

**The Politics of Body and Language in the Writing of
Margaret Atwood**

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a prolific, versatile writer with a distinguished, international reputation. This dissertation explores the themes of body and language in relation to male and female power politics throughout Atwood's poetry, short stories and novels. Other issues related to body and language such as pregnancy, maternity, disease, pornography and split personality are also discussed and analysed.

The thesis is organised in a thematic rather than chronological order in four chapters. My approach to the ideas of body and language is mainly feminist and psychoanalytic. I use the theories of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Sigmund Freud, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Elaine Scarry, Maud Ellmann and others to inform my approach to Atwood's writing. In addition, I use revisionist mythmaking and original Greek myths related to the themes of body and language. Finally, the historical and social circumstances of Atwood's texts are also an important point of reference, because they influence the course of events and the making of decisions.

Chapter one explores the volatile female body versus the hard male body and the limitations of human language in Atwood's novels *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle* and collection of poems 'Circe/Mud Poems' (*You Are Happy*). Chapter two discusses the novels *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace* and the short story 'Giving Birth' (*Dancing Girls*) in the light of pregnancy as a biological, sexual and social factor for women's exploitation. Chapter three examines how physical and psychological disease in the novels *The Edible Woman* and *Bodily Harm* becomes the motivating power for women to transcend their restrictive social roles. Chapter four analyses how women use body and language as powerful tools for causing emotional and physical harm to other women in the novels *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*.

My research is original because, to the best of my knowledge, no full study that relates the work of Margaret Atwood to the themes of body and language has been made in one thesis. This thesis has been a rewarding challenge because it also gave me the opportunity to contribute something new to knowledge by discussing some of Atwood's short stories and her more recent novel *Alias Grace* (1996) which have received very little criticism.

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Introduction

During an interview with Graeme Gibson in 1972, Margaret Atwood offers a distinction between poetry and novel writing:

I think of the novel as a different kind of thing than a poem...it's a lot more hard work. It's physical labour in a way poetry isn't. You can write a poem very quickly, and then it's done, and you've had everything, all possible satisfactions and engagements with the thing, condensed into a short period of time. The equivalent for that with a novel is when you get the idea or when you get a few of the key scenes. But the problem then is sustaining your interest long enough to actually sit down and work it out, and this is difficult for me because I don't like work.¹

The distinction between a poem and a novel is useful for the reader since Atwood's work includes poetry, novels, short-stories and children's literature, as well as literary criticism. It is also pleasing to read that one of the most influential and charismatic figures in contemporary writing does not like work. Here we see Atwood as an intelligent, honest and humorous woman who admits that there are difficulties in writing.

Despite these difficulties Atwood is established as a prolific, versatile writer with distinguished international reputation. During the thirty-four years since the day she received the Governor General's Award for her poetry collection *The Circle Game* (1966), Atwood has written ten poetry collections, nine novels, four collections of short stories, three works of literary criticism, one book of history, two children's books, a script for CBC television play, and many reviews. She also illustrated *The Can Lit Food Book*, edited the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* and co-edited the *Oxford*

¹ Graeme Gibson, 'Dissecting the Way a Writer Works,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 3-4.

Book of Canadian Short Stories in English. Atwood has received numerous honorary degrees and awards, including three short-listings of her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *Alias Grace* (1996) for the Booker Prize.

In all her work Atwood shows a passionate dedication to writing as a means for renewing language and for being a moral and ethical guardian of society. She is a political writer but her definition of political is wide: 'what do we mean by "political"? What we mean is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa...how is this individual in society? How do the forces of society interact with this person?'.² With this wide definition of 'political' in mind I use the title 'The Politics of Body and Language in the Writing of Margaret Atwood'. It refers to the male-female power politics within specific social structures but also includes other themes in Atwood's work: Canada's national identity and place in the world, especially in relation to the United States, political injustice and the fight for human rights, and concern about the increasing worldwide pollution and destruction of nature.

Atwood's work is mainly written in an objective, distant voice which treads a fine line between cynicism and optimism. This voice might not appear to encourage the reader to get actively involved with the text. But the reason Atwood is detached from her literary creations is that she wants to allow her reader to have an objective relation to her work. The verve and control of her sentences along with her attention

² Elizabeth Meese, 'The Empress Has No Clothes,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 185.

to detail reveal the power of a passionate and intelligent mind. This does not mean that she is not capable of being humorous (‘ “[e]very woman should have at least one baby.” She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer’³), sensual (‘[w]hile he writes, I feel as if he is... drawing on me - drawing on my skin - ...with an old-fashioned goose pen...As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face, and are softly opening and closing their wings’⁴), or deeply moving (‘[i]t’s the eyes I look at now...they are...defeated eyes...heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man...Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was’⁵).

An avid reader herself, Atwood judges good literary work by its power to engage and move its readers: [i]f you think of a book as an experience... you’re going to feel some sense of responsibility as to what kinds of experiences you’re going to put people through. You’re not going to put them through a lot of blood and gore for nothing; at least I’m not’.⁶ I discuss and analyse some of the major experiences that Atwood puts her reader through in the four chapters of my thesis which are arranged in a thematic rather than chronological order. It is useful to define here the two most significant themes of the thesis - body and language in Atwood’s work - and explain how smaller themes are related and discussed in the four chapters.

³ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1980) 40-41.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996) 69.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1990) 405.

⁶ Jo Brans, ‘Using What You’re Given,’ *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 151.

Body

The human body is one of the most important themes in all of Atwood's work. She exposes the way it is viewed, the way it is moulded into pre-described roles and ideal beauty standards and the way it is used in a patriarchal society. In Atwood's words:

The body as a concept has always been a concern of mine...I think that people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their bodies...I'm interested in where you feel your body can go without being...put into danger. How you see the adornment of your body, which every culture does, to some extent, in different ways. Whether you see that as something forced upon you or something that you do of your own free choice. Whether you see beauty as a tool...as part of your stock in trade that you have to use to get what you want. All of these things. And it is very central to everybody.⁷

Although it is true that the male body also has to conform to social regulations, the female body always suffers more in an androcentric society. In Atwood's short story 'The Female Body' from the collection *Good Bones* (1992) a playful but also sardonic female voice describes in seven sections the inferior and sometimes shocking male representations of the female body.

In the first section, the female narrator describes her own body as an object separate from herself: 'my controversial topic...my limping topic, my nearsighted topic...my vulgar topic...my aging topic...in its oversized coat and winter boots'.⁸ Throughout the story the female body is described as an animate or inanimate object; it is the

⁷ Elizabeth Meese, 'The Empress Has No Clothes,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 187-188.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'The Female Body', *Bones & Murder* (1983, 1992; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 78. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

sidewalk on which the body walks that feels ‘as if it were flesh and blood’ (78). In section two the female voice describes the accessories of the female body, from the Victorian era to the present day. These accessories either discipline and confine the female body (‘panty girdle...brassiere, stomacher, virgin zone...veil’ [78]) or turn it into a spectacle for the male gaze and desire (‘garter belt...spike heels, nose ring...fishnet stockings...chokers...feather boa [78]). Although some women may enjoy wearing these accessories (Jocasta in *Bodily Harm* [1981], Zcnia in *The Robber Bride* [1993]), their main purpose is to restrict the female body into the submissive social roles that women are expected to perform. This theme appears in *The Edible Woman* (1969) where Marian’s body is ‘stuffed’ in a tight red dress, in *Bodily Harm* where Rennie tries leather underwear to please Jake and in *Alias Grace* (1996), where corsets have a destructive, deforming effect on the female body.

In the third section, the female body is presented from the inside as a plastic object for anatomy lessons:

The Female Body is made of transparent plastic and lights up when you plug it in. You press a button to illuminate the different systems. The Circulatory System is red, for the heart and arteries, purple for the veins; the Respiratory System is blue, the Lymphatic System is yellow, the Digestive System is green, with liver and kidneys in aqua. The nerves are done in orange and the brain in pink. The skeleton, as you might expect, is white (79).

Less clean and clinical descriptions of the female body turned inside out can be found in *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).

The last part of this section describes female sexuality as an embarrassing topic and female reproductive ability as something that can be controlled by society: ‘[t]he

Reproductive System is optional, and can be removed. It comes with or without a miniature embryo. Parental judgement can thereby be exercised. We do not wish to frighten or offend' (79). This is related to part six, where a mother gives advice to her daughter about sexuality: '[p]leasure in the female is not a requirement. Pair-bonding is stronger in geese. We're not talking about love, we're talking about biology. That's how we all got here, daughter' (82). Female sexuality is regarded as frightening and shameful and female pleasure as exempt during lovemaking. According to Luce Irigaray, '[w]hat remains the most completely prohibited to woman, of course, is that she should express something of her own sexual pleasure. This latter is supposed to remain a "realm" of discourse, produced by men. For in fact feminine pleasure signifies the greatest threat to all masculine discourse' (Irigaray's emphasis).⁹ This theme along with the regulation of female fertility by the husband or partner or by society appears in most of Atwood's work.

In part four a father does not want his daughter to own a Barbie doll because it 'gives a young girl a false notion of beauty, not to mention anatomy. If a real woman was built like that she'd fall on her face' (79). This is exactly what happens in the next shocking and violent scene, where the doll and teenage daughter are seen as one:

She came whizzing down the stairs, thrown like a dart. She was stark naked. Her hair had been chopped off, her head was turned back to front, she was missing some toes and she'd been tattooed all over her body with purple ink...She hit the potted azalea, trembled there for a moment like a blotched angel, and fell (80).

⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (1985; New York: Cornell University Press, 1996) 157.

In this scene the human female body (teenage daughter) is mingled with the plastic female body (doll). The implication is that although the father says that he does not want this doll to be a role-model for his daughter, society tends to turn women into naked, mutilated and speechless dolls. This theme also appears in 'Circe/Mud Poems' from the collection *You Are Happy* (1974), *The Edible Woman* and *Bodily Harm*.

In part five, the female body turns into various domestic objects like 'a door knocker, a bottle-opener...a clock with a ticking belly...something to hold up lampshades...a nutcracker, just squeeze the brass legs together and out comes your nut' (81). Then it is used to advertise and sell various products such as 'cars, beer, shaving lotion, cigarettes, hard liquor...diet plans and diamonds, and desire in tiny crystal bottles' (81). In *The Edible Woman* we see mainly female bodies advertising products; women are used by men in this trade between objects and money. In Irigaray's words, '[w]oman has functioned most often...as merchandise, a commodity passing from one owner to another, from one consumer to another, a possible currency of exchange between one and the other'.¹⁰ Apart from using their bodies to sell products, women are also required to sell their bodies as products: '[l]isten, you want to reduce the national debt, don't you? Aren't you patriotic? That's the spirit. That's my girl' (81). The reference to the female body as 'a natural resource' (81) reminds the reader of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Handmaids are forced to sell their fertility in order to avoid death by exposure to chemical wastes.

¹⁰ Ibid., 157-58.

Part seven offers a combination of patriarchal theories about the female body from psychoanalysis and popular science. There is a description of the difference between the male and the female brain. The two parts of the female brain are closely connected in contrast to the male brain which is 'a different matter. Only a thin connection. Space over here, time over there, music and arithmetic in their own sealed compartments...That's the male brain for you. Objective' (83). This is the reason men and women have problems communicating: 'she says, Would you like a cheese sandwich...a cup of tea? And he grinds his teeth because she doesn't understand, and wanders off...searching for the other half, the twin who could complete him' (83). Men can theorise about the universe because women can take care of mundane things like a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea. In the last paragraph of the story the man realises that he has lost the female body of the mother. In psychoanalytic terms the loss of the maternal body is necessary so the child can move into the social realm of language. The theme of women's relation to the maternal body, appears in *Surfacing* (1972) and *Lady Oracle* (1976).

But although Atwood claims in the short story 'Alien Territory' that 'men don't have any bodies at all',¹¹ they do, and expect women to preserve these bodies for them.

According to Irigaray,

In the system of production that we know, including that of sexual production, men are distanced from their bodies. They have relied upon their sex, their language and their technology to go on and on building a world further and further removed from their relation to the corporeal. But they are corporeal. They therefore need to assure themselves that someone...is looking after the body for

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Alien Territory,' *Bones & Murder* (1983, 1992; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 108.

them. Their women or wives...are guardians of their corporeal unity.¹²

This theme is explored in *The Edible Woman* and 'Circe/Mud Poems' with the female body as a mirror, where the man can look and see his reflection. Mirrors are masculine weapons in Atwood's writings: they imprison or offer a distorted picture of the female body. Her women should refuse to see their bodies as a reflected image of the desires of others.

There is always a nervous interchange of love and mistrust between men and women in Atwood's work. Patriarchal attitudes which define the male body as active and the female body as passive or equate woman with the body and man with the head form Atwood's male-female power politics. She does not think that she is harder on men than on women. When asked why the men in her books are so weak, Atwood's answer is:

older men think of my men as wimps because they lead conventional lives and certainly never have to pick up their own socks. The men I write about are men as seen by a woman, and who knows a man better than a woman? He doesn't posture in locker room style before her...beating his own chest. A man's view of men will be quite different than a woman's. We know about their feelings, anxieties and vulnerabilities.¹³

About her portrayal of women she comments: 'I like interesting women with lively minds, a sense of humour and good stories to tell. I write about these kinds of women, but with a flaw or a tragedy. You can't have life run like clockwork in novels. You

¹² Luce Irigaray, 'Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order,' *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991) 48-49.

¹³ Atwood's papers (box 130). Daisy Fitch, 'Women in Atwood's books have sense of humour, lively minds,' *The Times* (Trenton, N.J.) 5 May 1985 : BB1, BB12.

can't have a novel in which nothing happens'.¹⁴ The main conflict that Atwood's women have to face lies in the difference between the way society perceives their body (passive and caring mother, wife and prostitute) and the way they perceive their body and its possibilities (dynamic and joyful human being).

Although these female characters develop a feminist consciousness in order to transform themselves, Atwood does not like the label 'feminist' for her work unless 'feminism' as a term is clearly defined:

I'm a feminist...But on the other hand, do I think that all men should be...shoved off a cliff? The answer is no. So I think I'm one of those people in between two extremes. I don't think women should be made to feel incompetent...or inferior, nor do I think they should be put down for choosing to be married, mothers or flower arrangers. I think if feminism is defined too narrowly, we're going to lose a lot of women.¹⁵

Atwood includes all kinds of women in her work who 'when facing an ordeal don't stick their heads in the oven or jump off a bridge. Instead they go out and confront their monster and triumph over it'.¹⁶ By the end of each poem, short story or novel many of Atwood's women manage to move closer to what she describes as position four in her basic victim positions: '[t]o be a creative non-victim' (Atwood's emphasis).¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., BB1.

¹⁵ Atwood's papers (box 159). Judy Kiemerud, 'Her women suffer, survive,' *New York Times* 11 Apr. 1982.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996) 38.

Language

In Atwood's short story 'Cold-Blooded' from the collection *Good Bones*, a group of female moths from outer space visit earth. Their speaker offers a satirical description of human beings including their use of language: 'we discovered that the incoherent squakings and gruntings that emerged from them, especially when pinched, were in fact a form of language, and after that we made rapid progress'.¹⁸ The humour and irony of the description demystifies the importance of language for which we pride ourselves so much as human beings. As a writer, Atwood has a love-hate relationship with language:

I think the writer is always both the lover of language and its enemy, because any single language will only do so many things for you. It is not within the power of a language to go beyond itself very far. You can push words around and bend them but you can't get beyond the structure of that language.¹⁹

The power of Atwood's language seems to come from her use of understatement.

What is sometimes perceived as coldness in her tone actually serves as a means of stretching words, such as *love*, in order to reveal alternative meanings: '[n]ext time we commit / love, we ought to / choose in advance what to kill'.²⁰ Humans can use language to play destructive games and inflict pain on each other in an attempt to control one another (*Cat's Eye* [1988], *The Robber Bride*).

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'Cold-Blooded,' *Bones and Murder* (1983; 1992; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 87.

¹⁹ Atwood's papers (box 129). Tony Curtis, 'Interview With Margaret Atwood,' *Madog* 3. 1 (1979): 52.

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Their attitudes differ,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 159.

One of the most important themes in Atwood's writings is the complexity and inability of language to express human emotions and things that are happening to the human, but especially to the female body. This theme is discussed and analysed in the four chapters of my thesis. Atwood summarizes the shortcomings of human language in her short story 'Mute' from the collection *Murder in the Dark* (1983):

Whether to speak or not: the question that comes up again...
Another clutch of nouns, a fistful: look how they pick them over,
the shoppers for words, pinching here and there to see if they're
bruised yet. Verbs are no better, they wind them up, let them go,
scrabbling over the table, wind them up again too tight and the
spring breaks.²¹

The 'tools' of language, verbs and nouns, are presented here as useless objects; speech and communication through language seems impossible. Besides, language has a 'bad smell'²² coming from rotted mouths and the speakers cannot use it until they find a way to wash it clean.

It is mainly Atwood's female characters who find it very hard to use language as a means for expressing their bodies and emotions because they live in a patriarchal society and feel that language is a male weapon. As Irigaray claims, ' "*the masculine*" is not prepared to share the initiative of discourse. It prefers to experiment with speaking, writing, enjoying "woman" rather than leaving to that other any right to intervene, to "act", in her own interests' (Irigaray's emphasis).²³ But

²¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Mute,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 83.

²³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (1985; New York: Cornell University Press, 1996) 157.

Atwood's women act in their own interests by finding alternative means of expression and communication. Body and language are connected in the sense that women use their bodies in order to 'talk' (*Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, 'Circe/Mud Poems', *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*). In other cases the bodies do the 'talking' even against their female owners' will by giving birth ('Giving Birth'), refusing food (*The Edible Woman*), developing breast cancer (*Bodily Harm*) and by using the somatic language of hysteria (*Alias Grace*).

Other ways of replacing traditional language are what Julia Kristeva names 'poetic' language, which is a language free from syntax and close to the female body (*The Robber Bride*), weaving ('Circe/Mud Poems', *Alias Grace*) and knitting (*The Handmaid's Tale*). Finally food often replaces language (*The Edible Woman*) since they are both linked to the human mouth: we roll words which taste like food and chew food which tastes like words in our mouths (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*). Both food and words should satisfy not only physical but also emotional hunger. After they manage to achieve some emotional and physical transformation ('you're waiting for the word, the one that will finally be right'²⁴) Atwood's women find that they can, to a lesser or greater degree, start using traditional language as '[a] compound, the generation of life, mud and light'.²⁵

²⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Mute,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

After elaborating on the two major themes as well as other related themes, I will now present and explain the theoretical background of my thesis. My approach to the ideas of body and language is mainly feminist and psychoanalytic. I use the theories of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Scarry, Maud Ellmann and others to inform my approach to Atwood's writing. I draw extensively from Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's theories on the pre-ocdipal, maternal body and language and on the paternal, symbolic law.²⁶ I analyse Kristeva's theories on the semiotic, symbolic, abjection, laughter and poetic language and those of Irigaray on mother-daughter and female-male relationships in relation to patriarchal language.

Although both Kristeva and Irigaray are French feminists, there are differences in their approaches. As Elizabeth Grosz claims,

Where Kristeva challenges or deconstructs the notion of sexual identity, Irigaray actively affirms a project challenging and deconstructing the cultural representations of femininity so that it may be capable of representation and recognition in its own self-defined terms. She insists on precisely the notion of women's *sexual specificity* which Kristeva seeks to undo (Grosz's emphasis).²⁷

Irigaray's style of writing is also different to Kristeva's:

Her writings...involve new forms of discourse...reproduce the rhythms of spoken French; her sentences are frequently 'unfinished', half-said, as they might occur in conversation...Irigaray has none of Kristeva's reverence (for systematicity, for science, for

²⁶ From Julia Kristeva I use the books *The Kristeva Reader*, *Powers of Horror*, *Tales of Love and Desire in Language*. From Luce Irigaray the books *The Irigaray Reader*, *This Sex Which Is Not One* and the articles 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', 'When Our Lips Speak Together'.

²⁷ Elizabeth Grosz. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd., 1989) 101.

precision, for ‘fair’ representations of other texts, etc.), nor her commitment to an ongoing, fundamentally totalising and systematic *world view* or overarching explanatory framework. Kristeva in turn has none of Irigaray’s irreverence, her playful mockery and her sense of outrageousness (Grosz’s emphasis).²⁸

A full exploration of the similarities and differences between these two most articulate and fascinating psychoanalysts and philosophers is beyond the scope of this thesis. I use their theories on body and language in order to offer a convincing and original reading of Atwood’s work.

Closer to Irigaray’s poetic, fluid but nonetheless serious writing style is the work of the third French feminist I draw on, Hélène Cixous. I use ideas about male-female politics, the maternal body and female language and writing from Cixous’ celebrated article ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’. In addition to feminism and psychoanalysis, I use revisionist mythmaking and original Greek myths related to the themes of body and language. Finally, the historical and social circumstances of Atwood’s texts are also an important point of reference in my thesis. I use historical material to reveal the social context of Atwood’s work, relate it to postwar Canadian history, feminism of the late sixties, seventeenth-century American puritanism and nineteenth-century Canadian life and explore the ways it influences the course of events and the making of decisions.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁹ Some of the historical books I use are Lyle Koehler’s *A Search for Power: The ‘Weaker Sex’ in Seventeenth-century New England*, Deborah Gorham’s *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Angus McLaren’s *Birth Control In Nineteenth-Century England*, Constance Backhouse’s *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth Century Canada*, Joanne Meyerowitz’s *Not June Cleaver: Women And Gender In Postwar America, 1945-1960*, and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*.

Although my main focus is on Atwood's novels, I discuss the poems 'Circe/Mud Poems' from the collection *You Are Happy* as well as individual poems such as 'Book of Ancestors', 'Siren Song' (*You Are Happy*), 'A Red Shirt' (*Two-Headed Poems*, 1978) and 'True Stories', 'Postcard' (*True Stories*, 1981). I also examine and compare some short stories which have themes similar to those of the novels and poems. The discussion of poems and short stories reveals how the same theme is treated in three different literary genres, and demonstrates that not enough critical attention has been paid to Atwood's short stories.

Chapter One

Volatile Female Bodies and Spiritual Rebirth: *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) and 'Circe/Mud Poems' (*You Are Happy*, 1974).

Introduction

When we think about a young, unnamed woman who works as a commercial illustrator, Joan, the writer of modestly successful Gothics and Homer's Circe, the beautiful but sometimes sinister sorceress with transformative powers, we cannot possibly imagine what these three women have in common. The young woman visits the remote island of her childhood in Northern Canada in order to find out what happened to her mysteriously vanished father, Joan is in an Italian seaside resort after having planned her fake suicide in Toronto and Circe transforms Odysseus' fellow-men into pigs. In Atwood's work, however, these three women share the loss of their identity and an effort to be reborn physically and spiritually. Despite the fact that my approaches to and interpretations of *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) and 'Circe/Mud Poems' from the poetry collection *You Are Happy* (1974) are different (psychoanalytic, gothic and revisionist mythmaking), the common, underlying theme of those works is always the inability of language to express the female narrator's feelings: '[i]t was language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine'.³⁰ The reason why words seem 'tongueless and broken'³¹ is because language is the product of a patriarchal society which devalues women and circumscribes their functions.

³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 100.

³¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 210.

Given the inadequacy of language, these three women use their bodies in order to 'talk'. There is a close relationship between body and language here: female bodies function as texts where the reader can see the women's sorrow and their desire to gain a better, happier identity. I call their bodies 'volatile' because all these three women transgress the biological and social boundaries of their bodies, hoping for positive transformation. The unnamed divorcee in *Surfacing* changes her body from human to animal - 'there's a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets...hair like a frayed bath-mat stuck with leaves and twigs'³² - and then back to human. Joan in *Lady Oracle* changes her body from fat to thin: 'I was still overweight...But...I had only eighteen pounds to go...Suddenly I was down to the required weight...I was now a different person, and it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen.'³³ Circe in 'Circe/Mud Poems' on the other hand, metaphorically allows Odysseus to change her beautiful body into a headless corpse made out of mud, which serves pornographic rather than artistic purposes: '[e]very sunny day / they would row across to the island where she lived.../ ...and make love to / her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown / wormy flesh'.³⁴ Later she realises her mistake and reclaims her whole, godlike body.

Although these three women share a desire to reach the end of their journey, - to be reborn as more complete and joyful human beings - they follow different paths to get there. The unnamed woman in *Surfacing* lives like an animal in the woods in order to

³² Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 184.

³³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1982) 137, 141.

³⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 214.

make peace with the ghosts of her parents. She also longs to become pregnant by her current lover Joe in order to forgive herself for the abortion that her previous married lover forced her to have. With this new pregnancy she unites nature and culture by re-introducing herself to her own body and loving it again. Joan in *Lady Oracle* becomes slim in order to free herself from her mother and find love, searches and fails to find the pre-oedipal phallic mother in relationships with men and refuses to become a mother herself before she makes peace with her mother's ghost. Circe in 'Circe/Mud Poems' repossesses her language along with her body from Odysseus by expanding her corporeal, spatial limits to another island where mythology finishes and real life begins. In part one of the chapter I compare the short story 'Wilderness Tips' from the collection *Wilderness Tips* (1991) to *Surfacing*, in part two Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to *Lady Oracle*, and in part three the short story 'Alien Territory' from the collection *Good Bones* (1992) to 'Circe/Mud Poems'. Atwood leaves it up to us to decide to what extent these three women transform themselves and succeed in finding happiness in the society where they live.

‘A language is everything you do’:³⁵ trauma, language and identity in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*.

Margaret Atwood’s famously unnamed female narrator³⁶ of *Surfacing* is a rather mediocre illustrator of children’s books. When her narration starts she suffers from total emotional paralysis but by the end of the novel she develops into a different person. Atwood comments that ‘*Surfacing* has elements of the mystery story and the ghost story’.³⁷ Her female narrator’s metamorphosis is triggered off when she finally encounters the ghosts of her parents: ‘[t]he heroine... is obsessed with finding the ghosts, but once she’s found them, she is released from that obsession... she realizes OK., I’ve learned something. Now I have to make my own life’.³⁸ The stages that the narrator goes through in order to make her body and head ‘clasp, interlocking like fingers’ (156) include her descent into the underworld of gods and spirits, her testing, her ascent out of the underworld, her transformation through knowledge and her return to human society.

From the beginning of the novel the narrator does not feel comfortable using human language because of its limited vocabulary: ‘[i]t was language again, I couldn’t use it because it wasn’t mine...the Eskimoes have fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love’ (100). In this chapter I will examine the narrator’s body/mind dichotomy and the inability of language to express

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 123. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

³⁶ Atwood’s narrator does not have a name because she is a voice rather than a fully developed character. She could be any woman in search of an identity.

³⁷ Linda Sandler, ‘A Question of Metamorphosis,’ *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

her thoughts and feelings. As part of my approach I will draw on Kristeva's theories of the semiotic and symbolic realms. The narrator undergoes a metamorphosis when she abandons the symbolic order of signification (along with her human nature) to return to what Kristeva names the semiotic chora of drives (and to the animal state). By the term semiotic I am not referring to the pre-oedipal stage which precedes the symbolic or oedipal stage, but to the constant semiotic pressure and eventual rupture of the symbolic boundaries (language) which exist within the symbolic realm.

Once the female narrator finds herself in this clearly irrational but, in literary terms, prolific land of drives and instincts, she needs the love of the imaginary father and the sternness of the symbolic father to help her abandon the semiotic and return to the symbolic. The workings behind the occurrence of both transferences will become clear in the course of my essay. However, I should add here that the 'imaginary father' (Kristeva's term) is not the biological father. 'He' is not even a coherent masculine subject but 'the father-mother conglomerate'.³⁹ 'He' pre-exists the oedipal stage and represents the maternal love which encourages the child to leave the maternal body and pre-linguistic phase and move to the symbolic order and linguistic phase. The symbolic father on the other hand is the judgmental father of the Law and the oedipal stage and the child's identification with him leads to his or her participation in language.

Time has a linear progression in this novel, with no giant leaps forward, but with regular flashbacks. The unfolding of events is viewed from the perspective of the female narrator who is given an objective, first-person voice. But despite its

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 40.

objectivity, this voice awakes in the reader empathy with the narrator; her traumatic past underlies all major developments in the novel. What traumatised her was the abortion she agreed to have after being emotionally blackmailed by her married lover. Cathy Caruth's enlightening definition of trauma will be helpful in my discussion: '[i]n its general definition trauma is described as a response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena'.⁴⁰ The paradox in every traumatic experience is that it does not register in the memory; no matter how intense the traumatic experience, it does not become part of our existing mental scheme. It is this impossibility of making a traumatic experience part of our history that allows us to experience trauma in the first place. The unfolding of the traumatic memory is so shocking and painful for the traumatised individual that he/she refuses to re-experience it. Such a traumatised individual is the narrator in *Surfacing*; incessantly resisting the surfacing of the traumatic memory she tries to forget.

It is not surprising then that the story develops so much before the female narrator's trauma is revealed to the reader. One of the symptoms of traumatic memory, the narrator's emotional emptiness, manifests itself in the course of the novel: 'I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time' (99). While anaesthesia is a manifestation of her traumatic memory, dissociation is her way of coping with it. The narrator suffers from what Pierre Janet, in 1894, called dissociated traumatic memory: 'when a subject does not remember a trauma its "memory" is contained in

⁴⁰ Cathy Caruth, 'Traumatic Awakenings,' *Performance and Performativity*, eds. Andrew Parker, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995) 89.

an alternate stream of consciousness which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness, e.g. during traumatic reenactments (Janet, 1894)'.⁴¹

The narrator's alternate stream of consciousness substitutes her abortion with a wedding, the white, shabby, surgery room with a post-office, the surgeon with a magistrate and her married lover, who did not want to jeopardize his real marriage for her, with a loving husband. As she admits to herself, 'I needed a different version. I pieced it together best way I could' (137). The best version of the past that she can fabricate is to present herself as a young divorcee whose child lives with her ex-husband. Atwood's heroines often work efficiently in order to create a different past for themselves. Joan, for example, in *Lady Oracle* wants a different past when her body changes from fat to slim: 'I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past. I'd have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself, a more agreeable one'.⁴² An important difference is that Joan's many versions of her past are tailored to suit the standards of her lovers, while the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* maintains only one carefully manufactured past. Her need for a different version of the story is not appreciated by her married lover, who does not consider his violating her soul and spirit as traumatic. Instead, he is under the illusion that he is her nurturer: 'he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was as good as new; others... wouldn't have bothered' (139). Although the first-person narration of the novel does not leave much space for taking a clear stance about a political issue such as abortion, it certainly

⁴¹ Cited in Onno Van Der Hart and Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and The Engraving of Trauma', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 168.

⁴² Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London, Virago Press Ltd., 1982) 141.

criticizes the narrator's deprivation of choice, disguised by her lover as 'it's better this way' (82).

It is useful to consider here how the narrator's traumatic memory surfaces. Usually it is the moment of becoming witness to a new traumatic scene that triggers off the old, unregistered traumatic memory. Witnessing her father's body at the bottom of the lake is the new traumatic scene which restores the narrator's previous traumatic memory. Kristeva's theory of abjection is useful here in order to elaborate on the nature of the trauma that her father's body generates in her.

According to Kristeva the abject is the disgusting, impure, evil element which disturbs identity, system and order in us and in society. When we try to protect ourselves from it, we do not know whether this potential danger comes from inside, or outside, or both. The abject exists in the semiotic and functions as a perpetual threat to symbolic boundaries. It threatens the unity of the symbolic realm because it questions the logical divisions of clean / unclean, sane / insane, order / disorder, humanity / animality which underpin the symbolic structure. The sight of bodily fluids for example, such as spit, sperm or menstrual blood, can cause spasms of disgust but also be the object of some perverse attraction. In other words, the abject blurs the boundaries of the self and the symbolic by presenting those boundaries as artificial and not natural. Therefore, the symbolic area must reject the abject in the same way that the human body rejects its faeces: it is an imperative procedure in order to keep its unity, in order to survive. As Kristeva argues, the most disturbing form of abjection for the human being is the corpse:

The corpse, seen without God and outside science, is the outmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which

one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.⁴³

By seeing the corpse of her drowned father, the narrator of *Surfacing* experiences abjection, causing her previous traumatic memory, her abortion, to surface.

It is not only the abjection associated with her father's drowned body that makes the narrator's traumatic experience surface. Fish imagery is also associated with her father's corpse; tied to the bottom of the lake by the cord of his heavy camera and tangled amongst underwater vegetation, his corpse brings to the narrator's mind her aborted foetus, whose huge jelly eyes and fins bear resemblance to a fish:

I balanced and plunged...the water seemed to have thickened... it was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead (136).

Once the old traumatic memory is released and transformed by the narrator into narrative language, the reader realises that such an activity is solitary: she tells her story to herself, trying to heal the wound of her abortion: 'I never saw it. They scrapped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them...I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished' (137). Every traumatic situation though carries the potential for change and the narrator has the potential to cure herself. Here again, in describing how her metamorphosis is accomplished, Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and the symbolic is useful.

⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

Kristeva defines the semiotic as the pre-oedipal phase in the child's life, in which the child does not conceive of itself as separate, but as the continuum of the maternal body. The sensations of the semiotic are physical drives such as oral and anal, and the pulses and rhythms of heartbeat and breath. The symbolic on the other hand encompasses the oedipal phase, where the child learns to situate itself apart from the m/other and enters language (symbols). By entering language the child ceases to see his mother as the love-object and identifies with the symbolic father or the father of the Law.

Atwood's female narrator abandons the symbolic and returns to the semiotic realm. By saying that she returns to the semiotic realm I do not mean that she re-enters or identifies herself with the maternal body, but that she places herself in the unspoken rupture of the semiotic within the symbolic area. Consequently she renounces symbolic language, whose words and meaning have always been a dissolution to her: '[f]irst I had to immerse myself in the other language' (152). This 'other language' is the semiotic chora of drives and sounds. Kristeva argues that although the semiotic pre-exists the symbolic it exists within the symbolic in the form of spaces which lack reason but are full of unconscious drives. The '(human) language's characteristic tendency to return to the (animal) code [semiotic]'⁴⁴ facilitates the narrator's decision to return to the animal state.

After renouncing symbolic language, the narrator becomes pregnant again and the 'donor' of the sperm is her lover Joe. She chooses him because he does not use

⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 117.

language often and therefore he seems to have an animal purity: '[f]or him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words' (153). As a couple they communicate through body language: 'Joe puts his arm around me, I take hold of his fingers' (34). The narrator values body language more than words; she knows how to interpret Joe's body: 'Joe is swaying back and forth, rocking, which may mean he's happy' (34). He, on the other hand, knows how to give pleasure to her body: 'his hands at any rate are intelligent, they move over me delicately as a blind man's reading braille, skilled, moulding me like a vase, they are learning me;...my body responds that way too, anticipates him, educated, crisp as a typewriter (62). Their relationship is based on physical pleasure and on their shared distrust of human speech.

The narrator impregnates herself again because she sees her new pregnancy as a way to replace the life she killed inside her: it is part of her catharsis. By getting pregnant a woman does not establish her femininity but rather her animality and her ability to bring together nature and society. By animality I do not mean the woman's body as a biological, reproductive vessel, but her opportunity to get in touch with her body of instincts and feelings, the body that hides under the sometimes artificial layers of humanity:

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water... the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it... dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes...When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy (172).

The water of the lake is the means the narrator uses to wash away her sinful human clothing and reveal her purified animal body.

But her return to the semiotic, to the animal, wordless state of being, is not the only reason she wants to conceive again. Her new body will also allow her to re-discover and re-unite herself with her mother. A loving child for her mother and a loving mother for her unborn child, she longs to share the promised *jouissance* of motherhood with her own mother. This shared *jouissance* is the core of Kristeva's experience of motherhood as described in 'Stabat Mater':

Recover childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells, instants of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dreams, at night, opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my mother's, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up dew from her hand, there, nearby, in the night. Alone: she, I and he.⁴⁵

Kristeva and the narrator of *Surfacing* have a shared experience not only of *jouissance* but also of gratitude; gratitude for their mothers' presence in their own motherhood. The narrator of *Surfacing* names this presence 'my mother's gift...for me' (152). But while Kristeva describes her son as 'a butterfly soaking up dew from my hand' the narrator of *Surfacing* describes both her future moment of birth and her future child with much more primitive, animal imagery: 'I will do it by myself... on leaves, dry leaves...the baby will slip out as easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord...it will be covered with shining fur, a god' (156). She also intends to keep her child in the pre-oedipal, maternal realm and never let it enter the symbolic: 'I will never teach it any words' (156).

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 172.

The narrator's metamorphosis from human to animal state is now complete. The narrator has entered the land of inarticulate, semiotic ruptures within the signifying order (language); her body is in its animal state, carrying in her womb the fetus in the form of a little animal god; she is identifying with her mother through maternal love. But will she be safe in the semiotic area of drives? Will this metamorphosis be her salvation? The nature of the semiotic can answer both questions: it is a phase where social reason is repudiated and unconscious drives, including the death drive, are given space to act, if not to take over. Stripped of reason, drives are ambiguous: they can lead to artistic creativity, or to psychosis and eventually to death. Here it is useful to compare *Surfacing* to Atwood's short story 'Wilderness Tips', published nineteen years later, in 1991.

Searching for relief from the pain caused by an unfaithful husband and a spiteful sister Portia goes swimming in the lake. The surface of the lake is so calm that it serves as Portia's mirror where she sees herself as a child. She goes back to what Lacan names the 'mirror stage': the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic. The child looks at him/herself in the mirror and sees his or her body as a perfect whole, completely separate from the maternal body, so the mirror stage marks the beginning of the child's differentiation from the world. Portia feels so safe that she metaphorically travels even further back, to the stage which precedes the mirror stage, the semiotic. In the lake's peaceful, maternal embrace, with all her emotion unbound from logic, Portia sees the potential return to the realm of signification as 'something bad' which is 'about to happen'.⁴⁶ She decides not to let it happen: '[s]he could avoid it; she could swim out further, let go, and sink'⁴⁷ and the implication is

⁴⁶ Margaret Atwood, 'Wilderness Tips,' *Wilderness Tips* (1991; London: Virago Press, 1992) 221.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

that she does. Portia succumbs to the death drive. She needs help to abandon the sphere of the death drive, the semiotic, and since she does not receive any, she quietly sinks in it. However, the narrator of *Surfacing* receives the help she needs to return to the symbolic sphere and this help emanates from what Kristeva calls the ‘imaginary father’.

Despite her use of the masculine noun ‘father’ Kristeva’s imaginary father is a combination of both maternal and paternal elements that exist in the semiotic: ‘[t]he child, male or female, hallucinates its merging with a nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father, in short a conglomeration that already condenses two into one’.⁴⁸ The child identifies with the mother’s body at this stage, but the mother realises that her child needs to be autonomous, separate from her body, and move on to the symbolic order. This separation can be violent, since the irrational drives of the semiotic are later focused on the sacrifice of the semiotic, maternal body for the sake of the symbolic law. In order to avoid this violence which can traumatise the child, an imaginary identification with the mother’s body is necessary.

During this imaginary identification the child identifies with the imaginary father, who represents the Phallus that satisfies the mother’s desire. Based on Lacan’s reading of the term ‘phallus’, Elizabeth Grosz defines it as

the “signifier of desire”, the “object” to which the other’s desire is directed: it is insofar as he *has* the phallus that man is the object of woman’s desire; and it is insofar as she *is* the phallus that a woman is a man’s object of desire. In this sense, the phallus is the heir to the primordial lost object (the mother).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 222.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions; Three French Feminists* (Australia: Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd., 1989) xx.

So the imaginary father/phallus represents the mother's desire for the imaginary bodily completion that took place during the child's conception. By identifying with this imaginary father the child can re-place itself into the mother's body, re-experience his or her conception and become the satisfaction of the mother's desire. This imaginary re-union with the mother's body supports the interruption of the real union and the child is ready to enter language. In Kristeva's words, the imaginary father is the 'guarantee of a love relationship between the mother and the child'⁵⁰ which helps the child move from the semiotic (identification with her body) to the symbolic (identification with her desire/phallus).

In *Surfacing*, the mother's ghost is the perfect candidate for the role of Kristeva's imaginary father. The narrator meets her mother's ghost outside their cabin in the woods:

She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out ...she is turned half away from me, I can only see the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them [the jays]... as I watch and it doesn't change I'm afraid...it isn't real...She must have sensed it, my fear. She turns her head quietly and looks at me...The jays cry again ...and she's gone (176).

The contact of the daughter with her mother's ghost is not verbal but visual, since it takes place in the semiotic ruptures of the symbolic. As a benevolent ghost, the mother quietly casts her gaze upon her daughter to soothe her fears and offer her a subtle but definite indication of her love as the imaginary father. If the mother's visual message could be verbal, it would be something along the lines of '[y]ou cannot stay here, you do not belong here. Do not be afraid, go back and my love for you will give meaning to the symbolic language that you should re-enter'.

⁵⁰ 'Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward' (ICA Documents, special issue on *Desire*, 1984) 23.

After the appearance of her mother's ghost, the narrator sees her father's ghost near the garden. The differences and similarities in the appearance of her parents' ghosts lead to the final unfolding of the story where the narrator's second metamorphosis takes place:

He is standing near the fence with his back to me, looking in at the garden...his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love...He turns towards me...gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless...It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself...(181).

If her mother appeared peaceful as the mythical earth-goddess Demeter or the aged Snow White who can understand the language of the birds, the father appears violently, with the threatening eyes of a wolf. The wolf- father represents the stern, symbolic father of the Law. He also acts as a warning to the narrator against the Sirens of the semiotic: primitive drives which can lead to madness, even death. It is no accident then that the ghost of the mother appears first since, as the imaginary father of love, she provides the balance needed for the narrator's painless transference to the symbolic.

Neither the ghost of her mother nor the ghost of her father force their daughter to make a decision: they simply present the facts to her. Her return to the realm of signification is her own conscious decision: '[t]o prefer life, I owe them that' (182). Before her diving into the past, her surfacing and spiritual rebirth, the narrator felt fragmented by language and this sense of fragmentation was revealed in the text: '[m]y hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole' (140). She initiates her healing process by abandoning language

and refusing to look at herself in the mirror: 'I must stop being in the mirror...I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me' (169). But after her decision to return to language, she re-conceives herself as a whole in the mirror: 'I turn the mirror around: in it there is a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves' (184). Maybe she does not fully recognise herself here, but she gradually acquires a new sense of wholeness that allows her to see herself and the world with new, wiser eyes.

The moment when she sees herself in the mirror is preceded and followed by the narrator's unconscious laughter. Laughter, according to Elizabeth Grosz, is 'perhaps the most primitive instance of semiotic impulses harnessed in vocalisation... it... prestructures the child's later (symbolic) positioning in language as a speaking subject'.⁵¹ In spite of herself, the narrator laughs after seeing her mother's ghost and herself in the mirror. Her laughter is the first sign of her decision to return to the symbolic, a decision which is final after the mirror stage: 'I re-enter my own time' (185). Despite her previous belief that her fetus is a little animal and her determination never to let it cross the line of the symbolic, she realises now that she too should be an imaginary father for her child and encourage his potential to enter symbolic language: '[w]ord furrows potential already in its proto-brain, untravelled paths' (185).

When the narrator is in the semiotic, its pressure on the language of the symbolic becomes apparent. The content of these semiotic breaks refers to the narrator's

⁵¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions; Three French Feminists* (Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1989) 44.

complete identification with nature which has no words but is full of pulses and rhythms. The fluidity of boundaries between the semiotic wordless state and the symbolic realm of human language is foreshadowed by the fluidity of boundaries between plants, animals and humans in nature: ‘the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks’ (175). When the narrator dives into the deep water of the lake she sees her drowned father, who can also be a fish or her aborted foetus, while the cord of his camera can be underwater vegetation or her own umbilical cord. Her mother’s ghost is the incarnation of a jay, her father’s of a wolf, her lover Joe has a furry back like a bear’s and her newly conceived foetus is a plant-animal. The blurring of the semiotic and symbolic becomes clear towards the end of the novel:

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning
 I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head
 against the ground
 I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the
 trees and animals move and grow, I am a place’ (175).

This statement can be interpreted with two ways; first, it reveals the narrator’s decision to abandon human language, turn into an animal and use her body in order to ‘talk’: ‘face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs’ (184), her body is not different to a tree, a deer skeleton or a rock. If the scars on her body talk louder than the words that she refuses to use, then the message is clear: she renounces society along with language and returns to nature.

This statement also acknowledges the identification of the female body with space: ‘I am a place’, she says, and this phrase brings to mind the ancient figure of Circe in

Atwood's 'Circe/Muds Poems' stating 'I am a desert island'.⁵² In other words, the female body sets and therefore expands spatial limits: in *Surfacing* the narrator expands the limits of the symbolic realm and reaches the semiotic by revealing the animalistic nature of her body, while in 'Circe/Mud Poems' Circe expands the boundaries of her island to a new, virgin island where history has not yet been written, by changing her passive, penetrable body to an active, penetrative one which will become impervious to male violence.

The semiotic overflow within the symbolic realm also manifests itself in the narrator's reference to the protean powers her father's ghost possesses: '[f]rom the lake a fish jumps An idea of a fish jumps' (181). He transforms from a fish to an idea of a fish, a piece of art, a hieroglyph, a protecting spirit and then the circle closes with him turning to a real fish in the water again. The most stimulating transformation here is his changing into a protecting spirit, because it softens his previous violent image of the wolf. Maybe he is a protecting spirit for his daughter, or what Kristeva imagines as a loving and stern father at the same time. In all these instances of semiotic pressure on the symbolic law, Atwood's language flows free from all syntactic rules: the sentences are segmented, their rhythm conveys a sense of breathlessness and there is no punctuation. This language, which appears in the symbolic as the product of semiotic pressure on the symbolic boundaries, is the language of the female body, closer to the body's kinetic movement and further from the rules of syntax.

⁵² Margaret Atwood, 'Circe / Mud Poems', *Poems 1965 - 1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 204.

For Atwood metamorphosis in *Surfacing* takes place as growth and transformation in the semiotic world of nature: ‘on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration...sundew the insect-eater...Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals now, metamorphosis’ (161). This metamorphosis in nature represents part of the narrator’s metamorphosis: she returns to the semiotic by unzipping her human and revealing the animal nature, but by the end of the novel she metamorphoses once more and returns to the symbolic by putting on her human clothing again: ‘[m]y spare clothes are here...I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons’ (185).

The story is spared the joyful fairy-tale ending where the female narrator gets married to her lover and lives happily ever after. Instead she is, in the end, privileged with knowledge. Unlike her brother who, after almost drowning, returns to life with no ‘secrets’ from the land of the dead, she returns from the land of pre-articulate instincts to the land of signification with secrets about human nature and about the world. Her assertiveness as a subject starts when she refuses to turn her body into a spectacle for the male gaze; not only does she avoid being ‘shot’ by David and Joe’s camera but also she destroys the film they have with naked shots of Anna, in an attempt to liberate her as well. But Anna remains trapped in the patriarchal voice of judgement, represented by the mirror she uses to apply her makeup every morning. The narrator on the other hand reverses the mirror in her father’s cabin and looks at it again only after she returns from the wordless semiotic stage with knowledge. Her newly acquired knowledge helps her unify her body/mind dichotomy which leads to the development of a true character worthy of a name: ‘He calls my name, then pauses, “Are you here?” Echo: here, here?’ (186).

Since she can hear the echo of her own name she has not yet fallen victim to narcissistic love; she can still share herself with others and she needs others in order to survive.⁵³ At the beginning of the novel the narrator cannot pronounce her name because of the difficulty she has using human language and seeing herself as a subject: ‘in my mouth tongue forming my name, repeating it like a chant’ (67).⁵⁴ After her decision to abandon her human nature and turn into an animal, she denies her name: ‘I no longer have a name. I tried for all these years to be civilized but I’m not and I’m through pretending’ (162). Her listening to Joe calling her name and recognizing it as hers is significant step towards finding her identity.

Atwood’s narrator though is as sceptical about woman’s place in the symbolic order as Kristeva is in ‘Women’s Time’. This scepticism stems from the nature of ‘the socio-symbolic contract as a sacrificial contract’⁵⁵: signification requires the sacrifice of the maternal body. Kristeva wonders whether this skepticism which has led to ‘active research’ will lead to ‘more deadly violence. Or to a cultural innovation’ and her answer is ‘[p]robably to both at once’.⁵⁶ This will be an inevitable issue for the future. What we are left with at the end of *Surfacing* is the realistic female narrator,

⁵³ ‘Narcissus was...the son of the...Nymph Leiriope, whom the River-god Cephisus had ... ravished...Anyone might...have fallen in love with Narcissus...and...his path was strewn with heartlessly rejected lovers of both sexes...Artemis...made Narcissus fall in love, though denying him love’s consummation...he came upon a spring, as clear as silver...and as he cast himself down...to slake his thirst, he fell in love with his reflection...How could he endure both to possess and yet not to possess? Echo... sympathetically echoed ‘Alas! Alas!’ as he plunged a dagger in his breast and...he expired’. Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (1955; London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1958) 286-88.

⁵⁴ This scene reminds the reader of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the Handmaid Offred also has difficulty using human language because she was deprived of it for so long: ‘[m]y tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world’. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 164.

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time,’ *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1986) 200.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

ready to face society if not with the prospect of happiness ('we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully...' [186]) then certainly with the prospect of freedom. Her return to language is natural because throughout her movement from the symbolic to the semiotic and back, she cannot help but describe with words her need to be wordless.

‘I carried my mother around my neck like a rotting albatross’⁵⁷ : the anti-gothic mother/daughter relationship in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*.

If the unnamed female narrator of Atwood’s *Surfacing* is a mediocre commercial artist of posters and covers for books and magazines then Joan, the narrator of *Lady Oracle*, is a more successful creator of female escapism in the form of ‘Costume Gothics’. The Costume Gothic is a parody of the historical gothic: it combines the use of archaic settings, ghosts and romantic plot of the historical Gothic with the happy ending of Harlequin Romance. Despite her efforts to create a fictional reality for herself according to her Costume Gothic heroine’s fallacious values of chastity, passivity, and love, Joan feels that her life is ‘a Gothic gone wrong’ (232). The reason is that Joan lives in the real world where men are both Heathcliffs and Lintons, women both Catherines and Isabellas and Joan herself can ‘fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart’ (319) and hit a potential intruder on the head with a Cinzano bottle.

In this part of the thesis I will concentrate on a less obvious but equally important ‘anti-Gothic’⁵⁸ element in the novel: Joan’s relationship with her mother. I analyse this famously fierce and problematic mother/daughter relationship in relation to Joan’s life and to her one successful, historical Gothic book, ‘Lady Oracle’. In her interview with Cathrine Martens Atwood describes *Lady Oracle* as ‘a Gothic novel which is a parody of a Gothic novel [Joan’s Costume Gothics], which also contains a

⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London: Virago Press, 1982) 213. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁸ J. R. (Tim) Struthers, ‘Playing Around,’ *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 59.

Gothic novel [Joan's one real Gothic, 'Lady Oracle'].⁵⁹ Within this framework of historical and modern Gothic novel I examine the mother/daughter relationship which is similar to the historical Gothic but also a departure from it. I also discuss how the role of body and language relates to the mother/daughter relationship; how the female search for the mother in Joan's hopeless relationships with men ends with the rejection of these men along with the rejection of the phallic mother.

Tania Modleski's has given us the following illuminating description of historical Gothic ingredients:

Gothics can be identified by their cover illustrations: each portrays a young girl wearing a long, flowing gown and standing in front of a large, menacing-looking castle or mansion. The atmosphere is dark and stormy, and the ethereal young girl appears to be frightened. In the typical gothic plot, the heroine comes to a mysterious house, perhaps as a bride, perhaps in another capacity, and either starts to mistrust her husband or else finds herself in love with a mysterious man who appears to be some kind of criminal.⁶⁰

Often there is a sensitive but powerless hero who turns out to be the villain and a cynical but dynamic villain who turns out to be the hero. The mystery that the young and sexually naive heroine is called upon to solve is the key to her happiness with her handsome suitor. Despite the repetition of its central narrative and stylistic devices the Gothic novel became very popular between the 1760's and the 1820's and some novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis are still widely read today.

⁵⁹ Cathrine Martens, 'Mother Figures in *Surfacing* And *Lady Oracle*,' *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 16 (1984): 51.

⁶⁰ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance, Mass-Produced Fantasies For Women* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 59.

Costume Gothics, which are considered pulp fiction, have a large, mainly female reading audience. The reason the Gothic novel is so popular, especially amongst women readers, is because it echoes the real fears women have about men's violence or indifference. As Janice Radway claims,

In suggesting that the cruelty and indifference that the hero exhibits towards the heroine in the early part of the novel are really of no consequence because they *actually* originated in love and affection, the romance effectively asserts that there are other signs for these two emotions than the traditional ones of physical caresses, oral professions of commitment, and thoughtful care.⁶¹

The female reader identifies with the mixed feelings of love and fear that the heroine nurtures for her husband/suitor, and the Gothic novel reassures the reader that male cruelty and indifference are a disguise for love. This is how Joan justifies Arthur's indifference towards her: '[h]eroes were supposed to be aloof. His indifference was feigned...Any moment now his hidden depths would heave to the surface; he would be passionate and confess his long-standing devotion. I would then confess mine, and we would be happy' (197). Interpreting male indifference as love instead of addressing it for what it is and finding a realistic solution creates a disastrous situation for women. Even Joan admits that Arthur's 'indifference at that time was probably not feigned at all' (197).

The male/female relationship, however, is not the only Gothic relationship which is complicated: there is also the relationship with the mother. Mothers in the historical Gothic novel dominate their daughters' lives (Elvira in *The Monk*) and when mothers

⁶¹ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 151.

die the daughters find it difficult to let them go. In Atwood's *Lady Oracle* Joan wants to unravel and clarify the complicated relationship with her mother and then liberate herself from her ghost once and for all. There are indeed similarities between Joan's relationship with her mother and other Gothic mother/daughter relationships, seen in the number of mother substitutes which are offered to Joan, because her real mother is unpleasant: Aunt Lou, a delightful woman who truly loves Joan, Leda Sprott, the spiritual guide who believes that Joan has great mental powers and Brown Owl, her helpful supervisor in the Brownies who '[u]nlike [her] mother...was impartial and kind, and...gave points for good intentions' (56). Some famous Gothic mother substitutes are the sometimes manipulative Nelly Dean in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the heartless aunt Mrs. Reed and the kind Miss Temple in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. But there is also a strong anti-gothic theme which underlies the mother/daughter relationship in *Lady Oracle* and that is their eternal war, where the positions of victim and victor perpetually interchange.

There are other gothic conventions regarding the maternal presence which are violated: most Gothic heroines lose their mothers at a very young age (Jane in *Jane Eyre*), while Joan is twenty years old when her mother dies. After the death of their mother Gothic heroines blossom physically and mentally (young Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*), while Joan's development is only physical. Gothic mothers protect their daughter's virtue with their own lives (Elvira in *The Monk*),⁶² while Joan

⁶² Anxious to have full control of her daughter's transition from innocence to experience, Elvira keeps her at home, unaware of any evil. With the best intentions in the world Elvira does her daughter harm, because she leaves her without any possible self-defence. This is reminiscent of Atwood's *Surfacing*, where the parents do not teach their children how to protect themselves from evil and consequently after the daughter is forced to have an abortion, she feels that she cannot return in the family home: '[t]hey didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand about it, how could I describe it

has two hundred and forty pounds of flesh to protect her own. Gothic mothers can speak and give advice to their daughters from the grave (Elvira in *The Monk*), but Joan's mother does not talk to her; she only cries 'soundlessly, horribly; mascara...running from her eyes in black tears' (173). Despite Joan's 'feeble attempts' (7) to be a fragile Gothic heroine, reality enters her fiction and prevents her from perpetuating a fictional reality for herself.

But even the realistic parts of Joan's life do not present a healthy picture because the problems with her mother expand beyond the violated Gothic rules. Atwood's novel is a parody of the historical Gothic novel, so the mother/daughter relationship in it is a parody of a real Gothic mother/daughter relationship, but there are also real life problems between Joan and her mother. The root of these problems lies in the fact that Joan was an unwanted child; the only reason why she exists is because her father would not allow her mother to have an abortion: '[i]t's not as though I wanted to have her...You're a doctor, don't tell me you couldn't have done something...Sacred my foot' (77) is what Joan overhears her mother saying, confirming her worst fears. A forced abortion creates the traumatic situation in *Surfacing*, while the forced pregnancy is the source of all evil in *Lady Oracle*.

Given their bad start, it is not surprising that Mrs. Delacourt's relationship with Joan is based on mutual emotional deprivation, on longing for power over each other's destinies within middle-class conformity: '[m]y mother didn't want her living rooms to be different than anybody else's...She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as

to them?'. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 138.

everybody else's' (70). The inside of the house as space reflects the female body, the woman; as Sue Best claims, '[f]or many male writers...the house is a woman - a warm, cosy, sheltering, uterine home'.⁶³ Mrs. Delacourt's home though is far from warm and cosy; she keeps it clean, covers the furniture with plastic and the lampshades with cellophane and turns it into something 'static, dustless and final' (70). She treats her body in the same way that she treats her house by keeping it slim, well-dressed, socially acceptable. She also keeps her hair and make-up⁶⁴ carefully arranged after spending hours in front of her triple mirror. But if the female body and consequently the house represent the realm of maternal care, Joan receives very little of that: 'no nests for me among those stiff immaculate curls' (89).

Aunt Lou on the other hand does not care about dust on the furniture or dishes in the sink. She concentrates on more fundamental things like being realistic and in touch with her feelings. She loves herself, her overweight niece, her job, her good-hearted, married boyfriend, she loves life in general and seems much happier than Joan's respectable mother. In contrast to Mrs. Delacourt's body, Aunt Lou's body is 'soft, billowy, woolly, befurred; even her face, powdered and rouged, was covered with tiny hairs, like a bee. Wisps escaped from her head, threads from her hems, sweetish odours from the space between her collar and her neck' (89). This soft body 'seemed

⁶³ Sue Best, 'Sexualizing Space,' *Sexy Bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 182.

⁶⁴ Mrs. Delacourt reminds the reader of Anna from *Surfacing*, another Atwoodian character who cannot live without her make-up: 'Anna says in a low voice, "He doesn't like to see me without it," and then, contradicting herself, "He doesn't know I wear it"'. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 38. Both women use make-up as a tool for moving successfully within the boundaries of a helpless, artificial femininity manufactured by the patriarchal society. Eager to look happy on the outside, they are unhappy inside because they feel deprived of a fully formed identity that would allow them to be comfortable with their bare face both in the mirror and under the male gaze.

to warm and expand, filling the room' (104), representing her space: 'large rooms... furniture dark and large, too, frequently dusty and always cluttered newspapers on the chesterfield, afghan shawls on the floor, odd shoes and stockings under the chairs' (82). There is no order or conformity in the space represented by Aunt Lou's body, but there is warmth and love; her nourishing lap is the only maternal shelter that Joan can remember after the age of six.

Just as she did not want her living room to be different, Mrs. Delacourt did not want Joan to look different from anybody else's daughter, but Joan, overweight and clumsy, fails to satisfy her mother's aspirations for conformity and elegance, her need for a perfect symbiotic twin. As a child Joan tries desperately to please her mother with ineffectual attempts to bring her breakfast in bed, clean the house or turn into a graceful ballet-dancer. Mrs. Delacourt is hardly moved by her daughter's thirst for maternal approval. Her indifference turns Joan's soul into an open wound, which she hides under her grotesque 'cloak of blubber' (141). As an adolescent Joan turns from oppressed to oppressor: she uses her mother's clothing allowance to dress her overweight body hideously, disperses litter around her newly-decorated room and takes dead-end jobs to defy her mother's middle-class standards. Her cold-war tactics contribute to Mrs. Delacourt's developing alcoholism and eventually to her death.

Joan's merciless weapon in the war with her mother is her fat body, which she uses in the same way she would use a gun or a knife; the only difference is that she causes her mother emotional instead of physical suffering. In a modern society which expresses feelings of contempt and disgust for grotesquely huge female bodies, Joan uses hers as a comfortable cocoon which offers her emotional protection from her

mother and the rest of the world. The caterpillar, or, to be more precise, the mothball refuses to become a butterfly. Her body also functions as her language: with it she expresses all the feelings of rage and scorn against her mother which she cannot express verbally. Words replace food later in the novel when a slim Joan exchanges her bodily malnutrition (junk food) with spiritual malnutrition (Costume Gothics).

Excessive amounts of food do not satisfy Joan's oral drive though; as Lacan claims, 'the pleasure of the mouth...is not a question of food...but of a memory of something that is called the breast'.⁶⁵ Overeating is a fetish substitute for Joan's need for her mother's nurturing breast. As Joan's mother does not touch or caress her after she is six, it is not surprising that she needs this fetish substitute to remember the pre-oedipal stage, where the maternal body provides warmth and comfort. As Kim Chernin claims,

A woman with an eating obsession is searching for the memory of things past. For in that past and in its hidden, troubled memory is the possibility of liberation from the unseen conflicts and ambivalence that keep her from moving into her own development and from the re-creation of herself she urgently requires.⁶⁶

But Joan finds it very hard to liberate herself from the memory of the soothing maternal breast and re-create herself as an independent woman. She tries to simultaneously unite and separate herself from the pre-oedipal maternal body because she is still at war with her mother, but instead of talking to her, Joan consumes tremendous amounts of food. This food protects her from her mother's horrifying and devouring mouth which, carefully enlarged with lipstick, looks larger than life and

⁶⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'The Deconstruction of the Drive,' trans. A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977) 167.

⁶⁶ Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 154.

evokes fear in Joan. It seems as if both the mother and the daughter's bodies have been reduced to their mouths: the mother's huge and red, threatening to devour the daughter, and the daughter's empty of words but full with food, refusing to fit into her mother's mouth.

The complexity of Joan's relationship with her mother's body goes beyond Mrs. Delacourt's devouring mouth. As a little girl Joan has the emotional impulse to touch and be touched by her mother, but since Mrs. Delacourt discourages such a close encounter, her body is both familiar and unfamiliar to Joan: 'I could always recall what my mother looked like but not what she felt like' (89). Joan's desire for touching her mother's body is repressed, so it turns into anxiety, into what Freud calls 'uncanny' feeling: 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression'.⁶⁷ Joan's uncanny feeling towards her mother's body surfaces in a repeated dream: 'my mother always had a triple mirror...as I watched I suddenly realised that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks' (67).⁶⁸ She dreams of her mother as a monster because she feels alienated from the maternal body. Initially the two bodies are one and even when they do separate, the daughter's

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1955) 241.

⁶⁸ Number three has many mythological associations: Cerberus is the three-headed dog who guards the gate of hell and the Gorgons are three awe-inspiring winged women with serpents for hair, one of which is Medusa whose eyes turn men into stone. Atwood has Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* in mind here because, as she claims in *Survival*, 'Graves divides Woman into three mythological categories...the elusive Diana or Maiden figure, the young girl [the young, obese Joan]; next the Venus figure, goddess of love, sex and fertility [the slim Joan]; then the Hecate figure...goddess of the underworld, who presides over death and has oracular powers [Joan's mother]'. Margaret Atwood, *Survival, A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature* (1972; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996) 199.

body grows to be identical to the mother's. In her dream Joan wants to cover up her mother's monstrosity (three heads) from fear that if it is exposed to the male gaze, Joan's monstrosity (fat body) will be exposed too: '[i]f he saw, if he found out the truth about my mother, something terrible would happen not only to my mother, but to me' (67).

As she grows older, her desire for a radical separation from the maternal body becomes stronger, to the point that she decides to betray her mother and identify with the father, the masculine law: 'there was a man, a man who was about to open the door and come in ...I wanted him to find out her secret, the secret that I alone know: my mother was a monster' (67). But it is difficult for the daughter to 'kill' the maternal body without feeling that she is killing her own body as well. Even after her mother's death, Joan feels that she carries her corpse inside her: a Venus (Joan) with a breathing Hecate within her (the mother).

It is not only her mother's but also her own body that feels familiar and unfamiliar to Joan. The fantastic element in Gothic takes the reader into a realm where reality is slightly distorted to change the former familiar into a defamiliarized state. Within this realm the body is a central source of pleasure, power and terror. Joan loses a hundred pounds but she is not totally relaxed with her new slim body. Her previous excessive body crossed the restrictive boundaries that western society imposes upon female corporeality with ideal beauty definitions and diets. This image of the huge female body is connected to the figure of the flying woman as a freak in a circus show. This woman is a trapeze artist with an overweight body which flies gracefully in the face of patriarchy and mocks the rules that try to squeeze her into a femininity

she could never fit. Joan often has fantasies about the Fat Lady in the circus, 'wearing pink tights with spangles, a short fluffy pink skirt, satin ballet slippers and, on her head, a sparkling tiara. She carried a diminutive pink umbrella; this was substitute for the wings which I longed to pin on her' (102). This Fat Lady balances on a wire and crosses to the other side without a safety net. She is one of Joan's alter egos, who follows her even when she loses weight.

If Joan's large body is the reason behind her mother's frustration and disapproval, Mrs. Delacourt's reaction to Joan's body when it shrinks due to her strict diet creates a paradoxical situation: '[w]hile I grew thinner, she herself became distraught and uncertain' (123). Mrs. Delacourt's outrage is initiated by the fact that Joan's sudden decision to lose weight stems from the death of Joan's beloved aunt Lou, who left her two thousand dollars provided she emerges out of her hideous yet protective flesh as a beautiful young woman. Joan also loses weight because of her self-disgust when she accidentally looks at her naked thigh in the mirror: '[i]t was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb...it spread on forever...the size of three ordinary thighs' (121). Joan knows why her mother is upset with her slimming body: 'making me thin was her last available project...she had counted on me to last her forever' (123). Her body has always been her mother's castle where Mrs. Delacourt has been hiding like a parody of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', safely looking at real life through her triple mirror, her altar of female vanity. By turning slim Joan pulverises her mother's metaphorical castle and the triple mirror cracks 'from side to side'.⁶⁹ The Lady of

⁶⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott,' *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986) 1102.

Shalott leaves the castle while Mrs. Delacourt attacks Joan's arm with a knife and pushes her to escape from the parental house the same evening.

But Joan feels guilty for destroying her mother's castle and leaving without an explanation. The creative product of this guilt is her one and only successful Gothic book which has the same title as the novel, 'Lady Oracle'. According to Joan it is, in parallel with her life, a 'Gothic gone wrong' (232). What she means is that 'Lady Oracle' is spared the carefully manufactured happy ending of the rest of her Costume Gothics, which are perfect painkillers for frustrated housewives. Her book is, however, a real Gothic gone wrong as well, a parody of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'. Gothic structures are disrupted because Mrs. Delacourt's presence in Joan's poems does not seem to follow Gothic rules. The presence of a virtuous mother who teaches her daughter to trust nobody and guides her even from the grave is one of the basic gothic ingredients. Joan feels her mother's presence when she tries to practice Automatic Writing⁷⁰ in front of the triple mirror: '[i]t had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn' (329-330).

Whilst the maternal presence is prominent in the historical Gothic novel, it is unusual to have a whole selection of Gothic poems about the mother, with no chaste, passive heroine/daughter in the background.

If we take a closer look though, the daughter does appear in the background; perhaps

⁷⁰ Automatic Writing is a procedure which involves sitting in front of a triple mirror with a candle, a pen and a piece of paper. You stare at the reflection of the candle in the mirror and lead yourself to a state of self-hypnosis. Eventually you wake up and examine what you have unconsciously written on the paper. Leda Spott, the spiritual adviser, tells Joan that she has the power to reach the land of spirits, so she starts experimenting with Automatic Writing and with this way she composes her only real gothic series of poems 'Lady Oracle'. Her trip into the mirror can be interpreted as a trip into the unconscious or into the maternal womb.

she is not passive or chaste, but she is the daughter nevertheless. 'The dark lady the redgold lady / the blank lady oracle' (226) is not only Mrs. Delacourt, but Joan herself. This mother/daughter identification represents the biggest female fear that the Gothic novel tries to pacify: 'it is not only that women fear being like their mothers... but also that...they fear being their mothers - hence the emphasis on identity in physical appearance the sensation of actually being possessed'.⁷¹ Joan certainly reduplicates patterns from her mother's life: both mother and daughter have a three-sided mirror through which they look at the world, they both need a project to work on to keep themselves sheltered from reality (Mrs. Delacourt's project is Joan's body while Joan's is the writing of her Costume Gothics) and they both 'become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry' (213) once their life projects are taken away from them.

Atwood's young heroine is also possessed by her mother's astral body, which appears to her for the first time during a spiritual ceremony she attends with her Aunt Lou while her mother is still alive. Its second appearance is simultaneous with her tragic death, while its third is at Joan's wedding; its presence is detected by the medium, Mr. Steward, who has some spiritual powers after all: '[t]here's someone standing behind you...She's a young woman, she's unhappy, she has on white gloves...she's reaching towards you' (205). In all her spiritual appearances Mrs. Delacourt is dressed in the same navy-blue suit, white gloves, hat and shoes that she was wearing when she committed one of the biggest crimes in the eyes of her seven-year-old daughter: she arranged it so that Joan, who was a fat child, would dance the more

⁷¹ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance, Mass-Produced Fantasies For Women* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 70.

suitable role of a mothball instead of that of the beautiful butterfly in the ballet-dancing recital and consequently opened a gap of hatred between herself and her daughter which was never fully closed.

Mrs. Delacourt makes her final appearance in the novel in Joan's final dream of her ghost. The scene strikingly recalls Mr. Lockwood's dream of Catherine's ghost in *Wuthering Heights*. As a work of fiction *Wuthering Heights* seems to follow the realistic novel form which, according to Coral Ann Howells, includes 'the world of everyday life and humane social awareness' along with 'a comprehensive view of feeling, imagination and reason'.⁷² But there are many Gothic ingredients in it: the dark, stormy atmosphere, the threatening mansion, the tyrannical hero-villain (Heathcliff), the young, innocent heroine (Isabella), who marries Heathcliff only to uncover his sadistic side after their wedding, which turns her love to fear and hatred. Within this Gothic framework, both Mrs. Delacourt and Catherine's ghosts appear outside the window and look like children even though they are adult women: Mrs. Delacourt 'pressed her face against the glass like a child' (329), while Catherine appears with 'a child's face looking through the window'.⁷³ Both female ghosts are sorrowful and ask the living to help them find some peace. But they ask for help in a different way and receive a different response; Catherine asks Mr. Lockwood's help verbally: 'a most melancholy voice sobbed "Let me in-let me in!"' and in response Mr. Lockwood, mad with fear, 'pulled [the ghost's] wrist on the broken pane and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes... "Begone!"'

⁷² Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (1978; London: The Athlone Press, 1995) 159.

⁷³ Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches (1847; London: Penguin Books, 1985)

[he] shouted'.⁷⁴ Mrs. Delacourt on the other hand uses the non-verbal, pre-oedipal elements to communicate with her daughter: tears- '[s]he was crying soundlessly... mascara ran from her eyes in black tears;' (329) - touch - '[s]he stretched out her arms to me, she wanted me to come with her;' (329) - and facial expression- '[s]he was smiling at me now' (329).

Joan's response represents her effort to follow her chaste heroine's moral code; she sleepwalks to join her mother according to the historical Gothic's mother/daughter reunion: '[t]ogether we would go down the corridor into the darkness. I would do what she wanted' (329). Reality triumphs again though and Joan wakes from her dream. This awakening is probably beneficial since gothic heroines return to a state of innocence, to the pre-oedipal represented by the mother, only by dying themselves, usually towards the end of the novel with their virginity intact. Even if it is violated by the Gothic villain, their body is purified with their death or suicide (Antonia in *The Monk*). Death re-establishes the blissful pre-oedipal union between the mother's and the daughter's body, but it is not the most desirable way for Joan to make peace with her mother, who now resembles 'a rotting albatross' (213) around her neck.

This last Gothic appearance leads us to the question which functions as a keystone in the novel: how can Joan liberate her mother's ghost and thereby herself? On the psychoanalytic level, in order for the girl to separate herself from the maternal body of the pre-oedipal stage she has to enter the realm of language and identify with the father. This identification is more problematic for the girl than it is for the boy since

⁷⁴ Ibid., 67.

she will always have the anatomic difference from the father's body and similarity with the mother's, so, as Modleski puts it, the girl 'unlike the boy...must make her "enemy" [father] her "lover" [husband/suitor]'.⁷⁵ This terminal separation from her mother is what Joan seeks in her relationships with men, but paradoxically enough she also seeks the nurturing phallic mother. According to Kristeva the woman finds the mother, not the father in her husband; for the woman the husband and for the man the wife represents the phallic mother of the pre-oedipal stage: 'each of the protagonists, he and she, has married, through the other, his or her mother'.⁷⁶

It is this desperate search for the phallic mother along with the parental indifference which Joan received as a child that explain her almost pathological eagerness to please men in order to gain their affection. She even adopts different personalities which she adjusts according to the needs and desires of the man she is with: for Paul, the right-wing Polish count alias Mavis Quilp, writer of trashy but commercially successful nurse novels, Joan is a carefree and talentless art student. For Arthur, the naive but sincere left-wing demonstrator and later lecturer in political science, she is a left-wing distributor of pamphlets. For the Royal Porcupine, alias Chuck Brewer, the unsuccessful artist of macabre shows involving collections of dead and frozen animals, she is the successful and sophisticated author of Gothic books.

⁷⁵ Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance, Mass-Produced Fantasies For Women* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 73-74.

⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 222-23.

But these men are unaware of who Joan really is and Joan finds it difficult to understand the complexity of their character because she is wrapped up in her Gothic heroine's world, where men are either heroes or villains :

Every man I'd ever been involved with, I realized, had two selves: my father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate. Why should Arthur be an exception? (292).

This is the question Joan asks herself when she is afraid that Arthur intends to kill her because he found out about her affair with the Royal Porcupine. Like a good Gothic heroine Joan is paranoid, constantly persecuted by outside dangers which threaten her life. She is also very efficient in justifying her paranoia: Arthur wants to kill her because she has been unfaithful, despite the fact that he knew she was unfaithful in the past (with the Polish Count in London) and he was understanding and forgiving. Joan has reasons to be afraid, since she receives threatening messages, phone-calls and dead animals on her doorstep, but her paranoid belief that all the men she knows want to kill or kidnap her is clearly 'Gothic'. Arthur is her last candidate for the role of the heartless villain; the first one is the Royal Porcupine, with whom she has just broken up, but he sounds logical in his denial: 'I swear to God I haven't called you once...you say it's over, it's over...what do you expect me to do? Stick my head in the oven?' (276). Her next candidate for the role of the kidnapper is Paul, who wants them to be together again, but he convincingly claims that he called her once and thought it was the wrong number.

Last but not least is her blackmailer Fraser Buchanan, who also has a perfectly logical explanation when Joan asks him about the dead animals and the messages: '[w]hy

would I do a thing like that?...There's no percentage in that. I'm a businessman' (288). Atwood never gives us a clear answer about these phone-calls and dead animals, but the point is that with her multiple, false identities, her paranoid gothic fears and her inability to accept the double nature of her male partners, Joan does not find the phallic mother in any of her relationships with men. As a result she does not really separate herself from her real mother.

If it is not through her relationships with men, there must be another way for Joan to liberate herself from her mother. This is not the first time in Atwood's work that a female character must find a way to release a suffering ghost from its temporary imprisonment in the land of the living and send it back to the land of the dead. The necessary charm which is required here is a momentary reunion with the ghost before its final catharsis. This spell works its miracle for Atwood's unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* who releases her parents' ghosts: 'they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them'.⁷⁷ Likewise it helps Elaine, Atwood's narrator in *Cat's Eye* to release the ghost of her childhood's evil bully, Cordelia: '[i]t's all right, I say to her, *You can go home now*' (Atwood's emphasis).⁷⁸

A momentary reunion with her mother's ghost is thus the answer to Joan's prayers in *Lady Oracle*. To accomplish it, Joan has to reconsider and re-evaluate the relationship with her mother. She has to reject the script of patriarchy which keeps

⁷⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 182.

⁷⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press, 1989) 419.

the mother/daughter forever imprisoned behind the institution of motherhood, a script which sacrifices the maternal body for the sake of a language where women are forever objects and never subjects, a script she has never written. She needs to strip her mother from the maternal element and talk to the woman inside, not as a daughter but as a woman, as a friend and, by overcoming the matrophobia that Rich describes as 'the fear...of becoming one's mother',⁷⁹ as a mother herself.

This newly acquired gift of talking to the woman in one's mother has its price which is, according to Irigaray,

giving up the idea of maternal omnipotence...To accept that one's mother is not all protective, the ultimate amorous recourse, the refuge against abandonment. Which then allows us to establish with her ties of reciprocity, where she could eventually feel myself to be my daughter.⁸⁰

Judging from Joan's reaction when she sees the statue of Diana of Ephesus, the phallic mother with multiple breasts, it is obvious that she has rejected the powerful phallic mother of the pre-oedipal stage: 'I stood licking my ice-cream cone, watching the goddess coldly. Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not anymore' (253). Her rejection is represented by her decision to be a motherless daughter, at least for the time being: 'Arthur wasn't ready...I myself had mixed feelings. I wanted children, but what if I had a child who would turn out like me? Even worse, what if I turned out to be like my mother?' (213). Joan refuses to identify with the phallic mother but she also rejects the castrated, powerless mother, who

⁷⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976) 235.

⁸⁰ Luce Irigaray, 'Meres et filles vues par Luce Irigaray,' *Liberation*, 21 Mai 1979. Translated by Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1989) 125.

sacrifices her own body in order to open the door to language and socialization.⁸¹ Her own mother had been a living proof of this image all her life.

Her rejection of the phallic mother also manifests itself as a rejection of men; Joan wisely acknowledges that she never found the phallic mother in any man because she never loved any of them: 'I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection, enhanced and sparkling' (282). This is an interesting twist in the usual patriarchal scenario where the woman's face serves as the mirror where the man sees himself: '[l]ook at me and see your reflection'⁸² says Circe to Odysseus in Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems'. Here, however, there is a reversal of roles: Joan sees her reflection in every man she gets involved with, realises that this narcissistic satisfaction does not equal love and eventually abandons it along with her search for the phallic mother in men. We must therefore trust Atwood when she says that her narrator has developed 'three quarters of an inch'⁸³ in understanding that the real world and herself as part of it is not and will never be a reflection of the Gothic novel and her unconscious search for the omnipotent, phallic mother in various men is not the solution to her problems. The path for the mother/daughter reunion seems to be clear and after accomplishing it, Joan can really let her mother's ghost rest. After all, it is only the creation of Joan's guilty consciousness.

⁸¹ This reminds the reader of Kristeva's 'socio-symbolic contract as a sacrificial contract' for the maternal body, which makes the female narrator of *Surfacing* sceptical about her return to language and society.

⁸² Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 210.

⁸³ J. R. (Tim) Struthers, 'Playing Around,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 66.

The end of *Lady Oracle* is ambiguous since Atwood seems to be challenging the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Joan's decision not to 'write any more Costume Gothics' but 'try some science fiction' because '[t]he future [is]... better for you' (345) leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling, because science fiction includes many Gothic ingredients transferred to the future. So it is possible that Joan will fall from one trap (fantasy in the past) to another (fantasy in the future). But we can trust her longing to free herself and her mother's ghost during her next dream, where we hope that their communication will not only be through touch but through language, through the gift of words, with both women speaking as subjects. In order to imagine Joan's final speech/liberating spell to her mother's ghost I cite Irigaray's concluding paragraph of the short text 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other':

And the one doesn't stir without the other. But we do not move together. When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive.⁸⁴

That the woman/friend in you remains alive, and you are not buried in or engulfed by maternity. A woman can lose the maternal body as maternal womb and love her mother's body, her own body as the body of a woman.

Irigaray's speech as a comforting farewell to the mother and a warm welcoming to the woman was never addressed to Mrs. Delacourt while she was alive. Joan's realisation of this fact is her final liberating spell to her mother's ghost. Long-lasting friendships between women are rare in Atwood; rarer in her work are good

⁸⁴ Luce Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other,' trans. Helene Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs* 7. 1 (1981): 61-67.

friendships between mother and daughter. Joan admits that they never tried to become friends, to talk and understand each other, despite the fact that they were both lonely. Our Gothic heroine is more open-minded now, more tolerant to her mother's anger and pain, because she accepts responsibility for not trying hard enough to understand her: '[n]obody did appreciate her, even though she...had devoted her life to us...she had made her family her career...and look at us: a sulky fat slob of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her' (178).

Atwood's last advice to Joan comes from another female character, Roz in *The Robber Bride* (1993), who has a similar past to Joan's (a war child, with an oppressive, hypochondriac mother and an absent father who appears one day out of thin air). But instead of having to 'get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for [herself], a more agreeable one' (141) like Joan, Roz decides to accept herself for what she is and develop the good sides of her character: 'Roz can see that she will never be prettier, daintier, thinner, sexier or harder to impress...she decides instead to be smarter, funnier and richer and once she had managed all that they can all kiss her fanny'.⁸⁵ Joan is prettier, thinner and sexier by the end of the novel; the only thing we worry about is whether she is smarter or not. We hope though that the honest narrator of a dishonest life, which never fitted her Gothic framework, has learned that she is not her mother and most importantly, that she should dance for nobody but herself.

⁸⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (1993; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 345.

‘My body...a desert island...your body...marred by war’:⁸⁶ the female body as space and male body as time in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Circe/Mud Poems’.

I halted at her gate and called. The Goddess heard, opened and bade me in...She prepared me a drink in a golden cup, dropped into it a draught for my destruction and gave it to me...she rose and struck me with her wand, crying: “Get you to your sty, wallow there with your friends!”⁸⁷

Placed in the particular temporal matrix of Homer's *The Odyssey*, which is characterised by the cultural transition from matrilinear to patrilinear society, the name Circe has become synonymous with sinister enchantment and trickery. However, Circe’s presence in *The Odyssey* can also be read as the sorceress’ effort to renounce the patriarchal misogyny which equates femininity with either angelic passivity or evil duplicity. If the Homeric model places Circe in a powerful but nevertheless subordinate role next to Odysseus, Margaret Atwood gives Circe her own independent voice in the group of twenty-four poems entitled ‘Circe/Mud Poems’.

Atwood’s extensive interest in myths and folk tales (Proteus, Narcissus, Sirens, Frankenstein) makes revisionist mythmaking one of the most important elements of her work. In her interview with Hermione Lee Atwood says:

It is interesting to take [a story], flip it over and tell it from the other point of view, tell it from the point of view of somebody for whom these arrangements have been made rather from the point of view of somebody...regally deciding what would be best for the human race.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Margaret Atwood, ‘Circe/Mud Poems,’ *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 204, 213. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

⁸⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. T.E. Lawrence (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992) 108.

⁸⁸ Hermione Lee, *Margaret Atwood in Conversation with Hermione Lee*, produced by ICA in conjunction with Trilion, 1986.

So Atwood recreates the story of *The Odyssey* from Circe's point of view. In her poems Circe seems to be speaking with two voices, one of the mythical prophetess and another one of the contemporary woman with a feminist consciousness.⁸⁹ In their constant interplay of need and conflict, desire and intellectuality Circe and Odysseus are more or less equal, but there is always the question of how much choice they really have within the mythological boundaries of *The Odyssey*. In the context of Atwood's mythological and feminist background, I will compare the female body seen as representing space and nature ('I am a desert island' [204]), and the male body as time and culture ('hold the wooden body under, / soul in control...in the clutch of your story, your disease, you are helpless' [206, 217]). I will examine the inadequacy of language to transcend these patriarchal dichotomies which devalue women and circumscribe their functions ('Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? /...It would be so simple' [214]). I will also argue that Circe's request for words is also a request for her whole, godlike body.

Before I start analysing Atwood's version of Circe's myth, it will be useful to define Circe's divine identity. Circe is the daughter of Helios (Sun) and Perse (daughter of the Ocean). She also has a brother, Aeetes, who is the sinister king of Colchis. Her name means 'falcon' and as Atwood's Circe admits in the fourteenth poem, she can have the ruthless nature of a predator: 'Last year I abstained / this year I devour

⁸⁹ Atwood is not usually comfortable with the term 'feminist' because, unless clearly defined, it carries many ambiguous meanings. In her interview with Jo Barns she gives the definition of her feminism: 'I'm defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice'. Jo Barns, 'Using What You're Given,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 142.

/without guilt / which is also an art' (201). The cold, almost clinical tone of this statement 'devouring is an art' brings to mind Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' where 'dying is an art'.⁸⁹ Apart from their dark, disturbing side of identity, Circe and Lady Lazarus share their associations with birds: Circe is a falcon while Lady Lazarus is a phoenix by the end of Plath's poem.

But there is much more in Circe than the identification with the falcon. She is the ruler of Aeaea, the island of Dawn and a goddess who possesses the secrets of many enchantments. In Atwood's first poem she predicts Odysseus' arrival and declares her authoritative position: '*[y]ou move within the range of my words*' (201, Atwood's emphasis), within my island, my territory. After five poems Circe adds: '[a]nd you weren't invited, just lured' (207). The first poem is written in italics as is the last one, perhaps due to the fact that the first poem presents the island as it is, while the last one presents it as Circe wants it to be.

In this first poem, Atwood changes Homer's sea to a forest, but Odysseus' boat nevertheless '*glides as if there is water*' (201, Atwood's emphasis). We can see a distinct difference between Homer and Atwood's descriptions of Circe's island. In Homer, the landscape is beautiful, the forest is 'dense', full of 'woodland glades' and Circe's palace is great and sacred, with four maidens providing 'silver tables', seats with 'purple palls', 'baskets of gold', 'silver cisterns' and 'honey-hearted wine'.⁹⁰ In

⁸⁹ Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Ariel* (1965; London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1968) 17.

⁹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. T. E. Lawrence (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992) 106-109.

Atwood's version the forest is '*burned and sparse*' (201, Atwood's emphasis), the branches are '*charred*' (201), the soil is '*thin*' (209) and Circe's '*front porch is waist deep in hands...blood horded in pickle jars*' (204) of unhappy people who '*come from all over to consult [her]*' (204). The island which Atwood describes as Aea is perhaps Homer's Ithaca, which is rather bare: no green fields, thick forests and rich soil. Even Circe's porch, covered with blood and human limbs, resembles Odysseus' palace in Ithaca after the killing of the suitors: '*dust...corpses and...pools of blood*'.⁹¹ Atwood changes the details of the landscape because her story is narrated from Circe's point of view and it is obvious that Atwood's Circe wants her island to be Ithaca, Odysseus' last destination, because she hopes that he will not leave.

Atwood's Circe makes a statement not spoken by Homer's Circe: '*I am a desert island*' (204). She identifies herself, and her female body with space, with her island and its natural surroundings. Woman's body has always been identified with space, as Julia Kristeva argues: '*and indeed, when evoking the name and destiny of woman, one thinks more of the space generating and forming the human species than of time, becoming or history*'.⁹² Kristeva has Plato's maternal space here, what he named as '*chora*', which '*must be devoid of the characters which it is to receive*',⁹³ characters

⁹¹ Ibid., 221.

⁹² Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 190. Space and nature are directly related to a woman's biological reproductive capacities. Her womb provides the nourishing space where new life begins. Kristeva associates only two types of temporality with a woman: cyclical and monumental. Cyclical time is related to the female monthly menstruation or to the nine months of pregnancy, while monumental time is related to eternity, to Greek myths or myths of Christianity, frozen in time. Both of these types of temporality confirm the passive female corporeality. On the other hand linear time, time as departure, progression and achievement, in other words time as history, is only related to man. His active body and his patriarchal language operate in the public realm and shape culture.

⁹³ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 69.

given by the patriarchal society of ancient Greece. Kristeva is right: Circe's body provides the space where Odysseus as time can write his heroic story; and so he does:

After your misadventures, lies,
losses and cunning departures, you are doing what most
veterans would like to do: you are writing a travel book....
...filling in the dangers as you go:
those with the sinister flowers who tempted you to forsake
pain, the perilous and hairy eye of the groin you were forced
to blind, the ones you mistook for friends, those eaters of
human flesh. You add details, you colour the dead red (217).

By describing his adventurous journeys Odysseus marks time and makes history, while Circe is marked by time and limited by history.

If the female body represents space and this space reflects the body's emotions, then this is another reason why the landscape in Homer is green while in Atwood it is bare. Homer's Circe is a self-sufficient, powerful goddess, who does not need Odysseus to be happy, while Atwood's Circe is not only a goddess but also a vulnerable woman without a man and a word-healer for humankind without any more healing words. She is as tired of 'looking picturesque and mythical'⁹⁴ as Atwood's Siren. She wants to fall in love with a real man and live a normal life without the epic rules of *The Odyssey*. She describes all mythological men with protean transformative powers as a disorganised circus: 'they swoop and thunder / around this island, common as flies, / sparks flashing, / bumping into each other' (202). The real men Circe is looking for 'have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives; / they have real faces and hands, they think / of themselves as / wrong somehow, they would rather be trees' (202). Perhaps these are the same men that Atwood describes in the fourth poem as

⁹⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Siren Song,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 195.

‘the silent ones, the ones they accused of being silent because they would not speak in the received language’ (204). The rejection of this received language and the transformation of men to trees brings to mind Atwood’s female protagonist in *Surfacing* who, after renouncing the received language, tries to identify her human body with a tree, to become a tree: ‘I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning’.⁹⁵

This received language is the everyday, technocratic language, efficient, detached, emotionless. The language that Circe’s pilgrims are seeking so desperately is the language of forgiveness, compassion and love. Circe, as mistress of the natural elements, presses her ear on the earth ‘collecting the few muted syllables left over; in the / evenings I dispense them a letter at a time, trying to be fair, / to the clamouring suppliants’ (204). She represents their only hope and therefore, as is obvious from the almost biblical imagery of the scene, is worshipped as a Virgin Mary figure: ‘[they] have built elaborate stair- / cases across the level ground so they can approach me on / their knees’ (204). Circe, the beautiful goddess with the ability to inspire terror, is here the kindest, most compassionate giver to humankind.

Circe may accept her role as modern psychologist who listens and tries to heal with words, but she does not accept her mythological role as mistress of enchantments. She is not responsible for transforming Odysseus’ fellow-men into various animals. These people were transformed to what they really are under their human clothing; they turned inside-out: their soul became their body and their body their soul. Circe ‘did not add the shaggy / rugs, the tusked masks, / they happened’ (203) because her words of

⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 175.

sympathy were 'wrecked' (205). Despite her divine nature, the sorceress' power over language is not inexhaustible.

Not only does Circe take no responsibility for the transformation of lovers into animals, she also denies any personal involvement with Odysseus' presence on her island:

I made no choice
I decided nothing

One day you simply appeared on your stupid boat,
your killer's hands, your disjointed body, jagged
as a shipwreck,
skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual,
pretending to be - what ? a survivor ? (205)

Although she did not invite him, Atwood's Circe, like her ancient predecessor, falls in love with Odysseus because he seems to be the real man she has been waiting for. She wants to escape with him from the conventions of myth which can imprison and indeed destroy. Within the myth their roles are predetermined: 'will you hurt me? / If you do I will fear you. / If you don't I will despise you. / To be feared, to be despised, / these are your choices' (208). Besides, isn't Odysseus tired of being 'shoved / by the wind from coast / to coast... / tired of killing / those whose deaths have been predicted / and are therefore dead already? / ...tired of wanting / to live forever?' (206). Yet Odysseus does not share Circe's desire for reality but seems determined to continue playing his heroic role and 'traverse again those menacing oceans;' (217).

Odysseus' sexual relationship with Circe determines the unfolding of events both in Homer's and in Atwood's version of the story. In Homer, Circe invites Odysseus into her bed: 'let us go lie together, that we may mingle our bodies and learn to trust one

another by proofs of love and intercourse'.⁹⁶ Their love-making is delightful and brings mutual surrender, trust and respect. But in Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems', Circe's body is the medium not for shared pleasure but for male invasion. If her female body represented space before (her own island), this space is now the place where Odysseus can confirm the power of his penis, the power to violate the female body. As Catherine Waldby claims, Western culture's conceptions of the male versus female body make this violation seem relatively natural: '[t]he male body is understood as phallic and impenetrable, as a war-body simultaneously armed and armoured, equipped for victory. The female body is its opposite, permeable and receptive, able to absorb all this violence'.⁹⁷ The difference seems to be based on the male versus female genitals. The man confuses himself with his penis and is anxious to prove 'his status as sovereign ego'.⁹⁸

This is exactly the case in Atwood's poem: '[h]olding my arms down / holding my head down by the hair / mouth gouging my face / and neck, fingers groping into my flesh' (210). Because of its penetrability Circe's body is abused by Odysseus. Possibly this demonstration of power gives him an erection, but there is not much in it for her apart from humiliation and pain: '(Let go this is extortion, / you force my body to confess / too fast and / incompletely, its words / tongueless and broken)' (210). Sexuality is directly related to language here. The male oppresses the female with the operations of body and language so completely that she is trapped in his sexuality,

⁹⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. T. E. Lawrence (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992) 109.

⁹⁷ Catherine Waldby, 'Destruction: Boundary erotics and refigurations of the heterosexual male body,' *Sexy Bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 268.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

unable to express hers physically or verbally. The modern Circe cannot find a word to describe the act of love-making without any real love, desire or pleasure being involved and the word 'rape' is not appropriate since she willingly slept with Odysseus.⁹⁹ Deprived of her body and betrayed by language, she is reduced to what Irigaray calls 'the living mirror'¹⁰⁰ for man's own reflection: '[l]ook at me and see your reflection' (210) says Circe to Odysseus.

Facing her violated bodily territory Circe cannot help but ask with oppressed anger: '[w]hy do you need this? / What do you want me to admit?' (210). Had Circe's question been 'what do you want me to be?' Odysseus' answer would have been 'a mud woman'. This is the mud woman that Circe describes in the sixteenth poem of this group. A traveller narrated this story to her, about how 'he and another boy constructed a woman / out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees / and elbows: they stuck to the essentials' (214). This female body, silent and headless, warm and curvy has only one purpose: the satisfaction of all male sexual appetites: 'into / her he spilled his entire life' (214). It is anonymous, pliant and vulnerable, subject to violence and therefore the ideal female body. Despite the fact that Circe says later on: 'I am the place where / all desires are fulfilled, / I mean: all desires' (220), she refuses to reduce herself to a mud woman for Odysseus sake. Instead, obviously hurt with his effort to make her a headless puppet, she orders him to '[g]et out of here' (216).

⁹⁹ Atwood displays the frustrating poverty of human language in most of her work. See also my discussion of the word 'rape' in *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 221.

However, Circe does not really want Odysseus to leave because she loves the real, vulnerable man in him. There is a description of his body in its shining armor, 'dressed in your thorax, / the forms of the intended / ribs and soft belly underneath / carved into the slick bronze / so that it fits you almost / like real skin...it hardens you, / this joy, this expectation' (208); this is the virile, violent body which took but did not give any sexual pleasure to her body. The male body is not naturally aggressive, hard and active but it becomes so within the rules of patriarchal society. Satisfaction for this male body comes in a brief orgasmic form with a big price to pay: the loss of its own corporeality. Odysseus needs Circe's body in order to feel alive in his own skin, but he cannot expand the possibilities of pleasure unless he abandons the attitude of mastery and control over her body. There is promise for change in Atwood's second description of Odysseus' body as 'broken and put together / not perfectly' with 'scars on the chest, moonmarks' (213) left by the wars he had to participate in as part of his heroic role in mythology. This description is tender and moving: it reveals Odysseus' struggle to keep his true self intact despite the assaults of experience. This wounded, tender body is the body Circe wants to make love with, although she hopes to gain Odysseus' affection as well: '[t]his is not what I want / but I want this also' (213).

Atwood dedicates a whole poem to the description of Odysseus' male body. But in her short story 'Alien Territory' she argues that the male body does not exist as such: 'it could be argued that men have no bodies at all. Look at the magazines! Magazines for women have women's bodies on the covers, magazines for men have women's bodies

on the covers'.¹⁰¹ Bodies of young and beautiful women untouched by disease, all the attention is on the body. On the other hand '[w]hen men appear on the covers of magazines, it's magazines about money or about world news...Such magazines show only the heads, the unsmiling heads, the talking heads, the decision-making heads, and maybe...a coy flash of suit'.¹⁰² Western culture's stereotyped conception of man as head/mind and woman as body is ironically illustrated by Atwood here. No wonder the traveller's mud woman does not need a head; headless she serves his need for impersonal sex better. And why lose time to create a head, he sticks 'to the essentials' (214).

Despite her determination not to turn into a mud woman, Circe is worried that she has after all become a flexible and obedient object in Odysseus' hands. In every aspect of their life together Odysseus behaves as an inconsiderate and greedy conqueror: he is a possessive lover, he takes away Circe's magical power of transformation by unbuckling 'the fingers of the fist' (211), the sacred fist which hangs on a chain around her neck, and in the end he ironically orders her to trust him. What hurts Circe most of all is the fact that Odysseus took her words, her healing language away from her. The removal of the sacred fist deprives Circe not only of the power to transform men into animals but also of the power to transform human pain into comfort with soothing words. Once she loses this power she feels as mutilated as her suppliants: 'it lets go of me and I open like a hand cut off at the wrist' (212).

¹⁰¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Alien Territory,' *Bones & Murder* (1992; 1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 108-109.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 109.

The inadequacy of language manifests itself through the whole group of poems ('wrecked words', 'words tongueless and broken') but the situation deteriorates once Odysseus violates Circe's body. The woman's body is an important source of her language; she needs to have the pleasure of expressing her body with its organs, its sexuality, its unconscious in everyday discourse. This close connection of female body and language is a central issue in the theory of feminist writers such as Cixous and Irigaray; they believe that language should be a social mechanism of re-evaluation and change and therefore rise above the rules of patriarchy, which reserved the place of silence for women, and that language should allow women to express their body's sensuality and fluidity in a rich, new language. By 'new language' I do not mean an incomprehensible muddle of words, but a language which is freer from the symbolic rules of syntax and closer to the body's rhythms and instincts.

Circe feels that Odysseus deprived her not only of the language of words but also of the language of signs. Circe's loss of a hand brings to mind Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), where the amputation of the hand is the penalty for any Handmaid who tries to read. The choice of the hand over any other part of the body is important; hands are used by everyone for writing language and by mute and deaf people for sign language, which makes self-expression and communication possible. Without her words, without her hand, Circe is mute and deaf: 'I close myself over, deaf as an eye, / deaf as a wound, which listens / to nothing but its own pain' (216). Despite her initial hope, she now has no illusions about Odysseus' mythical departure and therefore she asks: 'when you leave will you give me back the words?' (221).

Circe's uncertainty about her long-lasting possession of language also arises from the socio-political background of *The Odyssey*. In Homer's narrative women were losing their power to influence political issues and their withdrawal from language was a sign of this loss. But if women do not have direct access to speech/language, they can express their thoughts by using two other means: weaving and singing. In Homer we can see both Circe and Penelope weaving their version of the myth, while in Atwood's group of poems only Penelope is weaving. Atwood gives to Circe the voice to describe Penelope's weaving, and since Penelope is her rival, the description is far from favourable; on the contrary it carries the implication that Penelope was not faithful to Odysseus after all:

She's up to something, she's weaving
 histories, they are never right,
 she has to do them over,
 she is weaving her version,

 the one you will believe in,
 the only one you will hear (218).

Circe also describes Penelope's weaving as giving birth to a child, which is, on a metaphorical level, Penelope's version of *The Odyssey*: 'she sits in her chair / waxing and waning / like an inner tube or a mother, / breathing out, breathing in...' (218). In their effort to shape mythology through their weaving/language 'Penelope and Circe seemed as one'.¹⁰³

By using weaving, one of the very few tools that patriarchy offers her, Homer's Penelope plays a clever, calculated game with space (weaving room/bedroom) and

¹⁰³ Robert Graves, 'Ulysses,' *A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Robert Fagles and George Steiner (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1962) 139.

time (day/night) in order to stay married to Odysseus for as long as she possibly can. She promises to marry one of the suitors once she finishes weaving a linen shroud for her father-in-law and then weaves it during the day and unweaves it during the night. As Peggy Kamuf claims, '[n]o clever play on words but rather a spatial and temporal shift between the two centers of her woman's life preserves Penelope's indecision'.¹⁰⁴ Penelope fights patriarchy by following its own rules and therefore her triumph over it is overwhelming: not only does she get her husband back but she also succeeds in getting the suitors killed. They may have been slaughtered by Odysseus but it was Penelope who wove their death first and then she cut the thread of their lives like Atropos.¹⁰⁵

Another mode of language is singing, and singing - words embodied by the human voice - can subvert patriarchal discourse. This seems, in Homer, to be an activity related to Circe: 'they heard Circe, the Goddess with the comely braided hair, singing tunefully within by the great loom'.¹⁰⁶ Atwood does not refer to the Homeric Circe's singing, perhaps because she offers her modern Circe the opportunity to sing a new song through twenty-four poems, and poetry is a form of singing. Nevertheless, the ancient Circe's singing is worth mentioning here, because singing allows the use of the new, female language, the language of bodily emotions and drives. Cixous makes a direct connection of song with woman's speech and writing:

¹⁰⁴ Peggy Kamuf, 'Penelope at Work: Interruptions in A Room of One's Own', *Novel, A Forum On Fiction* 26. 1 (1982): 5-18.

¹⁰⁵ 'Three are the conjoined Fates robed in white...by name Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Of these, Atropos is the smallest in stature, but the most terrible...This myth seems to be based on the custom of weaving family and clan marks into the newly born child's swaddling bands...Clotho is the "spinner", Lachesis is the "measurer", Atropos is "she who cannot be turned or avoided" '. Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (1955; London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1958) 48.

¹⁰⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. T. E. Lawrence (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1992)

In women's speech, as in her writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us -that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man.¹⁰⁷

By using her singing/language in the form of poetry Atwood's Circe plays her own game with space and time in order to serve her purposes, like Homer's Penelope. She expands her body/space beyond the island of Aea and creates a new island for herself, one she knows '*nothing about / because it has never happened*' (222, Atwood's emphasis).

But this is not enough for the modern Circe who is determined to break the boundaries of mythology and transcend time. She accomplishes her liberating mission in Atwood's last poem of the *You Are Happy* collection 'Book of Ancestors'. The first part of this poem unravels itself within mythical limitations; it describes a human sacrifice for a warrior god. If we strip Atwood's savage language from the scene ('heart slashed from his opened flesh /...blood, glows in the still hungry sky¹⁰⁸) it is reminiscent of another famous sacrificial scene in Homer's Iliad: Iphigenia's sacrifice to the goddess Artemis, so that a favourable wind could take the Greek ships to Troy in order to start the war. Circe clearly renounces all these myths - '[s]o much for the gods and their / static demands.../ History / is over'¹⁰⁹ - and welcomes the opportunity to

¹⁰⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle De Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) 251.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'Book Of Ancestors', *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 238.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

live a normal life with Odysseus: 'we take place / in a season, an undivided / space, no necessities / hold us closed, / distort us'.¹¹⁰

Circe is not afraid to give up her mythological role and live like any other woman 'into anonymity, which she can merge with, without annihilating herself: because she is a giver'.¹¹¹ Her role as a generous giver to humankind was mentioned before, but here I would like to emphasize her affectionate generosity to Odysseus: '[t]here are so many things I want / you to have. This is mine, this / tree, I give you its name, / here is food.../ This is mine, this island, you can have / the rocks, the plants / You can have this water, / this flesh' (209). On the other hand Odysseus knows how to take, but does not know how to give and therefore he finds it more difficult to abandon his mythological role. In the end though the two lovers liberate themselves from myth. The paradox here is that winter is the season which unites them, instead of spring or summer. In the last poem from the 'Circe/Mud Poems' group, the two lovers 'walk through a field, it is November, /...the wet flakes / falling onto our skin and melting / we lick the melted snow / from each other's mouths' (223). In 'Book of Ancestors' they share a gentle, sensuous caress in front of the fireplace during '[m]idwinter, the window / is luminous with blown snow, the fire / burns inside its bars'.¹¹² If we compare the extortion which characterised their lovemaking in the tenth poem of 'Circe/Mud Poems', it is a relief to finally see them walking hand in hand.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 239.

¹¹¹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle De Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1980) 259.

¹¹² Margaret Atwood, 'Book Of Ancestors,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 240.

Atwood takes things a step further though with 'Book of Ancestors', where there is a reversal of sexual roles: the male accepts the passive side of his masculinity and the female becomes the active one during their sexual intercourse. This sexually active female is the phallic woman, and as Waldby claims,

the current eroticization of the phallic woman implies not just a reworking of the meaning of the feminine body but also its relation to the masculine. It could be taken to indicate a realization of the masculine erotic potential for pleasure in passivity, a desire to be fucked, to be taken.¹¹³

Such a realization is difficult though because the male is used to think of his non-penetrable body/penis entering the soft, warm female body/vagina and anything else can be considered as impotence, or negative sexuality from his part. However, this socially imposed sexual stereotype of male/active, female/passive is suffocating for both sexes. Therefore, lovemaking with constant interchanges of active/passive roles is the ideal, because each of the lovers has been in the other's place and consequently knows how to give and take mutual pleasure. This is also Atwood's suggestion which she describes with intimate and loving language:

you open
yourself to me gently, what
they tried, we
tried but could never do
before . without blood, the killed
heart . to take
that risk, to offer life and remain

alive, open yourself like this and become whole¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Catherine Waldby, 'Destruction: Boundary erotics and refigurations of the heterosexual male body,' *Sexy Bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 274.

¹¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Book Of Ancestors', *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 240.

The figure of the phallic woman in 'Book of Ancestors' is not the only phallic symbol in these poems. On a metaphorical level all participants are fully equipped with their own phallic symbols which will allow them to give their own version of the myth:

Circe has her wand, Odysseus his sword, Homer and Atwood their pens and they all agree that '[i]t's the story that counts' (221). Atwood's version interests us here because in it the beautiful sorceress Circe manages to imagine something more than the island of Aeaea and that is 'two islands at least' (222).

From all three female characters with volatile, transforming bodies in Atwood's work - the unnamed female character in *Surfacing* (from human to animal body), Joan in *Lady Oracle* (from fat to thin body) and Circe in 'Circe/Mud poems' (body shaped by male hands as if it was made of mud) - Circe is the only one who convinces her lover to open his body gently to her instead of trying to invade her body. Maybe they will not always share this openness and affection and in any case Atwood would not allow a perfect, romantic ending. There is still ambivalence and uncertainty about the future, but there is also hope and optimism. '[F]resh monsters' need not start 'breeding' (217) in Circe's head; it seems that she can have her words back after all.

Chapter Two

Social Control And Oppression: The Female Body as Breeding Machine in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996), and 'Giving Birth' (*Dancing Girls*, 1977).

Introduction

As in the first chapter the female protagonists of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996) and 'Giving Birth' from the collection of short stories *Dancing Girls* (1977) do not appear to have much in common. The female narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a Handmaid known to the reader only as Offred. She lives in what used to be the United States and now is the monotheocracy of Gilead. This republic was formed by neo-fundamentalists who categorise women according to class, status and reproductive capacity. The Handmaids are fertile young women whose purpose is to breed for the nearly childless republic. Their babies are prize objects for those in power, that is, Commanders and their barren Wives. Grace Marks, the female protagonist of *Alias Grace*, is a thirty-one-year-old model prisoner in Kingston, Ontario. She serves a life-long sentence after having been found guilty for slaughtering her master Thomas Kinnear and his beautiful housekeeper and mistress Nancy Montgomery. The female narrator of 'Giving Birth' is a young mother who describes the story of Jeanie. Jeanie is a heavily pregnant woman who is about to give birth for the first time. By the time the story ends, it is clear to the reader that the female narrator and Jeanie are the same person.

The common theme in these two novels and short story linking these three different women is society's frantic effort to control human sexuality, especially the female body with its reproductive potential. My reading of these three texts is historical, feminist and psychoanalytic. I used the words 'social control and oppression' in the title because I examine 'the female body as a breeding machine' in three different social and historical backgrounds: the renewed, strictly religious doctrines of seventeenth century Puritans in Cambridge/Massachusetts at the end of the twentieth century (*The Handmaid's Tale*), the Victorian society of Eastern Canada in the mid-nineteenth century (*Alias Grace*) and the relatively recent late seventies in an unspecified western culture ('Giving Birth'). The pregnant body is at the centre of all these texts and raises issues about human nature and sexuality.

The inadequacy of language is obvious not only when it comes to describing feelings, as in chapter one, but also when it comes to describing what happens to the female body during pregnancy and childbirth. Since the use of language is problematic, all three women initially replace it with alternative means of expression: body language in *The Handmaid's Tale* ('we could stretch out our arms...and touch each other's hands. We learned to lip-read...watching each other's mouths'¹¹⁵), smell and touch in *Alias Grace* ('[s]he smells like smoke; smoke and laundry soap, and the salt from her skin; and she smells of the skin itself...Ferns and mushrooms; fruits crushed and fermenting'¹¹⁶) and an alter ego who can carry all the negative feelings that the host self cannot express in 'Giving Birth' ('she is the woman who did not wish to become

¹¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 14.

¹¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 90.

pregnant, who did not choose to divide herself like this, who did not choose any of these ordeals, these initiations'¹¹⁷).

Eventually the three women start using language again. Due to their reduced circumstances (totalitarian regime and prison) Offred and Grace can only speak their story. Offred records it in tapes and saves them for future generations ('[t]ell rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden'¹¹⁸), whilst Grace, who is literate, narrates it to her doctor Simon Jordan in hope that she will find out what really happened that day: 'I don't know how it was, but little by little I found I could talk to him more easily, and think up things to say'.¹¹⁹ But the female narrator of 'Giving Birth' has the freedom to write her story and by doing so she recaptures the experience of childbirth: '[g]iving birth. But who gives it? And to whom is it given?...language muttering in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing, that needs to be renamed'.¹²⁰ By narrating or writing their story all three women regain their alienated bodies and their place in society not as objects of male desire but as separate subjects.

¹¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Giving Birth,' *Dancing Girls* (1977; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1996) 230.

¹¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 49.

¹¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 68.

¹²⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Giving Birth,' *Dancing Girls* (1977; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1996) 225.

‘I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body... pulled apart by force’¹²¹ : the use of fragmented body and amputated speech in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

When Margaret Atwood’s naive, young heroine Joan Foster announces ‘I won’t write any more Costume Gothics...But maybe I’ll try some science fiction. The future doesn’t appeal to me as much as the past, but I’m sure it’s better for you’¹²² at the end of *Lady Oracle*, she certainly does not imagine a future like the theocratic regime of Gilead. Atwood’s futuristic novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the end of the 20th century, after the assassination of the president and the Congress by a military group and the establishment of a dictatorship based on political, religious and moral fanaticism. As Atwood claims, ‘the mind set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans’¹²³, who ‘came to the New World...seeking freedom from persecution of themselves but when they got there they immediately set up a rigid society that set about persecuting anybody who deviated from the norm’¹²⁴.

The Puritans believed in Old Testament doctrines according to which women are driven by emotion rather than reason and are therefore in need of practical, moral and intellectual control by men. As Lyle Koehler claims, women in seventeenth century New England were given names that ‘providentially reminded them of their feminine

¹²¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 279. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

¹²² Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1982) 345.

¹²³ Bonnie Lyons, ‘Using Other People’s Dreadful Childhoods,’ *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 223.

¹²⁴ Atwood’s papers (box 150). Stephen Northfield, ‘Atwood ventures into a fundamentalist America’, *The Gazette* 11 Dec 1985, literary ed. : 5-6.

destiny: Silence, Fear, Patience, Prudence, Mindwell, Comfort, Hopetill and Be Fruitful'.¹²⁵ These names reveal the patriarchal attitude of the Puritan society which emphasizes the importance of women but also their obedience and subordination to men. Vanity in the form of mirrors and colourful clothes was banished, desire was suppressed and sexuality was controlled. Impregnation by the male body and motherhood was considered the fertile female body's only natural function. In Koehler's words again: '[o]f course, childbirth was associated with age-old, biblically ordained risks and difficulties...severe delivery pains [were] a divine sign that a woman needed to cleanse her soul'.¹²⁶ This is the spirit of Gilead, where pollution, diseases and birth-control have led to a catastrophically low birth-rate and therefore to a climate of sustained paranoia with regard to the regulation of the female body. All women with viable ovaries are given the Biblical name and role of the Handmaid, which means that they are used as two-legged wombs ready to be impregnated by high rank officials, the Commanders. Viable ovaries are the most powerful and yet the most powerless natural resource of Gilead.

The human body, then, as an animate organisation of flesh, bones, nerves and organs is broken down, explored and rearranged by the regime of Gilead in order to conform to the rules and become an obedient part of the social network. In any rule-governed social order, language defines reality, stabilises identity and fixes sexual roles, so the most effective tool in this calculated manipulation of the body is the restriction and, in some cases, total elimination of language. Within this context I will examine how the

¹²⁵ Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The 'Weaker Sex' in Seventeenth-century New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 29.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

parallel fragmentation, exploitation and re-arrangement of body and language by the regime leads to the loss of identity; and how this identity is regained through the reacquisition of the body as a whole, and the narration of the story by an eye/I witness (Handmaid Offred).

The first thing that Gilead does is strip the individuality from women by categorising them hierarchically according to class, status and reproductive capacity: Wives are older women, most of them barren, married to the Commanders, Aunts are post-menopausal women and teachers of the Handmaids, Econowives are married women with children from the time before Gilead, Handmaids are fertile younger women, whose future children belong to the Commanders and their Wives, Marthas are cleaning ladies and cooks. At the bottom of this hierarchy are all the women who cannot be assimilated in the previous categories and are therefore sent to the Colonies to clean toxic wastes, with a life expectancy of up to three years; they are called Unwomen. Here I will concentrate mostly on the Handmaid's body and language because her viable ovaries are the only means for the continuation of life in Gilead, and the story is narrated from the Handmaid's point of view.

The Handmaids' 're-education' in the Red Centre begins on the level of the flesh. They are taught how to transform their bodies into a semi-transparent blur to which nobody pays any attention. This is made obvious by the way that the Commander's limp wife uses the narrator's body as her cane: '[p]ossibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture. She's done it before' (89). Their body is concealed by their red nun-like habit and the white wings of their hats. This wrapping of the female body in mystery and invisibility is accompanied and

reinforced by Aunt Lydia's morality slogans: '[m]odesty is invisibility...To be seen...is to be- her voice trembled- penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable' (39).

In Gilead there is limited usage of language, which is often reduced to one-line phrases of moral guidance. Handmaids are deprived of their language at the same time that they are deprived of their bodies. They are only allowed to speak in prescribed pious clichés: ' "Blessed be the fruit"... "May the Lord open"... "The War is going well, I hear,"... "Praise be"... "We've been sent good weather"... "Which I receive with joy"' (29). From the raw egg-white quality of their speech, it appears that it is as controlled and confined as their body.

The social rules of Gilead not only keep the Handmaids' body veiled and supervised but they also mark it permanently with a small tattoo: 'I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade...I am too important, too scarce for that' (75). Tattoos or other bodily marks signified individuality during the time before Gilead. The female narrator regrets not paying enough attention to her husband's bodily marks, because as a result she finds it hard to keep her memory of him: 'I ought to have done that with Luke, paid more attention...the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn't and he is fading' (281). But in Gilead, bodily marks like tattoos are used to strip the Handmaids from their personal identity and stamp their body as a public social category. '[w]ashed, brushed and fed' (79) and marked by tattoos like prize pigs, they are ready for the male stock market, where they can be exchanged like any other product. Their body is property which only men can truly own; they merely hold it in trust for a lawful owner: '[h]e stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the

ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle-brand. It means ownership' (266).

This role of the female body as exchange commodity amongst men of higher military status is again expressed with language. All Handmaids lose their first names and take on the name of their owner/Commander along with the possessive preposition 'of'. The narrator's name is Offred. When they change Commander their name changes as well, but the preposition 'of' remains to secure the perpetuity of the fertile female body as a chalice to be possessed. The patronymic as a representation of the paternal law defined identity during the time before Gilead. Wives, daughters and daughters-in-law had to submit to the rigidity of its power. As Judith Butler claims, '[t]his performative power of the name...cannot be isolated from the paternal economy within which it operates and the power differential between the sexes that it institutes and serves'.¹²⁷ At that time, however, women had at least their first name which was unique, while in Gilead this luxury of individuality for women is eliminated.

The Handmaid's body is transformed into an almost invisible reproductive unit in a male-controlled chain of trade, while her limited use of language keeps it hidden and oppressed. But this is not enough for Gilead's disciplinary strategies. The next step is to ensure that the Handmaids perceive their bodies as fragmented parts. This altered perception of the female body as parts is mediated through speech, so Offred's story comes in pieces: 'I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing

¹²⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits Of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 216.

I can do to change it' (279). Deprived of the notion of their body as a whole, the Handmaids have to think of specific parts: eye, hand, foot, womb.

The eye is one of the most important parts of the body, since we receive the world through sight. Apart from taking in what is outside we also bring out what is inside us through looking and that is why the Handmaid's habit, with the big, white wings, is carefully designed to prevent them from looking to the left, or to the right, or at each other's eyes; as Offred claims, they 'have learned to see the world in gasps' (40). The accepted formula of farewell between the Handmaids is 'Under His Eye' and the national symbol of Gilead is a winged eye. Atwood plays a pun with the word 'eye': the Handmaids should avoid showing their eyes because the spies of Gilead, who are called Eyes, might see them: '[w]hat they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it's said' (38).

One of the first things that Offred notices about her room is 'a wreath and in the Centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in the face where the eye has been taken out' (17). Maybe she feels herself as if one of her eyes has been taken out, since any real communication with the environment and other people is strictly forbidden. There is also a play between the words 'eye' and 'I', and Offred as a Handmaid has no sense or control of 'I', of identity. The image of a single eye, taken out of the face brings to the reader's mind Cyclops, the one-eyed mythological monsters. This suggests the monstrosity of Gilead but also its vulnerability. It only took the cunningness of one man, Odysseus, for Cyclop Polyphemus to lose his eye in Homer's epic *The Odyssey*.

The term 'Handmaid' contains the word hand. Hands are frequently mentioned in *The Handmaid's Tale*; they are an important image for Atwood:

Hands are quite important to me. The hand to me is an extension of the brain. And if you read theory on the development of the human species, everybody says that the ability to use the two is central: they are part of one another. I don't think of the brain as something that is just in your head. The brain is also in your body...And the brain is certainly in the hands.¹²⁸

In accordance with Atwood's views, hands lose their uses in Gilead; they do not serve any reproductive purposes and Handmaids are not officially allowed to touch each other. But they do so either on special occasions, like the birth day of a pregnant Handmaid: '[i]mpulsively she grabs my hand, squeezes it, as we lurch around the corner;' (121) or in secrecy: '[t]wo of Moira's fingers appeared through the hole in the wall. It was only large enough for two fingers. I touched my own fingers to them quickly, held on. Let go' (100). Hands are also used to warn or threaten, as Aunt Lydia wags her finger at her 'girls', or to punish, since the Wives have the right to slap the Handmaids provided they use only their hands and no instruments.

While the Wives use their hands to punish, the Handmaids have their hands punished with steel cable if they break any of the rules. If a Handmaid is caught reading - the supreme transgression - one of her hands is immediately amputated. Despite the fact that words were stolen away from the Handmaids, they are not allowed to steal them back. The paradox is that these sightless, tortured hands hold Gilead's future, as Aunt Lydia says:

¹²⁸ Bonnie Lyons, 'Using Other People's Dreadful Childhoods,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 229.

The future is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and an invitation to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance... But there was nothing in them....It was our hands that were supposed to be full of the future; which could be held but not seen (57).

These nun-like dressed women are told that their purpose is to serve God and their country, but they do not do so with their hands - they do not do housework - but with the wombs of their fertile bodies.

Hands are the second part of the body to be punished; feet are the first. Feet offer a sense of freedom: as the saying goes, as long as you can stand on your own two feet, anything is possible. But this is not the case in Gilead. As soon as Offred loses her job, she feels as if somebody 'cut off [her] feet' (188). When she becomes a Handmaid, her feet, clad in their neat, flat-heeled shoes, are confined to walk within a limited space: '[n]ow and again we vary the route; there is nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze' (174).

The Handmaid's feet are not for dancing. As Atwood says in the poem 'A Red Shirt'

A girl should be
a veil, a white shadow, bloodless
as the moon on water; not
dangerous; she should

keep silent and avoid
red shoes, red stockings, dancing.
Dancing in red shoes will kill you.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'A Red Shirt,' *Poems 1976-1986* (1987; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 47. The last line of the poem is reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale 'The Red Shoes', where

Maybe it will not kill you in Gilead, but any dancing, any act of rebellion, is guaranteed to send your feet straight to Aunt Lydia's steel cables. The rebel Handmaid Moira is a living proof of this: '[t]hey took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab...Afterwards, she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen...They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless...like lungs (102). Despite all this cruelty Offred hopes that her Commander has tender feet: 'he's like a boot, hard on the outside, giving shape to a pulp of tender foot. That's just a wish. I've been watching him for some time and he's given no evidence, of softness' (99).

The most important organ of the fragmented female body is the womb, with its precious ability for creating human life. This ability is controlled by the state of Gilead with an organised repression of human desire and sexuality. Handmaids are restricted to a life of purity and asexual motherhood. Each Handmaid is assigned to a Commander who tries to impregnate her in a parody of the sexual act called the Ceremony, where the Commander, his Wife and the Handmaid form a grotesque triangle of flesh:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up

the girl who wears them has to dance until she dies, so she has her feet chopped off in the end. It can also be a reference to the film 'The Red Shoes', which Atwood mentions in her book *Lady Oracle*: 'the one I liked the best was *The Red Shoes*, with Moira Shearer as a ballet dancer torn between her career and her husband. I adored her...she finally threw herself in front of a train...'. Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1982) 82.

for (104).¹³⁰

Offred says that the Ceremony is not rape but worse: an institutionalised bargain, dressed with the hypocritical clothing of religious piety, where the Handmaid offers her fertile body and the Commander his promise not to send her to her death in the Colonies of chemical waste.

In Gilead the impregnation procedure is not only asexual but also very hygienic; Offred takes a bath before the night of the Ceremony: ‘I soap myself, use the scrub brush and the piece of pumice for sanding off dead skin...I wish to be totally clean, germless, without bacteria, like the surface of the moon’ (74). The Handmaid’s womb has many of the characteristics of the platonic chora¹³¹: it does not create, it receives; it does not produce, it incubates and nurses; and in order to do all that, it must be ‘devoid of all the characters which it is to receive. For if it were like any of the things that enter it, it would badly distort any impression of a contrary or entirely different nature when it receives it, as its own features would shine through’.¹³² The reproductive ideology of Gilead echoes features of the platonic chora, since only the Commander, who enters the Handmaid’s body, is supposed to give features to the child.

¹³⁰ Offred has difficulty finding a word to describe the nature of her sexual relationship to the Commander: it is neither lovemaking nor rape. Eventually she chooses ‘fucking’, but makes it clear that they do not ‘fuck’ each other; he is ‘fucking’ her. Once again, Atwood reveals to the reader the inability of human language to describe things that happen to the body.

¹³¹ The platonic chora is a neutral area with only one function: to receive things from outside. For this reason it is also called ‘hypodochē’ which means receptacle. It does not have body or shape and it ‘never assumes a form like that of any of the things which enter into her’. Although ‘chora’ is not directly related to the womb, Plato implies its feminine nature by calling it ‘the universal nature which receives all bodies’. Plato, ‘Timaeus,’ *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Cairns Huntington (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961) 1177.

¹³² Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 69.

This scene of 'pious' yet ludicrous fertilisation is based on the Bible, book of Genesis, chapter 30, from which Atwood takes the novel's epigraph:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

The Bible advances the double standards of female sexual purity and masculine lust:

'[m]en are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more...It's nature's way. It's God's device' (153). As Atwood claims, '[t]he Bible, of course, contains blasphemy, torture, rape, sodomy, orgies, murder, lying and lots of other unpleasant things...Its setting is the world as it is, human nature as it is'.¹³³ Human nature is monstrous in Gilead, where the newly-born baby is nursed by its natural mother for a few months, only to be handed in to an older woman, the Wife, like 'a bouquet of flowers; something she's won, a tribute' (136). The pain that the Handmaid must be going through when she is forced to give away her own flesh and blood does not seem to concern the Commander, his Wife or the Aunts. They are even less concerned about whether or not Bilhah or Offred want to get pregnant by Jacob or Commander Fred. The Handmaid's future baby is more important to the Wife than to the Commander; without it, she is in danger of losing her status. Within the patriarchal context of this theocracy, both the Handmaid and the Wife are victims, so they try to exploit each other. Sadly, as Offred acknowledges, '[c]ontext is all' (154).

¹³³ Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1982) 354.

Hatred and fear characterise not only the Wife-Handmaid relationship but all female relationships in Gilead. Marthas fear the Wives and usually resent the Handmaids: 'I heard Rita saying that she wouldn't debase herself like that' (20). Handmaids fear the Wives, and hate their teachers/tormentors, the Aunts: '[i]t's Aunt Lydia. How many years since I've seen her?...I've begun to shiver: hatred fills my mouth like spit' (286). They also receive enough brainwashing to despise other Handmaids like Janine, who is the worst victim of all: gang-raped during the time before Gilead, she was forced to have an abortion; pregnant in Gilead, she gives birth to an abnormal baby, 'a shredder' (123), which disappears under mysterious circumstances. Instead of compassion, Janine is subjected to humiliation by the Aunts because it was all 'her fault, her fault, her fault' (82): 'Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom...where we could all see her, her red face and dripping nose ...She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy...pink, like a new-born mouse...For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her' (82).

The Wives hate the Handmaids for being young and fertile and resent the fact that they need them. Their presence in the house is a constant reminder to the Wife of her own infertility: '[l]ittle whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right girls?' (125). During a Prayvaganza - the ceremony where arranged marriages between young officers and the virgin daughters of high rank officials take place - body and language are connected once more with one of Atwood's crafty similes: the Wives are watching the Handmaids, '[w]e are being looked at, assessed, whispered about; we can feel it, like tiny ants running on our bare skins' (225). The Wives despise not only the Handmaids but also the other Wives, although they keep each other busy with tea parties where they drink sherry and

gossip. During the birth day of another pregnant Handmaid, they hide their spite with difficulty: 'they cluster around the bed, the mother and child, cooing and congratulating. Envy radiates from them, I can smell it, faint wisps of acid mingled with their perfume' (136).

Econowives and widows seem to despise Handmaids as well, because they think the way they use their fertile body to avoid death does not differ from the way a prostitute would trade hers off for money. With the restriction of the female body to pre-given functions (mother, wife, servant, prostitute) and of language to prescribed formulas of speech ('Blessed be the fruit', 'Praise be') women suspect and hate other women. As Cixous claims, '[m]en have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilise their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs'.¹³⁴ Cixous describes a situation in the modern world which resembles *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Atwood's words,

The women that are used by the hierarchy to control the other women are analogous to what was done by any imperialist regime among native populations. The British in India put together a crack Indian army made up of Indians to keep the other Indians in line...So it stands to reason that if women are one of the groups being controlled by this regime they would use other women to control them. And if the question is surely women are too kind, too worthy and noble to do such a thing, I mean the answer is nonsense. Of course they will do it.¹³⁵

By giving to the Aunts the guarantee that they will not be sent to the Colonies to die

¹³⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle De Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) 248.

¹³⁵ Atwood's papers (box 150). Stephen, Northfield, 'Atwood ventures into a fundamentalist America', *The Gazette* 11 Dec 1985, literary edition: 5.

from radiation, and the privilege of reading and writing, the men of Gilead have ensured for themselves the most dedicated and cruel protectors of the established order.

But the reality of violence and hatred expand beyond the relationships amongst women. The Handmaids hold their own bodies in contempt whenever they do not manage to get pregnant, even though the Commanders are at fault, since their own fertility is medically proven. As Germaine Greer claims, '[a]ll polygynous societies reward successful males with increased reproductive opportunity, and...it is assumed that men are fertile unless they have been castrated... The reason why male sterility is seldom recognised is precisely because the recognition would strike at the heart of morality: all order and coherence would be put in jeopardy'.¹³⁶ In order to keep Gilead's morality intact, the Handmaid's body is always to blame when the fertilisation procedure with her Commander does not result in pregnancy.

Like the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, Offred identifies her body with the wilderness and, like Circe in 'Circe/Mud Poems', she listens to its pulses and rhythms in case there are any signs of pregnancy

I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future.
...swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh,
these are signs...Each month I watch for blood fearfully, for when
it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the
expectations of others, which have become my own (83).

Feeling betrayed by her uterus she perceives the inside of her body in an altered manner; the affected zones of her womb and her heart become enlarged in her body image:

¹³⁶ Germaine Greer, *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984) 34.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of the pear, which is hard and more real than I am ...Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy...It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine (84).

In addition to the fact that her body feels so unfamiliar and repulsive, Offred is also aware that it can be easily destroyed despite its reproductive capacity. After the women's Salvagings, where two Handmaids and a Wife are hung, she thinks with terror: 'I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall...I want to keep on living in any form. I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject' (298). I do not think that Atwood has Kristeva's theory of abjection in mind when she uses this term, but I will elaborate on it since it relates to Gilead's investment in fragmenting and torturing the human body.

According to Kristeva, the abject is what exists between the subject and the object, the inside and the outside, and yet cannot be identified with either. It upsets and defies order so the subject is constantly threatened by a return to its previous wordless, chaotic state. Bodily fluids such as vomit, saliva, phlegm, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, sperm and faeces are considered abject because they cross the corporeal boundaries and turn the inside of the body out: '[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being'.¹³⁸ The Handmaids experience the feeling of abjection because of another Handmaid's bodily fluids; they are all disgusted with Janine's tears and snot during Testimonies and with the smell of sweat

¹³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3.

and urine the day she gives birth. They also feel abjection when they see the tortured Guardian, who ‘smells like shit and vomit’ (290).

But the worst form of abjection comes during Salvagings, when they look at the hanging corpses of three other women: ‘[f]rom behind me there is a sound of retching. That’s why we don’t get breakfast...I’ve seen it before, the white bag placed over the head...the noose adjusted delicately around the neck...the stool kicked away ...I don’t want to see it anymore’ (288). The sight of a corpse does not blur the borders between the inside and the outside of the human body, but between life and death. It is threatening the solidity and vitality of the self. In Kristeva’s opinion, the corpse is ‘the most sickening of wastes ...a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer “I” who expel, “I” is expelled...The corpse seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life’.¹³⁸ It is this immediate threat on their lives that makes the Handmaids retch and choke. Once Salvagings finish, the survival instinct takes over and Offred develops an appetite. The consumption of food stabilises her shaken sense of identity and confirms that she is still alive: ‘[d]eath makes me hungry...maybe it’s the body’s way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: *I am, I am*. I am still...I could eat a horse’ (293, Atwood’s emphasis).

Despite the image of the female body as amorphous, reluctant guardian of the male, it is clearly more interesting than the male body: it can bleed without dying, it can

¹³⁸ Ibid. 3-4.

change shape and after nine months give birth to another human being. The male body is boring by comparison. Offred ridicules the part of the male anatomy that changes shape - the Commander's penis - by describing it with forbidden language: 'his extra, sensitive thumb, his tentacle...which...expands, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly, grows big again...avid for vision. To achieve vision in this way, this journey into a darkness that is composed of women ...who can see in the darkness while he strains blindly forward (98). Men like Offred's Commander have to wrap women in veils and habits, deprive them from all their civil liberties, including language, in order for them to feel that as men they have a meaningful existence: '[t]he problem wasn't only with women...The main problem was with men...there was nothing for them to do with women...sex was too easy...There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for...You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off sex even' (221-22).

In order for men to turn on sex again, a demonstration of their virile, heterosexual status, which includes using the permanent missionary position and neglecting the female sexual pleasure, seems essential. Sexual promiscuity is natural for men, as the sanctimonious Commander bluntly announces to Offred:

'Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy...Women know it instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes the old days? To trick men into thinking they were several women'... 'So now that you don't have different clothes, I say, you merely have different women'. 'It solves a lot of problems' he says without a twitch (249).

The Commanders make sure they have their variety of women by establishing a brothel which they call their little club, while the prostitutes call it Jezebel's, a name which mocks the Biblical piety of the state of Gilead.

Double standards reign in Atwood's God-fearing regime, where the men take active sexual positions with their Wives and Handmaids, but take pleasure in passivity and explore other erotogenic zones with the prostitutes. As Catherine Waldby claims:

This privatization has a kind of 'theme park' effect, in that it allows the client to experience the thrill of subjective danger where no real danger exists...By containing a passive sexual practice to the secretive and commodified world of prostitution, men can continue to stand in a phallic relation to their wives and girlfriends, so the active/passive distinction continues to describe the masculine/feminine distinction.¹³⁹

This suits Commander Fred fine. Even in the brothel he treats Offred as his property by slipping an evening rental tag around her wrist, showing her off to his friends and having sex with her as if she was a prostitute, her own needs and desires set aside: 'I lie there like a dead bird...Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head...Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It's the least you can do' (267).

Most of the prostitutes who work at Jezebel's are lesbians. Homosexuality is banned from Gilead as a crime called 'gender treachery'. Homosexual men are either hung or sent to the Colonies because they do not conform to the 'straight' model: male means active agent while female means passive receptacle. Homosexual women with viable ovaries are converted to Handmaids, but if that fails, they are sent to Jezebel's.

Lesbianism is a threat to patriarchal Gilead, not because of women loving women, but because of women using their bodies in a way that excludes men. The deprivation of the most important means that men intend to use in order to immortalise themselves, that is, impregnate a woman, is a serious threat to their ego. While lesbianism is a

¹³⁹ Catherine Waldby, 'Destruction: Boundary erotics and refigurations of the heterosexual male body,' *Sexy Bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 274.

persecuted sin outside Jezebel's, it is accepted, even welcome, inside. As Offred's lesbian friend Moira says to her '[t]he Aunts figure we are all damned anyway...so it doesn't matter what sort of vice we get up to, and the Commanders don't give a piss what we do in our off time. Anyway, women on women sort of turns them on' (262). This shows clearly the political character of sex hierarchy: it is not pornography that gives enjoyment, but the enjoyment of power that constitutes pornography.

With their body and their language being totally controlled, one cannot help but wonder if the Handmaids have any power in Gilead. They are given some power from the state in order to kill for the state. During the last part of Salvagings, which is called Particicution, Aunt Lydia verbally manipulates the Handmaids into tearing a man to pieces; she tells them he is the rapist of a pregnant Handmaid, while in reality he is working for the underground resistance. The savagery of the scene reminds us of Orpheus' body being torn apart by the Maenads:

It's true, there is bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend...The air is bright with adrenaline, we are permitted anything and this is freedom...but before the tide of cloth and bodies hits him Ofglen pushes him down...then kicks his head viciously...Now there are sounds, gasps...and the red bodies tumble forward...he's obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere like a horse in terror (292).

Not only women's but men's bodies are tortured. Once the state puts a white bag on a head and transforms a 'he' or a 'she' to an 'it', it can do anything it wants with their body.

There is a direct connection between language and physical pain here. A person in pain initially uses language in order to complain, but as the pain deepens, words lose their meaning and sounds anterior to language replace them. This is illustrated when

Janine- now Handmaid Ofwarren- gives birth. The stronger her pain becomes, the more she moves away from any rational use of language: she begins by saying 'I want to go for a walk. I feel fine. I have to go to the can' (134), then utters unconnected monosyllable words 'Oh no, oh no oh no' (135), and eventually makes pre-linguistic screams and groans. Language is also eliminated when the physical pain is caused by torture; the man who is torn to pieces by the Handmaids lets out 'a high scream...like a horse in terror' (292).¹⁴⁰ As Elaine Scarry claims, physical pain 'is not only resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. To hear those cries is to witness the shattering of language'.¹⁴¹ This shattering of language represents the power of Atwood's totalitarian regime.

The other kind of power that the Handmaids give to themselves is the power to take their own life. This is particularly disturbing for Gilead, because if they keep on killing themselves, there will be nobody left to breed. That is why there are no ropes, no glass frames, mirrors or razors: 'I know why there is no glass in front of the watercolour picture...why the window only opens partly and the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of...It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge' (17-18). Handmaids attack their body in order to take revenge for society's denial of woman's ability to choose freely. Aunt Lydia's famous saying - '[t]here is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In

¹⁴⁰ In *Alias Grace*, the young murderess can guess that a male prisoner 'was young, by the tenor of his screaming' when whipped. Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996) 238.

¹⁴¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 172.

the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it' (34) - is worth analysing here since it is another manipulation of language in order to oppress the Handmaids.

Freedom to choose whether they want to get pregnant, and if they do, whether they want to keep the baby or not does not exist in Gilead. There is freedom from, but we are not really told what freedom from means for a woman. Maybe it is freedom from sin, since their bodies are pure and clean now, or freedom from hard work, since all they have to do is lie flat on their back and look at the ceiling. It can also mean freedom from reproductive labour with the help of men, since now Handmaids give birth naturally, although still very painfully, in the presence of women only, apart from exceptional cases. But the most appropriate explanation is freedom from freedom itself, freedom from choosing how to live their lives. All the above may be true, but still men have it both ways: they are given freedom from reproductive labour and freedom to accept or deny paternity. '*From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each, according to his needs*' (127, Atwood's emphasis). It does not say anything about her needs. After all, they all live under His and not Her eye.

With such calculated abuse of body and language, tyranny and torture disguised as God's will and nature's way rule Gilead. However, from the last part of the book which describes a conference on Gileadian studies in the year 2195, we know that Gilead did not last for long. It is not difficult to imagine that what led to the creation of the theocracy also brought its destruction: breaking the rules that constitute body and language. Handmaids find ways to undermine Gilead's rules: they exchange their real names at night, they use butter to keep their complexion moist, they learn to read

lips and interpret body language and they have their own password to indicate that they belong to the underground resistance. There is a lot of body language in the book, ‘scenes in which people don’t say much but convey meaning anyway’,¹⁴² as Atwood claims. The Handmaids also defy Aunt Lydia’s doctrines by playing linguistic games: when she says ‘think of yourselves as pearls’ Offred thinks of ‘congealed oyster spit’ (124); Salvagings become Savagings, There is a Balm in Gilead becomes There is a Bomb in Gilead and somebody writes ‘Aunt Lydia sucks’ on the toilet wall. These are small tricks which do not guarantee any victory, but indicate that there is resistance.

The first thing that Offred repossesses is language. Surprisingly enough it is the Commander who helps her do that by secretly inviting her to his room for a game of Scrabble. Offred thinks that he is going to ask her for some kinky sex, but the game of Scrabble virtually carries the same stamp of perversion: the arbitrary use of the body and the arbitrary use of language for personal pleasure are equally forbidden. Offred has been confined to standard virtuous phrases for so long that she finds it difficult to re-enter her own language:

My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world...It was like trying to walk without crutches...That was the way my mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp r’s and t’s, sliding over to avoid vowels as if on pebbles (164).

Trying to talk is, for the Handmaids, as difficult as trying to walk after your feet have been tortured by the Aunts’ steel cables.

¹⁴² Geoff Hancock, ‘Tightrope-Walking Over Niagara Falls,’ *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 217.

It takes Offred time to relax into using language again. Slowly but steadily she regains her confidence and realises how starved she is for words, words which will satisfy her emotional appetites. Cixous' suggestion about language applies to Offred here: she feels like 'taking' words 'in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her own teeth, to invent for herself a language to get inside of'.¹⁴³ Food and language are connected because they are both activities that take place inside a person's mouth. We cannot speak and eat at the same time, but the pleasure we receive from words and food is sometimes the same. According to Virginia Woolf, the mouth is not only 'shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on [the tongue]; which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green, and sweetness'.¹⁴⁴ This is how Offred feels when she imagines that the letters of Scrabble are 'like Candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. I would like to put them in my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious' (149). During these Scrabble games, she gradually steals back her words.

The female narrator's desire for language is not only related to food but also to sex: '[t]he Commander and me, covering each other with ink, licking it off or making love on stacks of forbidden newsprint' (191). Her relationship with the Commander is, according to Atwood, 'erotic, but not sexual. It's erotic because he gives her access to forbidden words, to forbidden printed pages, all these forbidden objects...as soon as you repress something, you eroticise it'.¹⁴⁵ Offred does not love the Commander, but

¹⁴³ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle De Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980) 257.

¹⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 11.

¹⁴⁵ Atwood Papers (box 150). Sue Matheson, 'An interview with Margaret Atwood', *Horizons*, Jan.- Feb. 1986: 4.1, 21.

the secret visits to his study add some excitement to her life. Despite all the power that Gilead has given him the Commander is powerless before the possibility of his Handmaid's suicide, and needy of her real kiss: ' "I want you to kiss me"...I go to him and place my lips, closed, against his... "Not like that" he says. "As if you mean it". He was so sad' (150).

The turning point for her re-entry into language comes when Offred thinks how bizarre the Commander's expectations of her were, a game of Scrabble and a real kiss, and then realises that she is about to burst out laughing:

If I let the noise come out in the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it, someone is bound to hear, and then...who knows? Judgement: emotion inappropriate to the occasion...I cram both hands over my mouth as if I am about to be sick, drop to my knees the laughter boiling like lava in my throat...I'll choke on it. My ribs hurt from holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst...oh, to die of laughter (156).

As Kristeva claims '[w]e do not laugh because of what makes sense or because of what does not. We laugh because of possible meaning, because of the *attitude* that causes us to enunciate signification as it brings us *jouissance*'.¹⁴⁶ Offred is indeed happier after she realises how absurd and lonely her Commander is and laughter is the first audible and wordless expression of her feeling. The next step is the proper use of language, although this has to be done with extra caution within the framework of Gilead. She manages to have normal conversation with her shopping partner Ofglen, who is a member of the underground resistance, although they still have to whisper and keep their heads down. The most important evidence that Offred finds her voice/language is the story itself; *The Handmaid's Tale* is a transcription from several recordings made by Offred for the benefit of future generations. Before I elaborate

¹⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1981) 182.

more on that, I will explain how she regains her body.

The person who helps Offred reclaim her body is the last person anyone would expect:

Serena Joy. What is of interest here is the scene where Serena Joy and Offred have their first real conversation about their common problem: Offred's flat stomach.

Offred sits on a cushion and holds some wool, which Serena winds into a ball. Despite her higher status, she is also speechless, so the wool becomes words and knitting

becomes language. As Serena winds the wool, it is obvious that she plays the role of

Offred's Fate¹⁴⁷: the wool is her life and Serena can use her scissors and cut it any time

she likes. She needs Offred to be pregnant though, so she suggests impregnation by

another man. This puts Offred's life in danger, but her life is in danger anyway, since

she is not pregnant and this is her last chance. Once Offred agrees to do it, Serena

takes the wool away from her hands; Offred's life is in Serena's hands now, the same

merciless hands that hold Offred's arms raised during the Ceremony: 'she holds my

hands...This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really

means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product...The rings of her

left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge' (104).

Despite the fact that Serena helps Offred for her own reasons, Offred regains her

sensuality and through it her real body. Desire never disappears from Gilead no matter

how hard the Aunts try to abolish it. You can smell it in the old gymnasium where the

¹⁴⁷ 'Three are the conjoined Fates robed in white...by name Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Of these, Atropos is the smallest in stature, but the most terrible...This myth seems to be based on the custom of weaving family and clan marks into the newly born child's swaddling bands...Clotho is the "spinner", Lachesis is the "measurer", Atropos is "she who cannot be turned or avoided"'. Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (1955; London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1958) 48. The three fates of Greek mythology are also mentioned in the 'Circe/Mud Poems' section of chapter one in relation to language being replaced by the female activity of weaving.

Handmaids sleep, you can see it in the eyes of the young Guardians when they look at the Handmaids, you can sense it in Nick's boot when it touches Offred's shoe before the Ceremony: 'I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin' (91).

Nick is the Commander's chauffeur and Offred's future impregnator, chosen by Serena. There is an immediate sexual attraction between them which is reinforced by the sensual awakening of nature in early summer. In one of the rare poetic passages of the text, Offred invites us into the lush, irrational world of passion in Serena's fertile garden:

There's something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly into the light...The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs, the grass grows underfoot...Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. Even the bricks of the house are softening ...if I leaned against them they'd be warm and yielding (161).

The goddesses that Offred must have in mind here are the goddesses of love, like Aphrodite. The strange triangle that we have in the story includes different goddesses: Aunt Lydia is Athena, a passionless woman, preserver of patriarchal law and language, Serena Joy is Hecate, the barren queen of witches in the Underworld and Offred is Persephone, the girl whose fertile body is partially captured by the patriarchal law. Persephone has to spend winter in the Underworld with her sterile husband Hades (the Commander) but spring and summer on earth with her mother Demeter, where she turns into a sensual woman.

We are given three imaginary versions of Offred's love-making with Nick, until we receive the real one, which is joyful and comforting. Despite all the risks involved,

Offred goes to Nick's room more than once and, although neither of them mentions the word love, she tells him her real name, the name she keeps buried like a treasure, maybe in Serena's garden: 'I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come to dig up, one day. This name has an aura around it, like... some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my...bed at night...and my name floats there behind my eyes...shining in the dark' (94).

Two of the most loyal representatives of the status quo in Gilead, the Commander and his wife, give Offred access to her exploited body and abolished word, so that she can restore them to a relatively healthy state. She finds her voice, a voice that represents hundreds of other women and records her story on tapes, which she hides in a foot locker. It is important to mention here Atwood's opinion about the significance of writing:

It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It's also a witnessing. *Come with me*, the writer is saying to the reader. *There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know*. The writer 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 (Atwood's emphasis).¹⁴⁸

Within the framework of Gilead, Offred cannot possibly write her story, so she does something equally important, she speaks it.

Offred may not be as brave and inspiring as her friend Moira, but she nevertheless finds the courage to narrate her story with objectivity and developing political awareness, even if this means being critical about her own actions. According to

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1982) 348.

Atwood, Offred can be defined as an artist:

It has always been one function of the artist to speak the forbidden... especially in times of political repression. People risk imprisonment and torture because they know there are other people who are hungry for what they have to say. Inhabitants of concentration camps during the second world war jeopardised their already slim chances of survival by keeping diaries; why? Because there was a story that they felt impelled to tell, that they felt the rest of us *had* to know (Atwood's emphasis).¹⁴⁹

Gilead does not last for long but Atwood, with the ironic description of ignorance, and misogyny represented by professor Pieixoto in the year 2195, gives the reader a sceptical warning that the seed of Gilead still exists. We don't really know what happens to Offred, but there is some indication that she escapes, pregnant with Nick's baby and becomes a member of the underground resistance. Since she records the tapes, we assume that she can use language more freely now and she still has her body, but her relationship to it has changed. She does not have to use it as '[s]omething' that 'could be exchanged...some deal made, some trade-off' (14) but as a familiar source of strength and pleasure, which gives her back, in triumphant defiance to Aunt Lydia's 'freedom from', her freedom to choose.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 350.

‘She was in a delicate condition. She was in the family way. She was in trouble’¹⁵⁰ : sexuality, fertility and language in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*.

When Atwood describes a young woman dressed almost like a nun, ‘walking with her head lowered, flanked by two unsavoury-looking...guards’ who are ‘leaning very close to her, as if she’s a precious treasure to be kept safe’ (186) the reader may assume that the woman is a Handmaid, and the guards are escorting her to her monthly doctor’s appointment. But a closer look shows that the guards’ clothes are not right and the woman is wearing a blue not a red dress and a white cap, not a nun-like red hat with white wings. The young woman in question is Grace Marks, the celebrated murderess from Atwood’s latest novel *Alias Grace*, published in 1996.

The story is based on a historical event, the sensational court case of the double murder which took place in 1843. Thomas Kinnear, a wealthy Ontario land-owner and Nancy Montgomery, his beautiful housekeeper and mistress, were found slaughtered in the cellar of Mr. Kinnear’s house. Two people were accused for the murder, James McDermott, the manservant of the house and Grace Marks, the maid-of-all-work. McDermott was hanged for the crime, while Grace was sentenced to life in prison, thanks to the clever manipulations of her lawyer, who appealed for mercy on the grounds of her extreme youth and temporary insanity. The case became a focus for deeply rooted cultural anxieties about female nature: was Grace a blood-thirsty demon or an innocent victim of circumstances?

¹⁵⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 276. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

The stories of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* are different, and so is their historical background, but there are thematic similarities between the two novels. Atwood handles complex themes such as misinterpretation of the Bible, fragmentation of the human body, torture and killing in *The Handmaid's Tale* and treatment of prisoners and of the mentally ill, prostitution and spiritualism in *Alias Grace*. But what is common to the two novels is society's frantic effort to control human sexuality and especially female reproduction. And although in *Alias Grace* women who can no longer bear children are not sent to toxic colonies to die from constant exposure to radiation, female fertility is precious, pregnancy is its most valuable manifestation, and motherhood is the woman's most important role. In the first part of this chapter I discussed how Offred loses and regains her body and language. In this part I will discuss what the female body represents in relation to female nature and how violence is human, not gendered. I will analyse the Victorian suppressed sexuality and female fertility and explain how these two themes lead to the day of the murders. I will finally argue that language is initially restricted and replaced by smell and touch, but eventually freed and reused not only for narration but also for revealing the sexuality of the novel.

The main setting of the novel is Kingston, Ontario in 1859, after Grace has spent sixteen years in prison. At the age of thirty-one, she is a model prisoner, so a local support group tries to gather enough evidence for her pardon and release. They hire a young American psychiatrist, Dr. Simon Jordan, who converses with Grace in order to awaken the part of her brain that cannot remember the murders. Atwood gives the notorious murderess a voice of her own, so the events which lead to the murders are

re-examined through Grace's traumatised soul. Part of the novel is narrated by Grace in the first person, and part by Simon in the third. Letters and medical reports offer additional information, but the interaction between Grace and Simon, charged with curiosity, mistrust and underlying eroticism, constitutes the core of the novel. This case of double murder would not be as sensational if it was not spiced up with illicit sex: Nancy was Mr. Kinnear's mistress and pregnant with his child and there was speculation that Grace was sexually involved not only with her master, but also with her fellow servant James McDermott. Before I elaborate on the theme of sexuality I will discuss the female body and its role in assumptions about female nature in the Victorian period.

The inside of the house was regarded as an exclusively female domain during Victorian times. It is the place where a woman would look after her husband and children and be responsible for their moral guidance. According to Deborah Gorham, the ideal Victorian woman is epitomised by Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*:

The ideal woman was willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and she would have a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home. She would be innocent, pure, gentle and self-sacrificing. Possessing no ambitious strivings, she would be free of any trace of anger or hostility. More emotional than man, she was also more capable of self-renunciation.¹⁵¹

These wonderful qualities of the mind and heart need to be accompanied by the right body. Victorian upper and middle class women had high standards of hygiene, because, as John Haller claims, 'cleanliness was akin to godliness', so 'for all practical

¹⁵¹ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1982) 4-5.

purposes... hygiene demanded all the care and ritualism of a vestal virgin. Poor health, ugliness...and lack of cleanliness had all the attributes of sin and intimated indiscretions of the basest sort'.¹⁵² As well as keeping their body clean, they also dressed it with many uncomfortable and heavy layers of cloth. But the worst of their garments was the corset, whose strings they pulled as tight as possible, sacrificing their health for a wasp waist.

Limited movement was not the only problem corsets caused: they forced the breasts up and compressed the ribs almost to the point of overlapping. As a result women could not get enough air, looked pale, fainted easily and often suffered from collapsed lungs. Some of these symptoms are confided to Simon by the prison Governor's wife: '[c]oily, as if displaying an ankle, she relates a symptom- agitated breathing, a constriction around the ribs...She has a pain- well, she doesn't like to say exactly where. Whatever could be the cause of it?' (82). Although physicians advised women against it, they continued to wear corsets. Apart from being wives and mothers, they also had an ornamental purpose, which they tried to fulfil in their tight corsets and heavily laced, colourful dresses.

Despite the fashionable fragility of their bodies, many women did not display an equally fragile character. *Alias Grace* shows a fascination with women who do not conform to cultural stereotypes of femininity. The Governor's wife keeps a scrapbook with famous murders and hangings. Lydia, her daughter, may have a small waist, but

¹⁵² John Haller and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician And Sexuality In Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974) 141-42.

she also admits that she would have liked to attend McDermott's hanging. Simon's landlady has pale blonde hair and faints often, but she can still carefully plan the murder of her abusive husband. Atwood questions whether the slender, fragile body of Victorian upper-middle class women guarantees a refined and gentle nature, the same way she questions whether little girls' cute faces guarantee kindness or purity in *Cat's Eye*. As Simon observes,

In the course of his travels, he's encountered many women...drunk and swearing...pulling the hair from each other's heads...he's known them to make away with their own infants, and to sell their young daughters to wealthy men who hope that by raping children they will avoid disease. So he is under no illusions as to the innate refinement of women (87).

Simon describes working-class women and prostitutes here, but as he discovers later, middle and upper-class women were capable of the same brutality. Atwood seems to indicate that, despite appearances, women are not china dolls but human beings, and as such they can be curious about, plan, or even commit murder.

Although the young doctor seems to realise that a delicate female body does not always enclose an innocent soul, he finds it very difficult to relate Grace's gentle appearance to the aggressive nature of a murderess. Susanna Moodie, who visited Grace both in the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston and in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, gave a description of Grace's face and body:

She is a middle-sized woman, with a slight graceful figure...Her complexion is fair, and must, before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled it, have been very brilliant. Her eyes are a bright blue, her hair auburn, and her face would be rather handsome were it not for the long curved chin, which gives, as it always does to most

persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression.¹⁵⁴

The 'cunning, cruel expression' of Grace's face could have been Moodie's creation, because she saw what she wanted to see. The same thing happens to Simon the first time he meets Grace. He initially sees a thin and beautiful romantic heroine, but when he takes a closer look, he sees Grace as she really is: 'a different woman - straighter, taller, more self-possessed, wearing the conventional dress of the Penitentiary...Her eyes were unusually large, it was true, but far from insane. Instead they were frankly assessing him' (60).

Although Grace is not helpless or insane, Simon cannot see her as a wilful conspirator in a double murder because she is still a young and pretty woman. It was mainly her sex that saved Grace from the death penalty in 1843, and the situation remains the same today. According to Patricia Pearson, in the United States, few women are on death row for killing in self-defence; most of them

have committed savage or calculated crimes. The reality is that chivalry justice is a thriving player in death penalty cases. The reluctance of men to punish women severely - thus admitting that a woman can, in fact, be threatening to them - is alive and well at the end of the twentieth century. Only two of the 379 executions in Illinois's history have been women. Of 103 women sentenced to death in the United States since 1977, one has been executed; 47 remain on death row; the remainder were transferred out.¹⁵⁵

So even today, where the female body is not crushed by tight corsets, we tend to equate its relative powerlessness in relation to the masculine with innocence.

¹⁵⁴ Susanna Moodie, *Life In The Clearings* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1959) 169-70.

¹⁵⁵ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: How Women Get Away With Murder* (London: Virago Press, 1998) 61.

The perceived fragility of the upper-middle class body did not only give the wrong impression about a woman's soul, but also about her sexuality. Since the female body was so delicate, it could not possibly have erotic desires as strong as the virile, male body. William Acton claimed in 1857 that

the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally...There are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever. Others, again, immediately after each period, do become, to a limited degree, capable of experiencing it; but this capacity is often temporary, and will cease entirely until the next menstrual period. The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences.¹⁵⁵

The moral code clearly dictated that respectable young women were supposed to feel asexual and be ignorant about the physical side of their wedding night. When Simon thinks of lovemaking with a rich, future wife that his mother has chosen for him, he describes a passionless, clinical procedure: '[t]he act of procreation would be undergone unseen, prudently veiled in white cotton - she, dutiful but properly averse, he within his rights - but need never be mentioned' (88-89).

Female sexuality was confined by double standards; whilst strong sexual appetites in the male were a sign of vigorous masculinity, in the female they were a sign of unwomanly animality. Of course there were some physicians who believed that sexual desire in females was healthy. But sexuality in general suffered not only from double standards but from strict social control. Desire was repressed and led to anxiety and guilt about menstruation, masturbation, lack of sex or too much sex. And although

¹⁵⁵ William Acton, 'Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female a Cause of Impotence,' *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Tests 1830-1890*, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 179-80.

men suffered too, women suffered more because of their reproductive ability. Whether frail and middle-class, or robust and working-class, the preservation of chastity and the fear of pregnancy were common considerations for all Victorian women.

There are four important pregnancies in *Alias Grace* that lead to a sudden unfolding of the story. Grace's mother gives birth to nine children because neither she nor her husband use any birth-control methods. In the first half of the nineteenth century birth-control methods included douche within five minutes of coitus, condoms made of sheep's intestines, or abstinence from sexual intercourse. As Angus McLaren claims, some male writers were supporters of birth-control, and

went out of their way to enumerate the particular advantages that control of fertility offered to women. No longer would they have to be subjected to repeated pregnancies, dangerous miscarriages, and attendant illnesses. No longer would they be forced into acts of abortion and infanticide, acts which both degraded women in the eyes of society and undermined their mental and physical health...At last men and women could marry, not to simply bear children, but to secure their mutual affection.¹⁵⁶

While all this is true, birth-control methods were not used on a wide scale. Grace's English father, like other middle or working-class husbands, considers the children his wife's responsibility and sees no reason why he should practice coitus interruptus or abstain from intercourse. When his wife gets pregnant, he expects her to take care of it, which means either to abort the child, kill it when born, or decide to raise it by herself and not bother him with it: '[w]hat are you bringing another brat into this world for, haven't you had enough of that by now, but no you can't stop, another mouth to feed, as if he himself had nothing to do with it at all' (107).

¹⁵⁶ Angus McLaren, *Birth Control In Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978) 95.

Without the regular use of birth control all women, regardless of their class, got pregnant more often than they wanted to. The only woman who is happy to be pregnant in the novel is Grace's aunt Pauline, and that is because she does not have any other children. Grace's aunt and uncle will have their own child now, so they will stop looking after their nine nephews and nieces. This pregnancy leads to the immigration of the Marks family from Ireland to Canada which is crucial for the novel.

All the birth-control methods mentioned so far were the husband's responsibility; the man still had the final word on his wife's body and its reproductive abilities. The only birth-control practice that was entirely female and men could not prevent was abortion. Victorian social and moral rules condemned all birth-control methods as interfering with the workings of God and nature. Despite the harsh punishments, and the danger of dying from shock or infection, women continued to practice abortion as a last resort for an unwanted pregnancy. They did not want to be passive about their own body; on the contrary, they wanted to gain control over it and regulate its fertility. The abortion that takes place in *Alias Grace* is a typical case of a young, unmarried domestic servant called Mary, who fears the wrath of her mistress and of her strictly moral society. This is another pregnancy that leads to a rapid development of the story. Grace leaves the house she works for after Mary's unsuccessful abortion, and eventually she is hired by Nancy Montgomery.

Mary Whitney is Grace's fellow-servant, best friend and substitute mother. For the biggest part of the nineteenth century domestic service was the largest occupational

category for both Canadian women and immigrants. Domestic servants had to do the most difficult housework, like cleaning floors, lighting stoves, washing and ironing clothes and linen, and assisting with any dairy chores. Orphans like Mary and Grace or girls who travelled from the country to the city to work had no family to support them if they lost their jobs, so they ran the highest risk of financial and sexual exploitation.

As Backhouse claims,

The vulnerability of domestic servants to sexual exploitation was also widely understood. The culprits were typically their masters, or male relatives of their master, or hired men working within the same or nearby households. The long hours of work and lack of privacy were such that female servants were almost continuously accessible. Many found that seduction and an ensuing pregnancy were twin perils of the job.¹⁵⁷

Mary seems to be familiar with this unfortunate part of being a domestic servant and gives advice to Grace:

when you go out to the privy at night, they're drunk then, they lie in wait for you and then it is snatch and grab... and if you must, you should give them a kick between the legs where they'll feel it ...some of the masters...think you owe them service twenty-four hours a day, and should do the main work flat on your back (165, 199).

Mary is also aware of the moral advice given to young girls in relation to the opposite sex: girls should always guard themselves from strangers and never return any affection before the man's marriage proposal.

Despite her apparent knowledge and wisdom, Mary fails to follow her own advice when she falls in love. She is 'a pretty and cheerful girl, with a tidy figure and dark hair and sparkling black eyes, and rosy cheeks with dimples' (149), so she is seduced

¹⁵⁷ Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991) 60.

by her employer's eldest son. He promises to marry her, but when she gets pregnant he gives her five dollars to have an abortion. Victorian society was patriarchal, so if Mary's father was alive he could have taken the case to the court and won compensation. According to Backhouse, 'Canadian jurors would consistently show themselves to be sympathetic towards the fathers of seduced women'¹⁵⁸, especially if they were previously chaste and beautiful like Mary. But since her father is dead, she has no choice but to terminate her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She undergoes a bungled abortion performed by a doctor the prostitutes use and bleeds to death the same night.

Before I continue with the third important pregnancy in the novel, it is useful to elaborate on the Victorian prostitute in relation to her sexuality and fertility. There were two different classes of prostitutes: high-class, private prostitutes, who were tolerated by the law, and low-class, public ones, who were constantly chased and arrested. In Lynda Nead's words,

The definition of prostitution as an offence against public health and morality was formulated again and again in letters to newspapers ...and publications by evangelical missionaries. Private and hidden forms of prostitution could be accepted; it was lower-class, visible and public prostitutes who had to be controlled...The public streets were the domain of the fallen, the promiscuous, the diseased and the immoral.¹⁵⁹

Mary explains the class system of prostitution to Grace:

there were several bawdy-houses there...and the whores lived in them in their own bedchambers, and with maids to bring them their breakfasts...and all they had to do was put on their clothes and take them off again, and lie around on their backs...But the cheaper sort had to walk about outside, and make use of rooms

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵⁹ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988) 116-17.

rented by the hour; and many of them got diseases, and were old by the time they were twenty, and had to cover their faces with paint, so as to deceive the poor drunken sailors (152).

Regardless of her class, the prostitute's body represented sexual deviancy, immorality and disease. She possessed a feminine body, but she was unfeminine, since she sold it as a commodity and received money for it. What made the prostitute unique in the law of commercial supply and demand was that her body was the product and the seller at the same time. By making money she was financially independent, like any other middle-class white male, so her body was regarded by society in masculine terms. But although prostitutes were making money, their social status was not given legal protection and social respect, as the status of male professionals. And some prostitutes died from disease, or were exploited by their pimps, so they had little control and even less financial benefit from the selling of their body.

As Grace admits, there is a perverse allure in these female social deviants: 'I was indeed curious to see the women who made a living by selling their bodies, because I thought if worst came to worst and if starving, I would still have something to sell; and I wanted to see what they looked like' (152). This is the same thought that the Handmaids have; in a theocratic, totalitarian regime, where their bodies are allocated the specific function of breeding, their only comfort is that they still have a body to sell: '[s]omething could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies'.¹⁶¹ They are already accused by other women for prostituting their body's fertility in order to stay alive. If Handmaids try to escape and get caught,

¹⁶¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 14.

they are tortured first and then offered the choice of becoming unwomen and cleaning toxic waste, or becoming prostitutes. Prostitution is one of the few occupational choices offered to unemployed domestic servants and sinful Handmaids.

Another factor supporting the social belief about the prostitute's unfeminine body was the false claim of its infertility. Given the fact that motherhood was the Victorian feminine ideal, the prostitute was defined as a cancerous growth that polluted the rest of society. The refusal to fit in the respectable reproductive system could take religious overtones, as we can see with Ralph Wardlaw's claim: '*the general barrenness and unproductiveness of the system of prostitution...distinctly proclaiming its unnaturalness, by its contrariety to nature's admitted end and primary law in the creation of a male and a female, - a law which, expressed in the terms of holy writ, is "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" ' (Wardlaw's emphasis).¹⁶¹ In contrast to the general belief, however, some prostitutes got pregnant and then decided whether they wanted to keep the baby or not. The whore was not entirely free to accept or reject motherhood, but the fact that she had more choice than a married woman poked a finger in the eye of a society desperate to regulate human sexuality.*

Although the human body is produced and marked not only by nature but also by society, the strict moral rules did not manage to control sexuality during the Victorian era. As Elizabeth Grosz claims, 'sexuality...refuses to accept the containment of the bedroom or to restrict itself only to those activities which prepare for orgasmic

¹⁶¹ Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes, And Remedy* (Glasgow: David Russell, 1842) 70.

pleasure. It is excessive, redundant, and superfluous...It always seeks more than it needs, performs excessive actions, and can draw any object, any fantasy...into its circuits of pleasure'.¹⁶² *Alias Grace* is full of such erotic manifestations of forbidden sexuality. Language is largely replaced by bodily smell and taste: Grace bites the doctor who tries to grab her breasts whilst measuring her heartbeat and says that he 'tasted of raw sausages and damp woollen underclothes' (34). Mary Whitney 'smelled like nutmegs and carnations' (149) and Simon's landlady and mistress, smells of camphor and 'of violet-water, autumn leaves, and human flesh' (141). This prominent bodily odour often awakens erotic feelings in the characters: Simon thinks of the servant girls in his paternal home who 'smelled like strawberries and salt' (56) and in particular the one who found him touching her underwear 'and they'd ended by kissing...her hair came tumbling down...Her hands were red, as she'd been hulling strawberries; and her mouth tasted of them' (187).

In this erotic context it is not only smell and taste that replace language, it is also vision. As John Berger puts it, '[s]eeing comes before words'.¹⁶³ Simon is the voyeur observing the female body, whilst the various women he looks at know that their bodies are being surveyed. He describes Lydia as 'a healthy young animal' and 'is conscious of her white throat, her arm against his' (86) along with her smell: 'a cloud of scent rises from her, lily of the valley, enveloping him in olfactory gauze' (86). He also describes his landlady: '[h]er face is heart-shaped, her skin milky, her eyes large and compelling' (74). The young doctor has erotic fantasies about both women. He

¹⁶² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) viii.

¹⁶³ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books Ltd., 1972) 7.

imagines Lydia naked on a platter and organises her garnishing: 'she should be garlanded with flowers - ivory -coloured, shell pink - and with perhaps a border of hothouse grapes and peaches' (193). He also daydreams about Mrs. Humphrey's nipples: '[u]nderneath her stiff dress there must be breasts...with nipples; he finds himself idly guessing what colour these nipples would be, in sunlight or else in lamplight, and how large' (289). But the main object of his affection and his lust is the enigmatic murderess herself, Grace Marks.

Simon listens to Grace every afternoon while she is sewing quilts for the Governor's wife. Language does not help initially because Grace has stopped using it after years of being observed, poked and tied up like an animal in the lunatic asylum and in prison. Nobody believed her story, so 'at last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma'am No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir' (32). This dry use of language reminds the reader of the pious expressions the Handmaids are allowed to use: '[b]lessed be the fruit...May the Lord open...The War is going well I hear...Praise be'.¹⁶⁴ Since their use of language is as restricted as the use of their body they read lips and interpret body language. Simon and Grace also complement language with the use of two senses, sight and smell, in order to assess each other.

Grace describes Simon as a young, tall gentleman, who 'smells like shaving soap, the English kind, and of ears; and of the leather of his boots. It is a reassuring smell and I always look forward to it' (97). She finds it easier to trust him because she likes his

¹⁶⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 29.

smell. Simon, on the other hand, describes Grace as a beautiful young woman, who

smells like smoke... and laundry soap, and the salt from her skin; and she smells of the skin itself, with its undertone of dampness, fullness, ripeness...He is in the presence of a female animal; something fox-like and alert. He senses an answering alertness along his own skin, a sensation as of bristles lifting. Sometimes he feels as if he's walking on quicksand (90).

He does not only like her smell, he also finds it unbearably erotic. Even the noun attached to her name has a seductive smell: '[m]urderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive' (389, Atwood's emphasis). Simon has sexual fantasies about her but does not act upon them:

She was threading the needle now; she wet the end of the thread in her mouth...and this gesture seemed to him all at once both completely natural and unbearably intimate. He felt as if he was watching her undress, through a chink in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat (91).

His desire for Grace finds release in his anxious dreams. Even before Freud, who clearly stated that 'the majority of the dreams of adults deal with sexual material and give expression to erotic wishes'¹⁶⁵, Victorians knew about the erotic dream but were reluctant to talk about it. In Ronald Pearsall's words, '[i]n most of the writings about dreams, there is one great group that is neglected- the overtly erotic dream...Not surprisingly, up to ninety per cent of erotic dreams are described as vivid'.¹⁶⁶ These dreams about Grace lead to Simon's troublesome and illicit affair with his landlady, from which he barely escapes by fleeing Kingston.

¹⁶⁵ Freud Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (1953; London: Penguin Books, 1991) 520.

¹⁶⁶ Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Worcester: The Trinity Press, 1969) 436-37.

During their conversations the young doctor can be absent-minded and uncertain, while Grace is so in control of herself that Simon often feels ‘as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny’ (60). Unlike Simon who does not know what is going on in Grace’s head, the celebrated murderess knows how eager the young doctor is to break through her amnesia and uncover the truth about the murders. As mentioned before, language is not easy for Grace to use: ‘[i]t was difficult to begin talking. I had not talked very much for the past fifteen years, not really talking the way I once talked with Mary Whitney and Jeremiah the peddler...and in a way I had forgotten how’ (67). This is similar to Offred’s reaction when the Commander asks her to play scrabble with him. She has been deprived of real language for so long that she finds it hard to start using it again: ‘[m]y tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten’.¹⁶⁷ But both Offred and Grace find it easier to talk once they get to know the men they are conversing with better. Their talking aloud is frank and restrained, but their private thoughts are wild and vivid and manifest themselves, like Simon’s, in their dreams.

According to Ronald Pearsall, ‘the dream...was proof positive of the existence of the soul, of a psyche that was freed during the sleeping hours for all kinds of activities - visiting foreign parts or friends’.¹⁶⁸ This is true of Grace’s dreams, which revisit her mother’s death and the scene of the double murder, and which are full of blood and loss. Offred’s dreams are also dark and painful; she revisits her family and the scene of their tragic, failed escape to Canada. But Offred also has erotic dreams and longs

¹⁶⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 164.

¹⁶⁸ Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (Worcester: The Trinity Press, 1969) 436.

for a lover to put his arms around her. Grace on the other hand has only one erotic dream and it does not include Simon but Death as a lover, which implies a strong death-wish: 'it was Death...with his arms wrapped around me as tight as iron bands, and his lipless mouth kissing my neck as if in love. But as well as the horror, I also felt a strong longing' (280).

Grace does not dream about Simon, but there are other subtle indications that she also desires him. The young doctor admits that often women are attracted to him, fascinated by his knowledge of the inside of the female body. He cannot help but identify the colours of the furniture in the Governor's house with the colours of the body turning inside out: 'the maroon of kidneys, the reddish purple of hearts, the opaque blue of veins. The ivory of teeth and bones' (81). But it is not this corporeal knowledge that awakens Grace's desire for Simon; instead, it is the sensual power of language, which offers pleasure, once she starts using it naturally. Her conversations with Simon are not simply dominated by smell and vision, but also hearing and touch; he writes what she says and this writing about her is also writing on her. Grace feels as if her own written speech turns into Simon's hand, touching her body, marking it as an object of his desire:

While he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me - drawing on my skin - not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end. As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face, and are softly opening and closing their wings (69).

The image becomes more sexual when Grace imagines language turning into Simon's penis and slowly opening her body. There is no violence involved, only a mixture of vulnerability and pleasure, 'a feeling like being torn open; not like a body of flesh, it is

not painful as such, but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting open of its own accord' (69). But Grace is not entirely prepared to reveal the workings of her mind, so she keeps the reader on his/her toes by stating that 'inside the peach, there's a stone' (69).

Both Simon and Grace spend a big part of the novel hungry and their hunger is related to language and sexuality. Coming from an impoverished Irish family Grace has always been a hungry child. One of the reasons that she describes her first position as a domestic servant as the happiest time of her life is because there is plenty of food. In prison, she sometimes has to go through periods of starvation as a form of punishment. The hunger of her body makes her use of language more and more scarce. As Maud Ellmann has observed, 'the sparsity of words reflects the deprivation of the body, contracted by its hunger as much as by prison bars. Yet this diminishment of words, like that of flesh, is experienced as distillation rather than reduction, because it fosters the enlargement of the spirit'.¹⁶⁹ This seems to be true about Grace, who has a sharp wit, refined manners and a face of classical beauty after sixteen years in prison: '[h]er complexion is pale, the skin smooth and unwrinkled...perhaps because she's kept indoors; or it may be the sparse prison diet. She's thinner now...more than pretty...The line of her cheek has a marble, a classic, simplicity; to look at her is to believe that suffering does indeed purify' (89-90).

Simon makes an effort to feed Grace by bringing her an apple and a radish. He is

¹⁶⁹ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists; Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993) 107.

constantly hungry himself because all the food he receives is either overcooked, undercooked, burned or dirty.¹⁷⁰ If eating represents an act through which one takes in the world, then the young doctor is unsatisfied with what the world is offering him. Language is another means not only for taking the world in but also for giving part of yourself out. These two activities are combined during shared meals, which also fail to satisfy Simon's body and soul. He feels tired and annoyed during breakfasts with his landlady, when they both chew food and words: 'Mrs. Humphrey is talking again; the subject is her gratitude to him, as it often is while he is eating his toast. She waits until his mouth is full, then launches in' (289). The only person who pacifies his hunger with her words is Grace; he is also hungry for her body, and this sexual hunger tortures him as much as his hunger for food. According to Ellmann, sexual desire is as cultural as hunger: 'the fact that hunger endangers our existence, whereas celibacy merely embitters it, does not mean that hunger is more "natural" than sex, less resonant with cultural signification'.¹⁷¹

The third pregnancy of the novel involves Nancy and Mr. Kinnear. The rich landowner is unmarried and has a taste for servant girls and his liberated sexuality is revealed by the two paintings he has in his bedroom: 'a picture of a woman without any clothes on, on a sofa...seen from the back and looking over her shoulder' (213). The other painting is also of a naked 'young lady taking a bath, in a garden...and a maid holding a large towel ready for her, and several old men with beards peering at her from behind the

¹⁷⁰ The same theme of food being badly cooked, plain or tasteless, leaving the people who consume it hungry and frustrated, appears in *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

¹⁷¹ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists; Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993) 36.

bushes' (221). Both models are painted in submissive positions because the paintings are there for Mr. Kinnear's visual pleasure. As John Berger claims, they are made 'to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality...The woman's sexual passion needs to be minimised so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion. Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own' (Berger's emphasis).¹⁷²

The woman who is satisfying Mr. Kinnear's sexual appetites is Nancy, his previous servant girl and current housekeeper. Nancy belongs to the category of Victorian prostitute, since she has transgressed the moral code of sexual activity within marriage. In return for performing illicit sex, she has beautiful clothes and a certain power and authority as Mr. Kinnear's housekeeper. But this young female sinner is unhappy, nervous, moody, because she knows that the only thing which keeps her in her privileged position is her ability to please Mr. Kinnear with her body. The moment her body changes with pregnancy the young housekeeper realises that her fragile position is in danger; Grace has to go or she will soon replace Nancy in her rich master's bed. As she tells Grace herself, gentlemen can have anything they want 'if rich enough...If they want a thing, all they have to do is pay for it. It's all one to them' (221).

By being the master's lover, Nancy can fire both Grace and James, despite the fact that she comes from the same working-class background as they do. This must have caused bitterness, but it is not the only reason behind the murders. The inconsistency

¹⁷² John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books Ltd., 1972) 55.

of Nancy's character is the main source of Grace and James' anger and frustration: one day she is their best friend, and wants to have a party and everybody is going to drink, sing and dance. The next minute she becomes the lady of the house by bossing them about and giving them their notice . She cannot make up her mind who she is, whose side she is on. Grace admits that there were times that she wished Nancy dead, but as she says to Simon 'if we were all on trial for our thoughts we would all be hanged' (317).

When Grace's narration reaches the day of the murders, Simon must be careful in stirring her lost memory, because a reckless previous effort to measure her head causes a hysterical reaction. Seeing a doctor 'with his bagful of shining knives' (29), triggers off in Grace's head previous memories of the doctors who are involved with her mother and Mary's death. According to Freud, an 'attack...can be provoked...by a new experience which sets it going owing to a similarity with the pathogenic experience'.

¹⁷³ Since Grace lives years in silence and forgets how to use language, it is her body that uses the somatic language of hysteria, where words that cannot be expressed with speech come out in the form of a hysterical fit. The suspense about her guilt or innocence is heightened by the fact that her support group decide to employ hypnotism, as the last drastic phase of the therapy aiming to bring back her memory.

Hypnotism was a phenomenon developed in the 1840's by James Braid. He claimed that it was

¹⁷³ Freud Sigmund, 'On The Psychical Mechanism Of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication (1893),' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume Two*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974) 16.

solely attributable to a particular physiological state of the brain and spinal cord. He stated that magnetic sleep results from a rapid exhaustion of the sensory and nervous systems, which produces a feeling of “somnolency” in which the mind “slips out of gear”... Braid used the terms “hypnotic influence”... “hypnotic sleep”, and called the process of producing that state “hypnotizing”.¹⁷⁴

Grace is hypnotized and admits with a scornful voice to urging and helping McDermott to strangle Nancy and shoot Mr. Kinnear. She also admits to having some, although not full, sexual relations with both her master and the manservant: ‘I would meet him outside...in my nightdress. I’d press up against him, I’d let him kiss me, and touch me as well, all over...But that was all, Doctor. That was all I’d let him do. I had him on a string, and Mr. Kinnear as well’ (400). But the minute that all seems clear, the hypnotised Grace says that she is not Grace at all, but Mary Whitney: ‘[s]he knew nothing! I only borrowed her clothing...her fleshy garment. She forgot to open the window, and so I couldn’t get out! But I wouldn’t want to hurt her. You mustn’t tell her!’ (402-3). This does not mean that Grace is possessed by Mary’s spirit, but that she possesses two memories, one for the waking and the other one for the hypnotic state.

Braid called the existence of two different memories in the same person ‘double consciousness’: ‘events that occur to the hypnotic subject in the “second state” of consciousness or “full” hypnotic state would be forgotten when the subject returned to the waking state. They would, however, be clearly recalled when the subject was rehypnotized’.¹⁷⁵ Grace, the host body, is oblivious of Mary’s existence, but Mary knows everything about Grace. She can see in the dark, she can read people’s minds,

¹⁷⁴ Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (Grand Rapids: Yale University Press, 1993) 158.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

and her presence is one possible explanation for the murders that Atwood offers to her readers.

With the development of hypnotism, duality became a very popular theme in nineteenth century literature. According to Karl Miller, we 'were to enter the world... of spectacle and sleight- in which dramas of deception, detection, and pursuit, of the double agent, would be an industry and a commerce'.¹⁷⁶ What interests me here is that Mary, as Grace's alter ego, is lively, witty, forward, passionate, vindictive. These same adjectives can be used to define all the female alter egos in Atwood's work: Jocasta for Rennie, Moira for Offred, Cordelia for Elaine, Zenia for Tony, Charis and Roz are a way to express uninhibited aspects of personality that a woman wants but society does not allow her to own. Offred, for example, wants Moira to be brave for both of them in the reduced circumstances of the theocratic regime in which they are forced to live: 'I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin...I want gallantry from her...heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack'.¹⁷⁷ All alter egos are much bolder in their use of language. Mary's sexual and other swearwords break all Victorian linguistic taboos: she calls the rich 'as useless as a prick on a priest...and if they were to...[be] thrown out on the streets, they would not even be able to make a living by honest whoring...and ...they too had bodies, and their shit stank as much as anyone else's, if not worse' (158-59).

Not all the fierce alter egos are friendly towards their meek first selves; Cordelia and

¹⁷⁶ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 49.

¹⁷⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 261.

Zenia become hostile and oppressive to their distressed other selves. However, many of Atwood's female characters who are traumatised early in life and cannot cope well with the social and financial pressures of their environment as adults find relief in sharing their burden with stronger alter egos. In Miller's words, 'if duality is a compulsion, it is also a recourse. It responds to demands made by the environment-demands which...stigmatise duality as ominous and destructive, and...promote a belief in the biological necessity of the single self, of an experienced integrity'.¹⁷⁸ This aid that Atwood's vulnerable females receive from confident alter egos is only temporary, since their sense of self may be completely dominated and lost in their alter egos. There are no easy solutions in Atwood's world, but she does offer her heroines a chance to go through a transforming experience which helps them regain a unique sense of identity. After that, they either reject their alter egos, or relate to them on more equal terms.

The fourth and last pregnancy in the novel is, surprisingly, Grace's. She is given pardon from prison after thirty years, goes to New York accompanied by the warden and his daughter, and gets married to Jamie Walsh, the boy who used to run errands for Mr. Kinnear. At the age of forty-six, Grace faces her pregnancy with the joy and fear one feels for a miracle. She refuses to see a doctor and calmly speculates that it might be a tumour, since both the foetus and the tumour invade and grow inside the host body's space. This rather macabre connection between the tumour and the foetus is also seen elsewhere in Atwood's work: Rennie has a partial mastectomy in *Bodily*

¹⁷⁸ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

Harm and then thinks that if she gets pregnant it will probably be another tumour, Kat in 'Hairball' (from the collection of short stories *Wilderness Tips*) feels maternal towards her benign ovarian tumour, and Zenia in *The Robber Bride* refuses to have any children and gets ovarian cancer in the end. These images show the power of life and death that exists inside the human body and how various women cope with this power. Grace is philosophical about the fact that she could be dying: 'I suppose time alone must tell' (459).

At the end of the story, and after fifteen different quilt patterns as titles in the novel's chapters, Grace, the skilful quilt-maker, has woven her version of the story, like Penelope in Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems'. Her final quilt has The Tree of Paradise as a pattern, made from three triangles: one

white from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's...And so we will all be together (460).

After this description the ambiguous Grace becomes silent, keeping her true identity and enigma. But Atwood does not leave her reader frustrated; by exposing hypocrisy, sexism, fear and ignorance, she offers the reader enough information to make up his/her own mind about Grace's evil or good nature. Another option would be to accept that it is not the truthfulness or falsity of her story that is important, but the social and moral circumstances that lead to her story, and then follow the advice Atwood gives in her poem 'True Stories' published in 1981: '[t]he true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue / after all. Why do you / need it? Don't ever / ask for the true

story'.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Margaret Atwood, 'True Stories,' *True Stories* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981)

‘Giving Birth. But who gives it? And to whom is it given?...Words ripple at my feet, black, sluggish, lethal’¹⁸⁰: pregnant body and distorted language in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Giving Birth’.

In Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* women with viable ovaries are ‘lucky’: they have the luxury of offering their reproductive capacity to be exploited by the theocracy of Gilead in order to bear children for the ruling estate, the Commanders and their Wives. In return for their fruitful uterus this female breeding stock is not sent to the colonies to die from exposure to toxic wastes. Within the social and political framework of Atwood’s dystopia pregnancy is a necessarily terrible and a terribly necessary ticket to survival. But this is only one side of a complicated, variable, profound event of life which frequently appears in Atwood’s work.

Roz and Charis are happy with their pregnancies in *The Robber Bride* (1993). In *Alias Grace* (1996) there are two wanted and two unwanted pregnancies. The unnamed female narrator in *Surfacing* (1972) gets pregnant twice: her first pregnancy is traumatic and ends up with a forced abortion, while the second is a delightful event that leads to self-discovery, transformation and knowledge. However Clara is practically engulfed by her pregnancies in *The Edible Woman* (1969) and in *Lady Oracle* (1976) Joan overhears her mother say that she was an unwanted child; the only reason she exists is because of her father’s unwillingness to allow her mother have an abortion. As Atwood herself claims in her interview with Jo Brans,

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Atwood, ‘Giving Birth,’ *Dancing Girls* (1977; London: Vintage, 1996) 225-26. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

You can't say that pregnancy is one thing. It's many things like making love. I mean, it's not just one thing that ought to have one meaning. It's one of those profoundly meaningful human activities which can be very multifaceted and resonant. It can have a very positive meaning for some people and a very negative for others.¹⁸¹

In her short story 'Giving Birth' Atwood discusses both the positive and the negative meaning of pregnancy. The story is a detailed description of a pregnant woman giving birth. The narration is characterised by Atwood's familiar sharpness, accuracy and sense of humour but also by warmth, joy and a sense of wholeness which is rather unfamiliar for Atwood.

Unlike the pregnancies in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *Alias Grace* which take place within repressive social structures based on seventeenth and nineteenth century puritanical morality, 'Giving Birth' takes place in the present. In the previous parts of this chapter I examined the themes of pregnancy, language and sexuality and how they led to the development of events in the novels. This short story concentrates exclusively on issues such as the pregnant female body with its intense somatic and psychological changes, the double personality of the pregnant woman and finally the frequent inability of language to find the right names for things that happen in the body. In this final part of the chapter, I will analyse these issues and show that despite the problematic relationship of body and language, the narrator finds a way to overcome the obstacles and tell the reader her story.

¹⁸¹ Jo Brans, 'Using What You're Given,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd, 1992) 142.

The story is narrated by a young mother, who describes her relationship with her baby daughter and then describes another woman's experience of giving birth. She chooses to call this other woman Jeanie. Jeanie's heavily pregnant body immediately attracts the reader's attention. It is useful to look here at Kristeva's poetic but accurate description of the physical changes that the maternal body has to go through:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.¹⁸²

It is sometimes impossible for future mothers to comprehend fully how another body is growing inside their own. There is no doubt that pregnancy is a stressful period in a woman's life, but Jeanie's pregnancy is a generally positive experience. She is healthy, calm and well-informed about the facts of her condition. Her baby is wanted and her partner is supportive, nurturing and very involved in her pregnancy. In fact, he is one of the few Atwoodian males with such a bright and pleasingly powerful personality. He accompanied Jeanie to pre-natal classes, which Atwood describes with a good sense of humour: the enema, the different hats for long and short hair for the fathers-to-be who are going to attend the delivery, the disposable diaper conversation and the pain described by young, naive mothers-to-be as '*discomfort*' (231, Atwood's emphasis). Atwood does not give him a full name, but simply calls him A. because she wants Jeanie to be the center of attention. No matter how devoted A. is to Jeanie and their future baby, it is in Jeanie's

¹⁸² Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1981) 246.

amniotic fluid that the baby is resting and from Jeanie's body that it will be delivered.

Despite the fact that Jeanie is '[v]itaminized, conscientious, well-read...has managed to avoid morning sickness, varicose veins, stretch marks, toxemia and depression...has had no aberrations of appetite, no blurrings of vision', she is nevertheless 'followed...by this other' (231). The woman who follows Jeanie is her alter ego. As a pregnant woman Jeanie is aware of the fact that her body is split in two: the host body and the foetus which grows inside the host body. But even outside pregnancy, the human body represents a place of positive duality. As Karl Miller claims, it

is evidently a pair, and a bundle of binary forms. The brain is two brains, each with its own skills. The corpus callosum which joins the cerebral hemispheres can be severed in cases of injury, to produce what are reported to be two separate minds. In recent times, medical science has referred to 'dissociations of personality' caused by injury or disease, and to the 'divided personalities' that occur during fits of absent-mindedness.¹⁸⁴

Pregnancy is the reason behind the presence of an alter ego in 'Giving Birth' and not injury or disease. And unlike Grace Marks in Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996), who is unaware of her alter ego, Mary Whitney, Jeanie can actually see her own unnamed female double.

Jeanie may look happy and peaceful with her pregnancy on the surface, but deep down she is scared; scared of all the pain she will have to suffer, scared of all the painkillers and labour practices she may or may not choose and scared that she may not be able to bond

¹⁸⁴ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 49.

with her infant, to listen, taste and smell the inside of her body:

Jeanie tries to reach down to the baby...sending waves of love... but she finds she...can no longer feel the baby as a baby, its arms and legs poking, kicking, turning. It has collected itself together, it's a hard sphere, it does not have time right now to listen to her. She is grateful for this because she is not sure how good the message will be (236).

There is a combination of love and hatred for the baby here, which is natural for a pregnant woman who is ready to give birth. But Jeanie does not talk about her negative feelings at all, because language does not help her find the right words: '[b]ut these...were indescribable events of the body...why should the mind distress itself to find a language for them?...there is no word in the language for what it is about to happen to this woman' (235, 230). Instead, she projects her negative feelings on her alter ego: it is the other woman who is angry and frustrated, who screams and cries during labour and whose life might be in danger because of a difficult delivery. Jeanie herself has nothing to do with any of these things. Only when she becomes exhausted with the long, painful and inactive waiting during labour, Jeanie admits some negative feelings: '[a]t the moment she can't remember why she wanted to have a baby in the first place. The decision was made by someone else, whose motives are now unclear' (235).

Apart from embodying Jeanie's alter ego, this woman also represents an unwanted pregnancy: 'she is a woman who did not wish to become pregnant, who did not choose to divide herself like this, who did not choose any of these ordeals, these initiations' (230). If a wanted pregnancy is one of the major crises in a woman's life, 'a sort of instituted,

socialized, natural psychosis'¹⁸⁴ as Kristeva puts it, an unwanted pregnancy must be an emotional and physical torture. The reader does not know how this woman ended up ready to give birth to a child she does not want, but it is clear that her pregnancy is not the result of rape. She could have been convinced, despite her wishes, by her husband or partner that it is time for her to 'fulfil her femininity' and she could not live with the guilt of not becoming a mother. As Adrienne Rich comments: '[w]omen who refuse to become mothers are not merely emotionally suspect, but are dangerous. Not only do they refuse to continue the species; they also deprive society of its emotional leaven - the suffering of the mother'.¹⁸⁵

Society must be happy with this woman then since Jeanie can hear her 'screaming and crying over and over, "It hurts. It hurts"' (236) during her labor. The child represents a form of punishment for the mother who was not decisive enough to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Tired, bored and resentful, she will raise a traumatised child who will run away from her hatred as soon as he/she possibly can.¹⁸⁶ All this grief can be avoided if a pregnancy is the result of free choice instead of fear that the motherless woman will be regarded as a freak of nature.

¹⁸⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 206.

¹⁸⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1976) 169. The comment Rich makes about women who refuse to become mothers is reminiscent of Aunt Lydia's speech in *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode...They said there was no sense in breeding...They were lazy women...They were sluts'. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 123.

¹⁸⁶ This scenario is similar to the story of Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle*, where the mother-daughter relationship is the result of an unwanted pregnancy and therefore deeply problematic.

It seems that Jeanie's alter ego, who is also the woman with the unwanted pregnancy, does not always appear with the same face: '[d]epending on the light, she has appeared by turns as a young girl of perhaps twenty to an older woman of forty or forty-five but there was never any doubt in Jeanie's mind that it was the same woman' (232). The reason for this is that this woman is, presumably, also Jeanie's mother. Women do not forget that their first home, their first source of warmth and nurturance, is their mother's womb, so it is only natural to long for their mother's presence in their own labor. While men are reproduced by women's bodies, women reproduce each other; they are the corporeal keepers of the human race. Jeanie's mother offers the comfort and protection of a guardian angel: she follows Jeanie's pregnancy step by step, ensures that she arrives safely at the hospital. When her labour starts, this mother figure does not leave until Jeanie gives birth to a healthy baby girl.

Jeanie's pregnancy and delivery are described with natural and animalistic images: 'time has thickened around her...a kind of slush, wet earth underfoot' (226) and 'a wet kitten slithers between her legs' (232). These images bear striking similarities to Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, where the mother's protective spirit appears to the daughter after she gets pregnant. The mother-daughter communication is wordless in both cases because it takes them back to a time before language, when the mother's was blissfully united with the daughter's body. Their wordlessness also shows the inefficiency of language to describe the miraculous irrationality of the female body doubling in size, turning inside-out and producing an independent other. During labour, this pregnant body becomes the center of

attention. The future mother disappears as a subject: '[w]hat pain? Jeanie thinks. When there is no pain she feels nothing, when there is pain she feels nothing because there is no *she*. This, finally, is the disappearance of language' (237, Atwood's emphasis). The disappearance of language continues after the baby is born since his/her relationship with the mother is based on touch, smell, sight, taste and sound and not on verbal communication. When the time for the first words comes the mother is supposed to encourage the child's transference from nature (the maternal body) to culture and the law of the father (language).

If it is men's language that prevents women from describing their bodies and their pregnancies, then one solution is to follow the reproductive practices of the alien, female insect-like species, who land on earth and try to establish communication with humans in Atwood's short story 'Cold-Blooded' from the collection *Good Bones*: '[i]n an attempt to establish common ground, we asked them what season they mated and then devoured their males'¹⁸⁷ because anything else would be after all 'a waste of protein'. But the female narrator of 'Giving Birth' follows a less drastic solution by writing about her pregnancy. She tries to distance herself from the pregnant woman of her story, Jeanie, but the narrator and Jeanie are the same person, and there is subtle evidence for this in the story.

¹⁸⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Cold-Blooded,' *Bones and Murder* (1992, 1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 87, 88.

The narrator says that the difference between herself and Jeanie 'is in the hair. My own hair is not light brown, but Jeanie's was' (228), and at the end of the story she states: 'in the days that follow herself becomes drifted over with new words, her hair slowly darkens, she ceases to be what she was and is replaced, gradually, by someone else' (240). This someone else is the narrator of the story who has darker hair and the new word for her is 'mother'. Despite her fears of not being up to the difficult task of motherhood, the reader sees the image of both mother and child getting the same satisfactions of warmth and comfort: 'we... played with the alarm clock and the hot water bottle...I took her downstairs and we had the usual struggle over her clothes...After this she fed herself: orange, banana, muffin, porridge' (226). Mother and father are also sharing the pleasures of parenthood: 'halfway down the stairs, met my daughter, who was ascending, autonomously she thought, actually in the arms of her father. We greeted each other with hugs and smiles' (226).

However inadequate language seems to be, the narrator uses it to rename the world for her daughter, who is on the threshold of instinctual drives and language:

we recognized anew, and by their names, the dog, the cats and the birds, blue jays...She puts her fingers on my lips as I pronounce these words; she hasn't yet learned the secret of making them. I am waiting for her first word: surely it will be miraculous, something that has never yet been said (226).

She also uses language in order to describe her experience of pregnancy and labour. As

Atwood says, 'I think most writers share this distrust of language-just as painters are

always wishing there were more colours, more dimensions. But language is one of the few

tools we do have. So we have to use it'.¹⁸⁸ So Atwood's narrator experiments with words and searches for phrases and meanings that language has not offered before:

Giving Birth. But who gives it? And to whom is it given? Certainly it doesn't feel like giving, which implies a flow, a gentle handing gentle handing over, no coercion...No one ever says *giving death* although they are in some ways the same, events, not things. And *delivering*, that act the doctor is generally believed to perform: who delivers what? (225, Atwood's emphasis).

Naturally it is very difficult to answer to all these questions, but Jeanie believes that she gave birth to herself as a mother by delivering her daughter and writing her story: '[i]t was to me, after all, Jeanie gave it, I am the result' (239).

As well as giving birth to her infant and to herself, the narrator/Jeanie also gives birth to her text, which, as Cixous claims, satisfies 'a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood'.¹⁸⁹ Kristeva also provides an answer very much to the point here when she says that a woman 'does not give birth in pain' but 'to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous'.¹⁹⁰ It takes the endurance of a lot of pain in order for the mother to give up the pleasures of adult life, such as career or an active social life, and nurture a totally dependent baby, who does not think that his/her mother has any other interests apart from nourishing him/her. I say mother because, in most cases, the parenting of the children is still the mother's responsibility. However, this

¹⁸⁸ Geoff Hancock, 'Tightrope-Walking Over Niagara Falls,' *Margaret Atwood, Conversations*, ed. Earl G Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd, 1992) 209.

¹⁸⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle De Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) 261.

¹⁹⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 167.

parenting does not only involve pain, but also love, which Jeanie strongly feels towards her baby daughter while writing her story. She acknowledges but also challenges the limitations of language with her text and as a result, motherhood is less of a mystery to her now. The narrator of 'Giving Birth' makes a conscious effort to display the misery caused by and reject the distinction between maternal and non-maternal women. As Irigaray points out, '[w]e bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious for example'.¹⁹¹ A good start for this kind of acknowledgment would be to accept that motherhood is not an instinct to be followed but a free choice that may or may not be taken.

¹⁹¹ Luce Irigaray, 'The bodily encounter with the mother,' *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991) 43.

Chapter Three

Socially Scripted Roles and the Diseased Female Body: *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Bodily Harm* (1981).

Introduction

Unlike the female protagonists in chapters one and two who do not appear to have much in common, the similarities between the two young women in *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Bodily Harm* (1981) are clearer to the reader from the start. Both Marian (*The Edible Woman*) and Rennie (*Bodily Harm*) are attractive, clever and university graduates, so they get jobs in Toronto and never return to their small hometowns. Both their jobs are based on manipulation rather than creative use of language. Marian works in a market research company, where she rewrites the complicated questionnaires of the male psychologists using simple language so that the public can understand them. Rennie, on the other hand, is a freelance journalist of articles about trendy styles in food, travel, clothes and relationships. Both women have handsome, successful boyfriends, with whom they share fun, food and sex. But despite their urban polish and air of confidence and independence both Marian and Rennie are unhappy.

The main reason behind their unhappiness is the restrictive scripted roles that society wants them to play. I examine, from a historical point of view, the traditional roles from which Marian tries to escape in the 60's (wife and mother) and Rennie in the 80's

(obedient sexy doll created to satisfy male desire). They both lead carefree lifestyles and use language only in a superficial manner; as Rennie admits, 'there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, are preferable to depths'.¹⁹² But both women find it hard to suppress their hunger for intellectual and emotional stimulation that would allow them to accomplish something worthy of their talent. As in chapters one and two, language proves to be an ineffective tool for describing human feelings and female bodies. In chapter one the three female protagonists choose to use their bodies in order to 'talk', whilst in chapter two they replace language with alternative means of expression such as body language, smell and touch.

But in this chapter it is Marian and Rennie's bodies that rebel against the miserable lives they lead. Both women are shocked by their body's decision to change without their permission. Marian's body suffers from an unwilling self-starvation: '[s]he was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled'.¹⁹³ Rennie's breast turns cancerous, so she has to go through a partial mastectomy: 'she asked him, How much of me did you cut off?...About a quarter, he said gently...Either I'm living or I'm dying, she said to Daniel...Which is it? Which does it feel like?...You're not dead yet. You're a lot more

¹⁹² Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (1981; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1983) 211.

¹⁹³ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1980) 177-78.

alive than many people. This isn't good enough for Rennie'.¹⁹⁵ In chapter one it was volatile and in chapter two pregnant bodies that functioned as texts; in this chapter it is the two diseased female bodies on which we can read the pain of half-lived lives and the rot on the body of politics and society.

Marian regains her body (with its healthy appetite) through food: she bakes a cake-woman, offers it to both men in her life and then eats some of it herself. In this way she breaks the circle of consuming and being consumed by somebody else. Rennie on the other hand regains her body (free from the fear of dying) through language. She decides to take her job as journalist seriously and write an article that might open the eyes of the Canadian government about the political injustices in the Caribbean. In order to offer a richer illustration of these themes, I compare *The Edible Woman* to the short story 'Spring Song of the Frogs' from the collection *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *Bodily Harm* to the short stories 'Hairball' and 'Hand' from the collections *Wilderness Tips* (1991) and *Murder in the Dark* (1983). Both women go through a journey from passive to active, from disconnected observation to connected objectivity, and by the end of this journey their bodies and texts are no longer fragmented but whole.

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (1981; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1983) 34, 60.

‘Eating is a ridiculous activity anyway...I’d prefer to be fed through the main artery’ :¹⁹⁵ the relationship of food to body and language in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*.

‘Oh,...we all have to eat. Besides, what else can you do with a BA. these days?’(55) says Marian, the sensible young protagonist of Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman*. By defending her job in the market research company, Seymour Surveys, Marian reveals one of the main themes that runs throughout the book: the limited career opportunities offered to even educated young women in the Canadian technological society of the early sixties. Marian’s job is to revise ‘the questionnaires, turning the convoluted and overly-subtle prose of the [male] psychologists who write them into simple questions which can be understood by the people who ask them as well as the people who answer them’ (19). This sterilized manipulation of words does not offer Marian any personal fulfilment but it pays the bills. Besides, she is engaged to a bachelor-prince, the attractive and successful young lawyer Peter, who is going to save her from her dead-end job and spinsterhood. Because of her good luck, Marian has to deal with the jealousy of the three husband-hunting office virgins, Emmy, Millie and Lucy, who have not managed to catch a man yet.

All seems to be working well for Marian, but as her wedding day approaches her body decides to gradually refuse more and more edible products until it turns down food completely. A healthy eater, Marian is disturbed by her new condition, which she soon realises is more than ‘bridal nerves’ (206). Her body reacts against the feminine role that a

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1980) 192. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

young woman is supposed to fill, that of a wife and mother. She finds it difficult to suppress her hunger for sensual and intellectual pleasures beyond these two traditionally female roles. Although she is a crafty manipulator of words at work, it seems impossible for her to express her feelings with words in her personal life and therefore it is her body that protests. As I show throughout this dissertation, Atwood's male and female characters have difficulty expressing their feelings with human language, so they, or their bodies, find alternative ways. Language seems to be a male rather than a female tool, so men often use it in order to arrange the female body according to their wishes. What is different in *The Edible Woman* is that Marian does not regain her body through language but through food: she bakes a cake-woman and offers it to both of the men in her life and then she eats some of it herself. What interests me is the close relation between the human body and food in this novel. I shall look at eating and how it is associated with the most deeply felt human experiences such as friendship, sex, and marriage; how eating expresses emotions that are sometimes difficult to articulate in everyday language.

Marian lives in a consumer-oriented, sexist Western culture where advertising creates myths of happiness upon which society depends. Clara, her high-school friend, 'was everyone's ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity' (36) and Peter, her fiancé 'was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads' (61). Many advertisements concentrate on how to create and maintain a young, healthy and beautiful body by buying and using various slimming, exercise and cosmetic products. This perfect body promises to offer an exciting life of fun, freedom,

romance and adventure. In a materialistic society, where bodily imperfections are deplored, and love for oneself is stolen and offered back at a price of a product, both men and women are victimised.

Women however, are targeted more than men by the consumer system because they identify more with their body, since it is so close to life and death processes (menstruation, reproduction). The female body is often viewed as the object of male sexual pleasure. Women are taught by advertisements that their face must be made-up, their eyes must look more mysterious, their lips more kissable, the complexion softer and their body slimmer. Lucy, one of the office virgins, personifies this attitude. Slim, elegant and beautifully dressed, she craftily displays her body to the male gaze while she fishes for a future husband:

Lucy was wearing a new dress, a stately dark-mauve laminated jersey...had mauve eye-shadow to match her dress and lipstick with pale mauve tinge...She had been lunching out expensively more and more...good restaurants and cocktail bars...where the right kind of man might be expected to be lurking, ravenous as pike, though more maritally inclined (111-12).

Lucy plays by the masculine rules of what 'a lady' should be like but 'those men, the right kind, weren't biting' (112), maybe because they can tell that the bait is cunning, shallow and artificially blonde.

Marian, on the other hand, does not spend all her salary on clothes, but she is also a consumer: she believes in the importance of good clothing and prefers to look at the

advertisements on the bus than to talk to her friend Ainsley. Even the company where Marian works teaches people to be consumers by promising relief for their anxieties through the purchasing of products. Traditionally sexist, it offers no chance of promotion for any of the female staff: '[t]he company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle' (19). On the top floor all the psychologists who arrange contracts with clients are men, and on the bottom floor all the people who handle the machines of information are also men. Working in a dead and traditionally female job and surrounded by sex-fearing colleagues whose only purpose in life is to get themselves a husband-saviour, Marian is constantly hungry. Her hunger is a symbol for an unsatisfied passion for something new and challenging. But it cannot be satisfied in Seymour Surveys, where most of the food is not nutritious but rich, fattening and soothing: ice-cream, jelly, peanut butter and honey. The same way hysteria was the somatic protest of nineteenth century women against the degradations of their domestic and social positions, Marian's hunger is her body's protest against the boring role of wife and mother that society and her family expect her to undertake. Pregnant and ageing female bodies seem to her directly associated with food, and become grotesque and disgusting when the reader looks at them through Marian's eyes.

Clara, Marian's friend, is heavily pregnant with her third child and Marian finds her body appalling: 'she looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon' (31).

Clara's body resembles the watermelon that Atwood mentions in her interview with

Graeme Gibson: 'there are great advantages in being a vegetable, you know...life is very much simplified: if you think you're a watermelon, you don't have to do anything, you can just sit around'.¹⁹⁶ This is exactly what Clara does, she just sits around. She never finished her degree because she married Joe and followed the conventional pattern of becoming a wife and a mother. She seems engulfed by maternity, without any passion for progress and self-development; instead, she is completely dependent on Joe for her physical and emotional nourishment. In fact, everything in this fragile creature's life is beyond her control: her unfinished degree, her children who stick on her body like leeches, even her own body, with its three unexpected pregnancies: '[s]he simply stood helpless while the tide of dirt rose round her, unable to stop or evade it. The babies were like that too; her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any direction of hers' (37). It is difficult for the reader to tell whether Clara is happy or not, but apart from some occasional remarks about just being a housewife, she seems to be content. But Marian pities Clara and, more importantly, is afraid that Clara's fate will be hers once she marries Peter.

Her passive friend's pregnant body is not the only body that Marian finds unpleasant. She is simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the ageing bodies of her colleagues. This is partially because Marian lives in a consumer culture, where youth has to be prolonged for as long as possible, and ageing is viewed negatively, as an unwelcome reminder of the

¹⁹⁶ Graeme Gibson, 'Dissecting the Way a Writer Works,' ed. Earl G Ingersoll, *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (1990; Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 16.

inevitable decay of even the healthiest human body. But the main reason why she is disgusted with these aging bodies is because she is frustrated with life itself and cannot find any way out in the lives of the people around her:

But now she could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge's back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases around the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly teacosy over those rounded shoulders (167).

While Marian is looking at these women, their bodies turn inside out and reveal an even more repulsive sight of mouths chewing uneaten and digested food and liquids, even body waste: 'the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, garbage' (167). Marian watches their piggish manners with the same apathy that Circe, the beautiful sorceress of Greek mythology, watches Odysseus' fellow travellers turn into pigs in Atwood's collection of poems entitled 'Circe/Mud Poems': '[i]t was not my fault, these animals / who once were lovers /...the snouts / and hooves, the tongues /...I did not add the shaggy / rugs, the tusked masks, / they happened.../ because I did not say anything /'.¹⁹⁸ Marian cannot find anything to say either since she neither trusts nor feels comfortable with using human language to express her inner world. She seems surrounded by female friends and acquaintances who personify various traditional female roles, none of which Marian herself wants to play.

¹⁹⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 203.

The only hope for something different seems to come from Marian's flatmate Ainsley. Theoretically rebellious and avant-garde, Ainsley does not want a husband but a sperm donor to impregnate her. She believes that a woman's contribution to society should be a baby: '[i]t's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity' (41). Yet the last sentence sounds conventional enough to represent the female image created by women's magazines and advertisements in the 1950's and 1960's: 'the proud and public image of the high-school girl going steady, the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children'.¹⁹⁸ But Ainsley insists on raising the child by herself, without any paternal influence, just as Offred's mother raised her in *The Handmaid's Tale*: '[n]ot that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare. So he went to the coast and sent Christmas cards'.¹⁹⁹ While Offred's mother sticks to her convictions, Ainsley, who borrows most of her trendy ideas from popular paperbacks, changes her mind and demands that Len, the man she seduced to get pregnant, should marry her.

The reason behind Ainsley's change of heart is the information she received about the importance of 'father-image' in the pre-natal clinic. She is convinced that her baby will be a son and will need his father's presence and guidance in order not to become a homosexual. But Len, who shares Marian's disgust for pregnant bodies and for the whole

¹⁹⁸ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 30.

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 131.

procedure of childbirth, does not marry Ainsley. Instead he has a nervous breakdown and ends up in Clara's house, where she takes care of him as another of her children.

Atwood's satirical prose portrays Ainsley as a laughable pre-feminist parody of a young woman. She changes her ideas as quickly as she changes her books. Although she calls Marian a prude, she ends up as a conventional wife and mother: pregnant with Len's baby, she fishes Fischer, a depressed English graduate, for a husband and goes to Niagara Falls for her honeymoon.

Frustrated with the professional and personal limitations of her friends' lives, terrified of what is going to happen to her body when she is pregnant, like Clara, or older, like the women in the office, 'suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity' (167), Marian longs to be saved by Peter. She perceives him as 'something solid, clear: a man; she wanted Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down' (167). Peter and Marian have a logical and practical relationship that revolves around food, sex and, eventually, wedding plans.

Peter is the only resident in a modern block of flats which is still under construction. His apartment is the only one which is more or less finished. There is a rather disturbing description of the entrance of the building, which resembles the inside of a living organism: '[t]he rough grey underskin of subflooring and unplastered wall-surface was still showing, and raw wires dangled like loose nerves from most of the sockets' (57). The second time that Marian visits Peter's flat, the entrance of the building is almost finished,

so she notices how all the raw materials have disappeared and been transformed into something new, like food disappearing into the human body: '[g]radually the clutter of raw materials, pipes and rough boards and cement blocks, had disappeared, transmuted by an invisible process of digestion and assimilation into the shining skins that enclosed the space through which they were moving' (225). There is something metallic and cold about this unfinished block of flats. This mixture of metal and human flesh brings to the reader's mind robots, one of Atwood's favourite images for shallow people, drowned in modern technology, social conformity and advertisements. The three office virgins are described with adjectives which are commonly used for metal ('whisk-tinted, 'platinum', and 'brassy') and Marian notices that she is turning into a robot herself, 'a huge billboard smile, peeling away in flaps and patches, the metal surface beneath showing through' (244).

As the reader moves from the unfinished entrance of the building to Peter's apartment, the depressing image of metallic human bodies persists. The apartment is clean, sparsely but expensively furnished, but far from homely and warm, so Marian feels uncomfortable in it. There are similarities between Peter's domestic surroundings and his body, which is also clean, smooth and soft, to the point that Marian looks desperately for a bodily scar, as a sign of his humanity and vulnerability. Despite the perfection of his body, his sexual relationship with Marian is not a happy one, at least not for Marian. Peter is an oppressive and selfish lover, who draws patterns for unusual and adventurous lovemaking places from popular books and magazines: 'Peter's abstraction on these occasions gave me the

feeling that he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere... The field was, I guessed, a hunting story from one of the outdoorsy male magazines;... The sheepskin I placed in one of the man's glossies, the kind of lust in pent-houses' (60). The young lawyer does not only expect Marian to agree with his ludicrous erotic suggestions, like the 'scratchy blanket in a field we'd driven four hours to get to, and where I was made uneasy by thoughts of farmers and cows' (60), but also to reassure him about his sensitivity and virility as a lover: ' "How was it for you?" he asked casually... "Marvellous" I murmured' (62).

His latest inspiration probably comes from one of the murder mysteries he reads and it is sex in the bathtub. In order to serve his narcissistic need for youthfulness and spontaneity he almost tortures Marian's flesh: 'Peter yawned beside me, grinding my arm against the porcelain...it wasn't his flesh that was being mortified: he had been on top' (62), and then expects her to have an amazing orgasm. The bathtub seems like a coffin to Marian. After they finish making love, they bite each other, like a couple of unhappy vampires feeding off each other's blood. This time Marian rebels, but only silently: 'why couldn't he tell? One of these days I should say "rotten" just to see what he would do; but I know in advance he wouldn't believe me' (62). She shapes words to meet the needs of others in her public life and to please Peter in private.

It is not only their lovemaking though that Peter dominates with his egotistical, almost tyrannical rules. It is also their conversations and their public appearances, where Peter

expects Marian to be a model woman, a 'lady', which means that she has to avoid admitting selfish needs and desires. Writing in 1963, Betty Friedan claimed that, according to the contents of *McCall's* magazine, a young 'lady' should be 'frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man'.²⁰⁰ Marian struggles to be content with this role, to be the nurturer, the sympathetic ear for Peter's problems without demonstrating any anger. She listens to his childish whining when his bachelor friends, who 'sound like the last of the Mohicans, noble and free...and the last of the dodos, too dumb to get away' (64), get married. When the last one, Trigger, is also 'destroyed', Peter cannot continue to live his bachelor, playboy life, because '[n]ow Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty' (27). Peter needs somebody to fill the gap in the mirror, where he can see a positive image of himself, so he proposes to Marian during a sinister night of a storm: '[a] tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes' (83). In a rather frustrating demonstration of female passivity, Marian agrees to marry him.

Although Marian feels that her marriage to Peter will be a threat to her identity as an independent woman, she cannot stop playing the part that society has cast for her. But if she does not do anything to stop this potential loss of self, her body will. During the first part of the book, when Marian uses first person narration because she still sees herself as a

²⁰⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 32.

subject, she experiences frightening episodes of ‘disintegration anxiety’. She perceives her body as fragmented and, as Lacan claims, ‘[t]his fragmented body... usually manifests itself in dreams, when the movement of analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual’.²⁰¹ Marian has such dreams because she is gradually losing the ability to distinguish herself as a ‘subject’ from ‘objects’:

The alarm clock startled me out of a dream in which I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent. I had started towards the mirror to see what was happening to my face, but at that point I woke up (43).

While her unconscious emotional struggle to assert herself as a subject continues, she gets a claustrophobic attack at the roof bar of Park Plaza hotel, where she has drinks with Peter, Ainsley and a university friend, Len. Peter and Len are unified by chauvinistic ideas about how they like to hunt their erotic prey, which is explicitly female, and then ‘hit and run’. The conversation changes to real hunting stories and Peter describes how he and his friend Trigger killed a rabbit, gutted it and then took a photograph of the whole mess. The savagery of Peter’s voice when he describes the scene reveals to the alarmed Marian the heart of a killer. A wave of severe unhappiness sweeps over her and, unable to find words to express her anger and sorrow, she starts to cry.

Thankfully Peter does not see her, but once they leave the hotel she runs away from him with a hunted rabbit’s terror and speed. Eventually she lets herself get caught, but soon

²⁰¹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans, Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977) 4-5.

after that she has an agoraphobic attack and hides under the bed in Len's house. She identifies with a foetus re-entering the warmth, nourishment and tranquillity of its mother's body: 'I had dug myself a private burrow' (76).²⁰² But this peaceful moment does not last for long because her hiding place is discovered and she has to come out. She runs away and gets caught again and finally Peter, probably excited by this hunter-hunted game, proposes to her. Marian's panic attacks are not accidental: they are her body's way of telling her that she should not marry Peter. She shows some initiative by running away from him, disgusted with his patronising attitude and sadistic instincts. Her first independent action is characterised as aggressive and unfeminine by Peter and hysterical by Len. Here I would like to elaborate on the theme of female hysteria, because it is directly related to another mainly female disease, anorexia, and later on in the book Marian develops an eating disorder that resembles anorexia.

Both hysteria and anorexia were named in the second half of nineteenth century. As Hilde Bruch claims, a French doctor called Lasegue 'in 1873 reported on 8 patients suffering from what he called anorexia hysterique, with severe emaciation and food refusal, though without absolute fasting. He differentiated this anorexia from that observed in depression'.²⁰³ 'Anorexia nervosa' was given its name in the 1870's, to distinguish its symptoms from these of tuberculosis and hysteria. Hysteria and anorexia spread fast in the

²⁰² This brings to the reader's mind the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, who repudiates her human nature, identifies with animals and sleeps in burrows that she digs. Soon after this incident Marian starts to identify with animals too.

²⁰³ Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) 213.

female population of middle and upper classes because, as Susan Bordo claims in *Unbearable Weight*, it was an unstable time, financially and socially:

On the one hand, the old pre-industrial order, with the father at the head of a self-contained family production unit, had given way to the dictatorship of the market, opening up new, non-domestic opportunities for working women. On the other hand, it turned many of the most valued 'female' skills- textile and garment manufacture...-out of the home and over to the factory system. In the new machine economy, the lives of middle-class women were far emptier than...before.²⁰⁴

Boredom, intellectual frustration, and suppressed desires led to cases of hysteria and anorexia amongst creative, independent, and often highly educated women. Similar limitations on women led to more hysterical and anorexic symptoms in the fifties and sixties. In Bordo's words, the bodies of hysterical and anorexic women 'protest against the limitations of the ideal of female domesticity...that reigned in America throughout the 1950s and early 1960s...This was...the era...during which women were fired en masse from the jobs they had during the war and shamelessly propagandized back into the full-time job of wife and mother'.²⁰⁵ The social conditions are the same in the 1960s Canada, where Marian is called hysterical because she wants to be more than a wife and a mother. What is next in store for her is her body's refusal to eat certain products, but as her situation deteriorates, the list of non-edible products increases.

Marian has a special relationship with food from the beginning of the novel. She describes

²⁰⁴ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture And The Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 157.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

the company where she works as an ice-cream, and uses ice-cream instead of conversation to soothe Peter's frustration about his friends' weddings. Always hungry, she appreciates good food and loves other people cooking for her. Food in general is important in Atwood's work. In her interview with Bonnie Lyons, Atwood separates food into categories: '[i]f you think of food as coming in various categories: scared food, ceremonial food, everyday food, and things that are not to be eaten, forbidden food, dirty food if you like - for the anorexic all food is dirty food'.²⁰⁶ Even during the late stages of her eating disorder Marian does not consider food dirty. On the contrary, she is angry with her body's decision to reject food. There are other reasons to believe that Marian is not anorexic: she does not have a distorted, that is fat, body image, or a disrupted menstrual cycle, and she is not obsessed with gaining weight. In order to show more clearly the difference between Marian's strange hunger strike and real anorexia, I will briefly discuss Atwood's short story 'Spring Song of the Frogs' from the collection *Bluebeard's Egg*, which was published fourteen years after *The Edible Woman*.

The narrator of the story, Will, describes the relationship between three women he knows and food. The first woman, Robyn, is a narcissistic fashion victim: she has taken pains to manage her smart clothes and matching make-up. Worried about the stigma of ugliness and sloth that Western culture has imposed upon obesity, she maintains her slender appearance by constantly being on a diet: she orders Perrier and spinach salad and finds

²⁰⁶ Bonnie Lyons, 'Using Other People's Dreadful Childhoods,' *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (1990; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 228.

the idea of bread repulsive. Will finds her performance artificial and boring, despite the fact that it takes place for his sake.

The second woman is Will's niece, Cynthia, who suffers from anorexia nervosa. Cynthia's disease started when she was about fourteen, and she is seventeen and very seriously ill now. She has most of the symptoms of anorexia: a sense of superiority for her successful loss of weight by avoidance of food and an intense fear of becoming fat despite the fact that she is dangerously underweight: ' "if I hardly ate anything and I gained a pound...what's going to happen? I'll get fat"''.²⁰⁷ As Susan Bordo claims, anorexia usually starts during adolescence, when young girls are terrified of putting on weight, so 'they jog daily, count their calories obsessively, and risk serious vitamin deficiencies and delayed reproductive maturation.'²⁰⁸ A high achiever at school, Cynthia enters the difficult age of adolescence with feelings of powerlessness and dependency. Being a girl, she is probably not encouraged to develop her talent and ambition to self-fulfilling, autonomous actions, so she feels worthless. By controlling her body weight through her refusal to eat, she not only becomes the centre of attention in her family, but also feels an enormous sense of achievement. In Bordo's words: '[f]ood refusal, weight loss, commitment to exercise, and ability to tolerate bodily pain and exhaustion...become cultural metaphors for self-determination, will, and moral fortitude'.²⁰⁹ Sadly enough, weight loss through starvation

²⁰⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Spring Song of the Frogs,' *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983; London: Vintage Ltd., 1996) 170.

²⁰⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture And The Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 157.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

seems to be fashionable amongst teenagers: '[s]he actually said a lot of the girls at school were doing it. She's so goddamned competitive'.²¹⁰

Cynthia's anorexia is also an effort to deny her blossoming sexuality. There is an indication in the story that she and uncle Will were attracted to each other, but nothing physical happened: '[t]here was nothing wrong with Cynthia then; she wore her hair loose, her skin was golden, and Will felt a disturbing sexual pull towards her which he certainly doesn't feel now'.²¹¹ Maybe the fact that Cynthia's first 'crush' ends in disappointment triggers off a crisis in her self-confidence and a longing to remain a child: '[s]he's not wearing the hospital gown but a white nightgown with ruffles, childish, Victorian...She draws the sheet up to her chest, backing away from him, against the headboard of the bed'.²¹² Like most anorexic patients Cynthia is very difficult to treat, since she fiercely resists any treatment which will make her put on weight: ' "[h]ow are you today Cynthia?" he says... "Okay" she says. She smiles...her eyes are anxious and cunning. She wants him to believe her and go away'.²¹³

The third woman is Diane, Will's ex-girlfriend, who seems to be suffering from a mixed eating disorder. Diane's body reveals severe weight loss, which is a symptom of anorexia, but she also fits in with the diagnostic guidelines of bulimia nervosa: a smart, successful

²¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Spring Song of the Frogs,' *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983; London: Vintage Ltd., 1996) 170.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 169.

career woman, with a healthy love-life, who displays a face of perfection and competence and gets rid of all her food by self-induced vomiting. As Rosemary Betterton informs us, 'bulimia...provides a dual mechanism through which the oral pleasures of eating can be gratified by bingeing while, at the same time, through vomiting, the burden of flesh can be denied'.²¹⁴ Like the other two women Diane is tortured by emotional rather than physical dilemmas. Her break-up with Will is perhaps a reason behind her condition, but it is not the only one. In their search for something more than the domestic role that society has to offer, all three women are terrified of what Bordo calls 'a certain archetypal image of the female: as hungering, voracious, all-needing, and all-wanting. It is this image that shapes and permeates her experience of her own hunger for food as insatiable and out of control'.²¹⁵ They try to compensate for this unflattering image by dangerously restraining their food intake and by excessively accommodating their men's needs. But these actions only lead to further feelings of rage and helplessness which they cannot express with words.

Will also has difficulty with language: he wants to tell Cynthia that she is pretty and she should not waste her life and to Diane that he missed her, but instead he says nothing. Since there are so many important things left unsaid, body language does not work either: Will 'tries to think about running his hand up [Robyn's] leg and around her thigh...but it's

²¹⁴ Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists And The Body* (London: Routledge, 1996) 151.

²¹⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture And The Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press Ltd., 1993) 160.

no good. She wouldn't enjoy it'.²¹⁶ The peck he gives to Cynthia does not have any warmth and he feels 'as defeated as she wants him to feel',²¹⁷ and a kiss with Diane could end up in disaster: 'Will would like to kiss her, but...against his arm she feels...awkward, as if she's withholding her body from him, though not quite'.²¹⁸ The painful emotional void that separates Will and these three women is registered on their diseased bodies. Unless Will or one of the women sums up the courage to break the silence and start a meaningful conversation, this unhealthy situation might perpetuate itself.

Marian shares the longing to escape from society's conventional roles with the three women from 'Spring Song of the Frogs'. She also shares their linguistic problem. Since there are no words available to express what these women really feel and desire, their body does the 'talking' for them, with intense and often unhealthy reactions: extreme diet, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. As Maud Ellmann claims, 'hunger depends upon its context for its meaning, but...self-inflicted hunger is a struggle to release the body from all contexts, even from the context of embodiment itself'.²¹⁹ This is what happens to Marian; the hunger that her body imposes upon her releases her not only from society, but also from her own body: '[l]ooking down, she became aware of the water...and of the body that was sitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter

²¹⁶ Ibid., 168.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 178.

²¹⁹ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993) 14.

puddle' (218).

But Marian's eating disorder is neither anorexia nor bulimia. Initially it looks as if she involuntarily turns vegetarian, since she cannot eat any meat, but when her body rejects carrots, eggs and rice pudding, it is clear that it is not just vegetarianism. Marian identifies herself with the edible products she has previously eaten and digested. As she turns from eater to eaten, from consumer to consumed, the narration changes from first to third person: she is now an object, a desirable object designed to please Peter. Her engagement ring resembles the tag that commander Fred slips on Offred's wrist to indicate ownership in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both Peter and commander Fred like showing off their women-property to their friends as a sign of status. Marian notices that Peter is fonder of the label of his ownership (ring) than of the property itself (Marian): '[s]he took off the engagement ring and deposited it in the soap dish...she had developed a fear of seeing it disappear down the drain. Peter would be furious: he was very fond of it' (217).

While Peter likes serving the ringed Marian to his friends, Duncan, the other man in her life, prefers to keep her presence secret. Marian met Duncan, the ageless and eccentric graduate student, when she was doing a survey on a new beer brand. He shares a flat with two other graduate students, Fischer and Trevor, and depends on them for his nourishment. In fact all three of them play happy families, where Fischer is the dad, Trevor is the mum and Duncan the child. Disorganised, self-obsessed and unable to finish his graduate work, Duncan challenges Marian's traditional ideas of masculinity, romantic

love and parenthood, just as the domestic arrangements of the three men parody and challenge traditional ideas of the nuclear family. She is relaxed when she is with him, because she is neither watched nor judged, so she feels she does not have to perform. Unconventional Duncan, whose idea of pastime is a visit to the Laundromat and of relaxation ironing as many clothes as possible, works as an antithesis to conventional Peter. Peter spends a considerable amount of time staring at Marian, studying her face and trying to read her thoughts. As Berger claims in *Ways of Seeing*, '[m]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at'.²²⁰ Marian feels uncomfortable under Peter's gaze, the same way she feels uncomfortable when he tries to take a photograph of her.

In Atwood's work the camera is generally considered a masculine weapon because it 'trades on the masculine privilege of the disembodied gaze, the gaze that has the power to produce bodies, but which is itself no body'²²¹ as Butler claims in *Bodies That Matter*. Peter's camera produces a false image of Marian's body, stuffed in a girdle and covered by a short red dress, and of her face, made up like an Egyptian mummy. Even when they are in bed, Peter stares at her: 'when they were lying side by side exhausted on the bed she would open her eyes and realize that he had been watching her...hoping perhaps to surprise a secret expression on that face' (149). Duncan, on the other hand, is so wrapped up in his own narcissistic world that he rarely looks at Marian. The first thing he does

²²⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972) 47.

²²¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits Of "Sex,"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 136.

when they indulge in foreplay is to switch off the light. He prefers to touch Marian rather than look at her and this touching brings pleasure since, as Irigaray says, 'the predominance of the visual...is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Women take pleasure more from touching than from looking'.²²² Marian feels more sexually liberated with Duncan, because she does not have to assume passive female positions and complement his performance to boast his ego. Duncan views with sarcasm stereotypical ideas of masculinity - 'I guess now I'm supposed to crush you in my manly arms' (253) - just as it is Marian who asks '[h]ow was it for you' (263) after their lovemaking.

The postgraduate student does not only function as Peter's antithesis but also as Marian's alter ego. By being a man Duncan personifies a more exaggerated and ridiculous version of Marian's passivity and helplessness, so Marian can see herself clearly for the first time. Her effort to change Duncan, make him take control of his life and stop playing the eternal victim, is an unconscious effort to change herself. He honestly admits that he does not love her - '[y]ou're just another substitute for the Laundromat' (145) - but he treats her as an equal and forces her to admit and attend to her own needs and desires. At Peter's party Duncan is the only one who can tell the difference between surface and depth. He does not recognise Marian's tarty outfit anymore than she can recognise herself in the mirror: 'Marian stared into the Egyptian-lidded and outlined and thickly-fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before. She was afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied

²²² Luce, Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (1985; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 25-26.

face would crack and flake with the strain' (222). The mirror seems to reflect a narcissistic image for Peter and a false one for Marian, which weakens her already fragile sense of identity. As Berger puts it, the 'mirror was often used as a symbol of vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical...The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight'.²²³

Finally Marian cannot stand playing Peter's happy bride-to-be while she identifies with gutted rabbits and beheaded carrots, so she runs away again and finds Duncan in the Laundromat. He makes her admit that she went to him in order to satisfy her own selfish needs and not because he needs her and after that they spend a parody of the first wedding night in a sleazy motel. The next morning Marian realises that she cannot eat anything at all now, so she tries to find a solution for her body's compulsive fasting. Talking about it will not help, because Duncan and Marian share a mutual distrust of human language; Marian thinks that words are 'like snakes, they had a way of coiling back on you and getting you all wrapped up' (134) and Duncan feels 'all tangled up in words' (142). Instead, they walk together towards the bottom of a huge, frozen ravine where 'in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing' (263). In Atwood's work ravines are places where some kind of transformation occurs: in *Lady Oracle* Joan sees the exhibitionist in the ravine, who flashes his genitals at her but also gives her a bouquet of daffodils, so she realises that every man is a villain and a hero at the same time. In *Cat's Eye* Elaine, left by

²²³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972) 51.

her friends to die from hypothermia in the frozen ravine, sees a vision of the Virgin Mary. In *The Edible Woman* Marian realises that she should put an end to acting as a victim and expecting Peter to be her rescuer from chaos; instead, she should start acting like a responsible adult. With these thoughts in mind, she leaves Duncan in the ravine, goes home and decides to bake a cake for Peter.

Both Duncan and Marian seem to be constantly hungry, but Duncan remains skinny despite the large quantities of food that he wolfs down. Duncan, Marian and Peter have a cyclical relation to food: Duncan expects Marian to feed him, Marian wants to be fed by Peter and Peter complains that she does not cook often enough. In fact, everybody in the book is hungry and dependent on somebody else for the satisfaction of this hunger:

Marian and Ainsley go to Clara's for a meal, only to find out that Joe, Clara's husband, will do the cooking, Peter and Marian eat out often and Trevor cooks meals for Duncan and Fischer on a regular basis. But all three dinner parties in the book end with some kind of disaster: Clara and Joe's children soil in the wrong place at the wrong time when Joe cooks and the situation repeats itself when Marian cooks for them. The behaviour of Clara and Joe's children highlights one of the principle means of socializing the child: the child must learn to control her or his bowel and urinary functions. Marian's difficulty with socially acceptable forms of eating is echoed by the children's chaotically misplaced faeces. When Trevor cooks an elaborate meal, Duncan breaks some of his expensive china by trying to catch some of the meat that Marian throws at him, and the rest of the meal is ruined. By the end of the book almost everybody remains hungry, perhaps because

this hunger represents the intellectual and emotional stirrings of their soul, and to satisfy these feelings they should not count on anybody but themselves.

The starved heroine of *The Edible Woman* is the one who breaks the bad spell of her eating disorder by baking a doll-like cake. She identifies with the two dolls she keeps on either side of her mirror, a blonde one, which represents her cheerful, social self, and a dark one, which is her inner troubled self. Feeling confused and eaten up by social expectations, she cannot see her real self in the mirror or feel her own body in the bathtub. But after she symbolically serves a cake-woman image of herself to Peter, Marian wants him to eat the cake and let Marian be her true self, not the doll-like, empty-headed wife he desires. Now that she is an assertive sculptor of her own body and politely invites him to consume it, he detects the symbolic cannibalism of the action and flees in horror.

Her skinny lover on the other hand, who never asked and never gave much to Marian, eats the cake without satisfaction or pleasure. But the first person to try the cake is Marian herself, who finally gets her appetite back. She eats the feet first, because they are the part of her body that she uses to punish Peter, by sprinkling his body with cold water in the bathtub: 'I reached out my right foot- I have agile feet- and turned on the COLD tap' (63). She also uses her feet to run away from him when she sees his nasty, primitive side previously hidden under the civilised surface of the articulate young lawyer. But running away is not an autonomous action and Marian proves it by allowing herself to be caught in the imprisonment of social conventions again, so she now eats the most dextrous and least

effective part of her body. Duncan follows her example and eats the head of the cake, since his endless and complicated self-analysis has not brought any results. However, with his Peter Pan syndrome of childlike irresponsibility and his total withdrawal into himself, Duncan does not seem to have changed much by the end of the novel. Incapable of independent action, he will probably go back to his flat to complain about his unfinished essays and to be fed by his motherly flatmate Trevor.

Things do not look very promising for Marian either, since she also finds herself at the same dead-end where she was at the beginning, only now she has no job, no fiancé, and no flatmate. But she does regain her healthy appetite, and deserves some credit for questioning the technological world of greedy market research, trendy bathtub sex and plastic apartment blocks. She cannot change society but she can heal herself from the damage done to her by male stereotypical concepts of the female body (wife and mother) and language (she is a manipulator, not a creator of words). '[J]aunty and full of good things' (280), she is hoping for a happy survival outside a culture that does not allow the full development of women. But for the time being she can enjoy her newly acquired assertiveness: she does not have to wear the red dress for anybody's sake and she neither needs nor wants anyone to cook or open doors for her; she can manage very well by herself.

‘She thinks of the cells, whispering, dividing in darkness...and of the other cells, the evil ones which may or may not be there’:²²⁴ Violence, pornography and language in Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*.

In Atwood’s short story ‘A Travel Piece’ (1977), a group of aeroplane crash survivors are stuck in a lifeboat, slowly dying of thirst. One of them, a student called Greg, is more or less dead, so they decide to consume his body for the purpose of their survival, instead of wasting it by throwing it into the sea. One of the lifeboat passengers, Annette, a freelance journalist of travel pieces, does not want to participate in the devouring of a human body: ‘I can always say it wasn’t me, I couldn’t help it, she thinks, visualising the newspaper interview’.²²⁵ ‘A Travel Piece’ works as a prelude to Atwood’s novel *Bodily Harm* (1981), in which the main female narrator, Rennie, is very similar to Annette: a freelance journalist, Rennie writes trendy but shallow articles on lifestyles and food for magazines and newspapers. Her relationship to food is as problematic as Marian’s in *The Edible Woman*: there never seems to be enough of it around and when there is, it is usually dirty, burnt, or undercooked. Although she feels as alienated from her body as Marian, she does not develop Marian’s difficulty in eating. Instead she develops breast cancer, and after her partial mastectomy she experiences fears of further amputation, even of dying grotesquely of her disease.

Rennie finds it hard to use words in order to express her feelings because as a child she

²²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (1981; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1983) 100. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

²²⁵ Margaret Atwood, ‘A Travel Piece,’ *Dancing Girls* (1977; London: Vintage, 1996) 143.

was taught how to be quiet, so she became an expert on silences. As an adult, she is a professional manipulator of words like Marian, but since her articles are superficial, so is her use of language. She lives on the surface of her body and of language: 'there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, are preferable to depths' (211). Although she ceases to trust the deceptively healthy surface of her body after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she still uses language in a shallow and playful manner. She writes articles on sweaters and jewellery and systematically avoids weighty issues: issues she will have to address in time, such as pornography, violence, and political injustice.

Atwood's young journalist decides to escape from Toronto's urban scenery, from her empty apartment where an intruder left a coil of rope, and from her diseased body and the radiotherapy it needs in order to stop the cancer from spreading. With the excuse of writing a travel piece, she flees to the twin Caribbean islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe, but the promised tropical paradise turns into hell, when Rennie finds herself caught in the middle of a doomed revolution against a corrupt government. As in the first part of the chapter, in this second part the body works as a text, not with its unwilling self-starvation but with breast cancer. I will discuss how breast cancer functions as a metaphor for a half-lived life, with painfully suppressed yearnings; how the illness and decay of Rennie's body become metaphors for rot in the body of politics and society. I will use Atwood's short story 'Hairball' (1991), where the female protagonist, Kat, has a benign ovarian tumour, for comparison. I will also examine how amputated bodies and broken

language reflect on the fragmented text, where time and space, inside and outside, reverse and alternate.

One of the things that Rennie is desperately trying to get away from is her childhood and adolescent upbringing in the small and puritanical town of Griswold. Parts two and three of the novel begin with Rennie as a third person narrator, introducing first person stories of her past, which help the reader understand how she formed her adult personality.

Raised by her grandmother and mother Rennie 'learned three things well: how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them' (54). When she hugged her grandmother's legs and begged for forgiveness after having done something wrong, Rennie was locked up in the cellar, a punishment which made her develop feelings of claustrophobia as an adult. Her grandmother represents the small-town social demand of suppressing one's emotions for the sake of decency.

Although softer and more loving than her grandmother, her mother operates with the same absolutes, so Rennie learns to judge human decency in terms of the amount of flesh covered by collars and sleeves. If a girl is not decent, she is a worthless slut, and there is nothing in between. The weak and domesticated grandfather who appears in the background used to be a doctor, who 'drove...through blizzards to tear babies out through holes he cut in women's stomachs...he amputated a man's leg with an ordinary saw' (55). These stories of emotional frigidity and physical amputation explain to a certain extent why Rennie, as an adult, craves human contact through touch but also associates the male

hand that heals with the surgical hand that mutilates the human body. Emotionally scarred early in life, Rennie has learned to repress her feelings and avoid substantial involvement with others.

In many ways it seems that Rennie has put Griswold behind her: she is a young woman of the 80's, sexy, seductive, with a university degree and a professional job. She lives in Toronto now, and leads a hedonistic life, involved only in skin-deep relationships because of her fear of losing control over her body and mind. The biggest relief for Rennie is that she has succeeded in becoming nothing like her mother, who is described as a self-sacrificial saint, always taking care of others such as Rennie's sick grandfather and grandmother and Rennie herself: '[y]ou laugh or you cry, said my other aunt. You laugh or you go bats, said my mother, injecting a little guilt, as she always did. This sobered them up. They knew that her life, her absence of a life, was permitting them their own' (57). But Rennie's involuntary, yet, saintlike incarceration in the cellar as a child and her future incarceration in a filthy prison as an adult ironically compromise her distancing herself from her mother.

Rennie believes that her mother is a helpless victim of her prudish upbringing and swears never to allow herself be victimised like that. Ironically, Rennie is already victimised by men in a patriarchal society. She deliberately limits her articles to discussing 'women's lipstick, the length of their skirts, the height of their heels, what bits of plastic junk they choose to stick on themselves' (25), which turn women into brainless living dolls, for the pleasure of the dominating male gaze. Rennie perpetuates rather than challenges the passive-female, active-male dyad, and reveals her own emotional limitations. All her

pieces are beneath her talent as a journalist, but she refuses to write anything serious such as pornography in the media or colonisation and revolution in the Caribbean. Instead, she clearly abdicates all power and withdraws from all responsibility.

Despite the image of a young, sophisticated journalist, and her so-called radical separation from the past, Rennie remains a small-town girl, haunted by Griswold's rules of decency and morality as well as by her fears of relationships with men. She lives both her professional and her personal life on the surface, because she believes that love is a form of penetration that will leave her body open and vulnerable: '[b]eing in love was like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles...if you got through it without damage it was only by sheer luck' (102). When she moves in with Jake, she makes a packaged deal with him which includes sex, fun, and keeping their options open.

Although she promises herself to keep control of her body and mind, Rennie allows Jake to rearrange her world according to his convenience and pleasure. A professional packager, Jake starts with Rennie's apartment, which he redecorates according to the latest '40's-is-back' fashion. Jake's decorative taste is shown up by the two posters that he hangs in the bedroom:

he hung...a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed...The other picture in the bedroom was a stylized print of a woman lying on a 1940's puffy sofa...feet-first and her head, up at the other end of the sofa, was tiny, featureless and rounded like a doorknob (105-6).

Both posters represent a pornographic visualisation of femininity, whereby a man is allowed to look at a woman voyeuristically as a spectacle, and not realistically as a

person. This is what Susan Griffin calls ‘the miracle in reverse of the pornographic camera’:

Except for her decorations she [the model] is nude...and particular parts of her body, those intended for use - her breasts, her vulva, her ass- must be carefully examined. And yet at each turn of the body... we see nothing. For there is no person there...For the pornographic camera performs a miracle in reverse. Looking on a living being, a person with a soul, it produces an image of a thing.²²⁶

Whilst these posters with the two naked female ‘things’ make Jake feel secure, they make ‘Rennie slightly nervous, especially when she was lying on their bed with no clothes on’ (106). But, accustomed to being oppressed, Rennie hides her misgivings.

Once he is through with her apartment Jake alters Rennie’s appearance, from her clothes and underwear, to her naked body posture before lovemaking: ‘[p]ut your arms over your head...it lifts the breasts. Move your legs apart, just a little. Raise your left knee. You look fantastic’ (106). An obedient sexy doll, Rennie fits into his erotic images of pleasure through male dominance and female submission. Their lovemaking is a master-slave game, in which Jake likes to win. He does not so much enjoy sex, as the fact that he can violently take whatever he wants from her body:

Watch it, pussycat, said Jake. Remember your place. He got hold of her two hands, held her wrists together, shoved himself in between her thighs, squeezing her breast harder than he needed to. Feel that, he said. That’s what you do to me, the fastest erection in the West. Pretend I just came through the window. Pretend you are being raped (117).

²²⁶ Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd., 1981) 36.

According to Jocasta, Rennie's liberated, feminist friend, men can only enjoy sex that includes some violation of the female body. Jake seems to think that the word 'game' justifies any act of sadism on Rennie's body, but the problem with sexual games is that sometimes the boundaries between fantasy and reality are transgressed, and the female body with its vulnerable orifices is sexually abused. As George Steiner claims,

There may be deeper affinities than we as yet understand between the 'total freedom' of the uncensored erotic imagination and the 'total freedom' of the sadist. Both are experienced at the expense of someone else's humanity, of someone else's most precious right—the right to a private life of feeling.²²⁷

But Jake pays little attention to Rennie's feelings, and the notion that she has a mind has not fully registered with him. Judging from one of the posters in their bedroom, where the woman is presented as a huge body and a tiny head, Jake does not believe that women have a mind. 'Screw your mind' (104) he says, and that is indeed what he does with Rennie's mind, because she passively allows him to turn her into a consumable erotic object. As he claims later, '[y]ou can't rape a woman's mind without her consent, you know that' (104).

There are, of course, sexual practices such as bondage or group sex which certain women as well as men freely choose. The problem begins when a woman feels deprived of her right to reject any sexual activity she does not want, because social and historical conditions dictate that sexual violence is needed, even desired by the normal female. Pornography may function as the mirror and not as the creator of sexism in society. As

²²⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1977) 76.

Frank, the creator of sculptures with life-sized mannequins, says to Rennie, '[a]rt is for contemplation. What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right?' (208). Wrong, because the viewers of art should contemplate on its beauty, originality or decency and not passively accept it as an unchangeable reflection of reality. Frank uses some male bodies for his sculptures, but mostly he works with female bodies, which he positions in erotic and rather degrading postures for a specifically male gaze: '[o]ne of the chairs was a woman on her knees, her back arched, her wrists tied to her thighs. The ropes and arms were the arms of the chair, her bum was the seat' (208). These models willingly volunteer their bodies, but that does not alter the fact that in a culture that humiliates and abuses the human body for the sake of some questionable art, women are still dealt a worse hand than men.

If this is the attitude of society then this is what we take to bed with us, because, as Angela Carter remarks, '[w]e do not go to bed in simple pairs; even if we choose not to refer to them, we still drag with us the cultural impedimenta of our social class, our parents' lives, our sexual and emotional expectations, our whole biographies - all the bits and pieces of our unique existences'.²²⁸ Therefore it comes as no surprise that Jake wants Rennie to wear half-cup bras and G-string panties similar to what Frank's models wear, or that Rennie, trapped in her childhood's victim scenario, takes so long to protest against Jake's staged sexual encounters, in which she is cast as the submissive victim of forced sex.

²²⁸ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 9.

What starts Rennie's resistance to Jake's sadistic lovemaking is her viewing of some pornographic material, kept in Metro Police Headquarters, for the purpose of writing an article on pornography. Richard Miller's distinction between violent and non-violent pornography is useful here:

Violent pornography is thanatic, whereas non-violent or erotic pornography more closely resembles the festive anarchy of the Dionysian orgy...erotica depicts pleasure, enjoyment, and, on some occasions, intimations of love...Even though some pain may be depicted, it is not inflicted as...proof of one's superiority over another. Thanatica, in contrast...depicts the annihilation of others and "elevates" such nihilistic visions by suggesting that the death of another can be a source of amusement.²²⁹

Violent pornography does not only transgress the boundaries between life and death, but also eliminates the differences between humans, animals, and objects. Women are presented as sexual objects, tied up, mutilated, gang raped, whipped and beaten, but also as having sex with animals and being penetrated by them or by other physical objects.

Rennie and her friend Jocasta manage to make it 'through the whips and the rubber appliances' (209) and through 'some film clips, a woman with a dog, a woman with a pig, a woman with a donkey' (210) without getting upset. Even the 'sex-and-death pieces, women being strangled or bludgeoned or having their nipples cut off by men dressed up as Nazis' (210) do not seem to bother Rennie, because she develops a defence mechanism: 'it couldn't possibly be real, it was all done with ketchup' (210). The only way for Rennie to deal with violent pornography is to pretend that it is not real, that no real woman

²²⁹ Richard B. Miller, 'Violent Pornography: Mimetic Nihilism and the Eclipse of Differences,' *The Dilemma of Violent Pornography, For Adult Users Only*, eds. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 157.

participates in it. Her reaction is the same as Moira's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when the Handmaids are forced to watch porno films as part of their education: 'women hanging from trees, or upside down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out'.²³⁰

If Moira and Rennie believed what they saw was real, they would be terrified. But when Rennie sees the following clip which the policeman calls 'the grand finale', she cannot maintain her detachment and vomits on the policeman's shoes:

The picture showed a woman's pelvis, just the pelvis and the tops of the thighs. The woman was black. The legs were slightly apart; the usual hair, the usual swollen pinkish purple showed between them; nothing was moving. Then something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat (210).

The boundaries of life-death and of human-animal world are transcended in this stunningly revolting and monstrous birth. The scenarios of this scene vary: the rat might have devoured the woman's insides, or the woman might have been already dead when the rat was placed inside her, or, if she is still alive, she is a monster, capable of only giving birth to a disease-carrier, filth-related rat. Pornography - Atwood tells us here - embodies, promotes and sells the idea that woman's genitals are dirty, that her sexuality is disgusting, especially since she is black. She belongs to the socially exploited group of

²³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 128.

women in North America, stigmatised by Western society as the worst of whores. Rennie feels shaky and violated after watching this film clip. As Griffin claims,

Once entering the arena of pornography she [any woman]...becomes a pornographic image. It is her body that is displayed. And if she is interested in pornography...if she is shocked and turns away from the pornographic image in disgust, she becomes the pornographic 'victim'. She cannot escape pornography without humiliation.²³¹

Despite this humiliation, Rennie actually thanks the policeman without a word of protest.

It is Jocasta who verbally attacks him for his casual attitude towards such monstrosities.

Once more, Rennie avoids getting involved and expressing an opinion, and she does not write a piece on pornography after all. Instead, she does 'a piece on the return of the angora sweater and another one on the hand-knit-look industry. That was soothing' (211).

The theme of non-involvement in reality continues even after Rennie discovers that she has breast cancer. Her first thought is to make a piece on it called 'Cancer, The Coming Thing' or 'The Cutoff Point', so that she can distance herself from it and pretend it is happening to somebody else. Rennie cannot ignore her disease for long though, because her own body is both the suffering territory and the agent of bodily harm. According to Varmus and Weinberg's definition, 'the unifying aspect of cancer is uncontrolled growth- the appearance of disorganised tissues that expand without limit, compromising the function of organs and threatening the life of the organism'.²³² Cancer is not a metaphor for an outside enemy, but for the body turning against itself, for the cells betraying their

²³¹ Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1981) 102.

²³² Harold Varmus, and Robert A. Weinberg, *Genes and the Biology of Cancer* (New York: The Scientific American Library, 1993) 25.

host. At some stage Rennie realises that this is the biggest crisis of her life and develops feelings or resentment towards her own body: '[n]othing had prepared her for her own outrage, the feeling that she'd been betrayed by a close friend. She'd given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She'd trusted it. Why then had it turned against her?' (82).

Atwood wanted to show the relationship between the self and the most eroticised part of the female body, the breast. Many women can relate feelings of pleasure, pride, and vulnerability to their breasts, but also a sense of estrangement. As Marilyn Yalom claims,

It is the tragic reality of breast cancer that is bringing women into full possession of their breasts. They are learning, with the shock of life-threatening illness, that their breasts really are their own. Even husbands and lovers...sometimes abandon them when their breasts become diseased...unable to lend comfort when it is most needed.²³⁴

If the breast is the organ of maternal feeding, and the egg is the metaphor for female reproduction, Atwood's fiction plays with malfunctioning breasts and eggs. Rennie gets breast cancer and does not know if she can have children and in the short story 'Hairball' (*Wilderness Tips*, 1991) Kat has an ovarian tumour that resembles a monstrous pregnancy. In *The Edible Woman* Marian's body rejects eggs - an indication that it rejects pregnancy - and in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred has trouble getting pregnant despite the regular monitoring of her 'eggs'. In *Alias Grace* Mary is forced to have a fatal abortion and in *Surfacing* the unnamed protagonist rejoices in the presence of a new foetus - a 'blood

²³⁴ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997) 276.

egg’-²³⁵ inside her after her first abortion. Atwood’s work is questioning the social perceptions of the female body as maternal and nurturing, and contemplating the cost to women of these perceptions.

Rennie does not seem to pay any attention to her breasts before her disease, but afterwards, she does: she ‘lies with her arms folded, left hand on her right breast, right hand on the ridge of skin that slants across the side of her breast up towards her armpit. This is how she always sleeps now’ (48). Jake leaves her shortly after the operation not only because they do not make love - so he finds another lover - but also because Rennie, unable to ask for emotional support, rejects him completely:

What can I do if you won’t let me touch you? You don’t even want to talk about it. What aspect of it would you like to discuss? she said ...How you feel, he said. Try that...Great. I feel great. I feel like the body beautiful. How do you want me to feel? Come on, he said. So it’s the end of the world? Not yet, she said. Not for you (101-2).

Unhappily comfortable with her role as a victim, Rennie cannot give Jake a chance to help her. They both lived their relationship on the surface, and now that this surface proved to be diseased, they go their separate ways, unable to think of alternative ways to construct a deeper, loving relationship.

The surface of the body works as a cultural map of the psyche, where personality, emotions and sufferings are inscribed. Because cancer is not a germ or a virus invading the body, but a case of cellular malfunction within the body, it is sometimes used as a

²³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 172.

metaphor for hopelessness and lack of self-love. This does not necessarily mean that every person who gets cancer reveals memories of distress and pain, but, given the close relationship between body and soul, positive attitude and love for one's body can make a difference. Rennie's childhood memories of hypocritical Griswold with its cold, punishing cellars do not inspire a love of life. She does not even tell her mother about her disease and operation because according to Griswold morality, cancer is interpreted as God's punishment for wickedness.

Whilst in *The Edible Woman* it was eating, in *Bodily Harm* it is cancer that transgresses the boundaries between the outside and the inside of her body. After the operation Rennie imagines her body turning inside out: 'the scar on her breast splits open like a diseased fruit and something like this [a centipede] coming out of it' (60). This is the central theme of *Bodily Harm* and of Atwood's short story 'Hairball' (1991): the diseased female body and how this disease becomes a mirror for the disease in the heart of society and a metaphor for self-knowledge. Social decay in the form of superficial, violent and pornographic sex is exposed from the start, but both Rennie and Kat, the female narrator of 'Hairball', choose to ignore it. They only begin to see it when it links up with the decay of the inside of their body. Surfaces crumble then, depths become transparent, and both women acquire new knowledge about their bodies and about their social and political reality. Atwood paradoxically presents disease not as a carrier of death, but of rebirth. A comparison between the two women's feelings towards their disease is useful here.

Like Rennie, Kat is a successful journalist and editor of a trendy magazine, who suddenly feels victimised by her illness. Atwood's fiction creatively and questioningly explores the ways modern media (magazines, films and television) influences our perception of our bodies. In both stories a somatic disease makes Rennie and Kat aware of the inside of their bodies, exposed to the medical gaze: '[h]e spoke of "going in" the way she'd heard old veterans in TV documentaries speak of assaults on enemy territory...Except that what he would be going in was her body'.²³⁶ Rennie's breast tumour turns out to be malignant while Kat's ovarian cyst is benign, so they develop a different attitude towards their aching parts. Rennie invests an almost erotic interest in her diseased breast, sleeps a certain way to protect it and dreams about it revealing her pain. Touched lightly by death, she is scared of her own body's interior: '[h]er real fear, irrational but fear, is that the scar will come undone in the water, split open like a faulty zipper, and she will turn inside out' (80).

Kat, on the other hand, is initially curious about her cyst and then becomes maternal towards it, saves it in a bottle of formaldehyde and names it 'Hairball', as a mother would name a newly born baby. There are indeed similarities between a tumour and the foetus.

As Jackie Stacey claims,

The foetus and the tumour are both constituted by cell growth. Normal and deviant divide their purpose, but cell division unites their mode of expansion. The analogy becomes a mimetic image in the case of the teratoma, whose cell origins imitate pregnancy and release the same hormonal indicators. The teratoma tumour may even develop differentiated cells and show hair, teeth and nails on birth: a monstrous birth, delivered to the waiting medical gaze.²³⁷

²³⁶ Margaret Atwood, 'Hairball,' *Wilderness Tips* (1991; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 41.

²³⁷ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies, A Cultural Study Of Cancer* (London: Routledge, 1997) 89, 91.

The inside of the body in *Bodily Harm* and in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be compared here. Both Rennie and Offred visualise their internal organs, and Rennie is afraid of more cancerous growth:

She lies down on the bed again, hearing the blood running through her body, which is still alive. She thinks of the cells, whispering, dividing in darkness, replacing each other one at a time; and of the other cells, the evil ones which may or may not be there, working away in her with furious energy, like yeast (100).

Offred, on the other hand, is hoping for a foetus: 'I sink into my body as into a swamp, fenland...Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain...swellings and diminishings of tissue, the drooling of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about'.²³⁸

Despite the similarities between a foetus and a tumour, '[t]he immune system must be able to recognise the presence of a benign other, such as a foetus, in which cells divide to form the organs and tissue of an other, and a malignant tumour in which the cells of the self divide without purpose and without limit to form tumours'.²³⁹ Since her tumour is benign, Kat chooses to see it as the child she secretly wants to have with her rich, married lover Ger: '[s]he pictures it as a child. It has come out of her, after all. It is flesh on her flesh. Her child with Gerald, her thwarted child, not allowed to grow normally'.²⁴⁰

'Hairball' is narrated in a similar way to *Bodily Harm*, with dramatised flashbacks that intertwine with present events, so the reader knows that Kat has already had two abortions, because the men she was involved with at the time did not want the

²³⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987) 83.

²³⁹ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies, A Cultural Study Of Cancer* (London: Routledge, 1997) 163.

²⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Hairball,' *Wilderness Tips* (1991; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 54.

responsibility of a child. Gerald hires her to edit his magazine because of her creative and original approach, her sixth sense for semi-kinky material that sells well. Just as Jake rearranges Rennie's flat and then rearranges Rennie, Kat rearranges the magazine and then Gerald, turning him from banal and eager Gerald to sexy and smooth Ger. Once the transformation is complete though, Ger fires Kat and takes her job as editor of the magazine.

Although Kat feels as betrayed as Frankenstein does, when his monster turned against his creator, she responds creatively to the crisis. She sends 'Hairball' to Ger and to his wife Cheryl, covered with cocoa powder and surrounded by chocolate truffles as a gift for their cocktail party with the message 'Gerald, Sorry I couldn't be with you. This is all the rage. Love, K.'²⁴¹ Here Atwood uses the name of the magazine that Kat wanted - 'All The Rage' - and the name that the editors chose - 'Felice' ('[i]t was vaguely French-sounding, it meant "happy" '²⁴²) - to explain Kat's self-understanding and final catharsis. By sending 'Hairball' to Ger, an act of bittersweet revenge, Kat does not end up 'happy', but at least she gets rid of 'all the rage'. She is tired of being somebody's fashionable mistress and wants to make a new start with a new job and perhaps a less exciting but more fulfilling relationship.

Rennie does not feel as maternal as Kat after she has her malignant tumour removed, but she asks Daniel, her surgeon, whether she can have children or not. She suffers from low self-esteem, due to the disfigurement of her breast. Given her physical and emotional

²⁴¹ Ibid., 56.

²⁴² Ibid., 50.

vulnerability, it is natural to surrender herself to Daniel's healing hands. After all, he is the one who saw the depths of her body, all the secret places that she can only visualise, so if anybody can cure her, then he is the right person. Following the romantic plot of 'omnipotent male doctor, dependent female patient', Rennie falls in love with Daniel. It is only after making love with him that Rennie realises that Daniel is not an all-powerful, altruistic healer, but a simple man with needs that he tries to satisfy during their lovemaking. Betrayed by her body and by the myth of romantic rescuer that she had invested in Daniel, Rennie seeks invisibility by escaping to the twin Caribbean islands to write a travel piece.

But island paradises do not work very well for Atwood's heroines: '[t]he beach isn't one of the seven jewel-like beaches with clean sparkling iridescent sand advertised in the brochure. It's narrow and gravelly and dotted with lumps of coagulated oil, soft as chewing gum and tar-coloured' (79).²⁴³ Apart from the environmental pollution, Rennie has to deal with the unbearable heat, the bad food, the hostile locals and the corrupt government. Dr. Minnow, an educated, honest idealist who runs for president, informs Rennie about the government's abuse of foreign aid, the violation of human rights, the

²⁴³ In 'Circe/Mud Poems', the goddess Circe admits that her island is not a tropical paradise, despite the fact that it is advertised as one: '[t]here are travel / brochures that...contain / several very shiny illustrations.../ They leave out the insects and / the castaway bottles but so would I in their place; all advertise- / ments are slanted, including this one'. Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems', *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 207. In the poem 'Postcard', which is included in the *True Stories* selection, written the same year as *Bodily Harm*, the narrator does not find the advertised beauty of the tropics on the island where she spends her holidays alone: '[t]he palm trees on the reverse / are a delusion; so is the pink sand. /What we have are the usual / fractured Coke bottles and the smell / of backed up drains, too sweet, / like a mango on the verge / of rot, which we have also. / The air clear sweat, mosquitoes / & their tracks; birds blue & elusive'. Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981) 18.

unemployment, and the censorship of any opposition. He also points out to her that powerful ex-colonisers such as the USA supply the islands with guns, use them for their drug trade and discourage the development of any autonomous economies. It is obvious to the reader that the malignancy of Rennie's body has crept into the body of the earth and the body of politics.

Dr. Minnow wants Rennie to write an article about all these injustices, in order to open the eyes of the Canadian government. But Rennie is tortured by memories of the anaesthetic before the operation, by moments of confusion between dreams and reality, which make her eyes cloudy and her narration unreliable. She finds the island atmosphere threatening and claustrophobic and she stubbornly maintains her role as voyeur: she looks at reality without touching it. Although she needs to revise the old myths of innocence, femininity and romance, she is also a woman obsessed with loss and the damage of her own body, unable to help others before she heals herself.

Her healing starts after making love with Paul, the American adventurer, who is a drug smuggler and a gun-runner for the revolution. Unlike Jake and Daniel who try to transform her, Paul gives Rennie her body back by accepting it as it is, with its emotional and physical scars:

He notes the scar, the missing piece...He doesn't look away...He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could?... but meanwhile she's solid after all, she's still here on the earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched (204).

Rennie is similar to the mythical sorceress Circe, from Atwood's selection of poems with the title 'Circe/Mud Poems'. Her breasts represent the twin islands of St. Antoine and Ste.

Agathe, as Circe's body represents her island. Odysseus' lovemaking at the beginning - '[h]olding my arms down / holding my head down by the hair / moth gouging my face / and neck, fingers groping into my flesh'²⁴⁴ - is as sadistic as Jake's. In both texts, the female body is opened up or opening up during lovemaking: Circe does not only open up for Odysseus, but also assumes the active position and gently opens his body up during intercourse: '[o]n the floor your body curves / like that: the ancient pose, neck slackened, arms / thrown above the head, vital / throat and belly lying undefended...you open / yourself to me gently'.²⁴⁵ Jake tries to violently open Rennie up, but she finds comfort and pleasure by willingly opening her body up for Paul, the one lover who never asked for anything: '[s]he's open now, she's been opened, she's being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation' (204). It is Paul's touch, not Jake or Daniel's, that resurrects Rennie's flesh.

Neither Circe nor Rennie find themselves capable of resisting the romantic idea of searching for 'war' marks on their lovers' bodies. Circe finds that despite Odysseus' heroic status his body is vulnerable, and loves him for it: '[y]our body, broken and put together / not perfectly, marred / by war but moving / despite that with such ease and leisure'.²⁴⁶ Rennie also wants to check 'whether Paul has any bullet holes in him. If he has, she'd like to see' (244). Yet despite the romance plot Paul is not a hero, but a danger lover, who enjoys the adrenaline rush he feels when he pushes things as far as they go and still manages to stay alive. When the revolution starts and the government declares a

²⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'Circe/Mud Poems,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 210.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

situation of emergency, Paul uses Rennie and his ex-lover Lora as objects of exchange between himself and Marsdon, the leader of the revolution: 'Paul and Marsdon are arguing about them. Paul wants to take Rennie to St. Antoine, Marsdon doesn't want him to...Marsdon wants more guns. Rennie can see what she is now: she's an object of negotiation ...So much for vacation romances, she thinks' (258).

Rennie is not a typically virtuous heroine. She is required to resist the hero but she doesn't, because she wants to satisfy her own desire, which she neither conceals nor denies. An unsuitable heroine, she is too much of everything: too nice, too obvious, too eager. In all her sexual relationships Rennie feels that her own desire is used against her: '[e]nough with the voracious female animalistic desires, [Jake] said. You should all be locked in cages' (73). Rennie realises that if a middle-class, sexually liberated woman admits her carnal lust, she becomes an animal, in which case male sadism is required to tame her back to her passive place: '[s]he wondered what it was like to be able to throw yourself into another person, another body, a darkness like that. Women could not do it. Instead they had darkness thrown into them' (236). But the real challenge to the masculine code is Rennie's friend Jocasta. She does not only resist the popular romantic culture - 'I can't seem to get it up for love anymore' (153) - but also voices the female desire for revenge: 'I think it would a great idea if all the men were turned into women and all women were turned into men, even just for a day. Then they'd all know exactly how the other ones would like to be treated' (156).

If Jocasta voices revenge then Lora, acutely aware of gender and class limitations, carries the anger of the text. Like Rennie's, Lora's monologue is narrated in the first person

without quotation marks and snakes through Rennie's monologue. These narrative strategies are important because they allow the characters to be as ironic as Atwood about their own conditions. Apart from ironic, the description of their personal memories and traumas is also informative, because it gives the reader the chance to understand how the characters 'got there', and how whatever happened to them is part of a complex social system. Rennie and Lora share their fear of cellars and the absence of a father in their childhood. Lora is not only emotionally but also sexually abused as a teenager by her stepfather Bob, who tries to rape her. Just as Rennie's mother would blame Rennie for getting breast cancer, Lora's mother blames Lora for Bob's assault: '[y]ou're asking for it, she said, you flaunt it around enough, it's a wonder every man in the city didn't do the same thing a long time ago' (172). Lora's mother assumes that a woman is prey, as long as she is attractive, and she can choose chastity only if she is unattractive. By supporting convictions such as this which are sexist and destructive for women, women are as guilty as men for sustaining patriarchy.

As an adult Lora falls in love and has several sexual relationships, but she never really finds the right partner. Despite her dexterity in selling drugs and smuggling guns under the police's nose, Lora remains a victim of her status as a low working-class female. She seriously misjudges people and ends up in a filthy, subterranean cell with Rennie, from where they both narrate their life stories. Even in prison, where their bodies start disintegrating because of lack of water, proper food and sleep, Lora is under the illusion that she has the policemen 'by the nuts' (278). She prostitutes her body for them for two packets of cigarettes, chewing-gum and some information about her boyfriend Prince,

who is also involved in the revolution. Without realising it, Lora gives the policemen the power to feel superior and call all women sluts by treating her as one.

Once she finds out that her boyfriend is already dead and the policemen have been lying to her in order to use her as a sexual object, her powerlessness becomes obvious. She threatens to reveal their corruption and they do not hesitate to beat her to a pulp:

They go for the breasts and the buttocks, the stomach, the crotch, the head...Morton's got the gun out and he's hitting her with it... Lora twists on the floor of the corridor...like a worm that's been cut in half, trying to avoid the feet, they have shoes on, there's nothing she can avoid (293).

After witnessing Lora's beating up, Rennie tries to revive her by licking the blood off her face: 'all the cloth in this room is filthy, septic, except her hands, she could lick this face, clean it off with her tongue, that would be the best, that's what animals did' (299). This scene reminds the reader of the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, who promises to cut off the umbilical cord of her baby with her own teeth, just like an animal. Earlier on Rennie imagines herself leaving her body and viewing it from outside, an act that leads to her disappearance as a subject but also relieves her pain.

In Atwood's short story 'Hand' (1983), a woman is massaging the tightly clenched body of a man, trying to tenderly open it up, so that the subject can re-enter his body: '[n]o good to say you are your body, though this also is true, because at the moment you are not; you are only a fist tightening somewhere at the back of the neck...This fist is what I must open:

to let you in'.²⁴⁷ This is what Rennie is trying to do by holding Lora's hand, to drag her back into her body: 'she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there's an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through...this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done' (299).

Rennie is doing for Lora what Daniel's clinical but gentle hands, what Paul's practical carpenter's hands did for her: bring her back to life. Hands with punishing or healing power appear all through the novel: the grandmother's hands, rough and unforgiving, Elva's, the island's medicine woman's, hands, strong, primitive and blessed with the ancient gift of healing, and finally Lora's damaged hands: '[t]he fingers bitten to the quick, stub-tipped, slightly grubby, the raw skin around the nails nibbled as if mice have been at them' (86). Hands reveal this recurring desire to touch and be touched, to comfort and to help unite humanity that seems divided against itself. Rennie is touched and comforted by Paul and she now lovingly touches Lora's broken body.

Lora's body is not the only broken body of the novel: Rennie has part of her breast missing, Elva gets beaten up by the police, at the Fort Industry a woman has chopped up another woman, and the bodies of prisoners are being tortured and mutilated in the prison yard. There is nothing sexual about the torturing, it is sheer violence, which exposes the vulnerability of both female and male bodies: '[h]e's at the second man now..he pulls the head back like a chicken's, the hair is grey, he slices again with the bayonet but he's not

²⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Hand,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 103.

not careful enough, the man howls, a voice that is not a voice, there are no teeth in his opened mouth, blood is pouring down his face (289). The fact that Rennie witnesses these political atrocities makes her realise that '[s]he's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening' (290). This does not mean that Rennie is exempt from responsibility; on the contrary, she makes a narcissistic investment in all the men she's been with, so now she can see her own weakness reflected on them. The faceless stranger, the sadistic voyeur who invaded her apartment, is her twin. Rennie's gaze from the window of her cell reverses the rules of patriarchy: a woman is the voyeur, the spectator, and the spectacle is a man. By refusing to use her privileged position as a journalist to inform the world about the corruption and cruelty of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe's government, Rennie is as guilty as the policemen for the prisoners' bodily harm.

The broken bodies of the story are mirrored in the text which is also fragmented: recollected stories presented in short scenes interfere with the main body of narration and break up the written page. Language is also problematic because profound issues such as pornography and revolution exceed Rennie's superficial and playful linguistic frame. Rennie is dealing with the pain of the human body, which is something that cannot be easily described with words. As Elaine Scarry claims: '[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.²⁴⁸ This is true for most of the people who suffer bodily harm in the novel: the

²⁴⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 4.

German woman who steps on the sea urchin moans, Rennie can hear the prisoners scream at night, and the prisoners in the yard howl. Her own reaction to pain is an ambivalent '*oh please*' (Atwood's emphasis), which, disconnected like a fragmented limp, appears in several parts of the novel.

Some words connected to both body and violence, such as raw materials, massive involvement, remission, terminal, cutoff, malignant and invasion, are stretched to reveal their excess of meaning: 'she's in remission...*Remission* is a good word, *terminal* is a bad one. It makes Rennie think of bus stations: the end of the line' (59, Atwood's emphasis). In language as in everything else, choices ought to be multiple rather than either/or. The vocabulary of bodily harm usually appears in the text in italics, a stylistic device that indicates the special function of these words. Atwood uses them to move the theme of malignancy from the body, to society and then to nature. Although the implication of the novel is that we are all morally to blame for our cancers - mothers for being complicit with patriarchal authority, daughters for allowing themselves to be sexually exploited - Atwood's writing is more sardonic than punitive. Not all heterosexual relationships are pornographic and violent, although the ones in the novel are mostly described as such, in order to reveal the unequal distribution of power in society. Atwood exposes the various ways according to which power works, 'who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how'.²⁴⁹ After that she keeps her ironic distance, allowing her readers to draw their own conclusions.

²⁴⁹ Atwood's papers (box 159). John Hoesses, 'Living Dangerously; The Art of Margaret Atwood,' *Monday Magazine*, February 12-18, 1981: 14-15.

Bodily Harm is, in Atwood's words, a novel about a 'process that helps women discover their strength, which I see as a non-aggressive power'.²⁵⁰ Rennie discovers this power by putting things in perspective: by comparison to the wounded, suffering, and broken bodies she has seen, her own nibbled flesh is less terrifying and more alive. She is cured from her biggest fear and that is the fear of death. Unlike Kat, Rennie does not seek revenge. She does not get rid of 'all the rage' by covering the missing part of her breast with cocoa powder and sending it to Jake or Daniel, but by choosing to report the atrocities committed by the totalitarian regime of the islands. This way, she can raise the western world's political and moral consciousness. Nobody is immune or innocent; the colonies must also take responsibility with their colonisers for what is done to them, just as women must take responsibility for sustaining a patriarchal social system that invades and harms their bodies.

In the open-ended and ambiguous last pages of the text, Rennie's body is no longer a clean page for Jake or Paul to write their stories. Instead, she uses a clean page to write her story, she turns from text to writer. The lyrical description of Rennie's rebirth and catharsis in the end of *Bodily Harm* is similar to that of 'Hairball': Rennie 'looks out the window of the plane, it's so bright, the sea is below and there are some islands... The shadow of the plane is down there, crossing over sea, now land, like a cloud, like magic... You can fly, she says to no one, to herself' (301), while Kat goes out for a walk: 'outside the window it's snowing, the soft, damp, windless flakes of her childhood... The snow melts against her face like small fingers touching'.²⁵¹ Kat is ready for a new start

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

²⁵¹ Margaret Atwood, 'Hairball,' *Wilderness Tips* (1991; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 56.

after being caressed by snow, Rennie flies with the help of language and intends to make language fly in her first serious article, and they both feel 'light, peaceful and full with charity'.²⁵²

²⁵² Ibid., 56.

Chapter Four

Female Vampires: Women feeding on the suffering of other women in *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993).

Introduction

As in chapter three, the common theme that connects Atwood's novels *Cat's Eye* (1989) and *The Robber Bride* (1993) is rather obvious to the reader: the physical and emotional pain that women are capable of causing to each other. In *Cat's Eye* the suffering is inflicted upon Elaine by her 'friend' Cordelia through shockingly malicious games. Although this cruel victimisation takes place between the ages of nine to twelve, it leaves Elaine with life-long emotional scars: '[g]et me out of this, Cordelia. I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old forever'.²⁵³ As an adult Elaine acknowledges the possibility of a darker side in a superficially innocent childhood friendship.

Atwood takes this theme a step further in her next novel, *The Robber Bride*, with the creation of a mysterious, beautiful and ruthless villainess named Zenia. Cordelia could have grown up to be like Zenia if she had not revealed her traumatic family background, had a nervous breakdown and ended up in a psychiatric clinic. Zenia, however, is not a nine-year-old bully, but a strong-minded woman who never shows any signs of vulnerability. She exploits the childhood wounds and adult weaknesses of her three

²⁵³ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1990) 400.

‘friends’, Tony, Charis and Roz, in order to steal their money and their men and once her mission is accomplished she disappears without any remorse for her victims.

All the female characters in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, with the exception of Zenia whose past is unknown, have a problematic relationship with their parents and especially with their mothers. My reading of these two novels is historical in the sense that I examine the background of the late 40's and early 50's in which these girls grew up because it is largely responsible for the intensity of their relationships with their mothers. Social anxieties about discussing the body dictate that the girls should not ask their mothers anything about their growing bodies, so they come to regard their own sexuality as something awkward, fascinating and fearful. As in chapters one, two and three, language proves to be an uncomfortable means for expressing feelings: '[w]e can't ask our mothers... Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It's filled with wordlessness'.²⁵⁴ I use feminist and psychoanalytic theory again to explain how all the female characters find alternative ways for expressing themselves physically and emotionally and for putting their painful past behind them: '[s]he threw away as many of the old wounds and poisons as she could. She kept only the things about herself that she liked or needed'.²⁵⁵ To support this point further, I include a comparison between *Cat's Eye* and the short stories 'Uncles', 'Instructions to the Third-Eye' and 'The Sunrise' from

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 93.

²⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (1993; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 265.

the collections *Wilderness Tips* (1991), *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983).

Elaine replaces language with the third-eye of the painter, Cordelia with the pre-written scripts of the actress, Tony with writing words backwards, Roz with jokes and swear words and Charis by metaphorically leaving her old, suffering body and creating a new, pure body for herself. With the exception of Cordelia, all the other women succeed in coming to terms with their body and their past and in gaining a new, happier identity.

Elaine, Tony, Charis and Roz also come to the realisation that women sometimes behave in an unsisterly manner, like vampires who feed on the suffering of other women. This is because they try to compensate for their own pain (Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*), or because women are human beings who make moral choices, and some of them choose not to be nice (Zenia in *The Robber Bride*). Elaine understands this and forgives Cordelia, while Tony, Charis and Roz not only forgive but also admire the magnificent, destructive Zenia: 'and although she was many other things, she was also courageous. What side she was on doesn't matter... There may not even have been a side. She may have been alone'.²⁵⁶

Female friendship is sadly not possible in *Cat's Eye*, but it is in *The Robber Bride* and brings happiness and comfort to the lives of the three female friends.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 470.

‘I look at it and see my life entire’:²⁵⁷ language, third-eye vision and painting in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*.

‘ “Now...we’re going to leave you here for the bad man”. The other two started to giggle uncontrollably and I could hear them running off’.²⁵⁸ When Joan’s childhood tormentors blindfold and tie her at the end of the bridge which lies over a Toronto ravine, and then abandon her to the mercy of any flasher, Atwood introduces the reader to the theme of bullying at school. But the rather nasty bullying in *Lady Oracle* (1976) develops into a reign of emotional terror in *Cat’s Eye*, a novel published twelve years after *Lady Oracle*. Carol, Grace, and their leader, Cordelia, systematically torture and ostracise their friend Elaine. Cordelia is portrayed as a malicious little villainess, inventive in her punishments, witty in her excuses. All the distress they cause Elaine is verbal and emotional until the night they leave her alone in a ravine similar to the one in *Lady Oracle*, and she almost freezes to death. Joan and Elaine are victimized because they are social misfits. Joan is hugely overweight for an eight year old child and Elaine is a social *tabula rasa*, raised in the woods of northern Canada by her rather eccentric parents until the age of eight. She finds the world of urban middle-class girls, with their whispers, household shopping catalogues, and numerous dresses hard to comprehend.

Cat’s Eye is a novel about female cruelty, about women being their own worst enemies,

²⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1990) 398. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

²⁵⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1982) 62.

but it is also about surviving, aging, and forgiving. This part of the chapter discusses how patriarchal society fixes people, especially women, in a certain hierarchy which they find hard to escape; how the female body is viewed as helpless and dismembered, and female sexuality as fearful and repulsive; how language is used more to cause than to express pain; and finally how Elaine replaces language with the 'eye' of her imagination which she uses in order to become a painter. This 'third-eye vision' helps Elaine see beyond male or female social stereotypes, come to terms with her past and reacquire her identity.

The book has fifteen chapters, each narrated by two voices. One is the voice of Elaine as a middle-aged, established painter, who describes three and a half days in the present. She offers a bittersweet criticism of the cosmopolitan and trendy Toronto of the late 80's. The other narrative voice is the voice of Elaine as a child, a teenager and a young adult. She describes the people and situations of a past that covers almost half a century, from the 40's to the 80's. The present tense is used for both present and past indicating that past and present unify in Elaine's head. She has to uncover, face, and overcome her repressed traumatic memories in order to become whole again.

The narration of the past starts with Elaine living a nomadic, innocent life close to nature with her parents and brother. This life changes when Elaine's entomologist father moves the family into a permanent house in Toronto. At the age of eight Elaine moves from nature to society, and whilst she is familiar and comfortable with caterpillars, snakes, turtles, lizards, and birds, she is ignorant of and uncomfortable with other little girls.

Elaine has to learn a new language which refers to female appearance and household objects: honey-blonde hair, pageboy haircut, cold wave, tweed coats, twin beds, chintz. Because of her insufficient knowledge and her trustworthiness for keeping things secret from her parents, Elaine becomes the ideal victim for Cordelia, Grace and Carol, her three girlfriends. Their aggression is indirect, expressed as cruel jokes and criticism: '[t]hey comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them or behind...my shoulders sag, my spine crumples...I see myself shambling crookedly, I make an effort to stand straighter, my body rigid with anxiety' (120, 124). Elaine's body acts as the agent of its own pain, but it is Cordelia's words that caused this pain in the first place. She is the perpetrator of many acts of cruelty towards Elaine, and uses language in order to hurt her: ' "[i]f a man who catches fish is a fisher, what's a man who catches bugs?" she says..."A bugger" I say. "Is that what you think of your own father? He's an entomologist stupid. You should be ashamed"' (135). As Valerie Besag observes: '[m]any bullies appear to experience little guilt or sympathy for their victims...some children have a cold and calculating approach to their misbehaviour and their intent to cause pain to others'.²⁵⁹ Cordelia and her gang fit into this category. They have no compassion for the suffering Elaine, no regret for leaving her to die from exposure in the ravine; instead, they invent excuses to escape punishment for their murderous misbehaviour.

²⁵⁹ Valerie E. Besag, *Bullies and Victims in Schools* (Milton Keynes, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1989) 33-34.

This intense torture leaves Elaine with life-long emotional scars, and yet it is disguised as friendship: '[b]ut Cordelia is my friend...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' (120). Besag claims that a child who has been bullied for a while 'begins to believe in the label with a resulting lowering of self-confidence and -esteem...The subject is isolated and vulnerable and unable to call support from others and fully accepts the role which has been allocated to him/her'.²⁶⁰ Elaine believes all the diminishing names that her friends use: she is a stupid, impolite and useless little heathen. But unlike physical bullying, name-calling is not considered that bad, so parents usually ask their children to ignore it. Elaine realises that and does not ask support from her family. She cannot use language to defend herself from her friends' verbal attacks either, so instead, she starts hurting her body, to the point that most of her childhood memories are associated with blood.

Even her name, 'Elaine', rhymes with 'pain'. She bites her lips and her fingers until they bleed, and peels off the skin of her feet:

I did it at night, when I was supposed to be sleeping. My feet would be...smooth, like the skin of mushrooms...I would bend my foot up and bite a small opening in the thickest part of the skin...Then...I would pull the skin off in narrow strips. I would go down as far as the blood. Nobody but me ever looked at my feet, so nobody knew I was doing it...The pain gave me something definite to think about... something to hold onto (113-114).²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 46.

²⁶¹ Female feet often suffer in Atwood's work. The theme of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tale 'The Red Shoes' is part of Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* (1976): a girl can either have the love of a good man or dance in red shoes. Dancing in red shoes might kill her, unless she has her feet chopped off. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which takes place in a totalitarian regime, if any of the Handmaids tries to escape her feet are tortured with steel cables. So feet are the first part of the female body to suffer for any

This disturbing scene of self-inflicted torture demonstrates Elaine's desire to reject her body, in an effort to save it from its own vulnerability. The physical pain she feels gives her some control over her body and balances with the pain caused by Cordelia's words. The privacy of the procedure reveals not only the loneliness of physical pain but also Elaine's dream for complete disembodiment through suicide: 'I think about drinking Javex out of the skull-and-crossbones bottle... about jumping off the bridge, smashing down like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin. I would come apart like that, I would be dead, like the dead people' (155).

Elaine does not act upon her suicidal plans because, to her relief, she travels north with her parents for the summer, leaving both her tormentors and language behind:

My throat is no longer tight, I've stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeing how I look from the back, talk without hearing the way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into rhythms of transience as if into bed (143).

The moment she escapes her friends' verbal torture, her body starts healing. Even Elaine's prayers to the Virgin Mary 'are wordless, defiant, dry-eyed, desperate...' (138), but she feels that the Virgin Mary can hear and offer her compassion. The image of the Virgin Mary is usually connected with wordlessness. In the words of Julia Kristeva,

independent thought that does not comply with the rules of society. Perhaps this is because the foot's physical function is to aid mobility, so if the foot is mutilated the female body becomes less mobile and more helpless. Also feet do not contribute much to traditional patterns of female beauty (*Lady Oracle*), or reproduction (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and can easily be concealed (*Cat's Eye*).

Under a full blue dress, the maternal, virginal body allowed only the breast to show, while the face, with the stiffness of Byzantine icons gradually softened, was covered with tears. Milk and tears became the privileged signs of the Mater Dolorosa...what milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for.²⁶²

Kristeva defines the semiotic as the pre-oedipal, pre-linguistic phase, during which the child does not conceive of itself as separate, but as the continuum of the maternal body. The Virgin Mary with her milk, tears and asexual body represents Kristeva's semiotic phase as a universal substitute mother, who offers an understanding ear to all her suffering subjects.

This compassionate wordlessness attracts Elaine to the Virgin Mary. When she falls through the ice in the ravine, her physical distress is expressed by sounds anterior to learned language: '[c]old shoots through me. My overshoes are filling, and the shoes inside them...Probably I've screamed, or some noise has come out of me, but I can't remember hearing anything' (188). This almost fatal accident is the result of Cordelia's bullying. Cordelia uses torture as an interrogation technique, merging words with physical pain: 'Cordelia says to me "Were you laughing?" I think she means was I laughing at her because she fell down... "Yes," I say, "but..." Cordelia reaches out and pulls off my knitted hat...and throws my hat down into the ravine... "There's your stupid hat,"... "Why don't you go down and get it?"' (186-187). The little villainess' questions are formed like weapons about to cause physical torment and Elaine's short answers hide a scream as

²⁶² Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 173-74.

hurtful as her scream when she is drenched in freezing water. As Elaine Scarry puts it: ‘[t]he question, whatever its content, is an act of wounding; the answer, whatever its content, is a scream’.²⁶³

Although Elaine is happier when she is not using language, she cannot remain wordless forever. Eventually she uses language to confront and defy Cordelia two days after she almost dies of exposure because of Cordelia’s bullying games:

Cordelia says “I think Elaine should be punished for telling on us, don’t you?” “I didn’t tell” I say...My voice is flat, calm, reasonable. “Don’t contradict me,” Cordelia says. “Then how come your mother phoned our mothers?”...“I don’t know and I don’t care”...I am still a coward, still fearful;...But I turn my back and walk away from her. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game and I have been fooled...My anger is as much at myself as at them (193).

When Cordelia and Elaine meet again as teenagers, the intensity of their power struggle remains, although the tables have turned: Cordelia is not a manipulative child, but an insecure teenager. Elaine is the strong one now because she possesses the power of language to hurt. If we compare how Cordelia talks as a child - ‘ “What rhymes with Elaine?”... “Elaine is a pain”’ (133) - to how Elaine talks as a teenager, we can detect the same sarcasm: ‘ “Don’t be a pain” and “Takes one to know one”...“Better a brain than a pin-headed moron like you”’ (234). But Elaine’s use of language is limited; she still does not trust it and only uses it to torture Cordelia. Cordelia’s use of language is limited too, since she mainly invents ‘new, complicated swear-words: *excrement of the ungulate*, she

²⁶³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 46.

says, meaning *bullshit*, and *great flaming blue-eyed bald-headed Jesus*' (228, Atwood's emphasis). There is no real linguistic communication between the two girls.

On the surface, Cordelia and Elaine are like any other two teenage friends: they giggle for no reason, read horror comics and double-date boys. But whilst Elaine helps Cordelia with her homework, she also insults and frightens her as effectively as Cordelia had once bullied her. An unconscious need for revenge motivates Elaine's successful, linguistic counter-attack against Cordelia. Because she has repressed the emotional scars which Cordelia inflicted upon her, she is puzzled by the great satisfaction she feels by insulting Cordelia with her mean mouth. But once her ex-tormentor starts opening up about their shared unhappy childhood, Elaine avoids the issue, from fear her own old traumas will surface. Instead of using language to communicate with Cordelia, she chooses to shut her out, and eventually she stops seeing her.

Some reasons behind the girls' limited and destructive use of language can be found in the Toronto social framework of the forties and fifties. During the war women enjoyed financial and personal fulfilment from careers outside their home, but once the war was over, returning men started replacing women in various jobs. In postwar Toronto married women's lives were restricted to their home and their primary roles of wife and mother. As Betty Friedan claims '[b]y the end of 1949 only one out of three heroines in women's magazines was a career woman- and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career

and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife'.²⁶³ To a great extent women behaved according to an ideology which Friedan calls 'The Feminine Mystique'.

It dictated that

the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. But the new image this mystique gives to American women is an old image: 'Occupation: housewife'. Beneath the sophisticated trappings it simply makes certain concrete...domestic aspects of feminine existence- as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children- into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.²⁶⁴

The mothers in *Cat's Eye* play this 'happy housewife' role: they scrub floors, cook the family meals, 'put germ-killers onto germs, in toilet bowls...polish windows...get rid of their unwanted odours, rub hand lotion onto their rough, wrinkly hands...' (p.38). These women are given boring and thankless tasks, not only because they receive little gratitude for the work they do, but also because 'there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way' (138).

All the mothers in *Cat's Eye* know that 'respectable' women do not keep jobs outside the house; their husbands are the breadwinners. As Elaine says '[t]he teachers are mostly women of a certain age, women who aren't married. Married women don't have jobs; we

²⁶³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 39.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 38. The postwar ideas of the feminine mystique are very similar to the ideas of Victorian society with its patriarchal monogamous family. Victorians believed the 'evolutionary needs allocated woman to the private sphere in her role as reproducer and moraliser, man to the public sphere as competitor...'. Lucy Bland, 'Purity, Motherhood, Pleasure or Threat? Definitions of Female Sexuality 1900-1970s,' *Sex & Love: New thoughts on old contradictions*, eds. Sue Cartledge, Joanna Ryan (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1983) 10.

know this from our mothers. There's something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women' (77). The independent, unmarried woman with a career outside her house is viewed as aggressive and neurotic, like Miss Lumley, Elaine's teacher. Even if she is creative and lovable like her other teacher, Miss Stuart, she is still pitied by wives and mothers for her enforced celibacy and her inability to fulfil her sexual instincts in marriage and motherhood.

Apart from not being allowed any ambitions outside their home, women are also not allowed any desires or needs of their own. They are the nurturers, the ones who are supposed to take care of the other members of their family. Mothers teach their daughters to hide their aspirations, disappointments, anger; instead, they present themselves as pretty, helpless and giving in order to attract the right man for a husband. Friedan claims that this attitude was reflected in the pages of women's magazines in the late forties and fifties, with titles such as ' "Femininity Begins at Home"... "How to Snare a Male"... "Are You Training Your Daughter to be a Wife?"... "Do Women Have to Talk So Much?"... "Don't Be Afraid to Marry Young"... "Cooking to Me is Poetry" '.²⁶⁶ The advice contained in these women's magazines passes from mother to daughter, and makes the relationship of all four girls with their mothers problematic. Carol's mother communicates with her daughter only when some punishment is involved. Cordelia's mother is so fragile and absent-minded that her daughters feel the need to protect her and call her 'mummie'. Grace's mother, Mrs. Smeath, represents the strict moral rules of a

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 38.

religious, small-town mentality. Elaine's relationship with her mother is the healthiest of all. Mrs. Risley is not a typical representative of a forties mother, but rather an earth goddess: she hates housework and shopping, while she loves walking in the woods and ice-skating. Although they find it hard to talk and Elaine resents her mother for her own inadequate early socialisation, Mrs. Risley shows affection to Elaine and never punishes her.

None of the girls seems to know anything about female sexuality, so they imagine the female genitalia as both repulsive and fascinating cavities. Their mothers avoid talking about their daughters' hormonal and bodily changes during puberty, and conceal their own sexuality. The female body seems to be surrounded by social constraints, and language proves to be an uncomfortable means for communication: '[w]e can't ask our mothers. It's hard to imagine them without clothes, to think of them as having bodies at all, under their dresses. There's a great deal they don't say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It's filled with wordlessness' (93). Their mothers find it difficult to discuss their daughters' growing bodies as something natural, positive, and joyful, because they are uncomfortable with their own mature bodies, which are not described as curvy and sensuous, but rather as flat and asexual:

Mrs. Smeath has big bones, square teeth with little gaps between them...skin that looks rubbed raw as if scrubbed with a potato brush...Over the dresses she wears bibbed aprons that sag at the bosom and make it look as if she doesn't have two breasts but only one...her legs rise, white and sparsely haired, like a woman's

moustache (57-58).²⁶⁷

But they do receive some information from Perdie and Mirrie, Cordelia's older sisters, which, combined with their own imagination helps them create shameful and fearful myths about the mature female body. They think of their bodies turning soft and vulnerable, with puffy-looking breasts and bluish nipples, hairy legs and armpits, rounded bottoms, big hips, and the worst of all, they think of the 'curse' which is blood coming between your legs. With such unpleasant and embarrassing stories surrounding the issue of growing up to be female, and so little being explained about sexuality, the fact that Grace still thinks that God makes babies, and Mrs Risley does not discuss her miscarriage with Elaine comes as no surprise. But Elaine, who only sees a frightening splotch of blood on her parents' bed, needs her mother to explain things to her and feels disappointed when she doesn't. This silence pushes mother and daughter apart.

Whilst the postwar society confines the mothers of the novel to domestic roles, it provides the fathers with a mysterious, malevolent power. Although mothers seem to rule their homes alone, there is no doubt who is the real head of the family. As stated in the 1954 Easter issue of *McCall's* magazine,

For the sake of every member of the family, the family needs a head. This means Father, not Mother...Children of both sexes need to learn, recognize and respect the abilities and functions of each sex...He is not just a substitute mother, even though he is ready and willing to

²⁶⁷ In Atwood's work we often see unhappiness, cynicism and resignation being associated with the aging, dried-up body of a hag, for example Marian's work colleagues in *The Edible Woman*, Rennie's grandmother in *Bodily Harm*, Aunt Muriel in *Life Before Man* and all the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

do his share of bathing, feeding, comforting, playing. He is a link with the outside world he works in. If in that world he is interested, courageous, tolerant, constructive, he will pass on these values to his children.²⁶⁸

The fathers in *Cat's Eye* are the heads of the family, but nobody offers to bath, feed or play with the children. The exception is Elaine's father who cooks breakfast, loves gardening and plays with his children in the woods. Elaine seems to be the only girl in the novel who has a comfortable relationship with her father. Dr. Risley appears in daytime, either in the university lab, or in the house garden. All the other fathers are invisible during the day, but come back home at night, like vampires, always carrying the threat of punishment. Both Carol and Grace are afraid of their fathers, but Cordelia has the most problematic relationship with her father.

Cordelia's father is a charming and successful businessman, but a despotic ruler in his own home. Cordelia and her two sisters adore and fear him: 'Cordelia's father sits at the head of the table, with his craggy eyebrows, his wolfish look, and bends upon me the full force of his ponderous, ironic, terrifying charm. He can make you feel that what he thinks of you matters, because it will be all accurate, but what you think of him is of no importance' (249). When little girls separate from their mother, they are advised to start relating to their father, who represents maleness, language, socialisation. Little girls learn that their father is away most of the time, so when he is around, they should try to please him and win his affection. This situation of the little girl being encouraged by her mother

²⁶⁸ Cited by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 43.

to perform in order to please the father or the men in her family is repeated in Atwood's short story 'Uncles', from the collection *Wilderness Tips* (1991):

When she was nearly five, Susanna did a tap dance on a cheese box ...it was for a recital. Susanna repeated the tap dance on Sunday afternoons for the benefit of the uncles...there was lots of room for Susanna in her ruffled yellow cotton sun-dress, to hum the tune, stamp her feet, hop up and down, tap her heels and toes, do the salutes. The uncles would beam and clap...It was the uncles that counted.²⁶⁸

The short story also begins in postwar Toronto. Susanna knows that the uncles have the power because they have the jobs outside the house so they earn the money. By performing for them, like a cute little monkey, Susanna receives their affection along with a house for her widowed mother and a respectable amount of money for her education.

But whilst Susanna and Cordelia's two sisters succeed in both charming and pleasing the powerful males in their family, Cordelia fails. At best her father is indifferent to her, and at worst patronizing and condemning. Suffering from paternal contempt for not being good enough, Cordelia transfers her troubled family life to her playgroup, where she projects all her feelings of worthlessness onto Elaine, and plays the sadistic role of the punishing adult. As Besag says, a 'poor self-image, little confidence and feelings of hopelessness can result in some children failing to understand the effect of their behaviour on others...Frustration can be withheld from an original source so that the anger can be

²⁶⁸ Margaret Atwood, 'Uncles,' *Wilderness Tips* (1991; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1992) 134 - 135.

taken out on a more vulnerable target'.²⁶⁹ To compensate for the lack of a warm, supportive family environment Cordelia becomes good at disguises: she can stand very still, so nobody notices she is there, and later she can play minor parts in Shakespearean plays disguised so well that Elaine never knows where Cordelia is. Cordelia transforms herself from a fat, needy teenager to a sophisticated young adult who announces to Elaine that she wants to be an actress, a professional mistress of disguise: she will never have to face her own insecure self because she can always pretend to be somebody else.

Most women in Atwood's work are aware of the fact that their faces and bodies are constantly surveyed. Mirrors are considered to be masculine weapons because they make women aware of the fact that they are, in a patriarchal ordering, spectacles for the male gaze:

Cordelia brings a mirror to school...holds the mirror in front of me and says, "Look at yourself! Just look!" Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far. I look into the mirror but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. It's just my face, with the dark blotches on the lips where I've bitten off the skin (157).

This is the voice of patriarchy which both Cordelia and Elaine internalise, so they are constantly anxious about their appearance and do not like being looked from behind. They both try to return this judging gaze by outstaring people in the bus. Cordelia develops a chatty, cheerful personality and hides behind her numerous Shakespearean costumes, while Elaine adopts a more effective weapon than disguise: the professional, one-way

²⁶⁹ Valerie E. Besag, *Bullies and Victims in Schools* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1989) 34, 82.

stare of the painter. The roots of her decision can be found in her childhood marble, her cat's eye, and its supernatural protective powers. But the marble's real accomplishment is to help Elaine see the world through her mind's eye, which is the third eye.

In her short story 'Instructions to the Third Eye', published in the collection *Murder in the Dark* (1983), Atwood explains more: '[i]f you want to use the third eye you must close the other two. Then breathe evenly; then wait... You find...that what you see depends partly on what you want to look at and partly on how. As I said, the third eye is only an eye'.²⁷⁰

This is what Elaine does: she withdraws within her body and looks at the world through the lens of her third eye. As time goes by Elaine uses language less and her cat's eye vision more. She gives Mrs. Smeath the 'evil eye' when she discovers that Mrs. Smeath not only knew about her suffering in the hands of her friends but approved of it:

I have a brief, intense image of Mrs. Smeath going through the flesh-coloured wringer of my mother's washing machine, legs first, bones cracking and flattening, skin and flesh squeezing up towards the head, which will pop in a minute like a huge balloon of blood. ...She is right, I am a heathen. I cannot forgive (180).

Later in life Elaine, as a middle-aged woman, draws with her mind's eye a picture of Cordelia in an iron lung, more dead than alive:

The iron lung a cylinder, a gigantic sausage roll of metal, with a head sticking out one end of it...Cordelia in an iron lung, then...A mechanical wheezing sound comes from around her. She is fully conscious, but unable to move or speak. I come into the room, moving, speaking. Our eyes meet (7-8).

²⁷⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Instructions to the Third Eye,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 108.

These visions are shocking for their open aggression and the sadistic pleasure that Elaine, as voyeur, takes from these visions of tortured, mutilated female flesh. As Atwood claims in her short story: '[t]he third eye can be merciless, especially when wounded'.²⁷¹

What Elaine does not appreciate is that the female malevolence she experiences is not innate in women but stems from an oppressive, postwar society which confines women into their homes and often makes them bitter and unhappy. The result of her ignorance is that her third eye is ruthless with women and tolerant with men. As an art student she feels shaky when asked to draw the naked body of a female model. John Berger's definition of the difference between 'naked' and 'nude' is useful here:

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object). Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.²⁷²

But Elaine has difficulty looking at the model's body as nude, as an object she has to draw. Instead she sees it as a naked female body with all its alarming sexuality: 'this woman frightens me. There is a lot of flesh to her, especially below the waist; there are folds across her stomach, her breast are saggy and have enormous dark nipples...the massiveness of her body makes her head look like an afterthought. She is not beautiful and I am afraid of turning like that' (269). On the naked model's torso Elaine reads the restrictions of a patriarchal culture which silenced her mother from openly talking to her about female sexuality. Now she is afraid of all female bodies, including her own. But

²⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

²⁷² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972) 54.

painting frees Elaine from the boundaries of her body because painting is like writing, which, as Maud Ellmann explains, ‘insulates the body, in the sense that it is possible to write even if one’s ears are stopped and lips are sealed’.²⁷³ But writing and painting without an audience can lead to artistic self-annihilation. Luckily for Elaine, her paintings are shown in various public exhibitions.

Elaine’s third eye is also critical of the dressed female body; the picture she draws of Susie, a college friend, is rather harsh and unforgiving: ‘her body had grown stubby, her face round...She walked out, slumping like a middle-aged woman. With such an ass-end...no wonder Josef’s keeping away...Susie was letting herself go’ (318-19). This is the mean, internalised voice of a man-dominated society, the same voice which whispered in Elaine’s head ‘*it serves her right*’ (321, Atwood’s emphasis) when Susie nearly bled to death from a home abortion. But Elaine’s own reaction, when she discovers that she is pregnant, is to consider a home abortion: ‘[m]y body is a separate thing. It ticks like a clock; time is inside it. It has betrayed me and I am disgusted by it’ (338). Female sexuality as a taboo subject appears again; the main reason why both girls got pregnant is because they did not have access to birth control devices such as diaphragm or condoms. The sixties brought liberation regarding premarital sex, but it was still men who could have their cake and eat it. As Beatrice Campbell claims:

the permissive area had some pay-off for women in so far as it opened up political-sexual-space. It permitted sex for women too. What it did not do was defend women against the differential effects

²⁷³ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993) 93.

of permissiveness on men and women...and it was primarily a revolt of young *men*...The very affirmation of sexuality was a celebration of *masculine* sexuality (Campbell's emphasis).²⁷⁴

It appears that society still expects women to pass from innocence to maternity within marriage, without satisfying any sexual appetites in-between. If they do, there might be a high price to pay.

Although it is the female, not the male body which suffers for its sexuality, Elaine's third eye is loving and sensual when placed upon the male body:

When I am lonely for boys it's their bodies I miss. I study their hands ...the slope of a shoulder, the angle of a hip...My love for them is visual...*Don't move, I think. Stay like that. Let me have that...*I feel the backbone tensed and strung to breaking...The faces of the boys ...soften, open up, they ache. The body is pure energy, solidified light (240, Atwood's emphasis).

The young painter's relationship with males is simple; her father is her mentor, and her brother is her first friend and ally. As a teenager she is successful with boys, because she understands and shares their need for silence: '[b]oys by nature require these silences; they must not be startled by too many words, spoken too quickly. What they actually say is not important. The important parts exist in the silences between the words...They want to escape from adults and other boys, I want to escape from adults and other girls' (237).

Elaine knows that words like 'stunned broad', 'dog', 'bag', 'bitch', which boys sometimes use when they refer to other girls, come from their fear of girls, a fear that she can share.

²⁷⁴ Beatrix Campbell, 'A feminist sexual politics: Now you see it now you don't,' *Feminist Review* 5 (1980): 1-19.

By studying to be a painter she continues to use her visual rather than her verbal abilities. Most of her fellow-painters are men, who also prefer silence and body language to words: '[b]ut they can make their feelings known. There are shrugs, mutterings, half-finished sentences, hand movements: jabs, fists, openings of the fingers, jerky sculptings of the air' (280). Elaine prefers men for what she perceives as their purity and ignorance and avoids women because they 'pass hard, legitimate judgements...know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted' (379). Her painting *Fallen Women* describes her views on male-female sexual politics:

There are no men in this picture but it was about men, the kind who caused women to fall. I did not ascribe any intentions to these men. They were like the weather, they didn't have a mind...they were like rocks, a line of sharp, slippery rocks with jagged edges...if you slipped you'd fall and cut yourself, but it was no use blaming the rocks (268).

Later on she realises that men are not as blameless as she thinks. Josef, her art instructor and first lover, treats her like a helpless flower. He is a Hungarian political refugee and carries himself as a mysterious and depressed nineteenth century hero. Initially attracted by his need for her, Elaine soon realises that she is not happy sharing his grief, his obscure thoughts, and his nightmares, so eventually they split up.

Elaine's second boyfriend, Jon, becomes her husband when she gets pregnant. Jon is also a painter who makes constructions 'out of bits of wood and leather he'd pick out of people's trash or else he'd smash things-violins, glassware- and glue the pieces in the position of the smash; shatter patterns, he called them' (325) and artificial limbs for

movies. All his work reflects passion, aggression and fragmentation; like Elaine, he has wounds to lick in his search for a fuller and happier identity. Elaine loves him deeply and expresses her love, like any other emotion in her life, by using her third eye of a painter: ‘Jon glowed for me then 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...*Stay that way*, I would think. But he could not’ (341, Atwood’s emphasis). Soon the wreckage of Jon’s constructions shows in his marriage to Elaine as well. They both love their daughter, but their marriage does not work because they will not accept their role as adults and use language in order to communicate. Eventually they divorce and Elaine finds marital bliss with her second husband, Ben, who is easy to please and offers her a peaceful, suburban life.

As an adult Elaine realises that she needs to find a way to express her own anger. Like other female characters in Atwood’s novels²⁷⁵ she initially avoids language and withdraws into her own body: ‘[m]y body was like a feather bed, warm, boneless, deeply comforting, in which I lay cocooned’ (341). Eventually she becomes more lively and starts painting. As Scarry observes, painting is an effective means for expressing human torment:

Even prolonged, agonised human screams...convey only a limited dimension of the sufferer’s experience. It may be for this reason that images of the human scream recur fairly often in the visual arts, which for the most part avoid depictions of auditory experience.

²⁷⁵ Marian in *The Edible Woman*, the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, Joan in *Lady Oracle*, and Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The very failure to convey the sound makes these representations arresting and accurate; the open mouth with no sound reaching everyone in the sketches, paintings.²⁷⁷

Elaine does not actually paint an open mouth screaming, but her inner roar is expressed in her paintings. When she is still an unhappy child, she paints a black room: 'I draw my bed, with myself in it...I colour in the night. My hand holding the black crayon presses down, harder and harder, until the picture is almost entirely black' (162).

Her adult paintings are autobiographical records, verbal as well as visual images, where she offers her viewers and herself a picture of what your face and body looks like when surveyed by an outside gaze. As Roland Barthes claims: '[y]ou are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens...even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to a repertoire of its images'.²⁷⁸ An example of the power the painter has over people's faces and bodies is the Mrs. Smeath collection of paintings, which was inspired by Elaine's desire for revenge: 'I put a lot of work into that imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork-fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear. I laboured on it, with, I now see, considerable malice' (404).

But painting also offers to Elaine the chance to rediscover her past, by dissecting it in her mind's eye and putting it together again. She does not realise that until she finds her old

²⁷⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 52.

²⁷⁸ Ronald Barthes, *Ronald Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 31.

cat's eye marble in the cellar of her parental house: 'I look into it and see my life entire' (398). Elaine firmly closes her other two eyes and opens her third eye, the eye which replaced language all her life, in order to really see her paintings. What delights her and the reader is the fact that a painting can have an element of surprise:

It's the eyes I look at now. I used to think these were self-righteous eyes...and they are. But they are also defeated eyes...of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man...Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was. Now I can see myself, through these painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath: a frazzle-headed ragamuffin...unbaptized, a nest for demons...And yet she took me in (405).

Mrs. Smeath had to adjust to the standards of a postwar housewife, and probably suffered all her life with what Friedan calls 'the problem that has no name, a vague, undefined wish "for something more" than washing dishes, ironing, punishing and praising the children'.²⁷⁹ This is the first time in the novel that Elaine comes to terms with an aspect of the past, and also the first time that a woman feels warmth, understanding, compassion for another woman.

Atwood's female painter comes to the realisation that patriarchal society is responsible for the cruel way women treat each other or compete with each other. From the Victorian era to the early sixties, women were expected to be placid, moral beings, and to live life through their husband and children without developing their own intelligence and individuality. Women worked outside their home only during the two world wars because men were away. In the sixties, seventies and eighties, when feminism and postwar

²⁷⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 54-55.

capitalism gave women another chance for a career outside their home, they had to put up with inferior jobs, smaller salaries and sexism. But while all this is true, blaming patriarchy for everything withdraws responsibility from women themselves for having destructive rather than supportive relationships. Women are responsible because they are human beings, and as such they cannot help being competitive at times in structures which encourage competition. There is no reason why female competition or aggressiveness should be less present than male. Maybe Atwood is questioning the social pressure on women to express sisterhood, to confide to each other and be supportive of each other:

Confession is popular, not of your flaws but of your sufferings, at the hands of men...Telling about your pain is called sharing. I don't want to share in this way...I've never been beaten up, raped, gone hungry...I avoid gatherings of these women...in fear of being...burned at the stake. At times I feel defiant: what right have they to tell me what to think?...*Bitch*, I think silently. *Don't boss me around* (378-79, Atwood's emphasis).

This description of feminist painters' meetings does not mean that *Cat's Eye* is not a feminist novel, but that it is portraying a different kind of feminism where every friendship, male or female, includes the element of competitiveness and the potential for going wrong.

What seems to unite these women is not so much hatred for men but love for painting. Painting brings pleasure and hope, so it is also a form of therapy for Elaine, a way of coping with pain. As Griselda Pollock puts it:

Painting...answers to many women's powerful desire for a way to

represent women's experience as whole, human and thus equally important...feminist painting registers a demand for a permitted space in which the women who wish to be artists can experience, in the creative freedom of the studio and canvas, those expanding and personally challenging adventures symbolized through an encounter with the black canvas, aided only by one's brushes and paints and fired by ambition and a sense of limitless possibility.²⁸⁰

This limitless possibility is what Elaine sees in her paintings. They are not simply hers, they have a public life of their own and are open to other viewers' interpretations, but they still reflect something about herself, which she may accept, refuse, or change. There is *Life Drawing*, a painting of Josef and Jon, which clearly shows Elaine's fondness for both men: '[t]heir bodies are somewhat idealised: less hairy than they really were, the muscle groups in higher definition, the skin luminous...Both of them have wonderful bums' (365-66). As in Mrs. Smeath's paintings, Elaine has power over Josef and Jon's bodies, but the reversal of the gaze is even more complete here: the painter is dressed and female while the models are naked and male.

This situation brings to the reader's mind Yvonne, another female painter from Atwood's short story 'The Sunrise', published in the collection *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983). Yvonne does not only paint naked men from memory, but she also has live models. They are men she stalks in the street and subway, and politely asks if they can come to her studio so that she can draw them:

Once Yvonne gets the men into her studio...she sits them...beside the large window, and turns them so that the light catches on their

²⁸⁰ Griselda Pollock, 'Painting, Feminism, History,' *Destabilizing Theory*, eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) 151.

bones...If she thinks they are relaxed enough she asks them to take off their shirts. She finds collar-bones very expressive, or rather the slight hollow at the V, the base of the throat.²⁸¹

Both Elaine and Yvonne prefer men who are not conventionally handsome and explore the male body's complex forms and expressive potential in their paintings. But neither of them turn the male body into a vulgar object for the sake of the lascivious female gaze. The brushes or 'pencil travelling over paper' raise 'the small hairs on the skin, as if the pencil is not a pencil at all but a hand being passed over the body, half an inch from the surface'.²⁸² There is the possibility of eroticism, but not of pornographic degradation. The real pleasure for both female painters comes from the opportunity they have to look into these men's and into their own souls.

The painting called *Cat's Eye* is 'a self-portrait of sorts. My head is in the right foreground, though it's shown only from the middle of the nose up...the eyes looking outwards, the forehead and the topping of hair' (407-8). The part of the face missing is Cordelia's face, and Elaine is desperately looking for her in order to feel whole. These two women lived parallel lives: both traumatised early in life, pressurised by social expectation, they tried to hide behind theatrical disguises and art, broke down at some stage, tried to commit suicide and failed. What they never managed is to help and support each other, so now they cannot relish the possibility of enjoying life as 'two old women giggling over their tea' (420). Elaine comes out stronger though and has her art to thank

²⁸¹ Margaret Atwood, 'The Sunrise,' *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983; London: Vintage, 1994) 243.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 243.

for that. Her paintings help her see that the past is not a place we live in, but a collection of memories from which we draw in order to act more wisely in the present.

This realisation leads to her last painting called *Unified Field Theory*, a painting which brings together all the fragmented pieces of her life: the bridge, the ravine, her cat's eye, the Virgin Mary. Elaine revisits the ravine and frees Cordelia's spirit, knowing that Cordelia will always live in her paintings. Her third eye, which could only see 'the hearts gone bubonic with jealousy and greed, glinting through the vests and sweaters of anyone at all' now can see 'everything, the stones by the driveway, the brick houses, each brick, each leaf of each tree, your own body...glowing from within...'.²⁸² It would be wishful thinking to assume that Elaine can now 'reach out in any direction and ... touch the light itself',²⁸³ but light reaches her and there is enough of it to see by.

²⁸² Margaret Atwood, 'Instructions to the Third Eye,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 109-110.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 110.

‘War is what happens when language fails’: body, language, and doubles in Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*.

When Elaine, Atwood’s eight year old protagonist in *Cat’s Eye*, bites her fingers and lips until they bleed, peels the skin off her feet at night, and even considers suicide because of the bullying of her friend Cordelia, the reader cannot imagine another female character exceeding Cordelia’s malevolence. But Atwood offers a more than worthy substitute for Cordelia in *The Robber Bride* (1993), a novel published four years after *Cat’s Eye*. Her name is Zenia, and she is not an articulate and nasty girl, but a tall, beautiful woman, whose ruthlessness and destructiveness go beyond anything Cordelia could imagine: ‘[b]rilliant, but also fearsome. Wolfish, feral, beyond the pale’.²⁸⁴ Unlike Cordelia, who shows signs of weaknesses related to her traumatic family environment, Zenia remains throughout the novel an invincible personification of female evil with a mysterious past. She defies all social and moral rules and exploits the childhood wounds and adult weaknesses of her three ‘friends’: Tony, the child-like military historian, Charis, the over-aged flower-child, and Roz, the big-boned businesswoman.

Pain, power, repressed memories, and females hurting each other are themes found both in *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. But whilst Cordelia uses language to hurt Elaine, Zenia shapes not only her words into weapons but also her body with its undeniable sexuality. In this part of the chapter I will discuss how Tony, Charis and Roz’s traumatic

²⁸⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (1993; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 133. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

past is responsible for their problematic relationship with their body and language and how they transcend the limits of their body and language in order to create an alternative identity. I will analyse how Zenia also transgresses her bodily and linguistic boundaries in order to create not one but multiple deceptive identities; how she slips into these three women and gives life to their figurative alter egos. I will finally argue that it is not the 'third-eye vision' of the painter here, but Zenia, their literal alter ego, who forces all three of them to confront their past, discard their need to please men, and gain a new identity.

The narration in the novel is retrospective. It starts in the 90's, with Tony, Charis, and Roz spending their mornings separately, before they meet for lunch in the trendy restaurant 'Toxique'. They suddenly see Zenia there, who they thought dead for five years, and her presence makes each of them unravel her past. All three start the narration with their childhood after the Second World War, and then proceed with the circumstances under which they met Zenia. Like the mothers in *Cat's Eye*, the mothers in *The Robber Bride* are war brides whose weddings were performed under strain due to the historical circumstances of the Second World War. This strain is evident in the family lives of all the women in *The Robber Bride*. The parents do not share a loving relationship with each other or with their children.

Tony's English mother, Anthea, meets her Canadian father in a dance-hall in London towards the end of the war. She is a fun-loving girl, and when she gets pregnant she marries Tony's father, but the marriage never works because her mother was forced to

marry her father and move to Canada. To make matters worse, both her parents are uncommunicative; they only use language to insult each other in public: ‘ “At the end it was just children,” says Griff. “Children, in men’s uniforms. We were killing children.” “Lucky you,” says Anthea lightly. “That must have made it smoother for you.” “It didn’t,” says Tony’s father. They stare at each other as if no one else is in the room: tense and measuring’ (144). There are other linguistic references indicating that there is tension in the marriage: Anthea always asks Tony to ‘dig up’ or ‘root out’ her father before dinner, and she calls both of them ‘cold fish’. Her father’s name is Griff and Tony realises that ‘he isn’t happy; but...never complains about...it; unlike her mother’ (143). When Anthea flees to California with her lover, Tony and her father find it impossible to comfort each other with words: his ‘suffering wore her out: it was too flat, it was too wordless, it was too powerless, it was too much like her own’ (155). Eventually her mother is killed in a boat accident and her father kills himself after Tony’s high school graduation. Despite her misfortunes, Tony still finds it very hard to use language in order to express her sorrow. She does not cry either because she has learned that ‘[p]ain and distress were of scant importance really. They could be ignored’ (156).

The reason behind Tony’s difficulty in using language is that she feels like a disappointment to both her parents. A premature baby, she turns into an ambidextrous, small child, who ‘feels a rush of longing for whatever it was that existed between herself and her mother, in the photo album’ (141). The photographs of this album stop when Tony is eighteen months old, so, in psychoanalytic terms, she yearns to go back to the

time when words were not yet acquired and her body was in blissful union with her mother's nourishing body. Kristeva calls this pre-oedipal, inarticulate phase of bodily rhythms semiotic. The child must eventually separate from the maternal body and move from the semiotic to the symbolic, which is the oedipal phase of articulated language. Within language the child overcomes the loss of the maternal body and regains the mother as a love object. In Kristeva's words, ' "I have lost an essential object that happens to be...my mother...But no, I have found her again in signs...I can recover her in language" ' .²⁸⁵ But Tony cannot recover her mother in language, because she is afraid to use it freely. She does not have an English accent and her mother gets irritated by her. Her father does not talk to her much either because she is not the boy he was hoping for, so the preexistent language that Tony enters as part of her socialisation is of limited use to her. It does not allow her to express and experience herself as a speaking and acting subject, so she invents a new language by writing words backwards: '[w]ith her right hand she holds the cereal box close to her eyes. *Sekalf narb. Ytiraluger*, Tony whispers to herself. They never come right out and say "constipation." *Noitapitsnoc*: a much more satisfactory word' (149, Atwood's emphasis).

This language is similar to what Kristeva calls poetic language, where there is 'an explosion of the semiotic in the symbolic'.²⁸⁶ This means that the poet transgresses the

²⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Author Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 43.

²⁸⁶ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986) 119.

symbolic rules of grammar and syntax and uses a language full of the semiotic rhythm, flow and physicality. This stretching of language brings it closer 'to the body and emotions'²⁸⁷ and leads to its renovation. But Kristeva insists that this revolutionary function of the semiotic can only happen within the symbolic, otherwise it will lead to psychosis. It cannot last for long either: the poet has to return to traditional symbolic structures. Maybe Tony does not think of herself as a poet, but does use her own language to escape from preexistent, social meanings and returns to them after a while.

Writing words backwards also gives her the opportunity to create a more desirable identity for herself, an alter-ego: she is not only Tony Fremont, but also Tnomerf Ynot:

This name had a Russian or Martian sound to it, which pleased her. It was the name of an alien or a spy. Sometimes it was the name of a twin, an invisible twin...her twin was merely her invention, the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing. Although she was a twin, Tnomerf Ynot was a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring. (137).

Dissatisfied with her present identity Tony is happy to find this dark twin. Ynot is unruly and temporarily releases Tony from oppressive power structures in society. Her linguistic practices confirm Tony's rebelliousness: she writes swearwords like 'kcuf' and 'tihs' on window fog patches²⁸⁸. Even when obscene words are not written backwards they function in a similar way to Tony's new language: they break the traditional syntax and

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 200.

²⁸⁸ Many female protagonists develop fierce alternative personalities in Atwood's work. Their free use of swear words is one manifestation of their bravery: like Ynot, Tony's double, Cordelia, who is Elaine's double in *Cat's Eye*, also swears: '*excrement of the ungulate*, she says, meaning *bullshit*, and *great flaming blue-eyed bald-headed Jesus*'. Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1990) 228.

meaning of the symbolic. As Kristeva claims: ‘the obscene word mobilizes the signifying resources of the subject, permitting to cross through the membrane of meaning where consciousness holds it, connecting it to gestuality, kinesthesia’.²⁸⁹ Gestuality and kinesthesia are two features of the semiotic which, with the use of obscene words, flows in the symbolic and expresses desires and pleasures beyond language and closer to the body. Armed with such a powerful, defiant alter-ego, Tony becomes a brilliant academic of military history, which is an academic field stereotypically associated with men.

Unlike Tony’s parents who are married, Charis’ parents might not have been, ‘although her mother called herself Mrs. and wore a ring’ (235). Her father was killed during the war and her mother, Gloria, has to raise Charis, whose original name is Karen, alone. Stricken by bad luck, Karen’s mother is possessed by violent mood swings. As Regina Kunzel explains, ‘neurotic’ would be a safe and respectable term for Gloria’s condition: ‘[b]eginning in the 1940s, social workers...diagnosed...white, middle-class unmarried mothers as neurotic’, a term which ‘defined them as sexually passive, even asexual’ and was certainly preferable to ‘moral defectives or prostitutes’.²⁹⁰ By strictly denying any sexual feelings and by working as a teacher, Gloria manages to dress herself with the respectable clothing of a war widow. But she is still a single mother and therefore as much of a social misfit as any unmarried pregnant woman. As Kunzel puts it: ‘in the

²⁸⁹ Julia Kristeva, ‘From One Identity To An Other,’ trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (1980; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1981) 143.

²⁹⁰ Regina G. Kunzel, ‘White Neurosis, Black Pathology; Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States,’ *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 308, 313.

context of the World War 2 and the postwar period...when “health” was measured in terms of how well an individual adjusted to his or her appropriate place in the nuclear family it should come as no surprise that out-of-wedlock pregnancy was stigmatised as an “abnormal” departure from “normal” gender roles’.²⁹² Under the circumstances it is not surprising that Karen’s mother has bad nerves, or that the recipient of her angry outbursts is Karen.

The mother-child relationship is difficult even under normal circumstances because there is unequal distribution of power; the child is powerless and the mother powerful, but sometimes the tables turn and the child completely dominates the mother’s life. As Chodorow and Contratto claim, there is ‘an almost primal aggression in the mother-child relationship, an aggression that goes from mother to child, from child to mother, from mother-as-child to her own mother’.²⁹³ Karen’s mother has a bad relationship with her own mother. Born in a farmhouse, Gloria ‘had run away...when she was only sixteen...so she could be out from under the thumb of her own mother, the crazy old bat’ (233). The unloving relationship with her own mother along with the loss of Karen’s father during the war have as a result Karen’s physical abuse by her mother:

she would hit the backs of Karen’s legs with one of her shoes...and thick red light would pour out of her body and some of it would get on Karen, and Karen would squirm and scream...Karen cried a lot when her mother hit her...because she was supposed to show she was sorry, although she was confused about why. Also, if she didn’t cry

²⁹² Ibid., 312.

²⁹³ Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto, ‘The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother,’ *Rethinking the Family*, eds. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (New York: Longman, 1982) 85.

her mother would keep on hitting her until she did (235).

It is Karen's grandmother who heals Karen's legs by touching them with her therapeutic hands. She is a strong mother-earth figure, who passes her healing power to Karen after her death and becomes her grand-daughter's protective spirit.

After her mother's death in a psychiatric clinic, aunt Viola and uncle Vern become Karen's legal guardians. Under their roof she turns from victim of physical abuse to victim of sexual abuse:

Uncle Vern...stands Karen in front of him...and puts his hands under her pleated school skirts and slides her panties right down, shoving something hard in between her legs from behind. Or he uses two fingers, three. It hurts, but Karen knows that people who love you can do painful things to you, and she tries hard to believe that he does love her... "Your old uncle loves you," he tells her, scraping his face against hers (260).

Karen tries to tell her aunt what is happening but her aunt does not believe her, so she feels powerless to do anything. Like Tony, she has a special relationship to language; she relates a word to a colour, and when she hears and feels the word, she sees the colour: pain and anger are red, healing is blue, disease is silver, the soul is grey, and love is a mixture of colours. This is why she finds it hard as an adult to listen to Tony describing battles: 'the words are pictures and then screams and moans, and then a smell of rotting meat, and of burning...flesh, and then physical pain, and if you dwell on it you make it happen' (64). Like Tony she needs to create an alter-ego in order to cope with the pain.

Unlike Tony though, who uses language, Karen transcends her bodily boundaries in order to create her other self. When uncle Vern has full sex with her,

He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather... There's no pain in it at all. She flies over to the window... and stays there... What she sees is a small pale girl... On top of her is a dark mass, worrying at her, like an animal eating another animal... the man grunts... the small child wriggles and flails as if hooked through the neck. Charis doesn't know she is Charis, of course. She has no name yet (262).

Karen only re-enters her body when she thinks it is safe. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, this splitting of the body in two is a common reaction amongst incest victims:

Many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether, leaving other parts of their personality to suffer and store the overwhelming experience. "I moved up to the ceiling from where I saw this little girl being molested and I felt very sorry for her" is a common description by incest survivors.²⁹³

Karen gives to the body that flies out of her body a name she picked from her grandmother's Bible: Charis for Christian charity. As soon as she starts menstruating her uncle stops touching her, but Karen, who is still part of Charis, is 'disgusted with him, but also with her body, because it still has his dirt inside it. She must think of ways to get clean inside' (264). A new name, a new identity, a new pure body offers the ideal solution to Karen, who officially changes her name to Charis when she is twenty-six. Along with her old name she 'threw away as many of the old wounds and poisons as she could. She kept only the things about herself that she liked or needed' (265). In contrast to Tony's

²⁹³ Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility Of Memory And The Engraving Of Trauma,' *Trauma: Exploitations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 168.

other self, Ynot, who is strong and sinister, Karen's other self is innocent and serene, and eventually takes over Karen.

Roz's mother, Agnes, is a strict Catholic who runs a rooming house, a female profession as respectable as teaching during the postwar era, because she stays at home and earns money at the same time. Agnes sees this house as a reflection of her own purity and decency, so she constantly cleans it and expects Roz to help her. Unlike Tony and Charis' fathers who fought during the war, Roz's Jewish father was a criminal who helped Jews cross the border to safety. When he does come back home, he is more cheerful, and affectionate than Tony's father: '[h]e's large and barrel-shaped...He smiles and holds out his arms. "Come, give Papa a kiss!" Roz looks around: who is this *Papa*?' (332, Atwood's emphasis). With her father's arrival, Roz feels cut in two. '[o]n one side is Roz, and her mother...On the other side is her father...filling the space in her mother's gaze so that Roz is pushed off to the edge' (332). The relationship between Roz and her mother changes. They are not an inseparable dyad anymore, and the object of her mother's desire is not Roz but her father: 'Roz catches them hugging and kissing in the kitchen...and is full of disgust at her mother for being so soft, and with sorrow and jealousy and the rage of banishment' (332). In psychoanalytic terms Roz separates from her mother's pre-oedipal body, and identifies with her father's oedipal language: '[t]o punish her mother for such betrayals Roz...turns to her...father' from where 'she regards her mother, working as hard as ever...with gloating triumph and thinks it serves her right. (333). In her father's world Roz is given a new name and a new religion: '[s]he's no longer Rosalind Greenwood,

she's Roz Grunwald' (343). Like Tony and Charis Roz suffers from split identity. But she does not use language or her body to create an alter ego; instead, an alternative identity is offered to her along with her new name, and now she has to find ways to cope and be happy.

Her tall and big-boned body is not a useful tool in this effort. Roz decides to use language instead in order to make jokes: '[s]he takes to making faces...she imitates. She picks up... accents...intonations...vocabulary; she adds layers of language to herself, sticking them on like on a fence, one glued over the top of the next, covering up the bare boards' (345-46).

The fact that she makes faces as well as telling jokes proves to be an effective joke technique. According to Freud,

A comic facade encourages the effectiveness of a joke in more than one way; not only does it make the automatism of the joking process possible, by holding the attention, but it also facilitates the discharge by the joke, by sending ahead a discharge of a comic kind. The comic is here operating exactly like a bribing fore-pleasure...²⁹⁴

Tony also uses her own language to make her friends laugh. She sings backwards to them:

'Gnilrad ym ho,/...Enitn(e)melc,/ Reverof (e)nog dna tsol er(a) uoy,/ Yrros lufdaerd,/ Enitn(e)melc. In order to make it scan she would claim that three of the vowels were

silent, and that *uo* was a diphthong...All languages had such tics, and this was her

language; so its rules...were at her mercy' (116, Atwood's emphasis). Tony does not even

smile when she sings, a technique which is as effective as Roz's funny faces. It is because

²⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Motives Of Jokes - Jokes As A Social Process,' trans. James Strachey, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. Angela Richards (1960; London: Penguin Books, 1991) 205.

Tony thinks of the real meaning of her song instead of the transgression of its meaning that she cannot laugh: ‘this song about a woman who had drowned...who was not mourned, who was ultimately forgotten. She found it sad...Why did they laugh?’ (116-117).

In both Tony and Roz’s cases, laughter is the result of the utterance of non-meaning, of nonsense, which leaves space to the listeners for many different interpretations. In Kristeva’s words, ‘it is the *arbitrariness of the break establishing meaning*, which sets itself squarely against the flow of rhythm, intonation, and music, that provokes this laughter...Laughter of language, laughter of sociality itself’ (Kristeva’s emphasis).²⁹⁵ This transcendence of language lifts anxiety and brings pleasure to both the teller and the listener of the joke. Jokes are a healthy exercise towards socialisation and help both Tony and Roz feel they belong to a group. Obscene words can also cause laughter because they transcend meaning. But while Tony occasionally uses her reversed language as a joke, Roz finds jokes the only means for surviving her split subjectivity. She continues lifting given semantic contents by telling jokes and using obscene words even when she is a successful and wealthy businesswoman. Since she is caught between two religions, many of her jokes are about God: ‘[g]et me through this, God, and I’ll scrub a million toilets for you! Not that you’d be interested, because in Heaven, who shits?’ (309).

²⁹⁵ Julia Kristeva, ‘The Novel As Polylogue,’ trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (1980; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) 182.

All three female characters in *The Robber Bride* feel like foreigners in Toronto, and so does Zenia, the powerful anti-heroine, who has European roots. They have all transcended their body or language to create or cope with an alternative identity, and so has Zenia. But the novel's femme fatale does not only have one different self, but three, each craftily tailored to exploit the three women's weaknesses: Tony's academic intellectuality, Charis' maternal instincts, Roz's brain for business. Zenia enters these women's lives by using language her own way: she is a charming yet very convincing liar. But she gives a subtle warning to her victims, like the murderer in Atwood's short story 'Murder in the Dark' (1983):

In any case, that's me in the dark. I have designs on you, I'm plotting my sinister crime... You can hear my footsteps approaching, I wear boots and carry a knife, or maybe it's a pearl-handled revolver... Just remember this, when the scream has ended and you've turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie.²⁹⁶

Tony, Charis, and Roz should immediately shut Zenia out of their lives. But none of them ever received consistent love by their families, so they have not developed a positive sense of being in the world. As Atwood claims in her interview to Victor-Levy Beaulieu:

A Zenia knocks on your door and you open it and she says, "Hello, I'm Zenia. I would like to come into your life and completely destroy it". You answer, "No, thank you, goodbye," and you close the door. These three women have weaknesses in their character. Without this opening, Zenia would not have been able to get in. I had to construct each character so that there was a door in her character that opened up and let Zenia in.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Margaret Atwood, 'Murder in the Dark,' *Murder in the Dark* (1983; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994) 55-56.

²⁹⁷ Margaret Atwood, Victor-Levy Beaulieu, *Two Solicitudes*, trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1998) 90.

Atwood's villainess does find a small crack in each one of them, enters their lives like a parasite entering a healthy organism, and robs them of their self-respect, their husbands, and their money.

Zenia's charm works on these women because she promises to relieve their anxieties by giving life to their figurative alter egos. She will perform for them all the heroic, rebellious and sexual acts which will make them freer, happier, more complete. But as Karl Miller observes,

The imagination of the double has been explained as an effort to deal with the existence of evil- an effort which leads to the assignment of destructive urges to another self, which may chase the subject as the spectre of his own disobedience...while the double may enable the orphan to attack his enemies, the double may also behave like an enemy, striking from outside- like an oppressor, a possessor, a tempter of devil, a tyrant or parent.²⁹⁸

Zenia turns into this kind of tyrant for Tony, Charis and Roz. She befriends them, shares their secrets, turns their lives upside-down, steals what she wants and then disappears, with nothing but contempt for the ruins she leaves behind. The last time she sees Tony she uses the obscene language of the evil double, a language that Tony used to admire for its boldness, in order to attack Tony, the host body: ‘ “[y]ou always were...a...prune faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions...you sit on poor West as if he's your...fresh-laid fucking egg. I bet he's bored out of his skull, with nobody but you to stick his boring dick into! Jesus, it must be like fucking a gerbil!” ’ (414).

²⁹⁸ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 46-47.

Tony meets Zenia in the 60's, when they are both students at Toronto University. The expansion of higher education amongst girls means that young women can now get professional jobs: Tony wants to be a military historian, while Zenia is thinking of finance, journalism, even politics. They meet through West, Zenia's boyfriend, and become friends because Zenia shares Tony's interest in war: '[w]hich was the magic word, *war* or *raw*? Probably it was the two of them together; the doubleness. That would have had high appeal, for Zenia' (130, Atwood's emphasis). West's girlfriend realises that Tony has a harder side, very similar to her own: she is a female warrior, a survivor. She slips into Tony's body and becomes the embodiment of her dark twin, Tnomerf Ynot. Tony is happy with the merging; she 'looks at her, looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself as she would like to be. Tnomerd Ynot. Herself turned inside out' (167). The two women tell each other everything about their past: Zenia is not sure who her father was, but her mother was a white Russian, who made a living as a high-class prostitute in Paris. She was a child prostitute, until she abandoned her mother to die from tuberculosis. Her story is, of course, fictitious, and once the villainess learns what she wants about Tony she gets bored, blackmails Tony into giving her a thousand dollars and vanishes into thin air.

Tony does not only feel uncomfortable with traditional language, but also with her body, maybe because it is so small. The description of her face matches her body: '[p]owder on the nose, but no lipstick...Comb through the hair...With her big glasses and her big eyes behind them and her too-skinny neck, the effect is street urchin crossed with newly

hatched bird' (17). Atwood repeats words like 'little lady', '[t]iny Tony', 'Toinette', 'little pal' and phrases such as 'Tony would sit on the edge of the chair, her toes barely touching the floor' (121-22) to emphasize Tony's diminutive body. This is an effective way of keeping a particular image of a character throughout the story. Tony's physical smallness is not related to a limited mind, but rather to the fact that she does not have any strong sexual appetites. She is ignorant about her sexuality and finds '[t]he thought of going to bed with anyone at all is terrifying. What if they rolled over on her by mistake, and she got squashed?' (178). Her first sexual experience with her husband West is good, but their relationship is not based on carnal pleasure: '[t]heir love is gentle, and discreet. If it were a plant it would be a fern, light green and feathery and delicate' (180). Apart from being good friends, Tony and West also share a mother-child relationship, which is obvious during their breakfast: 'West sits eating his egg; he's absorbed in it, like a happy child. The bright primary colours - the red cups, the yellow tablecloth, the orange plates - give the kitchen a playground air' (14). Tony is the mother who feeds, hugs and protects West as if he were her child. This is perhaps the reason why she does not feel the need for a biological child.

Tony and Zenia are the only women in the novel who do not have children. But unlike Zenia who does not like children in general, Tony feels maternal towards Roz's twins who are her goddaughters. At the same time she finds a substitute mother in West, one that heals the wound left by the inadequate relationship with her real mother. As Melanie Klein puts it: '[h]owever gratifying it is in later life to express thoughts and feelings to a

congenial person, there remains an unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words- ultimately for the earliest relation with the mother'.²⁹⁹ Tony's relationship with West is based on an almost maternal touch and smell rather than words: '[m]ost of their talk was an easy silence' (121). For Tony, who always longed for the brief, bodily warmth she received from her mother when she was a baby, this affectionate symbiosis with West is all that she needs.

Charis meets Zenia in the 70's, the time of hippies and free sex for everyone. She lives with her American, draft-dodger boyfriend Billy in a cottage on the Toronto island. She is a gentle, earthy creature who gives yoga lessons which Zenia joins, looking really ill and telling Charis that she has cancer. She adjusts language in order to appeal to Charis' vegetarianism, belief in spiritual healing and alternative medicine: ' "I went to the mountains, by myself. I stopped eating meat, I cut out alcohol. I just had to concentrate. On getting well...I thought I was better...So I came back...and the cancer came back" ' (221).

Under the circumstances Charis finds it impossible to deprive Zenia of her healing powers. She can tell from Zenia's aura that she's really sick. As Lucy Goodison explains, there is a theory according to which,

each person has an energy field similar to, but not identical with, an electromagnetic energy field. This 'electromagnetic' energy runs through the body along channels and radiates outwards from

²⁹⁹ Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (Hogarth Press, 1963) 100.

it. An inner layer of radiation close to the skin surface has been recorded photographically by Kirlian³⁰⁰ aura photography which shows variations in the aura depending on the health, temper and state of mind of the person. The theory also suggests that people's energy fields interact with each other.³⁰¹

This theory applies to Charis, who is able to see people's auras and responds positively to Zenia's fading energy field. She takes Zenia to her home and tries to cure her by vegetable and fruit juices, hot aromatic baths, but mainly by transferring all her positive energy to her sick friend.

Of course Zenia provides Charis with another fictitious past, according to which her mother was a Roumanian gypsy, who got stoned to death by villagers because they thought she had the evil eye. Her father was Finnish and got killed during the war, like Charis' father. She also uses language to push Billy out and keep Charis all to herself: 'she's taken to speaking of him in the third person even when he's standing right there. It creates a circle, a circle of language, with Zenia and Charis on the inside of it and Billy on the outside. Charis wishes she wouldn't do it' (229). Zenia's presence creates problems between Charis and Billy, but she cannot ask her to leave. She needs her in order to feel 'competent and virtuous' (225) and Zenia needs her too, because she is a weasel thirsty for blood and Charis has chickens in her garden. As in Tony's case, Charis feels as if their bodies merge at some stage, and Zenia takes the place of Charis' dark twin, Karen:

³⁰⁰ For a brief account of this method, see Brian and Marita Snellgrove, *The Unseen Self, Kirlian Aura Diagnosis* (Surrey: Carshalton, 1972).

³⁰¹ Lucy Goodison, 'Really Being in Love means Wanting to Live in a Different World,' *Sex & Love, New thoughts on old contradictions*, eds. Sue Cartledge & Joanna Ryan (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1983) 61.

But she's no longer a nine-year-old girl. She has grown up, she has grown tall and thin...And her hair isn't pale any more, but dark. The sockets for her eyes are dark too, dark bruises. She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia. She walks towards Charis and bends, and blends into her and now she's inside Charis's body (266).

With this borrowed body Charis makes loves with Billy that night and conceives her daughter Augusta. But four months later both Billy and Zenia disappear, leaving her in a desperate state.

From all three of them, Charis is the one who lives life mostly through her new body. But although she values it, feeds it healthy food, checks it for any signs of disease, she sometimes feels completely out of touch with it: '[h]aving a body, being in the body, is like being roped to a sick cat' (200). The reasons behind Charis' occasional alienation with her body lie in the physical and sexual abuse that she suffered as a child. An obvious manifestation of this abuse is her sexual frigidity. In all her sexual encounters Charis disconnects herself from her body. This is because 'memories are reactivated when a person is exposed to a situation, or is in a somatic state, reminiscent of the one when the original memory was stored'.³⁰² This sexual abuse though is not the only reason behind Charis' frigidity.

Her physical appearance is not sensual: she is tall and thin, wears loose, long dresses, and '[h]er long straight hair is grey-blond and parted in the middle;...her peach lipstick could

³⁰² Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility Of Memory And The Engraving Of Trauma,' *Trauma: Exploitations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 174.

be her real lips. She resembles a slightly faded advertisement for herbal shampoo...' (28). But her inability to enjoy sex is more related to the fact that her adult sexual partners make love to her according to the male-active/female-passive patriarchal dichotomy. She admits that '[m]aybe if there had been less...plain old sex - if she had felt less like a trampoline with someone jumping up and down on it - she would have learned to enjoy it more, in time' (208). All her lovers are afraid to acknowledge that each person can express both a masculine and a feminine side. Such a realisation would allow them to explore a number of positions, desires and pleasures and turn sexual intercourse to a fulfilling experience. As it is, Charis enjoys sex only once and that is because she feels possessed by Zenia's body, so she becomes an active participant during the sexual act: 'she's no longer in charge of her own body. This other woman has taken over; but Charis doesn't float away...She's in the body too...She can feel her body moving, responding; she can feel the pleasure shoot through her like electricity, unfold in a hundred colours' (266). The result of that night is her daughter Augusta, the best present her body could give her. After Billy leaves her, she happily gives up men and sex altogether.

When Roz meets Zenia in the 80's, she runs her own feminist magazine. Zenia is a freelance journalist now and manages to dig her way into Roz's comfortable life by inventing another past for herself. This time she is half-Jewish, half-German, a mixture, like Roz. But Roz is not easy to convince because she knows about all the lies that the two-faced villainess told Tony and Charis. Zenia confesses with tears that she lied to the others, but chose Roz to tell the truth. As Michel Foucault claims:

we have...become a singularly confessing society The confession... plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling with the greatest precision, whatever is difficult to tell.³⁰³

After Zenia's heart-breaking confession Roz finds her a job in her own magazine. It takes Zenia only a few months to disappear again with fifty thousand dollars of Roz's money.

Mitch, Roz's husband, with whom Zenia had an affair, is devastated and eventually commits suicide. For all her business acumen Roz's vanity takes over and makes her ignore the first warning sign: the day she met Zenia was a beautiful 'May day' (296).

Despite everything that she has done, Roz also wants her body to merge with Zenia's, because she believes that this new body will turn her into somebody like Zenia, capable of accomplishing '[s]eduction followed by slow poisoning...Betrayal. Cheating and lies' (393). Roz does not have a good relationship with her body either. She has dark straight hair and a pleasant round face with 'dimples, but they were the kind of dimples you saw in knees. More like puckers. She was a big-boned girl, a raw-boned girl (her mother's words), a girl with backbone (her father's), and a full, mature figure (the dress shops)' (308). Roz is unhappy with her weight, but she does enjoy sex. Lovemaking with her husband Mitch is erotic and pleasurable although strictly penetrative, since Mitch is a traditional male: '[h]e's made it clear by then that there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the former and she the latter' (312).

³⁰³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 59.

Once the early physical stages of unsatisfied desire are over, Mitch does not treat sex as a means for loving communication, but as a dutiful and rather boring encounter. He becomes a serial adulterer who uses other women to preserve the image of carefree, perpetual adolescence. Through Mitch, Roz married her father, who was also a serial adulterer but never left her mother. But Mitch breaks this unspoken contract by leaving Roz for Zenia. With her he explores all aspects of his sexuality: as Zenia tells Roz, 'Mitch was a sick lech. What he wanted out of me was sexual twist - he wanted to be tied up, he wanted me to dress in leather underwear, and other stuff, stuff he would never ask you because...you were his angel wife' (439). Like a typical representative of patriarchal masculinity Mitch acts as an active participant who skilfully presses his wife's orgasmic buttons, and saves the kinkier positions for his mistress. In Germaine Greer's words,

Many men retain erotic interest in being penetrated rather than or as well as penetrating, and find themselves responding in unexpected ways to stimulation of parts of the body far from the penis. Absence of erection is not necessarily absence of arousal but in our society it is always interpreted as such, because in sex, as in everything else, we have superimposed a performance ethic.³⁰⁵

The problem is not that Mitch gives up his stereotypical performance ethic to discover more erotogenic zones, but that in doing so he reveals a nasty, violent side, a side that meets its match with Zenia: 'I could hardly breathe...he practically tried to kill me! I had the marks on my neck for weeks; good thing I wasn't too squeamish to kick him in the nuts, as hard as I could, to make him let go' (439). After speaking to Zenia, Roz manages

³⁰⁵ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (1999; London: Anchor, 2000) 242.

to exorcise Mitch's ghost and concentrates on making herself and her three children happier.

This demonic woman's body is the centre of her power over women and men. She has complete control over it and reshapes it in order to serve her various needs. She turns up at Roz's doorstep in an 'amazing lizard-skin shoes...with heels so high her legs are a mile long, and a cunning fuchsia-and-black raw silk suit with...a tight skirt well above the knees' (356). Ambitious and fearless, this villainess does not stop with the normal beautification practices, but moves to more radical solutions, like cosmetic surgery. As Kathy Davis explains,

In an open market system, the patient is a consumer and, like the consumers of other products, free to choose any treatment, provided it can be paid for. The body is no longer simply a dysfunctional object requiring medical intervention, but a commodity...It can be endlessly manipulated- reshaped, restyled, and reconstructed to meet prevailing fashions and cultural values.³⁰⁵

Zenia's body is a commodity which follows all the rules which define the ideal female figure in western culture: she is tall, with a tiny waist, big breasts and an unwrinkled face. She has nose alteration and breast augmentation in order to improve her appearance even more. Roz on the other hand, who is dissatisfied with her own body, never considers something as drastic as plastic surgery. Many women give in to the tyranny of ageless beauty and decide to go through this painful ritual in order to keep some control over their bodies and lives. Then they find themselves back where they started, in the position of 'a

³⁰⁵ Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 17.

woman, with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.' (392).

Roz knows that plastic surgery will only make her one of these women, more dependant on male good opinion:

That's not for Roz, she can't stand the thought of someone, some strange man, bending over her with a knife while she's lying in bed conked out cold...what if they make a mistake and you wake up covered in bandages and then spend six weeks looking like a road-kill raccoon, only to emerge as some bit player from a botched-up horror movie? No, she'd rather just age quietly. Like good red wine. (80).

It is true that plastic surgery can go wrong and terribly disfigure the female body, and it is also true that, as Davis explains, it is 'a site, particularly for women, to negotiate their identities, in the context of structured hierarchies of power. Cosmetic surgery becomes both an expression of the objectification of the female body, and of women's struggles to become embodied subjects rather than mere bodies'.³⁰⁶ That's what Zenia accomplishes: to remain an embodied subject despite the fact that she turns her body into an object. She beats patriarchy in its own game because she does use the mirror, a traditional male instrument for imprisoning the female, but she does not allow it to duplicate the critical male gaze. If there is any criticism about her body, that comes only from Zenia herself; she is her own creator.

With such a perfect figure, it does not come as a surprise to the reader when Zenia seduces Tony, Charis and Roz's husbands and boyfriends. She separates sex from

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 60.

reproduction, and, as Angela Carter claims,

There is a world of difference between a helplessly barren woman and a purposely infertile one...A woman who defines herself through her fertility has no other option. So a woman who feels she has been deprived of motherhood is...deprived - of children...But a woman who has chosen infertility does not feel this deprivation. All the same, she is not a surrogate man...All of her, her breasts, her cunt... are perfectly female- perhaps more perfectly so, from the point of view of aesthetics, than those of a woman who has borne children...³⁰⁷

Zenia is a purposely infertile woman who possesses an ideal, desirable female body. She is not threatened by society's norms which dictate that a woman should get pregnant in order to express her animality and double her value as a human being. Instead she is self-contained, capable of changing and satisfying the totality of her desires. Besides, unconditional, maternal love is not one of her strong points. It is difficult for one to imagine a seven-month pregnant evil temptress, and as Shahrukh Husain explains,

if these forceful females could be made to be 'fruitful and multiply' - that is, to concentrate on motherhood and stay well away from all else which was now male territory...female potential would be reduced to a single function of motherhood and all desire, sexual and personal, would gradually be relegated to the dominion of husband and son. A woman would participate in sex to pleasure the one and incubate the other, while her personal ambition would consist of sustaining and serving them both and preparing them for the world.³⁰⁸

Zenia would never sacrifice her ambitions in order to be confined in the docile world of motherhood. She is a con-artist who plays to win and exploits everybody. If she is faced with the traditional female dichotomy of fertile Madonna/infertile whore, she would

³⁰⁷ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1979) 106-7.

³⁰⁸ Shahrukh Husain, *The Virago Book of Temptresses* (London: Virago Press, 1998) viii.

always choose the defiant role of the whore.

But Zenia does not only use her glamour and sexuality; she adjusts her body to match the occasion. Tony is under the impression it was Zenia's sexual allure that had attracted her husband West, until she finds out that it was a sense of challenge along with pity and guilt, since Zenia had told West that she was frigid:

“She was sexually abused in childhood, by a Greek Orthodox priest. I felt sorry for her.”...Tony could just see white-knight West, dutifully huffing and puffing away...trying to save Zenia from the evil spell cast by the wicked, non-existent Greek Orthodox priest, with Zenia having the time of her life. Probably she told him she was faking orgasm to please him. Double the guilt (406-407).

And at Charis' doorstep Zenia is not well-dressed and unwrinkled, but her 'hair is soaked and streaking down her face, her teeth are chattering...and her eye, purple now, it piteous. There's a fresh cut on her lip' (222). She tells Charis that she has cancer and Charis believes her because her body looks so ill: she is 'so thin Charis can see her ribcage...Her skin is white as mushrooms' (218). Later it turns out that the novel's villainess made herself look ill by cutting out all vitamin C from her diet.

Towards the end of the novel though, Zenia is really sick with ovarian cancer; her own body, the body she used with such dexterity throughout the book finally betrays her. Her malignant tumour is the only 'child' she will ever have, since both the foetus and the tumour start exactly the same way: with cell growth. As Jackie Stacey claims:

The malignant cells which belong to the self and yet are other to it, and indeed threaten its existence, disturb the subject's space.

Pregnancy, too, shows the body hosting another that parasitically grows from the maternal body's apparently endless generative source...Normal and deviant divide their purpose, but cell division unites their mode of expansion.³⁰⁹

Zenia's dying from cancer shows that her presence in the book is a metaphor for cancer: like cancer she is an unwelcomed visitor in the land of the living, who abuses the host body's hospitality, and upsets the body's natural processes for regeneration. When she eventually leaves, the host organism is shocked and traumatised. But when her own body is infected, Zenia cannot die in a hospital bed; in accordance to her previous fearlessness, she commits suicide by throwing herself off the balcony of her hotel room. Atwood does not reject other options: somebody could have pushed her, or she might have overdosed by accident with the heroin they found in her room and then fallen off the balcony. But Zenia gives some indication of her decision in an early conversation about suicide with Tony: 'What if you had cancer?'... 'What if you knew you were going to die slowly, in unbearable pain?'" (131).

It is not only her body with its various disguises that Zenia uses in order to manipulate every character in the novel; it is also her skilful use of language. She is the Siren in Atwood's poem 'Siren Song' (1974): 'This is the one song.../ that is irresistible:/ the song that forces men/ to leap overboard in squadrons/ Even though they see the beached skulls.../ I will tell the secret to you.../ Come closer. This song / is a cry for help: Help me! / Only you, only you can, / you are unique/... Alas / it is a boring song / but it works every

³⁰⁹ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies; A Cultural Study Of Cancer* (London: Routledge, 1997) 89.

time'.³¹⁰ This is what Zenia sings, appealing to both male and female goodness and vanity.

She sells a sense of illusion:

She tells them they are unique, then reveals to them that they're not. She opens her cloak with the secret pockets and shows them how the magic trick is worked...Only by that time they refuse to see; they think the Water of Youth is real, even though she empties the bottle and fills it again from the tap, right before their very eyes. They want to believe (380).

And as Oscar Wilde says in the third epigraph of *The Robber Bride*, 'Illusion is the first of all pleasures'.

As a female representation of timeless evil, Zenia is very popular amongst readers.

Atwood explains this popularity: '[w]e're tired of being good all the time. When you deprive women of any notion of threat, it pretty much puts them back in the Victorian age.

All innocent, and without power, except the power of being good'.³¹¹ Tony, Charis and Roz feel some gratitude towards Zenia, because she was the initial reason behind their friendship: 'Tony has come to like these women...to consider them close friends...They have gallantry, they have scars, they've been through fire; and each of them knows things about the others by now that nobody else does' (29). Unlike Cordelia and Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, who never manage to develop a lasting friendship, the three women in *The Robber Bride* offer each other loyalty, support and affection. As Atwood confirms, '[o]f my recent books, this one has the most sustaining relationships in it. Why now? I don't know. I think people can be more supportive when they are older... You have to be old in order to

³¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, 'Siren song,' *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 195-96.

³¹¹ Laura Graeber, 'Zenia Is Sort of Like Madonna,' *New York Times Book Review* Oct. 1993, 22.

have old friends'.³¹² Zenia does not only help them become friends, but also realise that they cannot rely on their alter-egos in order to live a fulfilling life. She lies, but she also tells them some truths which make them deal with the past, unite their split identities and find a happier place in the world. And despite everything that she puts them through, they admire her courage, ambition and sexuality. She is a vessel of their own inner darkness, their own potential for evil, and her malevolent presence in their lives makes them wiser. As Jessamyn West ominously claims in the novel's first epigraph: '[a] rattlesnake that doesn't bite teaches you nothing'.

³¹² Val Ross, 'Playing the Atwood guessing game,' *The Globe and Mail* 7 Oct. 1993, C3.

Conclusion

Writing is...a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word...The encounter with language is a struggle in which each side is equally active, for what writer has not felt the language taking him over at times, blocking him at others? We all hope for the blessing;...And we hope if we receive the blessing it will not be for ourselves alone.³¹⁴

The above extract is part of Atwood's essay 'An End to Audience' from the collection of essays and reviews *Second Words* (1982). The two main two themes in Atwood's work that I have discussed in my thesis are here: body and language and the need for a language of the body. This does not mean that these are the only issues in Atwood's writings: with her unmistakably funny and ironic voice she writes about a wide range of issues, from birth, death, love, sex and relationships, to food, clothes and interior decor.

But no matter what her theme is, Atwood always displays an amazing versatility as a writer. As she claims in her interview with Lucy White: 'I have always been experimenting. It's a funny thing, when your books achieve high sales figures, people think you aren't experimental, whereas, had they remained at low sales figures, they would immediately be called experimental'.³¹⁵ Her work continually takes the reader by surprise: after the anti-comedy style of *The Edible Woman* she writes a ghost-story which takes place in the Canadian wilderness (*Surfacing*), then an anti-gothic novel (*Lady*

³¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1982) 348.

³¹⁵ Lucy White, 'Atwood On Art, Activism, Alternatives,' *The Varsity* 21 Jan. 1983: the review.

Oracle), a contemporary sexual triangle narrated by three different voices (*Life Before Man*), a spy thriller (*Bodily Harm*), a dystopia novel about extreme forms of feminism and religion (*The Handmaid's Tale*), two anti-sisterhood novels about the monstrosity of little girls (*Cat's Eye*) and women (*The Robber Bride*) and finally, a historical novel about a real-life double murder (*Alias Grace*).

Her writing style has progressively become more mellow, if one compares the superficial friendship between Marian and Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* (1969) and the real, warm friendship between Grace and Mary in *Alias Grace* (1996). The tenderness in her voice also shows in her latest collection of poems *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). In her own words, '[p]oetry has to do with the central, deep and scary things - love, death, war, time, nature. If all you're writing poetry for is to show off technical skill, people will say "How clever" but not "How moving"'.³¹⁵ And she is moving in her latest book of poems. In 'You fit into me' (1971), she claims with open aggression: '*you fit into me / like a hook into an eye / a fish hook / an open eye*' (Atwood's emphasis)³¹⁶, while in 'Shapechangers In Winter' (1995) she affectionately describes a couple growing old:

Once we were lithe as pythons, quick
and silvery as herring, and we still are, momentarily,
except our knees hurt...

Every cell
in our bodies has renewed itself
so many times since then, there's

³¹⁵ Atwood's papers (box 76). Val Ross, 'Atwood revisits the deep and the scary,' *The Globe And Mail* 30 Jan. 1995: Arts.

³¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, 'You fit into me', *Poems 1965-1975* (1976; London: Virago Press Ltd., 1991) 141.

not much left, my love,
of the originals. We're footprints
becoming limestone, or think of it
as coal becoming diamond...³¹⁷

But no matter what she chooses to write next and how she chooses to describe it, she will not ignore her role as a guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. As she claims in her interview with Karen Rosenberg:

When you are a fiction writer, you're confronted every day with the question that confronted, among others, George Eliot and Dostoevsky: what kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you see around you, or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you'll be unrealistic; if only the former, despairing. But it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have.³¹⁸

It is obvious that Atwood appreciates the need for optimism in literature although she does not embody this optimism in good, solid and boring characters. Nevertheless, her art can be lovely and luminous and can work as an act of hope that things can be better than they are.

My thesis has looked at the themes of body and language in Atwood's writing. Through these themes I have shown that her work contains an exploration of various issues such as historical and social prescriptions of femininity and how these affect mainly women but also men; child bearing, emotional and physical disease, sexual and political violence. This thesis has been challenging and stimulating because of the originality of the topic,

³¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, 'Shapechangers In Winter,' *Morning in the Burned House* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995) 123.

³¹⁸ Karen Rosenberg, 'On becoming a writer,' *In These Times* 8-21 Aug. 1984: 18.

but also because it offered me the opportunity to discuss material which has received little criticism, such as Atwood's short stories and her more recent novel *Alias Grace* (1996).

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