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My Introduction (1999) still seems accurate, though at third reading I can discover only sociopolitical merit in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The gothic intensity of Margaret Atwood’s sadomasochistic tale retains some vitality, but the virtual reality of our academies and our media moves in an opposite direction from the Fascist Republic of Gilead. Atwood’s gifts, in her novels and poems, remain unrealized.

Martine Watson Brownley chronicles Atwood’s stances in the gender wars, while Alice M. Palumbo observes the shifting borders of liminality in our contemporary northern romances.

Atwood’s mastery of temporal sequence is the subject of Alice Ridout, after which Barbara Hill Rigney reports on Atwood’s stances in the gender wars.

The stances in *Wilderness Tips* are hailed by Carol Beran as transformational possibilities, while Sharon Rose Wilson applies the feminist trope of “quilting” to Atwood’s narrative skill.

In two complementary essays on *Oryx and Crake*, J. Brooks Bouson and Earl G. Ingersoll praise Atwood’s sardonic vision of a posthuman future.

Gillian Siddall broods on the ambiguities of history in *Alias Grace*. Postcolonialism, one of our current academic vagaries, is applied by Fiona Tolan as a perspective to *The Robber Bride*.

This volume concludes with Roberta White’s meditation on Canadian survivalism in *Cat’s Eye*. 

*Editor’s Note*
Margaret Atwood (1939–)

Literary survival, as such, was not my overt subject when I started out as a critic, nearly a half-century ago, but I have aged into an exegete who rarely moves far from a concern with the question: Will it last? I have little regard for the ideologies—feminist, Marxist, historicist, deconstructive—that now tend to dominate both literary study and literary journalism. Margaret Atwood seems to me vastly superior as a critic of Atwood to the ideologues she attracts. My brief comments on *The Handmaid’s Tale* will be indebted to Atwood’s own published observations, and if I take any issue with her, it is with diffidence, as she herself is an authentic authority upon literary survival.

I first read *The Handmaid’s Tale* when it was published, in 1986. Rereading it in 1999 remains a frightening experience, even if one lives in New Haven and New York City, and not in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the Handmaid Offred suffers the humiliations and torments inflicted on much of womankind in the Fascist Republic of Gilead, which has taken over the northeastern United States. Atwood, in describing her novel as a dystopia, called it a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange, Brave New World,* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* All of these are now period pieces. Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange,* despite its Joycean wordplay, is a much weaker book than his memorable *Inside Enderby,* or his superb *Nothing Like the Sun,* persuasively spoken by Shakespeare-as-narrator. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* now seems genial but thin to the point of transparency, while George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is just a rather bad fiction. Today, these prophecies do not caution us. London’s thugs, like New York City’s, are not an enormous menace; Henry Ford does not seem to be the God of the American Religion; Big Brother
is not yet watching us, in our realm of virtual reality. But theocracy is a live menace: in Iran and Afghanistan, in the influence of the Christian Coalition upon the Republican Party, and on a much smaller scale, in the tyranny over English-speaking universities of our New Puritans, the academic feminists. The Handmaid’s Tale, even if it did not have authentic aesthetic value (and it does), is not at all a period piece under our current circumstances. The Right to Life demagogues rant on, urging that the Constitution be amended, and while contemporary Mormonism maintains its repudiation of plural marriage, the old faith of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young is practiced by tens of thousands of polygamists in Utah and adjacent states.

Atwood says of The Handmaid’s Tale: “It is an imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions.” Unless there is a Swiftian irony in that sentence, which I cannot quite hear, I am moved to murmur: just when and where, in the world of Atwood and her readers, are those not uncommon pronouncements being made? There are a certain number of southern Republican senators, and there is the leadership of the Southern Baptist convention, and some other clerical fascists who perhaps would dare to make such pronouncements, but “pronouncements” presumably have to be public, and in 1999 you don’t get very far by saying that a woman’s place is in the home. Doubtless we still have millions of men (and some women) who in private endorse the Bismarckian formula for women: Kinder, Kirche, und Kuchen, but they do not proclaim these sentiments to the voters.

Atwood makes a less disputable point when she warns us about the history of American Puritanism, which is long and dangerous. Its tendencies are always with us, and speculative fictions from Hawthorne to Atwood legitimately play upon its darkest aspects. The Handmaid’s Tale emerges from the strongest strain in Atwood’s imaginative sensibility, which is gothic. A gothic dystopia is an oddly mixed genre, but Atwood makes it work. Offred’s tone is consistent, cautious, and finally quite frightening. Atwood, in much, if not most, of her best poetry and prose, writes northern gothic in the tradition of the Brontës and of Mary Shelley. Though acclaimed by so many postmodernist ideologues, Atwood is a kind of late Victorian novelist, and all the better for it. Her Gilead, at bottom, is a vampiric realm, a society sick with blood. The Handmaid’s Tale is a brilliant gothic achievement and a salutary warning to keep our Puritanism mostly in the past.
Atwood on Women, War, and History:
“The Loneliness of the Military Historian”

“In the evenings the news seeps in from foreign countries, 
... 
We listen to the war, the wars, any old war.”
   —Margaret Atwood, “Two Headed-Poems”

“History cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by speculating about it.”
   —Atwood, “Marrying the Hangman”

A devoted recycler, Margaret Atwood seldom wastes literary effort. Commentators on her work have long noted themes, characters, and even images from her poems and short stories that subsequently reappear in her novels. The example most often cited is Bodily Harm (1981), which reflects the story “A Travel Piece” in Dancing Girls (1977) as well as a number of poems in the collection True Stories (1981). Peter Klappert has described those poems as “notes for” or “outtakes from” the novel, and his attitude is typical of most U.S. critics, who in general value Atwood’s novels more highly than her poetry.

In many cases, however, these poems of Atwood’s are far more than minor preparatory drafts, in effect ur-leavings, of novels, and they deserve
to be considered on their own textual grounds. Over a decade ago George Woodcock noted that the wider recognition given to Atwood as a novelist was making her role as a poet more difficult to evaluate, and nowhere is his point illustrated more clearly than in her poems related to novels. In the context of Atwood’s developing poetic oeuvre some of them reevaluate long term concerns of hers with new complexity and comprehensiveness, concerns that in many cases the novels have not treated as directly or effectively. A good example is “The Loneliness of the Military Historian” (1990), a dramatic monologue by a character who is a prototype of Tony Fremont, the military historian who appeared three years later in The Robber Bride.

What is surprising about a comparison of the two literary relatives is how little the poem’s persona illumines the protagonist of the later novel. As good historians who are also women, they naturally enough share certain traits and experiences—thorough professionalism, a commitment to accuracy, a distaste for dissecting motives, and the suspicion of associates because of what they study. Their sex may or may not play a role in the emphasis of both on what Tony terms the “more lowly” elements of war—lice, disease, food shortages, military clothing (even including in Tony’s case the “technology of fly-front fastenings” [23])—rather than grand martial exploits. It is amusing enough to recognize minor poetic details that resurface in the novel, such as the flowers each woman picks from battlefields and presses in hotel Bibles (“Loneliness,” 53; Robber Bride, 17), and the lavender scent in the poem (49) that becomes Tony’s lavender-filled satin sachet from the siege of Lavaur (460). But these details function similarly in each text (the lavender, for example, suggesting something slightly old-fashioned about each woman), and their juxtaposition yields no additional analytical insights.

After writing the poem Atwood apparently decided that she needed a livelier protagonist to carry her novel. The military historian, with her “dresses of sensible cut” in “unalarming shades of beige” (49) and her mildly depressed air, is a pale shadow of bouncy and energetic Tony in her “floral-wallpaper print” frocks (17). Tony’s more colorful appearance reflects her substantially stronger attraction to the romantic and exotic (and for her, escapist) elements of warfare. Indeed, the poem is in general more strongly anti-war than the novel.

More significant are the different approaches to history and historical writing taken in the two texts, in part because of the more detailed development of character inevitable in a novel as compared to a lyric poem. The Robber Bride focuses primarily on the meanings of personal histories, and Tony’s skills are therefore applied mainly to reconstructing and understanding the pasts of herself and her friends. The novel emphasizes history as a human construct, and particularly the difficulty, even the futility, of writing it—“the impossibility of accurate reconstruction” (458). The poem is focused, as its opening line indicates, on the historian’s “profession” (pro, forth, and fateri,
“to confess,” “to acknowledge”), and although recognizing the multiple impediments to historical work, it ultimately affirms the value of such work.

Fredric Jameson, following Louis Althusser, writes that “as old-fashioned narrative or ‘realistic’ historiography [becomes] problematic, the historian should reformulate her vocation—not any longer to produce some vivid representation of History ‘as it really happened,’ but rather to produce the concept of history” (italics Jameson’s). With the novel’s capaciousness allowing more lengthy and particularized discussions of events, *The Robber Bride* produces more “representation,” depictions of historical actions, than “concept”; the poem, in contrast, produces mainly “concept,” the idea of what history itself is and should be. Questioned in an interview about the differences between novels and poems, Atwood commented: “novels are about change, living in time. But poetry, lyric poetry anyway, is more likely to be about the out-of-time experience” (Ingersoll, 223). Not diachronic event but synchronic perspective on the mind of a military historian is the poem’s concern; it explores the parameters rather than the ultimate viability of historical thought and language about war.

I

In her early poetry war served Atwood as a source of metaphor more often than as a subject. Despite her concern with political atrocities, which stemmed from her work with Amnesty International and was reflected in many of the poems in *True Stories*, and despite isolated poems such as “1837 war in retrospect” (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*) and “Projected slide of an unknown soldier” (*Procedures for Underground*), Atwood’s early work usually subordinated public martial concerns to personal struggles. Typical was *Power Politics*, which in poems such as “They are hostile nations” and “My beautiful wooden leader” figured relationships between the sexes in military imagery.

However, in an address to the Harvard Consortium in Inter-American Relations in 1981, Atwood emphasized “the study of human aggression” as “the most important field of study at the moment.” Over the next decade or so she wrote several powerful poems and prose poems on the subject of war, from “Machine. Gun. Nest” in the mid-1980s to “Poppies: Three Variations” and “Epaulettes” in the collection *Good Bones* (1992). “The Loneliness of the Military Historian” takes its place among these poems as a part of Atwood’s increasing concern with and exploration of war as a subject.

At about the same period that Atwood began to write poems on war, she also in her “Historical Notes” appended to *The Handmaid’s Tale* began to focus directly on the problems of writing and interpreting history. Her personal interest in history dated from childhood. Describing her father as “a history nut” with a basement full of historical works, she noted in an interview that one of the things that she “grew up on . . . was a lot of history.”
She particularly recalled reading “Second World War stuff” in her early teens, including a biography of Rommel when she was twelve and Churchill’s five-volume history two or three years later (Ingersoll, 182, 216).

History itself entered Atwood’s work in various ways. The overt statements about history in her poetry tended to be passing, somewhat unsatisfactorily orphic utterances: “history / breeds death but if you kill / it you kill yourself” (Selected Poems II, 32). But she excelled in interpreting and re-creating historical material in both prose and poetry. During the decade of the 1970s, in Survival2 Atwood deftly surveyed literary and symbolic manifestations of Canadian history, while in The Journals of Susanna Moodie she focused on the pioneer past and in “Four Small Elegies” wrote on the reprisals around Beaufortois after the failed 1838 uprising. The Handmaid’s Tale in the mid-1980s imaginatively reworked New England’s Puritan history.

The lonely military historian takes her place in a long line of what one critic describes as Atwood’s “unsympathetic central characters,” who force readers “beyond identification into speculation and self-criticism.”13 A woman who chooses military historiography as her profession is an incongruous figure, given the traditional associations between masculinity and militarism.14 As Micaela di Leonardo points out, “gender is at the center of recurrent contradictions in the militarization process.”15 Many of these contradictions have been highlighted in hotly contested contemporary debates over women and the military. From conscription to combat, male military space has been staunchly defended. A 1983 U.S. Army reclassification project, for example, went so far as to redefine carpenters, electricians, and plumbers as combat positions, exclusively for males.16 Barred from the battlefield, women and their views have been equally unwelcome in the study of armed conflict. Cynthia Enloe writes that “a woman who presumes to theorize about militarism is too frequently dismissed, as if she had wandered uninvited into the men’s locker room” (39), while Carol Cohn, after participating for a year in seminars with defense intellectuals, concluded that “There was no evidence that feminist critiques had ever reached the ears, much less the minds, of these men.”17

With men identified with war, the figure of the military historian is also disturbing because of equally strong traditions linking women and peace.18 Again and again commentators have pointed out the lack of historical grounding for this long-standing popular association. From the mythical Amazons and the Biblical Deborah to Joan of Arc, Nicaraguan women in Sandinista militias, and U.S. servicewomen in the Gulf War, women have fought in wars, and fought well. Even more important has been women’s support of wars, from Plutarch’s Spartan mothers to pre-World War I women peace advocates who recanted once war broke out and women workers in defense industries.

The persistence of the belief in women’s natural pacifism despite overwhelming historical evidence suggests that it serves some crucial psychological
as well as social needs. The tendency to explain this pacifism in terms of women’s roles as mothers locates the origins of the construction not only in sexist sentimentality but in deep human fears and compensatory wish-fulfillments that underlie refusals to accept constructions of women as violent or aggressive. Social needs also supplement personal ones. As the capacity for nuclear destruction proliferates, peace becomes more imperative even as it becomes more difficult to achieve. Under such conditions, Diane Eyer points out, “As so often happens in avoiding a complex, cultural problem, it is projected onto women, who are then required by the tenets of their sex role to perform a symbolic redress.”

Various feminist theorists, particularly those connected with the peace and nuclear disarmament movements, have repeatedly tried to draw on the association of women and pacifism, with predictably mixed results. The 1980s marked a high point for such theories, culminating in the publication of Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989). But by the time Ruddick’s study appeared, the emerging anti-essentialist emphasis in feminist theory had fairly thoroughly deconstructed the stereotype of the naturally peaceful woman. With her demise, questions about the relationship between women and militarism emerged as yet another aspect of the ongoing equality-versus-difference debates between liberal and radical feminists. Liberals insisted that women’s equal access to and opportunity in every area included military service, while radicals insisted that any such integration inhibited the substantive transformations of values and institutions for which they believed feminism should stand. Questions about war’s reinforcement or subversion of male dominance proliferated as women gained greater access to the armed forces:

Do [women soldiers] subvert the military by depriving it of its historic claim to masculinity, thereby also demasculinizing the state which it serves? Or do these battles won by women stalking the corridors of state power have the effect of relegitimizing the military at a time when it was about to seem an anachronism? (Enloe, 60)

It is within these kinds of contexts that Atwood’s figure of the military historian functions to problematize the relationship of women to war. Atwood’s previous poetry had reflected the stereotypical military gender equivalencies:

The history of war is a history of killed bodies. That’s what war is: bodies killing other bodies, bodies being killed. Some of the killed bodies are those of women and children,
as a side effect, you might say. . . . But most of the killed bodies are
men. So are most of those doing the killing. 20

Women and war are separated: “No woman can imagine this,” the gunner
in “Machine. Gun. Nest” asserts (Selected Poems II, 138). The depiction of
women as war’s victims inevitably accompanied the association of men and
violence, even though in other poems Atwood had depicted women’s impli-
cation in men’s power games.

“The Loneliness of the Military Historian” marks an important change
of focus in Atwood’s treatment of militarism, with a more complex construc-
tion of the relationship between women and war than in the earlier poems.
Women are still shown as war’s victims. Indeed, one of the images of female
victims in the poem, that of women who, “having been raped repeatedly, /
hang themselves with their own hair” (50), is presaged in her earlier poem
“Christmas Carols,” where a

woman with her hair cut off
so she could not hang herself
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty
times raped & pregnant by the enemy
who did this to her.

(Selected Poems II, 70)

But “The Loneliness of the Military Historian” also depicts women’s
complicity in men’s wars. They appear as supporters of war, engaged in various
forms of “moral cheerleading” (50). Through juxtaposition Atwood highlights
the mixed historical record of women’s responses to war: “Women should
march for peace, / or hand out white feathers to arouse bravery” (49). The
movement in Atwood’s poetry from women as war victims to women as both
victims and abettors of conflict parallels the evolution of feminist theory away
from the figure of the naturally peaceful woman. Here Atwood’s poetic stance
on women and war also catches up with her theoretical treatments of victim-
hood in other works. She has long been interested in what she calls in Surviv-
al “Victor/Victim games” (39), and from the ending of Surfacing on—“This
above all, to refuse to be a victim” 21—most of her work has valorized refusals
of victimhood.

II

Atwood in her poetic character sketch of the military historian in “Loneli-
ness” is delineating a certain cast of mind, the perspective and attitudes
necessary for good historical writing. Her historian directly addresses what
some would see as the problematical gender demands of her profession:
In general I might agree with you: women should not contemplate war, should not weigh tactics impartially, or evade the word enemy, or view both sides and denounce nothing. (49)

Her word choice—"contemplate," "weigh impartially," "view both sides and denounce nothing"—reflects the discourse of reason, traditionally defined in terms of men and denied to women. This language is in stark contrast to the rest of the stanza that follows, which portrays both women victims and accomplices during war behaving with passion—with the feeling and, from the Latin root patior, the suffering traditionally connected with women.

In deconstructing this stereotype of women, feminist theory in focusing on misuses of reason (overly narrow conceptions of reason, reason as rationalization for male power and desire, etc.) has too often veered into overstatement, with totalizing denigration of reason itself, rather than asserting women's own claims to participate in rational discourse. Atwood's poetry, as opposed to her novels, has always focused on intelligent women, and part of the appeal of "Loneliness" is the historian's firm assertions of her rationality in her work. Her strong feelings against war surface in various ways in the poem—for example, she comments that "Grand exploits merely depress me" (52)—but professionally she contains them. Their displacement is reflected in the "flower or two" she picks at each battleground she visits for research and presses in the hotel Bible (53).

The historian's commitment to the realm of reason is clear in her rejection of both romance and speculation in her work. Dominick LaCapra has noted "the tendency of traditional narrative to romanticize events" and has detailed some of the resulting problems for historiography. Recognizing the difficulties, the military historian relegates the "glamour" of war to her dreams in an effective passage in which the poetry itself conveys the attraction of the color and power of certain aspects of war and their pull on the imagination. The stanza ends, however, with the historian firmly—and ironically—rejecting what "A poet might say," because of the taint of romance (51).

Speculation about the reasons for war are also avoided: "I don't ask why, because it is mostly the same. / Wars happen because the ones who start them / think they can win" (50). Significantly, in "Alien Territory," another of Atwood's poems that deals with war, the persona offers a detailed answer to the question "Why do men want to kill the bodies of other men?":


*(Good Bones and Simple Murders, 100)*

The questions of poetry, however, are not the questions appropriate for historical writing, and the military historian refuses to engage them.

“The Loneliness of the Military Historian” itself enacts several of the analytical and linguistic processes that contemporary critics have identified as crucial to historical writing. Following Bakhtin, LaCapra has emphasized the importance of dialogism in historiography. He notes, for example, “the way the ‘voice’ of the historian may he internally ‘dialogized’ when it undergoes the appeal of different interpretations” (36). Such dialogism permeates the poem. As the military historian discusses the representation of war, qualifying conjunctions, adverbs, and adjectives introduce different viewpoints to widen the scope. “Despite,” “true,” “though,” “sometimes,” and “but” qualify and enlarge the historical perspective as she enumerates factors influencing the course of wars, from technology to food supplies, disease, and, on occasion, “being right” (52). Metonymy dominates the section: “But rats and cholera have won many wars. / Those, and potatoes / or the absence of them” (52). In Hayden White’s well known tropological system of historiographical analysis in *Metahistory*, metonymy is the trope connected with the tragic mode of emplotment, which would of course be appropriate for military history.23

But tragic potential is contained within Atwood’s poem by irony, the great trope of negation and the perfect embodiment of the skepticism necessary for effective historical reconstruction. Significantly, White emphasizes that irony has “continued to flourish as the dominant mode of professional historiography, as cultivated in the academy,” since the end of the nineteenth century (xii). LaCapra includes among the methods of dialogizing historical writing moments when the historian’s voice “employs self-critical reflection about its own protocols of inquiry, and makes use of modes such as irony, parody, self-parody, and humor, that is, double- or multiple-voiced uses of language” (36). Self-conscious about the limits of her methods and ironic in her expressions of her insights, the voice of the historian in the poem reflects this kind of dialogic approach to history. Various forms of irony—litotes and understatement, along with occasional sarcasm—recur in the poem. Limiting herself to “What [she] hope[s] will pass as truth,” she refuses to provide “a final statement,” insisting that she deals only in “tactics” (50, 53). Kathy Ferguson has pointed out that “the recognition of limits” that irony invokes is a virtue “historically associated with women.”24 Joan Riviere’s famous formulation of womanliness as masquerade, when juxtaposed with the *eiron’s* traditional position as a dissembler, a weak person or an underdog who survives through clever manipulation, also has
suggestive gender ramifications. Particularly in view of the female military historian’s position as a minority within a minority—not only does the field of military history attract few women, but history itself still remains male-dominated—the ironic stance is an especially appropriate one for her. At the same time, the traditional critical categories of tragic irony and cosmic irony are reminders that gendering irony, while of some use in particular textual contexts, if carried too far may ultimately restrict the wider human ramifications of the trope and limit readings.

III

The qualities of mind that the female military historian in “Loneliness” represents can be clarified by juxtaposing her with Atwood’s other representation of an academic historian, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto in The Handmaid’s Tale. Pieixoto’s speech analyzing historical contexts of the Handmaid’s story at a scholarly symposium comprises the bulk of the “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale” appended to the novel (379–395). Pieixoto is the nightmare Other of the military historian; through him, Atwood produces a savage and brilliant satire on certain kinds of male academic historians.

The military historian’s approach is dialogic, self-consciously critical, and non-sexist. Pieixoto’s is just the opposite. A pompous pedant, condescending to his audience and his material, he represents positivistic historiography at its worst. The title of his address, “Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid’s Tale,” reflects his emphasis on method and technique, in his case not very critically applied, rather than interpretation. Peripheral evidence—for example, “a metal footlocker, U.S. Army issue, circa perhaps 1955,” which even Pieixoto has to admit “need have no significance” (381)—is more carefully scrutinized than the Handmaid’s surviving text. His concerns center on old-fashioned political history and its great men; dismissive of the Handmaid’s story, he longs instead for “even twenty pages or so of print-out” from the Commander’s home computer (393).

LaCapra has noted the historian’s problem of “coming to terms with ‘transference’ in the psychoanalytic sense of a repetition/displacement of the ‘object’ of study in one’s own discourse about it” (40). Because of such transference in the process of historical writing, he warns that “considerations at issue in the object of study are always repeated with variations—or find their displaced analogues—in one’s account of it” (72). In Pieixoto’s account of Gilead, this kind of transference is reflected in his replication in his address of the sexism and the objectification of women that characterized Gilead itself. Along with his sexist jokes, his euphemisms—“birth services” for childbearing and “serial polygamy” for late twentieth-century marriage (386)—reflect his androcentric biases and misogyny.
With his narrow conception of what constitutes historical fact, Pieixoto misreads the Handmaid’s text, when he bothers to consider it at all. Raising questions about matters on which the Handmaid is silent, Pieixoto comments:

We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. (394)

Yet another of Atwood’s poems that has ramifications for a subsequent novel puts the professor’s ornamental rhetoric into perspective. In “Orpheus (1),” published in Interlunar a year before The Handmaid’s Tale, Eurydice explains why she had to leave Orpheus on the way out of Hades. Orpheus viewed her only in terms of his own desires—“the image of what you wanted / me to become.” Eurydice was his “hallucination.” The poem ends: “You could not believe I was more than your echo” (Selected Poems II, 106–107). Like Orpheus, Pieixoto can see only himself, and he imposes himself and his views on the past. The result is a historical monologism that silences the Handmaid and those like her in Gileadic culture.

Academic critics have savaged Pieixoto for his excesses, in most cases accurately. But if Atwood’s depiction of the military historian offers an alternative to Pieixoto, in the process she also corrects a widespread critical misreading of him. For no statement has Pieixoto been more excoriated by critics than his refusal to take a moral stand on his material: “Allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand” (383). In this connection one critic goes so far as to say that any scholar who fails to assert moral or political positions on issues like totalitarianism “will necessarily become an apologist for evil.”

However, the response to immoral human beings and events appropriate for a novelist, a reader of novels, or a poet is not necessarily useful for a historian. Pieixoto’s statement actually reflects proper historical practice. Atwood’s military historian, too, several times in the poem firmly asserts her refusal to deliver moral judgments. She “evade[s] the word enemy”; she “denounce[s] nothing.” Describing her “trade” as “courage and atrocities,” she “look[s] at them and do[es] not condemn” (49–50).

The military historian chooses instead to “write things down the way they happened” (50). The “way they happened” is reminiscent of Leopold von Ranke’s famous “wie es eigentlich gewesen.” Ranke’s remark occurs in the introduction to his first historical work in 1824, signaling his revolutionary
break with earlier conceptions of historiography: “History has had assigned
to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the bene-
fit of the future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume:
it seeks only to show what actually happened” (58). Atwood, always aware of
the human construction of historical writing and therefore its contingency,
updates Ranke with an important qualification, the military historian adds
that she writes things down “the way they happened, / as near as can be
remembered” (50). Nevertheless, the echo of the famous break with classi-
cal and Renaissance conceptions of history as moral monitor and political
instructor remains.

In the process of historical writing, overt moral judgment is often the
easiest path, and almost always an unnecessary one. Herbert Butterfield al-
most half a century ago discussed why historiography does not require moral
interpolations: “those who do not recognise that the killing and torturing
of human beings is barbarity will hardly be brought to that realisation by
any labels and nicknames that historians may attach to these things.”29 Thus
moral exhortation within historical texts becomes simply pointless rhetorical
posturing. In Butterfield’s view the one way that the historian can reinforce
her initial moral judgment and thereby serve general morality is through her
representation of events, “merely describing, say, the massacre or the persecu-
tion, laying it out in concrete detail, and giving the specification of what it
means in actuality.” He sees this kind of representation as crucial because

One of the causes of moral indifference is precisely the failure
to realise in an objective manner and make vivid to oneself the
terrible nature of crime and suffering; but those who are unmoved
by the historical description will not be stirred by any pontifical
commentary that may be superadded. (123)

As with all texts, the construction of histories is inevitably shaped by
ideological perspectives and moral ones, as Butterfield’s own comment about
“the terrible nature of crime and suffering” suggests. Interspersing overt moral
judgments, in contrast, is a matter of conscious authorial choice, one that cre-
ates various textual difficulties. Indulging in direct denunciation, the historian
turns preacher, in the process distorting the focus on the material that he
or she is ostensibly treating. In the case of Atwood’s military historian, her
adamant refusal to take sides works against transference into her own texts
of the conflicts she chronicles. Her strong personal feelings against war are
displaced into her pressed flowers rather than into her text.

The problem with Pieixoto, then, is not what he says about moral judg-
ments in historiography but what he actually does in his own historical text.
There, in violation of his stated principle, he affirms and supports immoral
positions. Sometimes he does so overtly, as when he attempts to exculpate Gileadic tyranny: “Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise” (383). In addition to what Annette Kolodny terms his “discourse of exoneration,” by projection Pieixoto reads his shabby personal standards into his text. For example, he suggests that the Handmaidens must have enjoyed the Particution or that Nick might have been wiser to assassinate the Handmaid himself (390, 394). His evaluative language also conveys moral viewpoints, as when he speaks of Gilead’s “genius” in connection with the savage Particution and Salvaging rituals or praises the Commanders for their brilliance and ingenuity (389, 391).

Ranke’s “wie es eigentlich gewesen” now reads more like naively wishful thinking than a viable goal, and even Butterfield’s slightly less demanding “merely describing, . . . laying it out in concrete detail, and giving the specification of what it means in actuality” seems somewhat dubious. Writing in the early nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Ranke and Butterfield naturally enough showed greater confidence in the ability of language to recreate the past than most contemporary theorists would. For Pieixoto there is no such excuse.

IV

Atwood’s military historian is sensitive to language and particularly to its limitations. Her comment that each of the battlefields she visits for research “has inspired a few good quotes in its day” highlights the inadequacy of language for coming to terms with the events she studies, as does her reference to the ubiquity of the word “glory” on gateways (52–53). That words themselves have histories whose reverberations are often unknown to and beyond the control of those who use them is ironically reflected in the historian’s closing demurral, when she insists that she deals in “tactics. / Also statistics” (53). The word “statistics” evokes the ordered objectivity of numbers, but it is actually derived from the German Statistik, “political science,” via the Neo-Latin statiscus, “of state affairs,” to the Latin status, meaning “state” or “position.” Its ultimate root is the Latin stare, “to stand.” Etymologically, then, behind the putative detachment of modern mathematical data lurks the unruliness of ideologies, dominions, and politics—essentially, the very forces fueling the militarism that the historian seeks to study and understand.

One of the comments that best sums up the kind of historian the persona is, the subtlety of her understanding of both the tenuousness of historical evidence and the instability of the language used to describe it, occurs as she discusses the battleground cemeteries she sees in the course of her research. Describing their marble angels as “Sad,” she parenthetically notes that they “could just as well be described as vulgar, / or pitiless, depending on the camera angle” (52–53). The key is her reference to the camera and its
perspectives. Photographs are popularly believed to directly reflect and reproduce what Roland Barthes terms “literal reality,” and for this reason he notes their “special credibility.”31 Barthes’s decoding of this “myth of photographic naturalness,” however, has increased understanding of how connotations of various kinds shape a medium that seems to be purely denotative, “exclusively constituted and occupied by a ‘denoted’ message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence” (44, 18). The historian’s adjectival alternatives emphasize her recognition of the variability and fallibility of the camera’s eye in any given situation. At the same time, within its own limits the camera is of course much less fallible than the human eye and its repository of images, the memory. The historian’s sensitivity to how perspective shapes description under the most seemingly unmediated conditions highlights her general awareness of the provisionality and contingency of any historical construction.

Finally, Atwood’s deployment of language in the poem suggests that the tendency on the part of some contemporary critics to dismiss earlier commentators like Butterfield because of their lack of attention to linguistic limitations may be in some cases excessive. Butterfield’s call was for “merely describing” atrocities, “laying [them] out in concrete detail” in order to render precisely their moral impact. In her poem Atwood depicts the atrocities of war using two different modes of expression. Simple language and straightforward description such as Butterfield prescribes are used about women who

spit themselves on bayonets

to protect their babies,

whose skulls will be split anyway,

or, having been raped repeatedly,

hang themselves with their own hair. (50)

In contrast, Atwood moves to simile to describe death in battle: “Sometimes men throw themselves on grenades / and burst like paper bags of guts / to save their comrades” (52). The poetic image not only obscures but in a sense diminishes the impact of the deeds.

Overwriting is not a poetic sin unknown to Atwood, and it could be objected that the simile is simply an unfortunate one. However, a more elaborate series of metaphors in another battleground description ends up producing roughly the same effect. She describes fields “that once were liquid with pulped / men’s bodies and spangled with exploded / shells and splayed bone” (52). Attention focused on the images themselves and the way they work detracts from the stark reality of the events being recalled; the passage thus lacks the “specification” which Butterfield demanded. In dealing with such horror, when history strains toward poetry, even the little that one can hope to recapture of the past becomes lost. Susan Schweik has noted that war poetry
generally tends to be a bad subgenre, and she connects its shortcomings to its tendency towards excessive historicism, its failure “to entirely transcend its time” (13). The example of Atwood suggests that the subject of war also involves another kind of difficulty with specificity because of the abstraction of poetic language and its self-referentiality. Singing about arms and the man too often becomes focused at the level of the song rather than the arms.

Though Butterfield was more optimistic than we that any language could be capable of re-creating “what [any event] means in actuality,” the example of Atwood’s practice suggests that the plain style he commends is more effective than elaborate alternatives. The linguistic shortcomings that limit Butterfield’s theoretical viability do not ultimately vitiate the practical usefulness of his formulations as a working guide to historical style.

Although Atwood’s historian speaks with both straightforward and metaphorical description in the poem, given the depiction of her mindset, her attitudes and perspectives, it is not difficult to guess which kind of language would predominate in any history that she might write. Moreover, Atwood makes it clear that the specialized case of the military historian has broader ramifications. As the closing lines of the poem point out, “for every year of peace there have been four hundred / years of war” (53). Under such circumstances almost every historian is in some sense a military historian.

Thus Atwood’s poem offers a penetrating analysis of the demands of historical writing and the kind of mind that can meet those demands. The requirements are unusual ones, and some of the positions that Atwood has previously taken in her poetry shift accordingly. In general she has insisted on ambiguity and on human thralldom to fictions intentional and unintentional, asserting the impossibility of “True Stories”:

\[ \text{The true story is vicious and multiple and untrue} \]

after all. Why do you need it? Don’t ever ask for the true story.

\[ (\text{Selected Poems II, 58}) \]

She has also consistently criticized the stance of “uncommitted indepen-
dence,” questioning the ability of anyone to remain unaligned (McCombs and Palmer, 337). Skeptical about human memory and human language, refusing transference and moralism but encouraging dialogism, the military historian is fully aware of the limitations of any “truth”—“A blunt thing, not lovely” (50)—that she can reconstruct. But her perseverance despite the
implied criticism to which her poetic monologue is a response asserts the value of that truth and of the informed detachment required to recreate it.

At a time when the kind of rationality the military historian represents is often disdained, and when even the limited kind of objectivity that she creates from her dialogism and refusal of transference is considered by many illusory, the persona in Atwood’s poem is a challenging figure. Her uncompromising assertion of impartiality as a proper academic stance and refusal to function as a moral arbiter also have resonance given the sloughs of ideology and political commitment in which contemporary literary studies flounder. Noting the “prompt politicization of empirical differences” in some current criticism, Howard Horwitz finds that it risks becoming “a new moralism, in that disputes about evidence and its interpretation are subordinated to the rush to judgment and recast as sanction or censure.” In such circumstances the modest but compelling claims of Atwood’s military historian are a salutary reminder of the kinds of validity that rigorous intellectual inquiry—work which recognizes its own limitations, the liabilities of language, and the different roles that are appropriate for the historian and the critic as opposed to the preacher—can retain.

Notes


6. Jack Goody in *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) prints a Renaissance lyric connecting lavender with “lovers true.” However, he notes that in the lyric “significances attached to each flower are clearly ruled by the desire for assonance,” concluding that the “written code is largely a literary conceit in which the meanings are shaped or constructed to fit the poem’s form” (181). Any connections between lavender and love would probably be somewhat more ironic in Atwood’s poem than in her novel.

7. Etymologies in this essay are from the *American Heritage Dictionary (Second College Edition)* and the *OED*.

16. Ultimately, carpenters were reclassified as noncombat (Enloe, 59).
26. One of the best treatments of the “Historical Notes” is Arnold E. Davidson’s “Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms* [Carbondale


and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988], 113–121)—although practically no critic who writes on the novel fails to take a shot at Pieixoto.
ALICE M. PALUMBO

On the Border: Margaret Atwood’s Novels

In the poetry collection The Journals of Susanna Moodie, first published in 1970, Margaret Atwood develops the idea of the double voice. Susanna Moodie, in the poem “The Double Voice,” acknowledges that “two voices / took turns using my eyes” (42). These voices act in antithesis to each other, and present a synthesized point of view only after death. As Atwood writes in the “Afterword” to the collection, Moodie is “divided down the middle” (62), an example of the “violent duality” the Canadian landscape provokes in its inhabitants.

In her novels, Atwood has made constant use of the double voice, depicting characters at war with themselves and their environments. Through intertextual allusions, alterations in narrative point of view, and the use of the unconscious, Atwood shows the way in which the self is constructed from contradictory impulses, some more societally acceptable than others. The emphasis in each of her novels, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, is the movement from product to process, or the realization of her protagonists that they are not merely objects to be acted upon, but dynamic subjects (17). Her use of intertexts derived from, for example, the Gothic novel and fairy tales, places her novels on a continuum while critiquing the tradition; Lady Oracle, which parodies the Gothic and exists as a Gothic novel in its own right, is a good example of this.
Thematically, Atwood's novels share linked concerns. *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Lady Oracle* (1976) all examine, to some degree, consumption and consumer culture. *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) analyze power relationships, both personal and societal. Finally, *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Alias Grace* (1996) focus on the relations between the present, the past, and the functions of memory. In all of these works Atwood examines boundaries, the ease with which they can be crossed, blurred, or eliminated, and the anxiety this produces in her protagonists.

The boundary between commodity and commodifier is deconstructed by Atwood in her first three novels. In the course of *The Edible Woman*, Marian MacAlpin, a middle-level worker in a consumer surveys company in Toronto, finds herself gradually moving from being a consumer to feeling consumed. Marian is just the most obvious case, though, in a world where the lines between consumer and consumed are blurred. Peter, Marian's fiancé, is a well-turned-out lawyer on the rise who, Marian realizes, may be merely the sum of the lifestyle tips he gathers from men's magazines.

Atwood problematizes the idea of authenticity and unitary identity in the novel through Marian's dilemma. In attempting to avoid being a consumer, Marian instead falls into a ritualistic form of progressive anorexia which makes her unable to consume anything. Marian's increasing identification with the object consumed (her over-identification as a victim) leads to her becoming a victim of her own body. She finds that her attempt to remove herself from a consumer/consumed dyad is untenable, as Atwood shows consumerism as permeating every aspect of life. Ainsley, Marian's roommate, becomes pregnant as a result of media prompting:

“But why do you want a baby, Ainsley? What are you going to do with it?”

She gave me a disgusted look. “Every woman should have at least one baby.” She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. (40–41)

The discourse of consumption affects even academe, as demonstrated by Duncan, the graduate student with whom Marian becomes involved. Graduate study in English is merely the act of devouring one text and regurgitating it in another form. The narrative enacts this itself, by devouring a number of intertexts (fairy tales, Gothic romance, children’s fiction) to produce the text itself. By literalizing her feelings of consumption in the act of baking the “edible woman” of the title, Marian hopes to fend off her metaphorical consumption by Peter, and resolve her own ambivalence to marriage. However, Atwood shows that even this symbol is ambiguous. While Peter flees
the cake (and presumably his engagement to Marian), Duncan cheerfully eats it, troubling Marian’s simple resolution to her problems:

“But the real truth is that it wasn’t Peter at all. It was me. I was trying to destroy you.”
I gave a nervous laugh. “Don’t say that.”
“Okay,” he said, “ever eager to please. Maybe Peter was trying to destroy me, or maybe I was trying to destroy him, or we were both trying to destroy each other, how’s that? What does it matter, you’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer.” (281)

In contrast to the devouring narrative of *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* presents an archeology of both a time and a person on the point of serious rupture. Early 1970s anglophone Canada and its relationships with the United States and francophone Canada are presented in parallel to the story of the nameless narrator, a woman on the verge of complete breakdown due to an unvoiced, but real, grief. The manners in which this novel has been analyzed by critics (as ghost story, family story, anatomy of a breakdown) all highlight the layering of histories and cultures in the novel. In *Surfacing*, the narrator drives north from Toronto with her partner and another couple to the isolated lake in Quebec where she was brought up by stubbornly rationalist, yet idealistically innocent, parents. The narrator’s father has disappeared, which prompts her first visit north in nine years. During the trip, the narrator is discomfited by the way in which everything has changed, yet not changed, as time seems to her to have congealed; meanwhile, the reader is discomfited by the narrator’s mysterious evasions and absences. The narrator simultaneously affirms her doubled existence, “now we’re on my home ground, foreign territory” (11), and denies it, describing a childhood split between the city and the wilderness, and an affectless present. The truth of the narrator’s memories is hidden beneath feverish polarities. Her more ambiguously happy childhood is hidden behind the preternaturally idyllic one she describes, while a failed affair and an abortion lie beneath her disturbingly violent descriptions of marriage and childbirth. An unvoiced, but lurking, anxiety is the source of the narrator’s need to order things in neat binaries; for her, leeches are “good” or “bad,” humans are bad, animals good, and the mind and the body are two separate things. The narrator’s breakdown comes in her attempt to throw off all influences of the “human” and “American,” and become “natural”; since this flight from the human depends on there being rigid separations between the natural and human (giving the human increased importance even in the process of evading it), it is doomed to failure. The authentic, as Atwood shows, is found in a synthesis of the two, and not at either pole exclusively.
The narrator’s realization that the victim/victor binary must be transcended is the key to her integrating all aspects of her fragmented history:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. (191)

As the narrator acts out, and resolves, her own emotional rupture, the narrative depicts Quebec and Canada shifting into a more clearly self-defined identity. Behind the characters’ apocalyptic rhetoric describing the landscape and Canadian culture is a very real sense of Canada’s growing unease with American hegemony, and a corresponding sense of nationalism that itself is working away from victim/victor games.

*Lady Oracle* takes the notion of existence on borders to a near-parodic extreme. The novel is narrated from a limbo between life in Toronto and “death” in Italy by Joan Foster, a self-confessed “escape artist” on the run from her serial identities (as former fat girl in suburban Toronto, author of supermarket costume Gothic romances, and renowned pop poet) and her blackmailer. *Lady Oracle* revisits the comedy of *The Edible Woman*; like the earlier novel, it is an “anti-comedy,” to use Atwood’s description, where there is no marriage and no real reordering of society at the close of the narrative (Ingersoll, 12). Aspects of *Surfacing* are also held up for parody. While the landscape of the north is depicted as sublime in the earlier novel, as a place where “you can see only a small part of it, the part you’re in” (*Surfacing*, 31), the whole of *Lady Oracle* itself is narrated from a state Edmund Burke considered the source of the sublime experience: the contemplation of death itself (Heiland, 116). But the death is a sham, a feigned drowning in a prosaically polluted Lake Ontario. The novel is full of such ironic deflations, the primary narrative deconstructing the assumptions of the Gothic romances Joan writes for a living while simultaneously constructing a new model of female Gothic terror based on more mundane, contemporary dangers.

*Lady Oracle* unfolds as a series of doubled, contradictory narratives, first as confession beyond the grave of a living woman, a purveyor of “romance” primarily concerned with the commodities of her fictional lovers. The novel presents a social archeology of life in suburban North America in the 1950s, narrated by a woman obsessed with cultural minutiae. Joan Foster, compared to Atwood’s earlier protagonists, is relatively adept at negotiating media-driven consumer culture, illustrated by Atwood’s use of a series of intertextual allusions, most notably 1940s women’s films, 1960s art films, Victorian sensation fiction, and mass-market Gothic romance. Joan
turns her childhood interest in reading the social meanings of furniture, housing, and film (itself inculcated by her social-climbing mother) into the key of her success as a pseudonymous Gothic romance writer. Part of the romantic fantasy she sells comes, she knows, from the material wealth surrounding her heroines, her “goddess[es] of quick money” (*Lady Oracle*, 132). Joan’s Gothics mirror her own concerns, while the intertextual references mirror Joan’s narrative. The Gothics increasingly relate her fear of disclosure and rejection, while her constant use of cinematic references (most notably to the films of Fellini) and discourse illustrates the detached manner in which she views her life. In the Gothics she speaks through the heroines (and rejected wives), while in her Fellini-fuelled fantasies she, significantly, speaks as the director. Her cinematic references also refract outward, offering unspoken alternatives for interpreting her life; her musings over why her mother named her after Joan Crawford prompt reader comparisons to *Mildred Pierce*, and awaken her fear of understanding her mother’s rage at her entrapment in suburban Toronto with a silent husband and a hostile daughter.

The line separating Joan’s conscious self from her own rage and frustration is elided once she starts using automatic writing (a spiritualist aid to advice and prophecy) to write poetry. The themes and imagery of the poetry disturb her as something alien:

> The words I collected in this way became increasingly bizarre and even threatening: “iron,” “throat,” “knife,” “heart.” At first the sentences centered around the same figure, the same woman. After a while I could almost see her: she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building. . . . She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me. She wasn’t like anyone I’d ever imagined, and certainly she had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t like that, I was happy. Happy and inept. (224)

Joan’s “death” forces her to confront her many “lives,” and accept the possibility of synthesis.

Symbolically, she visualizes her various selves (Joan Foster, “Lady Oracle” the famous poet, Louisa K. Delacourt the Gothic novelist, and the “Fat Lady,” the embodiment of her fat past) as a group of women in the center of a maze, the plot of the Gothic she is writing blurring into her own life. The inset Gothic narrative integrates Joan’s multiple selves, while the framing narrative leaves the question open. “I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this,” Joan confesses, while planning to exchange one form of fantasy writing for another:
I won't write any more Costume Gothics, though; I think they were bad for me. But maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you. (*Lady Oracle*, 345)

Atwood here shows the possibility of the unconscious (represented by Joan’s writing, both Gothic and poetic) synthesizing identity more clearly than the conscious.

A large part of Atwood’s construction of the double voice is the implied contrast, in her work, between the literary effects and devices used in the narratives, and received ideas on the inherent dullness of Canada. A certain amount of the comedy in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* comes from the disjunction between the use of the Gothic and its placement in contemporary Toronto, while the unease in *Surfacing* comes from the unsettling realization that Canada is just as vulnerable to haunting and violence as any other place. The contrast between a fossilized, conservative English Ontario and the events taking place in it is increasingly important in Atwood’s novels.

The works that follow exhibit a shift in emphasis from the first three. Where the primary problem there was to synthesize warring identities, *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* concern themselves with the necessity for the individual to reject individual retreats from the external world and to become involved in resistance to power. This entails a rejection of the idea of powerlessness, as stated back in *Surfacing*: the protagonists of Atwood’s later works all have to work hard to renounce the idea of the sheltered position of powerlessness, whether as women, or Canadians. Atwood expands on her earlier themes of the collapse between the social and personal, depicting worlds in which the boundary between the two has been completely erased. This is seen, for example, in *Life Before Man*, as the depiction of Nate’s and Elizabeth’s impending divorce is compared to the threat of national separation in Canada. The actual divorce, like the actual referendum on sovereignty, falls beyond the span of the narrative.

*Life Before Man* differs from Atwood’s previous novels in its narrative structure; the novel is presented through the viewpoints of three characters. Toronto’s natural history museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, serves as a focal point for the three protagonists, two of whom, Elizabeth and Lesje, are employed there. Nate, the third protagonist, is married to Elizabeth at the start of the novel and becomes involved with Lesje as the novel progresses. Displacement and absence are the organizing motifs of the novel. Events in the outside world are shown in microcosm, or indirectly; the election of the Parti Québécois as the government of Quebec in 1976 is shown obliquely, on television screens in bars Nate haunts, and the impending separation of Quebec and Canada is related to Nate’s and Elizabeth’s disintegrating marriage.
Similarly, the Holocaust and Canadian multiculturalism are particularized in the family history of Lesje, who is a second generation Canadian of eastern European and Jewish descent. Canada, and the lives of the protagonists, are seen at points of rupture; Atwood’s novel works as a problem novel (as Coral Ann Howells has noted, comparing it to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*), but one in which larger societal changes and eruptions are tracked in small, indirect ways (87). The small-scale domestic drama of *Life Before Man*, often considered overwhelmingly depressing and dreary by critics, works as a microcosm of global change and disruption. All three characters find they must confront the “life before man” by ceasing to hide in elaborate fantasy worlds (as Nate and Lesje do) or in obsessive blaming of the past (as Elizabeth does). The double voice can be seen in the narrative itself, as Atwood contrasts the pessimism of the plot with the optimism of the act of writing it.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion wrote in the essay “The White Album” (11), and Atwood works with this idea of the recuperative power of storytelling in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Rennie Wilford, the protagonist of *Bodily Harm*, resembles Didion’s journalist persona in “The White Album,” a reporter who has begun “to doubt the premises of all the stories [she] ever told [herself]” (11). Offred, the eponymous narrator of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, tells and retells her own story in order to live in the oppressive future world of Gilead, a theocratic dystopia set in a future United States. Atwood has described *Bodily Harm* as an “anti-thriller”; the intertextual use of murder mysteries, spy thrillers, and children’s detective board games highlights the primary narrative of the novel, which concerns the gradual awakening to political awareness of a detached “lifestyles” journalist, appropriately described by Sharon Rose Wilson as a “life tourist” (136).

Most of the people she knew thought Rennie was way out ahead of it, but she saw herself as off to the side. She preferred it there. (26)

After a series of events in Toronto that illustrate varieties of “bodily harm,” namely a bout with breast cancer and a narrowly-averted assault in her home, Rennie goes on a working vacation in the Caribbean in order to write a travel piece on less-visited islands and take stock of her life. Rennie’s series of close calls with death has made her doubt her ability to write successfully about surfaces, the principal theme of her journalism (and thus the basis of her entire career). Rennie’s loss of faith in what she regards as her primary ability leads her to mistake the external signs on the islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe. In her continual misreading of the landscape and objects on the islands, Rennie illustrates Atwood’s concern with the duplicity of surfaces. As Eleanora Rao has noted, Rennie mistakes many things on the islands. She thinks the gallows in Fort Industry is a child’s playhouse, and that the police
who solicit in the airport for the policemen’s ball are soldiers (103–104). Later, however, the police do indeed become soldiers; in a related scene of mistaken meaning, Rennie is surprised at the drug store on St. Antoine:

A couple of doors down there’s a drugstore, also new-looking, and she goes into it and asks for some suntan lotion.

“We have Quaaludes,” the man says as she’s paying for the lotion. “Pardon?” says Rennie. . . .

Well, it’s a drugstore, Rennie thinks. It sells drugs. Why be surprised? (69)

Rennie’s inability to read signs and events correctly on the islands leads her into what she loathes, “massive involvement” (34). By taking things at face value, she manages to transport illegal weapons into the hands of a political candidate; by insisting on “reading” the events around her as mere kitsch, or pulp novel plotlines (see Irvine in this volume), she places herself in real danger by refusing to acknowledge the truth in what she thinks of as cultural clichés. By focusing on the banality of the surfaces, as she does by regarding the near-assault on her in Toronto as a solution in a game of Clue (“Miss Wilford, in the bedroom, with a rope,” 14), she misses the network of intrigues, conspiracies, and threats on St. Antoine, a newly-independent former colony of Britain having its first elections. Arrested for “suspicion,” she is thrown into Fort Industry (transformed from heritage site to prison), another demonstration of Atwood’s literalization of literary clichés as Gothic imprisonment becomes real. Rennie and her fellow Canadian prisoner Lora trade stories, and after Lora’s savage beating by prison guards, Rennie works up the courage to touch her battered body, thereby concretizing her realization that “she is not exempt” (301). She resolves to report what she has seen on the islands (an attempted coup against the government, and its violent repression), recuperating with her reportage the lives of those like Dr. Minnow, an assassinated candidate, and Lora, as well as the actuality of political violence. The ending is ambiguous, however, as its relation in future tense makes it unclear whether Rennie is in fact released from prison.

_The Handmaid’s Tale_, Atwood’s best-known novel, continues this examination of violence, and the importance of bearing witness. “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling,” Offred the narrator says, echoing Didion’s words on the importance of storytelling as a survival tool, “I need to believe it. I must believe it” (49).

If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. (49)
Offred’s tale, in which she constructs, by necessity, a listener, takes place in the Republic of Gilead, the government devised by fundamentalist Christians at some unspecified date in the future in the United States. In a continuation of the theme first seen in *Life Before Man* of the gradual blurring of the boundary between the personal and the social, the Republic of Gilead is shown to have completely conflated the two. Women’s reproductive capacity is the basis of the state in Gilead; society is constructed to maximize the possibility of reproduction, while making it obvious that women are merely extensions of their reproductive organs. All of society is run on the lines of the patriarchal family, and Offred’s name is derived from the man to whom she belongs. “Handmaids” are concubines, “two-legged wombs” (146); as Offred says of her body, “I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (73). The novel refers back to narratives of Puritan New England in its construction of a theocracy where all inhabitants are subsumed into their appointed roles. Marked as much by her red dress as a handmaid as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne is by her red “A” as an adulteress, Offred strives in her narrative for the multiplicity that Gilead denies her in body. Offred’s voice is doubled in her continual re-telling and re-visioning of the past; she often tells several versions of the same story, and the “Historical Notes” section at the close of the novel makes it clear that Offred’s voice is itself a construction, and not a simple unitary confession. Again, Atwood problematizes the happy ending, as Offred’s ultimate fate after producing the evidence of her story is left unclear; as in *Life Before Man*, the act of storytelling itself is regarded as positive, although the contents of the story are not.

The examination of macro power relations in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* shifts, in *Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride,* and *Alias Grace,* into an analysis of power in women’s relationships, and the conflict between the conscious and unconscious, and memory and the present. *Cat’s Eye,* written in the form of a Bildungsroman, depicts the story of Elaine Risley, a noted artist returning to her hometown of Toronto after years away in Vancouver. While in Toronto, Elaine is the subject of a retrospective show, and finds herself dealing with the painful memories of her childhood in suburban Toronto. Atwood contrasts Elaine’s detached, ironic narrative with her paintings, which articulate all that Elaine cannot bring herself to utter. Elaine’s dreams, as well as her paintings, recuperate her past, and present her anger at her treatment by her friends as a child. The pre-adolescent psychodrama, in which Elaine is progressively tormented and emotionally abused by her three best friends (and nearly killed as a result of a prank one of them, Cordelia, pulls), is played out in a precisely depicted Canadian suburb in the 1940s; the horrible events are grounded by their placement in mundane life. The differences in the girls’ socio-economic backgrounds contribute to their ferocity
in legislating acceptable feminine behavior. Elaine and Cordelia are marked out by the other girls for their different families, and in the course of the novel they exchange positions of power, each acting as the abject twin of the other. Atwood utilizes the discourse of science, here theoretical physics, to present the properties and actions of memory (as series of transparencies, as series of strings, as dimensions that can leak into each other), and how it influences the present. Elaine’s own memories are finally integrated, and recuperated, in a series of events that accentuate the double voice of the narrative; first her paintings tell her story, then she speaks to exorcise Cordelia (and by implication her childhood guilt).

*The Robber Bride* can be described as one long act of exorcism, as Tony, Charis, and Roz, the three protagonists, strive to rid themselves of the influence of Zenia, the “robber bride” of the title. In this novel, Atwood uses intertextual allusions and genres as organizing motifs for each character: Tony sees her life, and her interactions with Zenia, using the rhetoric of history, while Charis sees her own relationship with Zenia through New Age prophecy, and Roz through the language of mystery novels and fairy tales. Zenia wreaks havoc with the lives of each of the women after insinuating herself as their missing, all-understanding best friend. In assessing the damage, each of the women uses various narrative strategies to understand what happened, as exemplified in Roz’s discussions with her therapist:

Together the two of them labour over Roz’s life as if it’s a jigsaw puzzle, a mystery story with a solution at the end. They arrange and rearrange the pieces, trying to get them to come out better. They are hopeful: if Roz can figure out what story she’s in, then they will be able to spot the erroneous turns she took, they can retrace her steps, they can change the ending. (382–383)

Atwood utilizes almost incessant duplication in *The Robber Bride*. The novel is cast as both Gothic novel and fairy tale, each of the women has a hidden twin (Tony has a “secret identity” of her unborn twin; Roz has two names, each reflecting half of her ethnic and religious background; and Charis is doubled with Karen, her birth name and repository of the memories of her childhood sexual abuse), and each of the women is paired with Zenia. Roz even has twin daughters. The stories of each woman’s encounter with Zenia resemble each other, as Zenia convinces them that they are both unique and not alone. Zenia is a confidence trickster, having faked her own death (and thus is a “ghost” in her return to Toronto on the eve of the Gulf War), lured the husbands or boyfriends of the three women away, and relieved them of various sums of money. In fact, Zenia is one sustained fiction, and Atwood indicates that what is more important than the facts of her life is the impact
she has on others. As the lost twin of Tony, Charis, and Roz, Zenia enacts the return of the repressed, and is the repository of their submerged aggression and anger. Coming to terms with Zenia means accepting their own potential for hostility, anger, and rage, and integrating it into themselves. Cut yourself off from these conventionally nonfeminine emotions, and they will return to you in distorted form; Atwood uses the rhetoric of the Gothic in describing Zenia as a ghost, a vampire, or a patched-together monster. The story of Zenia, recounted once more after her death at the close of the novel, may have a moral, or not, as Tony reflects:

*Still, there was supposed to be a message. Let that be a lesson to you,*

adults used to say to children, and historians to their readers. But do the stories of history really teach anything at all? In a general sense, thinks Tony, possibly not. (462)

History is shown in *The Robber Bride* to be both “patched together from worthless leftovers” and “flags, hoisted with a certain jaunty insolence . . . glimpsed here and there through the trees . . . on the long march into chaos” (462).

The psychic damage caused by the wholesale repression of ranges of emotion is explored again in *Alias Grace.* While the *Robber Bride* played out this theme with the interactions of the four major characters, *Alias Grace* follows this conflict into the individual psyche. The historical base of the narrative is the nineteenth century murder mystery surrounding Grace Marks, an Irishwoman accused of murdering her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, in a village north of Toronto in 1843. Sixteen years later, a group of social reformers in Kingston (the site of the provincial prison) engage an American alienist, Simon Jordan, to examine Grace and determine her guilt or innocence. Grace has claimed to have no memory of the murders, and the testimony of her trial lawyer and the warden of the provincial insane asylum in Toronto is so contradictory that only a doctor, it is felt, can get to the bottom of the mystery. Grace, like Zenia, is the vehicle for whatever others want to see in her. At one point she enumerates the opinions of her as published in the provincial newspapers:

*I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals . . . that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot.* (23)
The prison governor’s daughters think of her in terms of romantic literary heroines, and Grace tends to use the language and discourse of Romantic narratives (Sir Walter Scott in particular) when thinking to herself. The figure of Grace Marks herself is, in a way, “alias” Grace, since all who see her project their own needs, and narratives, upon her. Simon Jordan grows to think of himself as her “rescuer” from prison, and of Grace herself as the object of all his desires. Provincial asylum visitor Susanna Moodie writes of Grace in metaphors right out of Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, much to the disgust of the asylum warden, who views Grace as an object lesson in human evil. Finding the authentic Grace is difficult, if not impossible; the mesmerism session designed by Grace’s clerical supporters in order to divine the truth of the murders of Kinnear and Montgomery brings out the voice of Mary Whitney, Grace’s fellow servant in her first posting in Toronto. Mary Whitney herself may or may not exist; Atwood presents evidence to prove both that Mary was real, and died of a botched abortion, and that Mary is the projection of all of Grace’s own feelings of rage and hostility. The murders themselves are shown to have some degree of ambiguity about them. Grace was tried for only one, the murder of Kinnear, as an accessory, and as such was sentenced to death (her fellow accused James McDermot was found guilty and hanged). She was never, therefore, tried for the murder of Nancy Montgomery, the murder which she may or may not have actually committed. Grace is obviously haunted by something, whether repressed memories or guilt, and Atwood leaves this, and Grace’s ultimate fate, open. The conclusion to *Alias Grace* recalls the final paragraphs of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* in its ambiguousness regarding Grace’s future, while it recapitulates Atwood’s concern with the acceptance of one’s potential for aggression and rage.

“Don’t ever / ask for the true story,” Atwood warned in the title poem to the 1981 collection *True Stories*. In her novels she reminds us that it is nearly impossible to expect one single “true story” to emerge from the wealth of alternatives: changes in perspective and context alter interpretations of facts and narratives. The novels depict society, and characters, in a state of flux, or on the cusp of change. Offred refers to herself and her friends in her former life as those who “lived in the gaps between the stories” (67). The Reverend Verringer, in *Alias Grace*, explains that the difficulty in interpreting Grace’s behavior under hypnosis may be the result of being between times:

“Two hundred years ago, they would not have been at a loss . . . It would have been a clear case of possession. Mary Whitney would have been found to have been inhabiting the body of Grace Marks, and thus to be responsible for inciting the crime, and for helping to strangle Nancy Montgomery. An exorcism would have been in order.” (405)
The continual process Atwood characters are involved with in developing viable senses of identity is shown in the manner in which they negotiate these thresholds in time. The “violent duality” Atwood wrote of in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is an active strategy for engaging with a contingent world. The double voice in the novels vividly shows this, and the dangers inherent in suppressing parts of the self. “I live / on all the edges there are,” the early poem “Evening Trainstation, Before Departure” ends (*Circle Game*, 16), and this state, analogous to that of Canada itself as one long border culture, is depicted in Atwood’s novels. From Marian MacAlpin’s perception of the permeability of the boundary between eater and eaten, to Grace Marks’s embodiment of the fragility of the line between the self and others, Atwood has shown characters learning to negotiate “all the edges there are.”

**Note**

1. As Joan notes early on in *Lady Oracle*, “my mother named me after Joan Crawford . . . Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built her self up from nothing, according to my mother” (38). This echoes the plotline of Crawford’s 1945 film *Mildred Pierce*, about a woman who built herself up from nothing to become a successful entrepreneur. Crawford’s character in *Mildred Pierce*, interestingly, has an ungrateful daughter for whom she has sacrificed everything. It is striking that Joan Foster, the juvenile film buff, stresses her childhood enjoyment of Susan Hayward films but barely mentions this, or any, Joan Crawford film. Joan’s mother’s liking for Joan Crawford films provides a hint of her (possible) interpretation of her life with her daughter.

**Works Cited**


Margaret Atwood’s attempt to define ‘What’s Canadian about Canadian Literature’ in *Survival* is a helpful starting point for considering the way the stories in *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Bluebeard’s Egg* (1983), and *Wilderness Tips* (1992) relate to the short story genre and Canadian literature as broad, limiting categories. Atwood herself recognizes the personal nature of *Survival*, defining it as ‘a cross between a personal manifesto’ and ‘a political manifesto’ (*Survival*, 13). She also acknowledges that ‘several though by no means all of the patterns I’ve found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work’ (14). As the title suggests, Atwood’s main thesis is that the recurring theme of Canadian literature is survival. Although Atwood identifies different types of survival (such as Canada’s cultural survival despite the influence of the United States), she believes that the most prevalent type of survival in ‘Canlit’ is simply that of ‘hanging on, staying alive’ (33). Survival was a difficult challenge for early settlers, and Atwood certainly seems correct in identifying it as a formative experience for early writers:

Bare Survival isn’t a central theme by accident, and neither is the victim motif; the land was hard, and we have been (and are) an exploited colony; our literature is rooted in those facts. (41)
However, Atwood is not at the ‘root’ of Canadian literature, and her ‘Canadian experience’ has not been that of the early pioneer encountering the hostile wilderness. Atwood’s rewriting of that early Canadian experience in ‘The Journals of Susanna Moodie’ implies a certain nostalgia for the pioneering experience and a desire to write in that tradition of Canadian literature. Although Linda Hutcheon’s labelling of Atwood as ‘postmodern’ has been challenged, it does point to the important fact of Atwood’s belatedness in the Canadian tradition.

Atwood notes in *Survival* that the replacement of wilderness with cities alters and complicates the theme of ‘bare survival in the face of “hostile” elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive’ (32). Toronto, with its maze of underground shopping malls, is an image of how late twentieth-century Canadians already have carved ‘out a place and a way of keeping alive.’ It is important to note the prevalence of Toronto as the setting for the stories in *Dancing Girls* and *Bluebeard’s Egg*. Even when the story is set in the countryside north of Toronto, Toronto’s presence is closely felt. In ‘Betty,’ which appears in both books, for example, Fred ‘was just coming back from the city’ (*Dancing Girls*, 43) when he says or does something to the store owner’s daughter to make her stare at him ‘as if she wanted to kill him’ (43). Fred’s womanizing is linked, therefore, to the city. Furthermore, the girl Fred leaves Betty for is described as ‘some girl from town’ (45), again indicating a mistrust of the urban. This distrust of the urban conflicts with the safety which cities provide from ‘“hostile” elements’. Cities certainly represent the survival, even the conquering, of the wilderness. It is difficult to view the ‘Canadian experience’ as one of overcoming the hardships of a wild land when you are selecting tomatoes imported from Florida in a temperature-controlled shopping mall in January. A brief comparison of the dangerous accident in ‘The Salt Garden’ (*Bluebeard’s Egg*) with the one in ‘Death by Landscape’ (*Wilderness Tips*) makes these different urban and rural threats clear. When the girl gets trapped in the streetcar in ‘The Salt Garden’ an ambulance quickly takes her away:

> Luckily there’s an ambulance right beside them, so the girl is put into it. Alma can’t see her face or how badly injured she is, though she cranes her neck, but she can hear the noises she’s making. (*Bluebeard’s Egg*, 234)

The word ‘luckily’ implies that the ambulance will ensure the girl’s survival. The physical danger to the girl is depicted as less threatening and upsetting than the impersonal nature of her experience, as Atwood writes:

> The most frightening thing must have been not the pain but the sense that no one could see or hear her. (234)
This contrasts with ‘Death by Landscape,’ where the campers are ill equipped, compared to the Toronto ambulance, to deal with Lucy's disappearance. The counsellors, Pat and Kip, have only whistles and canoes to search for Lucy. Even the experts with their motorboats and well-trained dogs are ineffective in the wilderness:

After that, the police went in a motorboat, with dogs; they were the Mounties and the dogs were German shepherds, trained to follow trails in the woods. But it had rained since, and they could find nothing. (Wilderness Tips, 125)

This incident is more personal because Lucy has been described to us, but her complete erasure by the landscape attests to the wilderness's ‘hostile’ elements.

Replacing ‘hostile’ forces with all-too-comfortable but impersonal ones causes an alteration in the type of survival required:

A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external—the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror. . . . It may even be life itself that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle. (Survival, 33)

This description of later literary expressions of the theme of survival fits Atwood’s fiction most closely. The contemporary Canadian writer has to deal with surviving survival. As Atwood notes in Survival, the Canadian survivor has no triumph but simply the ‘fact’ of his existence to celebrate:

The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (33)

It is no surprise, therefore, that Atwood shows such concern for everyday life and the simple process of getting through time.

Survival implies a linear concept of time because it refers to the process of continuing to exist. Many people had sympathy for the murderer Gary
Gilmore’s decision to be executed as his sentence decreed, rather than suffer the process of surviving survival in prison. In many countries the ‘life sentence’ has replaced the ‘death penalty,’ implying that a lifetime of repetition and routine is as bad as death. The slang phrase ‘doing time’ indicates that prison life represents a negative, linear, temporal experience. It should not be surprising, therefore, that while studying long-term prisoners, Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor discovered that many of the prisoners’ problems and strategies for dealing with their day-to-day lives had parallels in our urban everyday lives outside prison. In both situations bare survival is almost guaranteed, and escaping these mundane routines of guaranteed survival can become difficult. Simple existence becomes a problem in a world where it is no longer a challenge to simply exist. Cohen and Taylor realized that the length of the prisoners’ sentences provided a restricting map of their futures. A prisoner doing a twenty-year sentence knows where he will be tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. With no ‘hostile’ obstacles to our plans for the future, our ‘life plans’ can result in the same sort of predictability as a prisoner’s ‘life sentence’:

The life plan maps our existence. Ahead of us run the career lines of our jobs, our marriage, our leisure interests, our children and our economic fortunes. But sometimes when we scan these maps, traverse these routes, follow the signs, we become strangely disturbed by the predictability of the journey, the accuracy of the map, the knowledge that today’s route will be much like yesterday’s. Is this what our life is really about? Why is each day’s journey marked by feelings of boredom, habit, routine? (Cohen and Taylor, 46)

Much of what constitutes any individual’s ‘life plan’ comes from socially accepted ‘scripts’ which dictate how certain events and relationships will develop. In the pursuit of bare survival it is necessary, even acceptable, to discard socially constructed scripts. But the city does not allow for such disregard. In the city, the ‘life script’ affects all areas of life:

But at times all areas of life, no matter how we may switch the internal components, remain at the mercy of what [Eric] Berne has called the life script—that script which contains not just stage directions for sex, work and leisure, but for the whole development of our personality. (Cohen and Taylor, 79)

In Dancing Girls, Atwood portrays many characters who are prisoners of life scripts which they wish to escape but cannot.
In ‘The Man from Mars,’ having a stalker allows Christine temporary escape from the life scripts which she ‘had always agreed with’:

No one had ever found Christine mysterious before. To her parents she was a beefy heavyweight, a plodder, lacking in flair, ordinary as bread. To her sisters she was the plain one. [. . .] To her male friends she was the one who could be relied on. (Dancing Girls, 23)

When her stalker leaves, she returns to these tedious life scripts. ‘Under Glass’ depicts a female character receiving her life sentence as she allows herself to be imprisoned in the life script of long-suffering, domestic wife to a cheating man. In ‘The Grave of a Famous Poet,’ both characters are trapped in the inevitable script of breaking up. ‘Hair Jewellery’ describes the disappointment of two old lovers when they discover that they have both succumbed to unoriginal life scripts:

You were surprised to see me; you had never thought of me, you said, ending up quite like this, and your possibly dismayed gaze took in my salon haircut, my trim-fitting red jump suit, my jaunty boots. You yourself were married, with three children, and you hastily showed me wallet snapshots, holding them out like protective talismans. I matched them with my own. Neither of us suggested having a drink. We wished each other well; we were both disappointed. You had wanted me, I saw now, to die young of consumption or some equally operatic disease. Underneath it all you too were a romantic. (Dancing Girls, 117)

Like the concept of survival, these life scripts tend to assume that time is linear because they imply an inevitable progression of events; in the quotation above this progression is marriage, house ownership, and children. Atwood’s concern with survival and her awareness of the limited ‘life scripts’ available to us lead her to accept a linear view of time. A linear model of time is not necessarily a negative one. In her notion of survival in early ‘Canlit,’ linear time is the measure of the survivor’s success. However, then it was enough that the survivor had ‘the fact of his survival.’ He had no need for ‘triumph or victory’ because he had ‘gratitude for having escaped with his life’ (Survival, 33). Contemporary Canadians have lost that gratitude as they pursue their life plans in temperature-controlled buildings. In this new world the linear model of time becomes negative because it supports the limited and limiting life scripts which result in inevitable and mundane futures. It is this negative view of surviving survival which Atwood presents in her
early stories. Many of the characters in *Dancing Girls* are stuck in the ‘vicious circle’ created when ‘life becomes a threat to life’ (*Survival*, 33).

In Atwood’s later stories, however, her characters are shown revising life scripts. They learn to tell and retell the stories of their survival. Her characters move back and forth through time, revising their narratives of past experiences and finding new narratives for their futures. The inevitably linear and progressive model of time is challenged by the apocalyptic vision of many of her later characters. This progression towards a more complex model of time and more varied life scripts results in multi-layered short stories. In ‘Death by Landscape,’ we have seen that Atwood even returns to encounter the wilder-

ness and reinvent its relevance to contemporary urban life.

Atwood ends several of the stories in *Dancing Girls* with a dramatic temporal shift. The early part of the story, however, rarely reveals the main characters’ retrospective revision of their previous experiences which the end of the story implies. In ‘The Man From Mars,’ for example, the largest temporal jump marks a change in Christine’s understanding of her stalker’s situation. She realizes that he was from Vietnam, and she ‘obsessively’ searches for news about him in the media. As she attempts to see his face in the pictures, she starts to confuse this recent experience with the past:

> Finally she had to stop looking at the pictures. It bothered her too much, it was bad for her; she was beginning to have nightmares in which he was coming through the French doors of her mother’s house in his shabby jacket, carrying a pack sack and a rifle and a huge bouquet of richly coloured flowers. He was smiling in the same way but with blood streaked over his face, partly blotting out the features. (*Dancing Girls*, 31)

Instead of accepting this blurring of places and time frames, Christine finds the confusion disturbing and develops strategies to prevent it from happen-

ing. She reads nineteenth-century novels, gaining comfort from their linear progression and final resolutions.

Atwood’s narrative method also erases the complexities this change of perspective creates. Although the story starts with the phrase ‘A long time ago’ (9), Christine’s retrospective position in relation to her experience of being stalked, which is described in the final part of the story, is not written into the version of events which Atwood offers us. The story is written in the past tense, but it is told as the events happened; and, instead of being told from Christine’s point of view, it is told in the third person. Christine’s stalker’s nationality is obscured from us and Atwood does not make any allusions to the more romantic notion of him Christine develops later. Shortly after the events, Christine told her friends the story about the man. This is before her
realization that he is Vietnamese, when he was just an ‘amusing story’ (28).

Atwood even describes how Christine revises her story when she is told that
he had stalked girls in Montreal, too. In fact, she ceases to tell the story alto-
gether, as it no longer makes her seem special or unique:

Christine ceased to tell her amusing story. She had been one
among many, then. She went back to playing tennis, she had been
neglecting her game. (29)

The link between telling the story and neglecting her tennis indicates that
Christine was using the story to escape the mundane life scripts she had
accepted from other people. Telling the story represents Christine’s refusal
to be the ‘beefy heavyweight’ her parents think she is or the ‘one who could
be relied on’ by her male friends. The fact that she had been stalked became
‘something about her that could not be explained,’ and it caused ‘other
men’ to examine ‘her more closely than they ever had, appraising her’ (24).

Atwood makes this link between the story and Christine’s increased popu-
larlarity with men overtly clear:

Now that he was no longer an embarrassing present reality, he
could be talked about, he could become an amusing story. In fact,
he was the only amusing story Christine had to tell, and telling it
preserved for herself and for others the aura of her strange allure.
Her friends and the men who continued to ask her out speculated
about his motives. (28)

Here Atwood makes us highly conscious of how Christine used and nar-
rated her experience at the time. Christine’s assumption that he was stalking
her because she was special is evident when the police call her to tell her that
he has been deported. She assumes that she was the cause: “Did he try to
come back here?” Maybe she had been special after all, maybe he had dared
everything for her’ (29). Christine’s early version of him reveals her teenage
obsession with self. Even when she seems to be searching for an explana-
tion for his behaviour, she looks to herself to provide it. It is the story of her
surviving being stalked. This awareness of the character constructing a nar-
rative of the events becomes a central aspect of Atwood’s later stories, such
as ‘The Bog Man’ in Wilderness Tips.

Atwood’s concern with how Christine told and used the story of her
stalker at the time highlights the absence of any description of how she tells
the story during her obsession with his situation in the Vietnam War. The
story Christine used to tell of him gave her an ‘aura of mystery’ which had
‘faded’ by the time she knows about his Vietnamese nationality. In fact, even
‘she herself no longer believed’ that it made her mysterious (30). Christine’s concern for this Vietnamese man, which she develops later on, clearly constitutes a different version of him from that offered in the earlier account. Christine has lost her self-centred inability to understand others and is more concerned with his life than her own. Now the story is concerned with the Vietnamese man’s survival in the war, not with Christine’s survival of her experience with him. However, this revised version is not evident in the account Atwood offers. The two versions of how Christine feels about him remain disconnected, like parallel lines which never meet. Although Christine also becomes a stalker, obsessively trying to follow her ‘friend’s life through the media, Atwood does not offer us any indication of how this changed Christine’s perspective on being stalked by this man. Does she feel more guilty for co-operating with the police? Does she feel more complicit with his having stalked her because she realizes that she enjoyed it?

The troubled boundaries between fact and fiction, and between history and story, are highlighted at the end of ‘The Man from Mars.’ Christine feeds her fictional fantasies about her friend’s life by following the news. Finally, she discards her television because she starts to live his life and not her own. She plunges into nineteenth-century novels to escape her dreams of him. This ironic mix of fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary, is presented as a solution to Christine’s problems and demonstrates the importance of story-telling in our lives. She reads nineteenth-century fiction to maintain her focus on her own ‘real’ life, and to prevent her from dreaming her way through a fantasy version of the realities of the war her ‘friend’ is experiencing. Her situation as ‘something nondescript, something in the background’ (31) is also related to her loss of the unreal ‘aura of mystery’ which he had given her. Unable to tell her only amusing story, Christine has fallen into the background. These contradictions highlight the lack of resolution in this story between the two time frames. We also realize that the man’s Vietnamese identity does not solve the mystery of why he stalked Christine. The later time frame raises more questions than it answers about the earlier events. The two temporalities seem to be mutually exclusive and unable to connect with each other. Christine’s sense of being unique, which is so central to the early story, disappears in the later time frame. Similarly, the man’s specific national identity, which triggers Christine’s later obsession, is totally absent from the earlier version of him in which he is described as sounding French and looking Japanese. Each time frame maintains a tyrannous hold over the events occurring within it, refusing to let them connect with later or earlier occurrences.

‘Betty,’ which appears in both Dancing Girls and Bluebeard’s Egg, ends with a similar temporal jump which, again, introduces a new perspective on the past narrative, but one which does not resolve the mysteries and tensions of the story. After Betty’s death, Elizabeth feels particularly close to Betty’s experiences:
For years after that, Betty followed me around, waiting for me to finish her off in some way more satisfactory to both of us. When I first heard about her death I felt doomed. This, then, was the punishment for being devoted and obliging, this was what happened to girls such as (I felt) myself. (Dancing Girls, 50)

Elizabeth seems to feel that she should provide Betty’s story with resolution and closure. She fails to do so, however. Elizabeth simply changes and, owing to her emerging identity as a ‘clever’ girl, she loses her special connection with Betty:

As I passed beyond the age of melodrama I came to see that if I did not want to be Betty, I would have to be someone else. Furthermore, I was already quite different from Betty. . . . Betty herself, baking oatmeal cookies in the ephemeral sunlight of fifteen years before, slid back into three dimensions. She was an ordinary woman who died too young of an incurable disease. Was that it, was that all? (50)

Although the story ends with Elizabeth recognizing that ‘It is the Bettys who are mysterious’ (50), it also ends with a sense of her being unable to solve Betty’s mystery. Elizabeth wishes she could ‘have Betty back’ just to ask her if any of her story about Betty is true. Simultaneously, Elizabeth realizes that even if she could have Betty back it would resolve nothing. Elizabeth’s inability to understand Betty’s perspective and convince herself of the validity of her narrative version of Betty’s life is presented partly as a fault of linear time. As a child, Elizabeth was frightened by Betty’s emotional reaction to her desertion by her husband, Fred, and ran away (45). Elizabeth’s mother’s explanation only served to confuse her further:

‘She’s having a nervous breakdown’ our mother said, which for me called up an image of Betty lying disjointed on the floor like a car at the garage. (45)

When Elizabeth feels more psychologically in tune with Betty, she is too young to analyse and understand her affinity with Betty. When Elizabeth is ready to understand Betty, time forbids it for, as Atwood puts it, ‘People change, especially after they are dead’ (50). Elizabeth no longer considers herself to be a younger version of Betty. Change marches forwards, preventing earlier characters and events from ever being fully understood.

In ‘Uglypuss,’ published in Atwood’s 1983 collection, Bluebeard’s Egg, the failure of Becka and Joel’s relationship is finalized by Joel’s refusal to stay
at home at a certain time to meet Becka. The two linear narratives that Atwood offers us, one from Joel’s point of view and the other from Becka’s, again give the impression of parallel lines which fail to meet. Becka and Joel have been to all the places depicted in the story. Indeed, Becka feels more at home in Joel’s apartment than she does in her own accommodation. Her discomfort comes from waiting for Joel, not from being in his place: ‘She waited for an hour and a half, pacing, reading his magazines, surrounded by a space that used to be hers and still felt like it’ (Bluebeard’s Egg, 103). However, they are not in this place at the same time. Instead, Joel chooses to go to a bar which he associates with a time before Becka:

The back room of the Blue Danube used to be one of his favourite places to eat, before he moved in with Becka, or rather, she moved in with him. (90)

The fact that the last time they ate together was at this place is a sign that they will no longer be sharing time together:

Becka never liked this place, so he gradually eased out of the habit of coming here. The last time they ate together was here, though: a sure sign, for both of them, that the tide had turned. (91)

During the argument they have at this meal, Joel reveals his belief that he has access to an objective account of events that is uncoloured by perspective. This belief is one of the reasons why he and Becka cannot agree on a way to live together:

‘Women make love. Men make war,’ she said.
‘So?’ Joel said. ‘Is the lipstick pink or red?’
‘So it’s true.’
‘That’s supposed to be an insight?’ said Joel. ‘It’s not men that make war. It’s some men. You think those young working-class guys want to march off and be slaughtered? It’s the generals, it’s the . . . ’
‘But it’s not women, is it?’ said Becka.
‘That’s got nothing to do with anything,’ Joel said, exasperated.
‘That’s what I mean about you,’ said Becka. ‘It’s only your goddamned point of view that’s valid, right?’
‘Bullshit,’ he said. ‘We aren’t talking about points of view. We’re talking about history.’ (91)

This discussion clearly shows two different but equally valid perspectives on history. Becka’s viewpoint privileges gender over all other identity
categories, Joel’s focuses on class. The noticeable number of rhetorical questions illustrate that they are not really asking about or interested in each other’s point of view, but are simply trying to assert their own perspectives. Indeed, the whole structure of this story serves to demonstrate how different two perspectives on the same events can be. The story describes a single incident—Joel’s refusal to be at home when Becka asked to meet him and their reactions to it. Joel and Becka’s versions of this event have more in contrast than they have in common.

The sudden shift from Joel’s perspective to Becka’s gives the reader a brief feeling of being alienated from Becka’s point of view. We are initially in Joel’s position, outside Becka’s consciousness: ‘Becka walks along the street’ (102). This first sentence gives us only external information about Becka. The second sentence informs us about Becka’s habits by telling us that it is usual for her to walk on this street. By the third sentence, Atwood is telling us what Becka is thinking: ‘She tells herself there is nothing unusual about it’ (102). The fact that Becka is trying to reassure herself that this is usual suggests that she feels emotionally different from normal. We are already being drawn into her consciousness. As we come to understand Becka’s perspective, we realize that the differences between Becka and Joel are related to their contrasting understandings of the story of their relationship.

Becka is shocked by her violent axing of Joel’s chair and kidnapping of Joel’s cat, the ‘Uglypuss’ of the title, and she blames herself for calling Joel:

She should never have called him. She should know by now that over is over, that when it says The End at the end of a book it means there isn’t any more; which she can never quite believe. (107)

It is significant that Becka thinks of the relationship as a narrative. Her refusal to accept ‘The End’ makes us question Joel’s version of their last meal together. At the end of the meal Becka wants to return ‘home.’ She once told Joel that ‘Home isn’t a place, . . . it’s a feeling’ (92), which implies that she still considered them to be a family. What Joel reads as ‘a sure sign, for both of them, that the tide had turned’ may well have been a sincere attempt on Becka’s part to compromise with Joel and eat somewhere he likes in the hope of working out some solutions. Joel does not want a monogamous relationship and attempts to escape from Becka’s desired narrative of monogamy and family:

Every move to encircle him, pin him down, force him into a corner, only makes him more desperate to escape. She never came right out and said so, but what she wanted was permanence, commitment, monogamy, the works. Forty years of the same thing night after night was a long time to contemplate. (93)
He manufactures an ending to the relationship by saying that ‘People came to the end of what they had to say to one another’ (107).

Becka’s anger comes from the fact that she ‘hadn’t come to the end of what she had to say’ (107). Indeed, even Joel’s own narrative reveals that she had just developed the vocabulary and political consciousness necessary to express herself. When Joel met her, Becka was not political. He ‘enjoyed trying to educate her’ (94), and she had learnt in order to please him. She was quickly able to engage with him on an equal footing in political discussion. Joel turns her into the sort of woman who ought to attract him by giving her an informed political vocabulary. When she uses that vocabulary to express her own opinions, however, he finds her too challenging and demanding:

In recent years, he’s come to realize that the kind of woman that ought to turn him on—left-leaning intellectual women who can hold up their end of a debate, who believe in fifty-fifty, who can be good pals—aren’t the kind that actually do. He’s not ashamed of this discovery, as he would have been once. He prefers women who are soft-spoken and who don’t live all the time in their heads, who don’t take everything with deadly seriousness. What he needs is someone who won’t argue about whether he’s too macho, whether he should or shouldn’t encourage the capitalists by using underarm deodorant, whether the personal is political or the political is personal, whether he’s anti-Semitic, anti-female, anti-anything. Someone who won’t argue. (94)

Joel is clearly referring to debates he had with Becka, which, ironically, he taught her to be able to engage in. It is clear that Becka has challenged his politics in the personal sphere as she has found his treatment of her far from ‘left-leaning.’ Arguing can be a way in which different perspectives merge into a single narrative. Indeed, this is exactly what Joel expected of his arguments with Becka:

Early on, he thought they’d been engaging in a dialogue, out of which, sooner or later, a consensus would emerge. He thought they’d been involved in a process of mutual adjustment and counter-adjustment. But viewed from here and now, it was never a dialogue. It was merely a degrading squabble. (83)

It becomes clear through the story that Joel is not capable of ‘adjustment’ because he is convinced that his version of reality is correct. He cannot bear to be questioned or challenged by Becka. He expects her to accept his version of ‘history.’
Becka believed that by accepting his political education of her and becoming interested and involved in his street theatre group, she was becoming what he wanted her to be. Although Joel has taught her a new political, left-wing vocabulary, Becka’s understanding of their relationship seems limited by the vocabulary of popular romance and women’s magazines. Her decision to call him was motivated by romantic clichés:

Today she thought she still loved him, and love conquers all, doesn’t it? Where there’s love there’s hope. Maybe they could get it back, together. Now, she doesn’t know. (104)

It reads like the introduction of the next guest on a talk show about relationships. Just as the self-centred and opinionated Joel reached the stage where he could no longer live with Becka because she can ‘hold up [her] end of a debate,’ Becka reached the state in her life script which called for marriage and children. Indeed, Becka’s mother blames her for the end of the relationship and ‘thought but did not say that it served her right for not insisting on marriage’ (108). Becka also describes the cat as ‘His kidnapped child, the one he wouldn’t let her have.’ She parodies his excuses—‘We’re not ready yet and all that crap’ (105)—in a way that highlights the difference between their desired life scripts. Her realization that he does not agree with her perspective affects her experience of time. She feels old because she is back at the beginning of the narrative of marriage and family which she wishes to live out:

Tonight she feels dingy, old. Soon she will start getting into firming cream; she will start worrying about her eyelids. Beginning again is supposed to be exciting, a challenge. Beginning again is fine as an idea, but what with? She’s used it all up; she’s used up. (106)

She experiences the break-up with Joel as a temporal disjunction. Her new room in a shared house ‘reeks of impermanence’ (108). She feels that her angry display has brought about the end of something. However, time does not stop: ‘What now, now that she’s done it? Time will go on’ (108). Like Christine reading her nineteenth-century novels, Becka attempts to find a strategy for escaping time:

When she gets home she’ll do some Yogic breathing and concentrate on the void for a while, trying once more for serenity, and take a bath. (110)

We are not informed whether these strategies work. The last words of the story affirm that Becka’s heart does bleed.
Becka’s recognition of the serious degree of her emotional pain provides yet another contrast with Joel’s narrative. At the end of his story, he is searching for his cat while telling himself that he is allowing Becka’s unimportant personal things to disturb his ‘perspective’:

He shouldn’t be spending time on something this trivial, this personal; he should be conserving his energy for the important things. What he needs is perspective. This is Becka controlling him again. (102)

He does register that he may be sad tomorrow ‘when the full implications of a future without Uglypuss will sink in’ (102). He does not even consider the loss of Becka. His callousness is evident in his final thought: ‘At the moment though he’s thinking: Why did I have to give it that dumb name?’ (102). The brief jump into the first person emphasizes Joel’s concern with himself.

Although these two narratives happen at the same time, they fail to overlap. Becka manages to guess at Joel’s activities more accurately than he guesses at hers. Indeed, Atwood tells us that ‘He’s not thinking about Becka. He doesn’t remember her till his key’s in the lock, when he has a sudden image of her, waiting on the other side’ (100). Although this image does correspond with how Becka passed the initial hours waiting for him, it contrasts greatly with the evidence of the fury Joel actually finds behind his door. While the two perspectives never overlap (partly because Joel and Becka never meet), they do answer to each other in a much more satisfactory manner than the early and later parts of ‘Betty’ or ‘The Man From Mars’ do. It is possible at least to understand the characters’ differences. Time is certainly a highly subjective experience in this text, but by the end, both Becka and Joel seem to accept that their story has ended—they cannot ‘get it back, together’ (104).

This is significantly different from the two unnamed characters in ‘Under Glass,’ who are like versions of Becka and Joel at the beginning of their relationship. ‘Under Glass’ is told in the first person, so we never understand both characters’ points of view. The main character arrives at her boyfriend’s house with his lunch. She is ‘playing house’ and this is the ‘first domestic thing [she’s] ever done for him’ (Dancing Girls, 77). Her boyfriend, however, is hung-over, having slept with an ‘old friend’ the night before; a behaviour which seems to be a habit, rather as it is with Joel. The difference between this man and Joel, however, is that this man fails to understand the power of memory:

He kisses my fingers; he thinks we have been cured. He believes in amnesia, he will never mention it again. It should hurt less each time. (86)
In contrast, Joel recognizes the pain Becka’s memories cause her. He describes her memory as being ‘like a rat-trap: full of rats’ (Bluebeard’s Egg, 80). The memories in ‘Uglypsyss’ are the only times when the characters nearly connect. Often they do so in anger, but even the negative memories at least point to a previous life lived together. The earlier story, ‘Under Glass,’ ends with the suggestion that the female character will simply continue to collect painful experiences which her boyfriend will assume she has forgotten about. The last paragraph describes her day-dreaming of ‘the plants that have taught themselves to look like stones’ (Dancing Girls, 87), the living creatures which learn to survive in an emotionless state.

Becka’s strategies of doing yoga and taking a bath point to another of Atwood’s characters who attempts to escape the emotional pain of linear time and the narratives that unfold through it. Alma in ‘The Salt Garden’ has developed a much more complex set of strategies for escaping and rewriting the linear narrative of monogamy, marriage, and family. Alma is like Becka in that she is a woman running out of time: ‘she’s getting old’ (Bluebeard’s Egg, 215). Like Becka, Alma’s attempt at monogamy has failed. She is separated from her husband but still sees him—partly because of their child but also because they still sleep together. Alma’s husband, Mort, has a girlfriend called Fran who actually acts more like a wife to Mort than Alma does:

Fran isn’t the name of a mistress or a lover; more of a wife, but Alma is the wife. Maybe it’s the name that’s confusing Mort. Maybe that’s why he feels, not passion or tenderness or devotion towards this woman, but a mixture of anxiety, guilt, and resentment, or this is what he tells Alma. (219)

Alma does not mind this inverted arrangement:

It’s ridiculous the way the five of them carry on, but it would seem just as ridiculous to Alma not to go to bed with Mort. After all, he is her husband. It’s something she’s always done. Also, the current arrangement has done wonders for their sex life. Being a forbidden fruit suits her. She’s never been one before. (237)

Alma feels confident about how well she knows Mort: ‘Mort is thoroughly hers already; she knows every hair on his body, every wrinkle, every rhythm. She can relax into him with scarcely a thought’ (237). Unlike Becka, Alma has the confidence to share a man without feeling belittled herself. Alma also has a second relationship with Theo, which is perhaps another reason for her lack of anxiety over Mort’s girlfriend. Having two men to love rids
Alma of the anxieties associated with trying to have a monogamous relationship with a cheating husband:

She’s decided she prefers having two men rather than one: it keeps things even. . . . It makes her less anxious and less vulnerable, and suggests multiple futures. Theo may go back to his wife, or wish to move in with Alma . . . Mort may want to return, or he may decide to start over with Fran. Or Alma could lose both of them and be left alone with Carol. This thought, which would once have given rise to panic and depression not unconnected with questions of money, doesn't worry her much at the moment. She wants it to go on the way it is forever. (238–239)

Alma’s desire for this impermanent, makeshift arrangement to continue ‘forever’ indicates that she feels free from the progressive linear narrative of the female role in the nuclear family. Alma has avoided Becka’s feeling of being trapped in linear time which ‘will go on’ (108). When Becka’s monogamous relationship with Joel finally comes to an end, she has no visions of other possible futures. She believes that she is ‘beginning again,’ her only option being to repeat the same story she was going through with Joel in the hope that she can give it a happy ending. In contrast, Alma’s situation ‘suggests multiple futures.’ Time is not linear and monolithic for Alma. It is multiple and often spatial. It is noticeable that Alma often escapes from the notion of linear progress into a space. For example, the bathroom where she does a great deal of her day-dreaming is such a space. When Mort still lived with her, ‘she used to lock herself into the bathroom’ (227) to escape the pressure of her role in the family. Alma feels ‘weightlessness’ enclosing her as she takes the elevator up to Theo’s apartment, where time becomes blurred while they make love. Alma feels as if she is in ‘the wave’ while ‘Theo makes love to her as if he’s running for a train he’s never going to catch’ (239). These images imply that time is experienced differently in this rented apartment. Alma’s apocalyptic day-dream in which she and her daughter survive the ‘strike’ by hiding in the ‘large root cellar’ (229) also offers a detailed description of a space which will allow her to escape time. If, as Stephen Dedalus states in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, ‘History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake’ (Joyce, 42), apocalypse is the day-dream into which Alma attempts to escape. Significantly, this dream has a rural setting and suggests Atwood’s nostalgia for the early pioneering experience of ‘carving out a place and a way of keeping alive’ (*Survival*, 32).

These spaces allow Alma only temporary and precarious escapes, however. The image of the girl who is dragged along by the streetcar implies the linearity of time. Alma chooses to take the streetcar rather than drive because
‘she prefers modes of transportation that do not require any conscious decisions on her part. She’d rather be pulled along on a track if possible and let someone else do the steering’ (Bluebeard’s Egg, 233). This is clearly how Alma is living out her relationships, and the ominous image of the girl trapped in the streetcar doors implies that Alma knows that time and change will drag her along, too:

She knows that the present balance of power can’t last. Sooner or later, pressures will be brought to bear. The men will not be allowed to drift back and forth between their women, their houses. Barriers will be erected, signs will go up: STAY PUT OR GET OUT. Rightly so; but none of these pressures will come from Alma. (238)

Indeed, after her encounter with Theo she is shocked to realize that he is already anticipating the end of their relationship. Instead of being a space to escape into, Alma has been a short narrative to Theo:

Alma freezes, the half slip half on. Then air goes into her, a silent gasp, a scream in reverse, because she’s noticed at once: he didn’t say ‘if’, he said ‘when’. Inside his head there’s a schedule. All this time during which she’s been denying time, he’s been checking off the days, doing a little countdown. He believes in predestination. He believes in doom. She should have known that, being such a neat person, he would not be able to stand anarchy forever. (240)

This realization seems to be connected to her blackout, which occurs shortly afterwards. After her apocalyptic vision, Alma sees salt drifting ‘down behind her eyes, falling like snow’ (242). She realizes why she is so attracted to the salt garden she is crystallizing for her daughter. Not only does it imply control over time because ‘By the time Carol comes home from school, there will be a whole winter in the glass’ (226), but also, Alma realizes, salt will still exist after the nuclear apocalypse she is convinced will occur: ‘Nothing can kill it. After everything is over, she thinks, there will still be salt’ (242).

The fact that Alma identifies something that will survive the nuclear holocaust she is awaiting echoes her positive vision of her own future with Carol. She claims not to be anxious about her relationships with both men ending. Indeed, her day-dream about escaping with Carol into the root cellar only works as long as she does not include her husband and lover. This is the opposite of Becka, who feels she cannot survive without Joel because ‘she’s used up’ (106). Thus, while Alma’s apocalyptic hallucination is clearly a negative and destructive one, her belief that life will end soon also gives her
a sense of freedom from conventional narratives and linear time. In Alma, Atwood creates a female protagonist who is not trapped by the linear narrative of a monogamous relationship which ends in either heartbreak or motherhood. Instead, Alma’s imagination provides her with a sense of the absurdity of progress and the narrative of everyday life. Her sense of having privileged knowledge enables her to laugh at Theo ‘filling teeth, filling teeth, as if all the tiny adjustments he’s making to people’s mouths are still going to matter in ten years, or five, or even two’ (224). While Theo ‘makes investments’ and plans ‘his retirement’ (224), Alma busies herself discovering whether celery is a practically viable vegetable to include in her apocalyptic day-dream. Alma’s living arrangement as a single mother who treats her husband as a secret lover and has her own lover, too, allows her to live her life like ‘a man riding at the top of a wave on a surfboard: moving, yet suspended, as if there is no time’ (226). ‘Time,’ Atwood tells us ‘presupposes a future,’ whereas Alma does not expect a future. Furthermore, her living arrangement actually ‘suggests multiple futures,’ all of which may be wiped out by the immanent nuclear strike. It is no wonder, therefore, that Alma feels ‘removed from time’ (226). Despite Alma’s freedom, however, Atwood leads us to believe that it is temporary and precarious. Atwood still seems to assume that time is inescapably linear and Alma will fall victim to someone else’s ‘schedule.’ The other characters in this story are all ‘checking off the days, doing a little countdown,’ like Theo. Alma’s desire that this impermanence should continue forever is an unresolvable paradox.

In her 1992 collection of short stories, *Wilderness Tips*, the strategy of rewriting past narratives emerges as a more successful way of escaping linear scripts. ‘The Bog Man’ is a particularly good example of how Atwood empowers her female characters to retell and recast their stories. The first sentence of the story seems to start with the statement of a fact: ‘Julie broke up with Connor in the middle of a swamp’ (*Wilderness Tips*, 87). However, this sentence unravels as Atwood reveals that it involves several significant revisions of the events:

Julie silently revises: not exactly in the middle, not knee-deep in rotting leaves and dubious brown water. More or less on the edge; sort of within striking distance. Well, in an inn, to be precise. Or not even an inn. A room in a pub. What was available.

And not in a swamp anyway. In a bog. *Swamp* is when the water goes in one end and out the other, *bog* is when it goes in and stays in. How many times did Connor have to explain the difference? Quite a few. But Julie prefers the sound of *swamp*. It is mistier, more haunted . . .

So Julie always says: *I broke up with Connor in the middle of a swamp.* (87)
The reader is made highly conscious of the liberties Julie has taken with the ‘real’ events in order to construct her attention-catching sentence ‘I broke up with Connor in the middle of a swamp.’ These revisions are only the last set in a whole series. At first Julie is unable to tell the story at all: ‘It was too painful for her, in too complicated a way’ (104). More important, she did not know how to tell it:

Also she did not know what it was about. Was it about the way she had been taken advantage of, by someone older and more experienced and superior to her in power? Or was it about how she had saved herself from an ogre in the nick of time? But Connor was not an ogre. She had loved him, uselessly. (104–105)

After her divorce, ‘she began to tell the story of Connor once in a while’ and ‘always to women’ as part of their ‘exchange’ of ‘mystery stories.’ The purpose of these stories was to try to reach an understanding of ‘men and their obscure behaviour.’ Connor was the ‘mysterious object’ of the story (105). ‘Now that she has married again, she tells it more frequently’ as a party piece. She describes the Scottish setting in more detail and ‘puts in more comic elements’ (105). She no longer attempts to explain Connor and ‘his once-golden aura.’ ‘She skims over the grief’ including her own, Connor’s, and the sorrow she may have caused his wife. By the end of ‘The Bog Man,’ Connor is almost lost from the story—he ‘loses substance every time she forms him in words’ (106). As an ‘almost old’ woman, Julie now tells ‘a story about her own stupidity, or call it innocence, which shines at this distance with a soft and mellowing light. The story is now like an artefact from a vanished civilization’ (106). Like the bog man, whose value is derived purely from his age, this story now has a new value because it is old. Nostalgia infuses it with a ‘soft and mellowing light.’ This story is not lost because of linear time, as Betty’s story was; rather, it becomes more interesting and varied through time. The result is a short story which is structured like an onion, with layer upon layer of interpretation and reinterpretation, rather than a story structured like a linear road through events.

The image of a preserved man is also present in ‘The Age of Lead,’ where, again, time seems to increase the value of a past relationship rather than to result in the loss of those memories. Atwood’s assertion that, unlike the buried man from the Franklin Expedition, Vincent ‘was not put into the permafrost or frozen in ice’ (172), only serves to highlight the parallel between the two men. Indeed, almost immediately after this assertion of contrast between the two, Vincent is described in a way which closely echoes the frozen John Torrington:
It was white in his room, wintry. [Vincent] lay packed in ice, for the pain. A white sheet wrapped him, his white thin feet poked out the bottom of it. They were so pale and cold. Jane took one look at him, laid out on ice like a salmon, and began to cry. (173)

Even their causes of death are similar because they are both mysterious. Vincent makes a joke that relates back to the ice man when he says, “It must have been something I ate” (173). The irony is that ‘It was what they’d been eating that had killed [the men on the Franklin Expedition]’ (174). This parallel points to this story’s subtheme of the dangers of technology. The new cans, ‘a new technology, the ultimate defence against starvation and scurvy,’ actually killed the men on the Franklin Expedition because the ‘whole expedition got lead-poisoning’ (174). Similarly, Vincent dies at a time when ‘[p]eople were dying. They were dying too early’ (172) and ‘Jane began to notice news items of the kind she’d once skimmed over. Maple groves dying of acid rains, hormones in the beef, mercury in the fish, pesticides in the vegetables, poison sprayed on the fruit, God knows what in the drinking water’ (172). Vincent, too, may well be a victim of ‘new technology’. The apocalyptic overtones evident in ‘The Salt Garden’ are clearly present here.

Vincent emerges from this parallel with John Torrington as a preserved pioneer, a precious treasure like the ice man. Vincent was a pioneer in the field of relationships. He tried to live out the traditional romantic script with Jane but seemed purposely to fail at it:

They’d tried being lovers but had not made a success of it. Vincent had gone along with this scheme because Jane had wanted it, but he was elusive, he would not make declarations. What worked with other men did not work with him: appeals to his protective instincts, pretences at jealousy, requests to remove stuck lids from jars. Sex with him was more like a musical workout. He couldn’t take it seriously, and accused her of being too solemn about it. She thought he might be gay, but was afraid to ask him; she dreaded feeling irrelevant to him, excluded. (170)

The question of whether Vincent was gay refers back to his mysterious illness and the high incidence of AIDS in the gay population. The gay community found the mystery surrounding AIDS very difficult to cope with, partly because many people took advantage of the lack of information about the disease to supply their own damning explanations. While it seems that it was not AIDS that killed Vincent, there is certainly a connection made in this story between pioneering (both in terms of discovering new lands and in terms of exploring new relationships) and the risk of
illness. Atwood seems to imply that there is risk involved in deviating from society’s traditional life scripts.

Jane’s mother, surprisingly, liked Vincent because she did not believe that he represented a romantic or sexual threat to Jane:

Strangely enough, Jane’s mother approved of [Vincent]. She didn’t usually approve of the boys Jane went out with. Maybe she approved of him because it was obvious to her that no bad results would follow from Jane’s going out with him. . . . None of what she called consequences. Consequences: the weightiness of the body, the growing flesh hauled around like a bundle, the tiny frill-framed goblin head in the carriage. Babies and marriage, in that order. This was how she understood men and their furtive, fumbling, threatening desires, because Jane herself had been a consequence. (163)

Jane’s mother’s life script is one which certainly seems like a ‘life sentence.’ The linear series of events—pregnancy, babies, marriage—traps Jane’s mother in a life script she detests. There are no ‘consequences’ in this sense to Jane’s relationship with Vincent. They fail in their attempt to live out the life script of romantic love together. There are, however, other consequences to things they did not even realize they had done:

She felt desolate: left behind, stranded. Their mothers had finally caught up to them and been proven right. There were consequences after all; but they were the consequences to things you didn’t even know you’d done. (173–174)

Like Alma, Jane has escaped the narrative of monogamous marriage and family by living in multiple relationships, the most important of which was her friendship with Vincent.

The end of ‘The Age of Lead’ echoes even more closely the apocalyptic tone of ‘The Salt Garden’:

Increasingly the sidewalk that runs past her house is cluttered with plastic drinking cups, crumpled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates. She picks them up, clears them away, but they appear again overnight, like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment, discarding the objects that were once thought essential but are now too heavy to carry. (175)

The difference between Alma and Jane, however, is that Jane resists the apocalyptic movement of society; she clears away the evidence of decline.
She is also less passive in her self-conscious experimentation with romantic scripts. Whereas Alma waits for one of her men or their women to change the ‘balance of power,’ Jane succeeds in getting Vincent to try being her lover. She also refuses to ‘tie herself down’ or ‘make any sort of soul-stunting commitment to anything or anyone’ (169). Unlike Alma, it is Jane who does the moving out; and, unlike Becka, Jane wants to escape the life script of the conventional marriage. The parallel between Vincent and John Torrington suggests that Jane has preserved her memory of Vincent. She may return to her memory of him and, like the scientists who solve the mystery of John Torrington’s death, she might solve the mystery of how Vincent died and, more important, of how and why she loved him.

*Wilderness Tips* still describes some women who are victims in their relationships with men, such as Portia in the title story. Even in this story, however, Portia is not a victim of linear narrative. She recognizes that ‘nothing has happened, really, that hasn’t happened before’ (221), suggesting a cyclical notion of time. When Portia hears her husband making love to her sister, Pamela, Portia escapes to ‘the small, sandy bay where they all swam as children’ and goes to sleep (220). When she wakes, she does not feel threatened by her age and probable need to start again, as Becka does when she is cheated on. Instead, Portia feels connected and safe with her childhood memories:

> The cold hush of the lake is like a long breathing-out of relief. It’s safe to be this age, to know that the stump is her stump, the rock is hers, that nothing will ever change. (221)

Portia has a final vision which, in common with many of Atwood’s later female protagonists, is an apocalyptic one. Portia imagines a boat sinking, and she is the only one ‘aware of the disaster that has already overcome them’ (221). Even as a victim of her husband’s infidelity, Portia refuses to accept a linear model of inevitable consequences. Instead, she ‘knows that something bad is about to happen’ and she dreams of avoiding it: ‘she could swim out further, let go, and sink’ (221). She withdraws from the pain and anger Becka failed to escape.

Atwood’s later stories, which move away from depicting female victims of the linear narrative of marriage and family towards more complex relationships with ‘multiple futures,’ rewrite the early Canadian narrative of the survivor’s ingenuity in the face of a hostile environment. Surviving survival entails its own challenges and, like the early settlers, Atwood’s characters only succeed when they are resourceful and original. Just as early pioneers developed new strategies in order to ‘[carve] out a place and a way of keeping alive,’ the characters in Atwood’s later and more positive stories develop new ‘life scripts’ in order to avoid becoming characters in socially conventional
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narratives. When Atwood tells us that the survivor ‘has little after his ordeal that he did not have before’ (Survival, 33), she is denying the entire content of her own study. The survivor has the story of his survival to tell when he returns, and, as the bibliographies in Survival attest, Canadian survivors have repeatedly and successfully told their stories. In Wilderness Tips (and to some extent in Bluebeard’s Egg), Atwood depicts characters who have learnt how to tell their stories of survival. It is as narrators of the past and visionaries of the future that characters like Alma, Lois, Portia, and Julie survive their survival. However, Atwood’s later stories generally shy away from a final resolution of whether these characters’ strategies really do undermine linear time. ‘The Bog Man’ ends by informing us that ‘Julie is almost old’ (Wilderness Tips, 106), implying that, despite her creative retelling of the past, she will fall victim to linear time. ‘The Age of Lead’ and ‘Wilderness Tips’ both end with ominous images. ‘The Salt Garden’ ends with Alma’s vision of apocalypse, after she has learnt of Theo’s ‘schedule.’ These apocalyptic endings leave us with the same concern as Joanne has at the end of ‘True Trash’—that what seems like an ending actually ‘would not be an ending, it would only be the beginning of something else’ (37).

Note

1. In an essay entitled ‘Gender and Narrative Perspective in Margaret Atwood’s Stories,’ Dieter Meindl describes the application of the term postmodern to Atwood as ‘problematic.’

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BARBARA HILL RIGNEY

Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics

Probably every secondary school teacher of English literature in the world introduces Jane Austen’s *Emma* by quoting Austen herself, who claimed she had “created a heroine whom no one but myself will very much like.” Margaret Atwood’s heroines, if we can even designate them as such, are similarly ambiguous and morally suspect, often as “clueless” as Emma, sometimes guilty of worse crimes than Emma or Austen could have possibly imagined, and Atwood herself seldom appears to “like” any of them very much at all. What, then, about Atwood’s narratives solicits her readers’ sympathies for these characters and secures Atwood’s place, second only to Austen’s perhaps, in the canon of feminist rhetoric? Surely we readers, as much as her characters, are victims of Atwood’s trickery and pawns in her narrative games which become more complex and less predictable with the publication of each poem and every novel.

But Atwood has warned us for years that her intentions are dishonorable and that she plays for keeps: “That’s me in the dark. I have designs on you, I’m plotting my sinister crime, my hands are reaching for your neck . . . Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you’ve turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie” (*Murder in the Dark*, 30). But does Austen’s Emma “lie” because she is a fabricator of fictions about herself as well as about others; does Henry James’s governess in *The Turn of*
the Screw “lie” to us, to herself, or maybe even to Henry James; do any or even all of Atwood’s heroines actually “lie,” or are they simply unreliable narrators because they are mad, evil, or simply guilty?

The most duplicitous of all of Atwood’s female protagonists, Grace Marks in Alias Grace, has been convicted by everyone but Atwood and her readers of murder in the first degree. Grace (amazing and otherwise) begins her first explanation not with the words, “This is what happened,” but “This is what I told Dr. Jordan,” to whom she has every practical reason to lie, for he is among the few who can argue for her sanity, her innocence, her freedom. It is the perverse aspect of this novel that neither Dr. Jordan, the reader (and maybe not even Grace, given the possibility that she is truly insane and therefore does not recognize her own reality), nor Atwood herself ever learns the “truth” from Grace, who tells her story only to keep from being returned to the Kingston Penitentiary or to the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. As she daily, chapter by chapter, “spins out her yarn,” she stitches, expertly and artistically, on the intricate patterns of quilts for which she provides such telling names as “Jagged Edge” and, later and more sinister (since Grace has been convicted of bludgeoning with an ax handle and then dismembering the body of her former employer’s mistress), “Hearts and Gizzards.” So, as in all literatures, particularly those written by women and particularly those written by Atwood, the image of the woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider, becomes one with the image of tale-teller, writer.

Equally pervasive in Atwood’s fictions and poetry is the dangerous and seductive Siren, to whom all singers–writers are also related. Circe, in Atwood’s “Circe/Mud Poems,” can turn men into pigs, and so can Grace in Alias Grace. As an older, but not necessarily wiser physician warns Dr. Jordan: “Many older and wiser heads have been enmeshed in her toils, and you would do well to stop your ears with wax, as Ulysses made his sailors do, to escape the Sirens” (Alias Grace, 71). At one point, Dr. Jordan compliments Grace on her singing, but he never gets the connection, never realizes that she has become the object of his fantasies. As he sits with her in the sewing room, he imagines the smell of her skin, “with its undertone of dampness, fullness, ripeness—what? Ferns and mushrooms; fruits crushed and fermenting. He wonders how often the female prisoners are allowed to bathe. . . . He is in the presence of a female animal” (Alias Grace, 90). Fantasies about Grace lead him into degrading sexual acts with his landlady as Grace’s surrogate. Professionally, too, Dr. Jordan has suffered from his association with Grace; the Sirens may well have helped Ulysses’s career, but a paper written about Grace doesn’t help Dr. Jordan as he expected it would.

Not that Dr. Jordan deserves help, and Atwood dissolves any possible sympathy to which her wayward readers may have succumbed, by reminding us that Dr. Jordan, “while a medical student, dissected a good many women—
from the labouring classes, naturally,” nor does he make political connections though he notices that “their spines and musculature were on the average no feebleer than those of men, although many suffered from rickets” (*Alias Grace*, 73). His interest, clearly, is not only medical: “He has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside . . . he is one of the dark trio—the doctor, the judge, the executioner” (*Alias Grace*, 82).

In Atwood’s fictions there is a dark trio of women as well—along with Arachne, the weaver, and Circe, the Siren, there is also Scheherazade, telling stories to stay alive. As a more perceptive male character tells Dr. Jordan of Grace: “Has she been lying to you, you ask? Let me put it this way—did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether” (*Alias Grace*, 377). In case we have missed the inherent ambiguity of the nature of truth, which is Atwood’s major thesis, Atwood begins the novel with an epigraph, a quotation from William Morris, *The Defense of Guenevere*, another heroine condemned by history and literature: “Whatever may have happened through these years, / God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie.”

The paradoxical relation between truth and fabrication, fact and fiction, are at the center of all of Atwood’s narratives, especially *Alias Grace*, which combines history (or truth as we know it) and the novel. Atwood weaves fiction in between court records, sketches of the defendants, ballads written around the events of the murders, and newspaper accounts, many of which were fiction as well, as Grace maintains throughout her story and Atwood also believes was the case, as she states in the “Author’s Afterword.” She also quotes observations by that clearly not infallible recorder of events, Mrs. Susanna Moodie, who also has an existence in historical record and whom we recognize from Atwood’s earlier volume of poetry, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. That there was also a Grace Marks who spent twenty-nine years in the Kingston Penitentiary is documented by sources other than Atwood. But Atwood, as she writes, has “of course fictionalized historical events . . . Where many hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent” (*Alias Grace*, 466–467).

History itself is as enigmatic as any of Atwood’s narrative interests, and she moves through epochs without a backward glance. The dates are all there for Grace, and she is solidly of a past which evokes horror in the twentieth-century reader. But dates are not always so dependable, as we know from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which future becomes merged with past, one as unbearable as the other. The future Gilead is a ghost of Puritan America, in which witches still hang, sex for pleasure is forbidden, and language is subject to censorship. Grace shares with Offred the veil of history, and as Professor Pieixoto tells his audience about the irretrievability of past heroines, fictional
or historical: “We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer…. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes” (The Handmaid’s Tale, 324). Tony in The Robber Bride is a historian by profession, and she knows that “History was once a substantial edifice, with pillars of wisdom,” but these pillars are only “glimpsed here and there through the trees, on the mountain roads, among the ruins, on the long march into chaos” (The Robber Bride, 462). And sometimes Atwood can make history disappear altogether, as she does in the introductory paragraphs of Cat’s Eye, where time itself is subject to the narrator’s perception. A speaker not yet named Elaine tells us that she thinks “of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time, but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away” (Cat’s Eye, 3).

So, if we cannot even depend on the reality of time as we perceive it, history and the historian are certainly not to be trusted, which is exactly the conclusion to which Atwood would like us to arrive. We certainly have no wish to doubt Atwood’s veracity in her historical narratives, or even to question her evidence, even though we cannot help but contrast the “Author’s Afterword” in Alias Grace with the ironic epilogue to The Handmaid’s Tale, the “Historical Notes” in which Offred’s terrible story is so misinterpreted in the academic jargon of professors of anthropology at an international conference at the “University of Denay, Nunavit.” Truth itself, finally, is like Scheherazade’s stories, “Another realm altogether.” Indeed, as Sherrill E. Grace has argued so well: “Duplicity—deceit and doubleness—is a familiar Atwood subject and a fundamental Atwood concern. It informs her vision of this world, is at the root of her poetics, and is, indeed, the systemic model for her work” (55).

Thus, Atwood places herself (inadvertently or otherwise) directly in the center of current academic controversy and theoretical debate (another “Disneyland of the Soul,” though not the one Atwood meant in her earlier essay) about feminism and its relation to Booth’s “implied narrator,” Bakhtin’s “dialogic imagination,” Genette’s “autodiegetic” narrative, and to numerous other auto- and homodiegetic schools of thought, until we feel like the audience at the University of Denay, Nunavit must have felt. We are fortunate that Atwood herself has anticipated her critical position and characterized theories of narrative intention in simpler terms: “Why do authors wish to pretend they don’t exist? It’s a way of skinning out, of avoiding truth and consequences. They’d like to deny the crime, although their fingerprints are all over the martini glasses, not to mention the hacksaw blade and the victim’s neck” (“Me, She, and It,” 17). But fingerprints or not, we are still puzzled by Atwood’s refusal to distinguish, let alone choose, between author and narrator, and who to hang in the end, since there is never, strictly speaking, an “end” anyway. It is almost always
we, the readers, who are left hanging, bereft of answers, and condemned to imagine our own, longing for that post-postmodernist writer who even now may be planning a text in which Anna Karenina always jumps, Mrs. Ramsay always dies, heroines like Emma always get their man. Would we like that?

Except for the relevance of a Canadian setting to Atwood’s own life, she disappears from her text as much as do the guilty authors she cites above. Who, for example, is telling Grace’s story? Mostly it is Grace, but how do we know about Dr. Jordan’s secret life, and who reads the news reports to us? Mostly Grace addresses her story to Dr. Jordan, to “Sir,” but at other times she is alone, either thinking, or perhaps, since she and Atwood are both careful to tell us that Grace can read and write, actually writing her own story. Tense varies as well, and subjects arise seemingly spontaneously, a flight of ideas, as is sometimes the case for people who are either very young or very old or emotionally very ill. So, we can only know about Grace what she wants us to know, and Atwood is back to her narrative tricks.

In all of Atwood’s novels, the author is not the only criminal, for all of her protagonists have their fingerprints on the martini glasses as well and especially on the hacksaw blades. They are bloodthirsty and sometimes violent. Marian MacAlpin of The Edible Woman is a cannibal who eats herself; the nameless protagonist of Surfacing ritualistically murders dolls in childhood, just as she later, as an adult, considers herself guilty of child murder by abortion, real or imagined or simply a lie; Joan Foster of Lady Oracle kills her own identity into fantasy and romance, just as Lesje in Life Before Man kills hers into a Disney version of prehistory; Rennie in Bodily Harm either imagines or engineers for herself every version of bodily harm from cancer to torture at the hands of political tyrants; Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale is truly victimized by oppression beyond self-destruction, but she also participates in the “Salvaging Ceremony,” in which a man is torn to pieces by a crowd of Maenad-like women. Mostly men do terrible things to women in Atwood’s fictions, but increasingly and particularly in the most recent novels, women do them to each other: a live burial in Cat’s Eye, mental and physical cruelty in The Robber Bride, and, as stated earlier, murder and (possibly) dismemberment in Alias Grace. Some of the poems are worse.

How, then, given such negative portrayals of women, can we construct a feminist ethic for Atwood, how infer a woman-centered poetic? Atwood’s gender politics are trickier than her narrative style. If women are responsible for their own predicaments (how did Scheherazade get herself into that situation in the first place?), what can we conclude about guilt and innocence in general, the nature of human beings, the possibility of evil? Is evil merely a childhood fantasy like the Hitler games in Surfacing, or could there be physiological explanations, like those Dr. Jordan provides for himself, that evil has a scientific explanation, that it is “an illness due to some lesion of the nervous
system, and that the Devil himself is simply a malformation of the cerebrum” (Alias Grace, 80)? Is the quest for power a motivating force for women as well as for men? Based on Atwood’s evidence, we must agree with Roz in The Robber Bride that women “haven’t let themselves be molded into male fantasies, they’ve done it to themselves” (The Robber Bride, 388).

A strange gender inequality exists in all of Atwood’s texts, for women, more than their comparatively benign male counterparts, are capable of virtually demonic power. Atwood has always, since her early fiction and essays, claimed that writing itself is at least figuratively demonic, a function of possession, a practice akin to witchcraft, which women have traditionally practiced with greater success than men. Grace, for example, can conjure the initials of her future husband with an apple peeling and confound a room full of theologians and scientists by enacting a drama of possession and spiritualism, abetted by her doppelgänger, the peddler/gypsy, Jeremiah. Not surprisingly, this chapter in the novel is entitled “Pandora’s Box,” again the name of one of Grace’s quilt patterns, but also a design to evoke the mythological association of Grace and women in general with the nature of evil.

Similarly, Elaine in Cat’s Eye is a talented witch who can summon to her rescue the Virgin Mary, or some darker manifestation of her, and then summon her again in a painting of “a woman dressed in black, with a black hood or veil covering her hair. Here and there on the black of her dress or cloak there are pinpoints of light” (Cat’s Eye, 430). This novel appropriately concludes on All Souls’ Eve, that witch’s festival of masked children who are really “spirits of the dead . . . come back to the living, dressed as ballerinas and Coke bottles, and spacemen and Mickey Mice, and the living will give them candy to keep them from turning vicious” (Cat’s Eye, 409). As expected, Elaine changes her blue jogging suit for a black dress at the last moment. We know from the subjects of Elaine’s paintings evoking the evils done to her in childhood that she has the “evil eye,” capable of transforming her enemies to stone, or at least freezing them into paint and exposing their ugliness to curious gallery visitors. Mrs. Smeath, we agree, deserves her representation as an “imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear” (Cat’s Eye, 426–427). It is Elaine’s curse and her fantasy that Cordelia, responsible in childhood for so many brutal acts, dies, finally, in obscurity and misery, while Elaine herself enjoys the success imaged in the “retrospective” of her work.

All of Atwood’s writer/artist protagonists are witches to varying degrees, capable of casting spells, and all are on trial for witchcraft, if not for murder. Atwood writes in Second Words that writers are always under suspicion, and that they “cannot have come by their power naturally, it is felt. They must have got it from somewhere. Women writers are particularly subject to such projections, for writing itself is uncanny” (Second Words, 331). This is,
of course, feminist rhetoric, for by restoring ancient powers to women, albeit symbolically, Atwood takes her characters as well as her readers above and beyond the gendered stereotypes.

Atwood also restores women to women as friends, ultimately, though they may have suffered horrors at one another’s hands. In every novel, a friendship between two, or among a group, forms a center. Even Cordelia is resurrected, redeemed, and imagined as a friend, as “not something that’s gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea” (Cat’s Eye, 445). The evil Zenia in The Robber Bride serves unwittingly to bring all her victims together in the end, when they celebrate their powers by telling stories, “That’s what they will do, increasingly, in their lives” (The Robber Bride, 470). Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale can have no friendships in her present life, but the words of her unknown and unnamed predecessor are the friendly message of one woman to another, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (197).

If Atwood will not create heroines, her protagonists often fabricate their own. Offred idealizes Moira, who speaks the unspeakable that Offred is afraid even to think in The Handmaid’s Tale; Rennie in Bodily Harm endows Lora with the same ability to speak and do the outrageous things that lead to survival. Not many women in the world of Alias Grace are capable of intimacy, but Mary Whitney, mostly because of her wild stories and rebellious language, becomes like a sister to Grace, lending her clothes, her name for Grace’s alias, and thus also her identity: “She was always kind to me . . . and without her, it would have been a different story entirely” (Alias Grace, 102). Thus, the celebration of women’s friendships and their relation to language and stories more than mitigates Atwood’s cynicism about human relationships in general.

In many ways, then, Atwood’s gender politics have not changed essentially during her writing career, and neither have her narrative games, which continue to be a contest between reader and author, of, to parody Atwood herself, “who can say what to whom and get away with it.” But the ironic edge is stronger now than before; Atwood’s narrative blades are sharpened and ready lest we sink her into sentiment. She refuses to be canonized in any area but the literary. Everything for Atwood is two-sided, and both sides are subjects for satire, satire as subtle yet as cutting as that which Jane Austen wrote. Somewhere there is a line between laughter and anguish, “cutting the heart asunder” (Woolf, 17). Atwood also writes that line exactly, and what utterly and finally redeems her tricks and games is her political sensibility, as serious as any grave.

Though Atwood as author may choose her subjects to “look” at them, as Mrs. Moodie so coldly examines Grace who sits unknowing in her prison cell, Atwood’s women are not mere objects of curiosity. Grace’s story is a narrative exercise, but it is also a tragedy, not a testament to the survivor ability
of women, but an autopsy of a world that has killed women's spirits as well as their bodies. The real enigma of Grace is that she can resist the drama of her own story, that she can tell so simply and ingenuously the account of her emigration, as horrific as any historical or fictional recounting of the Middle Passage, that she can analyze her own poverty and servitude without hysteria, that her very hysteria becomes a revelation about the medical treatment of madness in the period and about how people must have suffered from such inhumane practices. What, then, is truly amazing about Grace is that she can see flowers from the barred windows of the madhouse. Like Atwood herself, Grace stitches on the “Tree of Paradise,” “changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas” (Alias Grace, 459).

Works Cited


CAROL L. BERAN


title

My I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression.

Henry David Thoreau

In each of the ten stories in Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips*, readers encounter a stranger in an enclosed world. The invaders in these stories—unlikely doubles, members of the opposite sex, immigrants, aliens—bring the unknown, the foreign, the bizarre into everyday life in flat, dull Canada. However, strangers in these stories do more than enliven cabin-fevered Canadian characters. Critical assessments of Margaret Atwood’s writings, in the detached academic mode, generally fail to voice the intensity of Atwood’s commitment to teach and to delight. The stories in *Wilderness Tips* illustrate how Atwood demands of her readers a strong engagement that goes beyond the stance that David Staines considers typical of Canadians and Canadian literature: the “dispassionate witness” (*Beyond the Provinces*, 60). These stories challenge readers to acknowledge the human predicament in the latter half of the twentieth century, consider possible responses, and finally transform themselves into “creative non-victims.” Reading *Wilderness Tips* as variations on the theme of the stranger clarifies Atwood’s critique of contemporary society, reveals her metacriticism of those who write

literary criticism about her works, and underscores the intensity with which she attempts to arouse her audience to respond to typical Canadian situations with un-Canadian impoliteness and intensity.

An initial look at strangers in *Wilderness Tips* suggests that Atwood has set up groups of stories that tempt readers to analysis by particular currently fashionable literary theories. Critics have frequently found Atwood creating characters who are doubles of one another. For these critics, Atwood provides strangers who are also doppelgangers. Functioning as a self outside of the self, a stranger whose invasion of personal space sparks introspection and epiphany, is a key role of Ronette in “True Trash,” Molly in “Weight,” and Marcia in “Hack Wednesday.” The difference between two women—a relatively small degree of strangeness—becomes space in which to work out the question of identity. Joanne, her double name suggesting the split in her identity, follows from outside the less analytical, more lived life of her double, Ronette; in the end, Joanne cannot know for sure what has happened to her other, nor become like her, nor enter into the true story of her life: “The melodrama tempts her, the idea of a revelation, a sensation, a neat ending” (*WT*, 30). The terms Atwood uses here suggest that Joanne resists creating a traditional, consciously shaped narrative out of Ronette’s life (“melodrama,” “revelation,” “sensation,” “neat ending”), preferring to see it as a “found” story: “an archaic story, a folktale, a mosaic artifact” (30). Joanne learns from Ronette’s story that observing and analyzing put her at one remove from engaging in life: “What she wants is what Ronette has: the power to give herself up, without reservation and without commentary. . . . Everything Joanne herself does is surrounded by quotation marks” (18–19), marking her sensibility as postmodern. When she does try to engage, her borrowed dress becomes indelibly stained as she enters the world of a folktale. In “Weight” the narrator, like Joanne, remains an outside observer of the aspects of life in which her friend Molly had been engaged: marriage, children, and a legal career representing people unable to pay her. Unlike Joanne, this narrator knows the end of the story of her doppelganger: Hacked up by her husband, Molly’s body has been scattered across Ontario. The narrator’s power over the men that she cajoles, seduces, and blackmails into donating to the battered women’s shelter may avenge the murderous power of Molly’s husband. However, when it occurs to the narrator that she doesn’t have to go to dinner or have an affair with the latest contributor, the options of being like Molly (a victim) or being the opposite of Molly (a victimizer) give way to a third possibility: being a creative non-victim, someone who moves out of victim patterns, transcends traditional roles, and learns to tell her own story (*Survival*, 38–39). Marcia in “Hack Wednesday” is her own double. She is a stranger to herself as past and present selves seem to exist simultaneously. For her, “Time is going faster and faster” (207). She must cope with changes within her body (aging) and outside it (her partner aging, her children growing up, computers
in the workplace, “Rex Morgan, M.D.” disappearing from the newspaper). Her psyche is also double: She is both immersed in and ironically detached from quintessential Canadian attitudes—the stories Canadians tell themselves about themselves: “the supposed Anglo-Canadian prudery, inhibition, and obsession with public opinion” (208), the “moral obligation to deal with winter instead of merely avoiding it” (213), and the anti-Americanism of her husband’s refusal to eat Cheerios “because they’re American” (209). Exploring the theme of the double in these stories could expand beyond traditional thematic criticism into psychological or feminist interpretations of the other self, with emphasis on how Atwood’s ideal of the creative non-victim emerges or fails to emerge in each case, or into postcolonial analyses of the stories, showing how Joanne, the narrator of “Weight,” and Marcia each have a hybridity of perspective that reflects Canada’s colonial status (with respect to both Britain and the United States) and marks the characters’ position in a postmodern world.

Critics who explore gender differences and the power politics between men and women are likely to be interested in the interactions of Percy Marrow and Susanna in “Uncles” and Selena and Richard in “Isis in Darkness.” In “Uncles” Atwood observes the interrelationship between the genders as Percy creates and destroys Susanna professionally, causing her to perceive an uncomfortable revisionist history of her life that makes him a stranger to her and her a stranger to herself: “‘Maybe I’ve remembered my whole life wrong’” (143). The differences she perceives between males and females—that boys were told “Don’t be a smart aleck” (124), whereas she “could do whatever she liked and still be cute as a button” (125)—prove inaccurate or at least inadequate; the lack of deference between males and females in spite of seeming mutual politeness comes as a shock, making all men as much strangers to Susanna as Percy makes himself by writing the exposé. Susanna assumes that the version of her story that men tell is accurate, letting men make her a stranger to herself. In contrast, the poet Selena in “Isis in Darkness” writes her own story that eludes man’s synthetic power. As Richard tries unsuccessfully to analyze the elusive and changeable Selena, Atwood leads the reader into an inquiry about the feminist concern with difference. Richard’s scholarly note cards become mosaic pieces from which he tries to reconstruct Selena with deference bordering on reverence: “He is the one who will sift through the rubble, groping for the shape of the past. He is the one who will say it has meaning” (74). Nevertheless, trying to reassemble her makes his “eyes hurt” (74). Here, the man seems to have the power to create meaning; yet the woman, through her complexity, cannot be adequately reduced to the note cards that seem to contain her, nor synthesized from them. In Atwood’s theory of victimization, Susanna allows herself to be a victim of what she perceives as a male-dominated world (Victim Position Two [Survival, 37]), whereas Selena makes herself a creative non-victim (Victim Position Four [Survival,
Reading the two stories together clarifies that what apparently reflects a difference in power between males and females can be transformed by a difference in how and by whom their stories are told. In these stories Atwood challenges simplistic views that men have all the power and use it to victimize women. Susanna makes herself a victim of male power by letting men create her identity, whereas Selena creates her own identity and is unaffected by whatever identities Richard may create for her. For feminist critics interested in the ways that men have power to control what is seen as real and to discriminate against whatever lies outside their reality paradigm, these stories offer abundant material.

Lucy in “Death by Landscape” comes from the United States, and George in “Wilderness Tips” comes from Hungary, inviting cultural critics to discuss clashes of customs and beliefs as these characters interact with Canadian characters. As Atwood explores characters who are strangers to each other due to cultural differences, she creates political allegories about Canadian multiculturalism. Canadian writers frequently attempt to define the ever-elusive national identity by contrasting Canadians with people from the United States and by including distinctly different people from various ethnic groups within the Canadian mosaic. American Lucy influences the entire life of Canadian Lois, although Lucy disappears when the girls are teenagers. Lois stares at Canadian paintings on her wall, looking for Lucy the way other Canadians might stare at American programs on the television screen, and she seems to deny her own life because of her feelings about Lucy: “She can hardly remember, now, having her two boys in the hospital, nursing them as babies; she can hardly remember getting married, or what Rob looked like” (117). American culture as center marginalizes Canadian culture.3 George similarly invades the life stories of Canadians. The three sisters of the story represent types of Canadian women: Prue is a sexual adventurer; Pamela, a reserved academic; and Portia, a loving but betrayed wife. Hungarian George—not a British Saint George—seduces them all. Portia’s vision at the end of the story, evoked by her realization of what George with his different code of behavior has done to them all, shows Canada as the sinking Titanic with its passengers “still not aware of the disaster that has already overcome them” (204). However, envisioning herself as Cassandra, “running naked through the ballroom” predicting catastrophe, reminds her that “nothing has happened, really, that hasn't happened before” (204). These two stories offer more than an entertaining read. By critiquing stories Canadians tell about themselves, they demand that we see the potentially destructive aspects of Canada’s ways of defining itself, whether by its attraction/repulsion response to the United States or its mosaic response toward immigrants, naïvely valuing them without understanding the cultural differences that make them truly strangers.
The tumor in “Hairball,” the preserved 2,000-year-old body in “The Bog Man,” and the 150-year-old frozen body of John Torrington in “The Age of Lead” are the most alien of the strangers in Wilderness Tips. For Freudian critics who want to discover what is inside a character, “Hairball” presents a hidden self brought to light. For new historical critics, the exhumed bodies of the bog man and John Torrington shed light on the past, present, and future. For critics interested in the myths and symbols that define Canada today, these stories present a plethora of material that challenges and deconstructs key cultural myths. Hairball, who is benign only in the doctor’s diagnosis, invades Kat’s body and the party held by Ger’s wife. The potentially slapstick comedy of the untold opening of the truffle box containing the tumor is funny because of its incongruity. But Kat’s behavior—which readers sympathetic to Kat’s predicament applaud—is not polite; it not only joyously transgresses the Canadian code of good manners, but also violates the biblical injunction, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2, King James Version), satirizing two cultural beliefs.

In “The Bog Man” the well-preserved human body may be an object of wonder, yet the bog man represents a past that Julie repudiates when she envisions her lover changing into a bog man. Julie goes into a telephone booth and ultimately transforms herself; Connor’s failure to get inside the booth to metamorphose into Superman nullifies cultural myths concerning male power. Years later Julie wonders, “how can she explain him, him and his once golden aura? She no longer tries” (94). Bereft of his saintly halo, Connor, like the bog man, is ultimately a total stranger. Julie prefers a story that “is now like an artifact from a vanished civilization, the customs of which have become obscure” (95). This allows her to be a dispassionate witness to the stranger she once confronted. But as readers who watch her story-making, can we be as dispassionate? Are we to feel no outrage at the professor for beginning an affair with his student without mentioning that he is married? Do we feel it is appropriate that Julie takes revenge on him as he declares his love for her while he pounds on the door of the phone booth? Because she “is truly frightened of him” (93), she is caught between her fear and the social code of good manners and kindness that says she should listen with sympathy, especially since she is a woman. Is the story she constantly revises and retells for thirty years adequate? Is she a creative non-victim or a victimizer? We are told that “She knows the damage was done, was severe, at least at the time; but how can it be acknowledged without sounding like a form of gloating?” (94–95). Neither Julie’s nor Connor’s actions are charming or polite. The brutal, transgressive worlds of Connor and the bog man have great power and energy, now lost. We should grieve for the diminution: “By this time he is almost an anecdote” (95). Julie may feel that way because the story is from her distant past; for us, however, the story is present. We should feel strongly
because we know that this is no anecdote, but an indictment of viewpoints characteristic of our time.

In “The Age of Lead” John Torrington and his companions on the Franklin Expedition, we are told, died because of the new technology that was intended to save their lives, just as Vincent, dying of “a mutated virus that didn’t even have a name yet” (160), may be the victim of a modern malaise, symbolized by the clutter of “plastic drinking cups, crumpled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates . . . like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment” (162), an image that magnifies a kind of environmental pollution that some might consider trivial by linking it with the devastation of war. Neither Jane’s sympathy (Atwood’s choice of Lady Franklin’s first name for her modern character suggests the story is a retelling of Jane Griffin Franklin’s efforts to rescue her lost husband), nor technology’s latest advances, nor the health care system in which Canadians take such pride are effective in this situation. But are we just dispassionate observers of the destruction by technology that this story recounts? By the end of the story, Atwood overthrows any sense of superiority we may have felt as we began to read about John Torrington. Atwood presents us with our world. We should be upset. Because the mysterious disease killing Vincent is specifically not AIDS, we become aware that AIDS may only be a precursor to dreadful diseases yet to come; even as knowing and being able to prevent the mysterious disease that killed John Torrington does not end human suffering, solving the puzzle of AIDS or cancer will change rather than end the story of sickness and death. “The most troubling warning,” embodied in both John Torrington and Vincent, “is that there are some secrets, mysteries, truths that will always escape our desire to possess, label, control” (Grace, “Franklin Lives,” 162). In these three stories, by means of the outrageous character of the stranger, Atwood not only satirizes both the myth of the polite Canadian and the myth of technology’s ability to improve human life, but also pokes fun at those critics who espouse artistic detachment, who see reading as a dispassionate way of gazing on the problems of other people, problems that they themselves expect never to encounter, rather than as a way of engaging in a transformative process set up by a writer who bears witness to the problems confronting humanity now. “Witness is what you must bear,” Atwood writes in “Notes towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written” (Selected Poems II, 73).

Of course, Atwood’s stories also tempt subtle or devious readings. Doubles may be more obviously present in “True Trash,” “Weight,” and “Hack Wednesday” than in the other stories, but surely George is the evil twin of the women’s ineffectual brother, Roland, and Lucy is the lost half of Lois. Hairball, the bog man, and John Torrington might be discussed as doubles that manifest inner worlds of Kat, Connor, and Vincent. Using Sharon Wilson’s notion that doppelgangers can be opposite sexes (270), Susanna and Percy or
Richard and Selena might be seen as doubles in opposition, with one in each pair representing fantasy and the other reality. Stories other than “Uncles” and “Isis in Darkness” explore gender differences. In “True Trash,” Joanne and Ronette become tainted by experiences that seem not to affect the male characters in the same way. In “Wilderness Tips,” the battle of the sexes and the double standard provide both the tragedy and the humor as the patriarch watches from the washroom wall. Although the sisters in “Wilderness Tips” have become very different people, all can be hoodwinked by the same male and all fail to support each other in the sisterhood of women. Marcia and Eric reveal differing aging patterns in women and men. Lois’s childhood experiences at camp reveal part of the process of gender role acquisition for women. Kat, Julie, and Jane all fight for the man they think they love, engaging unsuccessfully in the battle of the sexes. And although Hairball, the bog man, and John Torrington may he the strangest of the strangers in these stories, all the stories do contain strangers whose presence reveals inadequacies in the perceptions of the other characters.

In providing obvious fodder for certain types of critics and more subtle gleanings for more ingenious critics, is Atwood mocking the literary critical establishment? Are we ridiculous to be tracking down one more example of the doppelganger, one more battle of the sexes, one more appropriation of voice, one more example of the workings of the multicultural mosaic, one more wild conceit in Atwood’s writings? Is there folly in not simply enjoying these stories as a good read? As readers, should we be Ronettes rather than Joannes? If Atwood reuses her best known motifs, we critics cry, “nothing new here.” Sherrill E. Grace, for example, calls the stories in Wilderness Tips “too familiar, even boring,” comparing them to “pictures at a retrospective exhibition” that “seem to have been chosen deliberately to evoke, echo and recall” (“Surviving,” 31). Yet if Atwood does not reuse her most familiar motifs, her signature is missing—she loses her way of saying, “Margaret Atwood is present in this story as its maker; listen for her distinctive voice.” Furthermore, if as critics we read the story for other readers, are we appropriating their voices with patriarchal (or matriarchal) voices, preempting their individual analyses, their right to tell their own story from the story Atwood provides?

The three stories of very strange strangers offer a key to reading this book: rage. The words “rage,” “outraged,” “anger,” and “angry” recur throughout Wilderness Tips. In “Hairball” Kat wants to name a magazine “All the Rage,” but “the board was put off by the vibrations of anger in the word ‘rage’” (41); she later writes of Hairball disguised as a truffle, “This is all the rage” (47). In “Hack Wednesday,” Marcia remembers “when airlessness was all the rage” (214). The waitresses in “True Trash” are “outraged” at a story (8). Donny in “True Trash,” Richard in “Isis in Darkness,” and Lois in “Death by Landscape” are described as “angry” (27, 56, 115). Susanna feels “anger” in “Uncles”
In the stories in *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood’s strangers are not nice polite Canadians who, with infinite tact, help needy and grateful friends to graceful epiphanies, but foreigners, trespassers, meddlers, non-natives who jab alien elements into the peaceful, orderly, well-governed lives of Canadians. Hugh MacLennan writes that he was told by a movie mogul, “Boy meets girl in Winnipeg and who cares?” (“Oil Being,” 23). But in *Wilderness Tips* Atwood demands that we care: The exaggeration of the interloper clashes with the diminution of the Canadian to produce a kind of humor that, in spite of its understated tone, should make the reader angry about the way things are. Readers who find the “consistently muted palette” of the stories in *Wilderness Tips* “too much of the same thing” (Grace, “Surviving,” 31) have missed the demanding role that Atwood assigns to readers of this volume: responding with rage and then transcending it.

Atwood is defining Canada and trying to improve it, just as she has frequently done throughout her career. In a 1999 reassessment of *Survival*, Atwood asserts that “its central concerns remain with us, and must still be confronted. Are we really that different from anybody else? If so, how? And is that how something worth preserving?” (“Survival Then and Now,” 58). Taken together, the stories in *Wilderness Tips* explore ways that outsiders affect Canadians and Canadian society. However, this exploration is not dispassionate, because Atwood calls on readers to react with the passion sometimes lacking in the reactions of the characters.

For Atwood, the detached, dispassionate gaze is insufficient (Victim Position One [*Survival*, 36]). So is assent to victimization (Victim Position Two [*Survival*, 37]). So is activism against victimization (Victim Position Three [*Survival*, 37–38]). Only transformation into creative non-victims (Victim Position Four [*Survival*, 38–39]) proves adequate to the demands of the human predicament. In *Wilderness Tips* Atwood offers that next moment, the moment beyond the ends of stories, as the transforming moment, the moment in which each reader begins or continues the journey toward being a creative non-victim by his or her responses to the story. Readers’ roles can go beyond Staines’s concept of the “dispassionate witness” (“Beyond the Provinces,” 60). By the end of her story as told by Atwood, Joanne is no longer threatened by the kinds of victimization experienced by Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or her descendant in “True Trash,” Ronette. Joanne puts together stories, understanding that they may not take standard shapes or have traditional endings. But she has missed the fact that the owner of the camp, Mr. B., has the same name as the man who attempts to seduce but later marries Pamela; Ronette’s life may not be a story of a woman’s generous act toward a boy (following the archetype of the experienced older woman who initiates the inexperienced male into the mysteries of sex, satirized in Atwood’s version by the extreme youth of the boy and the resulting pregnancy for the theoretically
knowledgeable woman), but the age-old story of a powerful man victimizing a defenseless woman. The story of the Canadian charm and politeness with which Ronette gives herself to Donny omits the alternative story that Mr. B.’s name suggests, leaving us to feel an outrage that the characters don’t feel. Ronette’s politeness and feminine nurturing are not affirmed by the outcome—pregnancy with no possibility of marriage in an era when that would have seriously stigmatized a woman. Joanne is a creative non-victim in that she is composing a story rather than simply experiencing it; yet the story that she constructs is too incomplete to make adequate sense of the world. Atwood constructs a larger story; readers who construct a story that includes Joanne’s version of Ronette’s story and Atwood’s version of Joanne’s story have learned what Atwood is teaching, which is less about women still being victimized sexually by men than about old patterns that repeat, stories that define a culture, and a vision that might move a society beyond its no longer productive archetypes and myths.

Readers of “Weight” experience outrage at the way that the narrator uses her sexuality to gain power over men. Yet, as we watch this exaggerated scenario, we begin to recognize that this is exactly what some women have always done. Hasn’t sexuality been a major source of power for women? At the end, the narrator revises her vision when she realizes that she does not have to have sex with this man in order to have power over him. However, she has not yet found a way out of the age-old battle of the sexes—the same battle that killed her double. If readers can experience anger at the narrator’s initial vision, applaud her revised vision, and then move on ultimately to see more than she does, Atwood’s story will not only have brought delight, but will also have initiated a learning process.

For some readers, the elegiac tone of “Hack Wednesday,” sweetly sentimental about aging to begin with, becomes cloying by the end of the story. Yet, as in the story of John and Mary that Atwood satirizes in “Happy Endings” in Murder in the Dark, the “only authentic ending” is “John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die” (40); fact, not nostalgia. Alzheimer’s disease may one day obliterate bittersweet memories and make Marcia a real stranger to herself. Her partner’s futile crusades may devolve into more meaningless symptoms of old age. Amid the sentimentalism, we can recall Dylan Thomas’s plea: “Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (128). From there we can move beyond rage into being creative non-victims, people who can accept their own experience “for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others’ versions of it” (Atwood, Survival, 39), which may be precisely what Marcia does.

When Selena and Susanna allow strangers to tell their stories, and thereby make them strangers to themselves, we should be incensed that the characters let what the males say be given the status of single truth; we should
then move on to tell their stories as our own vision dictates. Because Richard is a literary critic and obviously cannot tell Selena’s whole story, reviewing this story reminds us not to let literary critics or our adherence to various schools of literary criticism tell the story for us. Because Percy’s subjectivity colors his vision of Susanna, “Uncles” serves as a call to assert one’s own view in the face of conflicting alternative stories, thereby allowing the process of reading to become transformative.

Outsiders Lucy and George have taken over the stories of the Canadian characters. Why aren’t we outraged at this? Can Lucy’s and George’s stories coexist with rather than co-opt other stories? These stories ask questions regarding the multiple stories current in the Canadian mosaic. In “Survival, Then and Now” Atwood writes, “Canada’s well-known failure to embrace a single ‘identity’ of the yodelling or Beefeater variety has come to seem less like a failure than a deliberate and rather brave refusal” (57). Yet these stories raise the question of whether all of the multiple identities available to Canadians are equally conducive to the well-being of the community as a whole and its members individually; Atwood challenges the stories her nation tells itself about the destructive power of the United States and the value of generously embracing refugees.

Moreover, the stories in Wilderness Tips appear to contradict each other. What seems clear in one story gets muddied by another. Is Lucy a good summer visitor while George is a bad immigrant? Lucy seemingly fails to cope with the Canadian wilderness and apparently does not survive; yet in another sense her disappearance makes her potent and pernicious. George has learned to survive in the Canadian wilderness, yet he hardly seems a role model for survival. Perhaps survival is not the only goal for Canadians, and “Wilderness Tips” contains a revision of Atwood’s former thesis. Naming George’s wife Portia suggests that she represents the Christian virtue of her predecessor in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice who asserts, “The quality of mercy is not strained” (606). Does Atwood’s Portia look foolish to us as she acts out this ideal? Or does mercy truly bless “him that gives and him that takes” (Shakespeare, 606)? Would we want to live in a world in which Atwood’s story is the final revision of Portia’s story? John Torrington seems to symbolize how we retell and revise the past but forget to learn from it. In contrast, Julie begins to learn how to tell her own story from her experiences with the bog man. But is she an acceptable storyteller when her retelling loses so much of the energy of the past? Is the powerfully assertive narrator of “Weight” a better role model for women than Marcia, who seems adrift in passing time, yet perhaps lives her daily life more richly than Molly’s friend? Do the fates of Ronette and Molly warn against actively engaging in life? Yet detachment in Joanne and in Molly’s friend seems lacking if slightly less dangerous than engagement. Is Kat’s revenge on Ger and his wife more acceptable than the revenge that
Molly’s friend takes on males? Should we prefer Joanne or Julie to Richard as a collector of stories? Is Atwood suggesting that men and women are equally unfit to tell the stories of others? Should we blame Percy for destroying Susanna or Richard for not rescuing Selena? Should we be angry with Atwood for this muddle of contradictions? Is she playing games with thematic critics and critics who look for consistency? Atwood as postmodern trickster invites us to listen to a narrator or see with a focalizer whose vision seems plausible and pleasing to accept, but then Atwood reveals how foolish we have been in not thinking for ourselves. The shifts of vision and the independent thought required of the reader make these stories unsettling, yet the discomfort is part of the process of transformation that these stories set in motion.

Often literary critics want a writer such as Atwood to be politically correct, by their definition of correctness, desiring her stories to fit into their categories of belief. Looking at all ten stories in *Wilderness Tips* demonstrates how Atwood satirizes these critics with stories that seem to contradict one another or create ambiguity rather than eliminate it. Atwood’s role as a satirist requires no consistency except the consistency of ridiculing folly wherever it may be found. Literature’s function to teach does not mean to Atwood that stories should offer clearly stated rules to live by; there is no “moral of the story” in the traditional sense. Rather, the stories in *Wilderness Tips* open up subjects for discussion, leading into a process of thinking and rethinking. Atwood delights us by her outrageousness even as she evokes passionate responses that move us away from being mere dispassionate observers of absurdity and injustice. By tempting readers to various kinds of rational analyses, Atwood makes them complicit in their own victimization, because they think that they are not victims at all (Victim Position One); failing to acknowledge their own victimization, they victimize others by constructing the story of the story for other readers out of theories about literature rather than letting other readers speak in their own voices. Yet if we do react to the stories in our own ways rather than in any prescribed way; if, remembering that “Art is anger” (Van Herk, 330), we let rage take us into our own reading of each text, we can move toward becoming creative non-victims, able to tell our own stories. For Atwood, the value of reading and writing fiction is that we broaden our vision by identifying ourselves with strangers: “If writing novels—and reading them—have any redeeming social value, it’s probably that they force you to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else” (*Second Words*, 430). As we read these stories, Atwood makes us entertain strangers—and it may be that in her wily art she is making us entertain “angels unawares,” characters who change us as we encounter and react to them and their interactions with other characters, pushing us along one more step in our own journeys toward becoming creative non-victims able to move beyond the myths and archetypes that have defined us in the past, able to retell our own stories in new ways in a world
where a tiny piece of the Berlin Wall may be the largest possible symbol of hope for peace and freedom.

**Notes**

1. Atwood uses the term “creative non-victim” in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* to describe people who are free to be creative because they do not divert their energy into suppressing, displacing, or protesting victimization (38–39). Atwood’s discussion of Victim Positions in *Survival* is sometimes dismissed as trivial, derived from popular psychology (see, for example, James Steele’s “The Literary Criticism of Margaret Atwood,” p. 77). However, I disagree. The Victim Positions seem to me a reworking of the highly respected psychological stages outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance, Hope). The positions Atwood defines, taken in order, not only mark a progression often seen in the thinking of the characters in Atwood’s stories, from the earliest to the most recent, but also explain (as I show in this essay) the process that readers of Atwood’s stories undergo.

2. Bruno Bettelheim sees the staining associated with the young woman in the folktale “Bluebeard’s Egg” as indicating that her curiosity has caused her to lose her innocence/virginity (300–302). In *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Sharon Rose Wilson traces the “Bluebeard’s Egg” motif in many of Atwood’s works.

3. See, for example, Staines’s comment on L. M. Montgomery’s *Chronicles of Avonlea*: “For Avonlea residents, the United States is the foreign, the exotic, the centre that makes them seem on the periphery” (11).

4. Atwood paraphrases this verse and connects it with the Canadian virtue of good manners when she writes about the Canadians whom George takes advantage of in “Wilderness Tips”: “These people were lax and trusting, and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren’t ready for him” (190).

5. Coral Ann Howells notes that *Wilderness Tips* gives “a bleaker vision of survival on a globalized scale” (59) than Atwood’s previous works, and after discussing Atwood’s critiques in various stories, concludes that “Atwood’s conception of futures already being shaped by the present and foreshadowed by the past makes for dire warnings, yet she continues to write, diagnosing the symptoms of a general malaise as they appear in her specifically Canadian context” (68). Howells believes that “it is through the very power of myth to transform perceptions that hopes for regeneration and survival may lie” (68).

6. See Arnold E. Davidson’s “Negotiating *Wilderness Tips*,” pp. 184–86, for a discussion of additional ways in which “the obvious interconnections between the stories modifies their meanings, individually and collectively” (186).
Alias Grace (1996) may appear to be a new direction for Margaret Atwood. The novel is based on considerable research of a real, uneducated Irish woman, Grace Marks, and a famous nineteenth-century crime she supposedly committed with one lover, James McDermott, against her Scottish master and lover, Thomas Kinnear, who represents his class with the aristocracy of social advantage and educational opportunity that continues in Canada (Margaret Atwood Papers, AG, Kinnear research). The novel also appears to take seriously topics and genres, including double personalities, sex scandals, and murder mysteries, previously exposed to parody. Because of this, it seems less experimental, less postmodern, than The Handmaid’s Tale and The Robber Bride. Occasionally, since “Grace was the O. J. Simpson of her time” and may have resembled O. J. in feeling “battered” and minimizing the gravity of the crime (Wiley, 2; Atwood Papers, AG, Psychiatry notes), its story even seems to resort to the “parlour theatrics” and kind of melodrama (Joan Thomas, C10) associated with contemporary TV trials, throw-away mystery paperbacks, and popular histories, including one of her nineteenth-century sources, Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings. As Stein points out, the novel makes use of genres in which Atwood has written before, including the Jamesian ghost story, detective thriller, Gothic tale, autobiography, and Scheherazade story, but still uses what Stein considers a
nineteenth-century style, including social realism, comedy of manners, epistolary form, Gothic fiction, and even a ballad (103). Since *The Blind Assassin* (2000) arises from what Atwood calls the same “UR Manuscript,” *The Angel of Bad Judgment* (Margaret Atwood Papers), the two novels indicate a paradoxical but not uncommon direction for a postmodern writer: increasing documentation that compounds textual gaps and coexists with growing magical realism; in the case of *Alias Grace*, blood-red flowers that appear on the ground and in the cell of Grace’s prison. *Alias Grace* is again a feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial metafiction.

Feminist fiction, grounded in a belief that change is possible, analyzes gender as socially constructed. As a tool of feminist critique, feminist metafiction can reveal the conventionality of the codes of fiction, how they have been constructed, and how they can be changed (Greene, 4). Feminist intertextual revisions, sometimes involving direct reader address and always revealing the ideologically determined discourses encoded in traditional tales, also frequently have a “metanarrative function” (Cranny-Francis, 85, 89, 94). In opposition to Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophical usage, where “metanarrative” often refers to totalizing or legitimating master discourses, such as science (xxiii–xxiv), “metanarrative” here simply refers to narrative about narrative, as one of its varieties, metafiction, is fiction about fiction (Holman and Harmon, 297). Although postmodern metanarrative, including antinarrative, resembles Lyotard’s questioning or deligitimizing discourse (37, 79), it marks a fundamental historical and cultural break with modernism (Jameson, xvi). Despite some attempts to label Canadian fiction, including *Alias Grace*, as essentially realistic and transitional or “intramodern” (Kirtz, “Facts”; “The Past”), postmodernism is no less evident in Canadian than in U.S., Latin American, New Zealand, or Asian fiction; and characteristics of Canadian postmodernism (See Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern*, 1–25; “Circling,” 168–169) even largely define international conceptions. Like the metafictions of Louise Erdrich, Rosario Ferre, and Keri Hulme, *Alias Grace* uses postmodern techniques such as self-reflexiveness and intertextuality to foreground issues of class, sexual politics, and other political issues, including those of the postcolonial condition.

The novel is based in part on Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings*, designed to reconfirm English attitudes about the “uncivilized” life in Canada. It is also set immediately following the nearly successful Mackenzie Rebellion, widely supported by the Canadian poor, and during a period of large-scale Irish emigration. Thus, the novel is not only centered in nineteenth-century colonial attitudes about Canada, the lower classes, and the Irish, shared by many Anglo-Canadians as well as by the English; it also critiques these attitudes.
Quilting as Narrative Art

*Alias Grace* is about history, money, class, gender, ethnicity, psychoanalysis, legend, and myth. It is also about spiritualism, magic acts, master-servant narratives, misreading (Atwood letter to Ellen [Seligman], 17 March 1996), and all fictions, including Atwood’s, Canada’s, and our own. Resembling folklore itself (March, n.1), it deconstructs not only orally transmitted and published stories that we may assume are facts, but also national and social myth, gender roles, constructions of personal identity, and readers’ expectations of novels and reality. Both Simon and Grace, “the artful minx, with her blandishments!” continually call attention to Grace’s narrative-while-quilting as a “story.” Not only Grace’s attorney, MacKenzie, but Atwood notes that “butter wouldn’t melt in [Grace’s] mouth,” and Grace knows how to arrange herself as well as her narrative to attract interest (Atwood letter to Edna Slater, 3 Sept. 1996). Once again, Atwood’s use of intertexts, and, ironically, even her “Author’s Afterword,” foreground the novel’s focus on fiction making. In this novel, however, Atwood uses the unique image of quilting to represent the piecing together of different stories into a new pattern, in this case a pattern that questions master patterns and, by implication, all patterns. In addition to marking and naming each of the fifteen sections that correspond to quilt squares, these metaquilts comment on themselves, the women who make them, any variation from traditional patterns, and the stories they depict. Thus, the quilt patterns and section titles highlight the metafictionality of *Alias Grace* and themselves function as postmodern metafiction.

Characteristically, Atwood’s afterword begins with an assumption of clear boundaries between fiction and reality: “*Alias Grace* is a work of fiction, although it is based on reality.” She notes the appeal of the Kinnear-Montgomery murder story and Grace’s ability to “polarize opinion.” Suggesting some of the reasons why this historical incident is significant, Atwood notes that “Attitudes towards [Grace] reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women”: Grace was simultaneously a female fiend, a temptress, the real instigator and murderer, and a silenced, unwilling victim (461). Again appropriate to Atwood’s purposes, Grace gave three different accounts of the Montgomery murder and James McDermott gave two. The novel also quotes from Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings* (1853), a central but third-hand source for information about the murder, and the one on which Atwood based her earlier CBC television play *The Servant Girl* (1974). As Atwood points out, Moodie’s book was influenced by Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, and anything based exclusively on it “cannot now be taken as definitive” (467). Atwood also referred to Canadian, U.S., and British newspapers; penitentiary, asylum, emigration, and medical records; letters from doctors who examined Grace; letters from clergymen and others who circulated petitions on Grace’s behalf; the published confessions of Marks and McDermott; song lyrics; maps of Canada; photographs of Ireland; and
research on Spiritualism, Mesmerism, mental illness, including "dissociation of personality" (dedoublement), the Mackenzie Rebellion, and psychology (See Acknowledgments; Atwood Papers, AG). In addition, she consulted quite a few other literary, historical, and medical accounts of the period, including Letters of a Lifetime; History of Toronto and County of York, Ontario; Beeton’s Book of Household Management (467); Kiracofe’s The American Quilt; Cyclopedia of Fraternities; Laver’s Costume and Fashion; The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle; and the works of Emily Dickinson, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Charles Dickens, and Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Atwood Papers, AG). The afterword ends by stating what we have already observed, that “the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’ . . . . Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent” (461, 465). Frequently, Atwood again does so by embedding literary, folklore, and other popular culture intertexts, including fairy-tale, mythic, and biblical stories and popular songs. Although she notes that “People want an outcome / They want a guilty person / They want to know who did it / They don’t like not knowing,” she chooses not to provide closure either to the relationship between Grace and Simon or the extent of Grace’s involvement in the murders (Atwood Papers, AG Notes to 1995, 14 Aug.; Letter to Ellen, 17 Mar. 1996). Paradoxically, what most attracts readers, including those in her friend’s book club where Atwood discussed this novel, are the gaps that remain in the novel, gaps that the reader is delighted to fill.

At the end of the novel, when Grace is married and possibly pregnant, she uses pieces of Mary Whitney’s white petticoat, her faded yellow prison nightgown, and Nancy’s pink-and-white flowered dress to make three of the triangles of a Tree of Paradise quilt, the first she has ever made for herself (459–460). Because traditional quilts are generally composed of fabrics actually used by the maker’s family and friends, quilts are literally pieces of lives, as this one is. Fabrics from pants, blouses, and dresses worn in the past and associated with random, daily events, sometimes significant (such as weddings, birthings, and funerals), are brought together to form a pattern. Fragments are ordered into a whole; bits of the past become useful parts of the present, available to provide warmth and comfort in illness and in daily life and to remind the users of their personal, familial, communal, ethnic, racial, and even national pasts.

Quilting styles and names vary according to regions, periods, and countries of origin, and quilts frequently tell stories. Probably originating in Asia and as old as the Egyptians (Quilt History), quilts have shown mythic, folkloric, biblical, and historic stories, including Tristan and Iseult, the Seven Deadly Sins, and Arthurian ones (Quilt History/Page.html). Quilt block names, thus, are rooted in history and may show biblical influence, as with Jacob’s Ladder.
Other names, a kind of “folkloric poetry” that was rightfully whatever the maker chose (Bacon, 70, 72), might come from trades and occupations, nature, square dancing, or politics (*Quilt Block Names*) or be inspired by familiar objects, humor, pathos, tragedy, or sentimental meaning (Bacon, 70, 72).

Significantly for Atwood’s purposes, quilters have traditionally been women. As literary works, including Glaspell’s play *Trifles* and short story “A Jury of Her Peers,” Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Lives” and novel *The Color Purple*, and Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek’s play *Quilters*, indicate (See also Poetry and Prose Page), quilts are pieces of women’s lives and expressions of women’s feelings. In addition, quilting has usually been a social activity, a means for women to be with other women in a socially approved activity and a means for them to exchange family stories and vent anger or frustration with the “male world” from which women have been excluded (See also Rogerson, 11). Where other arts have been unavailable to subordinated women whose primary role was defined as nurturer and who could not always afford such supplies as paints and canvas, quilting has been a vehicle for breaking silence and speaking. Quilting helped establish and maintain a separate women’s culture with its own codes of language and manners prevalent in both the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century. Thus, quilting is an appropriate vehicle for retelling a nineteenth-century woman’s story. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood alludes to these quilt patterns: the Log Cabin, Job’s Tears, Old Maid’s Puzzle, Tree of Life, Tree of Temptation, Pine Tree, Jacob’s Ladder, Broken Plate, Flower Basket, Wild Goose Chase, Nine Patch, Memorial Quilt, Attic Windows, and Wheel of Mystery. In addition, she uses Jagged Edge, Rocky Road, Puss in the Corner, Young Man’s Fancy, Broken Dishes, Secret Drawer, Snake Fence, Fox and Geese, Hearts and Gizzards, Lady of the Lake, Falling Timbers, Solomon’s Temple, Pandora’s Box, the Letter X, and Tree of Paradise patterns as section titles.

In *Alias Grace*, Grace quilts in the sewing room at the governor’s mansion where she works during the day while serving her prison sentence for the murders. As she quilts, she tells her story to an American psychoanalyst, Simon Jordan, a character Atwood invented for the novel, who is seen mostly through his objects and his position, as his father was. As he writes down in a notebook what Grace says, she feels that he is drawing her or drawing on her skin and that she is splitting open like a ripe peach (69). He also records his own dreams, which suggest the locked boxes or fenced interiors he wants to open in Grace. Like other men of his period and profession, including Freud, Simon subscribes to the double standard and the angel/whore split and represents his loss of status and independence of action due to loss of the mills. As in *The Robber Bride*, characters’ dreams, such as those about corridors, drowning, and severed hands, seem to interpenetrate and comment on one another and on everyone’s repressions, projections, and fragmentation. Letters Simon
writes and receives (including to or from Dr. Workman and Bannerling; his mother, Mrs. William Jordan; his friend Dr. Edward Murchie; and clergy) and his interior monologues comment on, and are pieced into, Grace’s narrative. Grace’s interior monologue similarly comments on Simon, his expectations, his creation of story, her efforts to offer or deny him what he wants, and the psychologically revealing associations, visions, and dreams she rarely tells Jordan but tries to decipher herself. She also makes private metafictional comments to the reader about the story she tells and the memory—yet another story—she gradually constructs and unravels. Thus, Grace, a superior seamstress, presents the reader with blocks for a many-layered story quilt complete with border design and padding. As readers “progress” through the book, they must quilt the pieces, creating their own patterns and watching them deconstruct as they are constructed.

Grace uses the conversational style characteristic of folktales, frequently emphasizes the oral quality of her tale, and accompanies it with the folk activity of quilting. Atwood characteristically disarms the reader with allusions to nursery rhymes such as “Simple Simon” and “Little Jack Horner”; myths and folk tales about Perseus, Saint George, Ulysses and the Sirens, the Lorelei, mermaids, Pan, Pandora, Ariadne, Scheherazade, Eurydice, the Pied Piper of Hamlin [Hameln], “Fitcher’s Bird,” and “The Girl without Hands”, the Apocrypha story about Susanna and the Elders; literary and opera “myth” such as The Lady of the Lake, The Faerie Queen, Heart of Darkness, her own poem, “Five Poems for Grandmothers” (THP), and the opera Sonnambula; and biblical stories about the Trees of Knowledge and Paradise, the Tower of Babel, Jacob and Esau, Solomon, Lot’s wife, Jeremiah, Job, Simon Peter, Rachel, and Jonah. She even rewards the apparent murderess and her readers with a romantic fairy-tale resolution. But if Grace is a Scheherazade telling her story to entertain a doctor more associated, in her experience, with death than life, she is well aware of quilting’s subversive potential. We should be as well.

Atwood admits that her pattern “got bigger than I intended it to be. . . . I think originally there were only nine quilt-pattern titles, and then I just needed more. I needed to have more to cover the actual story as it unfolded” (Wiley, 4). Each section features an illustration of the quilt pattern under the title and, on one or more pages, section epigraphs, usually consisting of quotations from historical documents paired with literary ones from the period. Together they ironically or humorously foreground the section content. Although section and quilt titles changed some as the novel developed, passages or events often ironically name both title and quilt.

 Appropriately, the quilt marking the novel’s first section, which is also its only chapter, is a “Jagged Edge” pattern that pictures a literal jagged edge, nicely opposing the closing “Tree of Paradise.” It is accompanied with a quotation from Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings that ironically alludes to
“the superior moral training of the feebler sex” but states Moodie’s great interest in seeing “the celebrated murderess” Grace Marks (3). Grace, a model prisoner who has already been “shut up” for eight years for the murder of Thomas Kinnear, begins her story with the spots of dark red that appear in the prison-yard gravel, swell, burst, and then fall back to the ground as she walks. Grace associates these peonies, “glossy like satin,” with the white ones in Mr. Kinnear’s garden when she first saw Nancy. On that day, Nancy wore the pale dress with pink rosebuds that Grace wears not only when she is trying to escape, but also when she is on trial for the murder. They also contrast with the white ones she gathered for Mary Whitney’s funeral, before she ever saw Nancy or Kinnear. Bloodred flowers, similar to those associated with violence and passion in Atwood’s *Fitcher’s Bird* watercolor (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics*, plate 3), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and “Bad News” (GB) subliminally haunt both Grace and the reader throughout the book, revealing Grace’s unconscious preoccupation with blood, the murders it signifies, and dead characters alive within her. These red peonies thus introduce what Atwood refers to as the “is-it-alive-or-dead-or-both motif” later imaged in the decapitated chicken running around Kinnear’s yard. As Atwood points out to one of her editors, Grace has a temper, life experience, and submerged rage: She is “very preoccupied with laundering” (Letters to Edna Slater, 3 Sept. 1996; Ellen, 17 Mar. 1996). These spots of color, both memories and anger she tries to repress, thus become a recurrent, subversive part of the pattern that constitutes this book-as-quilt.

Section 2, “Rocky Road,” a variation of the well-known Jacob’s Ladder pattern and one of several road designs, including Road to Tennessee or Kansas or the White House, is again brief and one of several “X” quilt patterns. It provides background on the crime and shows the “rocks” that Grace’s friend Jeremiah predicts in her future, including the “rocky road” to and within prison. For the reader, it illuminates the “rocky road” to “solving” the book’s mystery. At one point, the quilt pattern marking this section was “Wheel of Mystery.” The warning epigraphs from the *Toronto Mirror* about McDermott’s execution and the Kingston Penitentiary punishment book about punishments for particular offenses, such as bread and water for staring and being inattentive at breakfast, contrast with the flattering pictures of Marks and McDermott and the poem celebrating their fame.

Section 3, “Puss in the Corner,” a quilt design that is similar to Thirteen Squares and does *not* feature a cat, presents Grace as the sly puss, invisible to others and possibly invisible to herself. Like section 4, “Young Man’s Fancy,” section 3 presents “Ourselx behind ourself, concealed” (46). Susanna Moodie’s description of Grace is matched with a passage from Emily Brontë’s “The Prisoner.” The “soft and mild” face of Brontë’s captive contrasts with her announcement that she won’t be held for long (19). In the governor’s parlor
with her hands folded “the proper way although I have no gloves,” Grace thinks about “jellyfish ladies,” who are mostly water and whose legs are penned in by wire crinoline cages. As a young girl, she remembers never having enough room and being told not to be too intelligent (33, 22–23). But here and elsewhere she counters such thoughts with the imagined comments, which she always labels “crude” or “coarse,” of her dead friend, Mary Whitney. “As Mary Whitney said” increasingly signifies a less socialized, freer, irreverent, and possibly revengeful aspect of Grace that she seems to repress. Expressing relief that she was “not present” to see Nancy’s rotting body, she says that “There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again.” Beginning to see the red flowers again, this time growing on the wall of her cell, she notes that “when you go mad you don’t go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in” (26, 33). This section ends with Grace pressing to her forehead an apple she associates with the Tree of Knowledge.

Section 4, the “Young Man’s Fancy” quilt pattern, identifies individual constructions of Grace, especially Dr. Jordan’s romantic “fancy.” It begins with the Dickinson epigraph from “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted”: “Ourself behind ourself, concealed.” Moodie’s description of Grace in the asylum and a quotation from Dr. Workman, one of Grace’s real doctors, follow. Unlike Dr. Bannerling, who favors cupping and bleeding to reduce the animal spirits of the insane, and Dr. Jerome Dupont—named after the chemical company (Letter to Ellen, 11 Mar. 1996) but really Jeremiah Pontelli, Grace’s trickster peddler—Dr. Workman feels blindfolded in attempting to cure problems of the human psyche. Ironically, Simon—the doctor who sets out to see all but resembles his namesake, the apostle Simon Peter—is blind in a more general way. The section ends in the “quicksand” of Simon’s sexual as much as medical frustration with Grace, who is “a hard nut to crack”; with his landlady, who waylays him; and with Lydia, who captures him on a “tongue-coloured setee” (54, 90). Feeling like the voyeur he is as he watches Grace threading a needle, he finally glimpses “the puss in the corner”: He imagines Grace “washing herself with her tongue, like a cat” (91).

Sections 5, “Broken Dishes”; 6, “Secret Drawer”; and 7, “Snake Fence,” again underline the sense in which we hide ourselves from ourselves. Section 5’s title refers not only to the quilt pattern and to the actual broken dishes it suggests, in this section the teapot that Grace’s Aunt Pauline gives her mother and that breaks on the journey from Ireland to Canada, but to the scraps and pieces, as of a broken plate or the book’s mysteries, “that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in” (103). Although “Secret Drawer” was once intended for section 7, with the “Snake Fence” pattern for section 6 (Atwood Papers, *AG*), it appropriately depicts the mind as a forbidden room. When Simon dreams of opening a door at the end of a Bluebeardian secret corridor, the sea
rushes out and immediately closes over his head, suggesting lost memories rising to the surface. When he dreams that his father’s dead hand is coming back to life, instead of exploring the implications for his identity, he rationalizes that his dream is really Grace’s story (139–141). Although “Pandora’s Box” is the title quilt of section 13, Grace works on a “Pandora’s Box” quilt in this section and remembers all the beautiful quilts, including a “Wild Goose Chase,” she saw at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s house. She notes that in the “Attic Windows” pattern, from one point of view the boxes may seem open, and from another, closed (162). We get a peek inside the secret drawer or box when Grace faints after she hears the dead Mary’s voice say, “Let me in.” Later she does not remember worrying that Grace is lost and has gone into the lake, marking her first bout of amnesia (180). But if the Pandora’s box of Grace’s psyche—or, for that matter, of Simon’s—is fully opened, what will we see inside? In section 7, after hearing about the ghost of Mary Whitney, Simon feels as if he has been closed in a dark room or come from an abattoir. This section’s title, “Snake Fence,” literally refers to the snake fence on which McDermott displays his agility and the period of harmony before the murder when Grace wishes nothing would ever change. Although this quilt pattern does actually depict “snakes,” subliminally, it suggests the hidden snake in the Garden of Eden and anticipates the snakes Grace will hide in the Tree of Paradise quilt she makes after she marries the man who helped convict her, Jamie Walsh.

Many of the quilt titles and sections draw attention to the sexual politics Grace finds intrinsic in the display of quilts. In section 6 she sees quilts as flags of war, placed on the tops of beds as warnings of “the many dangerous things that may take place in a bed” (161). Section 8, “Fox and Geese,” announces a chase. In addition to readers, chasers include prison keepers; ironically, they consider women edible but think that they should have been born without mouths, their only useful areas being below the waist (240). Lydia moons after Simon; Nancy, who has had one illegitimate baby, is pregnant with her master’s child; Jamie makes Grace a May Queen; and Grace dreams of a man caressing her. The chapter ends with the possibility that Grace has been embellishing her story to please her audience, thus leading Simon and us on a wild goose chase. Section 9, “Hearts and Gizzards,” prefaced with McDermott’s grizzly description of choking and dismembering Nancy, juxtaposes a gruesome depiction of the crime, which McDermott says he committed to have Grace, with the humorous telling of Simon’s romantic entanglements. In some of these he ironically feels snarled as in a spider’s web (293), imprisoned, when he really only wants to be Grace’s heroic rescuer (322).

Section 10 (X), “Lady of the Lake,” like 14, “The Letter X” quilt pattern, marks two “Xs” in the text and foregrounds how quilt illustrations may self-reflexively mirror literature (Scott’s Lady of the Lake and the lady in the lake of
Arthurian romance, incidents in the text we are reading (Grace in the lake), and even names in the text (the steamer "Lady of the Lake," in which Grace and McDermott flee). Although Grace finds no lady and no lake in the quilt, she thinks that the boat was named for the poem and the quilt for the boat so that things do make sense “and have a design to them” (340). Similar to its treatment of other images of grand order and design, however, the book immediately undercuts this clarity, as the water seems to erase Grace’s footsteps and all her traces, as if Grace Marks leaves “no marks.” Even more disconcerting for readers who wish, like Dr. Jordan, to hold on to the image of her that Grace constructs, is her calm satisfaction with being erased: “It is almost the same as being innocent” (342).

Similarly, section 11, “Falling Timbers,” a variation of the World’s Puzzle, Solomon’s Puzzle, and Drunkard’s Path designs (Lithgow, 59), highlights the puzzles and falls in this section. It may also ironically suggest the timbers of the popular pioneer Log Cabin design, which, with the associated Pine Tree pattern, came to symbolize the American colonies’ fight for freedom against oppression (Lithgow, 59). Not only are the timbers here falling, but the Log Cabin design itself is missing from the quilt-pattern section titles. Although Grace says that every young woman should have a Log Cabin quilt—to her, symbolizing home and hearth—and makes one for another young woman, the Log Cabin quilt she later sleeps under in marriage is both second-hand and potentially unlucky (Rogerson, 17). “Falling Timbers” also parallels Simon’s fall with that of Grace and James McDermott and continues the self-reflexive emphasis that makes the novel metafiction. When Simon is not listening to Grace’s consciously enhanced tale of capture (353), he sleeps with a “respectable woman,” his opium-taking landlady. When Grace was preparing for trial, she received literary advice about recounting the story of the crime—“to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed”—and she apparently practices her skill with the stories she tells Jordan, readers (357), and possibly herself. What she dreads most about the possibility of being hanged is being “cut up into pieces, and bits and fragments” (358), unlike the “whole cloth” she wants to offer Jordan (353). Simon concludes that Grace’s “strongest prison is of her own construction.” Ironically, this quilt section ends as the previous one does: Like Grace, he wants to be anonymous and “lose himself completely” (366).

In section 12, “Solomon’s Temple,” another design without any apparent Solomon or temple, Simon definitively proves himself devoid of Solomon’s wisdom. After hearing that Grace’s attorney, Kenneth MacKenzie, thinks Grace is guilty of helping to kill Nancy, Simon recognizes that Grace is the only woman he wishes to marry. The section ends with his ludicrously whispering “murderess” while thinking of hothouse gardenias.
In section 13, “Pandora’s Box,” the “box” of Grace’s psyche and what she has not remembered about the murders is opened during hypnotism, but Simon also faces the “Pandora’s box” possibilities of his own actions as he is invited to murder his landlady’s husband and contemplates murdering the landlady. In addition, as in other Atwood texts, when what was closed is opened, we face our inabilities to distinguish truth or reality from fiction. Illustrating the death-in-life motif, the Mary Whitney voice admits that she, not Grace, helped kill Nancy, thus solving the mystery of the book. But is it solved, or do the windows, including the one from which Mary’s soul supposedly could not escape, again only appear to be open from one angle? The Mary personality also tells Simon that “Curiosity killed the cat” (400). Since the hypnotist is Grace’s friend Jeremiah the Peddler posing as Dr. DuPont, we may be seeing a parlor trick. Grace could be acting, as, for that matter, she might have been in claiming not to remember. On the other hand, a double personality offers an explanation of details, in both novel and historical crime, that seem to defy rationality. In both the actual crime and in Atwood’s novel, the first murder victim is a reader, Thomas Kinnear, who is killed while reading a “Godey’s Ladies’” book. Although he is not killed in the bedroom, the magazine is later discovered, blood-covered, in Nancy’s bed (331). In opening the Pandora’s box of the novel, it is wise to remember the parodic images of Atwood’s earlier prose poem “Murder in the Dark,” where the persona invites us to play games with the game: “You can say: the murderer is the writer, the detective is the reader, the victim is the book. Or perhaps, the murderer is the writer, the detective is the critic and the victim is the reader . . . In any case,” the persona says, “I have designs on you . . . by the rules of the game, I must always lie” (MD, 30).

Section 14, “The Letter X,” a pattern that forms five more X’s in the text, relies on the puns of which Atwood is so fond: After the initial quotations, including a letter by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the section consists entirely of letters, some probably not delivered. These letters fill in what happens to Simon, who interestingly experiences the kind of amnesia he thinks Grace has, and Jeremiah, who, in another disguise, performs “The Future Told in Letters of Fire” at area theaters. Section 15, based on “The Tree of Paradise” quilt, which ironically appears to be falling, consists of another letter that fills in what happens to Grace. Whether or not the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are the same, as Grace believes, making not only the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil the same, but the consequences of eating them equivalent, she is released from prison and marries. In Atwood’s fictionalization, her rescuer is Jamie Walsh, the flute-playing Pan Grace knew when she worked for Kinnear. Recognizing that this role as an object of pity “calls for a different arrangement of the face” than when she was an object of horror and fear (443), Grace rejects the plausibility of the “happy ending” “just like
a book” that Janet and many readers would supply (445). Whether Atwood’s happy ending is indeed happy, and whether guilt spells guilt, are again questions for each of us.

As Alias Grace is a construction based on “reality,” so all our histories and conclusions are exposed as theories, speculations, the best we can do to build a structure over the abyss after the grounds of our being have been deconstructed (Derrida, 351–352). Although readers will endlessly debate whether Grace really helps kill Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, whether she really has either amnesia or a double personality, and whether she has sex with Kinnear and James McDermott, again such questions are beside the point, either/ors that overlook the pluralism of both identity and truth. As Grace notes in her mental letter to Dr. Simon Jordan on the final page of the novel’s final section, “The Tree of Paradise,” and of her version of her story, she may have finally guessed—or, more likely, is posing—a riddle. She will put a “border of snakes intertwined” on the Tree of Paradise quilt she makes after marriage, rather than the conventional bridal quilt with flowers and vines symbolic of fruitfulness, love, and longevity (Atwood Papers, AG, Fashion Quilts; see also Rogerson, 20). Her border suggests the snakes of the Great Goddess and of Atwood’s other trickster snake goddesses including Circe and Zenia (YAH, RB) as well as the Eve/snake of Eden and Atwood’s Double Persephone covers (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics, figures 3, 4). Although the snakes will look like vines or a cable pattern, “without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing.” She is changing the pattern to suit her own ideas and telling no one else, because her interpretation of the story on which the pattern is based is “not the approved reading.” Although the snakes could be phallic symbols, as Freud and Rogerson suggest (qtd. in Rogerson, 20), if the border encodes deceit and sexuality, we cannot exclude either this trickster storyteller or the sexist cultures that make killers of female snakes into mythic heroes (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics, 17–19). “Like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they [get] the main story right but some of the details wrong” (459–460).

Atwood, too, throws in a few embroidered snakes in her pretty pattern (460), thereby subverting our approved readings of quilts, literature, gender, culture, reality, and all master narratives. Grace is “alias Grace” because all of her, and our, identities are aliases, fictions. Where gaps exist in her or our life narratives, we too are “free to invent.”

Notes

1. In Atwood novels, many characters are also mainly “in pieces.” In Surfacing, David is a clumsily worked patchwork, and in Alias Grace, Rev. Verringer would have
us avoid the horror of being mere patchworks, without a soul, if we are mainly our unconscious mind, i.e., what we repress or forget (406).

2. When questioned about why Simon is not described further, in reference to more than objects and position, Atwood jokes that “the higher your class, the less likely you are to be subject to the impertinence of description! (It’s the beginning of surrealism, which substitutes objects for people.)” (Letter to Nan [Talese], Ellen [Seligman], Liz [Calder], Phoebe [Larmore], Vivienne [Schuster], 30 Jan. 1996.) She had hoped to have Workman play the Simon Jordan part until she discovered that Grace’s stay in the asylum overlapped his tenure by only three weeks. Early drafts do refer to this character as William (Atwood Papers, AG).

3. In short, “he is not a 20th-Century Sensitive Guy” (Atwood letter to Ellen [Seligman], 3 Mar. 1996).


5. Atwood also considered a similar design with space instead of squares beside the diamond.
J. BROOKS BOUSON

“It’s Game Over Forever”:
Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in Oryx and Crake

Asserting that “science is a key factor in the postmodern adventure”—something that theorists and cultural studies people ignore “to their own detriment”—Steven Best and Douglas Kellner call attention to the transformative and potentially dangerous powers of science and technology in an age in which biotechnology has already created

a surreal zoo of mutations that includes tobacco plants with firefly genes, mice and pigs with human genes, potatoes with chicken genes, fish and tomatoes with antifreeze genes, and dozens of different genetically modified foods spliced with bacteria, viruses, antibiotic-resistant marker genes, and insect genes.¹

In a biotechnological world in which the “boundaries between science fiction and science fact are fast collapsing,” corporations can own, patent, and commodify technologically designed species, and while some scientists are attempting to clone human beings, “others imagine concocting chimeras that are half-human, half-ape for medical and experimental purposes.”² If the “postmodern adventure” in science “strives to overcome all known limits, subverting boundaries such as those that demarcate species,” it also “steers us into an alleged ‘age of biological control’.”³ Moreover, even as a heedless

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“gene rush” is now underway, the genetic sciences, write Best and Kellner, all too often exhibit “a dangerous one-dimensional, reductionist mind-set that is blind to the social and historical context of science and to the ethical and ecological implications of radical interventions into natural processes.” Aware of the grave dangers posed by the “gene rush” currently underway and the “reductionist mind-set” of biotechnology as it heedlessly intervenes in natural processes, Margaret Atwood voices her concerns for the future in her 2003 dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*, even as she casts ridicule on the “surreal zoo” of transgenic species being created by genetic engineers in our new age of biological control and genetic determinism.

“[T]he most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a ‘posthuman’ stage of history,” writes Francis Fukuyama. In *Oryx and Crake*, a deadly serious and darkly satiric novel that, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood describes as “speculative fiction,” she intervenes parodically in the contemporary public debate about genetic engineering and provides a scathing indictment of our current “gene rush” in describing the catastrophic end of humanity in the near future—one generation or so from the present. Setting her novel on the east coast of the United States, Atwood describes the future world through the experiences of her central character, Jimmy-Snowman, who, according to Atwood, is born around 1999 and is twenty-eight when he finds himself inhabiting the post-catastrophe and posthuman world engineered by his genius-scientist friend, Crake. Explaining that she “grew up among the scientists” and that she has long read popular science so she could keep up with the “family dialogue,” Atwood, in *Oryx and Crake*, conducts a dialogue with—and provides a parodic, dialogic retort to—scientists. Atwood, who insists that *Oryx and Crake* is “fact within fiction,” states that “[w]e’ve taken a path that is already visible to us,” Disagreeing with those who see only positive benefits from contemporary biotechnology, she remarks, “If you’re going to do gene-splicing, you’re going down a very strange path indeed. If you’re going to do it on humans, what you have to ask yourself is, do you want the human race to remain human?” The novel “invents nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a what if, and then sets forth its axioms. The what if of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, What if we continue down the road we’re already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who’s got the will to stop us?”

Investigating the division between the humanities and the sciences through the stories of her two male characters, Jimmy and Crake, who are presented as paired opposites, for Jimmy is a “word man” and Crake a “numbers man,” Atwood is intent on showing the calamitous impact that scientific knowledge, if misused, can have on the human realm, focusing on the horrors of daily life in the twenty-first century world of her survivor, Jimmy-
Snowman. A cautionary tale written to inform and warn readers about the potentially dire consequences of genetic engineering, Oryx and Crake is also a complex, and game-like, multi-layered narrative in which Atwood, in her characteristic way, makes use of contemporary popular fictional forms, including not only the dystopian novel but also the castaway-survivor narrative (in presenting the recollections of Jimmy-Snowman, who divides his identity into his pre-catastrophe past as Jimmy and his post-catastrophe present as Snowman); the detective and action-thriller novel (as readers unravel and piece together the details of Crake’s bioterrorist plot to commit mass murder and destroy humanity, which, in part, is based on the doomsday computer games Crake and Jimmy play as adolescents); and the romance story (as the Jimmy-Crake-Oryx love triangle is ultimately shown to have a direct bearing on the final catastrophe). Described by Atwood as a “joke-filled romp through the end of the human race,” Oryx and Crake is also a darkly comic novel in which Atwood targets genetic engineering by depicting the embodiment of Crake’s ideas—his bioengineered hominids, the Crakers—as a kind of bizarre spectacle and extended authorial joke and in which she presents Crake as a scientist-imperialist but also a trickster-jokester figure who, not unlike the author-jokester, creates a grand game-like illusion that becomes the horrifying and bizarre post-catastrophe reality inhabited by Snowman, who stands as the reader’s surrogate in the text.

“Sitting in judgment on the world . . . but why had that been his right?” Jimmy-Snowman thinks of Crake, who, in a strange twist on the idea of scientific imperialism, uses science not to conquer the natural world but to control human nature by creating his bioengineered and environmentally friendly hominids, the Crakers, as a replacement for humanity. Left alive so he can act as the guide and protector of the Crakers, Snowman exists alone in a destroyed world: “Now I’m lost, I can’t get back, I’m stranded here, I’m all alone,” he thinks of his situation (p. 106). Draped in a filthy bedsheet, careful to avoid exposure to the brutal midday sun, barefooted and reduced to sleeping, like his pre-human ancestors, in a tree—“Arboreal, a fine word. Our arboreal ancestors, Crake used to say” (p. 358)—the grimy, smelly, bug-bitten and starving Snowman spends his final days ruminating over the past as he tries to stay alive by foraging for food “among the leavings of catastrophe” (p. 152) and fending off attacks from bioengineered animals-turned-predators—wolvogs, pigoons, and bobkittens. Drawing in part on the classic castaway narrative in describing the experiences of Snowman, Atwood emphasizes the precarious situation of her character, who remains dazed and demoralized through the actionless first half of the novel. A “castaway of sorts,” Snowman thinks of setting down his impressions in a journal, only to realize the futility of such an act, for “even a castaway assumes a future reader,” while the only reader he can imagine is “in the past” (p. 41). Aware that he must procure supplies and
weapons if he is to survive a bit longer, Snowman leaves his seaside shelter to return to the destroyed bioengineering compound where he once worked with Oryx and Crake, navigating his way through a devastated landscape of gnawed human carcasses, looted and burned out buildings, and derelict houses that are being overtaken by vegetation and overrun by rats—this return journey to the Paradice dome providing the primary action in the narrative present describing the post-catastrophe experiences of Snowman.

The “ancestor, come from the land of the dead” (p. 106) who has “served his evolutionary purpose” (p. 107) by saving the Crakers, Snowman thinks of himself as “[t]he Abominable Snowman—existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints” (pp. 7–8). Shortening his name to Snowman, the guilt-wracked Jimmy-Snowman, who comes to recognize his own wilful ignorance of the deadly plot spun by Crake—his own culpability—keeps “the abominable to himself, his own secret hair shirt” (p. 8). Snowman, who realizes that his time is running out, “doesn’t know which is worse, a past he can’t regain or a present that will destroy him if he looks at it too clearly. Then there’s the future. Sheer vertigo” (p. 147). Haunted by memories and voices from his pre-catastrophe past, Jimmy-Snowman, Crake’s unwitting game partner and victim, tries to make sense of his life and the game Crake has played with humanity, leaving him as the final human witness to Crake’s hubristic genocidal endgame.

In the complex structure of her multi-layered novel, as Atwood deftly interweaves the post-catastrophe experiences of her character, Jimmy-Snowman, with his memories of his pre-catastrophe past, she counter-poses the fully elaborated story of Jimmy with that of Crake, who remains somewhat opaque and therefore something of a textual enigma. The son of scientists—his father is a genographer and his mother a microbiologist—Jimmy nevertheless ends up a “word” and not a “numbers” person. But Atwood’s non-heroic and self-preoccupied protagonist also takes for granted aspects of his twenty-first century world that are meant to appall us as readers. Intent, in part, on instructing her readers, Atwood draws openly on the discourse of environmentalism as she emphasizes the effects of global warming on the future world inhabited by her character. While Jimmy grows up in a world of global climate change—one in which “the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the mid-continental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by” (p. 24)—he nevertheless finds his mother’s complaints about the deteriorating environment annoying. In a similar way, Jimmy unquestioningly accepts the rigidly divided social world he inhabits, which is divided into the pleeblands, the world of the cities where the masses live,
and the Compounds—walled communities with their own private security forces—where the scientists and other top people live.

As Atwood combines social observations with her scientific commentary in telling the story of Jimmy and deliberately sets the personal drama and private memory of Jimmy-Snowman against the larger social—and global—changes she describes, she also uses her narrative as a platform to voice her concern about a trend in contemporary culture that she finds troubling: the mainstreaming of violence and pornography into the mass culture. Even as Atwood expresses some of her deadpan humour in naming the forbidden sites Jimmy and Crake surf on the Internet—sites that provide live coverage of executions (shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com) or assisted suicides (nitee-nite.com) as well as porn sites (Tart of the Day, Super swallowers, and HottTotts)—she also conveys her uneasiness as she describes the degradation of culture in a society where violence and pornography have become cheap, and readily available, forms of entertainment. In a similar way, Atwood voices her concern as she describes, in her darkly satiric way, the violent computer games Jimmy and Crake play as adolescents—games like Barbarian Stomp, Blood and Roses, and Extinctathon—that turn mass destruction into an enjoyable spectacle.

Good at such games because of his “lateral thinking” (p. 77)—he is “a master of the sideways leap” (p. 40)—Crake, who hates to lose, gets fixated on the games that interest him, playing them until he masters them. Parallel ing the divided world of haves and have-nots in which Atwood’s characters find themselves, Barbarian Stomp (See If You Can Change History!) is a game in which one player has the cities and wealth and the other the hordes. “Either the barbarians stomped the cities or else they got stomped. . . . Rome versus the Visigoths, Ancient Egypt versus the Hyksos, Aztecs versus the Spaniards” (p. 77). In the trading game Blood and Roses, the Blood side plays with human atrocities in which large numbers of people were killed, while the Roses side plays with human achievements, such as works of art and scientific breakthroughs, and the winner is the player who retains the largest number of human achievements. “The exchange rates—one Mona Lisa equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the Ninth Symphony plus three Great Pyramids—were suggested, but there was room for haggling” (p. 79). When Jimmy complains that even though the Blood player usually wins, winning means that he inherits a “wasteland,” Crake insists that this outcome is the “point of the game” (p. 80). Just as these games prepare readers for Crake’s later successful attempt to change human history and leave behind the wasteland inhabited by his friend and former game-partner, Jimmy-Snowman, so the Extinctathon game, an “interactive biofreak masterlore game” that Crake finds on the Web, provides the inspiration for Crake’s later act of bioterrorism. “EXTINCTATHON, Monitored by MaddAddam. Adam named the living
animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones. Do you want to play? That was what came up when you logged on,” as Jimmy-Snowman recalls (p. 80). The code-names Crake chooses are also telling: he calls himself “Crake,” after an extinct Australian bird that, like Crake’s genius type, was never “very numerous,” and he calls Jimmy “Thickney,” after a defunct Australian bird that once frequented cemeteries (p. 81)—a dark hint of the future that awaits Jimmy-Snowman as the sole human survivor in the vast graveyard Crake leaves behind.

If Atwood, in describing these games, is slyly and playfully providing game-like clues to the reader, preparing for Crake’s later wanton destruction of humanity in his genocidal game of Extinctathon, she also registers alarm at, and provides sardonic commentary on, the culture her characters inhabit not only in the violent computer games they play but also in another trend in contemporary culture that she envisions becoming deeply entrenched in the future: the trivialization of the creative arts, which, in Jimmy’s world have become little more than worthless pastimes. Unlike the top-of-the-class Crake who, after high school, becomes a student at the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute—“It was like going to Harvard had been, back before it got drowned” (p. 173)—Jimmy attends the Martha Graham Academy, “named after some gory old dance goddess of the twentieth century” and founded in the last third of the twentieth century “by a clutch of now-dead rich liberal bleeding hearts from Old New York” (p. 186). In Jimmy’s world, the creative arts, no longer valued by the culture, have lost their vitality. “The students of song and dance continued to sing and dance, though the energy had gone out of these activities and the classes were small. . . . Theatrical events had dwindled into versions of the singalong or the tomato bombardment or the wet T-shirt contest.” Studying the arts at Martha Graham is like “studying Latin, or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything” (p. 187). Jimmy, who majors in Problematics, a course of study for word people nicknamed “Spin and Grin,” has few illusions about the future open to him with his “risible degree”: “Window-dressing was what he’d be doing, at best—decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage” (p. 188).

Unlike Jimmy, who is “filed . . . among the rejects” and studies what is considered “an archaic waste of time” (p. 195), Crake thrives studying transgenics at Watson-Crick. Nicknamed Asperger’s U. because of the “high percentage of brilliant weirdos that strolled and hopped and lurched through its corridors, Watson-Crick is populated by students who are “[d]emi-autistic, genetically speaking” and who have “single-track tunnel-vision minds” and exhibit “a marked degree of social ineptitude” (p. 193). In having Crake’s father name him after the boy-genius pianist, Glenn Gould, Atwood provides a significant clue to her character’s behavior, for Gould, as Atwood has speculated, probably had Asperger’s syndrome—a high-functioning type
of autism sometimes called the “little professor” syndrome, characterized by narrowly focused, obsessional interests and prodigious feats of memory, but also poor social skills and a lack of empathy. Pointing to the Asperger’s-like traits of her character, Atwood provides a contemporary twist on the well-worn stereotype of the mad—and impersonal-amoral—scientist, creating in the process a puzzling, and troubling, character, one whose game-like approach to life ultimately leads to his gruesome destruction of humanity.

When Jimmy visits Crake, he finds the Asperger’s-like world of Watson-Crick familiar, for the labs, the “socially spastic scientists” and the peculiar bioform experiments of the students remind him of the Compound world he grew up in (p. 205). Referred to as “Jimmy, the neurotypical” (p. 203) when Crake introduces him to others, Jimmy feels that in the “brainpound” of Watson-Crick, his status is “equivalent to that of a house plant” (p. 209). “Wave of the future” (p. 201), Crake tells Jimmy as he shows him student projects at Watson-Crick, including the bulblike, headless chicken object that grows chicken parts, a nightmarish object to Jimmy—“It was like an animal-protein tuber” (p. 202)—and the wolfvogs, vicious attack animals bred to look like dogs. Unlike Jimmy, who is concerned about whether something is “real or fake”—that is, whether it occurs in nature or is a genetically modified human creation—to Crake such a question is misguided. Once creatures like the shocking-pink butterflies with pancake-sized wings have been created, argues Crake, the “process is no longer important,” for the new bioengineered form is what the species now is “in real time” (p. 200).

Even as Jimmy begins to feel that “some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed” in the bioengineering experiments at Watson-Crick and wonders “[h]ow much is too much, how far is too far,” Crake, the budding young scientist-imperialist and biotech wizard, avows that he does not believe in either God or Nature with a “capital N” (p. 206). If Crake’s words reflect the “postmodern” scientific mindset that openly flouts the “laws” of nature posited by modern science and works to collapse boundaries among species in an age in which “science and technology are undermining firm boundaries between reality/unreality, natural/artificial . . . and the born/the made,” he also is presented as an amalgam of the mad-impersonal-amoral scientist figures found in literature and popular culture. Filled with scientific hubris, Crake, who does not believe in God or Nature, also does not believe in the value of human life, Atwood reveals, as she emphasizes Crake’s rationalistic and game-like—and utterly affectless—approach to life as he, unbeknownst to Jimmy, begins to formulate his plan to destroy humanity. Crake, who has become an Extinctathon grandmaster, is full of admiration when he discovers that the MaddAddam group includes Compound-trained bioengineers who are intent on biological sabotage, determined to shut down the system. “So far they haven’t done any people numbers, but it’s obvious they could,” he tells
Jimmy (p. 217). In a similar way, Crake is not horrified but enthusiastic when he describes his mother’s gruesome death from a bioengineered disease: “It was impressive. . . . Froth was coming out” (p. 177), Crake says of his mother’s death from a “trans-genetic staph . . . mixed with a clever gene from the slime-mould family” (p. 176). Like Crake’s mother, his stepfather also ends up dying from an unknown disease—a virus that goes through him “like shit through a goose,” causing “instant meltdown” (p. 253)—and later Jimmy speculates that both rogue diseases were created by Crake as “trial runs” (p. 343) as he plotted to commit mass murder, behaviour that points to the emotional void at the heart of Atwood’s impersonal and amoral scientist character.

If Jimmy, after earning his “dingy little degree” (p. 241) at Martha Graham, is destined to be a loser and a failure in Atwood’s future world—hired to work on promotionals at a minor Compound, he becomes, “corporately speaking, . . . a drudge and a helot” (p. 248)—Crake, the genius scientist, becomes a powerful force at one of the most important Compounds, RejoovenEsense, where he secretly brings in the Madd Addam Extinctathon grandmasters, who are bioterrorists and genius gene-splicers, to work on his secret Paradise project. When Crake hires Jimmy to do the ad campaign for his BlyssPluss pill, what seems at first glance to be a gesture of friendship is ultimately revealed to be something quite different, for if Crake is Jimmy’s best friend, he is also his worst enemy. An ironic deceiver in his speech, Crake intones environmental discourse—indeed, he gives voice to part of Atwood’s serious message in the novel as he recounts the environmental ills plaguing humanity—even as he plans his grandmaster act of bioterrorism. “As a species we’re in deep trouble, worse than anyone’s saying,” Crake remarks to Jimmy when he tells him about what he ironically refers to as his “immortality” project—his secret plan to replace what he sees as flawed humanity with his genetically modified hominids, the Crakers. “Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone. With the BlyssPluss Pill the human race will have a better chance of swimming” (p. 295). Predicting that the BlyssPluss pill will become the “must-have pill” worldwide, Crake envisions the “tide of human desire” taking control and driving events “as it had in every large change throughout history” (pp. 295–296). A pill that Crake claims is designed to lower the population level by sterilizing people while promising them enhanced sexual libido, protection against sexually transmitted diseases, and prolonged youth, the BlyssPluss pill also carries the hemorrhagic virus Crake has engineered to destroy humanity. “What if the fewer people are very greedy and wasteful?” Jimmy asks Crake when he first learns of the BlyssPluss project. “They won’t be,” Crake tellingly remarks (p. 295), the real significance of his words becoming evident to Jimmy only after the fact. The master of the sideways leap, Crake uses both
Jimmy and Oryx as unwitting players in his doomsday game of Extinctathon, a game plan he pronounces to be an “elegant concept” (p. 295).

If Atwood draws heavily on the popular detective-thriller genre in telling her story, inviting the reader, like Jimmy-Snowman, to unravel and piece together the clues to Crake’s game-like bioterrorist plot to destroy humanity, she also deliberately introduces a love triangle plot into the narrative by bringing together Jimmy, Crake and Oryx at the Paradise dome. An appropriate character for the body-identified and sex-addicted postfeminist world of the future Atwood conjures up, Oryx—or perhaps someone who resembles her—is first seen by Jimmy and Crake on HottTotts, a global paedophilia Internet site, when they are adolescents and both become obsessed with her. Prodded by Jimmy to tell the story of her past, Oryx is vague about the facts of her life—she does not know, for example, the name of the village or the country where she was born—and she seems, at times, to improvise to please Jimmy so that he comes to wonder if everything she has told him is “his own invention” (p. 316). But even as Atwood suggests that Oryx is, in part, a fantasized object of desire, she also uses the story that Oryx tells Jimmy to instruct readers about the baneful social and economic effects of global climate change on the poor of the world.

A member of the non-affluent masses in the third world, Oryx is born poor in a village in southeast Asia where the crops have suffered due to the climate changes caused by global warming. Sold by her mother when she is a girl to help improve the family’s finances, she starts out selling roses to rich tourists in a city in southeast Asia but ends up in porn films, eventually coming to the United States where she remains in the sex trade, which is where Crake finds her when he is a student at Watson-Crick and uses the HottTotts photo to locate the girl from the porn site—or someone older in the sex trade who resembles her. Hired by Crake to work on his Paradice project, she becomes a true believer in his project and chooses the MaddAddam codename Oryx, naming herself after an extinct East African herbivore. While Jimmy is convinced that the adult Oryx is the eight-year-old girl in the HottTotts photo and also the adolescent girl who was the subject of a television news story when she was found being kept as a sex slave in a locked garage in San Francisco, she casts doubt on whether she is, in fact, the girl in the photo and from the news story when Jimmy questions her about her past only to relent and, in “a storytelling voice” (p. 316), tell him what he wants to hear. “You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?” as she says at one point (p. 114). That Oryx is vague and evasive about her traumatic past gives her a kind of general representative status as a female sexual victim and commodity in the novel’s scheme even as she serves as a virtual and fantasized object of desire for both Jimmy and Crake in the strange love triangle plot that unfolds.
“Enter Oryx. Fatal moment. But which fatal moment?” Snowman wonders as he reconstructs events leading up to the catastrophic end of humanity (p. 307). When Jimmy suddenly encounters Oryx at the Paradice dome, where she works both as a worldwide distributor of the BlyssPluss pill and also as the teacher of the Crakers, he experiences a “moment of pure bliss, pure terror” as he gazes into her eyes. “He felt he'd dreamed her. How could a person be caught that way, in an instant, by a glance, the lift of an eyebrow, the curve of an arm? But he was” (p. 308). Aware that Crake is in love with Oryx, Jimmy feels that she is off limits to him, only to be seduced by Oryx, a practised hand who knows how to please men and who soon arranges to come to Jimmy after she is with Crake. While Atwood includes a love triangle plot in her narrative, she also works, in part, to subvert romantic discourse by describing Jimmy as a womanizer and sex addict who feels “jerked around by his own dick” (p. 253) and Crake as a non-romantic scientist who sees humans as “hormone robots” (p. 166) and describes falling in love as “a hormonally induced delusional state” (p. 193). And even as Atwood calls attention to the romantic, and melodramatic, formula she is evoking—that of the fatal love triangle plot—and even as the Jimmy-Crake-Oryx love triangle plays a direct role in the final catastrophe, she also provides a dark twist on this romantic formula by describing how to Jimmy what happens is an “overdone” melodrama: it is “porn with the sound muted” and “brainfrizz without the ads” (p. 326). In the rapid unfolding of events, as the hemorrhagic virus Crake has encysted in the BlyssPluss pill begins to kill people all over the globe and Oryx suddenly realizes that the virus was in the pills she helped distribute, a bloodied Crake returns to the Paradice dome with an unconscious Oryx, slits her throat in front of Jimmy, prompting Jimmy to shoot and kill Crake, an act of passion that Jimmy comes to suspect was stage-directed by Crake. “Did he set up the grand finale as an assisted suicide, had he intended to have Jimmy shoot him because he knew what would happen next and he didn't deign to stick around to watch the results of what he'd done?” he wonders. “Or was he tormented by jealousy, was he addled by love, was it revenge, did he just want Jimmy to put him out of his misery? Had he been a lunatic or an intellectually honourable man who'd thought things through to their logical conclusion? And was there any difference?” (p. 343).

“All it takes ... is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything. . . . Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it’s game over forever” (p. 223), as Crake once told Jimmy as he was preparing his Extinctathon game plan—his grandmaster plot to destroy humanity. “Oh, big points, Grandmaster,” Jimmy thinks as he follows world events on the Internet and television news and watches the end of a species, Homo sapiens sapiens, which is presented by the media as a global megaspectacle
“It’s Game Over Forever”

(p. 344). “I’m counting on you,” Crake says in his final words to Jimmy (p. 329), leaving him the protector and guide of the Crakers, the result of Crake’s grand project to bioengineer a new non-predatory, non-territorial hominid, one adapted to, and not in competition with, the natural environment. “From a certain perspective,” Atwood has commented, “Crake is the most altruistic person around,” for he has looked at the deteriorating environment and the hardwiring of humanity’s “monkey brains” and acted to get rid of humanity’s destructive features. But Crake’s “wonderful plan” (p. 333)—especially his creation of the Crakers—is also presented in the novel as a kind of extended MaddAddam joke as Atwood both expresses alarm at and mocks the idea of a bioengineered posthuman future.

“Think of an adaptation, any adaptation, and some animal somewhere will have thought of it first,” as Snowman recalls Crake saying (p. 164). An amalgam of the scientist-imperialist and the postmodern trickster-scientist, Crake, who finds the idea of the “real” superfluous and discounts the limits of nature and the boundaries separating species, reengineers human nature to follow his own subjective whims, creating a kind of scientific—and social—reconstruction of human reality, one that calls attention to the active role of genetics and biology in shaping human behavior and culture. Following Crake’s aesthetic, the Crakers are all well-proportioned and physically perfect; they come in a variety of different skin colors; and they all have Crake’s green eyes. “Each is sound of tooth, smooth of skin. No ripples of fat around their waists, no bulges, no dimpled orange-skin cellulite on their thighs. No body hair, no bushiness. They look like retouched fashion photos, or ads for a high-priced workout program.” (p. 100). Equipped with UV-resistant skin, a built-in citrus-smelling insect repellant, and an ability to digest unrefined plant material, they are designed for survival in their harsh globally warmed twenty-first century climate. And they eat their own dung, “another boy-genius concept on the part of Crake,” as Snowman sardonically thinks, recalling how, when he argued with Crake over this feature, “Crake had merely smiled” and then explained the scientific thinking behind this feature (pp. 158–159). Crake also designs another animal feature into his hominids by having the men urinate to mark their territory, the chemicals in their urine offering protection against predators. “Crake allotted the special piss to men only; he said they’d need something important to do, something that didn’t involve childbearing, so they wouldn’t feel left out. Woodworking, hunting, high finance, war, and golf would no longer be options, he’d joked” (p. 155). Although not immune from wounds, the Crakers heal their wounds by purring, a feature Crake spent years perfecting after he learned that the cat family’s purring mechanism is self-healing. “[H]e’d turned himself inside out in the attempt to install that feature,” Snowman recalls, despite the “botched experiments” that included
the “trial batch” of kids that had shown “a tendency to sprout long whiskers and scramble up the curtains” (p. 156).

With their altered ancient primate brains, the Crakers lack the destructive features of racism, hierarchy and territoriality, and because they regularly come into heat, like most other mammals, their sexuality is “not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones” (p. 305). Instead, when the female comes into heat, the bright-blue colour of her abdomen and the pheromones released by the blue tissue stimulate the males, turning their penises a matching bright blue, and they “do a sort of blue-dick dance number, erect members waving to and fro in unison”; then, when the female’s abdomen reaches its darkest shade, she and a chosen quartet of males “go at it” until she becomes pregnant and “that is that” (p. 165). Perfectly adapted to their habitat, they will never have to build houses or develop tools and weapons or create “harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money” (p. 305). Crake, who maintains that “God is a cluster of neurons,” attempts to remove the “G-spot in the brain” (p. 157) and to deprogramme out of the Crakers questions about their own origins. And he tries to eliminate art, believing that symbolic thinking would lead to the downfall of his hominids. “Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war,” in his view (p. 361). While they are hardwired for dreaming and singing, related aspects Crake could not get rid of, they are plain-spoken: “[T]hese people didn’t go in for fancy language: they hadn’t been taught evasion, euphemism, lily-gilding” (p. 348). If the Crakers are the “living results” of Crake’s theories (p. 236), they are also like an embodied boy-genius joke, and indeed, Crake, even as he plans to wipe out human history, names them after famous historical figures—Abraham Lincoln, Leonardo da Vinci, Madame Curie, Sojourner Truth, Simone de Beauvoir—because it amuses him. While Atwood’s method in presenting the Crakers is satirical—indeed, her descriptions of them read as a kind of over-the-top spoof of the ongoing project of bioengineering as she represents them as a kind of postmodern transgenic pastiche—she also is intent on sounding a warning about the potential baneful effects of gene manipulation. Unlike those who insist that science is nothing more than a social construction, Atwood emphasizes the growing, and potentially lethal, power of scientists to manipulate and alter human biology—and reality.

A game-master and master scientist-fabricator who believes that what is “real” is what is in the player’s head, Crake, not unlike the author-illusionist, constructs an alternate reality in his MaddAddam Extinctathon game. As Jimmy witnesses the extinction of humankind, unable to believe what is happening, it all seems like “an illusion, a practical joke of some kind” (p. 342)—a practical joke perpetrated by Crake, the master illusionist and jokester. Living in the post-catastrophe world, Snowman is immersed in
Crake’s dreams just as the reader is immersed in Atwood’s dystopian fantasy world—“Every moment he’s lived in the past few months was dreamed first by Crake,” Snowman realizes (p. 218). “Crake! . . . Why am I on this earth? How come I’m alone? Where’s my Bride of Frankenstein?” a bemused Snowman mutters to himself (p. 169). Aware that he was manipulated by Crake, Snowman comes to see himself as a kind of living joke, the decaying remnant of humankind. “Maybe he’s not the Abominable Snowman after all. Maybe he’s the other kind of snowman, the grinning dope set up as a joke and pushed down as an entertainment, his pebble smile and carrot nose an invitation to mockery and abuse. Maybe that’s the real him, the last Homo sapiens—a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow . . . ” (p. 224). A “goon, buffoon, poltroon,” Snowman is “humanoid, he’s hominid, he’s an aberration, he’s abominable; he’d be legendary, if there were anyone left to relate legends” (p. 307). Looking at himself in a mirror in a RejoovenEsense Compound house during his return journey to the Paradice dome, Snowman, even as he is appalled by the “bleary-eyed, hollow-cheeked” stranger he sees, stills winks and grins and sticks out his tongue at himself (p. 231)—the last human survivor, a human joke. But he also feels culpable. “I have been unintelligent,” he admits (p. 232):

How could I have missed it? . . . How could I have been so stupid?
No, not stupid. . . . Ignorant, perhaps. Unformed, inchoate. There had been something willed about it though, his ignorance. Or not willed, exactly: structured. He’d grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out (p. 184).

The last human survivor, Snowman, who as a word man in Crake’s world, acted as a “wordserf” (p. 253), often resorts to the borrowed phrases and clichéd speech that clutter his mind—especially self-help discourse—when thinking of his plight. “Get a life,” Snowman tells himself (p. 12); “Routines are good,” he says to himself at another point, only to think that his “entire head is becoming one big stash of obsolete fridge magnets” (p. 148); “Each one of us must tread the path laid out before him, or her,” says a man’s voice in his head in a style Snowman identifies as “bogus guru” from a “cheap do-it-yourself enlightenment handbook, Nirvana for halfwits” (p. 23). And over and over, as the dispirited Snowman tries to “flee the discouraging scene” and get rid of the “morbid tape-loop” in his mind, he hears various women’s voices offering encouragement: “Oh honey, . . . Cheer up! Look on the bright side! You’ve got to think positive!” (p. 169); “Oh honey, don’t beat yourself up!” (p. 42); “Oh sweetie. . . . You’re doing really well” (p. 238); “Oh Jimmy, this is so positive. It makes me happy when you grasp this. Paradice is lost, but you have a Paradice within you, happier far” (p. 308).
If Atwood uses the clichéd language and borrowed speech that runs through Snowman’s mind to discredit her character, she also works to redeem him, in part, by revealing his reverence for art and language. “When any civilization is dust and ashes,” as Jimmy once said to Crake, “art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them. You have to admit that” (p. 167). Attracted in his pre-catastrophe life to old books and old words, Snowman finds “[r]ag ends of language . . . floating in his head: mephitic, metronome, mastitis, metatarsal, maudlin. ‘I used to be erudite,’ he says out loud. Erudite. A hopeless word. What are all those things he once thought he knew, and where have they gone?” (p. 148). Wondering what is happening to his mind, Snowman “has a vision of the top of his neck, opening up into his head like a bathroom drain. Fragments of words are swirling down it, in a grey liquid he realizes is his dissolving brain” (p. 149). To Snowman, words keep him in touch with his humanity. But he is also aware that he has “[n]o hope” of passing on “all” his words to the Crakers (p. 339). “‘Hang on to the words,’ he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious. When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been” (p. 68).

“The whole world is now one vast uncontrolled experiment—the way it always was, Crake would have said—and the doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate” (p. 228). But while Crake has “had his way” (p. 169), there are signs that he has not been able to totally eliminate art and religion in his bioengineered hominids. Something of a storyteller-trickster himself, Snowman, who finds conversation with the Crakers “like a game,” sees them as “blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them” (p. 349). Led out of the Paradice dome by Snowman, an “improbable shepherd,” in a kind of “fringe religious procession” (p. 353), the Crakers, despite Crake’s plan, are interested in stories about the deeds of their maker, Crake, and because of Snowman’s stories, they come to believe that Crake lives in the sky and suffers on their behalf. “In the beginning, there was chaos,” Snowman says to the Crakers, who are “fond of repetition” and who “learn things by heart” (p. 102). “And then Oryx said to Crake, Let us get rid of the chaos. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away. . . . And this is how Crake did the Great Rearrangement and made the Great Emptiness” (p. 103), Snowman tells them in a genesis-like creation story, delighting in the fact that Crake would be “disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification” (p. 104).

But even as Jimmy-Snowman works to thwart Crake, he remains, as the novel ends, a kind of living human joke trapped in the master Extinctathon game engineered by Crake. For when Snowman learns that there are three other human survivors in the vicinity, his mind races as he considers the possibilities. “Maybe all will be well, maybe this trio of strangers is good-hearted,
sane, well-intentioned; maybe he’ll succeed in presenting the Crakers to them in the proper light. On the other hand, these new arrivals could easily see the Children of Crake as freakish, or savage, or non-human and a threat” (p. 366). Having taken on the role of the protector of the Crakers even as he mourns the loss of humanity, Snowman ponders whether or not he should kill the three human survivors as he sneaks up on them, realizing that if he tries to kill them he, too, will probably be killed in the process. Snowman’s final thought—“Zero hour. . . . Time to go” (p. 374)—is deliberately ambiguous. Does “time to go” mean that it is time to act as a peacemaker or that it is time to die? Refusing to predict what will happen, Atwood invites the reader to ponder the likely fate of her character. Are Snowman and the trio of survivors about to become the final human players in Crake’s elaborate game of Extinctathon? Will it be “game over forever,” as Crake predicted? Or is there some ray of hope that humanity will survive?

“Sitting in judgment on the world . . . but why had that been his right?” Why, indeed, Atwood asks through her character, as she warns us, in her darkly satiric way, against the slippery slope she sees us going down. Drawing on what has been called our “instinctive recoil” and “gut revulsion” against the idea of a genetically engineered and posthuman future, Atwood, in her parodic dialogue with biologists and genetic engineers in Oryx and Crake, sounds a warning about the slippery slope we are going down in our contemporary culture of science. If she could select “one motto” for the way we should approach genetic engineering, Atwood remarks, it would be “Think it through,” For she fears that in our new age of genetic manipulation and biological control, we may be blindly entering a catastrophic posthuman future as our scientific mavens sit in judgment on the world and play God with the building blocks of life while we, like Jimmy-Snowman, remain unaware of the perils that surround us until things have gone too far for us to reverse humanity’s slippery-slope downward course.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 161.
3. Ibid., p. 102.
4. Ibid., pp. 131, 133.
6. While the setting of the novel is not specified, Atwood has indicated that events in the novel occur in Massachusetts, near Boston (hence, Snowman’s Red Sox baseball cap). As she remarks, “It had to be a place with fairly low-lying coastal areas, which could be flooded by the melting of glacial ice and by a tidal wave” (Mel

7. ibid.


9. Eleanor Case and Maggie McDonald, “Life After Man” (interview), New Scientist.com <http://www.newscientist.com/opinion/opinterview.jsp?id=ns23931>. “I’d been clipping small items from the back pages of newspapers for years, and noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities,” Atwood recalls (“Writing *Oryx and Crake*”). When asked how close her speculative fiction is to today’s science, she said, “The goat spider is real, the multiple-organ pig is real” (“Life After Man”). Moreover, the “luminous green rabbit already exists. . . . We’ve already made [the polio] virus in a test tube. All they need is the recipes for the other ones and they can make those, too” (Catherine Keenan, “She Who Laughs Last”, 3 May 2003, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/02/1051382088211.html>). In *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003)—one of the books Atwood recommends to readers of her novel—Bill McKibben notes that a Dartmouth Medical School professor ended his presentation at a medical conference by “demanding permission to ‘sculpt the genotype’ and announcing that, were he given permission by a medical ethics board, he would try to engineer a person to have wings” (p. 25).

10. “She Who Laughs Last”.

11. “Writing *Oryx and Crake*”.


14. Atwood has remarked that Glenn Gould probably had Asperger’s syndrome “even if they didn’t diagnose it back then,” and she also recalls the “chill” she felt when, after writing the book, she learned that Gould, when he was ten, wrote an opera in which “all the people died at the end, and only the animals survived” (Brian Bethune, “Atwood Apocalyptic”, *Maclean’s* 116, 17 (28 April 2003), 44+. Available from Academic Search Elite, 28 May 2003 <http://web6.epnet.com>). In *Shadow Syndromes* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), John Ratey and Catherine Johnson explain that Asperger’s, a developmental disability that is “undeniably male,” is “a very high-functioning form of autism” (pp. 219 and 215). A socially awkward individual who avoids making eye contact and has few or no friends, the Asperger’s sufferer is “odd; different; strange” and “beyond the pale”, and yet while socially obtuse, some individuals with Asperger’s are “geniuses” or “near-geniuses”
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(Shadow Syndromes, pp. 220 and 278). “A lack of social skills, limited ability to have a reciprocal conversation and an intense interest in a particular subject are the core features of this syndrome,” as Tony Attwood explains in Asperger’s Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998, p. 13). In becoming “fascinated by a special interest that dominates the person’s time and conversation,” the Asperger’s sufferer will typically develop “an encyclopaedic knowledge” of the topic that fascinates him in his “solitary pursuit” of his interest (Asperger’s Syndrome pp. 89 and 90).

15. “Whereas genetic and cloning technologies . . . at least have the potential to benefit human beings, they have also been appropriated by the meat and dairy industries for blatantly self-serving purposes,” write Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. “While such anomalies as self-shearing sheep and broiler chickens with fewer feathers have already been assembled, some macabre visionaries foresee engineering pigs and chickens with flesh that is tender or can be easily microwaved, and chickens that are wingless so as to require smaller cages. The next step would be to create and replicate only animals’ torsos—sheer organ sacks—and dispense with superfluous heads and limbs. In fact, scientists have already created headless embryos of mice and frogs. . . .” (The Postmodern Adventure, p. 174).

16. The Postmodern Adventure, p. 151.

17. In From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), Roslynn Haynes investigates various representations of the scientist figure, including the alchemist “who reappears at critical times as the obsessed or maniacal scientist” and has been “reincarnated recently as the sinister biologist producing new (and hence allegedly unlawful) species through the quasi-magical processes of genetic engineering” (p. 3). If for a brief period of time at the beginning of the twentieth century, scientists were viewed as “adventurer-heroes, saving the Earth from evil space invaders or setting up a utopian society grounded on the principles of science,” this time of “hero worship” was short-lived. “After Hiroshima the scientists’ moral stocks plunged once more; they were depicted as ruthlessly sacrificing individuals, even whole nations, merely to gratify their scientific curiosity” (p. 5). Atwood’s Crake exhibits traits of the alchemist scientist and is also related to the “mad and evil” scientist, a stereotype based on fears that science and its products have the power to “crush individuals and whole societies, even the entire human race” (p. 188). Crake also shares traits with the “impersonal” and “amoral” scientist figures. “Of all the charges against the scientist in literature, none has been leveled more frequently or more vigorously than that of aloofness and emotional deficiency,” according to Haynes (p. 211). “A distinctive subset of the stereotype of the impersonal scientist is that of the amoral scientist. . . . Compared with the mad or evil scientist stereotype, scientists who fit the stereotype of the amoral scientist are less readily identifiable as evil; they do not pursue science for power or wealth, but merely for the apparently modest reward of solving an abstract intellectual problem or serving their country” (p. 236). The amoral scientists’ “disregard of the human factor in their research is interpreted as evidence of their alienation from their own humanity”—thus they are often depicted “as emotionally retarded, like the impersonal scientists” (p. 238).

18. “Atwood Apocalyptic”.

Two generations ago when the American New Critics preached a concentration on “the work itself” (usually a poem) and a rejection of concerns with everything outside the work, one major item on their agenda was eliminating the author as an authority for “his” work, stressing that once works are completed their authors become mere readers of their own productions. That intrinsic approach has long since disappeared, especially with the commodifying of contemporary authors who have become primary marketers of their work, encouraged by publishers to spend weeks “on the road,” doing readings, signing copies, granting interviews, and generally extending themselves as authorized readers of their most recent publications. As a best-selling novelist, Margaret Atwood is no exception, and on occasion she not only authorizes readings of her own fiction in public readings and in interviews but also writes an “Author’s Afterword” to a novel such as Alias Grace, in that particular case teasing readers of her “whodunit” with the possibility she might provide further clues, as Author, to clarify whether Grace was actually guilty of murder.

Recently in the publicizing of her novel Oryx and Crake, Atwood has emphasized that the novel functions as a “book end” to The Handmaid’s Tale. Her encouragement of readers to connect these two examples of what she likes to term “speculative fiction” seems to provide a kind of carte blanche to
read *Oryx and Crake* not only in connection with *The Handmaid’s Tale* but in the context of her other ventures into SF, most notably in the novel-within-a-novel of *The Blind Assassin*. The circles of potential contextualizing widen out to include other fiction with which *Oryx and Crake* will inevitably be compared—Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*—as well as Atwood’s own work that has been virtually from the beginning preoccupied with the theme of Survival.

*Oryx and Crake* begins, as have countless SF novels and stories, by dropping readers into a vaguely familiar yet overwhelmingly hostile and alien world in which a viewpoint character is struggling to survive. Readers are immediately encouraged to get involved in some quick Sherlockholmesing¹ to figure out when and where they have been dropped and what’s happened to this world. In dramatic contrast to the near-future and generally more familiar world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* seems to be set somewhere along the coast of the American South—Where would Atwood find a spot that’s warm year-round in Canada?—and the time seems to be later in the 21st century. What has happened takes longer to figure out because this post-apocalyptic world has been some time in the making. The viewpoint character Snowman lives in a tree, wrapped in a dirty bed sheet, gradually starving to death because his only nourishment comes from what he can scavenge in forays through abandoned houses, along with the fish brought to him once a week by the Children of Crake, who are a collective “Friday” to his role as a “Robinson Crusoe.” Indeed, Snowman (the nickname he has given himself, short for The Abominable Snowman, a “throwback” of a sort) may be the most recent in a long line of fictional characters representing The Last Man. And as a Crusoe-figure thrown back on his ingenuity in exploiting the materials at hand to survive, Snowman also draws on the recent obsession in popular culture with The Survivor.

How Snowman ended up in a post-apocalyptic world is answered in part by yet another critical aspect of the publicizing of this new novel. In its brief afterword, “Writing *Oryx and Crake,*” Atwood reveals that she began the project shortly after the publication of *The Blind Assassin* and well before she had expected to write another novel. This admission that she was willing to risk the mainstream horror of being thought “prolific” (one is reminded of Joyce Carol Oates’s burden) speaks to Atwood’s sense of *Oryx and Crake*’s urgent message. She writes of getting inspired to write the novel in Australia, where she was deeply impressed by reminders of how indigenous peoples had lived in close connection with their environment. Yet another stimulus was a journey to the Arctic where she observed evidence of the shrinking polar icecap. She indicates that she postponed the *Oryx and Crake* project because of the demands of the book tour for *The Blind Assassin*. Then that tour was brought to a dramatic halt.
when she appeared at the Toronto airport one morning, only to be told her flight had been canceled. It was September 11, 2001.

As Atwood herself knows, *Oryx and Crake* faces the risks inherent in any fiction produced by a writer with a “message,” and readers of SF know how long the genre has had to contend with the criticism that attention paid to a “message” restricts, for example, the writer’s ability to create characters. Furthermore, the setting of the action in a brave new world of perhaps almost a century in the future calls on her to “do the science” to make that projected world scientifically cohesive and credible. As a number of readers have pointed out, the genres of fantasy and science fiction have traditionally been gendered feminine and masculine, respectively, because until very recently young women have not been encouraged to study the sciences. Thus, in contrast to its “book end” *The Handmaid’s Tale* with its near-future of the fundamentalist Christian theocracy Gilead, this new futuristic novel represents a much fuller investment in science than *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is hardly “sciency” enough to be considered SF. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood draws on a background in science on which she comments in the afterword. Both her father and brother are scientists, and she grew up surrounded by her father’s students and colleagues, obliging her to “read up on” the popularized science of Stephen Jay Gould and others to have some background for dinner-table conversation. She also argues that all of the science in *Oryx and Crake* represents a mere extension of present knowledge in genetic engineering.

Although eco-scientists, environmentalists, and geneticists might quibble with the depth of her “homework,” Atwood provides the foundation of a future world that seems a believable extrapolation of contemporary nightmares. The devastation of Snowman’s world began with those nightmares becoming real. Global warming melted the polar icecaps, making most of 20th-century coastal habitation impossible. Metropolises are now under water, and aquifers have become saline. The total destruction of the ozone layer has made mid-day heat unbearable and sunlight carcinogenic. If these calamities were not enough, more are provided by the mushrooming of genetic engineering to become the dominant industry of Snowman’s world, as the corporations that research and market new products are locked into murderous competition for hegemony, making the American “robber barons” of the late 19th century look like the philanthropists many of them mutated into once they had made their killing.

Atwood takes a leaf from Aldous Huxley’s most famous book to provide a boyhood friendship between Snowman (who was then Jimmy) and Crake, who develops into the Mad Scientist figure in her own Brave New World. Snowman in part plays the John the Savage or Bernard Marx role as the one who is close enough to The Scientist to provide narrative access to that inner world without accepting the mad extensions of the desire for power, inher-

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ent in the professed aims of this monstrous Science to “benefit” humanity. Jimmy’s father was a “genographer,” who began “mapping the proteonome” in post-doctoral work, before contributing to the engineering of the “Methuselah Mouse.” He and other genetic engineers long ago helped to erase the black market in body parts, such as kidneys and hearts, by engineering *sus multigorganifer*, or as it became popularly known, the “pigoon.” This creature might be thought of as an organ factory, or an organ orchard from which an unending supply of, say, kidneys might be harvested. Similarly, Jimmy’s father was part of the team that engineered the implanting of cells in the skin of those who are no longer young. These implanted cells multiply like algae on the surface of a pond, consuming depleted human skin cells and replacing them with NooSkins. Behind these efforts, of course, are immense profits in a materialistic culture in which looking young and “surviving” as long as possible have become hallowed goals. These efforts in applied science and engineering may seem merely the prostituting of Science to profit-making, but they also speak to the idealism generated by scientific inquiry since its beginnings centuries ago.

Like other dystopic visionaries Atwood also enjoys spoofing the ridiculous ends to which genetic engineering could be put, and her satire is occasionally reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s in sending up the “projectors” of his time. Given the growing movement toward “fast food”—some pessimistic prognosticators speculating that cooking will become in the 21st century what sewing became by the end of the 20th—Atwood predicts the genetic engineering of the ChickieNob, a creature all breasts or drumsticks, making it unnecessary to discard the unwanted parts of that animal. Traditional meat has virtually disappeared because of the vulnerability of animals to diseases, especially those spread by bio-terrorists. Indeed, Jimmy’s earliest memory is seeing and smelling the burning heaps of animals slaughtered to prevent the spread of a deliberately released microbe. Atwood draws here on the television images of burning carcasses of cattle with “Mad Cows’ Disease” and “Foot and Mouth Disease” in Great Britain.

As the deterioration of the environment has led to the extinction of countless species—Jimmy and Crake as boys played a game called “Extinctionathon”—new creatures are created, often by the biotech boys, after hours, as scientific “play.” One of these is the “rakunk,” a splicing of the skunk and raccoon to function as a family pet. Others such as the Snat, the splicing of a snake and rat, are even more the product of a boyish sense of “play,” or, What kind of weird species can we guys dream up? This gendering of genetic engineering as a masculinist pursuit of a goal, regardless of the consequences of that compulsive pursuit, is played out in the conflict between Jimmy’s parents, ending with his mother’s departure. She had become a stay-at-home Mom when she quit her job at the same genetic engineering corporation at
which Jimmy’s father works. Eventually, however, she became so angry and depressed by her husband’s boyishly gleeful tampering with Life that she dropped out into an underworld of others who also reject what is happening and protest this brave new world at the risk of their imprisonment and even their death.

Because the 21st century of this novel is the century of the terrorist and the literally murderous competition between the dominant genetic engineering corporations, this future world has become even more stratified than our own. The cities, or “Pleeblands,” have been abandoned to the masses by the elite who are protected in corporation compounds, futuristic versions of “company towns,” where employees live with their families in corporation-owned spaces with little need or desire for contact with the Plebs. The power of scientific and technological knowledge further genders this futuristic society, as it becomes evident when Crake is identified as a boy-genius at genetic engineering and admitted to Watson-Crick Institute where he trains to become a major player in constructing the future, while Jimmy is relegated to Martha Graham Academy, where the arts and humanities have been prostituted into training schools to market what corporations produce. What can an English major do?

When Crake invites Jimmy to visit Watson-Crick, the narrative opens up a discussion of the roles the Arts can play in this future. Crake begins the discussion with the observation that human sexuality produces much misery and violence as the result of unfulfilled desire. When Jimmy responds that lack of sexual gratification has been the generator of some great art, Crake dismisses this traditional “Freudian” rationalization of creativity as “compensation,” asserting: “What is it Byron said? Who’d write if they could do otherwise?” Jimmy becomes so tongue-tied from frustration at Crake’s decision “to poach on his own shoddy, threadbare territory,” when he should “stick to science and leave poor Byron to Jimmy,” that he ends up agreeing with his opponent: “I mean, when you can’t get the otherwise, then . . .” to which his friend retorts: “Wouldn’t you rather be fucking?” (167). Tellingly, Jimmy’s face gets even redder at Crake’s blunt demolition of his “feminized” argument, and he proposes the standard humanist argument for the arts as the finest flower of any civilization: “When any civilization is dust and ashes art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them” (167). Although Jimmy wants to know, “Why are you always putting me down?” he asks, instead, what Crake has against art, to which his friend responds: “Nothing. People can amuse themselves any way they like. If they want to play with themselves in public, whack off over doodling, scribbling, fiddling, it’s fine with me” (167). Once again, Jimmy and his defense of “the arts” are positioned as “feminine” and self-indulgent, while Crake and science are gendered “masculine,” in a blatantly masculinist
performance of power. As a result, readers may be just as surprised as Jimmy that Crake eventually hires him to advertise his corporation's new line; however, just as Crake amuses himself by introducing his friend to other students at Watson-Crick as a “neurotypical,” he also enjoys the power of confirming Jimmy’s “femininity” in working “under” him.

Crake, on the other hand, seems doomed to the illusion of mastery, a kind of masculinist arrogance, masquerading as an idealistic mission to “save the world,” even if he must destroy that world in order to save it. He knows that even *homo sapiens* cannot survive in an environment devastated by the 20th century’s insistence on burning fossil fuels and by a mushrooming population. Because the species is headed for extinction, along with all the others unable to adapt to a hostile environment, Crake concludes that science must create a species with a better chance of surviving in a damaged ecosystem. Atwood has cleverly drawn her readers into enough sympathy with Crake through Jimmy’s having been this Mad Scientist’s friend from boyhood and admired the Whiz Kid aspects of Crake’s budding genius to prevent a total rejection of Crake as either evil or hopelessly insane, just as Mary Shelley maintains her reader’s sympathy for Dr. Frankenstein, even though his project is misguided. Although from boyhood Crake has had some of the iciness conventionally associated with The Scientist, Jimmy helps to humanize him enough so that readers will attend to the “what if” Crake proposes: What if our species is doomed to extinction? If life can survive only in the form of the Children of Crake, doesn’t that survival outweigh the loss of some of what readers are likely to consider their “humanity”?

No, in thunder! Atwood seems to be shouting. If traditional human qualities have to be sacrificed in order to survive, it may not be worth surviving. It is her brilliant imagining of Crake’s creatures that makes this dystopia most meaningful. First of all, these Children of Crake, or “Crakers,” are genetically engineered to withstand a devastated environment, ranging from the carcinogenic effects of sunlight, air, and water, down to the annoyance/health hazard of a mosquito bite—they have a built-in insect repellant. Because farming and even hunting can lead to the complications and destructive potential of civilization, the Crakers graze on grass, leaves, and the shoots of plants. Without a reasonable justification for the behavior, other than a possible shortage of food, these creatures have digestive systems allowing them to recycle their own excrement. But then Crake *does* have a fetish for excrement, as he revealed earlier in the narrative when he demolished Jimmy’s argument for art as the text through which future students read a civilization by retorting that it is much more likely to be “ossified shit” than artifacts that yields an understanding of a vanished civilization.

Because Crake is a variety of Dr. Frankenstein, “playing God” with “Life,” readers might expect him to create the Crakers in his own image.
Crake bears witness, however, to at least a century’s disenchantment with human intelligence. One thinks, for example, of the mythologizing of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist as tragic hero, devastatingly aware of the consequences of his own genius as a “father” of the atomic bomb that could destroy hundreds of thousands in seconds. Records from World War II indicate that the Japanese massacred more Chinese in the “Rape of Nanking” than were destroyed by the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; however, the Japanese bear less guilt because they killed through more primitive technology. Similarly, Stalin deliberately allowed millions of peasants to starve to death when they refused to participate in his effort to collectivize agriculture, but it was the engineering skills and the perversion of human intelligence that in part made the Nazis the greater criminals, even though “the numbers” were similar. In any case, the Children of Crake are programmed to have limited intelligence, unlike their maker who knows the problems the mind can create.

Like Crake, however, these creatures are essentially without desire, because eros, even more than intelligence, makes for human discontent. Like Huxley’s *Brave New World*, set in 632 A.F., “After Ford,” but also “After Freud,” Atwood’s futuristic world aims at the elimination of eros as anything more than mere sexual reflex. The Children of Crake represent a restoration of the sexuality once shared with other mammals. To ensure the future of the species the female goes into heat about every three years, cuing the males through the release of the appropriate pheromones, accompanied by visual signals of her readiness to mate: her genitalia and the adjacent area turn blue, an adaptation Crake copied from other higher primates. To guarantee impregnation the mating ritual requires that three males copulate with the female in turn, following a courting dance in which they woo her by waving their erect penises that have turned blue to mark their readiness to mate. Atwood draws here on the laughable mating rituals of other species, but also *homo sapiens* whose courtship rites have had their own bizarre eccentricities. There seems little concern with issues such as why this female in heat does not arouse the other males and why none of the males competes for mating rights, but cooperatively waits his turn. The author may be so successful in making her readers laugh at the spectacle of human-like creatures with waving blue penises that no one is likely to ponder the engineering—in of cooperation in this courting ritual, thus, ensuring the elimination of paternity, since none of the three males can know who actually impregnated the female. This easy assurance that the less intelligent primates are “morally” superior to *homo sapiens* may be disturbing to some who recall how much intellectuals enjoyed the appearance of cooperation in chimpanzee “culture” until anthropologists began to observe that male chimps also rape and even kill their own kind. Much as intelligence and eros can be disruptive agents in human culture, the Children of Crake remain just that—Crake’s *children*, and like children
tremendously vulnerable. Crake, the clever anticipator of his children’s needs knew that, however, and enlisted his friend Jimmy to be their shepherd, at least for the first generation or so.

As Jimmy discovers, Crake has had designs on him for some time, ironically “designs” very similar to those Crake has had on Oryx. Oryx is yet another chilling reminder of the reader’s world. As young adolescents, Crake and Jimmy encountered “Oryx” while surfing the Web for pornography and landing on HottTotts, a website for pedophiles. Although only eight, Oryx is a “sex worker,” sold to her handler, along with her brother, by their mother. From the beginning, the narrative starkly distinguishes the two friends in their responses to Oryx: for Jimmy she is an icon of desire, while for Crake she remains pretty much a “sex worker” to be used for his own purposes. Those purposes become clearer as Crake begins to set the stage for the Apocalypse, and Oryx is pressed into service as a surrogate mother to the Children Crake has “fathered.” She is the one who teaches these “wondrous creatures,” as Miranda calls the “aliens” she first sees on Prospero’s island in the “brave new world” passage Huxley drew on for his own satiric purposes. Crake appropriately constructs her as a variety of Mother Goddess, bringing together the only two versions of the female in the economy of his desire—mother or whore. Oryx teaches Crake’s creatures to reverence hers, the Children of Oryx, or other animals. Not coincidentally in this new cosmogony the human-like creations are made in the Garden by their Father, while the other fauna can be relegated to the Earth-Mother, whom this male deity supplants and dominates as his consort.

Those “purposes” include Crake’s boyhood friend as well as when Jimmy becomes a major player in the Apocalypse Crake is planning. By hiring Jimmy, purportedly to oversee the marketing of BlyssPluss, Crake opens the door on the corporate strategies and practices of HelthWyzer for which his father worked, and presumably its competitors in the pharmaceutical industry. Crake is strangely ambivalent about his father and the “accident” that ended his life. If anything, Crake learns from and exploits corporate behavior to further his own ends. In a culture led to believe virtually from infancy that there is precious little that cannot be “cured” by taking a pill, future pharmaceutical conglomerates will be forced, Atwood predicts, to become more innovative to survive. The pharmaceuticals of the future, like HelthWyzer, will have to pay attention to the lesson of dentistry in the 20th century: dentists have been so successful in improving dental hygiene that they face dwindling practices. The pharmaceutical industry will be forced to direct its research efforts toward discovering, if not actually creating, new diseases to keep their pills and their profits rolling. Thus, future research will push the industry into competition among corporations to find the most effective new diseases to be cured by a whole new line of products. Atwood must have felt a chill as the SARS
epidemic turned her own Toronto into a metropolis that the World Health Organization warned travelers to avoid, just as *Oryx and Crake* was moving into its production stage.5

As Crake discloses, his father died when he refused to be an accomplice to HelthWyzer’s introduction of diseases through the vitamin supplements it was marketing worldwide. Fearful that public confidence would be shaken in all their products, Management decided Crake’s father had to be eliminated. (He had made the mistake of confiding in his friend and boss Pete that he intended to blow the whistle on the corporation’s machinations.) The narrative may be making a gesture toward *Hamlet* in Crake’s discovery that his “Uncle Pete” conspired in his father’s murder and that his mother may have quickly remarried her dead husband’s boss out of fear that she, too, could become the victim of a mysterious “accident.” The gesture toward Shakespeare’s tragedy is provocative because Hamlet’s revenge plot leaves the stage at the end of Act V looking a bit post-apocalyptic, too.

Readers ought to be suspicious about Crake’s invention of BlyssPluss, but then Jimmy is equally willing to trust his old friend, underlining once again Jimmy’s value to the narrative as the one who has known Crake since youth. As Crake describes it, BlyssPluss packs a triple punch as a protection against sexually transmitted diseases, as a powerful aphrodisiac, and as an elixir of youth. Like most other things that sound too good to be true, BlyssPluss is as well. The ultimate manipulator, Crake sends Oryx off on a worldwide promotion of the pill that Jimmy has taken charge of marketing—a task so easy that any “neurotypical” could succeed at it—with both Oryx and Jimmy totally unaware that the pill contains a virus so virulent that human life will be wiped off the Earth to provide space for the Children of Crake. Crake may have learned something from the bobkitten, a genetically engineered creature whose males eliminate not only their rivals but also their rivals’ progeny to monopolize the gene pool.

As the scientist who believes that he has the best of intentions in wiping out *homo sapiens* to make room for the Crakers who are engineered to live in harmony with their environment, Crake will remind most readers of the Father of all Mad Scientists, Frankenstein, as we have been noting. The appearance of *Oryx and Crake* and other narratives of dystopian futures can be understood in part as the result of the tremendous power that genetic engineering could have for the 21st century. As Nancy Kress and others have predicted, genetics will be for this century what physics was for the last. Once again, the world has become aware of the great potential for change that Science is offering/threatening, and it is no surprise that writers, who tend to be cultural conservatives, are likely to look at the darker consequences of Science’s influences.
We need to remind ourselves, however, that Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein grew out of her husband’s and Lord Byron’s excitement with the potential of science to improve the condition of humanity, as indicated by the remainder of *Frankenstein’s* title—or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Like the high hopes of an H. G. Wells for a future made more livable through science and technology, a future that gave Orwell nightmares, this idealism of Shelley’s circle can also excite notions of the monstrous. Indeed, it might be argued that the monster is a logical outcome of the idealist who is intent on rarefying human experience, aspiring to the sacred, or the ideal, at the cost of the actual, or the profane. Once again, it is probably no coincidence that Crake has only enough body to house his intellect and demonstrates a revulsion against the body in his perverse attraction to excrement and to sex as mere physicality. In Atwood’s earlier novel *The Blind Assassin*, the aged Iris comes to see the interdependency of the sacred and the profane when she recalls her nanny’s adage, “No flowers without shit.” Taken to its logical extreme, idealism may be a form of madness, as is demonstrated by Conrad’s Kurtz whose idealistic impulses to bring the sweetness and light of civilization to the heart of darkness may lead him in the end to discover “the horror, the horror” of the monster into which he has transformed himself.

The image of the monster, on the other side of the mirror into which Dr. Jekyll peers, aptly describes Crake as he stands holding Oryx in the air hatch of Paradise, expecting Jimmy, his friend and Oryx’s lover, to assist him in suicide, once Crake has slain his Bride of Frankenstein, whom he is sacrificing to the Mother cult she will eventually represent for the Crakers. As the full extent of his mad machinations become apparent in this moment of recognition for which the novel’s readers as well as Jimmy ought to have been prepared, Crake reminds us also of Orwell’s O’Brien, the avatar of Big Brother, who has similarly maddened himself in his pursuit of an ideal future in which society will hum along like a harmonious bee hive, where death has been eliminated with the erasure of an awareness of self, the individual being absorbed into an everlasting (w)hole. And like the beings in Huxley’s brave new world, the Children of Crake will know no death or aging, for, once they have propagated themselves, the Crakers will simply die off, without any warning, at the age of thirty. Given their short and “happy” lives, the Children of Crake will have no use for much of what Atwood’s readers are likely to treasure as high culture. Art will be utterly irrelevant—indeed, dangerous to the stability and well-being of Craker culture.

Accordingly, art, religion, and learning in all forms will disappear. In the context of Survival this narrative offers extremely bleak prospects for the very transaction of writing and reading in which the author and her readers are participating in *Oryx and Crake*. Unlike *The Blind Assassin* whose narrator and central figure, Iris, is not only an “eye” but also an “I,” preserving the
history of her family (and Canada’s in the 20th century), Snowman is disabled from being an “I” in this novel. (Interestingly, Atwood has not a single male first-person narrator, and Snowman is her first male viewpoint character.) As a result, *Oryx and Crake* loses some of the rationale of the earlier novel in which an Iris is telling the story while outracing time, ticking away in her “bad heart.” Even if Snowman were author-ized to record the history of this Apocalypse in the making, the future offers no prospect of anyone able to read what he might write. He is a castaway in a culturally vacant cosmos, with no hope that his message-in-a-bottle could ever find a reader. If Iris introduces readers to the nightmare of an Author who could herself end before her novel, Snowman opens up the mother of all nightmares—a future in which no one can, or will, read what the Author writes.

In this special category of literary Survival, *Oryx and Crake* is exposing some particularly painful authorial anxieties. In one sense Atwood, like many other contemporary writers, is an heir of the Modernists who enshrined the Work of Art as monument to the Artist’s being. As noted earlier, Jimmy speaks to that point of view in the debate with Crake over what the future will seek in the remains of the present—*objets d’art* or “ossified shit.” In a number of ways, Iris represents the archetypal Modernist, constructing her family history as a tragic monument to love, a monument requiring, as it turns out, her own agency as a Blind Assassin, even sacrificing a sister to her artistic masterpiece. Furthermore, the novel-within-the-novel that Iris writes but whose authorship she attributes to her dead sister introduces themes to be developed in *Oryx and Crake*. The Iris-figure tells the Alex-figure, who supports himself by writing “sci-fi,” that she wants him to tell her a happy story. He offers the “Peach Women of Aa’ A,” with adventurers Will and Boyd who come upon a paradise in which no wish goes unfulfilled. They are happy until Will gets suspicious: “It must be a trap. . . . It’s Paradise, but we can’t get out of it. And anything you can’t get out of is Hell” (355).

*Oryx and Crake*, on the other hand, is the production of a late-Modernist author who received the warning of 9/11 that civilization itself is vulnerable not only to “natural” eco-catastrophes but also to terrorists maddened by their desire to cleanse the world of the infidel who has besmirched the purity of God. In the context of a new Armageddon, Survival through one’s Work of Art can seem rather precious and self-indulgent, as even W. B. Yeats, the quintessential Modernist, may have sensed in his late poem *Lapis Lazuli*, written on the brink of the Second World War, with full awareness that this Apocalypse could totally eradicate his civilization’s finest flowers, including the very poem he was composing. With that perception, the poet abandoned his earlier faith in the artifact as the sole promise of Survival and began to embrace, instead, the process of creating per se as the only enduring monument to humanness. *Oryx and Crake* makes gestures in that direction; however, this novel seems
in the end not quite sure how to end and what kind of future it wants to project.

In the end the narrative introduces two factors that complicate its inevitable function of prediction. Crake’s mad strategy to replace *homo sapiens* with the Crakers whom he has constructed as eternal children in “Paradice” advertises the “dicey-ness” of this project in its cutesy adaptation of “Paradise.” And his Paradice project seems, for better and for worse, to be coming undone in the latter scenes. First, when Snowman returns from his scavenging trip for food and supplies—as well as a weapon—he is dismayed to see the Children of Crake, chanting or praying to a figure they have constructed. He thinks he hears a crude “Amen,” opening the possibility of a cultural “throwback” to traditional religion. Instead, he discovers something potentially more disruptive of Crake’s plan for their eternal “innocence.” In addition to their deities Oryx and Crake, they seem to be developing symbolic representation and possibly another deity—Snowman, to whom they were praying for his safe return. Accordingly, when Snowman eventually dies, the narrative opens the door to exactly what Crake attempted to eliminate: Art. Jimmy recalls:

> Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view. Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery, and war. (361)

In this way the narrative posits the impossibility of constructing human-like creatures with a safe dose of intelligence—enough to survive but not so much that they will self-destruct, as *homo sapiens* may sometime in the 21st century.

The other factor is potentially just as devastating. Although he has received no confirmation that anyone else in the world has survived the Plague that Crake unleashed—readers may be reminded of the eerie silence of the world outside to the survivors in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*—Snowman encounters a roving band of survivors, one of whom has a “spraygun,” like his own. The question arises, Will these Others eliminate Snowman on their way to wiping out the defenseless Children of Crake? Atwood seems content to have her cake and eat it, too. She seeks to frighten readers into accepting the deadly seriousness of the threats to ecology and the potential menace of genetic engineering. At the same time, she wants to offer the hope of failure, as other creators of dystopian futures have urged readers to accept the possibility that the great projects of Science and Technology will not succeed because of unforeseen outcomes, or even the saving grace of human imperfection. It is the sort of ambivalence that many reveal in relation to the Machine: it awes
with its capacity to outperform humans, but it will ultimately break down and thereby vindicate human insufficiency.

Atwood’s encouragement of her readers to see *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* as “book ends” is instructive once again. In an interview, following the publication of the earlier novel, she was asked about its last section, “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” The question moved Atwood to talk about Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with which *The Handmaid’s Tale* had been paired by its reviewers. She responded:

> In fact, Orwell is much more optimistic than people give him credit for. He did the same thing. He has a text at the end of *1984*. Most people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn’t. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English—which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past. *(Conversations 217)*

This bizarre (mis)reading of Orwell’s “note”—Orwell entitles it “Appendix”—not only contributes to the problematical function of her own “notes” and “afterwords” but also credits Orwell’s novel with grounds for “optimism” that few readers would share. As many readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* have pointed out, Gilead may now “be history”; however, its roots in patriarchy remain in the farther future of the last section. And it is troubling that the ending of *Oryx and Crake* may be contaminated with a similar “optimism” for which readers may have difficulty finding any firm basis.

Following so quickly her novel *The Blind Assassin*, in which an author/narrator is battling a “heart” to finish her story before death finishes her, *Oryx and Crake* confirms that Atwood is very concerned with the fullest dimensions of Survival. On the other hand, both novels remind readers that this author has been concerned with Survival from the beginning, and that surviving is inherent in her identities as a woman, an author, and a Canadian. That awareness of the multiple areas of survival with which she had to be concerned began in her youth. From the largely autobiographical first essay in her collection *Negotiating with the Dead*, it becomes very clear how much she had to struggle to survive as a young woman with aspirations to becoming a writer in Canada.

It is no coincidence that in her early career she published *Survival*, a sort of primer of Canadian literature that she put together in response to questions she was continually asked after her public readings, questions such as: Is there a Canadian literature, and if there is a Canadian literature, what makes it “Canadian”? She began to answer those questions with her observation that being Canadian meant confronting an immense and formidable environment. To be “Canadian” is to be aware of that potentially hostile envi-
vironment and to develop strategies to survive in it. But that was only the beginning, because she was also responding to the question of how to survive as a woman and as a writer. Struggling against the post-War Fifties culture, with its attempt to recuperate the housewife/mother construction of femininity, how was she as an independent woman to survive outside that construction? How was she to avoid the sense that her society considered women commodities to fulfill the needs of others, or even “edible,” as her lead character in *The Edible Woman* feels? And how was she to survive as a writer in a nation whose 3,000-mile border exposed it to the most powerful nation in the world that both dominated and absorbed her culture so completely that not only Americans but even Canadians were hard put to recall the names of more than one or two Canadian writers, or painters, or composers?

As a leader of the movement to establish Canada’s cultural identity who has distinguished herself as a pre-eminent Canadian writer, Atwood has become increasingly drawn to the notion of the retrospective in her work. A dozen years ago in *Cat’s Eye* she may have been using her viewpoint character Elaine Risley’s art exhibit—a “retrospective”—as a parallel to her own looking backward at her growing accomplishment. However, it is probably Iris of *The Blind Assassin* who strikes the most resonant chord in Atwood’s retrospective impulse. Like Snowman, Iris is a “survivor,” representing Atwood’s own later-life perspective on survival: What of me will survive in my writing? Will my writing survive in a future where visual and sound images have supplanted the printed word? To those writerly concerns are added those of *Oryx and Crake*, as suggested in her essays *Negotiating with the Dead*: Why construct Palaces of Art and “monuments of unageing intellect” for a future that looks like a nightmare waiting to happen? It may be some of these concerns that have moved Atwood’s writing toward “speculative fiction” and even encouraged her to risk the ire of “mainstream” literary culture by incorporating elements of science fiction into her writing. As she becomes more intensely concerned with the survival of the civilization that generates and celebrates art, including her own writing, it ought to be no surprise that she will continue to find it difficult to contain her fascination with *what-if* propositions within the confines of conventional fiction. It is not unlikely that the theme of survival will impel her toward writing more speculative fiction, perhaps further troubling her relationship with mainstream fiction.

**Notes**

1. I borrow the term “Sherlockholmesing” from Corinna del Greco Lobner.
2. Atwood’s two title characters draw their names from the oryx, an African antelope, and the crake, a bird of the rail family. The author indicates she saw a red-necked crake in Australia.
3. In her *London Review of Books* piece on *Oryx and Crake*, Elaine Showalter projects her own feminist views on Atwood, writing: “The elusive Oryx is the vehicle in the novel for Atwood’s indignation at child slavery, prostitution, sex tourism and other extreme forms of female victimisation.” Her point is in part true; however, Showalter has missed the subtlety of Oryx’s own complicated relationship with her owner and the complexity of her attitudes to being a “sex worker.” Ms. Showalter is not likely to endear herself to readers of Atwood when she champions this “breakthrough” into “sci-fi,” to use Showalter’s terms, once “Atwood’s themes were becoming predictable, and her politics losing their ability to shock,” anymore than Showalter endeared herself to veterans of the earlier venture in Iraq when she posited that “Gulf War Syndrome” was really only a form of “male hysteria.”

4. As Sharon Wilson has ably demonstrated, Atwood draws extensively on myth and legend in her writing.

5. There is also the lingering “conspiracy theory” that AIDS was created by the CIA as a potential “weapon of mass destruction.”

6. This is what Atwood would identify as “science fiction” because it takes place on another planet and has extraterrestrials.

7. It is difficult to believe that Atwood is unaware of the rumors that Doris Lessing lost her position on the short-list for a Nobel Prize by persisting in the publication of what she termed “space fiction.” Indeed, at a recent conference some members of the Atwood Society speculated that Iris, her closeted writer of “sci-fi,” may be a gesture toward Lessing. Like Lessing, Atwood is a fiercely independent writer, who has fought off the efforts of various groups and movements to infringe on her integrity as an artist.
“That is what I told Dr. Jordan . . . ”: Public Constructions and Private Disruptions in Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace

What does the past tell us? In and of itself, it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word, and, even so, listening means telling, and then re-telling. It’s we ourselves who must do such telling, about the past, if anything is to be said about it; and our audience is one another.
—Margaret Atwood, “In Search of Alias Grace” (1515–1516)

The narrative of Alias Grace focuses on an infamous act of violence in Canadian history: the double murder of Thomas Kinnear and his servant Nancy Montgomery in Richmond Hill in 1843. The first-person narrator in the novel is Grace Marks, the young woman who was convicted for helping fellow servant James McDermott commit the murders. McDermott was hanged for the murders; Marks’s death sentence was commuted, and Marks spent the next twenty-nine years in the Kingston Penitentiary, with some time in the Lunatic Asylum (as it was then called) in Toronto. She became a celebrity of sorts; newspapers sensationalized the story, and people visited the prison to see the “celebrated murderess.” Atwood explains that “People went to see her the way you would go to see the elephant in the zoo. In those days you could visit prisons and insane asylums as a tourist attraction. People would go to the prison and say, ‘Here

I am, and I’d like to see Grace Marks.’ And she would be trotted out for
them to look at” (“Interview” [561]).

Grace Marks, then, was a figure of considerable interest to the people of
Upper Canada (and later Canada West), and it is the politics of public discourse,
more than the facts of the murder case, that become the focus of the novel. In
other words, the novel suggests that the public representations of Grace, pep-
pered throughout the novel, are not opinions reserved for this particular murder
case or this particular woman; rather, they are symptomatic of broader Victorian
ideas of femininity and sexuality, and Grace becomes a titillating figure through
which the public can articulate and consolidate those ideas. Her incarceration
becomes a metaphor for repressive aspects of nineteenth-century ideologies,
and her life story, as she tells it to Dr. Simon Jordan, is in part a story of her
negotiating her social identity—a female, servant-class, Irish immigrant—in a
culture in which that identity is devalued.¹

It is significant that Grace never tells Simon whether she committed
murder; indeed, we see that for her this opportunity to tell her story is not an
occasion for revealing an authentic identity and life story. The novel eschews
the very notion, foregrounding instead the complex politics of self-represen-
tation, in this case the self-representation of a woman oppressed by public
discourses of gender, class, and ethnicity. The problems that Grace faces in
telling her story to Simon are similar to those that Sidonie Smith ascribes to
women autobiographers in the nineteenth century. Smith argues that women
writing autobiography in that period were seen to be transgressing gender
boundaries, since autobiography recounts public life, and women were re-
stricted to the private sphere (52). A woman, then, in telling her own story,
had to maintain a fine balance between characterizing herself as “male,” a
public persona, and “female,” a private one. Smith suggests that “To write
an autobiography from that speaking posture does not become tantamount
to liberating woman from the fictions that bind her; indeed, it may embed
her even more deeply in them since it promotes identification with the very
essentialist ideology that renders woman’s story a story of silence, powerless-
ness, self-effacement”(53).² Atwood’s Grace is not writing her autobiography,
but she is certainly recounting it to Simon. However, while Grace Marks
lived in the nineteenth century, Atwood produced the novel in the twentieth
century, and thus her Grace has, anachronistically, access to postmodernist
conventions that allow her to construct her life story in a way that challenges
essentialist notions of identity. In refusing to engage in a conventional life
story with a stable narrative and the assertion of an authentic self, Grace
evades the trap identified by Smith. Grace may be a hapless celebrity, whose
notoriety is built upon Victorian gender politics, but she is not helpless.

Grace resists the gender politics of her day not only through the partic-
ular way in which she narrates her story to Simon but also through her access
to a private discursive mode available only to women in the novel: quilting. The novel’s very structure highlights the importance of quilting as a form of politicized signification with its use of quilting patterns—Jagged Edge, for example—to mark, and comment on, each major section of the narrative. The novel suggests that quilting provides women with a way discursively to resist powerful and repressive cultural formations of identity. This paper, then, will explore the social contexts in which the public rhetoric about Grace Marks was produced and the ways in which Grace, as narrator and as quilter, is able to disrupt the hegemony of this rhetoric.

Grace is discursively constituted in myriad ways throughout her life, and the novel presents these discursive representations through a number of different narrative modes. In addition to the first-person narrative of Grace, to which I’ll return, the novel is replete with letters, written primarily by men in positions of some power, newspaper reports on Grace and the murders, a third-person narration, songs, poetry, and excerpts from Susanna Moodie’s comments about Grace in *Life in the Clearings*. Grace herself articulates her bewilderment at the plentiful and contradictory public characterizations of herself:

> I think of all the things that have been written about me—that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (23)

Grace so strongly understands her own identity as one that is, at least in its superficial manifestations, constructed by others, that, when she is finally pardoned, she sees her shift from “celebrated murderess” to “innocent woman wrongly accused” as requiring a “different arrangement of the face” (443). Her musings here also remind us that her guilt and now innocence are determined not by what actually happened, since there are no living witnesses, but by discourses and institutions to which Grace has little access.
As indicated above, Atwood chooses not to resolve the mystery of Grace’s guilt or innocence. In her 1996 Bronfman Lecture (entitled “In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction”), Atwood details the criteria that she set herself for uncovering and reconstructing the story of Grace Marks. Faced with incomplete and often conflicting historical archives, Atwood explains that she developed the following guidelines for herself, guidelines that highlight the negotiation of her roles as both historian and novelist: “when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it; . . . but, in the parts left unexplained—the gaps left unfilled—I was free to invent” (1515). As a novelist, then, Atwood is freer than historians to fill in the gaps, and she does indeed invent significant portions of Grace’s story, and she adds characters who are not present in any of the historical materials. Given that she allowed herself considerable creative licence, it is intriguing that Atwood did not invent a narrative to fill in the biggest gap of all: whether or not Grace Marks committed murder.

In fact, the first time that Atwood wrote about Grace Marks—a television script for CBC in 1974—she did represent Grace as guilty, because she was basing her script on Susanna Moodie’s inflammatory descriptions of seeing Grace in prison and at the asylum. Moodie characterizes Grace as a deranged killer and seductress. Atwood says, “That was the first version of the story I came across, and, being young, and still believing that ‘non-fiction’ meant ‘true,’ I did not question it” (“In Search” 1513). Atwood explains that, when she discovered twenty years later that Moodie’s version was inaccurate, and that the newspaper accounts of the murders and of Grace were also inflammatory and contradictory, she decided to develop a more enigmatic characterization.

Her interest in the history of Grace Marks, as Atwood explains in the Bronfman Lecture, is not just determining what happened but also, and more importantly, identifying the social contexts in which the public rhetoric about Grace was produced. Atwood’s decision, then, not to invent the details of Grace’s guilt or innocence is integral to the novel’s compelling commentary on ways in which notions of class and gender in nineteenth-century Canada enacted a kind of discursive violence against women that often had a profound impact on their day-to-day lives. Atwood’s construction of Grace as a character is directly related to this issue. An important part of her character in the novel is the extent to which she is aware of the lack of control she has over the public representation of her identity. Indeed, her ability to see the ways in which her identity is constructed for her—and the extent to which she must negotiate those constructions within the confines of her imprisonment—are vital and strategic components of the novel; paradoxically, what Atwood has felt “free to invent” for Grace as a character is not her guilt or innocence but an intellectual awareness through which Atwood highlights the metafictive elements of the novel. As a result, Grace’s character plays a crucial role in articulating the social critique contained in
the novel. It is largely through Grace that the novel invites us to "listen" to the past, as Atwood urges us to do in the Bronfman Lecture.

Part of the historical context here is the ideology of gender in nineteenth-century Canada. Scholars have noted that notions of gender in Canada during the time of the murders were influenced by Britain’s doctrine of separate spheres, whereby women were expected to confine their activities primarily to the domestic space and to be purveyors of morality and virtue. As in England, people in Canada paid a great deal of attention to manners and codes of behaviour; the local newspapers dedicated much print to advice on conduct appropriate to ladies and gentlemen. Cecilia Morgan indicates that “the colonial newspapers provided hints and advice and, at times, railed about the correct forms of behaviour for men and women. Ranging from anecdotes scattered throughout the pages of the press to weekly columns devoted to appropriate conduct for men, women, and children, . . . this literature formed a discourse on manners, mores, and morals that relied heavily on gender as a given in social organization” (141). Morgan observes that one way in which the newspapers highlighted the notion of the “lady” was to offer—indeed revel in—examples of “unladylike” behaviour: “the trope of ‘ladies’in the colonial press of the 1850s was also heavily dependent on images of ‘deviant’ femininity” (228).

The public concern with gender and conduct in nineteenth-century Canada provides an important context for *Alias Grace*. The novel continually reminds us of the intense public interest in Grace Marks: newspaper clippings about Grace from the *Toronto Mirror* and the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, a published engraving of her and James McDermott at the courthouse, a popular song about Grace and the murders, and Susanna Moodie’s hyperbolic accounts in *Life in the Clearings* of seeing Grace “lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment” (*Alias Grace* 45). Grace is discursively constructed as someone who strays from normative femininity—as a violent deviant who fails to uphold her role as moral purveyor. Furthermore, much of the public rhetoric around Grace and the murders links the violence of the deaths of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery with sexual fantasies about the people involved, particularly Grace. As Atwood herself puts it in the afterword, “The combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was most attractive to the journalists of the day” (463). Indeed, Grace’s notoriety as a killer is much enhanced by her notoriety as the sex partner of the other accused killer, James McDermott. The novel represents Grace Marks as a figure who served as a public, and somewhat titillating, warning: a negative image to highlight the normative definitions of femininity, female sexuality, and, by extension, class identity.
Mary Poovey argues that the notion of women having latent sexual appetites was an important component of the Victorian idea of women and their appointed role in society:

The place women occupied in liberal, bourgeois ideology also helps account for the persistence in the domestic ideal of the earlier image of woman as sexualized, susceptible, and fallen. The representation of woman not only as dependent but as needing the control that was the other face of protection was integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it, because this image provided a defensible explanation for inequality. If women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray. Increasingly, from the late eighteenth century, the medical model of reproductive difference was invoked to define this something: when it was given one emphasis, woman's reproductive capacity equaled her maternal instinct; when given another, it equaled her sexuality. (11)

Poovey's observation would suggest that the public interest in “fallen” women in Canada was more than a source of titillating reading; it was part of what Poovey calls “the ideological work of gender,” a public discourse that illustrated the dangers of a woman without proper protection/control, and thereby implicitly asserted the need for women to marry and to remain in the domestic sphere. Again, as Poovey puts it, “The contradiction between a sexless, moralized angel and an aggressive, carnal magdalen was therefore written into the domestic ideal as one of its constitutive characteristics” (11). Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, argues that the sexual nature of women was seen to be more prevalent in servant-class women than in their bourgeois counterparts: “The Victorian splitting of women into whores and Madonnas, nuns and prostitutes has its origins . . . not in universal archetype, but in the class structure of the household” (87). As a servant-class woman, then, Grace is even more susceptible to being represented discursively as a sexual, even sexually deviant, woman.

As I have already indicated, the public rhetoric links Grace's sexual identity with her notoriety as a murderer. The public response to the violent deaths of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery engages with the notion of violence in a way that goes beyond recoiling at the thought of two bloody murders. In a very disturbing way, violence in this discourse is part of the ideological work of gender. Throughout the novel, sexual practice is linked either rhetorically or literally with acts of violence. Grace becomes a “celebrated murderess” not so much for the murders as for the presumed romantic link
between her and James McDermott: “That is what really interests them—the gentlemen and the ladies both. . . . [W]as I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don’t even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes” (27).

Indeed, Simon Jordan, while he claims a disinterested and scientific role in uncovering the truth of Grace’s involvement in the murders, is nonetheless sexually aroused by the thought that Grace did commit murder: “But what if he’d met her before the murders? He considers this, rejects it. Before the murders Grace would have been entirely different from the women he now knows. . . . Murderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. . . . He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. Murderess. He applies it to her throat like a brand” (389). Grace herself understands the kind of sexual currency that the word murderess has: “Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word—musky and oppressive” (22). The word in its feminine form glamorizes and sexualizes the violence that it denotes. It seems to give Simon licence to eroticize Grace in a proprietary and violent way, imagining branding her throat with that appellation as he presses his mouth against her. His fantasy underlines the broader societal assumption that violent women are concomitantly lascivious women, that a woman capable of murder is inclined to cross other moral boundaries as well.

The man whom Grace marries once she is finally freed from prison also makes this assumption about women’s morality. Faced with very grim financial prospects if she goes it alone, Grace has little choice but to agree to the arranged marriage with Jamie Walsh, the young man who sealed her conviction with his testimony at the trial. She is trapped by economic circumstances, feeding her new husband fictions about her past—his sexual desire aroused, it seems, only by stories that highlight and link the sexual and violent aspects of her life as he wishes to hear them:

If I put in the chilblains and the shivering at night under the thin blanket, and the whipping if you complained, he is in raptures; and if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me, and the cold baths naked and wrapped in a sheet, and the strait-waistcoat in the darkened room, he is almost in ecstasies; but his favourite part of the story is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house at Mr. Kinnear’s, looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes, with Nancy and Mr. Kinnear lying dead in the cellar, and me almost out of my wits with terror. (457)

Sex and violence, then, become a central part, in this mediated way, of Grace’s domestic life with her husband, even once Grace finally, ostensibly,
achieves a normal life and the respectable status of a married woman. What we see in the novel, then, is a revealing link between literal and rhetorical acts of violence against women, a link that demonstrates how profoundly the ideological work of gender affects Grace’s life and the lives of other women of her time.5

As I indicated at the beginning of the paper, Atwood does not leave Grace entirely immobilized by the powerful discursive machinery of nineteenth-century ideology. One way in which Atwood grants Grace some agency is through her construction of Grace as narrator of her own story. Most of the novel consists of her telling her story to Simon Jordan. We as readers learn about her past by listening in on those conversations rather than by being addressed directly by Grace or by a third-person narrator, although there are significant moments when she does directly address us, a point that I’ll return to shortly. That her story is told primarily through her conversations with Simon emphasizes the significance of the discursive spaces in which stories are told and meaning is made. Those conversations occur within a social context that punctuates unequal categories of identity—that is, a female, servant-class prisoner talking to a male psychiatrist of a monied family, albeit of somewhat reduced circumstances.6 They have very different motives for participating in the storytelling process and very different lenses through which to interpret her narrative.

While Grace does not share her story directly with us, she does share her keen awareness of the politics of her storytelling to Simon, and these revelations constitute the most poignant political message of the novel because they demonstrate how powerfully and personally normalized assumptions about gender and class affect the day-to-day lives of individual women. When we are first introduced to Grace, she is addressing us as a first-person narrator, describing her life as a prisoner and various dreams and visions that she has had of Nancy and the murders. These pages in which we meet her are rich with rhetorical figures, indicating that Grace as narrator is an astute and skilled rhetorician herself. There is a dreamlike fluidity to these pages as she builds an image pattern with peonies and gestures figuratively to key elements of the murders and her own state of mind as a prisoner. Our entry into her narrative is an entry into a tightly structured and richly layered narrative that encourages us to see her as suffering the oppression of prison life and feeling regret over the murder of Nancy, without being very specific about her part in it. At the end of this figurative and cryptic passage, Grace herself points to its significance as a rhetorical piece when she says, “That is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (6).

That comment comes, I think, as a bombshell since we take Grace’s opening comments, cryptic though they may be, at face value, and it is shocking to discover that we have been seduced by a narrative that Grace has fabri-
is what I told Dr. Jordan . . .”

cated for her own purposes. Yet, paradoxically, while this revelation at the end of the passage evokes in us a sense of betrayal, a sense of having been taken in by what we thought was a direct communication to us, it also invites us to be her confidant/e; we now know something that Simon does not know—that Grace, in telling him her story, is consciously constructing it. She continues to tell us things that she doesn’t tell Simon, often about the strategies that she uses to deal with being a prisoner, to maintain some sense of identity while trying to maintain as neutral an outward appearance as possible. Grace’s comment indicates that we, as readers, will not have unmediated access to her thoughts and that instead we will be witness to her negotiating, in her very limited position of power as a prisoner, with those around her who have more power and who are motivated to construct her in particular ways.

We see that Grace is astute at handling such negotiations. She has no choice but to meet with Simon, especially if she does not want to be sent to the insane asylum, but inasmuch as she can she controls the conversations between them. In their first meeting, she refuses to give him the answers that she knows he wants. When he slips a quotation from the Book of Job into their conversation, for example, and looks expectantly at Grace to see if she recognizes it, she indicates to the reader that she does but that she will not let on to him, fearful of the significance that she does in fact see in his quotation: “He must mean that he has come to test me, although he’s too late for that, as God has done a great deal of testing of me already, and you would think he would be tired of it by now. But I don’t say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised” (42). Her “practised” “stupid look” indicates her awareness of the politics of her identity. Knowing that she has been publicly constructed in so many ways, Grace takes refuge in a fairly neutral facial expression and series of verbal responses. This is what we are privy to and what no other character in the novel is aware of, and that is her strategic manipulation of an untenable situation. We do not hear from Grace what actually happened—whether or not she did commit murder—but we do have access to some, though not all, of her rhetorical strategies for surviving her time in prison.

Refusal to respond to Simon’s treatment constitutes a form of empowerment for Grace, and the impact of that empowerment is evident in his gradual loss of control—or gradual sense of loss of control—over his sessions with her. As a psychiatrist, Simon is initially operating on the assumption that, if he can discover the way to access her unconscious, he can help Grace to recover the events that she claims not to remember: that is, exactly what happened to Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery and what Grace was doing at the time of their deaths. In other words, he believes in a recoverable and accurate narrative of what happened and that he, in his capacity as a psychiatrist, is in control of that part of the narrative, in the sense that he will help Grace to
recall that repressed information. Yet this belief begins to unravel, a process apparent in the following passage:

Anything she says now may be a clue; any gesture; any twitch. She knows; she knows. She may not know that she knows, but buried deep within her, the knowledge is there. The trouble is that the more she remembers, the more she relates, the more difficulty he himself is having. He can’t seem to keep track of the pieces. It’s as if she’s drawing his energy out of him—using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances. This is nonsense, of course. He must refuse to indulge such brain-sick fancies. But still, there was something about a man, in the night: has he missed it? One of those men: McDermott, Kinnear. In his notebook he has pencilled the word whisper, and underlined it three times. Of what had he wished to remind himself?” (291–292)

We see here that Simon’s determination to uncover the “truth” is thwarted. As Simon describes it here, the tables are turned, and, rather than his drawing Grace out in his role as a psychiatrist, she is drawing the story out of him, and he can no longer process and make sense of the pieces of the story as she relates them, nor can he make sense of his own notes. His role as a psychiatrist is thus compromised, his disinterest supplanted by coded words that signify meanings that he is unable to decipher or articulate; the word “whisper” suggests the tenuous and perhaps erotic nature of Simon’s interaction with Grace.

The relationship between Grace and Simon is a complex one in which power, manifested here by the one controlling the narrative, shifts back and forth. It is clear that Grace cannot necessarily save herself by constructing a scenario in which she is an innocent victim who has been wrongly imprisoned—nor save herself in the sense that she can reclaim and redefine an identity that has been conscripted, assaulted, and formed by a variety of social institutions and discourses. What Grace can do, though, is destabilize normalized ideas of gender and class. The novel’s insistent reminder, through both its form and its content, of the significance of the social and historical contexts in which any narrative is produced serves both to highlight social inequities and—by exposing those inequities as socially produced—to offer possibilities for oppositional resistance to the status quo. Furthermore, the story that Grace does tell of her past, fictive though we have come as readers to regard it, is none-the-less politically charged. Instead of giving Simon what he wants—that is, instead of clarifying the details of the murders by responding to his treatment—she gives him story after story of the struggles of working-class
women in Britain and Upper Canada—women such as her mother, Mary, and Nancy—that constitute a scathing critique of social practices of the time that made women vulnerable to hypocritical notions of sex and propriety.

Thus, within the private discourse of the psychiatric treatment that Simon is giving Grace, and within the confines of her incarceration, she disrupts not only the authority of the medical profession but also the pervasive public constructions of both herself and many women living in Upper Canada and Canada West. Her disruptions come not only through her life story, however, but also through the way in which she politicizes the practice of quilting, transforming it from a highly gendered activity that signified women's place in the domestic sphere into a medium for articulating an eloquent, albeit coded, resistance to the Victorian ideology of gender that has so profoundly shaped and constrained her life.

Almost exclusively a female activity, quilting, as Margaret Rogerson argues, is “a form of female discourse [that] empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible” (6). The narrative possibilities of quilting are suggested by Atwood’s decision to use the title and graphic of a quilting pattern to begin each section of the novel. The narrative components of the novel, then, are linked and announced by these patterns, yet the oppositional possibilities of quilting are not immediately apparent. Grace characterizes quilting as one of the most important activities that a married woman undertakes to set up her home, and she imagines which pattern she will choose if she is ever able to make her own quilts rather than making them for the people for whom she is an indentured servant. Quilting, then, clearly identifies women with the domestic sphere. Ruth McKendry indicates that a young woman in Canada in the nineteenth century was expected to have completed twelve quilts by the time she got married (22–23); she was also expected to have made a special quilt for the marriage bed, one that would entail finer, more expensive material than the others (46). In other words, Canadian women spent a great deal of time, from an early age, making quilts, and, while the quilts certainly served an eminently practical purpose, they were clearly a marker of female identity in the Victorian ideology of gender.

While Grace fantasizes about which pattern she will use if she ever marries, she is also keenly aware of the significance of quilts in the context of gendered identities of her day. For example, at one point in her conversations with Simon, she characterizes quilts as signifying domestic life in a sinister way, a commentary consistent with the vulnerability that she ascribes to women throughout the novel:

> when we’d hung a half-dozen of them up on the line, all in a row, I thought that they looked like flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war.
And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in a room. And then I have thought, it’s for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir, and to you it may mean rest and comfort and a good night’s sleep. But it isn’t so for everyone; and there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women that I will not mention to you, Sir, but I suppose you know what it is; and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. (161)

Here Grace sees quilts as markers for women of the treacherous territory of the bed. The aesthetic quality of the quilt is here overridden by its signification as a kind of war flag, and the bed is a metonymic marker for the Victorian notions of gender. Women’s maternal and sexual identities—the Victorian bifurcation of female reproduction (Poovey II)— are here characterized as dangerous traps, but the quilt, as described here by Grace, also signifies the solidarity of women in their awareness of those traps. Significantly, she recognizes the value of quilting as an ironic protest against the very social ideals that quilts are meant to represent: the home and, concomitantly, feminine identity.

Interestingly, the design features of quilting patterns enhance the oppositional value of quilting. Quilting patterns are flexible in terms of how the blocks are put together, which colours and fabrics are used, and the way in which principles of shading are employed, and this flexibility allows for coded forms of resistance. Grace talks, for example, about a pattern called Attic Windows that features boxes that appear to be open or closed depending on how one looks at them. She tells Simon she used to think that the pattern was called “Attic Widows” and that, when she told Mary this, it led to hilarious fantasies about widows stuffing their dead husbands into boxes in the attic (163). This slippage in the name of the pattern echoes the variable way in which the pattern can be seen, depending on whether one focuses on the light or the dark patches, and offers an ironic reversal of the pattern of violence against women that pervades the novel.

For Grace, then, the significance of quilts surpasses practical and aesthetic concerns; quilts provide an opportunity for social critique and for clarifying certain aspects of her life story. Another example occurs when Grace talks about the pattern Lady of the Lake. Her initial comment on this pattern foregrounds the complexity of how one “reads” a quilt:
Then something came clear to me which I used to wonder about. There is a quilt pattern called Lady of the Lake, which I thought was named for the poem; but I could never find any lady in the pattern, nor any lake. But now I saw that the boat was named for the poem, and the quilt was named for the boat; because it was a pinwheel design, which must have stood for the paddle going around. And I thought that things did make sense, and have a design to them, if you only pondered them long enough. And so perhaps it might be with recent events, which at the moment seemed to me entirely senseless; and finding out the reason for the quilt pattern was a lesson to me, to have faith. (340)

Grace makes this connection after riding on the steamer called Lady of the Lake while she and James McDermott are on the run after the murders. It is an interesting comment on the connection between design and meaning, a connection that here relies less on representational, mimetic meaning—the steamer itself is not of primary interest to Grace—than on a metonymic, lateral play of meaning, through which one can make connections that are suggestive of other meanings and further connections. We can see Grace “reading” the quilt in this way: the image of the steamer makes her think of the night of the murders and of being on the run with McDermott, but it also reminds her of Scott’s poem, and it brings back fond memories of reading that poem aloud with Mary. In the context of that memory, Grace sees the poem as a poignant commentary on her life: “but the place [in the poem] I recalled best was the poor woman who’d been stolen away from the church on her wedding day, kidnapped for a nobleman’s pleasure, and had gone mad from it, and wandered about picking wildflowers, and singing to herself. And I considered that I too was being kidnapped after a fashion, though not on my wedding day; and I feared I might end up in the same plight” (340). Grace is referring specifically here to being taken unwillingly by McDermott after the murders, but there are undertones of other themes in the novel: her lengthy incarceration, the vulnerability of unmarried women in nineteenth-century Canada, the fear of madness or of being seen as mad. The Lady of the Lake pattern, as Grace meditates on it, offers far more than a simple geometric arrangement of pieces of fabric that represent a steamer: it reverberates with meanings that are very personal to her own experiences and to those of other women.

By the end of the novel, when Grace is finally able to make her own quilt, she makes one that articulates more than the entrapments symbolized by the bed. Significantly, as Rogerson points out, the quilt is not intended for the marriage bed; Grace buys a Log Cabin quilt for that purpose (17). Rather, Grace’s quilt is hers alone, and it seems to provide a resolution to
her narrative at the same time as it surreptitiously suggests that she has re-
claimed her narrative. She has reworked the Tree of Paradise pattern to her
own needs: hidden among the triangles that constitute the tree itself, she
includes a piece of Mary Whitney’s petticoat, Nancy’s dress, and her own
prison nightdress, thereby metonymically asserting their copresence. Her in-
tention is to use “red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pat-
tern. And so we will all be together” (460). She also tells us that the quilt will
feature a border of intertwined snakes, “as without a snake or two, the main
part of the story would be missing,” but that to the viewer they will look like
vines (460). Grace does not explain the significance of the snakes; one might
read them as symbolic of the temptations and entrapments that await women
in the ideological framework of Victorian Canada. In this context, the no-
tion of “paradise” is an ironic commentary on the social space constructed
for women at this time, and certainly her own domestic situation at the time
Grace is making this quilt—her marriage to Jamie Walsh—is far removed
from paradise. What is significant, though, is her decision to represent Nancy,
Mary, and herself all together here. This gesture, with its assertion of solidar-
ity, highlights the point that the primary issue the novel addresses is not who
committed the murders but the restrictive ways in which women’s identities
were constructed in Canada at the time.

Grace’s quilt, then, and arguably other women’s quilts, offer alterna-
tive articulations of resistance to socially imposed categories of identity and
power relations. The novel has asserted throughout that, while the truth is
ephemeral because it is mediated through language, language is nonetheless
a powerful tool for asserting “truths” that profoundly affect people’s lives and
that the extent to which one is empowered by language depends on one’s re-
lative position of power in society. Grace herself, although she seems to have a
keen and nuanced awareness of the politics of language, has limited access to
it. Every time she speaks, she takes a risk—that she will incriminate herself,
that she will be returned to the asylum, that she will alienate Simon. As I have
argued above, Grace does nonetheless find a way to produce an eloquent cri-
tique of Victorian ideas of gender and class. In her quilt, however, she is able
to say even more, to assert what she has been able only to imply in her story
to Simon, and that is the solidarity she feels with Nancy and Mary, who were
victims not of isolated violent incidents but of a broader set of social practices.
This quilt, then, pays tribute to the women whom Grace sees as victims of a
society that cannot reconcile notions of sexuality with categories of gender
and class, and, while it is too private a communication to make social change
in her lifetime, it does grant her the last word in the novel.

In her afterword to the paperback edition, Atwood says that “the true
character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma” (556). I have ar-
gued that Atwood embraces the enigmatic quality of the historical Grace and
transforms it into a central component of her novel. Atwood’s Grace is never seen to be really free from restrictive ideologies of her day, but she, as artful narrator of her story, finds a way to critique those ideologies, to disrupt public discourses about class and gender, and, in the private discourse of her quilting, to affirm a sense of solidarity with the other women whom she identifies as sharing her struggle against Victorian Canadian sexual mores.

Notes

1. Although I do not explore it in this paper, Grace’s ethnicity is an issue here. The historical Grace Marks would have had to deal with the widespread prejudice against Irish immigrants at this time. Marilyn Barber talks about the prevalence of degrading stereotypes of female Irish domestic servants: “In cartoons and literature, a stereotype of the Irish domestic emerged, undoubtedly influencing the general perception of domestic service as an occupation. . . . She was portrayed as personally untidy, careless, inept, ignorant and lacking common sense” (6). For a good discussion of the significance of Grace’s Irish identity, see Lovelady.

2. Smith goes on to say that, “With the twentieth century and the ambiguities and confusions of modernism, however, alternative autobiographical possibilities for women emerge as alternative relationships of woman to the autobiographical narrative of man arise. The autobiographer begins to grapple self-consciously with her identity as a woman in patriarchal culture and with her problematic relationship to engendered figures of selfhood” (56).

3. The notion of separate spheres was modified, however, by the experience of living in Canada, particularly for middle-class women unused to the labour required to make a living in the early days of settlement in Canada. Alison Prentice et al. note that the separation of the private and the public, and the ideals of femininity “denied what the vast majority of women, even of the urban middle classes, actually experienced: the absolute necessity of work and sometimes of ‘hard labour’ in the household, on the farm, or wherever they lived, to keep body and soul together and their families going” (84). Helen Smith and Lisa Sullivan point out that for Anne Langton, who emigrated to Upper Canada in 1837, “wilderness inspired reassessments of class, gender, and personal identity occurred in parallel with developments in the nature, scope, and significance of her labours” (254).

4. The intersection of class and gender here is a complex one. Cecilia Morgan argues that Upper Canadian society tended to rationalize and rhetorically diminish class difference by emphasizing the importance of moral conduct to members of all classes: “The maxims set out in the discourse of the family were offered as advice that all could follow, no matter what their position in life. This universality and tendency to homogenize traits characteristic of bourgeois ideology were the hallmark of dictates concerning moral conduct” (162). Morgan suggests that, “For Native, immigrant, and working-class women, the trope of the ‘lady’ might be seen as a badly flawed ideal that had little meaning for their lives. Even so, the category of virtuous womanhood helped shape the social, legal, economic, and political frameworks in which these women lived, while simultaneously creating significant divisions between themselves and those women who sought to create common ground in an ideal of shared womanhood” (229).
5. There are a number of instances of domestic violence in the novel. Grace’s mother was also beaten by her husband, and Grace met at least one woman in the asylum who was there not because she was mad but “to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up” (31).

6. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the historical context in which Simon is practising medicine; for information on medical practice in Canada in the nineteenth century, assumptions about women, and mental illness, see, for example, Mitchinson.

Works Cited

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Situating Canada: The Shifting Perspective of the Postcolonial Other in Margaret Atwood’s The Robber Bride

Margaret Atwood published her eighth novel, The Robber Bride, in 1993; it marks a moment when the postmodernism and the post-colonialism that have always been discernible in Atwood’s work came to the fore in critical dialog.¹ The Robber Bride is a novel concerned with place and with origins. Many of the characters have complicated ethnic and cultural histories, reflecting something of the increasingly multicultural composition of contemporary Canada. But this multiculturalism is always in tension in the novel with the traditionally White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism of British colonial Canada. Consequently, the question “where do you come from?” recurs throughout the novel, and Atwood reads it as an aggressive rather than a neutral question: seeking to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

In this article I examine this tension between insiders and outsiders—which is effectively the classic tension between the self and the other—and I suggest that The Robber Bride articulates a peculiarly Canadian view of the postcolonial other. Canada is caught between two opposing power positions. It is both the ex-colonial nation (that is, the colonial other to Britain’s colonizing self), and it is also undeniably a First World nation, with a position of privilege and power in the world (and therefore is the First World self to the Third World other). This unstable division continues even within the borders of Canada, as Donna Bennett points out: “both French and English Canada,
while they may be postcolonial to a dominant Other, have played, and continue to play, the role of imperial power to Native culture” (Bennett 2004, 115). This article examines Canada’s dual power position, and much of the argument is framed by an examination of the parallel experience of ambiguous power positions faced by white feminists addressing the problems of Third World women. Both topics—feminism and nationalism—are connected by a quest for power and a quest for identity. I demonstrate that Atwood’s examination of women’s power is frequently employed as a metaphor for Canada’s experience as a postcolonial nation. Identity in The Robber Bride is frequently shifting, and by this, I argue, Atwood attempts to reflect what she sees to be the shifting identity of Canada itself. In both the novel and the nation, the boundary between self and other—between colonizer and colonized—is fluid and uncertain.

In The Robber Bride, Atwood articulates a common late-twentieth-century interest in postcolonial discourse, but she translates prevalent postcolonial ideas of difference and otherness to fit her own understanding. The split voice of a racially divided culture becomes, in this novel, the separation of the narratorial focus into three separate speaking subjects. For each of the three (white) protagonists, Tony, Roz, and Charis, there is a detailed history; for each woman, origins are of fundamental importance. Post-colonialism in this novel is largely read through the experiences of white women, which may seem to undermine the potency of the examination, but this allows Atwood to challenge Canada on some of its assumptions of postcolonial innocence by examining, in abstract, the manner in which the First World self responds to the presence of the other. Further to this, Atwood interacts with many of the issues thrown up by postcolonial thinking in her depiction of the shape-shifting Zenia. This character’s instability—demonstrated by her compulsive re-reading of her own origins—creates a powerful depiction of “the other woman.” Most frequently read in terms of sexuality and greed (most notably by Coral Howells and Atwood herself, as discussed below), Zenia’s otherness, when considered through the lens of post-colonialism, becomes simply a metaphorical figure of “the other.” By examining the interaction of each of the three protagonists with this alien other, The Robber Bride plays out a number of tensions, including exoticism and orientalism, currently being articulated by postcolonial theorists.

In the canon of postcolonial writers, Atwood is a troublesome figure. Despite her notable search for an understanding of Canada that is not first mediated by an English or American aesthetic, Atwood remains uncompromisingly white, middle-class, university-educated: indeed, “waspish,” as she described William in Life Before Man. However, in examining her postcolonial instincts further, it becomes apparent that Atwood carries her own definition of what colonialism and post-colonialism entail. In her 1988 novel,
Cat’s Eye, she recalled the anglophilia that dominated Canadian schooling in the 1950s. The narrator Elaine ponders the song “Rule Britannia”: “Because we’re Britons, we will never be slaves. But we aren’t real Britons, because we are also Canadians. This isn’t quite as good” (CE. 80). Here, the postcolonial reality is experienced as a mild but insistent inferiority complex: a sense of internalised alienation. In Life Before Man (1979), Atwood gave an explicit representation of multicultural Canada, with one character telling another: “ethnic is big these days. Change your last name and you’ll get a multiculturalism grant” (LBM. 91). Perhaps more tellingly however, in Surfacing Atwood addressed the pressures of America’s cultural colonization of Canada, and in interview she expanded: “it’s impossible to talk about Canadian literature without also talking about the fact that Canada’s an economic and cultural colony” (Gibson 1990, 35). This broader view of colonialism encompasses various manifestations of national domination and suppression, and for Atwood, Canada’s marginal position in terms of political and economic power places her, as its citizen, as a marginal, colonial, and postcolonial subject.

This sense of cultural marginalisation also permeates into other aspects of Atwood’s politics. Asked about her connection to feminism, Atwood aligned the movement specifically to American feminism—a position from which she feels excluded:

Someone who understands my position would more likely be from a peripheral culture such as my own, someone from Scotland or the West Indies or a black feminist in the States . . . What the term “feminist writer” means to certain American feminists cannot mean the same thing it means to me. They are on the inside looking at each other, while I am on the outside. (FitzGerald 1990, 139)

Again, she identifies with a marginal position. Discussing her right to such an identification, Graham Huggan argues in The Post-Colonial Exotic that “there is something of a staged controversy surrounding Atwood and her work. Her putatively anti-establishment views have always tended to move with the fashions of the moment” (Huggan 2001, 216). Discussing Atwood alongside other postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, Huggan speaks of a shared phenomenon of “staged marginality”: a process by which “marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their ‘subordinate’ status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience. Staged marginality,” he goes on to explain, “far from being a form of necessary self-subordination, may function in certain contexts to uncover and challenge dominant structures of power” (Huggan 2001, xii). This highly ambiguous reading of Atwood’s celebrity simultaneously berates Atwood for her self-assumed marginalism, and promotes its function as a tool for empowerment.
Himani Bannerji also critically evaluates Atwood’s perceived marginal status. Bannerji locates in Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* the perpetuation of the Canadian myth of the white colonial settler threatened with extinction: the move by which the dominant invader becomes a threatened entity and so diffuses the narrative of their own aggressive invasion. This myth forms the core of Atwood’s influential text on Canadian literature, *Survival*. But Bannerji protests that the “political psyche of Canada as a threatened femininity/nature obliterates indigenous people, swallowing them up in the myth of an empty wilderness that is to be invaded and populated by White people.” This accusation haunts every account of the Canadian struggle for cultural and political survival in the face of British and American domination; it is the colonial narrative within the colonial narrative. Criticising *Surfacing*’s appropriation of the wilderness as the projected imagination of its protagonist rather than the reality of Native People, Bannerji states: “in spite of her gender and feminism, her race and class allow Atwood to project this particular vision of Canada.” With this statement, Bannerji effectively divides Atwood into a potent and an impotent identity, and concludes that Atwood’s dominating racial identity overwhelms her feminine experience of subordination, and thus positions her, despite her gender, in the role of the colonizer (Bannerji 2004, 296–297).

Atwood, however, is not unaware of the relative nature of power. In her 1981 novel, *Bodily Harm*, she used the character of Paul as antagonist to the Canadian woman’s claim of victimisation. Paul tells the protagonist Rennie:

> when you’ve spent years watching people dying, women, kids, men, everyone, because they’re starving or because someone kills them for complaining about it, you don’t have time for a lot of healthy women sitting around arguing whether or not they should shave their legs. (*BH*.240)

Although Paul’s view seems to undermine Atwood’s earlier definition of herself as a marginal and colonized subject, she broadly concurs with Paul’s argument: “Feminism for women in India,” she has said in interview, “starts with getting them jobs and money” (Meese 1990, 184). Atwood’s marginal position is evidently not the position of the Indian villager; her postcolonial voice has a power, largely connected to its white, First World status, which undermines its connection with other postcolonial speaking subjects. Linda Hutcheon supports this view when she voices her reservations at the attempt to describe Canada as a Third World country (a statement once made by Margaret Laurence); Hutcheon suggests: “there is something in this that is both trivializing of the Third World experience and exaggerated regarding the (white) Canadian” (Hutcheon 2004, 76). But other theorists have gone further than this, denying Canada its claim, not only to its position as Third
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World nation, but also to its status as postcolonial nation. In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman assert that the classification as postcolonial of what they term “the former white settler colonies”—Canada, Australia, New Zealand—is problematic: “They were not subject to the sort of coercive measures that were the lot of the colonies, and their ethnic stratification was fundamentally different” (Williams 1993, 4). Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin made a similar statement in *Decolonising Fictions*, arguing that Canada and Australia were not postcolonial nations “in the same sense that an emerging African nation might be so described,” but they also point out that “each postcolonial situation is different” (Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 12). And in a later article, Brydon strongly refutes what she reads as the implicit categorisation by Williams and Chrisman of “authentic” and “inauthentic” colonial experience. She argues that “ironically, withholding the status of ‘authentic’ colonialism from countries such as Canada makes the editors complicit in the continuing denial and marginalisation of Native people’s experience of colonialism as well as of the invader-settler and immigrant experiences” (Brydon 2004, 173). The difficulties faced by theorists attempting to locate Canada’s position within postcolonial discourse points to a complex political situation that defies easy categorisation. In *The Robber Bride* Atwood examines these shifting patterns of power and peripheralism in what is a necessarily symbolic and ambiguous representation of the colonial opposition between self and other.

I describe this representation as “necessarily ambiguous” because Atwood in this novel is concerned with how the experience of being on the inside or on the outside of postcolonial power relations is not a stable experience, but is instead a position that shifts with perspective. One can, in many situations, be both on the inside and on the outside simultaneously; one can be both the colonizer and the colonized. This is the point that Bennett makes when she says: “English Canada has played an oddly doubled role: subjected to an imperial power, it has also been an agent of that power in the control it has exercised over populations within Canada’s boundaries” (Bennett 2004, 116). Many second-wave feminists encountered a similarly shifting power position around the intersection of gender and racial difference. (The feminist experience is significant to an understanding of Atwood’s novel because it does, in many ways, inform her critique of Canada’s political power relations. Asked of her opinions about nationalism and feminism, she responded: “I see the two issues as similar. In fact, I see feminism as part of a larger issue: human dignity. That’s what Canadian nationalism is about, what feminism is about, and what black power is about. They’re all part of the same vision” [Hammond 1990, 102]. For Atwood, both feminism and nationalism are concerned with seeking recognition of equal worth, and both consequently involve a negotiation of power.)
Throughout second-wave feminism, racial domination has been read as a metaphor for the universal sexual colonization of women by men. Sheila Rowbotham, for example, wrote in 1972: “Certain similarities exist between the colonization of the under-developed country and female oppression within capitalism. There is the economic dependence, the cultural take-over, the identification of dignity with resemblance to the oppressor” (Rowbotham 1972, 201). Other feminists were more careful to acknowledge the cultural specificity of black women; writing in 1970, Robin Morgan stated: “black women, who are obviously doubly oppressed, have, for the most part, chosen to fight beside their black brothers, fighting racism as a priority oppression.” Morgan, however, still concluded that race was of secondary importance to gender, arguing: “we share a common root as women, much more natural to both groups than the very machismo style of male dominated organizations, black, brown, and white” (Morgan 1970, xxix–xxx). For such theorists, gender was the over-arching signifier of difference and of identity. However, the negation of ethnicity came to appear as another form of colonization: a domination and sublimation of the black experience by the white voice of academic feminism. In 1982, Mary Berry protested that: “the women’s movement and its scholars have been concerned, in the main, with white women, their needs and concerns” (Berry 1982, xv). Too often, feminism had situated Western women as the self in feminist discourses of identity, with non-Western women remaining the other (Bulbeck 1998). Consequently, the Third World woman became, for many First World feminists, a figure who was both “us” and “them.” Caught in a shifting power position similar to that of the Canadian postcolonial identity, white, middle-class second-wave feminists were in the seemingly contradictory position of believing themselves colonized by patriarchy, while at the same time, being members of a privileged and colonizing race (much as Bannerji accuses Atwood of being). Atwood examined this situation in Bodily Harm, in which Rennie had to come to terms with what Laura Donaldson calls: “the contradictory social positioning of white, middle-class women as both colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects” (Donaldson 1993, 6), and similarly, in The Robber Bride, Charis, Roz and Tony all experience, to a certain extent, something of the ambivalence of this dual position of privilege and oppression.

In The Robber Bride, Atwood confronts the implicit racial prejudices of her white protagonists. Toronto is depicted as an eclectic and multiracial city: “Chinatown has taken over mostly, though there are still some Jewish delicatessens, and, further up and off to the side, the Portuguese and West Indian shops . . .” (RB.36). It is what Howells calls “a representation of Toronto in a contemporary globalized context” (Howells 2002, 204). Old power balances are disrupted, and when white Tony walks through this heterogeneous area, she feels “foreign,” “among strangers” (RB.36). However, the old racial hierar-
chies are undeniably present, and in Roz’s expensive home, her Filipino housekeeper prompts liberal anxieties: “should Dolores be here? Will Western culture corrupt her? Is Roz paying her enough? Does Dolores secretly hate them all? Is she happy, and, if not, is it Roz’s fault?” (RB.303). Roz’s postcolonial guilt is humorously depicted but telling. Her white Canadian status and Dolores’s Filipino ethnicity creates an insurmountable barrier between them, negating their shared gender, and prompting an insistent but unproductive guilt in Roz the erstwhile feminist. Roz’s money, and her awareness that all wealth “made a profit from human desperation,” even if “at several removes,” results in a simultaneous distance from and connection with the poor around her: “she still has a sense of hands, bony hands, reaching up from under the earth, tugging at her ankles, wanting back what’s theirs” (RB.349). This uncanny image of cheated ghosts is particularly appropriate to the guilt of the Canadian invader-settler society. Discussing this issue of postcolonial guilt, Brydon suggests that it can in fact function as a retreat from political responsibility: “it excuses inaction and creates a paradoxical kind of pleasure in self-reckoning.” Accepting guilt for the sins of the past is easier, Brydon points out, than acknowledging complicity in an ongoing pattern of domination. In The Robber Bride, Charis, like Roz, is overwhelmed with First World guilt: “Being white is getting more and more exhausting. There are so many bad waves attached to it, left over from the past but spreading through the present . . . There’s so much to expiate!” (RB.58) But Charis, like Roz, locates the colonial injustices in the past. She remains within a shifting power binary which sees her placed, as a result of her various signifiers—female, Canadian, white—in confusing and contradictory relations to power. Brydon, instead, suggests: “It is much harder to imagine oneself outside the binary of oppressor versus oppressed, as complicit in a system that can be analysed and changed, in which it is not too late to make a difference” (Brydon 2004, 171). Locating their guilt in the past, Roz and Charis both find themselves uncomfortably positioned in the role of the oppressor self, which necessarily posits the figure of the oppressed other.

However, working in opposition to the perceived powerlessness of the other is an equally ill-founded investment of power in the other. In illustration, Becky Thompson speaks of “white feminists who treat Native American women as innately spiritual, as automatically their spiritual mothers” (Thompson 2002, 346). This situation is manifest in Charis’s relationship with her enigmatic boss, Shanita, a shape-shifter like Zenia:

Sometimes she’s part Chinese and part black, with a West Indian grandmother . . . but there are other grandmothers too, one from the States and one from Halifax, and one from Pakistan and one from New Mexico . . . But sometimes she’s part Ojibway, or else part Mayan, and one day she was even part Tibetan. (RB.57)
Charis invests in this woman a shamanistic power, having her read her fortune, and believing that “Anything from Shanita is good luck" (RB.40). The reality of Shanita as an entrepreneurial and astute business woman is wilfully ignored by Charis because it does not fit into the narrative that she has pre-constructed around Shanita’s exotic appearance. What Charis reads as magnetism and power translates into an everyday experience of displacement, despite the fact that Shanita “was born right in this very city!” (RB.57). Again, this same question reappears in the novel—“where do you come from?” Sensitive to thoughtless enquiries into her origins, Charis’s interpretation of these questions as: “where are your parents from,” translates to Shanita as “when [are you] leaving” (RB.57). Charis refuses to believe Shanita’s understanding, but Atwood emphasises its significance when Tony later speaks to Zenia with forked tongue: “Where are you staying? Tony asks politely, meaning when are you leaving” (RB.182). This contradictory comprehension of a seemingly shared language is discussed by Chilla Bulbeck in terms of what she calls “the doubled vision of migrant and indigenous women”:

It is . . . possible that when Hispanic, Indian, African, Arab but western-educated women speak in English they “do not talk the same language.” Perhaps they cannot fully translate their worlds, and end only in communicating the experience of exclusion (Bulbeck 1998, 188).

This concept of an assumed colonial discourse, which nevertheless presents an ironic gap between the speaker and the spoken, later becomes central to a number of theorists working in the field of postcolonialism.

Hutcheon discusses the trope of doubleness that has often been connected with postcolonial identities, and states that “doubleness is what characterizes . . . the two-fold vision of the postcolonial” (Hutcheon 2004, 81). A dual history, a dual culture, and a dual language all contribute to this notion of doubling, but the double identity can also be the cause of a less explicable anxiety; it is both the same and not the same; it is both self and other. In Atwood’s novel, Zenia takes on the role of both the double and the other, and this explains much of the anxiety and ambivalence that her presence prompts in the text. In her article on The Robber Bride, Isla J. Duncan uses the myth of the Wendigo—a flesh-eating monster appearing in various forms in traditional Canadian tales of the wilderness—to inform the image of Zenia as “man-eater.” While this is again a reworking of the popular interpretation of the novel as platform for uncontainable female sexuality, Duncan’s use of the Wendigo myth also leads to a reading of Zenia as a double. Quoting from Atwood’s essay, “Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice: The Wendigo,” written in 1995, Duncan documents Atwood’s interpretation of the beast as:
A “fragment of the protagonist’s psyche, a sliver of his repressed inner life made visible.” Such wendigos are humans who have, as she says, “turned themselves inside out, so that the creature they may only have feared or dreamed about splits off from the rest of their personality” (Duncan 1999, 75).

Atwood invokes a similar connection when she depicts the relationship of Zenia with each of the three main characters.

A number of critics have documented the doubling effects of Zenia within the text. A serial betrayer, Zenia befriends each of the female characters in turn, constructing herself in their image. When she leaves, taking with her a stolen lover as trophy, Zenia’s betrayal is consuming because each woman has come to rely on the positive image of her self that Zenia reflects. Lonely and neglected, Tony is seduced by this proffered reflection: “for aren’t they both orphans? Both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves . . .” (RB.166). Similarly, multiracial Roz is encouraged to recognise something of herself in Zenia’s exotic glamor: “So Zenia is a mixture, like herself!” (RB.360). Howells suggests: “It would appear that Zenia is threatening not because she is the other of these women, but because she is their double, forcing them to look at repressed dimensions of otherness within themselves” (Howells 2002, 205). This otherness manifests itself differently within each character, but none of them are without it. Tony, for example: “is a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is—and he has made this clear—not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting.” (RB.145). In his book, The Double and the Other, Paul Coates makes a strong connection between language and the literary trope of the Double. He says: “stories that deal explicitly with the Double seem in the main to be written by authors who are suspended between languages and cultures . . . Here the Double is the self when it speaks another language” (Coates 1988, 2). Atwood fits Coates’s description of an author balancing between two languages—“English” English and “Canadian” English—and is subject to its doubling effects. She draws attention to this through the character of Tony, for whom language is central to her sense of otherness: “Don’t talk like that! She hisses at Tony. She means the accent. Flat, she calls it. But how can Tony talk the way her mother does?” (RB.145) This double language, which is both hers and not hers, is metaphorically illustrated in Tony’s reversal of words: a practice which fascinates Zenia when it is mistakenly revealed: “Which was the magic word, raw or war? Probably it was the two of them together; the doubleness. That would have had high appeal, for Zenia” (RB.130). Through its reversal, Tony disrupts the signifier, infusing each word with a powerful alternative significance: “They are Tnomerf Ynot words. They make her feel powerful, in charge of some-
thing” (RB.139). It is this secret power of the transgressive, of the distorting reflection offered by the Double, that attracts Zenia, who inhabits a similarly marginal world of identification and difference.

The double language, as Hutcheon and others have pointed out, is reflective of the double self: a hybrid identity made common by postcolonial emigration and refugee migration (Hutcheon 2004). Like Shanita, who is both Canadian and not; like Tony who is foreigner to both English mother and Canadian father, the hybrid is, in Homi Bhabha’s words: “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1996, 361). This difference is also felt by Roz, whose relative racial stability, provided by her Irish Catholic mother, is shattered by the return of her Jewish father and her two “uncles” with their multiple passports: “I’m a Hungarian, he’s a Pole,’ says Uncle Joe, ‘I’m a Yugoslav, he’s a Dutchman. This other passport says I’m Spanish. Your father now, he’s half a German. The other half, that’s the Jew” (RB.334). This proliferation of possible identities is instinctively understood by Roz to equate in reality to an absence of identity. In suburban Canada, whiteness is the only signifier of selfhood, with all possible alternatives considered as “other,” and labelled as “DPs”: “DPs meant Displaced Persons. They came from the east, across the ocean . . . Sometimes Roz got called a DP herself, because of her dark skin” (RB.324–325). The broadness of the geographical definition of these marginal peoples illustrates the sweeping equation of non-white with other. And even though she is white, Roz is still able to feel the migrant woman’s experience of exclusion described by Bulbeck:

Even if Roz wasn’t a DP, there was something. There was something about her that set her apart, an invisible barrier, faint and hardly there . . . She wasn’t like the others, she was among them but she wasn’t part of them. (RB.325)

In response, Roz learns to mimic an appropriate exterior: “She imitates. She picks up their accents, their intonations, their vocabulary; she adds layers of language to herself, sticking them on like posters on a fence” (RB.345). This practice of cultural appropriation is discussed by Franz Fanon in his seminal text, Black Skin, White Masks, in which he speaks of the impulse of the black man in a white country to assimilate the language of the colonial power, and argues that: “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon 1986, 38). Faced with a world that commands “turn white or disappear” (Fanon 1986, 100), the black man rejects his native culture. Fanon explains: “the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (Fanon 1986, 18). Yet despite appropriating a white mask, he inevitably retains the mark of difference in his
black skin. Accordingly, in *The Robber Bride*, even in her wealthy Jewish school, Roz retains the mark of her difference: “whereas once Roz was not Catholic enough, now she isn’t Jewish enough. She’s an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person” (*RB*.344). In attempting to embrace the Jewishness for which she was previously abused, Roz experiences what Bulbeck refers to as “anti-racist racism.” Bulbeck explains: “affirming one’s racial identity *in opposition to whiteness* condemned the mixed-race or hybrid identity as inferior” (Bulbeck 1998, 53). Writers such as Bhabha try to negotiate an alternative discourse capable of undermining this oppositional understanding of racial purity, as Bulbeck states: “instead of merely asserting the value of one’s pure (but formerly denigrated) identity, postcolonial writers suggest hybrid or mixed identities which encompass the contradictory history of colonization” (Bulbeck 1998, 53).

Bhabha takes up Fanon’s thesis in his discussion of the function of mimicry within postcolonial discourse. Bhabha claims that the Enlightenment project of civilisation, used to justify much of colonialism, contains an impossible inevitable conclusion in which the other attains the status of the self, and the colonial project is forced to accept its anti-Enlightenment premise. To resolve this dilemma, argues Bhabha, colonial discourse utilises mimicry, an “ironic compromise”:

Colonial mimicry is a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference (Bhabha 1996, 361).

Within this “double articulation,” in which the other is both assimilated through sameness yet safely diminished through difference, the colonial subject can only ever be a “partial presence” (Bhabha 1996, 361). However, through this act of diminishment, the colonizer unwittingly contributes to his own loss of power; the partial presence of the colonized proves incapable of reflecting back the whole image of the colonizer’s self, necessary to “the narcissistic demand of colonial authority” (Bhabha 1996, 363). Consequently, “the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (Bhabha 1996, 363–364). In *The Robber Bride*, all of the characters who perform the function of other to the white Canadian self—Zenia, Shanita, Roz’s father, and her two uncles—are characterised by a lack of stable identity or essence. There can be no racial identification or concept of origins that lies outside of a Western
discourse of identity. Jan Campbell locates this assertion in the Enlightenment tradition: “In this narrative black people are situated as a primitive and unknowable other to Western ‘truths’ of knowledge and reason” (Campbell 2000, 191). With all knowledge and reason on the side of the West, anything that falls on the other side of the dividing line can only be known as disorder and difference. This quality is frequently seen as freeing within the novel, for example by Roz: “She wanted to travel light, and was happiest in a mixed bag” (RB.346), or by Charis, who envies Shanita: “She can be whatever she feels like, because who can tell?” (RB.57), but it is always associated with something off-center, transgressive, and disruptive. By investing in the other the contradictory properties of both sameness and difference, the identity of the colonizing self becomes subject to the reflection offered by the other, and is therefore troubled by the inessential and shifting figure that is being presented. When Zenia first appears in the book, Tony asks, “What is she doing here, on this side of the mirror?” (RB.34). The greatest threat posed by Zenia is that she refuses to remain merely a reflection of the self.

Hutcheon discusses the function of irony, which she terms a “trope of doubleness,” as a tool of empowerment in postcolonial politics. She traces the development of a national literature through a process of imitation, internalization, and then a final postcolonial moment of revalorization of that which was rejected by the dominant pattern. However, because the revolutionary final step “continues to operate within the power field of that dominant culture,” Hutcheon considers irony, which subverts from within, to be “a consistently useful strategy for postcolonial discourse” (Hutcheon 2004, 81). In The Robber Bride, Zenia’s power functions within these ironic principles. Imitating each of the three friends in turn, internalizing the characteristics by which each knows her self, Zenia reflects back to them a positive image of the self on which each comes to rely. However, this “colonial” stage of internalization and imitation is then superseded by a “postcolonial” stage of rejection, where Zenia reveals the sexuality, greed, and individualism which have been excluded by the dominant united narrative voice of the three friends. This revelation of difference rejects the colonial compulsion to mimic the dominant power, but Zenia does, nevertheless, continue to operate within the dominating narrative structure of Tony, Roz, and Charis. Although direct speech is limited in the novel, Atwood utilises free indirect discourse and a closely schematised narrative focus to equally represent the views of Tony, Roz, and Charis. Zenia’s perspective, however, is never represented, and her actions are only known through the narratives of the three women. So Zenia uses the ironic power of doubleness to disrupt the dominant narrative whilst continuing to operate within it.
Zenia is accepted as a double by each of the three women because she reflects an attractive positive image. But while the projection and reflection of themselves draws Zenia towards the women, each of them simultaneously pushes Zenia away, repulsed at her incarnation of their guiltily repressed needs and desires. The splitting of Zenia that occurs throughout the text into beauty and monstrosity, confidante and traitor, good and bad, reflects the split felt within each of the characters; just as each woman recognises a good about themselves within Zenia, so they also recognise previously repressed bad feelings. When Zenia declares: “Fuck the Third World! I’m tired of it!” Roz feels an illicit rush of excitement and sympathy, “an answering beat, in herself . . . Well, why not? You think they’d lift a finger, in the Third World, if it was you?” (RB.98). Zenia says the unsayable, and the desire for such forbidden liberation emanates from Roz, Tony, and Charis. Faced with an unpalatable reflection of their own capacity for greed, lust, and envy, the women proceed to turn the double into the other. By projecting the worst of themselves onto Zenia, they are each then in turn able to define themselves in opposition to her, and so create the illusion of a stable identity. This coincides with Edward Said’s influential text, Orientalism, in which he argued that the West creates the Orient through the construction of Orientalism, which is a term loaded with implicit definitions and understandings of what it means to be “Oriental.” Said argued that: “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 1995, 1–2). Similarly, Tony, Roz, and Charis each use Zenia to stabilise their own identities in contrast to hers. They become the self by setting Zenia up as the other.

Throughout The Robber Bride, a xenophobic tension mixes with the postcolonial guilt of the characters. Zenia is the stranger within the text, the other who is given no voice, but who prompts anxiety because she refuses to reflect a stable image back to the self. She appropriates the mask that Fanon detects on the face of every subaltern working within an alien dominant culture, but the effectiveness of her disguise is in itself unsettling: “her fakery was deeply assumed, and even her most superficial disguises were total” (RB.36–37). Zenia’s mimicry is potent and unsettling, crossing the boundaries between sameness and otherness. Howells speaks of the transgression of boundaries in the novel: “Zenia operates on this edge of desire and lack which is the borderline territory of the marauding Gothic Other” (Howells 1995, 139). Zenia works on this desire and the ambivalence it creates. As foreigner, she is part pitied, part feared, and part envied. Consequently, the other side to her monstrosity is her much discussed exotic beauty: “Zenia stands out . . . like the moon” (RB.126), and like Shanita, she prompts both fascination and repulsion. Everything
about her is contradictory and unstable. In *The Robber Bride*, boundaries are also crossed by Roz’s transgressive father:

“He could walk through a border like it wasn’t there,” says Uncle Joe.

“What’s a border?” asks Roz.

“A border is a line on a map,” says Uncle Joe.

“A border is where it gets dangerous,” says Uncle George.

(*RB.331*)

With every border that Zenia crosses, she becomes more disruptive, more alien, and more insubstantial.

In fact, what becomes apparent after reading *The Robber Bride* is that, despite her centrality to the story, the reader knows little or nothing about Zenia. Each narrative of her origins is exposed as another appropriated mask, and each one has been offered, not by Zenia, but by one of the three women who represent and re-inscribe her. Eventually, it is Charis who comes to realize that Zenia has not been considered as a subject of the narrative; in deconstructing her appearance, her actions, and her motives, she has only ever remained the object of their speculation: “although she has often thought about Zenia in relation to herself, or to Billy, or even to Tony and Roz, she has never truly considered what Zenia was in and by herself: the Zenia-ness of Zenia” (*RB.451*). However, Charis quickly abandons this recognition of Zenia’s selfhood, reverting to the egocentrism that denies the autonomy of the other, and concludes: “Zenia was sent into her life—was *chosen* by her—to teach her something” (*RB.451*). Despite the frequently devastating force of Zenia’s actions and reactions, she remains an exotic mute within the text.

Discussing what she terms the Canadian “national imaginary,” Bannerji argues that the myth of the empty wilderness—the refusal to recognize the presence of the other within the self—creates a real problem for Canadian identity; she states: “The threat to Canada, then, comes not only from south of its border but from within itself—from its denied, uncircumcised, alienated nature and its human forms” (Bannerji 2004, 297). In *The Robber Bride*, the compulsion to externalize and demonize Zenia as the other enormously heightens her dangerous powers until she becomes a silent figure of supernatural monstrosity. Zenia represents what is irrepressibly other within each character’s self. Her instability reflects their instability. And it is only when the women come to accept their own dual experience of being both self and other that they are able to more comfortably host the other within themselves, and no longer need Zenia in their lives as an external embodiment of the other. For Atwood, the experience of being both self and other, which is particularly
highlighted in Canada’s postcolonial discourse, requires an acceptance of a unique duality that cannot be overcome by a misleading identification with either the colonial self or the postcolonial other.

Notes

1. Atwood’s interest in postcolonial politics is long-standing, and has interacted with and informed her feminist sympathies from the start of her literary career. Ever since the publication of Surprising, generally considered to be her most nationally-aware novel, along with her critical survey of Canadian literature, Survival (both in 1972), she has been recognised as a novelist for whom all forms of oppression—sexual and cultural—are of concern.

2. Interestingly, Howells argues of Atwood that “paradoxically her specificity gives authority to her explorations of the multiplicities and ambiguities across Canadian society as codified in multiculturalism policies” (Howells 2002, 201).

3. In using the term “invader-settler societies,” I am following the lead of Brydon, who explains the evolution of the original description of Canada as a settler colony in some detail, concluding that: “instead of adding the modifier ‘invader’ to the prior narrative of the victor, which celebrated settlement, priority should in fact be given to the initial fact of invasion” (Brydon 2004, 177).

4. See, for example: Duncan 1999; Fand 2003; Howells 2002; Perrakis 1997.

Works Cited


The page waits, pretending to be blank. Is that its appeal, its blankness? What else is this smooth and white, this terrifyingly innocent? A snowfall, a glacier? It’s a desert, totally arid, without life. But people venture into such places. Why? To see how much they can endure, how much dry light?

—Margaret Atwood, “The Page”

The only thing between us is this black line: a thread thrown onto the empty page, into the empty air.

—Margaret Atwood, The Blind Assassin

For Margaret Atwood, the arts are a strategy for survival; writing is both necessary and dangerous. She sees her words as a slender lifeline thrown into the void in hopes that a reader will catch it. Like Virginia Woolf, Atwood is familiar with the terror of venturing into those desert places, the blank page or the empty canvas. The imagery of snowfall and glacier with which she describes the blank page no doubt comes naturally to a Canadian writer, especially one who spent much of her childhood in the bush of the far north. In Survival (1972), her handbook to Canadian literature, Atwood postulates that, just as the frontier is the central theme of American literature, survival is central to the literature of Canada, and she describes the survival theme as
“grim” and “bare.”¹ She then urges her fellow writers to break free of a Canadian literary heritage that usually presents the national sensibility in a negative and somber light. She characterizes earlier Canadian literature as a dreary record of struggle and victimization—death by avalanche, attacking grizzly bears, or lost expeditions—whose “true and only season” is winter.² Seeing herself as working against a literary tradition as dismal as a continent of snow, Atwood, beginning with her first novel, The Edible Woman, writes novels that are filled with color, wit, delightfully sardonic narrative voices, and vivid transformations. She writes in many different genres including satire, the ghost story, the historical novel, and future fiction. And yet, to quote Wallace Stevens,

The natives of rain are rainy men.
Although they paint effulgent, azure lakes,
And April hillsides wooded white and pink,
Their azure has a cloudy edge...³

Perhaps more subtly than the novels of the Irish writers Johnston and Madden, Atwood’s work is inevitably shaped by its place of origin. Various as they are, Atwood’s novels tend to follow the native Canadian tradition as she describes it; she adheres to the theme of survival against difficult odds. Her novels are mostly about women’s struggles and stratagems to survive, sometimes in extremely harsh circumstances, as in Bodily Harm or The Handmaid’s Tale. In Survival Atwood remarks humorously that the “Canadian author’s two favorite ‘natural’ methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing, drowning being preferred by poets... and freezing by prose writers.”⁴ Atwood herself makes use of that same imagery; near drowning is a favorite motif in her novels and stories. In Cat’s Eye, for example, Elaine Risley nearly freezes and drowns in a childhood episode of abuse that profoundly shapes her life and art. Near drowning often symbolizes the way that life can overwhelm women in the modern world. Atwood’s main characters exist in a liminal state in the sense that they see themselves as living on the brink—not of some transformative experience, as described by Carolyn Heilbrun—but rather on the brink of disaster.

Atwood’s protagonists view their own lives in drastic terms, as a struggle for survival, and their narrative voices tend to assume a wary, ironic tone. Atwood prefaces The Edible Woman with an epigraph taken from instructions for making puff pastry: “The surface on which you work (preferably marble)... should be chilled throughout the operations.”⁵ From her first novel on, Atwood’s narrators speak in voices purged of sentiment. For the sake of survival, sentiment must be jettisoned, along with all romantic dreams, including the dream of love. Male-female relations, mother-daughter relations, and friendships between women are all portrayed as problematic at
best, tyrannous at worst. Atwood’s narrators are nearly always isolated figures, distanced from others by their most admirable assets: their honesty, desire for autonomy, and need for self-expression. It is not surprising, therefore, that in her portrayal of visual artists Atwood focuses, more than other writers, on the psychological struggles of the artist to rise above the surface of life, to avoid permanent submersion and a kind of psychic oblivion. Although Atwood does not suggest that art must have a neurotic source, she assumes that the troubled aspects of the psyche are inevitably involved in the process and will leave their mark. In Atwood’s fiction, women artists have a more difficult struggle than men to achieve autonomy; a career in art requires self-knowledge and, as in other novelists, a radical isolation from what might be called normal life.

Atwood’s earlier artist protagonists, those before Cat’s Eye, do not overcome these psychological obstacles, and their art suffers as a consequence. The nameless narrator of Surfacing (1972), sometimes referred to as the Surfacer, lacks self-knowledge; in fact, through much of the book she suffers from a self-imposed state of amnesia in which she has suppressed the facts of her own life story. Yvonne, the painter in the story “The Sunrise,” in Bluebeard’s Egg and other Stories (1983), suffers from such radical isolation from everyone as to be virtually strangled in solitude. Only Elaine Risley in Cat’s Eye (1989) attains the imaginative power which, drawing upon memory, self-knowledge, and necessary isolation, can transform life into art.

A victim of circumstances and of a monstrously callous married lover, the narrator of Surfacing has too meager a grasp of reality to achieve much as an artist. She is a commercial artist and book illustrator, having been goaded onto that path by her first lover, who was also her art teacher: “For a while I was going to be a real artist; he thought that was cute but misguided, he said I should study something I’d be able to use because there has [sic] never been any important women artists.” When she embarks on her heavily allegorical journey into the wilderness of Quebec in search of her lost father, the narrator takes along her watercolors and acrylics in order to illustrate a book of fairy tales, but her fingers soon grow stiff and feel arthritic. She cannot perform the sort of imitative, insincere art that is expected of her—images of women as idealized princesses. Moreover, the publisher does not allow her to use hot or bright colors, even for a tale of the Golden Phoenix; fire must somehow be painted with a cool tone. It is not surprising that the narrator’s hopes for a career in art are aborted: forced into commercial art because of gender stereotypes, she discovers that the commercial field promotes those same stereotypes. The narrator’s present lover, the inarticulate Joe, is, like the punk artist in “Sunrise” and the ex-husband Jon in Cat’s Eye, a creator of ugly art. Joe does violence to his clay pots, mutilating them in seeming contempt for his own craft.
Several details of *Surfacing* anticipate *Cat’s Eye*, written seventeen years later: the background of the narrator’s family, her childhood in the wilderness, the disastrous affair with her art teacher, and the book illustrations. But *Surfacing* is not about the narrator’s art; it is about submersion and self-discovery. Atwood calls it a ghost story. The narrator’s denial of her own history—the fact that her lover has forced her to have an abortion—leads her to create in her own mind a false history in which she is married and has abandoned her child. The narrator’s best moments of sanity and control seem to occur when she is floating alone or with her companions in a canoe on the lake searching for her father: “It’s like moving on air, nothing beneath holding us up; suspended, we drift home.” She navigates well in the wilderness and feels most at home suspended in its beauty. Although it seems for a time that her increasingly intense mistrust of words and language will lead her more fully into a world of visual expression—maps, drawings, photographs—the narrator eventually burns all of her own and her family’s records, including her artwork, paints and tools, along with her childhood drawings and scrapbooks in order to “clear a space” in which she can descend for a time into, literally, an animal existence, devoid of language or civility. These events occur after she mystically “sees” the ghosts of both her parents. Although several of the elements of this story can be found in other novels about women artists—the sensation of suspension above water, the longing to enter into the mysteries of purely visual experience, and even the return of the ghosts—it is obvious that this narrator’s art is a dead end.

Atwood’s short story “The Sunrise” provides a sketch, rather than a full-length portrait, of Yvonne, a professional painter of undetermined age, somewhere between thirty and fifty. In this story Atwood’s relentlessly cold, laconic style keeps Yvonne at a distance from the reader, even as Yvonne keeps the world at a distance. Outwardly affecting a jaunty manner, Yvonne has acquaintances but confides in no one. She has developed mechanisms for coping with her own self-conscious fears when in the society of others: she clutches the tablecloth under the table and tells jokes she collects on index cards. Yvonne is the most isolated of the women artist figures encountered in this study. Although isolation is Yvonne’s most obvious problem, Atwood also dramatizes in this story several other difficulties confronted by a woman artist at the end of the twentieth century: stereotypes of what a painter should be, the familiar issue of art and Eros, and the destructive, antihumanistic nature of certain trends and fads in contemporary art.

In “The Sunrise” Atwood attacks issues of art and gender head-on. Yvonne, who has a studio of her own, likes to follow men in the streets of Toronto, not to seduce them but to draw them. The men are flattered. Although she is compulsively hungry to capture men’s souls through her art, her drawings of them seem rather tender. She likes to draw men who look a bit bat-
tered and worn out by life. Yvonne’s compulsion to gaze upon strangers and try to capture their essence in her drawings is, of course, a reversal of the traditional gender roles of artist and model. Indeed, earlier in her career Yvonne attained considerable notoriety by painting and exhibiting a series of male nudes with erect penises; amusingly, she became known as “the penis lady.”

Her outrageous boldness anticipates that of the painter Monica Szabo in Mary Gordon’s Spending, although Monica paints only “spent” men. Yvonne finds that her art and her temperament are incompatible with love; she has occasionally fallen in love with one of her models only to discover that her feelings for him drain away her creative energy. More significantly, when Yvonne falls in love with a man he becomes a blur of concentrated light to her; she loses sight of line and contour. Rather than merely making the artist’s hand shake, love in this instance interferes directly with the artist’s ability to see.

Images of water, ice, and sharp blades—imagery anticipating that of Cat’s Eye—characterize Yvonne’s psychological states, stressing her liminality. Yvonne sees herself as living at the edge, barely hanging on. She periodically suffers from hallucinatory episodes in which a tsunami, “a towering wall of black water,” comes rushing over her. The water seems very real, and Yvonne has to take to her bed, closing her eyes and ears and mouth and holding on tightly until the wave recedes. On a miniature scale, Atwood’s story reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf’s powerful metaphor of crashing waves to describe episodes of psychological submersion in The Waves. In addition to her apprehension of the tidal wave at her back, Yvonne is also keenly aware of the fragile, fugitive nature of the present moment, which she thinks of as skating on ice:

The blade of the skate floats, she knows, on a thin film of water, which it melts by pressure and which freezes behind it. This is the freedom of the present tense, this sliding edge.

Atwood emphasizes the knife-blade precariousness of the present moment by narrating her story in present tense. Yvonne also keeps a sharp razor blade on the edge of her bathtub, not for shaving but for suicide: “the razor blade is there all the time, underneath everything.” Yvonne takes curious comfort in the idea that she can control her death, if not her life.

Constant awareness of death and of the terrifying knife-edge existence of the present moment are psychic stumbling blocks that make art difficult. A different kind of obstacle is personified in the young punk artist whom Yvonne takes on as her model and temporary lover. With his half-shaven head of orange hair and aggressively unhealthy appearance, the punk artist looks like “a welding shop accident.” He is totally sullen and belligerent in demeanor. His motto is “Art sucks,” and his art consists of collages in which he has pasted mutilated photographs of women’s bodies on top of landscapes
and further abused the images of women by adding smears of red nail polish. Like Joe in *Surfacing* and Jon in *Cat’s Eye*, he practices a faddish anti-art of mutilation. Yvonne’s decision to take the punk artist as a lover, albeit a “somnambulant” one, and then to paint him, brings about a crisis in the story. The predicament is a serious one for Yvonne, because she asks herself, “if art sucks and everything is only art, what has she done with her life?” By making love to the punk artist is she also embracing his anti-art attitude, or is it the case—which seems more likely—that in painting him she is mastering anti-art by transforming it into her own art? She plans her first real painting in years, a very large canvas portraying the punk artist sprawled on a wine-colored velvet chair wearing nothing but a pink shirt and holding a red poppy. Although the envisioned painting, like her hold on life itself, remains ambiguous, it would seem to have genuine satiric, even comic, potential while offering a vibrant composition of clashing colors. The painting would not say “Art doesn’t suck,” but rather “This anti-art attitude sucks, and I have made art of it.”

Another hopeful note in this grim story is that when Yvonne rises every morning to witness the sunrise she renews herself daily with light. The story ends with her breathing in the morning light, which revivifies her and which is also an essential element in her art. Yvonne’s life is precarious, like tightrope walking, and her art seems to be the only thing that stabilizes her at all.

Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye* is better able than Atwood’s earlier protagonists to find the means to shape her most painful memories into works of art. She achieves what Atwood, in *Survival*, calls “creative non-victimhood,” but she too pays the price of isolation. *Cat’s Eye* is Atwood’s most autobiographical novel to date, and she endows Elaine with many of her own memories, particularly memories of a childhood spent partly in the bush with her mother, brother, and entomologist father. The novel beautifully evokes the games, toys, rituals, rhymes, and the cruelties of children in the 1940s as seen through the eye of Elaine’s memory as she prepares for her retrospective exhibit in Toronto sometime in the 1980s. Atwood gradually fills in Elaine’s middle years, so that the portrait of the artist is fairly complete, at least in its chronology.

It is not surprising that Atwood should choose as her subject a visual artist. Atwood has all her life practiced various visual arts, including illustrations and cover designs, collages, cartoons and comic strips, as well as watercolors and drawings. As in other novels about artists, there are interesting consonances and resonances between Atwood’s verbal art and Elaine’s visual art, although one cannot say with any certainty that Atwood’s writing is animated as much by resentment and grief as Elaine’s art is. Mature, sounding tougher and more sardonic than her true nature warrants, Elaine confides in the reader with such candor and forthcoming specificity that no lacunae seem to exist in her re-creation of her memories. Yet her paintings reveal the existence of gaps and silences in her narrative by alluding what has been
left unspoken, most notably the affective side of her psyche. Her art reveals what she cannot otherwise say, and Elaine refuses to theorize about her work or proclaim its redemptive value. The ekphrastic passages describing Elaine’s paintings at the exhibition stand out from the rest of the text almost like a retrospective commentary on it. Atwood leaves it to the reader to piece together Elaine’s words and her pictures to arrive at an understanding her artistic motives and her true nature.

As the novel begins, Elaine sees herself in the middle of life’s journey, like Dante on his pilgrimage, a position she imagines as “the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge.” The bridge is a literal one; it crosses a river over a ravine in Toronto, the scene of Elaine’s most extreme duress, where she was systematically bullied by three other girls, her so-called friends, as a child. Returning from Vancouver to Toronto, the city of her youth, to attend the retrospective of her work, Elaine also holds an inner retrospective in which she recalls long sequences of her life in Toronto from early childhood through art school, a disastrous affair with her drawing teacher, and her failed first marriage. The middle of life brings to Elaine the usual complaints of middle age: dimming eyesight, a less vigorous body, and an awareness of a large communication gap between herself and the next generation of women, represented by the young reporter who interviews her about her exhibit. As Elaine reflects upon her life, she comes to understand that past time cannot be thought of as a line, a linear record of events. Rather, the extraordinarily complex and reticulated connections among the events of one’s life begin to form a dimension or substance, something that can be dipped into, even though its exact structure cannot fully be described:

But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. (3)

Seeing time as like water and memories as like layered transparencies gives a tactile and visual quality to the act of remembering, a first step, it would seem, toward transforming memories into visual art. As Elaine looks back upon her life, her recollections down to the present moment culminate in the exhibition; it is not that the paintings document her life but rather that they prove she has something to “show” for having lived. Her paintings are, as she says, “drenched in time” (161). Elaine’s narration of events in various alternating time sequences is in keeping with her view of time as layered transparencies. As at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, the artistic effort of the novelist converges with that of the artist in the novel, so that both may rightly say, “I have had my vision.” Only in this case, Elaine’s words
are, “I have said, Look. I have said, I see” (427). Elaine cannot work her way progressively through grief and loss to artistic accomplishment in the conscious, internally articulate manner of Lily Briscoe, but her art bears witness to those aspects of her life. Whereas Lily struggles to achieve and inwardly articulate a “vision” as well as a painting, Elaine’s thoughts about art remain in the realm of the purely visual, even though her artistic process and goals are subtle and complex. To the extent that there is a “theory” of the creative process embedded in Cats Eye, it has to be read between the lines by looking at Elaine’s total development as an artist.

The scenes of a painful childhood are the most vivid part of Cat’s Eye. The novel has been justly praised for its faithful re-creation of the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations of life in Toronto in the 1940s and 1950s and for its dramatic portrayal of the schoolyard victimization of young Elaine. But critics like Judith Thurman, who thinks that Cat’s Eye should have ended “on page 206,” at the moment when Elaine turns her back on her chief tormenter, Cordelia, and walks away, disregard the fact that Elaine’s seemingly self-contained narrative of her early triumph over victimization bears a casual relationship to the larger confessional narrative that ratifies her career as an artist.15 There is a direct line of cause and effect between Elaine’s experience of cruelty at the hands of Cordelia and her career as an artist who is driven to arrest, transfix, and freeze the people and scenes of her life that have given the most pain.

Atwood offers a comprehensive view of the process by which art can arise from the artist’s particular experiences, in this case childhood trauma. An innocent child, reared mainly in the wilderness, is suddenly introduced to the society of other children, with all their entrenched rituals and cruelties. The abuse she suffers causes her to withdraw and become passive and silent. During this period of withdrawal she acquires mechanisms for survival and ways of seeing the world that will later determine the nature of her artistic expression when she finally gives herself back to the world through her paintings. Again, Atwood is not suggesting that art necessarily arises from suffering. Rather, as she wrote in a letter to a friend early in her career, everyone has some sort of neurosis; artists are simply more fortunate than others in having art as a medium in which to work out their neuroses. She suggests that “the artist is likely to be better adjusted (to his own neuroses) than someone with an equivalent intensity of neurosis who isn’t an artist.” Atwood adds that her theory is “probably a lot of crap,” but she prefers it to the notion that creativity requires the artist to suffer.16 In Elaine’s case, the childhood abuse, her first experience of purely gratuitous evil, leads to an early withdrawal into a self-imposed state of impersonality in order to evade an intolerable situation. She achieves the partial displacement of her feeling and perceiving self onto the radiance of the blue cat’s eye marble, which she treasures as a talisman.
The transformations of the marble from child’s toy, to talisman, to symbol of radiant art parallel Elaine’s own transformations as she grows up and learns gradually to avoid victimization. A transparent crystal with a flower-like shape of opaque blue inside, the luminous marble hints at possibilities of vision, energy, and beauty—an instrument to capture the light. Later, it merges with the picture of a convex mirror as a symbol of a world caught and transformed in the mind and reflected in art. Finally, its blue globular shape suggests a reconciling of macrocosm and microcosm: the eye, the world, and the stars.

Learning to see the world as the marble “sees,” Elaine’s visual imagination is shaped so that, in adulthood, she will develop a cool, impersonal, hard-edged style of painting, although it is also a style that celebrates light and sources of light. Elaine’s art is thus a retrieval and a giving back of herself and her feelings, but in encrypted forms that offer a degree of self-protection. It is not surprising that Elaine’s art feels drastic, given that it is based on backward-looking emotions, resentment and grief. One could contrast her paintings to those of Claire in *Nothing is Black*, where grief becomes the catalyst for love, the true motive of her art. It should also be noted that Elaine paints impressions of memories, compositions inspired by memories, and not pictures from the past like snapshots, which would be quite a different thing.

The three stages of Elaine’s development as an artist—withdrawal, the acquisition of a particular way of seeing and a style, and the giving back of her visions to the world—may be paralleled with the three ordeals that she undergoes, the ordeal of childhood abuse, the ordeal in young adulthood of learning to cope with self-centered men as she tries to become an artist, and the ordeal of the retrospective exhibit, which causes her to examine her life. The abuse of Elaine as a child adds a different dimension to Atwood’s ongoing exploration of abuses of power, which begins with her first novel, *The Edible Woman*. Atwood frequently suggests that power over others always lends itself to abuse. She offers no real remedies except to imply that any chance of freedom from oppression is worth the struggle. In the two novels preceding *Cat’s Eye*, *Bodily Harm* and *A Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood addresses the issue of abusive repression, by totalitarian governments and a patriarchal ruling class, in the larger social arena. By vividly portraying the meanness, tyranny, and physical abuse of which children are capable—girls’ cruelty to a girl—*Cat’s Eye* dramatizes the problem of evil on a more primitive and basic level. The techniques that Cordelia and the two other girls use to bully Elaine are the same as those employed by repressive governments: intimidation, isolation, instilling self-doubt by forcing paradoxical questions or imposing impossible tasks, continuous sarcasm, invective, and brainwashing, as well as direct physical threats and torments. Atwood shows that even seemingly innocent children are capable of such jack-booted sadism, dramatizing an innate human
perversity that her Calvinist forebears would have called original sin. Social evil as depicted in Atwood’s novels frequently assumes up-to-date forms, however. *A Handmaid’s Tale*, for example, anticipates the revelations about the mistreatment of women under present-day theocratic regimes; *Cat’s Eye* seems to predict the current preoccupation with the psychological causes of children’s violence. *Cat’s Eye* also differs from Atwood’s earlier novels in that it raises the question of whether there can be a connection between abuse and art.

Having lived in the wilderness, like Atwood herself, while her father did field research on insects, Elaine is innocent even for an eight year old when her family moves to the city. Since she has spent many years playing only with her brother, she has no inkling of the world of girls, with their role playing as housewives or figures of fashion and their different rules of behavior. Elaine has trouble understanding her own femininity, and that factor, along with her innocence, makes her an easy target. She is unprepared when games of jump rope, ball, and marbles yield to a far crueler game of psychological sadism in which Cordelia and the two other girls systematically dominate and brutalize her over a period of about two years. Although Carol and Grace are happy to follow along, it is Cordelia who, with a twist on a motif in *King Lear*, tells Elaine that she is “nothing”; her voice will echo in Elaine’s head for the rest of her life, like the voice of Mr. Tansley undermining the confidence of Lily Briscoe. It is Cordelia who convinces Elaine that the river under the bridge over the ravine carries the souls of dead people, washed down from the cemetery, and Cordelia who digs the deep hole in which Elaine is buried alive. Under such duress, Elaine begins to mutilate her own body, tearing the skin from her feet.

Elaine keeps as a talisman the cat’s eye marble, so like and unlike an eye in its crystalline transparency, because it seems beautiful and mysteriously alien, perhaps the first object she has ever looked at aesthetically. The marble’s purity and its gelid look suggest to her the power of disembodiment, of resisting torment by seeing without feeling, a way of freezing out those who have frozen her out. Later, in the respite of an unconfined summer camping out with her parents, Elaine dreams of the marble as a sun or planet falling from the sky into her sleeping body and making her cold, a dream which suggests that unconsciously she is maturing, acquiring new strength. In the next school year, as the torment increases, she holds on to the marble as though it were a magic third eye with an “impartial gaze” that allows her to “retreat back into my eyes” (166). As an objective correlative for her own eye and her ego (her “I”), the marble enables her to hold on to a core of herself and to cast a cold eye on her tormentors. Through the “magic” of the marble, she imagines that she can perceive the people around her without feeling anything:
Northern Light

Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. . . . I am alive in my eyes only. (151)

In this state of extreme emotional withdrawal, the only one of her senses that Elaine retains and clings to is the visual, her awareness of the shapes and colors of things. It would seem that visual perception is the least threatening and most empowering means of experiencing the world under duress, an early hint of the sources of inspiration for Elaine’s art. But also at this time she learns to faint away altogether, passing out almost at will during some of the most painful moments.

The climax of the abuse is an ordeal like a little “death” in which Elaine is exposed all at once to the horrors of freezing water, deep snow, ice, and fear of dying. On a winter evening Cordelia and the others force her to enter the ravine down the slippery hillside under the bridge, and they abandon her there, lying to her mother about where she is. She slips into the creek, waist deep in freezing water amid big slabs of ice, her feet immobile. Gradually regaining the strength to climb from the water, she lies numb and soaked by the edge of the stream, in immediate danger of dying from exposure, and surrounded, so she imagines, by the spirits and whispers of the dead floating down from the cemetery. The hallucinatory vision of the Black Virgin floating over the bridge with her glowing red heart awakens Elaine from her torpor and gives her the strength to survive. After this ordeal and her subsequent illness, Elaine suddenly gains the courage, at age ten, to turn her back on her tormentors, recognizing that they have no real power over her and never should have had any. She is freed from their tyranny by an unexpected perception: “I can see the greed in their eyes. It’s as if I can see right into them. Why was I unable to do this before?” (208). Elaine has by now fully absorbed the cold, indifferent eye of the marble: “there’s something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass” (208). After physically surviving the ordeal of near drowning and near freezing (Canadian deaths), Elaine psychologically overcomes the abuse and walks away because she has finally learned to see through the eyes of the other girls into their now obvious motives. She has learned that survival depends upon perception.

The first half of Cat’s Eye builds suspensefully to that moment when Elaine turns her back on Cordelia. The struggle against the Cordelia within, a voice that urges both cruelties and self-doubts, takes Elaine a very long time, however; she is still wrestling with that dark angel at the end of the novel. Her bitter experience with Cordelia also prepares the adult Elaine to cope with the main ordeal of her young adulthood—the familiar dilemma of art versus love—while at the same time trying to find her way as an artist. The
pattern of Elaine’s life in the 1960s and 1970s shows the growth of an artist in the social contexts of those times. Her life takes several wrong turns, and she has to learn to cast off destructive relationships while working by uncertain steps toward an understanding of what her art should be.

Elaine’s first lover Josef Hrbik and her first husband Jon, both artists, both self-centered, weak, and undependable, deflect her from the path of her artistic career. When Elaine shows her portfolio to Josef, he sees more promise in her biological drawings than in her paintings, but he tells her that her work lacks passion and advises her to try for more passion. Josef’s definition of passion includes her having an affair with him, which Elaine does, accepting for a time Josef’s presentation of himself as a romantic lover. He wants to turn her into a Pre-Raphaelite woman (not a Pre-Raphaelite painter), and yet something within her urges a resistance to becoming his fair object:

“Would you do anything for me?” he says, gazing into my eyes. I sway toward him, far away from the earth. Yes would be so easy.

“No,” I say. This is a surprise to me. I don’t know where it has come from, this unexpected and stubborn truthfulness. It sounds rude. (325)

Where this truth comes from, of course, is Elaine’s experience with Cordelia; like Lily Briscoe with Mr. Ramsay, she finds that something within her can resist falling under the sway of the emotional needs of another. Elaine’s instincts are proven correct when Josef virtually self-destructs before her eyes. Josef responds in a totally inappropriate way when his former lover, Suzy, nearly dies of a self-inflicted abortion: he expects Elaine to pity him and console him for the pain of it all.

Elaine’s marriage to fellow art student Jon more seriously interrupts her progress in art. Even as Jon drifts from one trendy art fad to another, Elaine has no time to paint at all in the first year after their daughter is born. Still constrained by old notions about a woman’s place, Elaine feels that she ought not to win in their marital battles, which are mostly about Jon’s infidelities: “If I were to win them, the order of the world would be changed, and I am not ready for that” (361). The world order is changing, of course, and a little more than a year later Elaine becomes so fully exasperated that she finally utters the words that Avis Dobell could not have uttered a century earlier:

Jon sits in the living room, having a beer with one of the painters.
I am in the kitchen, slamming around the pots.
“What’s with her?” says the painter.
“She’s mad because she’s a woman,” Jon says. This is something I haven’t heard for years, not since high school . . .
I go to the living room doorway. “I’m not mad because I’m a woman,” I say. “I’m mad because you’re an asshole.” (366)

Elaine’s frustration with her marriage leads her to cut her wrist theatrically with a tool of the trade, an Exacto knife, but later she regains control of her life and moves west with her daughter. With her second husband Ben, whom she eventually meets in Vancouver, Elaine enjoys the only relationship of her adult life not tainted by a victor-victim struggle of wills. Significantly, Ben, the most dependable, attractive male in any of Atwood’s novels, stays off on business in Mexico and never appears in the novel at all; he phones in his lines. With Ben, Atwood makes the point that decent, supportive men may occasionally be found, but she also keeps him out of sight so as not to dilute the novel’s pervasive cynicism about men.

During the time that Elaine makes these missteps with men she also moves with unsteady progress toward becoming an artist, first by discovering her vocation, then achieving a degree of technical expertise—precision of line, naturalistically rendered surfaces, and so on—and ultimately developing a style, the unique character of her work which will empower it and make it expressive. Elaine’s progress follows a familiar pattern that dates back at least to *The Story of Avis*: a dazzling revelation of her destiny as an artist is followed by a series of little epiphanies in which she confronts the numerous obstacles faced by women in pursuing that goal. The initial revelation comes during a botany examination when Elaine, having mastered scientific drawing under her father’s influence, realizes “like a sudden epileptic fit” that she wants to be a painter, not a biologist (274). One obstacle soon presents itself in her life drawing class when she is expected to draw a nude female model:

...this woman frightens me. There is a lot of flesh to her, especially below the waist; there are folds across her stomach, her breasts are saggy and have enormous dark nipples. The harsh fluorescent light, failing straight down on her, turns her eye sockets to caverns, emphasizes the descending lines from nose to chin; but the massiveness of her body makes her head look like an afterthought. She is not beautiful, and I am afraid of turning into that. (288)

At this point Elaine has not yet acquired the impersonal gaze that will serve her well as an artist. Although she observes in passing certain painterly features such as mass and line, her attention is captured by the woman’s alarmingly unglamorous fleshy presence, so that the model becomes a kind of bogey of aging.

Another problem that Elaine encounters is the ambiguous and belittling way that women artists are defined and labeled. When young men in
the Life Drawing class make fun of housewives in the class, calling them lady painters, Elaine raises the question:

“If they’re lady painters, what does that make me?” I say.
“A girl painter,” Jon says, joking.
Colin, who has manners of a sort, explains: “If you’re bad, you’re a lady painter. Otherwise you’re just a painter.” (297)

Although Colin may have “manners of a sort” he evidently takes pleasure in what he sees as the male prerogative to assign labels.

Elaine’s degree in art history and her studies in commercial art serve her well when she begins to arrive at her own style, since her paintings allude glancingly to the past and also have some of the properties of commercial art, hard edges and shiny surfaces. In contrast to the career of Jon, who slavishly follows every movement from abstract expressionism to op art and pop art, and who ends up doing special effects for chain-saw-massacre films, Elaine follows the more difficult path of painstakingly crafting her own style. First, she becomes fascinated with painting reflective surfaces, “pearls, crystals, mirrors” and such domestic items as ginger-ale bottles, ice cubes, and frying pans (347). Oddly enough, and contrary to usual artistic practice, she begins to paint objects from memory rather than from life, although the images are clear and sharp, not fuzzy-edged. She paints kitchen appliances from her childhood, and these objects, she says “are suffused with anxiety,” but she insists, “it’s not my own anxiety. The anxiety is in the things themselves” (357). Perhaps Elaine has learned to project her own anxiety about domesticity so fully upon the painted images that she can claim that she no longer possesses that anxiety. She also rejects the use of impasto, presumably because impasto can record the fervent touch of the artist in a way that a flat surface does not. Turning away from even the use of textured brushstrokes in favor of seemingly pure color and reflectivity, Elaine teaches herself the ancient art of mixing tempera, colors suspended in a water and egg emulsion. It is evident that the vision of the cat’s eye marble, the “kernel of glass,” has been absorbed into a painterly eye which leads her to depict “objects that breathe out light”(346). Thus, the first stage of Elaine’s artistic growth is the rejection of textured, self-expressive art in favor of an optically precise art of painting the light as it strikes the surfaces of things. The next and more difficult task is to bring the vision of a world of radiance to bear upon her own emotions and memories. Her rejection of impasto, and of brushstrokes that betray the artist’s hand leads to a cool, dispassionate presentation of subject matter, but the subjects themselves are drenched in passion, her own most memorable moments of being.
Elaine becomes fascinated with Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Marriage* not so much for its pellucid rendering of the wedding couple as for the framed convex mirror in the background, which reflects the figures of two people who exist in a different world outside the picture. “This round mirror,” she thinks, “is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking” (347). The surrogate eye intrigues her because it shows the outside of the painting’s inside, peeling back its reality and revealing the presence of the artist. By trickery, the artist is both concealed and revealed. For Elaine, I believe, that mirror, which, art historians tell us, symbolizes the spotlessness of the virgin, externalizes the artist’s vision, the eye and the ego, cleansed and made spotless by the will of the artist.

Elaine’s cool style in the visual medium is complemented by the literary style of her first-person narrative. Elaine’s is the voice of one who talks back to life, witty, epigrammatical, ironic to the point of sarcasm. Her sentences do not flow into one another but rather stand out sharply, like pieces of glass in a mosaic. Her tone is the opposite of romantic; she frequently dismisses sentimental or romantic notions as lies. The seeming objectivity of her paintings and the irony of her narrative tone go hand in hand, and the impersonality seems as much a survival technique, a refuge, as an aesthetic choice. Elaine protects herself from falling prey to sentiment and, more importantly, to abuse such as she suffered as a child. Elaine’s skeptical, impersonal tone is also consistent with her early training in science and the scientific points of view of her astrophysicist brother and biologist father. To the extent that the intellectual grounding of her art may be inferred from the novel, her art is evidently more rooted in a scientific than a religious perspective. Although she visits church with the Smeaths for a time, religion—except for her vision of the Virgin—has a short-lived effect upon her. Stargazing with her brother as a child, Elaine thinks, “His stars are different from the ones in the Bible; they’re wordless, they flame in an obliterating silence” (110). The fiery, wordless light of the stars seen from a modern, scientific perspective influences the images of radiance and light in her paintings more than religious illumination does. The novel ends with a reference to the stars as echoes of an old light shining out of nothingness. In a review of *The Blind Assassin*, John Updike aptly sums up the worldview that can be inferred from Atwood’s novels: the “cosmos above us and underneath our feet is void; in our poor neediness we are as carnivorous and blind as the gods.” Although Elaine is a persona quite distinct from Atwood, the painter in the novel and the author of the novel evidently share this attitude of stoic, not quite hopeless, cynicism.

At the retrospective exhibit Elaine speaks of time as bending back upon itself, like an ocean wave. The fact that sections of the novel are named for paintings in the exhibit also gives the final section of the book a backward-looking perspective. The exhibit, occupying three walls of the gallery, is like
a palace of memory; it is a reflection on her life though not a mirror of it. As Elaine describes the paintings on each of the walls, the reader witnesses the stages of her life: early anxieties, the hatred that once liberated her creativity, her affections, the loss and grief that come with the middle years, and finally her attempt to offer a comprehensive map of her inner world. The east wall displays her early works, the paintings of appliances; the end wall contains works from her middle period, including the series of paintings of Mrs. Smeath; and the west wall shows her five most recent works. Whereas the viewers in the novel have only the speculative gallery notes of Charna, the gallery manager, to rely on, Elaine gives the reader a guided tour of the show, moving around the fictional gallery from east to west. Atwood provides far more extensive passages of ekphrasis than other novelists in this study do. Elaine’s descriptions of her own work are cool, straightforward, detailed, and uncluttered by personal comment. In describing each painting she moves systematically from right to left or from top to bottom, inviting the reader’s “eye” to take in the elements of the composition. The lack of emotion in her tone is all the more telling in that the paintings depict the most grievous and moving moments of her life. The effect of the exhibit is vivid, providing a fitting climax to the novel, and the paintings take on a presence of their own, even a dominance in the narrative. Elaine’s ekphrastic passages attempt to translate the events of the novel into a visual form, and they become separately memorable from the rest of the text. The reader is invited to puzzle out the meaning of the events depicted and, on a more abstract level, to ponder the mysteriousness of words construed as pictures.

Displayed on the end wall is the series of paintings of Mrs. Smeath, some of which are narrative sequences, and all of which depict her in fantastic and humiliating situations. Although she has painted Mrs. Smeath more than any other subject, Elaine claims more than once that she does not know why she hates her so much, even though the paintings make it evident that the hatred has liberated and inspired Elaine’s creativity. The reader must therefore try to piece together the reasons for Elaine’s hatred of this obviously symbolic woman, and not surprisingly those reasons are complicated; Mrs. Smeath carries a good deal of cultural and moral significance as well as personal meaning for Elaine. The fact that Grace’s mother countenances the other girls’ torment of “heathen” Elaine and lets Elaine know that she countenances it is one of Elaine’s bitterest memories, filling her with hatred and shame. It is in that moment that Elaine first learns that adults can also be evil and that evil can mask itself under the guise of holiness. The pleasure that Mrs. Smeath displays in feeling spiritually superior to Elaine offers a glimpse into her meanness of spirit. Her bourgeois life is unredeemed by imagination, beauty, or vitality. Moreover, Mrs. Smeath’s appropriation of God unto herself robs Elaine of any hopes she might temporarily entertain of embracing Christian-
ity. As a child Elaine sees the potential for exclusiveness, smugness, and, by extension, violence in Canadian Protestant culture. Ironically, she is told that Mrs. Smeath has a “bad heart.” In the paintings Elaine satirically represents the moral ugliness of religious hypocrisy as physical ugliness and lack of grace. Culturally, then, Mrs. Smeath represents the part of Canadian society that is dull, narrow-minded, middle class, and smugly Protestant. Mrs. Smeath, her name a portmanteau of “Smith” and “Death,” represents the forces of anti-art, though in quite a different way than the punk artist in “The Sunrise” does. When a woman dashes into the gallery and throws ink on one of the Smeath pictures, Elaine momentarily mistakes her for Grace Smeath. In a sense the misapprehension is correct: the persons who violently oppose “indecency” in art are all children or clones of Mrs. Smeath.

Mrs. Smeath is also a particularly repulsive version of the Angel in the House; Elaine portrays her over and over in serial paintings in order to kill the Angel. The combination of religious hypocrisy and ferocious, discontented domesticity is depicted in a painting called AN EYE FOR AN EYE, in which Mrs. Smeath is shown violently peeling a potato with a mean-looking paring knife. Elaine also paints her posing as an odalisque in her Sunday hat with her rubber plant, symbol of stodgy domesticity. And, since the Mrs. Smeaths of this world lay claim to decency, Elaine makes her indecent through various humiliating poses, nude or in her underwear, or copulating with her husband in the posture of flying insects. In the painting that is defaced by the ink, White Gift, there are four panels showing Mrs. Smeath being unwrapped from tissue paper and stripped down to her underpants, with one big breast cut open to reveal a reptilian heart. These images reveal a savagely satiric purpose that is seen nowhere else in Elaine’s work but that seems to add animation—and animus—to her more gentle, later visions. Elaine ruthlessly exposes, reveals, then dissect and sections her victim, drawing upon her former expertise in laboratory illustration. Surely, no other writer has pilloried the Angel in the House with such bitterness and glee as Atwood has done. In its distaste for the supposedly corrupt flesh of her subject, Elaine’s satiric art seems neoclassical in spirit, at least remotely reminiscent of the practice of Swift and Hogarth, and, again, she presents a world where no pity or sentiment may enter.

Sentiment does threaten to seep in at the edges of the five paintings on the west wall of the gallery, Elaine’s most recent work, in that the paintings are themselves individually retrospective and also highly personal; they “tell” her life visually. But Elaine keeps sentiment at bay by assiduously sticking to her impersonal style. The paintings themselves are too reticent to arouse any easy or automatic responses. The five paintings are Picoseconds, which depicts her now-dead parents as small figures in a landscape; Three Muses, in which three friends who were kind to her when young now offer a ritual
gift of spruce budworm eggs; *One Wing*, a symbolic tribute to her brother, who was killed by terrorists; *Cat’s Eye*, showing herself with her childhood enemies; and *Unified Field Theory*, which attempts to map Elaine’s emotional and aesthetic world. In contrast to Elaine’s verbal narrative, these paintings are cryptic and surreal; they contain elements of displacement and deliberate rearrangement in order covertly to express an emotion or judgment. These paintings do not preserve moments in time; rather, they combine elements that could not have been present in the same moment. Like the artist in *Spending*, Elaine also draws upon materials and ideas from past ages of art, such as a virgin, a triptych, a convex mirror, and the use of tempera, the old monks’ medium, tying her private visions to a public tradition or historical and religiously significant art. Like Atwood herself, Elaine rejects the label of postmodern because it makes her work sound belated and derivative, but the reworking of bits of historic art in a boldly innovative style certainly gives her work a contemporary feel.

In *Picoseconds* Elaine paints a landscape depicting her parents picnicking in the bush above an iconic band of old gas pump logos—a red rose, a maple leaf, a shell—signs of their traveling days transformed into mysterious images. The parents are tiny and painted in the position of Bruegel’s disappearing Icarus. They are painted in a different light than the landscape, as if belonging to another dimension, and, as Elaine points out, the logos “call into question the reality of landscape and figures alike” (428). These are the parents who have twice abandoned her, most obviously by dying—she cannot bring them back for a trillionth of a second—and less obviously by her father’s obliviousness and her mother’s mute bafflement in the face of Elaine’s torment at the hands of her supposed friends in childhood. The positioning of the small figures of the parents so as to remind the viewer of Icarus, if only subliminally, suggests that they too have vanished from sight to the utter indifference of a busy, self-absorbed world.

*One Wing*, Elaine’s tribute to her brother, who was randomly killed by terrorists in an airplane hijacking, shows a man falling from the sky brandishing a child’s sword. In the triptych the suspended, falling man is flanked by representations of his hobbies and interests, a World War II airplane in the style of a cigarette card and a lunar moth. Although these metonymic emblems presumably have deep and grievous personal meaning for Elaine, there is no way that a visitor to the gallery could read the painting as a tribute to a brother murdered by terrorists without knowing Elaine’s family history. The same is true of the gas pump logos, the marble, and the image of the virgin in the other paintings; the reader is privy to the private code, but the viewer is not. Thus, Elaine has it both ways: the combination of her narrative and her paintings both reveals and conceals her private feelings at the same time.
The last two paintings described, *Cat’s Eye* and *Unified Field Theory*, allude to their own making and contain the artist’s presence through images of the mirror and the cat’s eye marble. Again, the artist’s presence makes itself known in encoded form. Both paintings refer to the crisis at the ravine, and both represent objects suspended against the sky without visible support, suggesting a precariousness, an uneasy balance; suspended objects are central to Elaine’s art. *Cat’s Eye* depicts not the marble but the convex mirror, ornately framed and hung against a blue field. Facing forward in front of the mirror is the upper half of Elaine’s middle-aged face, while the convex mirror shows the back of her head at a younger age and, beyond it, the reflection of her three childhood tormentors advancing through the snow. This painting is highly ambiguous. It may be read as witnessing a triumph: since Elaine’s back is turned to the image of the girls, she may be said to have put the childhood crisis behind her by capturing it in her art. On the other hand, the mirror reflection in the painting indicates that the tormentors are actually in front of her, a forever-approaching reminder of their false friendship and her lonely pain.

*Unified Field Theory* is ironically titled. Elaine is well aware that she is far from possessing a unified, comprehensive theory of space and time as she has experienced them. Rather, this long vertical painting is like a map of Elaine’s psychological and aesthetic world, holding in delicate balance several of the emotionally significant elements of her life and bracketing them in a single vision. The background of the painting shows the sky and stars blended together with the earth and roots in Escher-like fashion. This interpenetration of galaxies and stones is a poetic conceit suggesting the unity of existence and, perhaps, the fragility of the ecosystem. Stretching laterally across the painting is the familiar bridge over the ravine, under which runs the stream that flows from the cemetery, the world of the dead. Since the beginning of the novel, the bridge has represented Elaine’s life span, the structure that holds her up above the icy river. The sky and the bridge thus create space-time coordinates, the field of life and a symbolic representation of her life’s journey. Floating over the bridge is the Black Virgin, Elaine’s self-generated hallucination that saved her from freezing. The Black Virgin, who in Mexican folklore restores lost things, levitates over the bridge bearing in her hands an oversize cat’s eye marble. In part, she is a figure for memory, proffering the marble of luminous vision, now enlarged to suggest a globe. The levitating Virgin seems to be the opposite of the dreaded Mrs. Smeath, and indeed *Unified Field Theory* is the most hopeful and comprehensive of Elaine’s paintings, despite its references to fear and suffering. This painting also exhibits, more fully than any other embedded painting discussed in this study, the imagery of the liminal, the suspended, and the unfinished.

What *Unified Field Theory* might imply about Atwood’s own art of the novel is problematic. It suggests the necessity of transforming those events
that are most wounding, to turn them to some account in works of art. But Atwood’s own opinions and feelings are only hinted at in the novel: the device of a narrator who addresses the reader in brisk staccato rhythms, usually assuming an ironic stance, effectively removes the brush strokes that betray the artist’s hand. *Unified Field Theory* also conveys the precariousness of one woman’s modern existence as a fragile bridge across the void, unsustained by institutions or external props. The Black Virgin, detached from Christianity, is projected from Elaine’s own heart and mind like a photographic negative, back-lit against the sky, not only a symbol of memory but also a dark portrait of the artist.

*Cat’s Eye* ends with a stronger sense of closure than some of the other novels in this study. Elaine forgives Jon and at least partially lays to rest the ghosts of her parents and her brother, although she never can rid herself of the haunting voice of Cordelia. She attends the retrospective in which her life work is brought together and displayed. But the paintings themselves illustrate the aesthetic of the *unfinished* found in other novels. They include serial works, prominent depiction of suspended or floating figures, displaced and stylized objects, and fragments of her life presented ambiguously. In the paintings, old grievances are brought back and made to hang literally suspended on the walls. And, although the last painting in the gallery, *Unified Field Theory*, is tinged with light and hope of deliverance, it also reconstructs an old, cold time of suffering.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 49.
7. Ibid., 64.
9. Ibid., 293.
10. Ibid., 298.
11. Ibid., 294.
12. Ibid., 296.
16. Cooke, Margaret Atwood, 17.

Epigraphs

Works Cited


Margaret Eleanor Atwood is born on November 18 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She is the second of three children of Carl Edmund Atwood and Margaret Killam Atwood. Her brother, Harold, was born in 1937; her sister, Ruth, was born in 1951. Because Carl Atwood was a forest entomologist, the family would spend many months each year living in the Canadian wilderness. Margaret became an avid reader, particularly fond of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

By age six, Atwood had become a writer of plays, poems, comic books, and a novel. Writes juvenile poems “Rhyming Cats.” Family moves to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Family resides in Toronto, Ontario, where Carl joins University of Toronto faculty. Spends spring, summer, and autumn in Canadian bush.

Attends Leaside High School in Toronto; writes for literary magazine *Clan Call*.

Enrolls at Victoria College, University of Toronto, determined to become a writer. Her parents would rather she studied botany. Meets Dennis Lee; writes for *Acta Victoriana* and *The Strand*; begins reading poetry in public at Bohemian Embassy.


1961–1962 Graduate studies at Radcliffe College and Harvard University on Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

1962 Receives Master’s degree in English from Radcliffe College.

1962–1963 Continues graduate studies at Harvard; meets first husband; James Polk.

1963–1964 Moves to Toronto; works for market research company; poems published in Poesie / Poetry 64; writes libretto for John Beckwith’s The Trumpets of Summer; broadcast on CBC.

1964–1965 Moves to Vancouver; teaches literature at University of British Columbia. Writes poetry sequence The Circle Game accompanied by Pachter’s lithographs, published in limited edition.


1966 Awarded President’s Medal for Poetry from the University of Western Ontario. Publishes collection of poems, The Circle Game.


1967–1968 Teaches literature at Sir George Williams University, Montreal.


1969 The Edible Woman published. Receives Union Prize.

1971  *Power Politics* published.
1972  *Survival* published.
1974  *You Are Happy* published; *Grace Marks* televised as *The Servant Girl* on CBC. Receives honorary LL.D. from Queen’s University; awarded Bess Hopkins Prize for poetry.
1978–1979  Resides in Scotland for the winter.
1979  *Life Before Man* published.
1981  Chair of Writers’ Union of Canada. Receives Molson Award and Guggenheim Fellowship. *True Stories* and *Bodily Harm* published, collaborates on film *Snowbirds*.


1984–1986  President of International P.E.N., Canadian Centre (English speaking).

1985  *The Handmaid’s Tale* published. Writer-in-residence at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

1986  Holds Berg Chair in English at New York University. Receives Toronto Arts Award, Governor General’s Award, and Los Angeles Times Fiction Award.

1987  *Poems, 1976–1986* and *The Can-Lit Foodhook: From Pen to Palate; A Collection of Tasty Literary Fare* published. Writer-in-residence at Macquarie University, New South Wales, Australia. Receives Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction; Council for Advancement and Support of Education, Silver Medal, Best Articles of the Year; Humanist of the Year Award; Fellow of Royal Society of Canada. Writes script for drama *Heaven on Earth*, produced on CBC and BBC.

1988  *Cat’s Eye* published. Receives National Magazine Award for Environmental Journalism, and YWCA Woman of Distinction Award.


1992  *Good Bones* published. Returns to Toronto, where she currently resides with Graeme Gibson and their daughter, Jess. Lecturer of English at the University of Columbia, Vancouver.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>The Robber Bride</em> published; receives Trillium Award. <em>Heaven on Earth</em> produced on PBS.</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Alias Grace</em> published; awarded Giller Prize.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td><em>The Blind Assassin</em> wins the Booker Prize.</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Oryx and Crake</em> published.</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Atwood wins Enlightenment Award at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.</td>
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Givner, Jessie. “Names, Faces and Signatures in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and *The Handmaid’s Tale,*” *Canadian Literature* 133 (Summer 1992): 56–75.


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