THE FUNCTION OF ART IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
LADY ORACLE AND CAT'S EYE

by

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THE FUNCTION OF ART IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Major: English Literature

Title: The Function of Art in Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye.

This thesis undertakes the analysis of the function of art in Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle (1976) and Cat’s Eye (1988), tracing the evolution of this writer’s views on art from one novel to another. While art in Lady Oracle takes the form of gothic romances penned by the protagonist Joan Foster, in Cat’s Eye, artistic expression is embodied in the revealing paintings by the protagonist Elaine Risley.

The first chapter will outline the historical subordination imposed on Canadian literature by an Anglo-American tradition, and will also present a brief survey of the cultural milieu from which Atwood emerged as part of a literary movement contesting the canon. Moreover, a review of the critical assessments of Atwood’s novels will list the various feminist, psychoanalytical and postmodernist approaches, directly followed by the theoretical and methodological matrix of the present study.

In the second chapter, the concept, context and function of art in Lady Oracle will be analyzed. One of my main concerns in this chapter will be to portray the extent to which reality recurrently interweaves with the protagonist’s art of writing gothic romances, where life becomes a cheap version of art. The third chapter of the thesis will explore the function of art in Cat’s Eye, tackling such issues as the transgression of the boundaries between fiction and autobiography as well as examining the varying perspectives and visions experienced by this novel’s protagonist. Also, the theme of the male gaze, in addition to the significance of Elaine’s art and its institutionalization, will be dealt with in this chapter.

After depicting in Lady Oracle the evils of misusing art by delineating the complex character and the artistic output of the protagonist Joan Foster, Atwood, in Cat’s Eye, endorses the therapeutic function of the creative process and product by drawing, in vivid colors, the details of Elaine Risley’s life and art. Hence, although Atwood’s standpoint regarding the function of art in Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye remains unchanged, the manner by which this writer relays her opinions on art in these two novels differs, a shift discussed in the fourth and final chapter of the thesis.
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To Nada,

of course,

whose unfailing support

and unique sense of humor kept me going.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Canadian draws a boundary, then proves its existence by crossing it.
--Robert Kroetsch

To be Canadian is a state of mind, which often has to do with paranoid schizophrenia.
--Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood’s avid interest in women’s creative powers is evident in this author’s prodigious literary output, which abounds with the figure of the female artist. With sharp insight and a heightened awareness, Atwood, in her novels, explores the worlds of her artistically creative protagonists, raising important questions about the function of art in their lives.

Atwood’s fervent concern for depicting the important role that art plays in shaping the artist’s world is most pronounced in her two novels, *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Cat’s Eye* (1988). While art in *Lady Oracle* takes the form of gothic romances penned by the protagonist Joan Foster, in *Cat’s Eye*, artistic expression is embodied in the revealing paintings by the protagonist Elaine Risley. Although these two novels portray different artistic mediums, they both vividly communicate Atwood’s penetrating reflections on the intricacies of the creative process and the function of its end product.

By analyzing the function of art in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*, the present study will attempt to answer the following questions raised in these two novels: Is
art a form of escape? Does it provide the artists with healing powers vis-à-vis their respective pasts? Can art become a dangerous tool if misused? What do these works of art have to say about the artists themselves? Does Margaret Atwood's view of art change from one novel to another? And if it does, what are the implications of this change?

Providing answers to these questions by analyzing the function of the artistic media in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, however, requires a delimiting framework within which Atwood's literary identity can be situated. This initial chapter serves to draw such a framework by outlining the historical subordination imposed on Canadian literature by an Anglo-American tradition, as well as presenting a brief survey of the cultural milieu from which Atwood emerged as part of a literary movement contesting the canon. Moreover, a review of the critical assessments of Atwood's novels will list the various feminist, psychoanalytical and postmodernist approaches, directly followed by the theoretical and methodological matrix of the present study. In the following two chapters, the function of art in each of *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* will be separately analyzed in an attempt to detect in the fourth and final chapter any traces of evolution in Atwood's perception of art.

**A. A Literature is Born**

When British and French settlers reached Canada in the sixteenth century, its inhabitants consisted mainly of Indians and Inuits, with their own mythologies and belief systems (New 4). The European immigrants set about exploring and thereafter colonizing this untamed country, naturally molding it in their own image. By the end of the nineteenth century, European culture had gained enough ground to threaten the native cultures of that vast land (New 4).

Before Canada's independence in 1867, Canadian literature, to a large extent, took the form of reporting from colonies located at the periphery of an
empire which embodied authority (New 24). Canada, however, did not become completely autonomous after its independence since its “mental colonization” persisted, to the extent that the Canadian mentality continued to be dominated by the center-occupying ideologies, whose heritage “weighed on the Canadian imagination like a dead hand” (Surette 24). In addition to the European authority, mainly British and French, the American power slowly started taking shape after the first World War, accumulating more and more international supremacy (New 137), to become one of the most powerful influences on the Canadian literary culture. As Atwood observes when discussing the American-Canadian perspectives: “South of you you have Mexico and south of us we have you” (Second Words 392).

The crushing weight of poetic tradition was sensed by some Canadian writers long before the emergence of what Harold Bloom termed “anxiety of influence” in 1973. Robert Kroetsch summed up the powerful hold that the Anglo-American tradition had on the collective Canadian character by writing: “...just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so is there in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American” (43). In high schools, writers like Margaret Atwood were taught that “to be a poet you had to be English and dead. You could be American and dead but this was less frequent” (Atwood, Second Words 86). Such influence gave rise to a sense of inadequacy among Canadians, whose literature was thus viewed as a pale copy of its “authentic” source(s). Atwood succinctly describes the condescending European attitude towards the incipient Canadian literary efforts in an interview published in the Canadian Fiction Magazine:

For a long time, Canadian material was not thought to be suited to ‘great literature.’ You could not make a ‘real novel’ out of Canadian material. You had to go to the States or England to make a ‘real novel.’ Canadian novels per se were considered
second-rate pastiche, or imitation or embarrassing. ("Interview" by Geoff Hancock 118)

Gradually, a tentative effort to forge a new Canadian identity resulted in the establishment of the Canadian citizenship in 1947. However, as opposed to the American "melting pot," Canada adopted the "mosaic character," which rendered Canada the home of a diversity of groups, existing under the banner of one country (New 197). The most notable rift resulting from this diversity was the constant struggle between the "two solitudes," namely English and French Canada, over power and the supremacy of language, which culminated in 1976 in a series of events after which French became Quebec's official language in 1977 (McCombs, "Politics" 152; New 350). This multiplicity of Canadian identities created a sense of estrangement which many Canadians experienced in their own country, prompting them to look outwards for a solid center, the nearest of which was the American one. Atwood aptly depicts the pervading situation in her essay "Canadian-American Relations": "The Canadian experience was a circumference with no centre, the American one a centre which was mistaken for the whole thing" (Second Words 379). But this intimidating center came to be regarded by a growing number of Canadian writers as a hurdle that had to be surmounted and conquered in order to achieve an independent sense of selfhood. Gradually, this marginal force would rise to challenge the center, paving the way for an exclusively Canadian nationalistic literature.

B. Borders as Limits

Canadian literature, relegated for many years to a peripheral position vis-à-vis the Anglo-American tradition, exemplifies the power relations born of historical subordination. However, a whole generation of Canadian writers, including Margaret Atwood, has aimed at subverting this marginal position so much so that the periphery has also become "the frontier, the place of possibility"
Vutcheon, Canadian 3). Such significant efforts have gained a worldwide recognition for Canadian literature. As Atwood wrote in her first book of criticism *A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*:

> Literature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind . . . We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (qtd. in Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 1; Howells “It all depends” 51)

Tracing this “geography of the mind,” a group of writers emerged to contest Canada’s marginal position and to litigate its genus as “highschool land/deadset in adolescence” (Hutcheon, Canadian 1). This movement, which Atwood calls “the generation of 1960’s literary nationalism” (*Second Words* 375), flourished into full-blown postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s, embracing writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Timothy Findley, Susan Swan, Robert Kroetsch and Michael Ondaatje, all of whom incorporated postmodernism into their writings, marking it with a specific Canadian quality (Hutcheon, Canadian 1).

Although postmodernism is a highly ambiguous term whose definition has generated heated debates, it has been used by Canadian writers to denote “self-reflexive” art forms which act as creators rather than reflections of reality (Hutcheon, Canadian 1). Considered as an extension of modernism, postmodernism goes beyond its precedent, challenging as it does “our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society” (Hutcheon, Canadian 2). Such a challenge to the center renders the margin, which regards borders as limits to be overcome, the ultimate postmodern venue for new possibilities (Hutcheon, Canadian 3-4). In her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon places Canadian literature and postmodernism in the same context since both occupy
similar territories: "Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada's perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern eccentric is very much a part of the identity of the nation" (3).

One writer emerging from this contestatory periphery and capitalizing on possibilities generated from marginality is Margaret Atwood, whose literary awareness was shaped by the need to free Canada from the burden of colonial literary subordination. Although not explicitly nationalistic, her works contain a politically charged undercurrent, since she believes that "to say politics is dirty or that politics is dangerous and only dangerous people get involved with it is to isolate yourself from your environment" (Atwood, "Managing" 172).

Born in Ottawa in 1939, Atwood is one of the most acclaimed and conspicuous writers in Canada and beyond. Hailed as Canada's "best-known woman writer" (Glendinning 39), her list of works to date includes nine novels, fourteen books of poetry, five books of short stories, three books of non-fiction and a number of paintings, in addition to several television scripts. She received various awards and prizes such as the Governor General's Award in 1967 for her collection of verse *The Circle Game* and in 1986 for the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the Bess Hopkins Prize in 1974 for the book of verse *You Are Happy*. Atwood also served on the editorial board of House of Anansi Press from 1971 to 1973 and on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association from 1973 to 1975.

Atwood, like many other Canadian writers of her generation, is thus greatly concerned with the position of Canada in relation to the power countries as well as the relationship between the English and French factions in Canada itself. Her works, however, go beyond the national domain to touch upon universal themes such as the relationship between men and women (she has often compared the status of Canada to that of women), body and mind, past and present, culture and nature, reality and imagination. In her collection of critical essays entitled *Second*
Words, Atwood herself said that she began as "a profoundly apolitical writer, then...I began to describe the world around me" (15).

In addition to exploring various universal themes, Atwood also experiments with different styles and genres, which makes her known as a "quick-change artist" (Picker 31). What looks "at first glance like an endless identity crisis" in Atwood's personality (Fulford 95) is in fact this writer's way of exploring and transmuting various genres.

For someone who describes herself as "lazy, sluggish and of low energy" (Atwood, "A Conversation" 11), Atwood has produced an impressive list of works. Her novels include *Surfacing* (1972) considered to be of a ghost story genre with "a Nancy Drew style" (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 39), the anti-gothic *Lady Oracle* (1976) which won Atwood the 1977 City of Toronto Book Award and the 1977 Canadian Booksellers Association Award, the retrospective *Cat's Eye* (1988) which was short-listed for the Booker Prize, *Bodily Harm* (1981), a comment on power politics, and *The Edible Woman* (1969) which portrays the limitations and drawbacks of a consumerist society. Her most recent novel, *Alias Grace* (1996), is winner of the Giller Prize, and it experiments with the detective story.

C. Approaches to Atwood's Writing

Characterized by a highly versatile literary style, Atwood has attracted the attention of a multitude of critics, who have taken seriously this writer's assessment of her own work when she said: "You can make of it what you will" (Interview by Graeme Gibson 30).

Although interpretations of Atwood's works have varied in critical perspective, there is general consensus that Atwood is one of the great Canadian and international writers. Northrop Frye, considered "the dean of Canadian critics
who defined the Canadian imagination for this century," regarded Margaret Atwood as a "national resource" (Andrews 47).

Not all criticism of Atwood’s work, however, has been favorable. One critic describes Atwood as “…the author of sophisticated self-help books, a writer working in what could be called the Nausea-Romance School” (Powe 127). Atwood provides a counterpoint to such criticism by saying: “The literature of one’s own country is not escape literature. It tells truths, some of them hard” (“Interview” by Linda Sandler 20).

With a whole cast of women occupying center-stage in Atwood’s novels which embody a pervading call to subvert women’s limiting role in society, feminist critics such as Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, Judith McCombs, Lorna Irvine and Martha Sharpe have embraced Atwood as a champion of feminist causes. Such a claim, however, seems ironical when set against Atwood’s belief that if a writer tries to promote a certain cause in her writing, then “she would be a propagandist” (Atwood, “Talking” 66).

Atwood is more keen on portraying the multitude of problems beleaguering the society in which she lives than with focusing exclusively on the plight of women. She believes that the function of writing involves “an exploration of where in reality I live” (Second Words 112). Such a wide-ranging concern has been noted by feminist critics such as Maggie Humm, who considers Atwood’s fiction to be “a feminist rewriting of culture,” at the same time acknowledging that such work embraces other issues as well such as “nationalism, political power and gender identity” (124).

One technique used by feminists to subvert the social hierarchy between men and women has been the reworking of the patriarchal myths prevailing in a certain culture by weaving into them the threads of feminist ideology. Feminist critics regard Atwood as espousing such a technique in her novels to break away from Northrop Frye’s myth criticism, which sees literary texts as governed by “a
set of recurrent mythic patterns or structures” (Baldick 144). Carolyn Allen is one critic who upholds the belief that Atwood “delineates her character’s need for change at the same time that she transforms old myths and makes them her own” (17).

Such old myths include those of the heroic quest, the grail motif and the myth of the White Goddess whose reexamination by Atwood is discussed by the likes of Sue Thomas, Josie Campbell, Roberta Sciff-Zamaro, Francine du Plessex, Lucy M. Freibert, Kathleen Wall and Marilyn Patton. Atwood herself said in one interview: “I think the thing to do with a mythology is not to discard the mythology at all, but to transform it, rearrange it and shift the values” (“Talking” 66).

Securing for Atwood the title of feminist writer, however, is contested by a group of scholars including Robert Towers, Lillian S. Robinson, Helen Yglesias and Shena Mackay who even detect a strain of antifeminism in some of Atwood’s works, one which could also verge on misogyny according to the critic Alice McDermott. Such an extreme stance may stem from the description of Atwood’s protagonists as both “victims and victimizers” (Gussow 9). Gayle Green probes the matter even further by suggesting that this trace of antifeminism strongly foregrounded in a novel like Cat’s Eye is an actual reflection of Atwood’s own denunciation of feminism. In a review of the novel she delineates the reader’s superior position over that of the writer since the former possesses an objectivity lacking in the latter’s creative process: “The creation may show the observer or reader more than the creator sees” (qtd. in Hite, “Optics and Autobiography” 156).

In order to gain more insight into this creative process, some critics such as Elspeth Cameron, Kim Chernin, Arnold Davidson, Keith Garebian, Sonia Myeak, in addition to Catherine McLay and Roberta Rubenstein, have reverted to a close psychoanalytical study of the protagonists’ minds in Atwood’s novels, trying to interpret their actions through a close study of their psyche. For instance, a
number of critics including Frank Davey, Chinmoy Banerjee, Douglas Glover, and Coral Anne Howells, state that the psychological makeup of Elaine Risley, the protagonist artist in *Cat's Eye*, proves to be a key component for understanding her art.

Such a psychological approach may resort to specific clinical terminology when analyzing some of Atwood's novels. Gloria Onley, for one, when describing the narrator in *Surfacing*, diagnoses her as a schizophrenic involved in an experience that touches upon then returns from the verge of madness (qtd. in Davidson and Davidson, "The Anatomy" 53). Terry Goldie and Valerie Augier go further in employing the psychoanalytic approach by applying specific Jungian terminology in their analyses, while Shannon Hengen adopts a Lacanian interpretation of Atwood's works.

Despite the fact that feminist issues pervade Atwood's novels in which she endeavors to penetrate surfaces and probe the psychological world of her protagonists, the critical approach that best befits a thematic study of her two novels *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*--and the one to be employed here--is the postmodern one, notwithstanding the writer's reluctance to be labeled as an adherent to one -ism or another, including postmodernism (Ingersoll, "Margaret Atwood's" 17). Belonging to a country whose literary identity shares with postmodern literature a marginalized position acting as a challenge to a dominant center, Atwood develops in her novels a keen interest in postmodernist concerns such as the tension between process and product, or writing and reading, on the one hand, and the final piece of "art," on the other, in addition to the interplay between binary opposites such as art and reality, body and mind (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 138). When handling these themes, she often applies postmodernist devices such as parody, fragmentation, intertextuality and ambiguity. Thus, using postmodernism as a vehicle to challenge borders as limits, this writer has transcended a sideline role, so much so "that [she] is now considered 'mainstream'"
by most critics mark[ing] a major advance in postmodernism” (Hutcheon, Canadian 157).

Both Linda Hutcheon, whose critical writings on Canadian postmodernism and on Atwood’s works are to be drawn upon in the following study, and Earl G. Ingersoll, undeniably classify Atwood as a postmodern writer par excellence. Atwood’s novels adhere to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of the postmodern novel: “The postmodern version plays with and contests the boundaries between men and women, but also between art and life, fiction and autobiography” (Canadian 81). Despite Atwood’s denial of any autobiographical reference in her novels, these critics refer to the self-reflexive nature of Atwood’s writing, a trait highly ranked on the postmodernist scale. When discussing the novel Cat’s Eye, for instance, Ingersoll says: “... this novel is clearly Atwood’s most postmodern in its play with form--the fictional autobiography--and in its continual self-referentiality as a text” (“Margaret Atwood’s” 17). He goes on to suggest that Atwood may even be parodying certain critics who exhaust her autobiographical background when analyzing her earlier novels: “... Cat’s Eye is, among many things, a highly sophisticated expression of play with her audience’s expectations ... [Atwood] is undercutting the conventional notion that autobiography privileges an autobiographical fiction as more truthful than other forms of fiction” (“Margaret Atwood’s” 19).

Another postmodernist technique applied by Atwood is the constant Bakhtinian interplay between high and low literature which, by permitting popular forms to intermingle with highbrow texts, subverts the conventional literary tradition. This insurgent method permeates a novel like Lady Oracle, whose text is infused with excerpts from the protagonist’s gothic romances. Atwood herself has said: “All literature comes out of popular literature on whatever level” (“Interview” by J.R. Struthers 19). Certain critics like Glenys Stow, John Lauber, Perry Nodelman, Elizabeth Baer and T.D. MacLulich have emphasized Atwood’s
method of using popular narrative forms like the fairy tale, the ghost story, the mystery genre and harlequin romances. Others such as Roland Granofsky, Linda Hutcheon, Sherill Grace, Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Wilfrid Cude go further in their criticism to show how Atwood subverts such popular forms by parodying them.

Many critics such as Chinmoy Banerjee, Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, Coral Ann Howells, and Susan Maclean have been struck by the recurrence of the theme of art in Atwood's novels, discussing its various aspects such as its function as an emotional safety valve which Elaine Risley experiences in *Cat's Eye* through the act of painting (Banerjee 520), or Atwood's handling of certain "image patterns" in the same novel (Glover 14). The intermingling of reality and art in *Lady Oracle* is an issue often discussed by critics, some of whom proclaim that Atwood explores this theme to "mak[e] a statement about the misuse of art" (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 62). The contribution of the present dissertation is an investigation of the function of art in the two novels, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, to establish a thematic link between them, although the nature of the artistic medium under discussion varies from the one novel to the other.

Such an analysis would serve to elucidate Atwood's handling of the function of art in two of her novels, and how this author uses such a theme to formulate opinions on several issues. As a result, all that Atwood offers by way of critical commentaries on art in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* becomes also pertinent in the assessment of literature's social merit. In lieu of Roland Barthes' poststructuralist claim that "the author is dead," this study assumes the inseparability of author and text. Atwood believes in the important role of art in society at large and also in her moral duty as an artist. As Barbara Rigney points out in *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*: "For Atwood, art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her
world, but also to criticize it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures” (I). Despite the gravity of Atwood’s messages, however, her remedies appear in the form of parodic and witty narratives instead of dull sermons.

D. Tracing Atwood’s Vision

In this thesis, an analysis of the function of art in Atwood’s two novels Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye would naturally bring to the fore important postmodernist issues such as the discourse between high and low culture, the merging trajectories of fictional and realistic worlds, and the institutionalization and commercialization of art. Such issues constitute only some of the themes to be tackled in the following chapters of this thesis in order to trace the evolving character of the artist and the function of her art in these two novels.

In Chapter II, the concept, context, role and function of art in Lady Oracle will be analyzed. One of my main concerns in this chapter will be to portray the extent to which reality recurrently interweaves with the protagonist’s art of writing gothic romances, where life becomes a cheap version of art. Fiction too starts adopting certain characters and situations from real life. Joan’s novels become a reflection of the protagonist’s actual life, until there comes a point where the lines between reality and fiction become blurred. As Linda Hutcheon states in The Canadian Postmodern: “In Lady Oracle, Atwood further and more explicitly explores the artist as both the instigator of the creative process and, indeed, as a product of her own art” (145).

One section of this second chapter will undertake the task of showing how the plot of Lady Oracle both mirrors and contains that which it consistently parodies, namely, the forms of popular art (Hutcheon, Canadian 146). In Lady Oracle, Atwood is portraying the art of creating popular genres and, at the same time, commenting on these forms of art. As she said in an interview with Linda
Sandler: "‘Popular’ art is a collection of rigid patterns; ‘sophisticated’ art varies the patterns. But popular art is natural for serious art in the way that dreams are" (‘Interview’ 10).

When analyzing the function of art in *Cat’s Eye* in Chapter III, one section will tackle the issues of perspectives and visions in this novel. By placing Elaine’s paintings in an exhibition, even one described as avant-gardist, Atwood is making a statement about the institutionalization of art. These paintings no longer belong to Elaine herself, but become the possession of the public domain, where numerous interpretations can be given to one painting. The meaning of the work depends on who looks at it and how this person looks at it: "*Cat’s Eye* is [...] about visibility: about who sees and is seen, about evading or controlling the gaze, about the seeing that is the precondition and product of art" (Hite, “Optics and Autobiography” 136).

The theme of the gaze will lead to an analysis of the function of Elaine’s paintings in *Cat’s Eye*. Power of vision, something which the protagonist’s art in *Lady Oracle* lacks, characterizes Elaine Risley’s art. This power is represented in a cat’s eye marble, whose image becomes a recurrent motif in that novel. Elaine even names one of her paintings "Cat’s Eye" which, just like Joan Foster’s book of poetry entitled “Lady Oracle,” becomes a mise-en-abyme, or a reflection, of the novel as a whole (Hite, “Optics” 149).

After analyzing the function of art in each of *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*, the fourth chapter will trace the differences in handling this theme and will also underscore any traces of evolution or change in Atwood’s conception of the function of art between 1976, the year *Lady Oracle* was published, and 1988, *Cat’s Eye’s* publication date. In both novels, different forms of art transcend the visual domain and become a metonymy for literature as a whole. Indeed, what this study aims to demonstrate is the degree to which Atwood’s seemingly endless preoccupation with different signifying practices results from her self-
consciousness as a writer, one who is keenly aware of the intricacies of the writing process itself. As a result, all that Atwood offers by way of critical commentaries on art becomes also applicable to literature. When writing about Cat's Eye, Ingersoll said that it is "... a text of the author's own struggle to achieve selfhood as a woman and as an artist" ("Margaret Atwood's" 26). This statement is not only limited to Cat's Eye but is equally applicable to most of Atwood's novels, where the figure of the writer is constantly lurking in the background.
CHAPTER II
LADY ORACLE: THE ARTIST AND HER CREATIONS

A voice is a gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech if possible. Powerlessness and silence go together.
--Margaret Atwood

All around us—on advertisement hoardings, bookshelves, record covers, television screens—these miniature escape fantasies present themselves. This, it seems, is how we are destined to live, as split personalities in which the private life is disturbed by the promise of escape routes to another reality.
--Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor

A. Framing the Postmodern

Lady Oracle, Margaret Atwood’s most revised book, is, by its writer’s own admission, a “complex” novel (“Using” 231). Various critics have attempted to come to grips with Lady Oracle’s blend of comic overtones and thought-provoking themes. Their analyses vary between hollow remarks on this novel’s “sophomoric . . . humor” (qtd. in Jensen 29) and in-depth investigations of its wide-ranging themes. Its narrator, Joan Foster, whom Atwood regards as “the most amiable” of all her heroines (“Witness” 167), is a secret writer of costume gothics who mirrors the overblown romanticism of her heroines. Joan’s character, however, embraces so many identities that at the end of the novel her multiple personae are analogous to a “Cubist painting or a Picasso portrait” (Stovel 56). This abundance of identities in Lady Oracle is one of the hallmarks of
postmodernist fiction which, instead of duplicating reality, reflects its essential
pluralism (McHale 48). The multitudinous reality reflected in Joan’s life consists
of a “sorry assemblage of lies and alibis,” with Joan’s “essentially devious”
manner, layered by “a patina of honesty,” affirming the unpredictability of this
self-reflexive and unreliable narrator (Atwood, Lady Oracle 236, 328; Grace,
“Gender” 192). Joan’s duplicitous countenance, mirrored in both this writer’s life
and art, along with Atwood’s method of using “intertextuality, . . . parody. . . [and]
deconstruction of . . . cultural myth,” all characterize postmodernist discourse
(Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 26, 130).

Although Atwood does not proclaim her novel to be a postmodernist one,
Lady Oracle abounds with the techniques used in postmodernist narratives. These
methods, which are to be closely analyzed in this chapter, include the subversion
of cultural and popular texts by the use of parody (Hutcheon, Poetics 3, 11), the
breaking of the boundaries between high and low literary forms (McHale 173), as
well as the self-reflexivity of the work of art (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 1).

According to critic Jamie Dopp, revisionary Canadian writers incorporate this
postmodernist use and abuse of dominant concepts in their writings (40), while
Hutcheon believes that such a subversive technique is best translated by the
“rhetorical strategy of parody [since] its ironic double-voicing, [which is also
characterized by its contradictory double function of use and abuse], allows a
writer to speak to her culture, from within that culture, but without being totally
recuperated by it” (qtd. in Becker 116). In Atwood’s writing, however, this
postmodernist use and abuse is skillfully executed in a novel like Lady Oracle, in
which cultural and popular myths abound, only to be systematically deconstructed
by Atwood’s vision. When discussing myths, Atwood explains that “[m]yths
mean stories, and traditional myths mean traditional stories that have been
repeated frequently. The term doesn’t pertain to Greek myths alone. Grimm’s
Fairy Tales are just as much myth or story as anything else . . .” (“Articulating”
114-115). However, Atwood’s use of myth, a point discussed at length in the following section, is a deconstructive one (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 10), since, in *Lady Oracle*, this writer incorporates such mythological figures as Robert Graves’ Triple Goddess as well as intertextual references to some of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, and then steadfastly subverts these “traditional stories” by the use of parody. Hutcheon considers this parodic method, which “distances and changes,” a major example of self-reflexivity (*A Theory of Parody* 2).

Moreover, in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood makes use of the postmodernist technique of deliberately mixing literary and popular forms and figures in such a way that “Diana of Ephesus and Bertrand Russell rub shoulders with Joan Crawford and Kentucky Fried Chicken” (Rosengarten 87). Raye B. Browne, author of “Popular Culture: Notes Toward A Definition,” describes popular culture as “all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media” (qtd. in Goldie 96). As for Joan, her first encounter with popular culture is through fairy tales; not those by the Brothers Grimm but the animated versions of Walt Disney (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 77). As a young girl, Joan is constantly bombarded with images of movies such as *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing At the Met*, *Dumbo The Flying Elephant* and *The Red Shoes*. To show the effects of popular culture on Joan’s life, a section of this chapter will undertake the task of showing how Atwood further mixes high-brow art forms with popular constructs by embedding excerpts from Joan’s costume gothics, such as her novel-in-progress *Stalked By Love*, into the narrative text of the novel (Bouson 8). In this manner, fairy tales, films and melodrama intermingle with the primary frame of *Lady Oracle*, transforming Joan’s reality into “a waking-dream-life” (Hawkins 70).

This Bakhtinian interplay of high and low literary genres results in a blurring of the boundaries between the two narrative frames, the topic of another
section in this chapter, with the reality of the novel invading the fictional world of Joan's art. The life of this protagonist also starts adopting certain aspects from the costume gothics' threatening circumstances. But what Atwood brilliantly achieves at the end of *Lady Oracle* is a complete subversion of the gothic genre. As Bouson notes, Atwood "openly contests the masculine codes inscribed in traditional and popular fictional formats" (8). For, although at the end of the novel, Joan does not acquire the self-awareness that she most noticeably lacks, she is still able to break from the bind of victimization imposed on her by the men in her life. However, emulating the paradoxical open-ended closure of postmodernist fiction (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's* 15), the endings of both fictions, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Joan's *Stalked By Love*, are unresolved, a fact that directly challenges the happy endings of the traditional costume gothic genre. This subversive structural conclusion corroborates Atwood's own definition of *Lady Oracle* as an "anti-gothic" narrative ("Interview" by J.R. Struthers 19).

**B. More Than A Muse: Establishing the Female Creativity**

The mythology that nourishes Atwood's creative mind is richly diverse, varying between ancient deities dating back to primitive cultures and fairy tale myths dominating the popular imagination of the twentieth century. But very often, as Atwood reiterates throughout her novels, such figures serve to further reduce the female artist striving towards creative fulfillment to a state in which creativity is either absent, or relegated to the process of motherhood. A plethora of such feminine paradigms are embedded, implicitly and explicitly, throughout Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, not only as mere embodiments of women's inevitable choices, but as representatives of a patriarchal system against which the protagonist Joan Foster revolts.

Atwood underscores the importance of asserting one's own critical insights when assessing acquired myths by saying: "I don't think that people should divest
themselves of all their mythologies because I think, in a way, everybody needs one. It’s just a question of getting one that is liveable and not destructive to you” (“Interview” by Margaret Kaminski 13). In Lady Oracle, however, Atwood transcends “liveable” myths to challenge and undercut the powerful hold of “destructive” ones by aiming to transcend their limitations, which are forever stunting women’s creative impulse. To do so, Atwood sets out to achieve what Barthes called “vanquishing the myth from the inside” (135) in Mythologies by undercutting through parody certain destructive mythological figures such as the White Goddess which she incorporates in her narrative.

One myth which has preoccupied, and even terrified, Atwood since she was nineteen years old is that of the Triple Goddess as portrayed by Robert Graves in his book entitled The White Goddess (1948) (Atwood, Second Words 224; “Great Unexpectntions” xv). The Triple Goddess is an offspring of the earth mother dominating primitive matriarchal cultures and representing nature’s creative powers (Patton 30; “mother goddess” 607). The primary deity ruling over various ancient civilizations, this Goddess is described by Graves as the revered embodiment of the recurring roles of young woman, mother and hag in her cycle of New Moon, Full Moon and Old Moon (386). However, the most substantial characteristic of this female symbol lies in her powerful ability to inspire the male poet in his act of creation. For as Graves writes, “... woman is not a poet: she is either a [silent] Muse or she is nothing” (446), the very position that Atwood seeks to subvert.

Defying the creative nothingness decreed by Graves’ version of the White Goddess, Atwood ingeniously arms Lady Oracle’s protagonist Joan Foster with an imaginative mind which not only serves to break the goddess’s imposed silence, but also spawns plots which challenge any notion of her dullness. The muteness of the muse is transformed into the chatter of multiple creative voices, all personified in the figure of Joan Foster, writer of costume gothics and automatic
verse who carefully choreographs her life by constantly flitting from one identity to another. She herself admits: “… I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 274).

Joan’s active imagination and creative output, however, are not the only elements which pronounce her as the goddess’s complete antithesis. Extending from her childhood to her “death”, this protagonist’s life story parallels the characteristic transformations of the Triple Goddess from young girl to attractive siren, and finally to morbid hag. Several critics emphasize Joan’s appropriation of the goddess’ identit(ies) (Patton 31; Sciff-Zamaro 35; Godard, “My (m)Other, My Self” 22). But their critical inquiries tend to regard Joan as the embodiment of a single goddess selfhood instead of the reflection of three individual ones in separate phases, namely the New Moon, the Full Moon and the Old Moon in their three colors of white, red and black (Graves 70).

Equating the three female classifications endorsed by Graves with the analogous classical goddesses, Diana, Venus and Hecate in her first book of criticism (qtd. in Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s* 52-53), Atwood, in *Lady Oracle*, goes further in her battle against Graves’ White Goddess to undercut each of these figures by parodying their sequential representations by the protagonist Joan Foster, thus accomplishing a complete subversion of the role of woman as silent muse by placing such a mythology “in perspective” (Rigney, *Lilith’s Daughters* 56).

In acting out the role of Diana, who presides over the first phase of the Triple Goddess’s cycle, the young Joan refracts the attributes of this mythological huntress by becoming her parodic counterpart. Instead of emulating the agility and fitness of Diana, also known as the goddess of the moon, Joan, by the age of fifteen, weighs more than two hundred pounds, and describes herself as “a beluga whale [who] never opened her mouth except to put something into it” (Atwood,
Lady Oracle 78). Atwood's travesty of the figure of Diana reaches its crescendo in a scene in which Joan, instead of exhibiting her prowess in hunting, contracts blood poisoning from a flying arrow which accidentally hits her "moonlike rump" (Atwood, Lady Oracle 128). The use of the moon imagery in this context is a demystification of Diana as moon goddess.

Just as Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, emerges from the foam of the sea in classical mythology, so does Joan's transformed figure materialize from the folds of her flesh, allowing her to embark on the second phase of the goddess' cycle. With her flowing red hair and emaciated body, which Paul, the Polish count, regards as that of "a goddess," Joan is the perfect embodiment of Venus' sexual traits. But reveling in her new physical image does not prove to be as satisfying for Joan as exploring her hitherto untapped creative resources. Writing gothic romances, even if under a pseudonym, empowers this creative Venus to become more voluble, and she refuses to be reduced to a mere "body." Lashing back at the count's clichéd comparison, she says: "Do I have the head of one [a goddess] too?" (Atwood, Lady Oracle 158).

However, this is not all that Atwood does to subvert the second phase of the White Goddess myth. To parody the figure of Venus and the powerful hold which her beauty has on men, Atwood ironically reverses this goddess' charms by portraying Joan's love escapades as the outcome of mere "accidents." Instead of attracting her lovers through her newfound beauty, a helpless Joan literally stumbles into their arms, albeit in famous sites like Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park: "I collided with him [Arthur] between an anti-vivisectionist speaker and a man who was predicting the end of the world" (Atwood, Lady Oracle 150). As for Paul, Joan says: "I met him first when I fell off a double-decker bus..." (Atwood, Lady Oracle 158). Such a comic characterization serves to trivialize Venus' physical seductiveness in a bid to demythologize Graves' overpowering goddess figure who negates all female creativity.
Although Joan, in her Venus phase, defies the intellectual void of the Triple Goddess by writing gothic romances, it is only when she ventures into the land of automatic writing, becoming the renowned authoress of the book of poetry “Lady Oracle,” that she completes the cycle of the Triple Goddess, and is transformed into the incarnation of this figure’s complete opposite. As the embodiment of Hecate, the third member of the Triple Goddess’ triad who represents the powers and evils of the underworld, Joan once again refuses the sideline role of the muse and literally delves into the dark winding passages of the “other side” to explore its secrets, emerging with a collection of verse which transforms her into a true lady oracle in the eyes of the media.

Atwood sustains her piercing criticism of the Triple Goddess’ different phases, undercutting the growing power of Joan as Hecate by depicting her poetry as lacking in authenticity: “. . . it was . . . reminiscent--of a mixture of Kahlil Gibran and Rod McKuen” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 251). Failing to emit any valuable knowledge, this collection of convoluted poems entitled “Lady Oracle” ironically lacks any clairvoyant oracular insights, proving instead to be only a thinly disguised reiteration of Joan’s gothic romances: “[It was about an] . . . unhappy but torrid and . . . slightly preposterous love affair between a woman in a boat and a man in a cloak, with icicle teeth and eyes of fire” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 252).

Nevertheless, Joan quickly discerns the female figure pervading her automatic poetry to be “almost like a goddess,” whose power, however, she deems “unhappy” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 248). Although Joan herself may lack the needed insight to realize that this recurrent Hecate figure is a mirror image of herself, she nevertheless apprehends this goddess’ negative influence which persists in affecting her life even after she refrains from delving further into her oracular adventures. In this sense, the success of “Lady Oracle” carries “harbingers of disaster,” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 261) and triggers a series of
undesirable events with the likes of Fraser Buchanan surfacing to plague Joan with blackmail and the possibility of unearthing her carefully concealed past. By faking her own suicide, Joan is inadvertently seeking to drown her Hecatian aspect in order to flee from the tangle of her own life: "... I pretended to die so I could live, so I could have another life" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 347).

But Joan fails to escape altogether from Hecate’s evil shadow. Even after escaping to Italy and burying her clothes, which represent her past self, in the garden, Joan cannot easily get rid of her underworld and evil image. Not only are her clothes unearthed and returned to her, which signifies the unshakable hold of the past on Joan’s present, but she is also regarded as a witch by the locals who “make the sign” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 357) whenever they see her. Such a stance is even shared by the critic Wilfrid Cude who regards Joan as “something of a witch” (“Nobody” 32). Back in Toronto, Joan’s literary image further appropriates the morbid aspects of Hecate, becoming a “death cult” with “every necrophiliac in the country... rushing to buy a copy” of “Lady Oracle” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 345-346).

By depicting Joan as Hecate, Atwood reverses this goddess’ threatening powers, so that Joan, instead of posing a threat to others, becomes a menace to herself. The more this protagonist tries to put her life back on the right track, the more complicated and risky it becomes. But the simple fact that Joan is narrating her story from her hideout in Italy denotes the birth of a new aspect of her personality which “objectively” acknowledges all the three phases she had experienced, from Diana to Venus, followed by Hecate. Frank Davey describes this attitude as Joan’s “new vision” of her past, although her aspirations for the future remain somewhat naive (*Margaret Atwood* 59).

Sciff-Zamaro notes: “... in order to find her true self she [Joan] has to accept her multiplicity” (38). Although at the end of the novel Joan does not achieve genuine self-knowledge or “learn some lesson from all this” (Atwood,
*Lady Oracle* 379), she is able to recognize and embrace her multiple identities, while at the same time attempting to map out for herself an alternative literary future. "... [M]aybe I'll try some science fiction," she says (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 379).

In spite of her feeling remorseful for deceiving her husband, Joan contemplates engaging in a new emotional adventure. Some critics such as Jane Rule even believe Joan to have already fallen in love by the novel's closing scene (49). "He's a nice man; he doesn't have a very interesting nose, but I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage..." (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 379), Joan says of the reporter whom she hits with a Cinzano bottle.

Despite the frivolity of Joan's intellectual makeup and the paltry quality of her creative output, the most potent characteristic which distinguishes her from Graves' Triple Goddess is her abundant creativity. Joan, the writer and poet, becomes "...a challenge to the male ego" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 298) since she outshines all her lovers in creativity (Freibert 28). Not only does her talent for generating gothic romances surpass the count's efforts at composing nurse novels, but her utter dedication to writing acts as an antipode for Arthur's unfocused and recurrent shifts from one political cause to another. Even the Royal Porcupine's con-create art is at risk, since the raving newspaper reviews of Joan's poetry greatly supersede the meager critical attention given to SQUAWSHT, the Royal Porcupine's show of frozen squashed animals. More than simply overpowering the Royal Porcupine's artistic ego, Joan also threatens to invade his art's subject matter. With his overblown passion for Joan, he becomes interested in creating such ludicrous art pieces as "Joan Foster Kentucky Fried," "Foster Dances #30," and "Hairy Foster Music" which respectively consist of a sculpture of Joan's leftover chicken bones, her shoes, and clumps of her hair (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 284-285). Thus, looming large at the center of multiple creative activities, Joan
becomes a subversive symbol serving to eject women from the limiting role of reservoirs of inspiration to the powerful one of authors and subjects of creativity.

Moreover, in *Lady Oracle*, the concept of fertility undergoes major revision under Atwood’s scrutiny, with its source of inception shifting from the body to the imagination. Coming upon the statue of Diana of Ephesus in the Tivoli gardens, Joan feels totally alienated from this ultimate symbol of fecundity, whom she facetiously describes as “draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws...” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 282). This seemingly superficial rejection of motherhood has a far-reaching effect on Joan’s life, since she does not even consider the idea of bearing children with her husband Arthur. But this does not necessarily imply, as Rigney suggests, that Joan’s childless marriage makes her a “failed artist” (*Margaret Atwood* 4), since this protagonist concentrates instead on cultivating her creativity. By saying “I wanted things, for myself” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 282), Joan firmly negates the cultural imperatives of motherhood which chain her to constant self-negation, focusing instead on developing her creative talents. As Godard accurately notes: “... the whole novel [*Lady Oracle*] celebrates giving birth to the creative self...” (“Tales” 70).

Still, a metaphorical correlation may exist between motherhood and artistic creativity, but in everyday life, it quickly transforms into an arduous struggle (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 12). The difficult choice between complying to social gender expectations and committing oneself to one’s artistic gifts has been a perpetual dilemma for the woman artist, reflected in Atwood’s poem “Small Poems for the Writer Solstice”: “You think I live in a glass tower/where the phone doesn’t ring/and nobody eats? But it does, they do/and leave the crumbs and greasy knives” (qtd. in Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 12). Atwood further summarizes such a taxing strain on the creative imagination in a stark simile: “The woman who is a writer who is also a woman is like Siamese twins pulling
uneasily against each other, the writer feeling suffocated by the woman, the woman rendered sterile by the writer” (Second Words 172).

Moreover, in Lady Oracle, Atwood vividly portrays the female writer’s predicament by incorporating a bevy of embedded intertexts adopted from popular culture in direct reference to movies, magazines and most importantly, fairy tales. Allusions to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Red Shoes,” its 1948 movie adaptation by the same name, and “The Little Mermaid” fairy tale abound in the novel, with Joan’s life reflecting, to a great extent, the binding situations of their heroines (Jensen 30; Fenwick 51). But, as several critics have noted, Atwood, forever concerned with articulating the female voice, subverts the underlying message of these fairy tales which depict the “patriarchal amputations” of female talent, and designs Joan’s booming creative voice in defiance of all artistic limitations (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 6, 17; Grace, “Courting” 261; Godard, “Tales” 68).

The little mermaid and Victoria, heroine of “The Red Shoes’” movie adaptation, are both caught up in the “Siamese twins” dilemma; both are torn between securing male love while renouncing their artistic skills and pursuing their art at the expense of emotional fulfilment. In this world of either/or, Victoria, unable to combine her love for the orchestra conductor with her successful career as a ballet dancer, loses both by committing suicide, while Andersen’s little mermaid loses both talent and love after the prince marries a “neighboring princess,” although she obtains human legs to dance in front of the prince by renouncing her beautiful voice (Jensen 31).

Dancing, the recurrent theme in The Red Shoes and “The Little Mermaid,” becomes a most integral motif in Lady Oracle. As a fat girl, Joan, forbidden to be a butterfly in the school dance, is condemned to the humiliating role of a mothball. Concealed behind her costume, she throws herself wholeheartedly into the role, which turns out to be a success with the audience. As an adult, Joan continues her
anonymous performing act by writing costume gothics, in which the concealing mothball costume is replaced by a pseudonym. By hiding her identity as writer of gothic romances from her husband Arthur, Joan resolves the either/or dilemma of the female artist by separating the two most necessary but incompatible aspects of her life, namely creativity and love. After all, the celluloid renditions of cautionary tales such as Andersen’s “The Red Shoes” have taught Joan a most important lesson: “You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 368).

Attributing the deaths of the little mermaid and Victoria to their inability to separate love from art, Joan furthermore ascribes her successful career to her split identity, with the dance image becoming analogous to her writing: “Their mistake had been to go public, whereas I did my dancing behind closed doors” (Atwood *Lady Oracle* 242). Unable to settle for any concessions, Joan needs both love and talent to be happy. When she meets Arthur, whom she regards as “the right man,” she genuinely believes that her “life had [become] significant” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 191). At the same time, writing is as essential for Joan as love, and when unable to work on her costume gothics, she becomes “mean and irritable, drink[s] too much and start[s] to cry” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 238).

In this state of compartmentalized existence, Joan attains the first step in breaking away from the constricting roles dictated by her childhood’s fairy tales. The only threat to Joan’s gratification, however, is the fusion of her separate identities. When such a danger poses itself in the guise of Fraser Buchanan, Joan decides to escape by emulating the suicide of her childhood’s movie heroine, Victoria, star of the movie *The Red Shoes*. But of course, Joan’s suicide is a fake stratagem occurring only in the second-rate script of the charade she ingeniously contrives to escape from her life in Toronto. In Italy, Joan once again comes dangerously close to reproducing the ruinous endings of the little mermaid and Victoria who lost both love and talent. This protagonist not only loses Arthur, but
is also faced with the threat of becoming deprived of her creative powers since she becomes unable to conform to the standard gothic tale formula: “It was all wrong,” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 352), she says, referring to her latest novel-in-progress entitled Stalked By Love.

Once again, towards the end of the novel, Atwood makes another allusion to Andersen’s fairy tales, “The Little Mermaid” and “The Red Shoes,” only to resolutely rework, in the final chapter, the negative message which these tales suggest to the female artist. While dancing in her apartment whilst in Italy, Joan accidentally cuts her feet on some broken glass (Atwood, Lady Oracle 368). This incident is vividly reminiscent of both the little mermaid’s painful dance steps which she executes on her new human feet and the amputated feet of the heroine in “The Red Shoe” fairy tale, whose vanity and love for dancing causes her to become a cripple (Fee 47). Despite the similitude between the situations of these two heroines and that of Joan, Atwood does not altogether banish Joan to a similar fate, but subverts these fairy tales’ ominous endings by offering her heroine an alternative double life.

Even though Joan claims that she is returning to her old life in Canada, there are inherent insinuations that she may choose to venture into another duplicitous life by falling in love with a bandaged stranger while switching in her writing to the science fiction genre. Joan’s confession, “all my life I’d been hooked on plots” (Atwood Lady Oracle 342), is not only a clear reference to her incorrigible disposition to draw not only fictitious narratives, but also the entangled plots of her life. The familiar scenario of incorporating both love and work in her life is delicately woven into Joan’s script of her new life. But Joan’s new life is not a drastic departure from her previous ones. As Frank Davey notes: “While Joan is making significant changes in her life, she does not seem ready to change it totally” (“Lady Oracle’s Secret” 218).
In this manner, by reverting to the same methods she employs to
deconstruct the figure of the Triple Goddess, Atwood overthrows the negative
messages inherent in the body of widespread fairy tales by exploiting the
postmodernist technique of “using and abusing the very concepts [she] challenges
(Hutcheon, Poetics 1). In doing so, this authoress breaks the stifling cast
consigning female artists to social stereotypes, presenting them instead with the
opportunity to express their creativity without the traditional dangers
accompanying such artistic aspirations. But Lady Oracle’s comic aspects should
not overshadow the seriousness of Atwood’s campaign against the suppression of
women artist’s powers. Although Joan’s character is highly volatile and her
reliability is questionable, what Atwood establishes as unquestionable is her
protagonist’s expression of her abundant artistic talent. However, even after
establishing Joan’s creativity, Atwood continues her parodic investigation of
popular culture’s far-reaching influence on society’s imagination, using and
abusing the very nature of her heroine’s artistic products by focusing on the
complex interrelationship between life and art.

C. The Function of Costume Gothics in Lady Oracle

Devising Joan’s voluble artistic voice becomes the first step in Atwood’s
elaborate portrayal of the various functional elements involved in the creative
process. Her insightful depiction of the mechanics of the writer’s mind divulges
the intricate nature of Joan’s costume gothics, portraying their powerful effect on
romance readers as well as their important function as fictional parallels to Joan’s
life. Embedded within the narrative text of Lady Oracle, this generic mix of
gothic naturalism and harlequin romance plots functions on two levels: they
constitute the basic escape venue for a major part of Joan’s audience and also
mirror the winding trail of Joan’s episodic life narrative.
The very nature of Joan’s extravagant disposition proves to be the most significant constituent of her success in producing costume gothics. Enervated by a “debilitating mental diet ranging from Disney movies to True Confession magazines” (Cude, “Bravo” 45), Joan’s imagination evinces the hold of a tenacious romanticism brandished in her sensational prose which flaunts such titles as The Secret of Morgrave Manor and Love Defied. While exhibiting aspects of the gothic genre such as women’s tumultuous sense of fear and desire, as well as the elements of suspense and doubt (Howells, Margaret Atwood 64; Rao 144), Joan’s “bodice rippers” are viewed by some critics like Judith McCombs and John Cooke as being quintessential examples of the harlequin romance, Canada’s “major publishing export” (qtd. in Bouson 84; 159). In an interview with Karla Hammond, Atwood distinguishes between the two genres by defining harlequin romances as “those books [which] are about the dream that we all secretly have—that everything can work out . . . that there is a Mr. Wonderful who does exist, [while] the Gothic form centers on My husband is trying to kill me . . .” (“Defying Distinctions” 107-108).

Although Joan’s costume gothics are considered by John Cooke as an inferior form of the gothic genre (147), they still emit an overpowering sense of gloom by conforming to the murder threat theme, recognized by Atwood as the gothic plot’s central twist. In addition to the dangerous circumstances facing the heroine, gothic naturalism is characterized by an intangible “fear which stems not so much from external threats as from within [the heroine] herself” (McMillan 59). This gothic aura of double danger is duplicated in Joan’s fictional worlds in which her heroines, terrorized by threatening events, heedlessly project on the hero the additional role of villain. In Joan’s Stalked By Love, for instance, a series of mysterious occurrences threaten the life of the protagonist Charlotte, who, in turn, views her employer Lord Redmond as both a lover and a villain: “... Redmond, though he could be so disagreeable, she had found herself wishing that his hand
had remained on her throat just a moment longer" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 144).
Nevertheless, the heroines of Joan’s romances refuse to succumb to such daunting threats as rape and death, choosing instead to fight their attackers by using the nearest defense tool, ranging from a needle to “a weighty copy of Boswell’s Life of Johnson” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 143).

This gothic aura permeating Joan’s novels, however, is counterbalanced by the happy ending constituent characterizing harlequin romances, notwithstanding the injustice enforced on the heroine throughout the story (Radway 71). In *Escape From Love*, for one, the heroine Samantha Deane is happily rejoined with her love, vaguely referred to by Joan as ‘the hero,’ after enduring one menace after another (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 197). Hence, throughout her creative output, Joan reinstates her unwavering stance as a hopeless romantic. “At heart I was an optimist, with a lust for happy endings,” she confesses (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 159). In this manner, all of Joan’s heroines undergo a standard evolution which involves an escape from the clutches of death by distinguishing the hero from the villain and finding happiness in their lover’s embrace. Rao describes this mix of gothic and harlequin romance elements, characterizing Joan’s costume gothics as “fiction that is halfway between the historical romance of Barbara Cartland and the popular Gothic romances of Victoria Holt” (137).

The importance of this medley of popular romance in *Lady Oracle* lies in its essential impact on the lives of Joan’s audience. For the readers of romance fiction, Joan’s costume gothics prove to be indispensable fantasy outlets which help ease the pain of living in a dreary reality completely devoid of romanticism. This audience, comprised primarily of “middle-to-working-class dissatisfied women” (Hite, *Other Side* 133), suffers from a split vision regarding the image of the male figure. Instructed from an early age about the joys of marriage, these women, whose type Joan encounters as boy-conscious girls at school, project all their romantic yearnings on their future husbands, whom they expect to present
them with a more meaningful existence. But after settling down to revel in
domestic bliss, the discrepancy between their fantasy ideals and real situations
produces two separate emotional needs which cannot be met by the same man:

They wanted their men to be strong, lustful, passionate and
exciting, with hard rapacious mouths, but also tender and
worshipful. They wanted men in mysterious cloaks who would
rescue them from balconies, but they also wanted meaningful in-
depth relationships and total openness... They wanted multiple
orgasms, they wanted the earth to move, but they also wanted help
with the dishes. (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 240-241)

Discussing the nature of these opposing demands, Hite, for one, objects to
terms like fantasy and reality when used to denote the juxtaposition of “men in
mysterious cloaks” with “someone to help with the dishes,” claiming instead that
the “real” in this case is just another socially constructed genre, that of popular
psychology and self-help guides (*The Other Side* 133). But even if both ideals are
inherent messages repeatedly churned out by the media and the advertising
industry, the problem of never attaining these ideals is a constant one for women
(Rao 142). That is why, Joan’s costume gothics become the ultimate venue for the
realization of romance for dissatisfied women: “Despite the fact that women
readers know that the promises of romance cannot be kept, many women return to
romance for its promises. Promises of love, security and power” (Rao 142).

Producing a myriad of fictional worlds replete with maidens in distress,
cloaked strangers and happy endings becomes Joan’s winning marketing strategy,
procuring for her the title “scholar of trash” (Rule 47). Instead of posing as mere
compensations or even superfluous luxuries for her readers, these attractive
fictional alternatives incarnate necessary venues to escape from their “cramped
apartments and grudging husbands” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 45). Effectively
identifying with the “stand-in” heroine (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 34), many a bored
housewife can vicariously act out her fantasies by achieving the much coveted transformation from unattractive wife to desirable heroine without even leaving the privacy of her own living-room. Aware of its forceful social impact, Joan describes her work as the most stringent "antidotes to consciousness" (Maclean 184) by saying: "... when they [the readers] were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 34).

In addition to their function as literary remedies for dull realities, Joan's costume goths also act as important windows unto Joan's protean life, whose quixotic trail closely parallels the tempestuous adventures of this writer's heroines. Just as these defenseless maidens evade danger and murder by running from one adventure to another, so is Joan involved in a cyclical escape from several identities imposed on her by the men in her life. Atwood explains this similitude between fiction and reality by saying: "There's usually an area of reality in popular literature that's hooking into the reality in the lives of the readers" ("Defying Distinctions" 107). In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood carries this bond one step further by hooking the reality of popular literature into the life of the writer, Joan Foster. Excerpts from three of Joan's costume goths, incorporated into *Lady Oracle*’s narrative frame, reflect, from their secondary position in the main text, the salient characteristics of Joan’s world.

Interrupting the narrative flow of *Lady Oracle*, these excerpts from Joan's *Stalked by Love*, *Escape from Love* and *Love, My Ransom*, whose titles are highly indicative of the restrictive nature of love in the costume gothic genre, are carefully positioned in the pertaining sections of the novel which they contiguously mirror. From her hideout in Italy, Joan narrates her life story, flitting back and forth between a past from which she had escaped by feigning her own death, and a present replete with memories. Embedded within the sections depicting Joan in Italy are samples extracted from her work in progress, *Stalked By*
Love, a romance which concurrently unfolds with this writer’s tale, mirroring the changing emotional landscape which characterizes Joan’s past life. While excerpts from Stalked By Love are present in each section set in Italy, the other samples, however, extracted from the already published romances Escape From Love and Love, My Ransom, only appear once in the novel, vividly reflecting the exact actions undertaken by Joan at the time of her writing these costume gothics in the past.

The first part of Lady Oracle opens with Joan in Italy. A sample of Stalked By Love soon appears in this section but is discontinued to be resumed in the third part of the novel. This continuation immediately precedes Joan’s experiences in London, directly reflecting them. Posing as the prototypical “virgin on the run” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 146), Charlotte, the innocent heroine of Stalked By Love, becomes a projection of the love-starved Joan as the naive “artist-manquée” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 167), an identity which she adopts in her relationship with her first lover, the Polish count. Even before meeting the count, Joan exhibits the same desires and fears that Charlotte experiences. Hired by Lord Redmond to repair the jewels of his wife Felicia, Charlotte becomes a victim of her employer’s salacious advances. This fictional character’s conflicting emotions vacillate between an inexplicable attraction towards Lord Redmond and a cowering fear of his mesmerizing power over her. Similarly, Joan’s ardent desire to be rescued by a “cloaked stranger” is coupled with her dread of the evil tendencies lurking in men’s natures. Moreover, Charlotte’s sentimental memory of her mother’s parting advice on finding the right husband reflects Joan’s appropriation of her mother’s attitude towards men, whom she divides into two categories: “... nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 73).

Furthermore, the similarity in the predicaments of the two heroines, Charlotte and Joan, is augmented when Joan meets the Polish count whose title and lost wealth is an ironic reminder of Lord Redmond’s highly-regarded status in
the fictional world of *Stalked By Love*. Necessity drives both Charlotte and Joan into an experience which initially starts as a harmless engagement and quickly changes into a threatening confinement. A professional in repairing jewelry, Charlotte unsuspectingly arrives at Redmond Grange to work on Felicia’s jewels. Due to the disconcerting presence of the mysterious Lord Redmond whose charm she repeatedly tries to resist, her appointment is quickly transformed into an entangling bind making her want to leave the grange. Struggling to evade the embraces of her supposed protector, Charlotte cries: “*I beg you to remember, sir... that I am alone and unprotected under your roof*” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 143). With art acting as a reflection of life, Joan proceeds in the same part of *Lady Oracle* to act out Charlotte’s situation. Guilelessly accepting what she believes to be a most gallant invitation to live with the avuncular count after being dismissed from her apartment, Joan finds herself trapped under his roof in the binding role of mistress, imposed on her by the count’s old-fashioned disposition. Despite the fact that Joan does not typify the image of the chaste maiden, her naive outlook towards the intentions of her seemingly harmless rescuer, who eventually entraps her in a suffocating relationship, closely parallels Charlotte’s innocent venture into the world of Lord Redmond, and its unfavorable outcome of death threats and sexual harassment.

Seeking a release from the Polish count’s possessiveness, Joan stumbles into Arthur’s arms in the park, an incident which, as she recalls, occurs while she is rehearsing the route taken by Samantha Deane, heroine of the costume gothic she is writing at the time. The excerpt from this romance entitled *Escape from Love* is embedded in this crucial part of *Lady Oracle* to reflect Joan’s emotional escape from Paul’s possessive hold and her fated collision with Arthur in Hyde Park. In the excerpt, Samantha, after fleeing from the lustful Sir Edmund DeVere by scratching his face with her needle, paces the park, trying to find a solution to her problem, since her “*protector had failed her*” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 183).
Even then, Samantha is terrorized by “a hand on her arm, and a voice, hourse with passion, breath[ing] her name” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 183). At this point, the embedded fictional text is abruptly cut to plunge the reader into Joan’s story with Arthur, portraying her actions as she impersonates her heroine’s escape. When Samantha feels a hand on her arm, Joan shrieks in terror since she also feels someone touching her, and she lashes out to defend herself, thus cutting Arthur’s cheek, who is only handing her a “ban the bomb” leaflet. “To my horror,” says Joan, “I saw that he [Arthur] had a slight cut on his cheek. I felt like an idiot” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 183). In this way, Samantha’s attack on her aggressor becomes a mirror held up to reflect Joan’s survival instincts, which may as well be induced by the fiction itself, regardless of whether Arthur is an actual assailant or not.

Moreover, extracts from Love, My Ransom are incorporated in the narrative text of Lady Oracle to introduce another important incident in Joan’s life—her initiation into the world of automatic writing. No longer satisfied with the standard plot of gothic romances, Joan is intrigued by the occult, which she tries to integrate into her romance entitled Love, My Ransom. The heroine Penelope, having “great but undeveloped powers” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 243), becomes the “romance double” of Joan (Ross, “Calling Back” 50), who is recognized by the spiritualist Leda Sprott as having “great gifts [and] powers” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 122). The imagery of mirrors is most pronounced in this part since Penelope, subjected to a ritual in which a lit candle and a mirror are placed before her, finds herself “walking on the other side of the glass” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 244). This dive into the other side reflects Joan’s experimentation with mirrors as she ventures into automatic writing, an attempt resulting in a book of poetry entitled “Lady Oracle,” published under her own name.

Operating on another level of Lady Oracle’s narrative, this book acts as a mise-en-abyme, reflecting the frame of the novel as a whole, as well as creating
parallels between the public image of Joan as lady oracle and the various personalities which the mass media have imposed on the figure of Margaret Atwood. With its "...hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the looming death, [and] the sense of being imprisoned..." (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 259), this collection of indecipherable poems entitled "Lady Oracle" closely reflects the structure of the novel which incorporates numerous heroes turned villains. Joan, however, recognizes her work for what it is, saying: "...except for the diction, it seemed a lot like one of my standard Costume Gothsics, but a Gothic gone wrong, [since] there was no happy ending, no true love" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 259). In like manner, Joan's life story, occupying the body of *Lady Oracle*, represents a failed gothic, with the heroine still looking for love at the end of the novel. Hence "Lady Oracle," acting as a mise-en-abyme, reflects the wider diegetic frame of the novel *Lady Oracle*. Moreover, the embedded samples of verse, representing the characteristics of Joan's different identities, mirror the "various Atwoods" (Fulford 95) which act as extensions of Margaret Atwood the writer:

She sits on the iron throne  
She is one and three  
The dark lady    the redgold lady  
the blank lady    oracle  
of blood, she who must be  
obeyed    forever  
Her glass wings are gone  
She floats down the river  
singing her last song. (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 252)

The blank, redgold and dark lady personify Joan's systematic incorporation of the role of Diana, Venus and Hecate throughout the body of *Lady Oracle*. Similarly,
these figures reflect the diverse images with which the media has replaced Atwood’s personal identity. Such distorted representations vary between “a witch or man-freezing Medusa” (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 15) and “a pussycat-loving comedienne” (Atwood, “Review” 251). Hence the complete break in Atwood’s personality between the public Margaret and the private Peggy, as known to her friends (Atwood, “Review” 251), is reflected in Joan feeling “as if someone with [her] name were out there in the real world, impersonating [her], saying things [she’d] never said but which appeared in the newspapers . . .” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 279).

The creation’s reflection of the writer’s world is taken a step further in Atwood’s choice of title for Joan’s poetry collection, “Lady Oracle,” which reflects the title of the whole novel Lady Oracle. Both titles serve as parodic indications of their books’ content, since both the book of poetry and the novel itself depict the evils of producing art by looking in a mirror at reality’s distorted images instead of facing it headlong. Moreover, the critical attention received by both works indicates a myopic approach on the part of the critics, since, just as Joan’s interviewers directly assume that Joan’s verse reflects her own marriage to Arthur, so do many of Atwood’s critics believe that her fiction is a direct reflection of her reality. Atwood expresses the frustration she experiences as a result of this attitude by saying:

With Lady Oracle I was determined to make the character physically unidentifiable with myself, so I made her very fat and I gave her red hair—I had a friend with marvelous red hair that I always envied, so I took her hair and stuck it onto this character. What happens when I read this chapter to an audience? Someone immediately sticks up a hand and says, ‘How did you manage to lost all that weight?’ (“Interview,” by Linda Sandler 16)
As Joan’s narrative tale marks this protagonist’s transformation into a renowned cultural icon most beloved by the media, the character of Lord Redmond’s wife Felicia gains more and more prominence in the excerpts from *Stalked By Love*, while Charlotte, whose character represents Joan’s discarded identity, recedes into the background. With her flowing red hair and sparkling green eyes, Felicia is not only a reflection of Joan’s physical attributes, but also serves to mirror her creator’s newfound desirability. Felicia’s disloyalty to her husband echoes Joan’s marital infidelity. This breach of faith, however, is accompanied by a gnawing sense of guilt since both Joan and Felicia still love their husbands but are driven into the arms of other men as a direct result of the dubious affections of Arthur and Lord Redmond. Joan’s avowal of her strong devotion to Arthur and her constant need to be loved by him is closely reflected by Felicia’s pledge that she would “give up her present mode of life and go back to being a loving, conscientious wife” if Lord Redmond shows that he loves her (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 350). When Arthur fails to deliver such tender emotions, Joan starts viewing him as a typical gothic villain, and the person behind all the anonymous phone calls and slaughtered animals which start mysteriously appearing at her doorstep. True to the gothic plot, Joan believes that her husband is trying to kill her. “I’d known he had phases,” she ponderously admits, “but I hadn’t suspected this completely different side to his personality; not until now. The fact that I’d taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 326). To escape, Joan plans her own death, which she executes by feigning her drowning in Lake Ontario. Felicia also dies by drowning in River Papple, but her death remains dubious since her body is never recovered. Here too, Lord Redmond, the supposed hero of the costume gothic, is metamorphosed into the villain; his wife has just died, yet he is at “peace with himself,” cheerfully planning his next marriage (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 354).
The various costume gothics permeating the text of *Lady Oracle* exemplify a standard theme in gothic fiction, namely, women’s debilitating fear of their lovers’ inherent villainous identity. This manner of perception reflects the way Joan comes to understand the identities of all the men in her life. In this way, the identification of Joan with her gothic heroines is complete. The mix of tenderness and charm, on the one hand, and aggressive manner, on the other, which Charlotte perceives as characterizing Lord Redmond’s personality, for instance, automatically establishes him in the hero/villain tradition. Tania Modleski, in her novel entitled *Loving with A Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, identifies the basic constituent of the gothic novel, by which “the kind, considerate, gentle male . . . turns out to be vicious, insane, and/or murderous” (qtd. in Bouson 75). This duplicity of the hero’s role in *Stalked By Love* duly reflects Joan’s experiences with men. As a young girl, Joan first encounters this puzzling duality in men when her friends tie her to a post and leave her. A man passing by rescues her, and Joan toys with the idea that he might be the same person who had exposed himself to her a week before: “Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 67).

The first installment of this question’s answer is provided for Joan early on in her life by none other than her anesthetist father, whom she discovers to have been an assassin during the war. As she grows into a beautiful slim woman, the double identities revealed by Joan’s lovers serve to confirm her initial doubt, thus launching her in the double bind of her heroines’ stormy relationships with their double-natured lovers. Conforming to the hero/villain pattern of Joan’s costume gothics, the polish count, who first appears as an amiable figure respectful of Joan’s needs, starts throwing fits of extreme jealousy, accusing Joan of having a secret lover. Joan’s perception of him starts changing, and in her mind, his transformation into the feared gothic villain becomes complete: “It would have
been all right except for the baleful glances and the oppressive silences, and the revolver, which was making me anxious," complains Joan (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 180). In like manner, the Royal Porcupine’s passion for Joan changes into an insane obsession which he vents by threatening to shoot her and jump over a bridge with her in his arms. The frivolity of his wild statement is disregarded by Joan, who takes these dark threats to heart, saying: “He was completely serious” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 302).

The manner in which Joan’s world is constantly affected by her fiction is also depicted in the way Joan tailors her life to replicate the tempestuous adventures of her fictional heroines. Joan’s ultimate escapist venue is her fiction which in turn overpowers her perception of reality. This romantic countenance leads her to seek fairy-tale romance in her relationships with the men in her life, which only leads from one entrapment to another.

**D. Writing to Escape Reality ... Whose Reality?**

By writing costume gothics and bridging the gap between her life and fiction, Joan not only serves her reader’s need to escape, but also her own need to escape: “I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing,” she confesses (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 167). Thus, she actualizes the Polish count’s home-spun philosophy that “escape literature ... should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 173). By playing the double role of the mastermind and the prime beneficiary of her creative output (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 145), this protagonist intricately involves herself in the process of creativity, carefully contriving the events of her life, which by the end of the novel closely resembles the mangled plot of a romance narrative (Rao 137). The tendency of her life to meander and coil up in a knot, just like the plot of one of her costume dramas, is noted by Joan herself, and she says: “For me there were no
paths at all. Thickets, ditches, ponds, labyrinths, morasses, but no paths” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 189).

Constantly striving to reinvent herself through the method of evading reality, Joan recurrently seeks deliverance; its appeal in her case lies in an eagerness to “escape from the demands for individual responsibility in a complex world” (Rosowski 199). The complexity of Joan’s life drama, however, is to a large extent of her own concoction. Largely influenced by popular forms, the most powerful of which is the romance plot, this protagonist flits in and out of various culturally constructed identities which she had assimilated and appropriated as part of her multi-dimensional character, which ultimately results in a loss of her own individual identity (Salat 67).

By flaunting her “disappearance act” time and time again, Joan spends the larger part of her life identifying with the heroines of her steamy romances, shedding such unrequired items as hair, weight and men all along the way (White 55; Ross, “Calling” 49). The reason behind these transformations lies in this insecure woman’s dire need to be loved and accepted, driving her to conceal her real self and adopt an exorbitant number of alternative roles (Rosengarten 85). Justifying her appropriation of these extravagant roles imposed on her by her partners, Joan says: “I’d always found other people’s versions of reality very influential . . .” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 180).

The first and most influential “versions of reality” confronted by Joan are the ones she gorges on in the darkened movie theaters, which she regularly frequents with her Aunt Lou. The overblown romantic images of life she encounters in movies etch a permanent mark on Joan’s imagination by offering her the first taste of reality evasion, an art which she eventually masters: “I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it,” she remarks (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 34). Posing as attractive substitutes for her dreary life in a dysfunctional family, these frequent outings to the movies secure Joan’s ties with her aunt whom she regards
as a surrogate mother, as well as enable her to invent a plethora of attractive identities for herself based on the flickering images of glamorous movie stars to supplant her image as a “huge featureless blur” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 87).

Hooked on such tear-jerkers as With a Song in My Heart and Interrupted Melody, Joan genuinely commiserates with the emotional upheavals of these movies’ sentimental heroines, played by such famous actresses as Susan Hayward, Judy Garland, Eleanor Parker and most importantly, Moira Shearer. However, in her devout adoration of such movie stars, Joan, named by her mother after the actress Joan Crawford, becomes a victim of a myopic vision, unable to differentiate between the actresses’ public personae and the multiple identities which they depict on screen. In the case of her favorite movie, The Red Shoes, for example, she erroneously regards the death of Victoria, the movie’s character, as the actual death of Moira Shearer, who, in effect, is the name of the actress herself (Atwood, Lady Oracle 241). Joan’s unawareness of the two distinct aspects of the movie actress she sees on screen is ample proof of her inability to differentiate between real life and illusion. Because of her shortsightedness, Joan proceeds to replicate the double aspects of Moira Shearer by appropriating her aunt’s name as a pseudonym for her costume gothics, living as “two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believe [she] exist[s]” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 238).

In his book, Ways of Seeing, John Berger explains the far-reaching effects of visual stimuli on the child and how they are later translated into words: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (7). Joan proves Berger’s theory when she reappropriates the doubleness she perceives on the cinema screen into her own life.

Joan’s inability to separate life from fiction is best described by Sharon Wilson who states that Atwood’s heroines are perpetually “viewing life through a celluloid film” (“Turning” 136). Nevertheless, when Joan does conform to some
semblance of reality, it is always a second-hand replica dictated to her by other people, namely the Polish Count, her husband Arthur, and her lover the Royal Porcupine. In this manner, Joan ceases to view herself subjectively as an individual entity and shapes her personal image by extending her vision to others’ perception of herself, thus adhering to Onley’s statement that “the self defines itself in relation to others” (33). Berger expresses Joan’s predicament when discussing women’s presence in society, saying: “Her own self of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another” (46). In Joan’s case, the other is “the man who looks at her” (Carrington 61). As a result, Joan’s escape from reality into the fictive world of costume gothics becomes in fact an escape from other people’s “versions of reality” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 180).

To replicate the stormy romances of her fiction, Joan repeatedly searches for love in her real life, a quest which leads her from the arms of one “regressively narcissistic” man to another (Hengen, Margaret Atwood’s 67), resulting in a series of disappointments. Moreover, Joan’s manner of conforming to her partners’ fantasies by exhausting the roles of mistress, inept wife and adulterous lover, implicates her in a series of situations which become difficult to overcome: “Why did every one of my fantasies turn into a trap?” she exclaims (Atwood, Lady Oracle 367). Admitting to her failure in finding true love, Joan says: “I’d sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 367). Seeking to escape from the fiasco of her unstable emotional life, Joan becomes more and more dependent on the fixed world of her fictional models which invariably end with the heroines securing the love of a man after enduring extreme tribulations. The important hold of fantasy on Joan’s imagination, however, is not bound to the
limits of her costume gothics, but stretches out to invade her vision of the world around her.

However, although Joan’s life is, as described by Annette Kolodny, “a catalog of gothic conventions” (94), it still does not succeed in mirroring the magical realms of her writings. After fleeing from her parents’ house in Toronto, Joan arrives in London expecting to discover a dreamy world of “castles and princesses,” only to be faced with “a lot of traffic and a large number of squat people with bad teeth” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 159). Unable to shake off her unyielding faith in romance, Joan recurrently casts her lovers as chivalrous and mysterious heroes, aiming to match them with their fictional counterparts by “... polishing them with [her] love and expect[ing] them to shine” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 315). Upon meeting the Polish count, Joan is impressed with his title and mysterious past. Although her first sexual encounter with him fails to reproduce the sensual details permeating the trashy books she had read in her adolescence, Joan readily accepts her new role as “Paul’s mistress” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 169). Hence, instead of actualizing her dire need to be loved, Joan, a master at the art of self-delusion, is in fact fulfilling the count’s fantasies of rescuing a damsel in distress and taking her under his wing (Davidson and Davidson, “Margaret Atwood’s” 169). Justifying her compliance to an imposed identity which is not of her own choice, she says: “[I]f you find yourself trapped in a situation you can’t get out of gracefully, you might as well pretend you chose it” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 166).

Under Paul’s tutelage, Joan is initiated into the whimsical world of creativity, which previously supplied Joan with much-needed escape venues in the form of movies and *True Romance* magazines. Writing costume gothics under the pseudonym of Louisa K. Delacourt starts out as an easy way of making money but rapidly changes into an insidious addiction. The gnawing need to meticulously
research her fiction draws Joan to the antiquary delights of Portobello Road which she pores over with relish, inciting the count’s jealousy.

Even if Joan’s writing is, by this artist’s own admission, “… trash of the lowest order” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 33), it remains her essential emotional yardstick which she uses to gauge the degree of romanticism in her life. Reality does not shed light on the frivolity of her romantic plots; instead it is Joan’s fantasy that ultimately reveals the mediocrity of her reality. The count, Joan’s supposed knight in shining armor is, after all, an old, bitter man who makes love wearing pajamas, a far cry from her dashing and elegant fictional heroes. The more engrossed in her writing Joan becomes, the more she regards Paul’s reality of shoddy nurse novels, delusions of grandeur and inaccurate spelling as shabby and unattractive. Rejecting the risk of being engulfed by his reality, Joan leaves Paul and unfailingly adopts another role accompanied by a fresh reality, namely that of Arthur Foster, whom she eventually marries.

When compared with the standard romantic liaison between the ideal hero-rescuer and the innocent maiden in Joan’s costume gothic, the manner in which Joan meets Arthur by literally stumbling over him in Hyde Park is rather ironic. Falling in love with him on impact, Joan quickly discards her first impression of Arthur as a “skinny, confused-looking young man” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 183), a version which in fact is the closest to the truth, and severs all ties with realistic portrayal by giving free reign to her imagination. Once again, reality is colored by fiction, whose effect transforms Arthur, a rather common figure, into a “melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron …” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 184).

In this turbulent frame of mind, Joan concentrates on carving out her role as heroine of the imminent romance brewing in her fantasy between her and Arthur, a leftist which she turns into a Byronic hero. To do so, however, Joan not only sheds her past identity as Paul’s mistress, but also hides all remnants of her
individuality, including her costume gothics, thus permitting herself to be defined by Arthur according to his needs and moods. Perceiving her ineptitude when it comes to duplicating Arthur's intellectual zest, Joan initially tries to hide her ignorance in political issues by reverting to what little information she still remembers about the Palestinian cause from her school days. As her relationship with Arthur develops, Joan struggles to broaden her intellectual horizons by checking out all the Bertrand Russell books she could find in the public library. In fact, what Joan is indeed researching is the possible role of competent partner that she hopes to undertake in Arthur's "fictional world" which, for Joan, represents reality (Rosowski 200).

But all of Joan's "research" is in vain, since in failing to understand "theories and politics in general" (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 186), she is denied her fantasy role as Arthur's intellectual equal, stranded instead with the secondary role of the inept wife. Arthur, with his constant fluctuations from one revolutionary idea to another, is in reality an insecure and depressive outcast, who tries to hide his vulnerability by perceiving Joan as a worshipping wife. Hence Joan’s mission of procuring her husband’s happiness becomes her reality, requiring her to practice self-effacement by constantly flattering Arthur’s deflated ego. To succeed in this one-dimensional role and establish her husband’s superiority, she comports herself as the deficient housewife, gleefully parading her incorrigible lack of cleaning urges and cooking skills: "My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience," she enthuses (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 235).

Reality, or Arthur’s "version of reality," however, fails to mirror the gratifying elements of Joan’s fiction. Marriage does not endow Joan’s life with the expected happy ending twist which serves as the ultimate deus ex machina in many a torrid romance, serving instead to further drown Joan in the sordid unreality of marital bliss. "I would cook dinners of vegetables in boilable plastic packages, or tins of ravioli, and we would eat them sitting on the edge of the bed
and trying not to get any more tomato sauce on the sheets,” she says, describing her conjugal life with Arthur (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 232). In this manner, Joan’s reality starts to closely resemble the dissatisfied existence of her readers, driving this multi-talented actress to find release from her marital confines in the pleasurable act of orchestrating the more satisfying plots of her costume gothics.

Gradually, the concealing layers superimposed by Joan on Arthur’s true personality start falling away, revealing the humanity of this weary radical. As Joan’s life with her husband becomes more and more removed from this writer’s fiction, the image of Arthur embedded in Joan’s fantasy loses the attributes of “a cloaked, sinuous and faintly menacing stranger,” and he becomes associated with the common rank of ordinary men who “leave their socks on the floor or stick their fingers in their ears or gargle in the mornings to kill germs” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 241). Proving to be deficient in duplicating Joan’s imaginary relationships, Arthur’s reality thus loses its replicated glamour, becoming for Joan a dreary matter, to be shunned in favor of the hero-laden world of her fictional romances: “I kept Arthur in our apartment and the stranger [sic] in their castles and mansions, where they belonged” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 241).

With the two worlds of reality and fiction firmly separated, the outrageous figure of the Royal Porcupine waltzes into Joan’s life, dragging in with it all the illusory images of romance long cherished by Joan and converting them into reality. With his “long black cloak and spats, ... gold-headed cane, ... white gloves, and top hat embroidered with porcupine quills” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 266), this con-create artist, who considers himself as avant-garde despite being “standard Gothic,” appears to have just stepped out of a costume drama specifically to engage Joan in a torrid affair (Davidson and Davidson, “Margaret Atwood’s” 171). Sweeping the romance-starved Joan off her feet, he saves his heroine from her “soggy domestic atmosphere” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 286), transporting her into magical realms which she had only experienced in her
imagination. His vigorous presence in Joan’s life is so powerful that it even ousts Joan’s need to escape into the embalming cocoon of her costume gothics, rendering it superfluous (Mansbridge 115). “What did I need them [the costume gothics] for now?” she says, (Atwood, Lady Oracle 286). In this manner, Joan’s sly escapes into fiction-weaving is substituted by her furtive rendez-vous with the Royal Porcupine, which are far removed from her reality with Arthur.

The relinquishing of her fictional work in pursuit of concrete love, however, represents a temporary hiatus in Joan’s writing career, after which she returns to her art with concentrated zeal. The thrilling relationship with the Royal Porcupine turns out to be only a short-lived affair, proving that nothing can replace her unmarred versions of romance, regardless of their fictitious aspects. Upon the Royal Porcupine’s insistent pleas that she live with him permanently, Joan realizes that she cannot sustain her identity as his adulterous lover for long, since they differ in the basic manner of perceiving art and reality. The Royal Porcupine’s art is embodied in his life while Joan’s fantasy provides an escape from her life: “For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for me [Joan] it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 301).

To lure Joan into a “normal life” with him (McMillan 58), the Royal Porcupine undergoes a reverse metamorphosis, shaving his beard and transforming himself into the “antiheroic” Chuck Brewer with “the chin of a junior accountant” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 300, 302). This appalling shift into the realms of reality astonishes Joan, leading her to ponder: “Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 300). By murdering his identity as the Royal Porcupine, Chuck relinquishes the very thing which Joan had found so attractive in him, and simply turns into another Arthur. Unwilling to have two realities and no fantasy outlet, Joan abandons her lover and resumes writing gothic fiction, reassured by her forceful control over this world where the heroes remain heroes,
instead of transforming into “part-time commercial artists” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 294). However, the two worlds of reality and fiction, which are constantly influencing each other, do not remain separated. Gradually, the two frames get blurred, resulting at the end of the novel in a complete breaking of the boundaries between Joan’s life and art.

**E. Breaking The Boundaries**

In *Lady Oracle*, the two worlds of art and life, although inextricably linked, remain in two separate frames for the bulk of the novel. Only towards the end of Joan’s life narrative do the boundaries between this protagonist’s two worlds come crashing down, with reality and fantasy mixing to create a bizarre, hallucinatory third dimension.

This blurring of the frames results in the subversion of the costume gothic genre which limits women to the role of the victim. Joan, on the one hand, who mirrors her heroines, enacts this subversion by refusing to be victimized any longer. *Stalked by Love*, on the other hand, is invaded by Joan’s former realities, which she had discarded, and the fictional villain from her costume gothic is embodied in the figure of the unidentified reporter, who threatens Joan in Italy. Atwood’s intentional deviation from the gothic standards, accomplished by intermixing reality and fantasy, establishes the “anti-gothic” nature of this novel (Atwood, “Interview” by J.R. Struthers 19). By showing “the perils of Gothic thinking” and the irrelevance of “Gothic sensibility” to “real-life problems,” (Greene 167), Atwood accomplishes what she calls “pulling the components of Goths inside out, as you would a glove” (“Interview” by Betsy Draine 379).

Joan’s increasing commiseration with Felicia, the supposedly evil wife in *Stalked By Love*, is the first departure from the conventions of costume gothics (Bremberg 22). Bit by bit, the similarity between these two women’s lives increases, so much so that the parallel trajectories of fictional and realistic worlds
finally merge into one narrative thread. After subjecting her alter ego, Felicia, to a fate which reflects her own alleged drowning, Joan actualizes her persistent longing to see her husband Arthur once again by making her fiction become more and more like her reality. Rising from the bottom of the slimy River Papple, Felicia, whose bodily features are replaced by Joan’s former obese figure, confronts her husband Lord Redmond, whom she calls Arthur: “... it was such an effort, Arthur, to get out of that water and come all this way...” says Felicia (Atwood, Lady Oracle 355). Hence Lord Redmond, who is usually confined to his fictional world, is permitted to step into the realistic world as Arthur’s replica, even if this conversion only occurs in Joan’s imagination.

The ultimate blurring between fiction and reality, however, occurs in the final excerpt from Stalked By Love which Joan composes in her imagination whilst crouching behind the door in her apartment in Italy, awaiting her unknown pursuer. The image of the maze, a standard prop of the gothic genre representing danger, dominates this fictional sample, becoming a symbol of the winding paths concealed in Joan’s psychological make-up. As Atwood herself says: “In Gothic tales the maze is just a scare device. You have an old mansion with winding passages and a monster at the center. But the maze I use is a descent into the underworld” (“Interview” by Linda Sandler 16).

Charlotte, upon first arriving at Redmond Grange, is warned of its dangerous adjoining maze in which two of Lord Redmond’s wives were lost forever. When Felicia robs Charlotte of her position as heroine, the fiery Lady Redmond decides to defy the mysteries of the maze and boldly braves its winding passages. At this point, the two characters of Felicia and Joan merge to become one, since the writer is also submerged in the labyrinth of her subconscious. In the central plot, Felicia/Joan come across four women who systematically represent all the past identities which Joan had discarded one after the other, including her self as a fat child. However, the garden maze in Stalked By Love, like Joan’s fantasies,
becomes a veritable trap (Kolodny 94). Felicia/Joan are informed by the four ladies sitting at the center of the maze that the only exit is a door which when opened, exposes the figure of death. One by one, Joan’s father, the Polish count, the Royal Porcupine and finally Arthur appear in the guise of this figure, confirming Joan’s past perception of them as harbingers of death. With reality permeating fantasy, the cloaked Lord Redmond offers Felicia/Joan a chance to escape, thus echoing the empty promises of Joan’s lovers: “Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 377).

But Joan, lying in wait for her pursuer behind the door, refuses to succumb to this promise of escape. Fantasy intermingles with reality and when the doorbell rings, Joan envisions the figure of death awaiting her on the other side: “But if I turned the handle the door would unlock and swing outward, and I would have to face the man who stood waiting for me, for my life” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 377). Instead of yielding to another of her fantasies, and thus adopting another constraining identity, Joan swings the door open and fearlessly welcomes her alleged assailant by knocking him down with a Cinzano bottle. In this one act of self-defense, Joan releases herself from the shackles of victimhood characterizing the female position in gothic fiction and reverses the power relations between the traditional hero and heroine (Rao 140). This assertive move further defines the novel as an anti-gothic by acknowledging the intrinsic power which every woman, whether fictional or real, possesses. Being a victim, according to Joan, is “... a case of not knowing your own strength” (Atwood, Lady Oracle 378).

To further subvert the costume gothic formula, Atwood attacks the pristine character of its initial heroine, Charlotte, criticizing the total detachment of this immaculate maiden from the dingy qualities of everyday reality. Joan, no longer a sympathetic supporter of Charlotte, longs to plunge this detested heroine “with her intact virtue and her tidy ways” into a realistic role which would make her “fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart” (Atwood, Lady
*Oracle* 352). Atwood even makes Joan resentfully criticize the gothic patterns which this writer of costume gothics herself exhausts while spinning her plots. Denouncing Charlotte’s standard reactions to the stock themes of imminent danger and murder plots, Joan unintentionally deconstructs some of the basic structural elements constituting the costume gothic genre: “Even her [Charlotte’s] terrors were too pure, her faceless murderers, her corridors, her mazes and her forbidden doors” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 352). By using Joan to voice her opinion on the evils of gothic thinking, Atwood ingeniously establishes *Lady Oracle* as an anti-gothic novel by exploding the use of the gothic from within, thus achieving “a very funny burlesque of the genre” (Thomas 30).

Although Joan, at the end of the novel, does achieve the status of a non-victim by refusing to be manipulated any longer by men, she still lacks the vision of a true “artist or seer” since she remains entrapped in her own myopic vision (Davidson and Davidson, “Margaret Atwood’s” 176). The strong hold of fantasy on her imagination prevails, and she starts romanticizing the injured reporter: “... I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage,” she concedes (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 379). Although Joan is regarded by some critics as “a narrator-heroine ... possessing oracular powers” (Maclean 187), her strengths are restricted to superficial levels, and she remains immersed in her lies and self-delusion till the end of the novel: “... the odd thing is that I didn’t tell [the reporter] any lies. Well, not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 378). Even the reader of *Lady Oracle*, upon reaching the final scene, may have a “vague suspicion that he has, in some sense, been duped” (Maclean 179).

The function of Joan’s art, therefore, does not adhere to Atwood’s definition of “[w]riting [as] a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling ... a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word (*Second Words* 348). Instead, Joan’s creativity is a pack of lies which involves both the writer and the
reader in a harmful web of deception and fabrications. By creating Joan as a writer of costume gothics, however, Atwood is not condemning the production of popular romances but rather teaching through “negative example” (Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* 1). She herself admits that “a little escape reading isn’t bad for anybody; if we all had to read nothing but realistic fiction, we would feel quite cramped (“Witness” 167). But Joan, the quintessential escape artist, takes her art of evading reality in her life and in her fiction to an extreme, a pattern which Atwood denounces. The urge of the reader to escape into fabricated worlds is noted by Atwood when she says: “[O]n the whole, audiences prefer that art be not a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul, containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland, and all the other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth . . .” (qtd. in Hengen, *Margaret Atwood’s* 75).

According to Bemrose, “Atwood is a moralist who stresses that human beings have a moral dimension that they ignore at their peril” (10). Joan is a fictional writer who chooses to ignore such a “moral dimension,” thus following Leda Sprott’s lead when this charlatan advises her, saying: “When I had no truth to tell, I told them what they wanted to hear. I shouldn’t have done that. You may think it’s harmless, but it isn’t” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 230). Although Joan is aware of her writing’s harmful effects on women, she still deludes herself by thinking that she is “. . . offer[ing] [them] a vision of a better world, however preposterous. Was that so terrible?” she asks (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 35). The answer, which Atwood makes very clear, is a reverberating yes (Cude, “Bravo, Mothball!” 45).
CHAPTER III
POWER OF VISION AND POWER OF ART
IN CAT’S EYE

What's the difference between vision and a vision? The former relates to something it's assumed you've seen, the latter to something it's assumed you haven't.
--Margaret Atwood

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight....
---John Berger

A. Fiction and Autobiography in Cat's Eye

After publishing Lady Oracle in 1976, Atwood proceeded in her prolific writing career to produce an impressive list of works including novels, poetry, short stories and children’s books. Cat’s Eye, Atwood’s seventh novel, was published in 1988 to much critical acclaim. Described by its writer as “a... personal, unpretentious book” (qtd. in Bouson 159), it more than simply duplicates the various subversive techniques applied in Lady Oracle. Cat’s Eye delves further into postmodernism, so much so that it is hailed as Atwood’s “first full- fledged postmodern work” (Ingersoll, “Margaret Atwood’s” 17). Although Atwood obstinately refutes the critics’ tendencies to analyze her versatile writing
style according to one theoretical school or another (Ingersoll, "Margaret Atwood’s” 17), this writer recurrently reverts in her novels to various postmodernist techniques. In what Time has called “a haunting work of art” (Kanfer 70), Atwood ingeniously investigates the postmodernist tension between the process and product of creativity (Hutcheon, Canadian 138) by self-consciously weaving into the body of Cat’s Eye several allusions to her personal background. These autobiographical references, however, are perfunctorily repudiated by a disclaimer printed on the novel’s first page, ascribing any resemblance between the author’s life and her fiction to mere coincidence. Atwood denies that her fiction is thinly disguised autobiography by saying: “I believe in artistry . . . I believe that there’s a difference between true confessions and writing a novel” (qtd. in Cooke, “Politics” 225). However, Atwood subverts her readers’ limited perception of her art as a product of her life experiences by employing the postmodernist fluidity between genre borders and incorporating into the text what Nathalie Cooke calls “autobiographical illusion[s]” (“Reading” 162).

According to Hutcheon, postmodernist texts continually transgress the borders between literary genres, resulting in a blurring of the limits between the novel and the short story collection or the long poem, as well as between the novel and the autobiography (Poetics 9). Having her life regarded as the source of her fiction confirms Atwood’s opinion that readers consider “women [as] . . . more subjective and less capable of invention [than men]” (Atwood, “My Mother” 72). In Cat’s Eye, Atwood sets out to accomplish what she had already mastered in Lady Oracle, namely the art of subversion. To overthrow her readers’ habit of subjecting her novels to certain pre-conceived judgments, Atwood, forever attentive to the creative process, cleverly structures her novel as a “fictional autobiography,” (Ingersoll, “Margaret Atwood’s” 17), drawing a remarkable proximity between fictional character and author. In this manner, this writer
accomplishes the ultimate postmodern transgression of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and, by extension, between art and life (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 10). The various autobiographical references in *Cat’s Eye* induce many critics to regard the finished product as “barely mediated autobiography” (Towers 50), in which both writer and protagonist are involved in the process of creativity, although one expresses herself through writing and the other through painting.

Elaine, a successful painter approaching middle age, returns to Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her work in an “alternative” gallery entitled “Sub-Versions” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 15). This visit to the setting of her tortured childhood triggers an avalanche of memories, initiating Elaine into a reexamination of her whole life, with the text of the novel alternating between this protagonist’s present and past. Varying between her family’s excursions into the Canadian bush and the return to a post-war Toronto, Elaine’s childhood memories resonate with Atwood’s own background. Just like her fictional counterpart, Atwood spent most of her childhood with her family in the Canadian woods where her father, an entomologist, conducted his research. Uprooted from this “isolated background,” she underwent “culture shock” when supplanled in Toronto society (Atwood, “My Mother” 70; “Just Looking” 121). Some critics such as Lorraine M. York carry the parallelism between the author and her creation a step further by suggesting that *Cat’s Eye*, which was started by Atwood when she was in her mid-twenties and completed in 1988, depicts Atwood’s own retrospective of her fiction (“Over All” 248; Ingersoll, “Margaret Atwood’s” 26). Just like Elaine, Atwood, at the time of this novel’s publication date, was approaching her fiftieth birthday having acquired the distinguished and somewhat alienating fame of a seasoned celebrity. Another parallel between author and character is their contempt for labels, expressed in Elaine’s outlash against critics’ tendency to pigeonhole artists. While visiting Sub-Versions, the gallery where her show is to take place, Elaine acidly comments:
I don’t give a glance to what’s still on the walls, I hate those neo-expressionist dirty greens and putrid oranges, post this, post that. Everything is post these days, as if we’re just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own. (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 86)

This marked similarity between life and art is invalidated by a paratextual notice printed at the beginning of the book, stressing the novel’s fictional nature and claiming that “the opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author’s” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye n. pag.). Instead of deflecting the reader from viewing the novel as a thinly disguised autobiography, however, this negating statement, identified in postmodernist fiction as a “mock-disclaimer” (McHale 84), augments the reader’s interest in any parallels which may exist between Elaine and Atwood. Hence, this “borderline” work, in which Atwood plays “hide-and seek at the place where autobiography and fiction meet” (Glover 11), parodies both genres by eluding their traditions and conventions (Hutcheon, Poetics 11). Cat’s Eye is neither full-fledged autobiography nor pure fiction. The vast differences between Elaine and Atwood prevent the novel from becoming a self-indulgent memoir, while the biographical references assert that it is rooted in reality. Atwood reaches a conclusion that “Cat’s Eye is a mixture of fact and imagination; [a] literary home for all those vanished things from my own childhood [and] a celebration of the physical world we know” (qtd. in Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 296; “Waltzing” 234).

The reader’s awareness of this blend of fact and fiction, moreover, becomes an integral part of the reading process, by which he/she ceases to regard Atwood’s experiences as the sole nourishment of her imagination, and adopts a more accurate perspective of the work at hand. As Nathalie Cooke puts it: “This is indeed a book about self-reflection; and the reader’s role is to reflect upon the various reflections of the self contained within it” (“Reading” 166). In this
manner, Atwood succeeds in her endeavor to subvert her critics’ insistence on drawing parallels between her life and art by providing some solid clues for their arguments, only to show the frivolity and superficiality of such views. But this does not necessarily mean that Atwood has terminally resolved the postmodernist tension between the process and product of creativity (Hutcheon, Canadian 138), since the process of reading the novel may create for every reader a different experience characterizing his/her perception of the product of art. “The reader . . . actually participate[s] in the creation of the book. Every time someone reads a book, a new book is being created in the reader’s head. Reading is a creative activity,” says Atwood (“Witness” 169).

Such a creative activity, when liberated from the confining bounds of the reader’s obsession with the novel’s autobiographical allusions, becomes the ultimate means for obtaining unmitigated insight into the novel’s various levels and themes. After the presentation of these themes in the course of this chapter, it will become apparent that the function of art in Cat’s Eye is Atwood’s first and foremost concern. One issue probed by Atwood in this novel is the power of vision which characterizes Elaine’s artistic insights. This painter’s empowering subversion of traditional notions of perspective is a typical postmodernist technique, by which the reader “start[s] to encounter and [is] challenged by an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning” (Hutcheon, Poetics 11). Elaine’s life, as well as her art, reflect such “shifting perspectives,” since, after being subjected to the patriarchal gaze, this painter grows stronger and overthrows this one-way vision by focusing her artistic gaze on her tormentors.

Moreover, this chapter will also delineate the theme of the institutionalization of art, a notion contested by postmodernism, which duly questions all institutions (Hutchison, Poetics 9). Once her paintings are mounted on the gallery’s walls, Elaine feels alienated from her art which in turn becomes
separated from its creator's vision, thus attracting a multitude of critical interpretations which varies depending on the person looking at Elaine's paintings. By reading Elaine's narration, however, the reader is transformed into a viewer, fully grasping the underlying significance of the displayed paintings and their vivid expressions of the artist's painful experiences. Hence, by juxtaposing the internal world of the artist with the external world of institutionalized art, Atwood makes use of postmodernism's method of "closing the gap between high and low art forms" (Hutcheon, Poetics 44) by depicting Elaine's paintings from a double perspective. In this way she succeeds in making them both "elitist and accessible" (Hutcheon, Poetics 44).

B. Varying Visions

A most potent image which surfaces again and again in Cat's Eye is Elaine's power of vision. As a child, this protagonist exhibits a visual sensibility which later develops into artistic talent. However, during childhood, Elaine's vision passes through intense stimulation, followed by metaphorical blindness and restored sight. Aiding this woman in her journey towards artistic perception, the cat's eye marble and the vision of the Virgin Mary become recurrent motifs in Cat's Eye, empowering Elaine as a little girl in her struggle against her emotionally abusive girlfriends.

The powerful vision which Elaine uses to compose her paintings is manifested throughout the novel, to the extent that the narrative text becomes similar to a series of visual frames meticulously drawn to depict the narrator's life story. Hence the act of reading Cat's Eye is transformed into a process of viewing the constructed world of this novel through the eyes of its central female figure. Evidence of this artist's unique vision appears early on in her childhood, the events of which are engraved in Elaine's memory. Although these recollections are relayed by the narrative voice of an older Elaine who is looking back at her
past from a different perspective, they still serve to trace the budding talent of this painter by revealing her close attention to visual detail as a child.

One of Elaine’s earliest visual memories consists of a rear view of her family’s ears. During the long trips to the northern Canadian woods where her father conducts his field work, Elaine sits in the backseat of her father’s car focusing her attention on the objects appearing in her direct line of vision. From this “cramped vantage point in the back,” Elaine intricately describes the ears of her family members, starting with her father’s, which “are large and soft-looking,” followed by her mother’s, which she likens to “the handles of china cups” and finally her brother’s, characterized by their “round[ness] . . . like the ears of the green-tinged, oval-headed aliens from outer space . . .” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 21).

In addition to marking the innocence of Elaine’s “backseat vision” (Wilson, “Eyes and I’s” 230), such a distinct portrayal replaces the verbal with the visual, revealing this child’s feelings towards her family, as well as representing the important role of each of these characters in Elaine’s life.

For, Elaine’s description of her family’s ears is closely patterned according to the hierarchical structure of the family dictated by the strict social conventions of 1940s Toronto. First comes the father, then the mother, followed by the children. However, Elaine’s family departs from the typical roles ascribed to each member. Looming “large” in Elaine’s imagination, the father, as the description of his ears indicates, is “soft” and caring, in direct opposition to the traditional image of the rigid patriarchal figure which Elaine encounters through her girlfriends’ families: “All fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers. But fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 164). Moreover, when outlining the shape of her mother’s ears, Elaine unwittingly delineates the various facets of this character’s personality. With ears “like the handles of china cups,” Elaine’s mother is directly associated with the feminine domestic role
which she assumes only when living in the city. But despite her “fragile” ears, Elaine’s mother is, by her daughter’s admission, far from being weak. Accustomed to “skating on the neighborhood rink and walking alone in the ravine,” Elaine’s mother is “not like the other mothers, she doesn’t fit in with the idea of them” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 156). It is only when portraying her brother’s ears, however, that Elaine consciously corroborates her visual activity with the corresponding drawings executed by another person. Stephen’s sketches of “…the ears of green-tinged, oval-headed aliens from outer space” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 21) are used in Elaine’s visual description of her brother’s ears. The alien ears depict this girl’s fascination with pictorial delights, and also foreshadow Stephen’s future career as a scientist obsessed with outer space.

Gradually, Elaine’s perception of the world around her is transformed from passive reception to inquisitive exploration, and she exchanges her backseat perspective with a front seat one. Directly influenced by her entomologist father, Elaine delves into the intriguing realm of biology, exploring its hidden secrets with the aid of the microscope, which serves to magnify the powers of Elaine’s vision. Under the scrutinizing eye of this powerful instrument, ordinary objects like hair and skin are transformed beyond recognition. “We put our fingers under the lenses and examine our fingernails, the pale part curved like hills against their dark pink sky, the skin around them grainy and creased like the edge of a desert,” says an awestruck Elaine (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 36). More than simply enabling this protagonist to view her surroundings from a different perspective, these scientific explorations also allow her to look more closely into the nature of things. Examining cross-sections of insects carefully drawn by her father’s students, and later on becoming obsessed with their shapes as they appear under the microscope, Elaine exposes her early interest in artistic lines and colors by saying:

I look at slides, planaria worms in section with their triangular heads and cross-eyes, bacteria coloured with vivid dyes, hot
pinks, violent purples, radiant blues. These are lit up from beneath, they’re breathtaking, like stained-glass windows.

(Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 247)

Gradually, the employment of this detached viewpoint starts exceeding the bounds of examining dead insects and encroaches on Elaine’s manner of perceiving people. Perched on the windowsill of the Zoology Department to watch the Christmas parade, Elaine observes “... people dressed like snowflakes... march[ing] past [her], strangely truncated because [she’s] looking down at them” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 37). This alienating gaze, however, applied by Elaine to insects and people alike, becomes the source of her misery since she herself becomes “frozen under the gaze” of Cordelia, Carol and Grace, her childhood emotional aggressors (Wilson, “Eyes and I’s” 230).

Elaine’s principal tormentor is Cordelia, who tries to emulate her critical father by passing harsh judgments on Elaine’s every action. In this way, Cordelia is duplicating society’s patriarchal gaze by condemning her girlfriend for every action she deems inappropriate. Viewing Elaine from behind, Cordelia brusquely says: “Don’t hunch over... Don’t move your arms like that” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 120). Hiding her insecurity behind a facade of fierce self-assurance, Cordelia also manipulates the actions and opinions of her two other girlfriends, Grace and Carol, and turns them against Elaine. Under such scrutiny, Elaine’s life in Toronto is transformed into a living hell, the memory of which is repressed by this protagonist for a long period of time. Despite her misery, Elaine does not consider telling anyone about her tormentors, believing their bad treatment to be a secret which she has to keep: “They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 120). But to her amazement, Elaine eventually discovers that her being abused is apparent to some adults like her mother and Mrs. Sneath, Grace’s mother. Both women, however, do not intervene, a position which Elaine
asurable to her mother’s powerlessness and Mrs. Smeath’s self-righteous Christian faith.

Her girlfriends’ cruelty causes Elaine to lose her singular visionary powers. As a result, she exchanges her self-image with others’ perceptions, especially those of Cordelia, her alter ego. Just like her Shakespearean namesake, Cordelia is the third daughter, whose father is as critical of her as Lear is of his Cordelia (Lane 74). However, unlike Lear’s need for his daughter’s attention (Lane 74), Cordelia’s father in Cat’s Eye hardly pays any attention to his daughter except when scolding her, since “… [n]othing she can do or say will ever be enough, because she is somehow the wrong person (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 249).

Overwhelmed with a feeling of nothingness, Cordelia starts subjecting Elaine to the same interrogations which she herself has to endure at home. Looking back at her childhood days, Elaine remembers such excruciating moments: “What do you have to say for yourself? Cordelia used to ask. Nothing, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 41). Traumatized, Elaine starts to regularly peel the skin off her feet, with the pain of walking on blistered feet giving her something “to hold onto” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 107). Her classroom drawings also portray the darkness which Elaine’s vision is submerged in: “I colour in the night. My hand holding the black crayon presses down, harder and harder, until the picture is almost entirely black” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 162). To escape from the recurrent painful situations, moreover, Elaine even becomes able to faint at will. This ability lends a new perspective to Elaine’s vision, since fainting permits her to leave her body and view it from another angle: “… I can see my own body lying on the ground, just lying there... I’m seeing this all from above, as if I’m in the air... looking down like a bird” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 172).

However, the event leading to the temporary blindness of Elaine’s perceiving eye occurs when the three prosecutors—Carol, Grace, and Cordelia—
bury the unsuspecting Elaine in Cordelia’s backyard hole. Becoming “visionless and voiceless” (Wilson, “Eyes and I’s” 232) as she is submerged in darkness dressed as a headless Mary Queen of Scots in a “black dress and a cloak,” Elaine acknowledges this incident as “[t]he point at which I lost power” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 107). Engulfed in the earth’s blinding darkness, Elaine awaits the restoration of her vision which is so elemental to her emotional survival. “I close my eyes, wait for pictures,” she says (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 108). But these curative images elude Elaine’s visionary grasp, and she remains emotionally impaired until she discovers her lost visual powers to be in the form of a cat’s eye marble.

The image of the cat’s eye marble, an important motif permeating the text of Cat’s Eye, acts as the restorative antidote to Elaine’s metaphorical blindness, which she is afflicted by while immersed in the darker period of her childhood. Deeply scarred by her girlfriend’s agonizing torments, Elaine retreats into an isolated world of her own, which can be only penetrated by the derisive remarks of her friends. Upon finding a blue cat’s eye marble in her drawer, however, Elaine freezes her battered emotions and restores her “imaginative vision” (Howells, “Cat’s Eye” 210) by viewing the world through the transforming lens of the glass marble (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 314). This cat’s eye, which looks “like something frozen in the ice,” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 141) is emblematic of the icy world of nothingness inhabited by a little girl now intent on modeling herself after this marble by internalizing its cool and solid qualities (Hite, “An Eye” 199): “There’s something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass,” she says (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 193). Keeping this marble in her pocket like a protective amulet, she feels stronger and starts viewing people in a removed manner, modeling her restored visionary power on the detached perspective of her cat’s eye: “I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 141).
However, the most potent curative act which the cat's eye marble helps Elaine to achieve comes at a later stage in the novel. Having repressed all the dark memories of her childhood, Elaine does not remember the "bad time" she had spent as a child, nor does she understand her mother's implicit need to be forgiven before she dies. But when she accidentally finds the discarded cat's eye, she comes to terms with her past by looking into the marble and regaining all the past experiences which have been erased from her consciousness. "I look into it, and see my life entire," she says (Atwood, Cat's Eye 398). This flood of memories, moreover, is the instigator of Elaine's first act of forgiveness (Hite, "An Eye" 203-4). Although, as an adult, Elaine does not have a conscious recollection of her mother's powerlessness in the face of the viciousness of small girls, still she feels cut off from her mother: "I'm aware of a barrier between us. It's been there for a long time. Something I have resented" (Atwood, Lady Oracle 397). In the process of facing her past, however, these barriers dissolve, and Elaine forgives her mother for her shortcomings by acknowledging the supportive presence of this woman in her life: "Against [my father's] bleak forecasting is set my mother's cheerfulness, in retrospect profoundly willed" (Atwood, Cat's Eye 396).

Critic Judith McCombs traces the powers of the cat's eye marble in Cat's Eye to the Snow Queen's Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" ("Contrary" 10), with the marble's powerful eye representing the Snow Queen's icy gaze. In this fairy tale, the eyes and the heart of the protagonist Little Kay are pierced by the evil Snow Queen's "icy [and] heartless . . . grain of glass" (McCombs, "Contrary" 10). He is then abducted to this queen's icy palace where he is debarred from nature, playing with "pieces of ice [on a] frozen lake" (Wilson, Margaret Atwood's 303). Similarly, Elaine, after losing her visionary powers, appropriates the icy gaze of the marble's transforming eye. Moreover, just like Little Kay who forgets his family and home (Wilson, Margaret Atwood's 303), Elaine freezes up her emotions and becomes alienated from her personal
history by repressing her childhood memories. But the motif of the cat’s eye marble in *Cat’s Eye*, as opposed to the Snow Queen’s image, plays a restorative role by protecting Elaine from the debilitating gaze of others as well as enabling her to restore her childhood memories. After having seen her “life entire,” however, Elaine is ready to figuratively remove the glass vision from her eye, which she accomplishes, like Little Kay, by replacing it with her own discerning powers, thus becoming an “I with eyes” (Wilson, “Eyes and I’s” 234). But the parallelism between the novel and its fairy tale intertext is not complete. Although Elaine, like Little Kay, regains her vision, *Cat’s Eye* does not close, like its fairy tale intertext, on a happy note, with the protagonist returning to a life of bliss. On her way back to her “real life” in Vancouver (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 14), Elaine sadly acknowledges her sense of having forever lost the person who had controlled her imagination throughout her life, saying: “This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that’s gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 421).

In addition to these recurrent allusions to “The Snow Queen” fairy tale, the figure of the Virgin Mary is a seminal image in the novel, looming large in Elaine’s life and art. After shifting from a backseat perspective to inquisitive observation, followed by a period of figurative blindness cured by the empowering gaze of the cat’s eye marble, Elaine’s vision is itself subjected to a vision of the Virgin Mary. Ordered by Cordelia to descend into the ravine’s forbidden grounds where “the bad men are” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 187), Elaine is deserted by her girlfriends and left to almost freeze to death in the creek’s icy water. Fainting from cold and fear, Elaine sees what she later acknowledges to be the figure of the Virgin Mary which appears in the sky to rescue her:

I can see the white glimmer of her face, the dark scarf or hood around her head, or is it hair? She holds out her arms to me and I feel a surge of happiness. Inside her half-open cloak there’s a
glimpse of red. It’s her heart, I think. It must be her heart, on
the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal.

(Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 189)

This near-death experience acts as a turning-point in Elaine’s life, causing
this protagonist to turn from victim to victimizer. The Virgin Mary, appearing in
*Cat’s Eye* under different names such as The Lady Of Perpetual Help or The
Virgin of Lost Things, revives Elaine’s truncated awareness of her own powers,
which she has lost and forgotten about (Bouson 201). Thus Elaine emerges from
the ravine completely transformed, refusing to be subjected any longer to her
girlfriend’s abuse although she only realizes her newfound resilience after her
convalescence: “Nothing binds me to them. I am free” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 193).
In this manner, victim and victimizer exchange places, since Cordelia, Carol and
Grace lose their power over Elaine, who eventually develops a “mean mouth,”
using Cordelia “as target practice” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 235).

Elaine’s revolt against her tormentors is preceded by an aversion for the
institutionalized religion she is introduced to as a young girl by her friend Grace
Smeath. This rebellious sentiment is in fact an expression of Elaine’s loathing for
Grace’s mother, Mrs. Smeath, who turns a blind eye to Elaine’s pains, believing
them to be God’s punishment for this girl’s atheistic family. Considering Mrs.
Smeath to be God’s representative on earth, the young Elaine refuses to pray to
God anymore: “Mrs. Smeath has God all sewed up, she knows what things are his
punishments. He’s on her side, and it’s a side from which I’m excluded,” she says
(Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 181). Having lost faith in God, Elaine turns to the Virgin
Mary, beseeching this mother figure, with “her exposed heart of compassion”
(Wilson, “Margaret Atwood’s” 138) to release her from her abusers’ powers.

The Virgin Mary, considered as a “reversion to a preverbal era” by Molly
Hite in her article “An Eye for an I” (203), is actually an extension of the mythic
Great Mother. This goddess was worshipped in ancient times but later on, with
the advent of “Judaism, Judaic Christianity, Mohammedanism and Protestant Christianity” (Graves 389), she was replaced by patriarchal deities. In the Catholic faith, however, remnants of this goddess’ characteristics are embodied in the figure of the Virgin Mary. Atwood, a self-proclaimed pantheist, expresses her interest in such female religious figures by saying: “If I were going to convert to any religion I would probably choose Catholicism because it at least has female saints and the Virgin Mary” (“Articulating” 115).

C. Reversing the Male Gaze

Acting as visionary remedies for Elaine’s traumatic experiences, the images of the cat’s eye marble and the Virgin Mary lie dormant in Elaine’s subconscious for a period of time, resurfacing in this painter’s life to permeate her creative mind. Brought up under the scrutiny of the male gaze, Elaine gradually expunges others’ debilitating perceptions of herself and adopts a piercing artistic gaze which she manifests in her expressive paintings.

After having spent her early childhood in the northern Canadian bush with her family, Elaine, when first introduced to city life in Toronto, is unfamiliar with the various codes of behavior characterizing this patriarchal society. In addition to being initiated by her girlfriends into a female-dominated world fashioned by twin sets and cold waves, Elaine is also exposed to patriarchy’s unmitigated control over the female consciousness. One of the most potent indications of such powerful influence is the manner in which the male character focuses his unblinking gaze on female behavior, assessing women’s social merit and dictating all female activities and self-perceptions. As Molly Hite accurately notes: “Women look like, while in general men only look” (“Optics” 139). In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger also adds that “… men act and women appear” (47). The perfect images of efficient and happy housewives as depicted in ladies’
journals such as *Good Housekeeping* and *The Ladies’ Home Journal* serve as exemplary role models to the young Elaine who cuts out these pictures and pastes them in her scrapbook. Any unfavorable disposition displayed by women is frowned upon by an unrelenting patriarchal decorum, represented in these journals by a cartoon figure called the Watchbird, “a red and black bird like a child’s drawing, with big eyes and stick feet” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 138). This Watchbird is “an icon of the one-way gaze” (Hite, “Optics” 141), and it castigates any erratic female behavior with a tag line reading: “‘This is a Watchbird watching a Busybody,’ . . . ‘This is a Watchbird watching YOU’” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 138).

Besides encountering in magazines such images of social constraints, Elaine herself becomes a victim of patriarchy’s unnerving admonishments, which are duly administered by the figure of her girlfriend Cordelia. Elaine’s lack of social experience, caused by her family’s eccentric lifestyle, induces Cordelia to self-righteously subject her friend to an excruciating “improvement” regimen by way of intensely observing her with “her grey-green eyes, opaque and glinting as metal” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 4). Placing a mirror in front of Elaine’s face, Cordelia echoes the disparaging tone of the patriarchal Watchbird: “‘Look at yourself! Just look!’ Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face [Elaine’s], all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 158). Cordelia’s disconcerting gaze, however, is a direct result of this girl’s own endurance of patriarchal scrutiny, which is expressed in her father’s constant criticism. By steadily incorporating and enforcing such patriarchal values, Cordelia is constantly plagued by feelings of loneliness and depression, leading to her gradual physical and mental deterioration.

Elaine evades such a destructive fate by drawing on her visual powers to rebel against patriarchy’s subjugation, which freezes women under its male gaze. To do so, she reverses the direction of this gaze by deciding to become a painter. In this way, Elaine chooses to focus her vision on others, thus viewing them
according to her own individual perceptions (Hite, “Optics” 140). Elaine’s
subversion of the male gaze early on in her life is clearly depicted in her
relationship with boys, and it eventually evolves as she grows older to include her
experiences with men. Honing her visual skills, Elaine silently gazes at boys
whom she goes out with as a teenager, drawing them in her mind’s eye the same
way an artist would paint his models:

My love for them is visual: that is the part of them I would like
to possess. Don’t move, I think. Stay like that. Let me have
that. What power they have over me is held through the eyes,
and when I’m tired of them it’s an exhaustion partly physical,
but also partly visual. (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 240)

This visual obsession is sustained by Elaine as she grows older and engages
in sexual affairs with Josef, her art teacher, and then Jon, also a painter whom she
eventually marries and divorces. By creating art which radically differs from these
artists’ inherent “patriarchal myths of femininity” (Ahern 12), Elaine
systematically subverts the painterly gaze which turns all women into inert objects
to be arranged and rearranged according to the painter’s detached perspective.

Upon first meeting Josef, her art teacher, Elaine is immediately attracted to
his eyes, self-consciously feeling the way he focuses his male gaze on her: “He
has a habit of staring at you without saying anything, and it seems, without
blinking” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 270). Although she is held under her teacher’s
sexual and artistic sway for a period of time, Elaine comes to reject Josef’s notion
of women as being Pre-Raphaelite visions (Ahern 12) or “helpless flowers [and]
shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 318). Attempting to
draw the naked model posing in her Life Drawing class, Elaine cannot help but
look at this woman as a human being, noting that her “eyes are bored, her head
droops forward, the way it has been put . . . [and] she looks cramped and
uncomfortable” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 269). Joseph, by contrast, unaware of this
model's humanity, adjusts her pose as if he were handling a lifeless mannequin, while the other male students use such degrading terms as "cow," "bag" or "discard" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 280) when referring to the constant flow of nameless models on display.

In her relationship with her first husband Jon, Elaine also reverses the male gaze by focusing her vision on her husband's body, thus indulging herself in what she calls the "painterly delight in tactility" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 240): "Jon glowed for me... like a plum in sunlight, richly coloured, perfect in form. I would lie in bed beside him or sit at the kitchen table, running my eyes over him like hands. My adoration was physical, and wordless" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 341). Fixing her appreciative gaze on Jon, an act reminiscent of her visual adoration of boys as a teenager, Elaine subverts the position occupied by men in society by reducing them from observers to objects that are observed and desired. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger states that "a man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to... or for [women]... [while] a woman's presence expresses... what can and cannot be done to her" (46). This statement is inverted in *Cat's Eye*, with man's presence being precariously dependent on women's perspective.

Elaine also challenges the prevalent conceptions of artistic content which she encounters in her study of art and archeology at the University of Toronto. Realizing that the detached manner of perusing art throughout the ages dishearteningly suggests that "[art] has been accomplished elsewhere [and] all that remains to be done with it is the memory-work" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 276), Elaine resolves on developing her own artistic skills. Acknowledging her resolute urge to paint, she says: "I did not know how to paint or even what to paint, but I knew I had to begin" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 271). After acquiring the fundamental methods of drawing from several night classes which she attends at the Toronto College of Art, Elaine proceeds to cultivate her own creative identity as a painter, choosing the more difficult artistic path of achieving a distinct personal style in her work.
Such individual expression opposes, for instance, Jon's career, which faithfully adheres to a succession of artistic trends, varying between "abstract expressionism and pop art" before it degenerates into handling special effects for chain-saw-massacre films (White 65).

Turning her artistic vision to her surroundings, Elaine develops a keen interest in painting such household objects as wineglasses, ice cubes and gingerale bottles, thus producing various paintings which she nevertheless keeps hidden from Jon, since she fears that he would dismiss them as mere illustrations. Hence Elaine's art, in its early stage of development, becomes a form of copying, an artistic method recollected and analyzed by Elaine, who says: "Art is what you can get away with, said somebody or other, which makes it sound like shoplifting or some other minor crime. And maybe that's all it ever was, or is: a kind of stealing. A hijacking of the visual" (Atwood, Cat's Eye 225). Gradually, however, Elaine's art ceases to depict the tangible objects occupying this painter's world and starts liberating the childhood memories entrapped in Elaine's subconscious, so much so that she "begin[s] to paint things that aren't there" (Atwood, Cat's Eye 337). Hence Elaine's art, instead of "hijacking . . . the visual" present, liberates the repressed past, revealing the images which Elaine had held on to "before and after school, when she could escape her three girlfriends' secret, whispered condemnation" (McCombs, "Contrary" 10). Although Elaine does not have a conscious recollection of the images she paints from her past, such as the silver toaster, or the glass coffee percolator and even the wringer washing machine which dominate her mother's kitchen as a child, she still links these objects with an unidentified anxiety, the source of which remains beyond her grasp, but which she gradually identifies and overcomes through her paintings.
D. Painting the Past

The anxiety characterizing Elaine’s emotions during the traumatizing days of her childhood is the first sentiment which Elaine links to her paintings, quickly followed by feelings of guilt and revenge. As Bouson notes, *Cat’s Eye* depicts “the transformation of deep emotional trauma into complex and coded work[s] of art” (161). Even the titles of this novel’s chapters mirror the various titles of Elaine’s paintings. Bit by bit, all the images which have marked Elaine as a child start appearing one after the other in this painter’s art, a process by which Elaine actualizes a form of emotional purgation vis-à-vis her past experiences.

“Floating up without warning, like a dead fish” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 338) into Elaine’s consciousness, the image of Mrs. Smeath first appears on Elaine’s canvas when the still unmarried protagonist finds out that she is pregnant. The intense fear which grips Elaine as she faces this situation causes her to repeatedly paint her childhood image of Mrs. Smeath, which “multiplies on the walls like bacteria” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 338), enacting Elaine’s childhood fear of the harsh judgments of this self-righteous Christian. Elaine’s intense hatred of this woman, whose “bad heart and . . . damaging words” (Bouson 172) draw her character on the lines of the bad mother image, is most vividly vented through this painter’s art. Exacting her revenge on this evil mother, Elaine produces one painting after another, depicting Mrs. Smeath in various humiliating positions, the most insulting of which is the figure of Mrs. Smeath flying in the air with her husband Mr. Smeath stuck to her back. Another malicious attack on Mrs. Smeath’s puritanical religious zeal is embodied in a painting entitled *White Gift* which depicts throughout four panels the gradual unveiling of Mrs. Smeath, who is stripped down to her underpants, with the biblical reference “The Kingdom Of God is Within You” written beneath her figure. Thus, by exposing Mrs. Smeath to the artist’s condemnation and freezing her under a
scrutinizing gaze, Elaine, as a painter, expresses her intense hatred of Mrs. Smeath which she experienced as a child and repressed as an adult.

Turning back to her childhood emotions through her art, Elaine also conjures up images of her mother which she exposes in a series of painted panels entitled *Pressure Cooker*. Erroneously analyzed by Elaine’s critics as embodying references to the Earth Goddess and female slavery, this painting is simply an expression of Elaine’s need to imaginatively revive her recently deceased mother. “I suppose I wanted to bring her back to life. I suppose I wanted her timeless, though there is no such thing on earth,” she says (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 151). Some critics such as Sharon Wilson note this painting is an affirmation of Elaine’s recognition “that her mother, unlike herself, always controlled the societal ‘pressure cooker,’ even using it for her own purposes” (Margaret Atwood’s 312).

While Elaine’s paintings strongly depict the palpable objects and characters which occupy her world as a child, they also portray Elaine’s unexplainable encounter with the fantastic, such as her vision of the Virgin Mary which saves her from death in the ravine. This illusory aspect of Elaine’s imagination lends a surrealist tone to her works of art, a trait made visible in her painting entitled *Our Lady Of Perpetual Help*, in which she mixes the sacred with the mundane in her drawing of the Virgin Mary: “She is wearing a winter coat over her blue robe . . . She’s carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. Several things have fallen from the bags: an egg, an onion, an apple. She looks tired” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 345). It is in one of her later paintings, however, that Elaine tries to come to terms with her near-death experience in the ravine by laying out on canvas the exact vision that she sees in her mind’s eye as a child. The Virgin portrayed in this painting is The Virgin of Lost Things, which, in Mexico is one of several Virgin figures turned to after “all the others had failed” (Atwood, “Articulating” 115). This painting, entitled *Unified Field Theory*, combines the two motifs permeating the novel, namely the cat’s eye marble and the image of the Virgin, since the
Virgin of Lost Things holds in her hands “an oversized cat’s eye marble, with a blue centre” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 408).

But Elaine’s revision of her past through her art is not complete without reviewing the memory of her childhood tormentor. Cordelia’s face is depicted in a painting entitled Half A Face, which, as Elaine notes, sounds odd since “Cordelia’s entire face is visible” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 227). Having repressed the memory of her friend’s tormenting treatment, Elaine does not recall Cordelia’s other, malicious face, the one she hides from adults and exposes only when in the company of her girlfriends. An adult herself, Elaine the painter can only see the outer facade of her three girlfriends, Cordelia, Grace and Carol, the image of whom she incorporates in her “self-portrait, of sorts,” entitled “Cat’s Eye” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 407). Appearing in the painting’s background through a convex pier-glass, these “three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago,” are counteracted by Elaine’s aging face, carefully outlined in the foreground with its “incipient wrinkles, the little chicken-feet at the corners of the lids” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 408). Also appearing in this convex mirror is a section of the back of Elaine’s own head as a child, with the hair described as “different, [and] younger” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 408). By superimposing the present portrait of Elaine on her partly revealed past self, the painting “Cat’s Eye” acts as a mise-en-abyme, since it visually reflects the novel’s depiction of Elaine’s retrospective glance on her former days in Toronto.

With the various technical and emotional preparations for Elaine’s retrospective exhibition building up the reader’s anticipation throughout the novel, the penultimate chapter maps out the exact details of this show’s setup, to the extent that the reader, being guided by Elaine’s narration from one painting to another, feels that he/she is literally viewing the landscape laid out in front of him/her. However, this reader/viewer is presented with the privileged angle of Elaine’s own perspective as she ruminates over her entire life’s work.
Moreover, by detachedly viewing her paintings arranged on the gallery’s walls by chronological order, Elaine acquires a new vision of her past and of herself. Before the exhibition takes place, Elaine refers to the incident when she regains the repressed memories of her past by looking into her discarded cat’s eye marble. At the gallery before the exhibition’s opening, however, by looking into the essence of her paintings, Elaine realizes that most of her art was executed out of a pure need for vengeance. Acknowledging the futility of such hatred, she says: “An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (Atwood, Cat’s Eye 405).

Moreover, Elaine also exchanges the scrutinizing gaze which she had focused on Mrs. Smeath through her paintings with a more humane and understanding vision of this woman. Looking at the numerous paintings of Mrs. Smeath, Elaine reveals a maturity which she lacked at the moment of creation:

It’s the eyes I look at now. I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small-town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was.

(Atwood, Cat’s Eye 405)

Such a newfound enlightened vision induces Elaine to return to the ravine of her childhood to make peace with the ever elusive Cordelia. Once there, Elaine experiences another vision, but this time it is the image of Cordelia which appears, called back by Elaine’s memories. This image, however, is not that of the menacing Cordelia who rules over Elaine’s consciousness, but a reflection of Elaine herself as a weak and helpless victim. Just as she discerns Mrs. Smeath’s vulnerability, Elaine also discovers the reason behind Cordelia’s cruelty towards her by saying: “There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same
knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same which to be loved . . . But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were (Atwood, Cat's Eye 419). Understanding Cordelia’s motives, therefore, restores the warmth of Elaine’s vision, which grows in clarity and power. Elaine gladly embraces her visual release, saying: “The snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke” (Atwood, Cat's Eye 419). Emulating her own deliverance by the Virgin Mary’s compassion, Elaine reaches out for her friend and tells her: “It's all right . . . You can go home now” (Atwood, Cat's Eye 419). In this manner, Cordelia ceases to haunt her friend’s mind, leaving this painter with a sense of lost time and diminishing memories, whose empowering light, she says, is “not much . . . but enough to see by” (Atwood, Cat's Eye 421).

As long as Elaine acts as the interpreter of the meanings and the visual references imbued in her art, this artist’s exhibited paintings remain closely linked to the context of their creator’s life, providing the reader with revealing insights into Elaine’s experiences. These paintings, however, when separated from the context of Elaine’s life and mounted on the walls of the Sub-Version gallery, become exposed to the disconcerting gaze of any random viewer, who can imbue them with his own interpretations. In the case of Elaine’s retrospective, a catalogue prepared by Charna, the gallery’s director, provides the viewers who attend the opening with tailor-made interpretations, provided not by the artist, but by Charna herself. These contrived attempts at capturing the spirit of Elaine’s paintings serve as distorting impressions based on prevalent theoretical generalizations about art, driving Elaine to emphatically say: “Galleries are frightening places, places of evaluation, of judgment” (Atwood, Cat's Eye 19).

The paintings of the toaster, the coffee percolator and the wringer washer, for instance, are tagged with inane labels, describing them as Risley’s “early forays . . . into the realm of female symbolism and the charismatic nature of domestic objects” (Atwood, Cat's Eye 404). The lack of any insightful reference
to the mind of the artist behind the painting’s visual surface serves to alienate the artist Elaine from her own art, relegating her to the position of a viewer looking at the works as if for the first time through the misleading guidance of the “professional-looking computer-and-laser-printer” catalogue (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 404). “I stand there, my grin turning to stone, institutionalized,” says Elaine (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 412).

Another alienating strike at Elaine’s artistic identity occurs when she sees a poster with her name and face printed on it, announcing her retrospective exhibition. Her picture, however, is defaced by a “curled, flowing moustache” and a “graceful goatee to match” (Atwood *Cat’s Eye* 20) drawn on her face, which intensify what York describes as “Atwood’s play on literary iconization, [suggesting] . . . that only the truly iconic invites such desecration” (“Over All” 248). Elaine soaks up her growing eminence, which she describes as creeping “like gangrene up [her] legs” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 412), saying in a sarcastic tone: “I have achieved, finally, a face that a moustache can be drawn on, a face that attracts moustaches. A public face, a face worth defacing” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 20).

Hence, by the end of the novel, Elaine’s paintings, constantly tossed from one theoretical field to another, depending on the viewer, acquire a life of their own. Despite the institutionalization of her paintings within the walls of a gallery and their appropriation by the public eye, they remain very important in the artist’s life insofar as they perform a purgative function in Elaine’s life. For Elaine’s subjugation to an intense purging process whilst painting and viewing her art is what ultimately saves this artist from extreme trauma. Moreover, through her art, Elaine is able to view her past experiences with some peace of mind, as well as achieve a level of humane compassion that leads her to forgive her worst emotional abusers, namely Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia. Such empowering abilities, art’s ultimate gift to Elaine, are what remain permanently lodged in Elaine’s
artistic mind long after the paintings are completed, sold, or stowed away. Elaine, surrounded by the summation of her life’s work, expresses the strong sense of individuality which her artistic talent had instilled in her, saying:

   I walk the room, surrounded by the time I’ve made; which is not a place, which is only a blur, the moving edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself, like a wave. I may have thought I was preserving something from time, salvaging something; like all those painters, centuries ago, who thought they were bringing Heaven to Earth . . . I no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I’m what’s left over. (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 409)
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

Atwood's unwavering dedication to her art as well as her sense of responsibility as a writer towards her readers impels this prolific writer to explore in her novels such important issues as the function of artistic creativity and the ultimate role of the artist vis-à-vis his/her social milieu. For Atwood, "[t]he real power of art is to enhance life, to make it more fully humane and thus to obliterate the polarities between the real and the fantastic" (qtd. in Rigney, Margaret Atwood 8). Such fixed convictions are entrenched in the two novels, Lady Oracle and Cat's Eye, in which Atwood's keen portrayal of the artist and her creations serves to place the reader in a strategic position which enables him/her to assess each of the protagonist's creative process and the function of its end product. However, although Atwood's standpoint regarding the function of art in Lady Oracle and Cat's Eye remains unchanged, the manner by which she relays her views in these two novels differs.

The delineation of Atwood's representation of the nature and function of art in each of the two novels, a task undertaken in the thematic analysis of the present dissertation, shows the pronounced shift in Atwood's manner of conveying her opinions on art. While the author, in Lady Oracle, implicitly warns against the evils of misusing art by depicting the complex character and the artistic output of the protagonist Joan Foster, this writer, in Cat's Eye, endorses the curative function of the creative process and product by drawing, in vivid colors, the details of Elaine Risley's life and art.

Moreover, the shift in Atwood's tone between the two novels is most evident in her illustrative characterization of the protagonists in Lady Oracle and Cat's Eye, the first of whom is a writer of costume gothics while the second is a
famous painter. Although both Joan and Elaine depend greatly on their art for their emotional survival, and look back at their pasts through the perspective of their artistic medium of choice, they nevertheless differ in using their respective creative means. The outcome of such varying employments of art serves to arm these artists with different artistic sensibilities, so much so that Joan’s abuse of art promotes this writer’s immersion in a self-delusional existence, while Elaine’s paintings procure for their creator ultimate self-knowledge. Atwood herself defines the function of art as being the artist’s means of attaining a complete understanding not only of him/herself, but of his/her surroundings as well: “The writer, [or any other kind of artist] is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others” (Second Words 348).

Bearing this definition in mind, Joan’s art becomes therefore a deconstructive force in Joan’s life. Seeking to escape from one dreary reality after another, Joan takes refuge in her costume gothics which, in turn, repeatedly invade her perceptions of the physical world around her, turning her reality into an imaginative mix of passionate love and imminent danger. However, by repeatedly evading her reality and escaping into a constructed fictional world of Byronic heroes and illusive romance, Joan, by the end of the novel, loses all control over reality, and thus remains emotionally stagnant due to her limiting myopic vision. In Cat’s Eye, by contrast, Elaine’s paintings, described as “realistic images . . . used to map a psychic landscape in . . . [this artist’s] project of painting time” (Howells, “Cat’s Eye” 214), are tangible representations of Elaine’s reality as a child. Resurfacing in Elaine’s artistic consciousness as an adult to occupy the subject matter of this artist’s paintings, this reality provides the emotionally damaged Elaine with an inner reconciliation with her painful childhood experiences and an enriching new vision of her past tormentors, namely, her best girlfriend Cordelia and Mrs. Sneath, Elaine’s image of God on earth. Hence, in
Lady Oracle reality is permeated by art whereas in Cat’s Eye art is permeated by reality.

In this manner, Atwood succeeds in promoting her singular understanding of the function of art in two of her novels by first offering, in Lady Oracle, an unfavorable portrayal of the artistic process, only to overthrow it in favor of a more positive account of the artist’s metaphoric journey from visual blindness to a hyper-conscious awareness of herself as well as her surroundings. Thus, unlike Joan, who remains debarred from true epiphany, Elaine achieves the distinguished status of simultaneously being an “I-witness” probing the machinations of her inner self, and an “eye-witness,” providing her audience with the opportunity of finding their own selves when looking into this artist’s portrait of the world. Hence, the function of the different artistic media introduced by Atwood in her novels becomes a metonymy for the function of literature as a whole, since literature, according to Atwood, like other forms of artistic expression, should act as a mirroring agent of reality: “The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in” (qtd. in Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s 386).

Moreover, Atwood’s self-consciousness as a writer, one who is keenly aware of the intricacies of the artistic process, compels her to reexamine the patriarchal mythologies which impose debilitating constraints on the female artist’s creative impulse. Such a review is clearly manifested in Atwood’s characterization of Joan and Elaine in Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye respectively, as well as in this author’s endeavors to deconstruct, in Lady Oracle, patriarchal interpretations of mythical figures such as the Triple Goddess, only to restore, in her later work, Cat’s Eye, this goddess’ powers by depicting the curative influence of the image of the Virgin Mary on Elaine’s healing process.

Hence Atwood, to subvert Graves’ limiting definition of woman as a silent muse in his depiction of the Triple Goddess, unhesitatingly arms her protagonist in
Lady Oracle with the powers of creativity, regardless of the quality of Joan’s creations. In doing so, Atwood not only combats the patriarchal dismissal of women’s talents, but also frees Joan the artist, and by extension all women, from being constantly associated with mythological figures such as Diana, Venus and Hecate who respectively denote innocence, extreme beauty, and sinister evil. To accomplish her act of deliverance, Atwood undercuts each of the three stages characterizing the Triple Goddess cycle through the effective use of parody.

In Cat’s Eye, Atwood’s vehement deconstruction of Graves’ Triple Goddess gives way to this writer’s celebration of the powers of the Virgin Mary, a figure considered unique here. Atwood disengages Mary from any patriarchal associations, opting to salvage the remnants of the Great Goddess’ powers inherent in this religious female figure by portraying her as an independent and powerful goddess, whose compassionate qualities serve to restore the visionary powers of the painter Elaine. After appearing to Elaine as she lay half dead in the ravine, the Virgin Mary becomes a source of emotional and artistic power in the life of this protagonist, safeguarding her from the torments of vicious girlfriends and inspiring her to create some of her most expressive paintings. Thus, rejecting women’s confining role as inspirational objects by depicting them as voluble creators, as well as exchanging the negative attributes inherent in Robert Graves’ Triple Goddess with the positive influence of the compassionate Virgin Mary, Atwood, in her creative journey from Lady Oracle to Cat’s Eye, succeeds in replacing the “destructive” and alienating myths which she encounters in patriarchal discourse with “liveable” myths that allow women, especially female artists, to partake in the creative process (“Interview” by Margaret Kaminiski 13).

After tracing Atwood’s artistic vision in two of her novels, namely Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye, as well as analyzing the function of the artistic medium employed by each of Joan Foster and Elaine Risley, it is evident that Atwood’s penetrating gaze does not lose any of its piercing qualities from one novel to
another. Although this writer may modify her mode of expression, she
nevertheless possesses a distinct authorial voice recognizable in all of her works,
stylistic variations notwithstanding. Coral Ann Howells aptly summarizes the
exceptional quality of Atwood's unwavering interest in diverse artistic domains
including fiction, poetry and literary criticism by saying:

\[
\ldots \text{within this seemingly infinite variety there is a recognizably}
\text{Atwoodian voice, witty, self ironical, politically and morally}
\text{engaged as her worldly texts respond to what is actually}
\text{going on in her own place and time, speaking her double vision of}
\text{how things look on the surface and what else is happening at the}
\text{same time inside, underneath or elsewhere. (Margaret Atwood}
\text{162)}
\]

Moreover, although Atwood's two novels *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* have
been viewed as products of Atwood's feminism or have been subjected to the
psychological approach, they are in fact postmodernist novels, despite their
writer's reluctance to be labeled as an adherent to one -ism or another, including
postmodernism (Ingersoll, "Margaret Atwood's" 17). These novels'
postmodernist characteristics become evident when analyzing the theme of the
function of art pervading both *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, a task undertaken by
the present study. Hence, the use of such postmodernist devices as parody,
fragmentation, intertextuality and ambiguity abound in both novels, as well as the
interplay between highbrow texts and popular forms, the subversive technique of
breaking all boundaries between reality and fiction, and the intermingling of such
genres as fiction and autobiography. The blend of high and low literature, for
instance, a method permeating a novel like *Lady Oracle* whose text is infused with
excerpts from the protagonist's gothic romances, serves to subvert both the
conventional literary tradition of the novel as well as the gothic nature of Joan's
steam romances, since at the end of *Lady Oracle*, the boundaries between the
novel's reality and Joan's fiction become blurred. This contesting of boundaries as well as the postmodernist tension between the process and product of creativity is also present in *Cat's Eye*, in which Atwood challenges the limits between fiction and autobiography, thus self-consciously incorporating into the novel's text several references to her own background.

Hence, by closely analyzing these postmodernist techniques to investigate the function of art in the two novels, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, this study procures the answers to the following questions posed at the beginning of this thesis: Is art a form of escape? Does it provide the artists with healing powers vis-à-vis their respective pasts? Can art become a dangerous tool if misused? What do these works of art have to say about the artists themselves? Does Margaret Atwood's view of art change from one novel to another?

After handling each of these issues separately, it becomes evident that art is an escape mechanism in *Lady Oracle*, since Joan Foster uses her artistic talent to constantly evade her reality. Thus, the creative process in this novel, instead of providing Joan with empowering insights, serves to further implicate this protagonist in an unruly web of lies and becomes a menace to the artist herself. Nevertheless, the role of art differs in the life of *Cat's Eye*’s protagonist, since it provides Elaine with the healing powers which this artist desperately needs to be reconciled with her past. Atwood’s inherent conception of the function of art, however, is the same in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, although the manner by which this writer imparts her views varies from one novel to the other. In this manner, the theme of art in both novels serves to reveal the inner world of the protagonists, Joan and Elaine, as well as to elucidate Atwood’s own vision regarding the ultimate function of artistic creativity.

Moreover, the universal themes handled by Atwood in her novels, such as the relationship between men and women, body and mind, past and present, culture and nature, reality and imagination, do not deflect altogether from the
Canadian situation, since Atwood links such binary opposites with the ongoing tension between Canada’s marginal position and the center-occupying English and American traditions as well as the relationship between the English and French factions in Canada itself. However, although Atwood’s Canadian identity serves, to a great extent, in assisting and influencing this writer’s persistent exploration of herself and her surroundings, through which she achieves the ideal literary status of an “I-witness” and an “eye-witness,” Atwood transcends the national boundaries of Canadian literature so much so that her writing acquires an international dimension. Ultimately, the kind of literature which Atwood is offering defies categories, since it articulates the concerns of a nationalistic writer as well as reflects the condition of an international audience. Atwood herself believes the creative process of writing as well as reading to be “a revelation of the full range of our human response to the world--that is, what it means to be human, on earth” (Atwood, “Interview” by Geoff Hancock 144).


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