keeps hidden from herself and society, that contains a part of her authentic identity. The other half is “an animal..., a disguise that gives her the freedom to confront her demon and destroy it”.<sup>70</sup> It is that buried half the Surfacer must find before she can heal properly and create an identity that is completely her own. She needs to achieve that by undoing the knot she created herself with the fiction of her marriage and child; this she created in turn to escape the judgement that she expected from her parents for her affair with a married man and an abortion.

#### *Victimisation*

The first major influence that has made the Surfacer vulnerable to fragmentation is the way in which she was raised. Her father moved the family to the wilderness to work as a botanist and also because “isolation was to him desirable. He didn’t dislike people, he merely found them irrational”.<sup>71</sup> The Surfacer’s memories make it clear that rationality and logic are all-important to her father, and a selection of books that her father has kept in his cabin shows that “[h]e admired what he called the eighteenth century rationalists: he thought of them as men who avoided the corruptions of the Industrial Revolution and learned the secret of the golden mean, the balanced life, he was

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<sup>69</sup> Baer: p. 29

<sup>70</sup> Baer: p. 30

<sup>71</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 52-53

sure they all practised organic farming”.<sup>72</sup> Her father’s respect for logic and rationalism teaches the Surfacer to think in the same way as he does. Her mother also does not seem to be someone who invests in emotion because “all she put in [her diary] was a record of the weather and the work done on that day: no reflections, no emotions”.<sup>73</sup> The Surfacer learns from both parents, then, to disregard emotion as a way to connect with the world.

Because of her parents’ insistence on rationality and logic, the Surfacer does not learn that language does not reflect the world truly and reliably, making her vulnerable to the second major influence in her fragmentation: her lover. He destabilises her worldview with his words, telling her that her father’s heroes suffered from various psychological maladies. He also teaches her that women have a certain place in social structures by telling the Surfacer that her desire to be a real artist was “cute but misguided because there were never any important woman artists”.<sup>74</sup> His opinion prompts her to become a commercial artist instead, thus destroying a part of her identity as a creator. He destroys another part of her creativity when he convinces the Surfacer to have an abortion when she falls pregnant. Because of the abortion, she is denied the right to create new life and to protect it, and she voices that loss in terms of a lost piece of herself because, for her, “it was taken away from [her], exported, deported. A section of [her] own life sliced away from [her] like a Siamese twin, [her] own flesh cancelled”.<sup>75</sup> The abortion compromises her identity as a creator of new life, and her reality is altered.

The Surfacer defends herself from complete destruction by retreating into the role of victim. She learns about this concept when her brother is taught about Hitler and

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<sup>72</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 32

<sup>73</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 16

<sup>74</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 46

<sup>75</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 42

World War II. Learning about Hitler's evil allows the children to divide the world into moral dichotomies because for Hitler to be evil, good has to exist.<sup>76</sup> The Surfacer associates "power with evil and her dissociation of herself from both reflect a typical female delusion of innocence, which hides her complicity in evil and feeds her false belief that she can do nothing but witness her victimisation".<sup>77</sup> The Surfacer seems to think that if she does not have power, she cannot be evil. She forgets that she was complicit in the destruction of innocent lives before her knowledge of power and of good and evil. The children used to designate some leeches as good and others as bad, an arbitrary exercise based on the leeches' colour, destroying the 'bad' ones by throwing them into the fire in a cruel game. They have power over which leech is designated as good or bad. It is the Surfacer's brother, then, who first introduces the idea of random categories with connotations of superiority and inferiority. Thus, as with her father and her lover, the Surfacer's brother also has a hand in creating the person that the Surfacer becomes.

The fragmentation that the Surfacer's identity suffers can therefore be linked to the important male figures in her life and the ideologies to which they introduce her since "[h]er father's rationalism is one of the most powerful in splitting the narrator, dismembering her; likewise, the lover's insistence that she have an abortion has also divided her".<sup>78</sup> All of these psycho-linguistic influences inform the Surfacer's perception, and she adjusts her vision according to the ideas contained in the language that she assimilated from the males in her life.

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<sup>76</sup> Christ: p. 322

<sup>77</sup> Christ: p. 320

<sup>78</sup> Baer: p. 28

It is no wonder that the Surfacer is so uncomfortable with language. She notes that “language divides us into fragments”<sup>79</sup> by giving different names to different things. Language is part of the reason why she has felt like an outsider for much of her life since she, an English person, has grown up in a predominantly French area. Her lover had also manipulated words that should have held meaning; he had told her that he loved her, “the magic word... [that she’ll] never trust again”.<sup>80</sup> Instead, the Surfacer thinks that a visual language, where meaning can be seen rather than heard through words that contain logic underpinned by patriarchal ideology,<sup>81</sup> would be easier to deal with, and she thinks that “[t]o be deaf and dumb would be easier. The cards they poke at you when they want a quarter, with the hand alphabet on them”.<sup>82</sup> Because of her artist’s training, it is no surprise that she would lean towards visual rather than linguistic interaction with the world, and that she translates her difficulty in connecting with the world into visual terms: “I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem”.<sup>83</sup> The Surfacer sees badly because she cannot relate to the ideas contained by the language that she has learned and the ideologies implicit in that language.<sup>84</sup> Women are not meant to be artists; they are meant to be mothers. Yet, the Surfacer’s lover makes her a failed mother. The Surfacer does not process trauma through emotions because she overvalues logic as her father did. Finally, she sees herself as a victim because of the dichotomies that her brother taught her about because she cannot bear the idea of not being innocent.

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<sup>79</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 140

<sup>80</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 41

<sup>81</sup> Clark: p. 12

<sup>82</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 5

<sup>83</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 70

<sup>84</sup> Fishburn: p. 720

Language and its impact on her vision impair the Surfacers' psyche, and she becomes the ghost in the story:

a woman with no name, an artist with no art form and no past or tradition that she can recall correctly. She can neither 'feel' nor communicate effectively. She has a lover she cannot love; she is mother without a child, and a child without a mother.<sup>85</sup>

The Surfacers' life is defined completely by absence; she is a cipher with no clear identity, and her body tells a story of patriarchal domination. Because her identity has been undermined, she surrenders any power that she has by becoming comfortable in a position without power. However, she is not even aware that she has lost her power because she has suppressed her memories of what had really happened, making her a good example of Atwood's first position of victimhood, the victim who is in denial of her status.

#### *Victimisation's Effects*

Because of her affected language and vision, the Surfacers has constructed a story that reflects the patriarchal ideology. She makes sense of her tragedy within the limits of social norms, creating a plausible reason for why she never returned to see her parents. The narrative of divorce and an abandoned child is convincing because it shows that she has attempted to be a 'normal' person. The narrative becomes more appealing than the reality of her situation, allowing her to deny her complicity in the abortion.

The Surfacers achieves this denial by stripping her language of all emotion, mirroring her father's scientific language by using "the language of logic".<sup>86</sup> She observes and reports details in a way that shows detachment from the world: "I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are

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<sup>85</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 40

<sup>86</sup> Sullivan: p. 112

dying, the disease spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire”.<sup>87</sup> The “language of logic” speaks to avoidance since her description of the trees and technology does not indicate that she is upset. She is focusing on something other than the real problem, in keeping with her motto: “if it hurts invent a different pain”.<sup>88</sup> She demonstrates this effectively when, during the first sign of emotion from her, she numbs herself to the emotion by biting hard into an ice cream. In concentrating on nature’s destruction, the Surfacer focuses on an external pain rather than her internal crises.

The Surfacer’s language use betrays her way of seeing the world. Her images are filled with death, revealing a “vocabulary of disease”.<sup>89</sup> She sees nature’s destruction all around her: the trees are dying, technology is invading nature, and the lake’s level has been raised. Again, her father’s scientific influence is clear in her observations as she sees that “the white birches are dying”,<sup>90</sup> and the extent of patriarchal control can be seen in the Surfacer’s visual focus on the destruction evident in nature. Her language and vision aligns her with the victimised, revealing her feelings about herself.

As much as the Surfacer is in denial about what patriarchal influences have done to her, she does not display the same level of denial that Anna does. Anna’s character contrasts with the Surfacer’s, providing the third person view of patriarchy and its effects that the Surfacer’s first person point of view cannot express. It is also through how the Surfacer sees Anna that the reader becomes aware of how the male gaze influences and controls women. Anna is constantly on guard, playing the part of the perfect woman. She wears impractical white bellbottoms on their journey to the cabin instead of jeans because

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<sup>87</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 1

<sup>88</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 7

<sup>89</sup> Clark: p. 8

<sup>90</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 1

“she said she looked fat in them”.<sup>91</sup> While on the island, the Surfacers cast Anna and her friends as her family members; the men become the Surfacers’ brother and father, while Anna is the Surfacers’ teenage self. Anna sunbathes and applies makeup in the wilderness where “there is no one to look at [her]”.<sup>92</sup> Anna’s ritual is one that she performs for David who, according to her, has unwritten rules for her. It is telling, then, that she contradicts herself by stating that he does not know that she wears makeup. There is a sense that Anna does not really know which truth is the ‘real’ truth of the situation and that she has been so involved in pretending that it does not really matter. It does matter, however, because the makeup is only one form of control, as the women’s conversation about birth control reveals. The Surfacers say that while she was on it her vision was blurry, and that “it was like having vaseline on [her] eyes”,<sup>93</sup> while Anna developed a blood clot in her leg. Far from putting women in charge of their sexuality, the pill endangered their lives. Their complaints are dismissed by their male doctors who enforce the idea that, despite it being their bodies, the women do not know what is best for them.

Anna’s language, like her makeup and dress, reflects the patriarchal ideology with which she has been indoctrinated. When the Surfacers ask Anna’s advice about marriage, the latter’s voice changes, and she speaks as if there is “an invisible microphone suspended above her head: people’s voices go radio when they give advice”.<sup>94</sup> It is significant that Anna offers her counsel in a voice reminiscent of the radio seeing as it is the device with which David tries to silence her when she sings on their journey to the

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<sup>91</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 5

<sup>92</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 38

<sup>93</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 73

<sup>94</sup> Atwood: *Surfacing*: p. 41

cabin. Atwood effectively demonstrates that Anna's 'advice' is not her own; her thoughts have been silenced just as her voice has been and her appearance is controlled. The 'advice' that the Surfacer receives is a series of partially understood clichés. Anna tells the Surfacer that "you just had to make an emotional commitment, it was like skiing, you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had to let go".<sup>95</sup> With this, Anna voices "the male command that women must 'let go.'"<sup>96</sup> And she shows that, in this seemingly sexually liberated time, women are still "passive recipients and not active agents".<sup>97</sup>

It is through Anna's subsumed voice and controlled appearance that it becomes possible to see that women have been rewritten by male ideology. As innocuous as Anna's deceptions and David's preference for her in makeup may seem at first, the underlying coercion comes to the fore when David forces Anna to strip for "Random Samples" because he thinks the film needs a naked woman. It is then that the reality of women's situation, their exploitation, hits home in this novel, and this moment comes about through David and Joe's use of a camera, an instrument of "aggressive consumption" that takes away selfhood.<sup>98</sup> Anna becomes a victim of David and Joe's exploitation of nature in an effort to create David's version of art. For Atwood, "[t]o work with cameras... is to cheat at art, to fail at *seeing*, to exploit the natural".<sup>99</sup> The images used in "Random Samples" are of nature with the indelible mark of 'civilisation' on it: fish guts spilled for pleasure, moose dressed as humans to attract customers as at a petrol station, a tree chopped down by David and Joe. The apotheosis of this exploitation

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Bouson: p. 42

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Onley: p. 73

<sup>99</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 41 [emphasis in the original]

of nature is Anna, stripped naked, “brown-red with yellow fur and white markings like underwear”,<sup>100</sup> and the Surfacer sees her as “cut in half, one breast on either side of a thin tree”<sup>101</sup>. The value that is implicitly placed on Anna at this point puts her no higher than the dead heron or the fish guts.

Anna retaliates against this degradation by having sex with Joe, responding in the only way that she knows: with her body. This response speaks to just how much Anna exists within her body and how effectively she has been indoctrinated by patriarchal ideology. Whereas the Surfacer lives in her head, Anna seems to inhabit her body completely. Anna could be the twin that she enquires after when she reads the Surfacer’s palm. If read as two halves of the same person, these women “articulate the experience of incarceration and surveillance in a culture where women are trained in both self-surveillance and in exercising the surveillant gaze over other women”.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Anna who uses this surveillance to fulfil the male idea of the female ideal, the Surfacer uses it to question her experiences and the exact meaning of sexual liberation. What she sees is that women are told that they are free, but they still have to adhere to male ideals, taking birth control to keep sex uncomplicated for men and having abortions so that men do not have to deal with consequences. These “sexual revolution” ideas are empty, and women still conform to male ideals and fulfil male wishes.

### *Recognition*

Once removed from the influence of civilisation, the Surfacer’s ability to see and imitate what is necessary to live in the urban world becomes affected. As she describes her work on her latest commission, a book of fairy tales, the Surfacer reveals how she

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<sup>100</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 130

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Davies: p. 62

conducts herself. Just as she has compromised her dream of becoming an artist, so she makes concessions to others' opinions in her work. She does nothing that the publisher thinks is too "disturbing" for children, and she uses only cool colours to "keep the cost down".<sup>103</sup> She adheres to these rules without first speaking to the publisher because she has learned that it is easier to surrender to the publisher's wants without debate. It is also here that the cracks in her lies start to reveal themselves, much as she starts to see the "cracks in the relationship between David and Anna"<sup>104</sup> in this wilderness setting. Her illustrations do not behave for her; her giants look like football players, and one of her princesses has body parts that are not in proportion. The third princess does not conform to the idea of the emaciated female form: "I wanted my third princess to be running lightly through a meadow but the paper's wet, she gets out of control, sprouting an enormous rear".<sup>105</sup> The princess is discarded because of her unruly behaviour on the page. It seems that the Surfacer's unconscious mind starts to make itself known by imposing imperfection on her art, but she invents another pain, deciding that she must be developing arthritis because her hands are stiff. Being on the island and exposed to her past affects her ability to imitate, and "[t]he fairy tale she invents on paper, then, is as unsuccessful as the fairy-tale alibi she invents in her life".<sup>106</sup> Just as her ability to create illustrations fails, so her hold on her false memories is slipping away.

On the island, the ability to lie to herself and deflect reality is compromised as she is submerged in her past, and she admits that some of the things that she tells herself are not true, like when she states that she was never scared on the island. By the end of the

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<sup>103</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 48

<sup>104</sup> Cooke: p. 56

<sup>105</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 51

<sup>106</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 41

first part of their stay, the Surfacer acknowledges that her memories are compromised: “I have to be sure [my memories] are my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it”.<sup>107</sup> She is conscious of everything not being as it should be in her memory; she needs to rehearse her memories to make sure that they are correct. She, of course, does not confront the idea that her memories cannot be completely correct since some of them could not possibly be hers, like her mother saving her brother from drowning or her brother running his hands up and down a waitress’ stockings in a restaurant. Both of these events occurred before she had even been born. She also fails to address “the static, like a jumped track”<sup>108</sup> in her memory. She is not yet ready to face the implications of remembering things that she could not possibly remember. She is also not ready to confront the fact that there are pieces of her memory that are missing or to review the memories that she has not suppressed and acknowledge that her “fairy-tale alibi” is falling apart.

As much as the Surfacer rehearses her memories, turning them into a narrative that fits the parameters set by patriarchy, their real nature keeps intruding, leaving further clues that the Surfacer’s tale is not as reliable as she would have the reader believe. When she describes the birth of her child, details that she includes are out of place:

they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don’t let you see, they don’t want you to understand, they want you to believe it’s their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won’t hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering

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<sup>107</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 67

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar.<sup>109</sup>

The experience that the Surfacer describes here sounds less like childbirth than it does like a horrific science experiment. This could be interpreted as a dis-ease with the birthing process, but within the context of the story, it takes on a sinister quality that is not completely justified by the Surfacer's disconnection from conventional social roles. This passage conveys a terror at being physically violated that the Surfacer's usual emotional distance does not conceal, revealing a fear of dehumanisation and the Surfacer's control over her body being taken away.

As the Surfacer's memories continue to surface, the pain hidden under the layers of her fiction is revealed gradually, and the Surfacer's language starts to change. Just as she had difficulty in remembering her past, so the Surfacer starts to experience difficulty in communicating with her companions in the present. Her difficulty in communication seems to be precipitated by her encounter with a dead heron in close proximity. It smells "like decaying fish...hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope".<sup>110</sup> This heron symbolises man's senseless devastation of nature, and it also acts as a catalyst, opening the Surfacer up to what she has repressed. It seems to be the point at which the Surfacer's past and present start to come together; she now becomes aware of her companions' artificiality. She starts to perceive them as mechanical: Anna and David are "turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs".<sup>111</sup> Significantly, they are locked more tightly into the gender battle than the Surfacer or Joe, who has "a kind of

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<sup>109</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 74

<sup>110</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 109

<sup>111</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 153

purity”<sup>112</sup> about him as he has not completely succumbed to social norms as indicated by the mangled clay pots he creates. These pots are not useful or decorative like the ones that he teaches housewives to make. They are also a reaction to the Surfacers’ commercial work because whenever the Surfacers “get[s] a new commission he mangles another pot”.<sup>113</sup> Part of Joe’s reaction is, no doubt, sparked by jealousy, since the Surfacers is more successful than he is monetarily. However, his refusal to make something that is useful and commercially viable shows that Joe retains a sense of individuality, which the Surfacers does not given that she can fake anything asked of her. The Surfacers shifts and changes according to others’ needs; she never creates a reality for herself but always a vision of someone else’s. The fact that her language changes with her perception shows that language does not reflect an external reality, but is autonomous and can create a reality that is “inextricably linked both to ... destruction and creative survival”.<sup>114</sup> The lies that the Surfacers has been telling herself start to disintegrate more rapidly, and she recognises her companions are not what they appear to be. She also starts to understand that the lies that she and her companions tell themselves are destroying their authentic selves.

Seeing the dead heron also allows her, tacitly, to understand her complicity in acts of victimisation. She “felt a sickening complicity... as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it”.<sup>115</sup> Later on, the narrator will realise that she had done exactly that by not protecting the foetus from abortion. For now, however, the heron incident leads the Surfacers to acknowledge an important point: she

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<sup>112</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 51

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Clark: p. 3

<sup>115</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 124

cannot stand on the sidelines any more and refuse to be involved as she had done at childhood parties, for “her passivity is not innocence”.<sup>116</sup> She realises, then, that returning to her past is not the way towards finding her self. She was as guilty of destroying things when she was a child, like the leeches, as she is as an adult; she needs to find a new route towards redemption. Recognising complicity places her on the path towards reconstructing herself and understanding that she played a part in her own victimisation.

### *Regaining Identity*

It seems that the heron encounter was necessary to open the Surfacer up to the knowledge that she would gain from the dive that she undertakes to look for some of the pictographs that her father had found. She views these pictographs as part of a message that her father has left for her. Instead of pictographs, though, she encounters something else that “was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead”.<sup>117</sup> Whether this “dead thing” is a projected image from the Surfacer’s unconscious or her father’s corpse, it allows her to understand that she is familiar with death: “Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it”.<sup>118</sup> This image causes the memory of her abortion to surface, and the Surfacer is able to start working through the trauma and fragmentation that she experienced. When the Surfacer finally understands that her memories are false, the truth hidden in the images becomes clear. The Surfacer understands that she had not seen her brother drown; that she had never been married, her gold ring was just a disguise to help with the situation; and that the wedding day had, in fact, been the day of the abortion.

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<sup>116</sup> Christ: p. 321

<sup>117</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 136

<sup>118</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 137

The dive and abortion are described in similar ways.<sup>119</sup> The description of abortion contains the same sensations and colours as the dive: “They slipped the needle into a vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness into a deeper, deepest: when I rose through the anaesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I could remember nothing”.<sup>120</sup> This time, the Surfacer dives and goes from remembering nothing into knowing everything: “I hit the water and kicked myself down, sliding through the lake strata, gray and darker gray, cool to cold.... Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom”.<sup>121</sup> The Surfacer encounters the truth of her trauma in the lake’s depths, and she understands the reason for her emotional death as she realises that the story that she had been telling had been just that, a story. When the different images are linked to one another, it becomes clear that the Surfacer’s memories “lie about the strict facts of her life exactly as myths lie—in order to get at the essence of truth, the truth which eludes rational conceptualization”.<sup>122</sup> It is, therefore, revealed that, while the Surfacer’s memories are manufactured, they are based on a reality that has been reinterpreted. This shows that the Surfacer has her own logic, based on the lessons that she had learned from the men in her life: rationality, inferiority, and categorisation. The frameworks for the Surfacer’s marriage narrative are drawn from social expectations of marriage and childrearing, showing that the Surfacer had rewritten her destroyed identity while conforming to patriarchal ideology and according to the ideologies that she had absorbed from the male figures in her life.

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<sup>119</sup> Campbell: p. 173

<sup>120</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 105

<sup>121</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 135-36

<sup>122</sup> Clark: p. 6

The implication that, at first, weighs heaviest on her is her failure as a creator. As she understands her role in the abortion, she also “recognise[s] that she has killed yet another and analogous part of herself”<sup>123</sup> and that she has denied her creative ability. By acknowledging this failure, she can start mourning her unborn child and her own damage. Her newfound vision leads the Surfacer to the picture of the horned man and the pregnant woman that her mother had saved and that shows her what she must do to reconstruct the amputated portion. The Surfacer has sex with Joe without the prescriptions of pleasure as encoded in civilisation, and “she conceives a child to replace the one that was ‘sliced off’”.<sup>124</sup> When Joe “trembles”, the Surfacer “can feel [her] lost child surfacing within [her], forgiving [her] rising from the lake where it has been imprisoned for so long...”.<sup>125</sup> This act of conception shows that the Surfacer is “at one with her sexual powers, ... complete in herself; the male is incidental”.<sup>126</sup> Whether or not the Surfacer conceives is immaterial; the fact that she has used Joe to start her reparation process is more to the point because she controls their encounter. She believes that she has become pregnant, and she can fulfil the creative role that her previous lover had denied her, and she starts to rewrite the past and her self to satisfy her needs instead of the other way around.

The Surfacer’s trouble with language allows her to start the re-visioning of her identity. For the Surfacer, “the lake [had been a] fluid, silent world. Language [had set] up no barriers here...”,<sup>127</sup> and perhaps the silence is the reason why she is open to the message that she receives from her subconscious. Instead of a message consisting of words as she had expected from her parents, she experiences a vision, and this vision

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<sup>123</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 40

<sup>124</sup> Baer: p. 29

<sup>125</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 156

<sup>126</sup> Christ: p. 323

<sup>127</sup> Sullivan: p.110

cannot be altered or explained away by her use of logic because the “essence of truth”<sup>128</sup> that it contains has been expanded by her full understanding of events. The Surfacer takes the silence that she has encountered in the lake with her to the world above, allowing her to encounter more truths. Her silence is not like Anna’s silence of complicity, though; it is the silence of recognition, and it reflects the Surfacer’s willing withdrawal from the people around her and the ideology that they embody. Losing language is necessary in her quest for her self because language contains the patriarchal ideologies that had led to her fragmentation. She finally allows herself to stop using the language that is not hers and that fragments the body.

The Surfacer’s descent into the lake and its silence removes the neatly defined and barricaded definitions of the everyday world that she knows. This allows the Surfacer to reject

the interpretations that men use to justify their crimes. She no longer believes killing can be justified as “sport.” She rejects her brother’s distinction between “good” leeches which deserve to live and “bad” leeches which deserve to die. And she rejects her love’s distinctions between “good” (legitimate) fetuses which grow up to have birthday parties, and “bad” (illegitimate) fetuses which must be killed.<sup>129</sup>

Rejecting these categories allows the Surfacer to forge her own understanding of the world that understands that such distinctions are sometimes used as justification for committing unnecessarily destructive acts. After her dive, the Surfacer sets about rectifying the destruction that has occurred in her own life, rewriting her script.

One of the destructive acts that she refuses to be a part of is David and Anna’s war. She refuses to sleep with David, and her newfound power allows her to see him for what he is: “a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines... he didn’t

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<sup>128</sup> Clark: p.6

<sup>129</sup> Christ: p. 322

know what language to use, he had forgotten his own, he had to copy”.<sup>130</sup> David is more removed from his authentic self than the Surfacer is from her self; he believes in the ideology that men are superior and women should fall in line with what is expected of them. His reaction to the Surfacer’s refusal emphasises the fact that women are not respected for their sexual freedoms, such as the right to say no. The Surfacer also comes to understand that the sexual act is not about her, but about keeping the war with Anna, a part of a bigger gender battle, in balance. Because Anna is having sex with Joe, David and the Surfacer should have sex. When she later tells Anna about this refusal, she realises that she had made a mistake and that Anna “resented [her] because [she] hadn’t given in, it commented on [Anna]”.<sup>131</sup> Later, when they are about to leave the island, the Surfacer tries her second corrective act by dumping the film footage that David and Joe had taken of the naked Anna into the lake. The Surfacer hopes to set Anna free of the objectifying gaze, to free her from being a woman with her

rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere...captive princess in someone’s head.<sup>132</sup>

Only the celluloid Anna goes free, though. The real Anna tells the men what the Surfacer had done and returns to the city with David. Although her attempts to restore Anna to herself fail, these actions show that the Surfacer is rebelling against patriarchal influences and ideas, that she sees clearly how women are made complicit in their own victimhood through patriarchal prescriptions.<sup>133</sup> Being able to see and understand the superficiality and artificiality around her, though, is not enough. The ability to understand is still

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<sup>130</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 146

<sup>131</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 148

<sup>132</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 159

<sup>133</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 42

connected too closely to rationality and logic, and the Surfacer must break through to the other side of that dichotomy.

The other side consists of chaos and emotion, and she gains this by merging with nature. Doing so enables her to experience a world where there are only verbs, “no nouns, no barriers between self and not-self”,<sup>134</sup> and she is fully connected to her body for the first time in a long while. In fact, she is so connected to her body that she leaves behind her head and the logic that inhabits it. The power that she has gradually guides her away from ‘civilisation’ and the past, leading her to destroy her career in its Samsonite case, the utensils in the cabin, and the gold ring that embodies the anaesthesia that kept her from her emotional self. She submerges herself once more in the lake as an act of purification to cleanse herself of the “false body” that she has occupied for so long.

The power leads her away from the civilisation that her parents had imposed on nature: the cabin and the garden. The only food that she can eat comes from nature, and she ingests some questionable mushrooms, allowing her to become completely absorbed in and by nature. The Surfacer starts to experience her body and the forest in a new way:

Something has happened to my eyes, my feet are released, they alternate, several inches from the ground. I’m ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh... the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark.<sup>135</sup>

The final boundary has broken down for the Surfacer. She has left civilisation behind and has become one with nature, needing no words to communicate because “why talk when you are a word?”<sup>136</sup> The Surfacer leaves behind the inhuman self created by ‘civilisation’

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<sup>134</sup> Sullivan: p.111

<sup>135</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 175

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

to become “unhuman”<sup>137</sup> in the animalistic state that she experiences, living as close to nature as possible by leaving her dung on the ground, creating a lair for herself in the woodpile, and eating only what she finds in the wild. As the Surfacer separates completely from emotion while she is a part of ‘civilisation’, so she separates herself from any rational and logical thought while she is a part of nature.

In this state, she makes contact with her parents. The Surfacer sees her mother feeding the jays, a memory from when her mother was alive. In this vision, though, her mother is transformed into one of the jays, showing the Surfacer how closely connected her mother was to nature. Combined with this transformation, the journal that tracked the weather patterns and plant growth, and the memory of her mother chasing away a bear, the Surfacer has seen her mother commune with nature,<sup>138</sup> something the Surfacer had not fully acknowledged while her mother was alive, and that the Surfacer had denied herself by moving to the city.

When she encounters her father, he too has been transformed. He has become the wolf man that she feared encountering while they played hide and seek when she was a child. This vision shows that her father’s death has caused a “dissolution of mental structures [that] returns man completely to nature: *he* becomes *it*”.<sup>139</sup> Her father has become completely submerged in the natural world for which he had had so much respect, and that holds a warning for the narrator. She understands that she cannot stay in her current state forever because, to merge fully with nature, she would have to die and surrender her individuality, becoming a part of nature and a link in the circle that saw the dead heron become fish, frogs, and other herons. That would be tantamount to the

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<sup>137</sup> Larkin: p. 50

<sup>138</sup> Baer: p. 31

<sup>139</sup> Onley: p.87 [emphasis in the original]

emotionless life that she had led in the city where she had allowed patriarchy to take her individuality since she would have no more individuality in nature than she does in 'civilisation'.

In the Surfacers' visions, her mother and father do not speak to her. They do not impart any wisdom because they have already taught her what she needs to know. Her visions of them merely fulfil her need to see them again and to acknowledge that they have moved on and transformed so that she can "remove them... from the world of lies and myths where in her madness she has placed them".<sup>140</sup> She has to acknowledge her parents' authentic selves too before she can become whole because holding on to her idea of them means retaining her ideas from the past that preclude her new knowledge. The emphasis the Surfacers place on her father's preoccupation with science, logic, and rationalism fails to acknowledge that he also taught his children about the environment, about its dangers, and how to negotiate them. He had also kept his children from the evils of World War II and "the negative effects of superstitions like religion".<sup>141</sup> Similarly, the Surfacers must acknowledge that, although she was an emotional mystery, her mother was a nurturer who taught her children not to be cruel, who protected them, and who gave them life. In confronting those aspects of her parents' lives, the Surfacers take another step towards closing the gaps in the dichotomies that she held. Her mother and father are a more successful incarnation of the barometer couple than David and Anna because their relationship is not based on cruelty. She also learns that she had known what she had learned from the gods all along. The wolf-man that she had seen had, in fact, been her, and so had the figure of her mother, feeding the blue jays.

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<sup>140</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 53

<sup>141</sup> Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*: p. 54

When the Surfacer returns from her state of madness and to the cabin, she recognises her own transformation. The mirror reflects “a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket... straws in hair”.<sup>142</sup> The Surfacer sees “a natural woman.... A new kind of centrefold”<sup>143</sup> that no one else believes in because it does not fit into the social norms. She defines this in terms of language because “to have someone to speak to and words that can be understood” is the “definition of sanity”<sup>144</sup>. The Surfacer recognises that norms and values are kept in place because of a collective belief in them. She sets herself apart, then, with her declaration: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim”.<sup>145</sup> This declaration goes hand in hand with the subversion of language and the ideologies that it contains, and so the Surfacer takes a definite stance in the power games between genders.

Submerging herself in nature and hallucinations induced by her diet and state of mind, rather than linguistic human communication, is the only way in which the Surfacer can start her journey towards a new self. Her descent into ‘madness’ teaches her that “the logic of so-called sanity is a fabrication, or in the words she uses over and over again, a pastiche, a collage, a fake album”.<sup>146</sup> She sees clearly the fabrication using masculine logic that she had created for herself and the others for themselves. By acknowledging this fabrication, the Surfacer also recognises her complicity in her victimisation and the destruction of living things. This recognition allows the Surfacer to be able to start creating her authentic self. This self is not an embodiment of or dictated by the male ideal. It is also not the opposite of that ideal, which would still be male-defined. Instead,

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<sup>142</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 184

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 185

<sup>146</sup> Clark: p. 10

the Surfacers' self is a new ideal, an amalgamation of male and female, civilisation and madness, rationalism and emotion, and victor and victim. The Surfacers' self is something new that acknowledges the power she has and the right to wield it, and she emerges from the wilderness with the resolve to no longer be a victim.

In *Surfacing*, "the source of integration of the self, the reservoir of insight in Atwood lie deep in a wild and holy layer of experience usually inaccessible in modern life"<sup>147</sup> and that is why the Surfacers must return to the cabin. Without access to city life and its attendant ideologies, she can recognise how she has been fragmented by the patriarchal ideology that is so pervasive in the 'civilised' world. She recognises the lies that language can tell, she recognises the truth that images carry, and she combines the knowledge that she has gained from nature and her descent into madness with the knowledge that she has gained from civilisation to start creating her authentic self.

#### *Visionary Language's Viability*

The Surfacers' resolve not to be a victim is all good and well, but how does she translate it into a feasible strategy in the real world? Her probable return to Joe, the possible pregnancy, and a potential return to the city do not seem to break the pattern that had led to her victimisation in the first place.

One of the objections to the Surfacers' new position calls its legitimacy into question. Marge Piercy asks, "can a victim cease being one except through some victory?"<sup>148</sup> This objection is problematic because if a victim becomes a victor, then the narrator has simply traded one side of the dichotomy for the other. She would, therefore, still be part of the power games that created victims in the first place, and that does not

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<sup>147</sup> Piercy: p 60

<sup>148</sup> Piercy: p.65

seem to be the kind of survival that Atwood has in mind for her protagonists or anyone else. The identity that is needed to be a victor is still one that is identified by the dominant ideology that created the victim in the first place, and that certainly would be not be a victory for the Surfacer. The woman as victor would not be writing her self; she would still be defining her self in male terms.

The Surfacer's victory comes from surviving civilisation and surviving nature. The Surfacer's breakdown shows that "to know the wilderness is to be invaded by chaos. It is to understand, that the ordered social world coexists with an alien order".<sup>149</sup> It also shows that "social world order" and "alien order" are ideas that humans have imposed on the world. The Surfacer's insight shows that there are categories that exist because humans invent them. To move away from those human ideas and the power games that become attached to them, it is necessary first to recognise the categories, their artificiality, and the suffering that they can inflict. In other words, "in *Surfacing*, Atwood is challenging a whole way of seeing, a way of relating to nature".<sup>150</sup> The Surfacer relates to nature and civilisation in a way that combines the two worlds, enacting what she has learned in nature, where death and life are not separated but one is needed to support the other.

The Surfacer's return to 'sanity' and 'civilisation' seems, to some critics, to signal a complete lack of growth as "the novel recovers no symbolism or new language informing and enriching the present" and "no lasting intuition from the momentary healing of the division between self and nature" is found.<sup>151</sup> Further, the Surfacer seems

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<sup>149</sup> Sullivan: p. 108

<sup>150</sup> Sullivan: p. 109

<sup>151</sup> Sullivan: p. 113

to find that “nature and culture [...] are permanently opposed”.<sup>152</sup> This concern seems to misapprehend the Surfacer’s breakthrough, where nature and culture are unified to allow the Surfacer to create her new perception. Yes, the Surfacer recognises that she cannot stay in nature because that is a defeat in its own way. However, there is no indication that the Surfacer cannot reconcile what she has learned with her life in the city; the reader is just not privy to her life after the novel’s end. The fact that the reader leaves the Surfacer not knowing the outcome of her decision whether or not to respond to Joe’s call shows that she is not blindly accepting civilisation and all that goes with it.

Another problematic point of view is that “*Surfacing* rejects the masculinist culture—which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive—and idealizes a nature-identified femininity”.<sup>153</sup> Those who wish to co-opt Atwood’s voice for feminism would probably agree with this statement, but they would fail to recognise Atwood’s warning that nature, femininity, and chaos as a culture are just as treacherous as a masculinist culture. A feminist culture would mean shifting to the other side of the dichotomy, and would probably leave the original problems of dichotomies and power structures intact, although reversed. Although it is not possible to predict how this culture would affect individuals, it seems safe to say complete chaos and passivity as opposed to strict logic and aggression would not be ideal for an environment in which identities can form.

For Atwood, ultimately, it is necessary that the male and female worlds meet. At the end of *Surfacing*, the protagonist’s chaotic (which can be read as purely feminine, according to the Cartesian dichotomy) state is not the answer to all her problems. She

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Bouson: p. 40

cannot stay in the wild, in her wordless and mad state. If she does, she does not survive because those actions would be swinging too much to the opposite end of the spectrum. To stay in her mad state would mean that the Surfacers had drowned.<sup>154</sup> Being in the wilderness may mean that the Surfacers are outside of social norms, but staying there will not lead to a subversion of the dominant power structure because she is totally divorced from it. That could not be termed survival. Rather, it is an act of running away completely. It will not allow the Surfacers to rewrite her self and to become a creative non-victim.

The most important point seems to be that the Surfacers recognise her own power. She recognises that she is responsible for who she is and what she does. She learns that “beyond this recognition of one’s place, one’s predicament, beyond the mere will to continue there exists the journey of self-discovery that begins at the basic levels. Recognition, self-exploration, growth”.<sup>155</sup> The Surfacers’ knowledge and new self are the start of a new journey, ending the one in which she was disconnected from her identity and power. To embrace identity and power through creative survival, self-awareness is needed to move towards a world where the individual creates the self.

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<sup>154</sup> Piercy: p. 65

<sup>155</sup> Woodcock: p. 100

## Chapter Two: *Cat's Eye*

Through *Cat's Eye's* protagonist, Elaine Risley, Atwood tells a tale of the psychological damage that women can inflict on one another. In this novel, Atwood addresses “the feminist ideology that idealizes female relationships, viewing them as inherently egalitarian and cooperative”.<sup>156</sup> Elaine’s story reveals that not everyone is perceived as equal within ‘the sisterhood’, which can lead to oppression within feminine ranks. For Elaine, raised in the Canadian wilderness where all members of her family are of equal worth,<sup>157</sup> learning about and experiencing inequality in Toronto is an immense adjustment. She does not know what it means to be a girl in the city and must rely on other girls to teach her. The tutelage starts innocently but becomes psychologically harrowing for Elaine when Cordelia joins the group. The little girls who are her friends victimise her, and she “discovers the power of betrayal by members of her own sex”.<sup>158</sup> The abuse Elaine suffers is so traumatising that it affects her relationships with people, especially women, for the rest of her life.

This story is set in Toronto, where a middle-aged Elaine is to attend a retrospective exhibition of her work as an artist. The city holds many memories for Elaine because it is where she grew up and lived through her first marriage. As Elaine recounts some of her experiences, she seems detached, narrating events as though she were only an observer in her own life. This ‘detachment’, though, hints at repressed trauma as Elaine tells her story. The narration allows Elaine to reconnect with her past and memories, piecing her self together as past and present intersect in the story, and

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<sup>156</sup> Bouson: p. 159

<sup>157</sup> Gribble: p. 107

<sup>158</sup> Goldblatt: p. 277

addressing layers of repression. After the Retrospective's opening, the past is put into a different perspective for Elaine, helping her to reconnect with her experiences and identity.

Elaine realises that during the period of victimisation, her young self loses her identity and agency. While she takes part in all the activities that are deemed proper for little girls, she is "playing a part so that she can fit in with her girlfriends".<sup>159</sup> Her need to belong is so great that Elaine disregards her objections and questions and lets the other girls dictate her actions and thoughts. A remnant of this behaviour remains when, as an adult, a "nothingness" descends on her occasionally, incapacitating her completely. At those times, Elaine experiences an "invasion by and loss of the self to a malignant other".<sup>160</sup> During these absences, Elaine is unable to hold on to the life that she has forged in her adulthood as a successful painter and mother, showing that neither work nor motherhood are sufficient for a stable female identity.<sup>161</sup> Thus, another component seems to be missing from Elaine's identity.

That missing component seems to be the idea that Elaine can be her own person. While she is in situations where other people define her, Elaine does not recognise her capacity for originality and independence, but she does find ways of escaping from those who try to shape her as they wish. These escapes become forms of resistance as Elaine retreats into silence and vision. It is only after she has viewed the work in her Retrospective and told the reader her story that Elaine takes ownership of her story and identity. Elaine's process of reconstructing her identity is largely visual, as she has committed her memories to canvas. By representing her experiences visually, she is able

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<sup>159</sup> Osborne: p. 102

<sup>160</sup> Bouson: p. 160

<sup>161</sup> Osborne: p. 107

to re-view and re-interpret the events of her life. Once she reviews and recounts her memories, a long and painful process, she is brought to an understanding of the victimisers' motivations, and she is able to see her self as something other than a victim.

### *Isolation*

Elaine's isolation is immediately established as she withholds details about herself until after she introduces Stephen, her brother, and Cordelia, her 'best friend'. Only in Chapter Three does her last name appear, and in Chapter Fourteen, when Elaine first meets Cordelia, she finally reveals her first name. From that point, Elaine and Cordelia become inextricably linked, and Elaine's true isolation begins as she steps into "a circle of two".<sup>162</sup> Elaine seems to find friendship with Cordelia, who gives the impression of being transgressive<sup>163</sup> when she points out that "there's dog poop on [Elaine's] shoe".<sup>164</sup> Although the "dog poop" is only rotten apple, Cordelia casts a spell on Elaine because the words "dog poop" belong to the boys' world that Elaine leaves behind when she enters the girls' world in the city. At that moment, Cordelia seems to become a link between the boys' world that Elaine knows with Stephen and the alien world that Grace and Carol, her other friends, represent. What appears to be inclusion rapidly becomes alienation, though, as Cordelia and the other girls' behaviour becomes malignant as they constantly watch and correct Elaine's behaviour. The abuse that Elaine suffers causes her to retreat into herself. She becomes silent and lives through her eyes "to avoid feeling too much of the pain inflicted by her 'friends'"<sup>165</sup>, first by looking at the world as she imagines the cat's

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<sup>162</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 71

<sup>163</sup> Bouson: p. 165 - 166

<sup>164</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 71

<sup>165</sup> Hite: p. 143

eye marble would view it,<sup>166</sup> and then by “[spending] time outside [her] body without falling over.... [Her] eyes are open, but [she’s] not there”.<sup>167</sup> Elaine survives her ordeal by cutting herself off from the world emotionally, and this pattern is set throughout her life.

When her story starts, Elaine delivers information in a detached tone that borders on scientific observation. First, she recounts an outing that she and Cordelia took where they watched other people, specifically women, on the streetcar. Elaine describes clothes and makeup that women who seem old to the young girls on the streetcar wear in detail. The ones they like best “have a certain gaiety to them” with “scarlet outfits or purple ones, and dangly earrings,” with “hair dyed straw-blonde or baby-blue”, and “lipstick mouths [that] are too big around their mouths, their rouge blotchy, their eyes drawn screw-jiggy around their real eyes”.<sup>168</sup> In the next section, Elaine moves on to imply that she is the same age as these women as the text shifts to the present tense, and she wonders if those women had “eye problems. I’m having that trouble myself now”.<sup>169</sup> Even though this makes it clear that Elaine is of a similar age to the women she used to observe on the streetcar, it is difficult to pinpoint her age exactly. The description that she offers is uncertain as “some days [she] looks like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty”.<sup>170</sup> Elaine’s failure to provide a specific description of herself, along with her detached tone, keeps her at a distance from her audience as it is difficult for the reader to create a specific image of the protagonist with which to connect.

The narrator’s isolation is further developed when the narrative proper starts with Elaine alone in her ex-husband’s studio in Toronto, her childhood home. Her current

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<sup>166</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 141

<sup>167</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 173

<sup>168</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 4-5

<sup>169</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 5

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

husband and children are unable to attend the Retrospective. Her ex-husband is out of town, and Elaine is alone in a city she has “hated so long [she] can hardly remember feeling any other way about it”.<sup>171</sup> This disconnectedness from friends, family, and place carries over into how Elaine views her life:

I sometimes have trouble believing in it, because it doesn't seem like the kind of life I could ever get away with, or deserve. This goes along with another belief of mine: that everyone else my age is an adult, whereas I am merely in disguise.<sup>172</sup>

For much of the story, Elaine, in fact, seems at odds with the world, as if she does not belong in it. She is even unable to connect to her adoptive home in Vancouver where the trees, mountains, rain, and even slugs seem overdone. This disconnection from life can be traced back to Elaine's childhood when her family moves to the city on a permanent basis.

This move happens when Elaine is eight years old, dumping her into a foreign environment. Up to that point, Elaine lives in the Canadian wilderness because of her father who is an entomologist, and she has only Stephen as a playmate. Suddenly, Elaine finds herself separated from Stephen, her only contact with him at school being visual when they line up. She does not talk to him because, in the unwritten boyhood rules, having a sister and a mother is taboo. Elaine understands these rules and complies with them out of loyalty to Stephen, a loyalty that she carries towards men all her life. In the wilderness, however, Elaine expresses a strong desire for female friendship: “Girl friends. I know that these exist... but I've never had any girl friends because I've never been in one place long enough”.<sup>173</sup> Her encounters with Grace and Carol teach Elaine that she is different, though. She does not know what a pageboy haircut or a twin set is, and she

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<sup>171</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 13

<sup>172</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 14

<sup>173</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 28

does not have the same implicit knowledge about girls as she does about boys. For her, “playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I’m only doing an imitation of a girl”.<sup>174</sup> Elaine feels lonely in this world, even though her lack of knowledge about it provides entry for her when Carol Campbell befriends and introduces her to a feminine world. The entry is not acceptance, though. Elaine is considered an oddity and, later, has to be ‘improved’ according to Cordelia.

It is this lack of knowledge that makes Elaine vulnerable to Cordelia’s abuse. Elaine genuinely believes that the girls are her friends and want to help her fit into this alien world, so she remains quiet about what happens to her. Her desire to belong is profound, but, ironically, it sets the stage for Elaine’s isolation to deepen. In her bid to conform, Elaine endures the way she is treated, and she stays the one who is always on the outskirts and has to walk ahead of or behind the others. Years later, Elaine recognises that she had a hand in her victimisation because she tolerated it.

Elaine’s mother is unable to offer her any help during this “bad time”. Mrs Risley does not conform to social expectations for a lady: she wears slacks and does not seem overly interested in housework. Her disregard for social rules makes Elaine’s mother the wrong role model for her daughter. The reason why Mrs Risley fails as a role model for Elaine seems to consist of two parts. Firstly, Mrs Risley is not proactive in her child’s life. She does not question Elaine in the same manner that Elaine questions her own daughters about their friends. As a result, it may seem to Elaine that her mother is uninterested in her well-being. Secondly, through her association with the other girls, especially Cordelia, Elaine “becomes critical of her parents and begins searching for

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<sup>174</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 52

replacement figures for them”<sup>175</sup> as they teach her what it means to be a girl. Elaine’s subsequent behaviour shows “an ambivalent struggle for a sense of separateness and independence”<sup>176</sup> from her mother. Elaine finds a replacement for her mother in Cordelia, who is the “‘best friend’... ‘with whom she is identified, with whom she shares everything... Her friendship permits her to continue to experience merging, while at the same time denying feelings of merging with her mother’”.<sup>177</sup> Elaine does not want to become her mother because then she will never be a part of the feminine world. Unlike her mother, Elaine wants to belong at any cost. Elaine thinks that no one is aware of this cost until her mother remarks one day, “‘You don’t have to play with them... There must be other little girls you can play with instead’”.<sup>178</sup> Rather than feeling relief at having a possible ally, she is worried that her mother has told the other girls’ mothers. In an effort to help Elaine, Mrs Risley tells her to have more backbone, who interprets this as criticism instead of advice. When Mrs Risley confesses that she does not know how to handle the situation, Elaine understands that “as far as this thing is concerned, she is powerless”.<sup>179</sup> This realisation creates an even greater distance between mother and daughter than the one made by Mrs Risley’s near absence from the narrative.

Another adult who plays a part in Elaine’s isolation is Mrs Smeath with her “bad heart”. Mrs Smeath frowns upon the lack of religion in Elaine’s upbringing. When the Smeaths invite Elaine to church, she views it as an opportunity to be accepted into society. Elaine does everything that is expected of her; she memorises psalms, Beatitudes, and the names of the Bible books. Mrs Smeath does not recognise Elaine’s

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<sup>175</sup> Osborne: p. 102

<sup>176</sup> Chodorow in Sizemore: p. 76

<sup>177</sup> Chodorow in Osborne: p. 102

<sup>178</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p.156

<sup>179</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p.157

efforts, and Elaine realises that: “Mrs Smeath seems pleased with this arrangement, but she is pleased with herself, for going out of her way, for displaying charity. She’s not especially pleased with me. I can tell this by the line between her eyebrows when she looks at me...”<sup>180</sup> In this moment, Elaine and Mrs Smeath are connected to each other even though Elaine may not realise it. Just as Mrs Smeath’s eyes pass judgement on Elaine and find her wanting, so Mrs Smeath must think that society is watching her in her dealings with the heathen Elaine. Although Elaine tries, she simply cannot live up to the standard that Mrs Smeath and the girls have set, an impossible standard all women must strive to uphold. Mrs Smeath with her judgemental eyes perpetuates the male demand for perfection, keeping herself and the girls on the victim side of the victor/victim dichotomy since she actively encourages the girls in the way that they treat Elaine. She becomes an enforcing agent of patriarchal ideology in society through her own desire to be seen as the perfect woman, reinforcing Elaine’s status as an outsider.

Eventually, Elaine comes to view herself as a displaced person. The people with whom she identifies most are Mr Banerji, her father’s Indian graduate student, Mrs Finestein, the Risleys’ Jewish neighbour, and Miss Stuart, her Scottish teacher, all of whom are foreigners and outcasts in some way. Elaine owns her categorisation as a displaced person by dreaming that Mr Banerji and Mrs Finestein are her parents, showing that they “provide a greater sense of ‘otherness’ than do [Elaine’s real] parents”.<sup>181</sup> Elaine probably feels she belongs with these “others” because of the prejudice that they endure from the same people who torment her.<sup>182</sup> Carol calls Jews “kikes”, and Mr Banerji is passed over for promotion at the university repeatedly. It is these people who are

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<sup>180</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p.123

<sup>181</sup> Kirtz: p. 63

<sup>182</sup> Kirtz: p. 64

unwelcome and treated with hostility with whom Elaine feels a strong connection. The fact that Elaine feels a deeper connection to these displaced people than to her parents speaks volumes as to how persecuted Elaine must feel.

Nowhere in her adulthood does Elaine seem to find anyone like the three displaced people with whom she is able to connect like the ones from her childhood. She finds it especially hard to connect with women. Elaine does make several attempts, falling in with a few feminist groups who express their anger towards men in conversations and art during which:

Confession is popular, not of your flaws, but of your suffering, at the hands of men. Pain is important, but only certain kinds of it: the pain of women, but not the pain of men. Telling about your pain is called sharing. I don't want to share in this way: also I am insufficient in scars. I have led a privileged life, I've never been beaten up, raped, or gone hungry.<sup>183</sup>

Elaine feels like a fraud in these groups because she fails to recognise that she is as much a victim of patriarchy as the other women. Elaine feels that these groups demand a narrative from her that once again does not allow for individualism, and this act of subsuming makes her uncomfortable. She fails to realise that her victimisation by girls was an enactment of male ideologies in acts of self-censorship and surveillance, thus making her as much a victim as those who were beaten or raped. The ideas of inadequacy that Cordelia and the others implant in Elaine stay with her for the rest of her life, keeping her from making a meaningful connection with other women.

At every turn, Elaine feels alienated and alone. As a child, she wants nothing more than to belong to a community of girls, resulting in a lifetime of loneliness for Elaine who second guesses herself and her authenticity constantly. As Elaine withholds her name so long at the narrative's start, so she withholds herself from others. It is

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<sup>183</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 378

impossible to know Elaine because “each image or disguise adopted by Elaine in her life as in her art constitutes an attempt to write a new self in a retreat from subjectivity”.<sup>184</sup> From the time she moves to Toronto until she leaves Jon, her first husband, every identity that Elaine adopts is one someone suggests to her. She remains invisible in the guises that she adopts, and, as the narrative progresses, Elaine’s self gradually becomes invisible to even herself. It is her ability to disappear that alienates her from the contact that she wants to make.

### *Victimisation*

Like her isolation, the ways in which Elaine is victimised are layered. The method used for the victimisation, however, can essentially be ascribed to observation, which is used to point out imperfection. More than anything else, imperfection is frowned upon, and everything is done to keep females perfect. The idea of perfection is “patriarchal, hierarchical, and conformist”,<sup>185</sup> and it is reinforced visually and linguistically as the girls ‘teach’ Elaine. One of the most striking images described is that of the Watchbird adverts in women’s magazines. These adverts show women who knit or gossip too much. Some of them are accompanied by a Watchbird, judging them. These adverts show Elaine “there will be no end to imperfection”,<sup>186</sup> yet she still submits to the girls’ scrutiny and critique.

The Watchbird and Eaton catalogues show the girls what is expected of them, and that becomes the focus of their play. Often, the girls are “engrossed in cutting up pictures from Eaton’s catalogues that offer labor-saving devices along with fashionable clothes: children piece together a utopia of dollhouse dreams. So brainwashed are these girls that

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<sup>184</sup> Davies: p. 67

<sup>185</sup> Wilson: p. 182-83

<sup>186</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 138

when asked to indicate a possible job or profession, they answer, ‘A lady’ or ‘A mother’”.<sup>187</sup> The girls are taught to be domestic and that imperfection is unacceptable. When the girls create their scrapbooks from these images, they show them to each other, saying, “Oh, yours is so good. Mine’s no good. Mine’s *awful*”.<sup>188</sup> These games lead the girls to displays of self-doubt and self-denigration, and Elaine participates because it is expected. This new game is partly a relief to Elaine, who is used to competing against Stephen in their games, which she cannot win. Stephen creates his own narratives that he understands but to which Elaine is not privy when they are playing, and often she is killed. She walks away from these games frustrated but unscathed, and she lives to die another day.

Her exclusion from plots is present in her new life as well because Elaine is not familiar with female scripts. However, unlike in Stephen’s games, this exclusion from the feminine plot is detrimental to Elaine’s identity. She submits herself to the girls and their punishments, believing that they are only helping her. She becomes

caught between her own tendencies to express herself as her brother would and society’s expectations for her to be delicate, modest, and conforming, she loses her own voice and identity, copying the behavior of her friends and remaining silent when her views do not agree with theirs.<sup>189</sup>

Rather than staying true to the identity that she has developed outside of society in the wilderness with her family, Elaine’s individuality becomes weaker as she imitates the girls’ behaviour. Soon, she stops looking at toe jam and making disgusting jokes with Stephen when they visit their father’s work, and she becomes a part of the culture of false modesty. Elaine distances herself from her family as Cordelia makes Elaine ashamed of

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<sup>187</sup> Goldblatt: p. 279

<sup>188</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 53

<sup>189</sup> Osborne: p. 102

them. As she starts to see her family in the same way that Cordelia must see them, Elaine becomes aware of their poverty. Cordelia's constant criticism eventually strips Elaine of her identity, and under her reign, Elaine's true terrorisation begins.

Elaine comes to embody the feminine condition because she is subjected to constant scrutiny and critique. Cordelia and the other girls act as Elaine's Watchbirds, finding fault where there is none. To be accepted, Elaine has to correct these flaws. Cordelia reinforces her lessons with a typically female image: stacks of plates. Elaine is told that she has ten stacks of plates that represent her chances. When she commits an offence, one stack crashes to the ground. This image is almost ridiculous, but it holds great sway over Elaine. This power comes from uncertainty because "nobody ever says what will happen if all the stacks of plates fall".<sup>190</sup> Cordelia constantly badgers Elaine about perceived imperfections: "Stand up straight! People are looking!",<sup>191</sup> "Don't hunch over," "Don't move your arms like that."<sup>192</sup> Cordelia takes a mirror to school and forces Elaine to look at herself. There is nothing wrong with Elaine, though, and she does not "see anything out of the ordinary".<sup>193</sup> When Elaine goes to class or church, Carol watches Elaine and reports back to Cordelia. Later, it becomes clear that Elaine

is a surrogate victim, representative of the category "girl" and thus a stand-in for the other girls who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their fathers.<sup>194</sup>

Although no fathers are central in the text, their "real, unspeakable power"<sup>195</sup> is felt since they discipline wayward girls, keeping them in line. Cordelia's father's power is evident,

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<sup>190</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 171

<sup>191</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 119

<sup>192</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 120

<sup>193</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 158

<sup>194</sup> Hite: p. 137

<sup>195</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 164

for example, in the family's behaviour at dinner. When her father is not there, the women come and go from the table as they please, and their appearances are less than perfect. When he is present, everything necessary is at the table, and the women are presentable. During one of these dinners, Elaine notices that Cordelia "is frightened of not pleasing [her father]" and that "she is somehow the wrong person".<sup>196</sup> Cordelia does not seem able to interact with and please her father as her two older sisters are, and she remains a disappointment to him. No matter how hard she tries, Cordelia is unable to carve out her own niche in society. Instead, she tries to make Elaine fit into the feminine world, echoing her father's words when she expresses her disappointment in Elaine. In the process, she "makes Elaine feel like nothing, because this is the way she feels in her own household".<sup>197</sup> Through Elaine's 'education', Cordelia assumes a position of identity and power that she is denied in her home life.

Cordelia achieves her power over Elaine by imitation, a strategy she employs time and time again. This strategy fails, though, because even though she knows the correct words to use, her voice is still inauthentic. For example, the letters that she writes to Elaine when the latter is away with her parents one summer are "full of superlatives and exclamation marks".<sup>198</sup> Thus, even though "Cordelia's letters are in real ink, black in colour", which should convey a certain sense of maturity and a strong identity, "her burbly style does not ring true".<sup>199</sup> Cordelia's longing for an identity leads her to toe an unseen line with unfortunate consequences for her. When Cordelia draws a penis on a bat, for instance, she goes too far by adding the teacher's name and being caught red-

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<sup>196</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 249

<sup>197</sup> Cooke: p. 110

<sup>198</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 221

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

handed, which leads to her expulsion. It seems that Cordelia is trying to fit into high school, but, again, she does not seem to understand the rules of transgression successfully enough to avoid punishment. This incident can be described as disappointing, then, and as Elaine reveals soon after she meets Cordelia, when Cordelia is particularly disappointing, “[her] father will be called into it, and that’s serious”.<sup>200</sup> It is never clear how Cordelia is dealt with, but, judging by the way she treats Elaine, these actions take their toll on Cordelia. The effects on Cordelia can only be inferred as it is Elaine’s body that is inscribed with anxieties as she lies awake at night, thinking about everything that she had said and done wrong every day.

Because Elaine’s identity has been so stripped away by her interaction with women, especially Cordelia and Mrs Smeath, she suffers a similar fate when she attends college. Here she meets two men who build on the victimisation of her childhood: Josef and Jon. From the start, Josef, the Life Drawing teacher, holds sway over Elaine because “he had power over [her], the power to shut [her] out”.<sup>201</sup> Josef’s power is the same as Cordelia’s and Mrs Smeath’s; he can make Elaine part of a group she desperately wants to join. He also views Elaine as someone in need of fixing, “an unfinished woman” he will complete.<sup>202</sup> Again, Elaine submits to someone else’s will and is turned into someone she does not recognise: a woman with long untied hair and purple dresses, embodying the pre-Raphaelite vision that Josef sees. Elaine does not become emotionally invested in this relationship, though, and she subverts Josef’s hold by having an affair with Jon despite Josef’s warning that “if a man finds his woman with another man, he

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<sup>200</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p.73

<sup>201</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 271

<sup>202</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 272

kills both of them and everyone excuses him”.<sup>203</sup> Eventually, Elaine leaves Josef for Jon who offers a new set of obstacles. Jon “thinks [her paintings] are irrelevant. In his mind, what [she paints] is lumped in with the women who paint flowers”.<sup>204</sup> Instead, Jon seems to prefer the domestic Elaine who cooks, cleans, and launders his clothes. These men are far from the allies that Elaine had in boys when she was growing up because she is no longer an equal. Josef and Jon play by different rules, and again, Elaine does not know the plot. She is trapped by their power over the narrative, as she was in her childhood games with Stephen and, later, with her ‘friends’.

Her initial inability to accept and understand that she was victimised during girlhood places Elaine firmly in Atwood’s first position of victimhood. Young Elaine accepts victimisation, and it never occurs to her to find other friends. Elaine firmly believes that Grace, Carol, and Cordelia want to help her. She allows them to subject her to constant scrutiny, not recognising that these girls are damaging her. Only as Elaine walks away from them after the ravine incident does she realise that she had been victimised unnecessarily. Only then does she recognise that Cordelia’s words are

an imitation, it’s acting. It’s an impersonation, of someone much older. It’s a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them.<sup>205</sup>

Even this recognition is flawed, though, as she blames herself completely for what has happened instead assigning part of the blame to the other girls. That failure to recognise that someone else, another force, is culpable continues into her adulthood. For example, when Susie, a fellow Life Drawing student, becomes pregnant by Josef, Elaine judges her

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<sup>203</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 316

<sup>204</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 345

<sup>205</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 193

for what has happened. Part of Elaine thinks “it serves her right”<sup>206</sup> even as she helps her after a botched abortion attempt. Elaine shows that, to some degree, she accepts the fact that women should behave a certain way. Susie is, therefore, punished for having sex with a man who does not have honourable intentions. She never considers holding Josef responsible for Susie’s desperate act. In contrast, when Elaine becomes pregnant by Jon, she marries him. The way in which Elaine judges Susie, even if only fleetingly, and her marriage to Jon shows that she subscribes to social expectations.

When Elaine starts painting, she moves closer to becoming a creative non-victim. At this stage, though, Elaine has not yet realised that “reversing the Gaze with revenge... still means blindness”.<sup>207</sup> Thus, although she is taking control of one aspect of her life, she still needs to recognise the destructiveness of her anger. This destructiveness is plain to see in her and Jon’s marriage. Elaine cares for the household and their daughter, and Jon has affairs he does not really hide from her. While Elaine is aware of Jon’s infidelity, she does nothing to escape from it. Her anger seems to make her incapable of taking a constructive action in escaping the situation. Instead, she tries to kill herself, the ultimate stepping out of her body. The cut she makes into her wrist once again shows Elaine inscribing anxiety onto her own body. This time, however, the action also frightens her into taking positive steps at last, and she leaves Jon to start a new life with her daughter.

What is significant is that women are the perpetrators of the gender atrocities in the story. Elaine’s narrative shows “a strange gender inequality exists in all Atwood’s texts, for women, more than their comparatively benign male counterparts, are capable of

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<sup>206</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 321

<sup>207</sup> Wilson: p. 183

virtually demonic power”.<sup>208</sup> Men are fairly marginalised in terms of the impact that they have as enforcers of patriarchal ideology. Even Jon and Josef do not do as much damage as Cordelia and Mrs Smeath; the strictest enforcers are women. It might even be fair to state that Elaine is immune to the damage that men inflict because of her childhood experiences because she has learned to detach emotionally. In Elaine’s story, women are the ones who enforce patriarchal values and norms, and it is at their hands that Elaine is written and rewritten most.

#### *Victimisation’s Effects*

Even though this is Elaine’s story, she always seems slightly off centre, and never quite the focus of the story. Elaine achieves this effect by describing Cordelia, both her personality and her physical body in the past and imagined present. Cordelia’s cocksure teenaged self is described “with her grey-green eyes, opaque and glinting like metal,” able to “outstare anyone”.<sup>209</sup> Elaine also seems to be in awe of the judgements that Cordelia passes on their fellow passengers and their wardrobes and her ability to “tell cheap cloth at a glance”.<sup>210</sup> In the present, Elaine fantasises about Cordelia’s age-ravaged body: skin loosening under her eyes, hands warping, mouth withering, buttocks sagging, among other things.<sup>211</sup> Cordelia’s eyes stay the same, though, as if these orbs will always remain as clear and judgemental as when Elaine first encountered her.

In contrast, Elaine reveals little about herself. She refuses to be pinned down in any way, either physically or ideologically. Her descriptions of herself are so ambiguous

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<sup>208</sup> Rigney, *Narrative Games and Gender Politics*: p. 162

<sup>209</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 4

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 6

as to be unhelpful in creating a concrete idea of her appearance. This particular description reveals that even Elaine herself has trouble in seeing her own image:

Too close to the mirror and I'm a blur, too far back and I can't see the details. [...] Even when I've got the distance adjusted, I vary. I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, other like a sprightly fifty.<sup>212</sup>

Elaine's inability to see herself is a result of different people imposing their expectations and viewpoints on her. The only concrete image that Elaine mentions of herself is a poster for her Retrospective, and this picture has been defaced with a moustache. The picture's defacement foreshadows the story of her life. As the picture was a canvas for someone's idea of Elaine, so Elaine becomes a canvas that others deface during her victimisation.

Elaine becomes a blank slate when she submits herself to being re-educated in the ways of girls. As the girls teach Elaine, she sees herself as they must see her and reviews her day, looking for the mistakes that the others saw. Elaine's weakened sense of identity becomes a total lack when the girls bury her in the hole in Cordelia's backyard, and she remembers this incident as "the point at which [she] lost all power".<sup>213</sup> After this incident, Cordelia has total control over Elaine, and, essentially, Elaine becomes "a slave to Cordelia, who is herself enslaved by patriarchal demands".<sup>214</sup> By abandoning her ability to express herself, she succumbs completely to a group who merely uses her to cope with their own inadequacies.

When Elaine does encounter a group who wants her to belong, she does everything possible to remain out of their reach. Elaine feels pressured to be something that she is not in these groups:

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<sup>212</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 5

<sup>213</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 107

<sup>214</sup> Potvin: p. 639

They make me more nervous than ever, because they have a certain way they want me to be, and I am not that way they want to improve me. At times, I feel defiant: what right have they to tell me what to think? I am not Woman, and I'm damned if I'll be shoved into it. *Bitch*, I think silently. *Don't boss me around.*<sup>215</sup>

Elaine's reactions to groups of women are clearly linked to her childhood experiences. She resents being told who to be. She is, however, unable to defend herself verbally. Instead, she chooses avoidance. Elaine's interview for her Retrospective shows the same response. She imagines that the reporter is judging her and wants to improve the way she is sitting. Elaine also suspects that the journalist is exasperated by her lack of feminist politics. Her careful responses to the interviewer's questions show that Elaine has become adroit at avoiding attempts to pigeonhole her. When she is exposed to feminist groups, "Elaine experiences a repetition of girlhood patterns of subordination and domination".<sup>216</sup> Because she feels as if she will be trapped, Elaine is never capable of forming the close relationships that she desires so much at the narrative's outset. For her, the possibility of being rewritten is all too real and threatening, so she would rather avoid it altogether.

For a large portion of the novel, Elaine exhibits difficulty with language, and she often retreats into silence. She does not voice the fact that Cordelia and the others abuse her; instead, she suffers in silence and, often, in the dark as she peels skin from her feet. As mentioned above, even as an adult, Elaine does not 'confess' to the feminist groups what happened to her. This inability to confide in anyone and to express herself shows that Elaine does not have the same sense of agency as the rest of her family. Instead, young Elaine adopts an avoidance strategy to circumvent the girls: she does chores for her mother, and she faints. Finally, Elaine's disconnection from language is expressed

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<sup>215</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 379

<sup>216</sup> Bouson: p. 182

physically when she is ill just before the girls can punish her for not following their instructions. She throws up the alphabet soup she had for lunch, and it is “amazingly red and orange against the white of the snow, with here and there a ruined letter”.<sup>217</sup> The vivid description shows Elaine’s artist’s eye and her move towards the visual have already begun to develop.<sup>218</sup> She rejects language and moves away from its imprecision.

Elaine’s discomfort with language seems to come from the fact that Cordelia and the other girls ignore Elaine when she has supposedly said something wrong, and they keep her subdued by refusing to tell her what her error was. When Elaine stays quiet at the wrong times, she is also punished.<sup>219</sup> Elaine’s harshest punishment that nearly leads to her death occurs when Cordelia accuses her of laughing when the latter takes an embarrassing accidental tumble in the snow. When Cordelia asks if Elaine laughed, Cordelia limits Elaine’s response to “yes” or “no”. Elaine is not allowed to explain why she is laughing. Consequently, Cordelia throws Elaine’s hat into the ravine where the river runs, and Elaine falls into the icy water when she fetches the hat. A vision of the Virgin Mary, whom Elaine has adopted as her saviour in defiance of the Smeaths who consider her an idol, helps Elaine home, and after this incident, Elaine’s language use changes.

After this incident, Elaine manifests her emotional disconnection in her language use. When Cordelia accuses Elaine of telling on them, Elaine denies that she betrayed her friends in a voice that is “flat, calm, reasonable”.<sup>220</sup> For the first time since using avoidance strategies that allow her to cope with her abuse, Elaine is able to use her

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<sup>217</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 137

<sup>218</sup> Davies: p. 63

<sup>219</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 117

<sup>220</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 193

detachment from the situation to separate herself from her friends' manipulation. It is this emotional detachment that allows her to take that important step of walking away from them and to recognise that "[she's] never had to do what [Cordelia] says".<sup>221</sup> This pattern of being rewritten, being pushed to the edge, and walking away from a difficult situation is one that stays with Elaine. The new strategy of walking away is an important one, though, as it eventually allows Elaine to start a new life in Vancouver, away from Toronto's toxic memories. It is, therefore, more useful and proactive than Elaine's silence.

Later on, in Grade Eleven, Elaine uses language as a weapon. She becomes "mean mouth" with more friends because "they know where it's safest".<sup>222</sup> It is implied that the girls say things that aggravate Elaine as she does not "have occasion to use [her] mean mouth on boys, since they don't say provoking things to [her]".<sup>223</sup> Elaine gains this reputation for making comments that go beyond the acceptable. She is willing to use language that boys use, such as "suck". Cordelia does not have to say anything provoking either as "[Elaine] use[s] her as target practice".<sup>224</sup> Often Cordelia does not know how to respond to these attacks, and her avoidance strategies of changing the subject or lighting a cigarette are reminiscent of Elaine's inability to defend herself from Cordelia's attacks when they were younger. Besides the thrill that Elaine gets from using transgressive language, it has the same purpose as the language that boys use with one another. In high school, Elaine reconnects with the boys' world because she knows "what kind of talk

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 234

<sup>223</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 235

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

goes on among them... behind the field house".<sup>225</sup> The boys use words such as "dog, bag and bitch". These words are applied to girls as a way of "cutting them down to size so they can be handled".<sup>226</sup> Elaine uses the same tactic to defend herself. At this point, she does not remember the way Cordelia abused her, but her words create a shield around her. Her language hides how she really feels about girls: "it's girls I feel I have to defend myself against".<sup>227</sup> Her language is a defence that keeps other girls at a distance.

Elaine finds it easier to communicate with boys. To communicate with them does not take much effort as both she and the boys value silence. The conversations that Elaine has with the boys who call her consist of monosyllables, murmurs, and silences that offer "escape from adults and other boys" for the boys and "adults and other girls" for Elaine.<sup>228</sup> When Elaine attends college, she uses language with the female students in the same way that the male art students do with her. She tries to see how uncomfortable she can make the other women. This is reminiscent of the games she used to play with Stephen when they visited their father's work; Elaine's allegiance to the masculine world surfaces again strongly at this point as she uses it to protect herself from women.

The world of men is not without its dangers, though. When Elaine becomes involved with Josef, he not only manipulates the way she dresses and wears her hair, but he also controls her speech: "He has taken to demanding speech from me, or else he puts his hand over my mouth".<sup>229</sup> Elaine's freedom of speech is taken from her once again. She is, again, stripped of her identity by having her speech dictated. Josef and the silence he demands do not have the same impact on Elaine as Cordelia's demands had because

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<sup>225</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 237

<sup>226</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 238

<sup>227</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 237

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 316

she understands men's unspoken rules so much better than she does women's. Elaine is more comfortable in the male world and, therefore, able to walk away from this relationship quite easily.

While she is being victimised, Elaine takes on the allegiances and ideas that others think are appropriate for her to hold. That is why she attends church religiously with Grace. That is why Elaine marries Jon when she is pregnant and becomes the picture of domesticity. Just as she feels like an imitation of a girl, though, Elaine must subconsciously be unhappy with these actions, and she tries to keep a part of herself alive and close in a covert rebellion against those ideas that she is forced to adopt in order to be accepted. When she is a child, Elaine mutilates her own body to have something to hold on to when her 'education' becomes too strenuous. When she is in bed at night, Elaine peels the skin off her feet. She "[goes] down as far as the blood.[...] It was painful to walk, but not impossible. The pain gave [her] something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold onto".<sup>230</sup> She also bites her lips, leaving scabby areas around them, and she picks at the skin around her fingernails, leaving the area raw and weeping. When her marriage with Jon starts to disintegrate, she fights as hard as he does, but "her self-cohesion becomes more and more threatened as the failure of her marriage revives girlhood feelings of rejection and worthlessness".<sup>231</sup> Elaine's struggle for acceptance leaves her marked physically, her body rewritten with signs of struggle against patriarchy.

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<sup>230</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 114

<sup>231</sup> Bouson: p. 179

### *Recognition and Regaining Identity*

Elaine develops various ways of coping with her victimisation. These methods range in their success and constructiveness in handling her abuse. The least effective mechanisms provide temporary relief as they merely allow Elaine to distance herself emotionally from her tormentors. The most successful ones, though, allow Elaine to start a slow recuperation of her self as she is able to develop her gift of perception.

Elaine's least effective coping method is her ability to faint. At first, it is impressive, especially when she bleeds after fainting at school the first time. When Cordelia begins to suspect that she faints deliberately, though, Elaine has to adapt her strategy. She starts to move sideways out of her body, able to observe what is happening to her but emotionally uninvolved. Elaine's emotional detachment becomes more effective in saving her after the ravine incident. When Cordelia tries to punish Elaine for telling on them, Elaine walks away, "[she] no longer needs them. [She] is indifferent to them. There's something hard in [her], crystalline, a kernel of glass".<sup>232</sup> That glass kernel stays with Elaine for a long time, and she goes through life in a detached state, which is expressed by Elaine's relationship with the cat's eye marble. She considers the marble alien, like herself. Elaine imbues the marble with protective powers that allow her to dissociate and "see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out" and "their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them".<sup>233</sup> Elaine is able to observe all of this without becoming emotionally involved. The power may be passive in that it is "Elaine's

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<sup>232</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 193

<sup>233</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 141

dissociative attempts at self-rescue through a narrow field of vision and fantasy”.<sup>234</sup> However passive this strategy may be, it feeds into Elaine’s identity as a painter later on. Her detachment allows her to see things as other people do not, even though she may not recognise the truth of what she sees in the moment that she observes or in the act of painting. This act of seeing allows Elaine the painter to put people in their place, whether it is to belittle Mrs Smeath or to pay tribute to the displaced people in *Three Muses*, giving her power over those she observed when she was younger.

A major rebellion that Elaine embarks on is to pray to the Virgin Mary instead of God. With this, she goes against the Smeaths’ indoctrination, and it is the first coping mechanism that Elaine displays that allows her to assert a part of her identity. The Virgin Mary is powerful in a way that Elaine does not recognise in any women around her at that point. She is thus able to create an antithetical position to a masculinist culture. Elaine’s Virgin Mary also watches over her, but the Virgin’s gaze has an “aura of succour and concern”.<sup>235</sup> This incarnation of the Virgin Mary takes care of lost things, and Elaine is nothing if not lost. She does not look for faults and does not admonish Elaine for not having enough backbone. As a painter, Elaine envisions the Virgin Mary as a lioness with gnawed bone at her feet. Elaine’s bestial Virgin embodies the power that is absent from “the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history. [Elaine’s] Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild”.<sup>236</sup> This depiction of the Virgin, which incorporates such contradictions as compassion and fierce protectiveness, seems to be the first concrete step that Elaine takes in breaking through dichotomous barriers between male and female.

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<sup>234</sup> Vickroy

<sup>235</sup> Hite: p. 146

<sup>236</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 345

The Renaissance depictions of the Virgin that Elaine sees in art history confine her to one identity: “they bend over the cradle of the Nativity, or they hold Jesus on their laps”, and there is “a lot of breast-feeding”.<sup>237</sup> These paintings acknowledge the Virgin only as a caring mother, revealing the predominant “assumptions about role satisfaction, sexual differences, beauty, and goodness”.<sup>238</sup> The Catholic Church reinforces the image of the Virgin Mary as “The Great Mother”, presenting her as a “fixed immutable absolute”.<sup>239</sup> Even though Catholic women may have “expressed their sentiments about the Mother of Jesus in a way and a manner that reflected their own age” over the years, the Church’s own conception of Mary had been divorced from “socio-cultural contexts”.<sup>240</sup> Rather, the Catholic Church’s image of Mary is drawn from “the gospel image” and “doctrinal data”.<sup>241</sup> Therefore, Mary’s identity as mother, Madonna, and angel, does not connect with the needs of the women who worship her. Because Elaine is not Catholic, she does not have preconceived notions about what or who the Virgin Mary should be.<sup>242</sup> She can, therefore, create the Virgin Mary that she needs. Elaine reinvents the Virgin while she explores female groups and is having problems with Jon. Between the feminist groups and Jon, Elaine is in danger of being rewritten again. Unlike her past experiences, though, Jon, representing the men’s world, is not an ally against the feminists who want Elaine to be something that she not. Thus, Elaine turns to another ally, the Virgin who saved her from death, the ultimate erasure, in the ravine. In creating the fierce Virgin, Elaine creates something ‘other’ in her vision of the Virgin that is

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<sup>237</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 283

<sup>238</sup> Warner: p. 336

<sup>239</sup> Warner: p. 334

<sup>240</sup> Pope Paul VI in Warner: p. 334

<sup>241</sup> Warner: p. 334

<sup>242</sup> Gribble: p. 100

clearly feminine but has an identity that is her own. It takes a while, though, before Elaine can assert her own identity or even start to understand what her identity is.

Before Elaine can step outside of the binary oppositions, she first experiences the power that patriarchy gave Cordelia over her. As Cordelia's use of words diminished Elaine's power, so Elaine's "mean mouth" deflates Cordelia, and Elaine takes pleasure in her newfound power. She can use "words as weapons to intimidate Cordelia, mocking or frightening her, as she once did to Elaine".<sup>243</sup> In taking that stance, Elaine becomes just like Cordelia who had merely echoed the words and language that she had been subjected to at home. Significantly, Elaine discovers that she has power over Cordelia in the same cemetery in which Cordelia had scared her when they were younger, saying that the dead people dissolved and became a part of the river. Elaine equates herself with the dead when she tells Cordelia that she is a vampire. When Cordelia objects to this notion, Elaine counters by creating a twin for herself: "That's my twin. You've never known but I'm one of twins. Identical ones, you can't tell us apart by looking. Anyway it's just the sun I have to avoid. On days like this it's perfectly safe".<sup>244</sup> Elaine's words ring true as she did create a second self those nights she spent peeling her feet, a secret self that she dared not expose to sunlight. Elaine's dark self now comes to the fore when Cordelia is weakened, and "Elaine becomes a sadistic persecutor who feeds off Cordelia's energy".<sup>245</sup> This exchange of energies recurs in the pair's lives; when one is doing well, the other is inevitably not. However, this coping mechanism is as ineffective as her silence since Elaine is simply reversing positions with Cordelia. Elaine is claiming the

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<sup>243</sup> Vickroy

<sup>244</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 233

<sup>245</sup> Bouson: p. 175

power that patriarchal language gave Cordelia when they were younger, and, although Elaine feels stronger, the strength does not come from her authentic self.

The second coping mechanism that helps Elaine to establish her identity is her painting. She paints despite her parents' objections and continues with it despite Jon's disapproval. Elaine's painting allows her to assert a measure of control in her life that she does not have up until that point. By becoming a painter, Elaine "occupies a position usually reserved for the dominant class of men in a patriarchal system".<sup>246</sup> Elaine's position as a painter puts her on the other side of the seer/seen dichotomy, and she gains a certain amount of power from this position. In this way, Elaine can protect herself from any more revisions. Her paintings allow her to depict what she sees without having to submit herself to observation as she did with the girls and with Josef and Jon. It is also therapeutic for Elaine as she can submit those who had once judged her to her judgement. Mrs Smeath is the subject of many of Elaine's paintings, and "she multiplies on the wall like bacteria".<sup>247</sup> Elaine takes possession of Mrs Smeath's body and depicts the woman in a number of grotesque and humiliating ways: Mrs Smeath flying through the air with Mr Smeath stuck to her back, Mrs Smeath in a series that shows her being unwrapped and stripped. Elaine takes possession of Mrs Smeath's body and infuses it with her anger, making the body as grotesque as possible in a reversal of the idealised feminine body that some artists would paint. In fact, Elaine idealises the male body in *Cat's Eye* in which she depicts Josef and Jon painting her. Mrs Smeath does not receive the same treatment, and she is completely at Elaine's mercy just as Elaine was at the girls' mercy with Mrs Smeath's blessing. It is these paintings of Mrs Smeath that give Elaine her reputation as

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<sup>246</sup> Hite: p. 140

<sup>247</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 338

an artist when someone throws ink on one of them at an exhibition. This attack gives Elaine a reputation, just as a “mean mouth” did. This time, however, people want to know Elaine instead of fearing her. By rewriting other bodies, Elaine is able to re-write her own life.

The third coping mechanism that helps Elaine to cement her identity lies in telling her story. In Toronto, she is able to revisit the places and memories that were so integral to her formative years. By steeping herself in the past, she can see events in a different way, and she can re-vision what has happened to her to make her who she is. This re-vision is translated into a story as Elaine presents her experiences to her reader as an autobiography. This is Elaine’s chance to “put herself into the text”<sup>248</sup> of her life, as Cixous urges women to do. Cixous’s view is that “it is men who have confiscated [women’s] bodies, their voices, and thus their writing in order to defend patriarchal order”.<sup>249</sup>

Elaine’s story makes it clear that she has “been driven away... violently”<sup>250</sup> from her ability to express herself in a manner with which she is comfortable. Instead, people like Cordelia, Mrs Smeath, Josef, and Jon, who are themselves influenced by patriarchal ideology, have demanded that Elaine act and speak according to a script authorised by patriarchy. By presenting her story in words, Elaine takes control of her life’s narrative, arguably more than she does through her painting since she only appears in two of her paintings: *Half a Face* and *Cat’s Eye*. In both of these pieces, Elaine appears with Cordelia, showing how inextricably linked they are. While these are clearly important pieces in Elaine’s *oeuvre*, the viewer would not know what they mean, but those who

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<sup>248</sup> Cixous: p. 875

<sup>249</sup> Davies: p. 59

<sup>250</sup> Cixous: p. 875

read Elaine's narrative understand their significance. The reader is allowed to see the full picture, as it were. Elaine empowers the reader as much as her narrative empowers her.

Elaine expresses her victimisation through her paintings, showing her dis-ease with femininity mainly through her many paintings of Mrs Smeath. When she has reviewed her work, though, she comes to understand Mrs Smeath better, and it becomes clear that "blaming falsifies vision by representing the whole".<sup>251</sup> As Elaine reviews her work, she realises that she was wrong about Mrs Smeath:

I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small-town threadbare decency.<sup>252</sup>

Elaine realises that she had more in common with Mrs Smeath's than her nine-year old self could have understood. While her methods were questionable, Mrs Smeath had tried to help Elaine by taking her in and providing a part of the education that a 'civilised' person needed.

Just as Elaine is able to revise her experience of Mrs Smeath, she is able to do the same with Cordelia. She is able to understand that Cordelia was as lost as Elaine, a displaced person in her family. Their circle consisted of two people who were in equal need of acceptance. Elaine recognises this when she has a vision of the nine-year old Cordelia on the bridge over the ravine where Elaine nearly died. Elaine's description of the vision reveals how far she has come since she started telling her story:

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were. I am the older one now, I'm the

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<sup>251</sup> Hite: p. 147

<sup>252</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 405

stronger. If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late. I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now.*<sup>253</sup>

Finally, Elaine sees that the emotions that she had felt really belonged to Cordelia just as the words that Cordelia had used to torment and abuse her when they were younger were an adult's words. Recognising those facts allows Elaine to take the place of the Virgin Mary who had saved her in the same spot, and in that moment, she is no longer lost. By taking on this role, Elaine is able to deal with the true tormentor in her life, nine-year-old Cordelia with whom she had formed a circle of two. Elaine is able to extricate herself from that circle by finally realising that what she felt had been Cordelia's feelings, and in telling her that she could return home, Elaine does for her tormentor what the Lady of Lost Things had done for Elaine the victim by offering her the strength to break away from her primary victimisers. Elaine takes the Lady's place, Cordelia takes Elaine's place, and the healing gesture becomes one directed at herself once again because Elaine understands "that she directs the images of Mary and Cordelia; they no longer control her. By reaching out to comfort the imaginary figure of Cordelia, Elaine shows that she has reached an acceptance not only of her past and the figures in it, but of herself".<sup>254</sup> In that moment, Elaine understands that Cordelia has haunted her because she has allowed her to do so, and Elaine's forgiveness is as much directed at the nine-year old as it is at the present tense Elaine. She is who she is, and she shows that acceptance by allowing the nine year-old Cordelia to let go of her, and the crystalline kernel that had formed within Elaine finally melts away.

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<sup>253</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 419

<sup>254</sup> Osborne: p. 109

Through the retrospective exhibition, she has reconnected to her past and the people who have hurt her most, and she has forgiven and understood their actions. These acts of forgiveness allow Elaine's authentic self to be written, rather than the fact that she is a successful painter or a mother:

It seems important that Atwood does not portray Elaine as finding herself through feminist collectives or motherhood. Perhaps Atwood is rebelling against the myths that maintain that a woman can get a better sense of herself through organized groups of women.<sup>255</sup>

If Elaine had allowed herself to be categorised and accepted into a group as a mother or a feminist, she probably would have stayed entrenched in the victor/victim dichotomy. She would not have been able to reconcile her position as a painter and observer with a feminine position, and her identity as mother would have kept her subservient in the male world. By forgiving Mrs Smeath and Cordelia, Elaine is able to transcend the binary categories that those characters embodied and helped to perpetuate. Elaine is no longer a victim, but she has not gained a victory as it is defined by a patriarchal society either. Instead, she has become something 'other', outside of the identities that patriarchal binaries view as acceptable.

Elaine tells her story from a visual point of view befitting a successful artist, and, simultaneously, she uses language to convey her trauma. Elaine is able to present a picture of her self in writing that she has not been able to do completely successfully in her painting. The narrative shows Elaine as a complex self composed of layered identities, whereas *Half a Face* and *Cat's Eye* present two static selves as they are seen by others. Ultimately, though, Elaine and the reader who is privy to the events that inform her paintings recognise that the fragments of her identity do not only consist of the

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<sup>255</sup> Osborne: p. 107

various incarnations that she has embodied during her life, but that she has also been mirrored in the people who surrounded her, like Cordelia, Mrs Smeath, Mr Banerji, and Mrs Finestein. To Elaine, the paintings have a life of their own because they are beyond her control, and “[she is] what’s left over”.<sup>256</sup> Although this is a logical conclusion because Elaine has no power over how the paintings are perceived, the narrative has power over how the reader perceives the paintings. For the person reading this story, Elaine is still very much in power in terms of the paintings’ meanings. The narrative, then, allows Elaine to retain power over the stories that the paintings tell and the way that those memories and incidents have moulded Elaine into the person she is. Elaine’s paintings and narrative work together to help her re-view and revise her life, and the reader is placed in a position to understand the revision that has taken place. It is understood that Elaine has had a difficult journey, but she moves towards becoming a “creative non-victim”, writing her self.

#### *Visionary Language’s Viability*

By the end of the novel, Elaine has told her story of victimisation, forgiving those who abused her and recognising her own part in that abuse. The story ends on a wistful note as Elaine watches two old ladies on her trip back to Vancouver, enacting the future that Cordelia and Elaine had foreseen for themselves when they were teenagers. These old ladies are seemingly beyond the propriety that society demands of women, and Elaine is envious of the camaraderie that the two share. Although Elaine has made significant progress from the beginning of her narrative to its end, she realises that she will never be able to establish the kind of bond that she witnesses between these two ladies with anyone. Acknowledging her inability to form this kind of relationship with another

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<sup>256</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 409

woman also becomes a part of Elaine's identity. That lack will be a part of her forever. Herein lies a debate as to how successful Elaine really is in overcoming her childhood trauma.

On the one hand, it seems logical to say that Elaine has not worked past her victimhood at all because she has not been able to confront Cordelia. Because of this, Elaine is not "able to redefine her relationship with her old tormentor by breaking the strong bond between victim and persecutor".<sup>257</sup> This casts Elaine's encounter with nine-year-old Cordelia and her forgiveness into doubt, and "the healing gestures in the closing scene are ambiguous at best".<sup>258</sup> Because Elaine has not been able to contact Cordelia in the present tense, it seems that she cannot fully come to terms with her victimisation because her healing gestures are directed towards herself, and forgiveness is not truly granted.

On the other hand, though, Elaine needs to confront the nine-year-old Cordelia because it is that incarnation of Cordelia that tormented Elaine. These interpretations of the ending seem to ignore the fact that Elaine has taken the place of the Virgin of Lost Things, showing herself, the surrogate victim inscribed with the other girls' pain, that she is no longer lost. In this moment, all of Elaine's selves come together; she brings together the nine-year-old Cordelia, the Virgin Mary, and the Elaine who has just attended the Retrospective. In bringing these disparate elements of Elaine's life together, "Atwood shows that growth for individuals and for societies comes when people are able to empathize and connect with those who differ from them while also embracing

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<sup>257</sup> Parker: p. 357 - 58

<sup>258</sup> Bouson: p. 181

themselves”.<sup>259</sup> Elaine does for herself and for Cordelia what she had sought throughout the story; she is able to create the bonds that Cordelia seemed to have offered the first time the two girls met.

At the same time, this forgiveness and acceptance is offered on Elaine’s own terms. There is no sign of coercion in Elaine’s gesture. By negotiating the world and its gendered rules, Elaine has come to a point where she is what she is, and she is able to accept that. When she goes to the Retrospective, Elaine declares: “I will come as I am”.<sup>260</sup> What she is, is a person who has been able to break through a number of barriers: she is a mother, a painter, and a woman. None of these categories define her solely, though. Her experiences have ensured that. Instead, she becomes someone “in whom... opposites are reconciled”<sup>261</sup> through her acceptance of her identities as victim and victimiser as well as someone who is a mother with a successful career. Although Elaine’s life has been traumatic, her sense of self is not gendered, and along with the fact that she has been able to forgive her victimisers and herself, she has stepped out of the binary categories that engendered her victimisation to work towards becoming a creative non-victim.

Though Elaine is not perfectly healed and happy and still unable to form the bonds she so desired at the end of her story, there is an emotional tone in Elaine’s narrative that was not present at the start. So, “although Elaine is still somewhat other-directed near the end of the book,... she is healing her blindness. She has learned to see in the dark... and does survive”.<sup>262</sup> Through her painting, Elaine is able to capture her

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<sup>259</sup> Osborne: p. 110

<sup>260</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: 403

<sup>261</sup> Warner: p. 336

<sup>262</sup> Wilson: p. 184

memories, and by attending the Retrospective in the city of her childhood, Elaine is forced to review and remember what has happened to her. In doing so and recounting her childhood years, Elaine creates a narrative in which she is able to gather up the fragments of her identity to fashion a more integrated self.

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## Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's work questions the patriarchal ideology that underpins the images and language with which people are bombarded daily and that many accept unquestioningly, demonstrating that her fiction is "concerned with changing ways of seeing"<sup>263</sup>. In doing so, she allows her characters, and her readers, to question established notions, offering them a glimpse of a world where binary oppositions may be recognised as a means of subjugation. Once these oppositions are identified, it is possible to take steps to break down the barriers between the categories and create a world where male and female and victor and victimiser are not in constant tension but can work together to form an identity that does not deny any part of itself. She shows that identities based on the denial of what society may have deemed as undesirable elements are not an inherent part of life but rather stem from unthinking acts that people perpetuate through the ages, causing selves to fragment and suffer. Though Atwood draws attention to the fact that males are also victims of patriarchy, the ones who have endured the most hardship because of the patriarchal ideology that underlies binary oppositions are women, and it is their stories that she tells. Through these narratives, Atwood's girls become women who recognise the various parts of their fragmented selves and work to create a suitable identity from those different aspects. Thus, they are able to subvert established power structures in their personal spheres.

In the narrative space of her novels, Atwood's characters, in this case the Surfacers and Elaine, start to create a self that is more than a victim trying to squeeze the self into a socially acceptable category. By the story's close, Atwood's girls are no longer pathetic;

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<sup>263</sup> Ingersoll in Müller: p. 232

they move towards becoming powerful “creative non-victims” who subvert the social norms to which people subscribe unthinkingly. By doing this, Atwood’s characters all, to some extent, embody the Surfacers’ resolve: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing”.<sup>264</sup> It is through seeing clearly and assessing their situations with the new clarity of vision they gain on their quests for selfhood that these characters are able to articulate the ideas and beliefs necessary to create new selves and refuse victimhood.

Atwood’s characters who are best able to demonstrate the necessary change in perception and its influence on language and life are those who are closely linked to art, like the Surfacers and Elaine. These characters’ livelihoods and, indeed, lives depend on their vision. When they become immersed in their memories, the Surfacers and Elaine are able to recognise the reality of the situations that led to their fragmented selves. These characters’ work reveals knowledge to them of which they are not initially consciously aware, and, as a result, are unable to articulate at first. Gradually, however, the Surfacers and Elaine become conscious of the truths that their art captures. The Surfacers’ imitation art shows her that her perception of women as a commodity controlled by men is suspect and can be deconstructed. The Surfacers punishes her art by destroying it. Similarly, when she is no longer able to imitate the behaviours that allow her to blend in with her companions, she destroys the identity that had led her to that particular point in her life. This destruction leads to a renewal of identity for the Surfacers, and she no longer feels the need to imitate others. Likewise, Elaine is able to re-view the memories that she had captured on canvas and see her life differently. She finally makes sense of her victimisation, realising that she became a victim because others, like Cordelia and Josef,

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<sup>264</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*: p. 185

needed her to be a victim. Because of this, she is able to relinquish her identity as victim when she confronts the memory of Cordelia on the bridge. Through visual cues, the Surfacers and Elaine see that they lived in a world created by others. Those who have created the world do not question the established norms and values, and neither do the protagonists at first. When they regain their clarity of sight, they are able to recognise that they were “examples of a gender”.<sup>265</sup> They also recognise that they were complicit in their victimisation because they subscribed automatically to the ideologies that they were fed. It is this act of recognition that allows the new creation of self to start. This insight allows them to move beyond the restrictions placed on them, enabling them to trust their own ideas. Recognition is, therefore, conducive to the acceptance of individuality.

Once recognition has been achieved, the Surfacers and Elaine can start to revise their identities and, possibly, hopefully, construct a new world. For the Surfacers, part of her creativity lies in her ability to have children and create life. When she possibly conceives a baby with Joe, she starts to reconstruct her identity as a creator. Elaine’s creativity lies in her artistic ability; in that way, she is able to recreate her memories, which allow her to review her life during the Retrospective. And, once she reviews her memories, she recognises how she became a victim. From that point, she is able to reconstruct her self as she understands that “nothing goes away”<sup>266</sup> and that everything that has happened to her has played an important part in creating who she is. Elaine’s identity consists of allowing herself to accept that she is a sum of her experiences. By claiming their talents to create, these women embody the woman that Cixous<sup>267</sup> and

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<sup>265</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 34

<sup>266</sup> Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*: p. 3

<sup>267</sup> As discussed in the introduction, Atwood wants to create female characters who are complex and nuanced. In other words, she wants to move away from woman as angel or monster. Cixous desires the

Atwood long to create. They are no longer eternal Women. They are now inserting themselves into the texts of their lives rather than being inserted into a prefabricated construct and complacently accepting their fate.

While the Surfacer and Elaine achieve the same result through a clarification in vision, the two protagonists manifest their new identities differently despite the similarities they share: the socially isolated childhood, the scientist father, and the anomalous mother who does not conform to nor seem to care about society's feminine ideals, the brother as companion. The similarities of which the reader is aware end there, though. Atwood shows that different circumstances created the victims that the Surfacer and Elaine were. The Surfacer's breakthrough comes when she reconnects to the baby's life that she had destroyed. It is the possibility of motherhood that restores her idea of self to her. Another important factor that contributes to her new identity is that she recognises that she is not as innocent as she believed and that she, too, was responsible for her victimisation. For Elaine who is already a mother and an artist, something else has to happen to create her identity. Elaine's creation of self relies on the fact that she is finally able to acknowledge that "there is never only one, of anyone".<sup>268</sup> Her new identity incorporates a number of characters into it, some of them her identities as mother and artist. These recognitions allow the protagonists to leave behind the socially acceptable but psychologically constricting narrative that they had tried to fit into to tell their own stories.

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same complexity for all women. She wants women to acknowledge "the infinite richness of their individual constitutions" because "you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes" (876). Atwood and Cixous, therefore, share a desire for women to be seen as individuals.

<sup>268</sup> Atwood, *Cat's Eye*: p. 6

These new stories that the Surfacer and Elaine tell are conveyed in what, on the surface, seems to be the old language of patriarchy. This seems contrary to the project of creating a new identity and a new language as the very ideas that the protagonists need to escape from are contained in the old language. How can the very language that is used as “a masculine tool, an instrument of betrayal and coercion”<sup>269</sup> be used as part of a creative non-victim’s identity? Atwood’s protagonists show that when the language is used to tell the victim’s stories, subversion starts, and the flaws in the ideologies are revealed through the details in the stories. Once victimisation is recognised, women can subvert patriarchal language merely by telling their stories of victimisation with that language. Once women give a voice to their victimisation, subversion has started to take place, and women have created a language that allows the newly empowered identities to be part of the world through the voices that speak the language.

Although the language that the Surfacer and Elaine create is not completely new like the one that Cixous<sup>270</sup> calls for because it is based in the existing patriarchal language, it is one that subverts the ideologies contained by the established language. Because these women are able to recognise their victimisation, its source, and their part in that victimisation, they are able to start creating a new language that is still recognisable and understandable within society. Potentially, it is all the more potent because the new language can still be understood by those who are not a part of the subversion, even if it may not be consciously and/or immediately recognised for what it

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<sup>269</sup> Bouson: p. 45

<sup>270</sup> Cixous wants “woman to write woman. And man, man” (877). The difference between male and female writing is vast according to Cixous. She states that a man separates “the logic of oral speech and the logic of text” (881). A woman, however, “throws her trembling body forward” and “she physically materializes what she’s thinking” (881). There is, therefore, no division between the text and the woman delivering the speech. A feminine language, *l’écriture féminine*, thus embodies feminine identity in a way that masculine language does not.

is by everyone in society. Furthermore, even though these women are subversive only on an individual level, they embody “personal growth through conscious effort [and] a means to wrest control of their lives from society and transform their destinies. These women become manipulators rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated.”<sup>271</sup> By understanding the ideology contained within language, women who are willing and able can define selves that are not reliant on authorisation from a patriarchal society. Once they are able to gain clarity of vision and to seize control of their creativity, Atwood’s protagonists become powerful enough to create and claim their identities and to face the world not as victimisers or victims, but as they are - unique, autonomous individuals.

Exactly what the protagonists have become and will grow to be beyond the borders of their stories is not clear. Atwood refuses to supply definitive endings. Instead, she shows the reader women who are more aware of their identities and how they are formed than they were when their stories started. The protagonists are on the brink of something new and hopeful, even though it is not clear just how they will implement the new insights they achieved. It is particularly difficult to be sure of how useful the realisations are to the protagonists when they re-enter the ‘real’ world. The reader’s dilemma can be summarised as follows: How real is the protagonist’s newfound power when multiple readings of the same texts can lead the reader to doubt the usefulness of the characters’ insights on one hand or to be optimistic about the change that protagonists seem to have undergone on the other? The reader might also wonder how long the protagonists will be able to withstand social pressures that simply cannot be avoided. Will they eventually return to a position of victimhood simply because it is easier than asserting their right to power in an overwhelmingly patriarchal world, or will they be able

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<sup>271</sup> Goldblatt: p. 281

to effect real social change in their everyday lives? The protagonists and their stories may well haunt the reader for some time as [s]he seeks clarity and finality about the texts.

Atwood is not in the business of clarity and finality, however. As a writer, she problematises the world. She blurs boundaries and crosses genres. She asks “What if?”<sup>272</sup> and explores the possible answers to that question in her work. During the course of her stories, she produces a version of reality that shows that Women can become women if they allow themselves to do so.

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<sup>272</sup> Atwood, *Curious Pursuits*: p. 321

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