

# Maternity and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

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## ABSTRACT

A continuing and growing concern with questions of maternity and the ethics of mothering is present in Margaret Atwood's novels and can be traced in the narrative strategies used by Atwood. Thus, the aesthetic choices made in constructing each fiction is integrally involved with the ethical comment Atwood is making. This emerges in its most realized form in the political and artistic positions taken in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les romans de Margaret Atwood continuent à présenter une préoccupation croissante par rapport aux questions maternelles et à l'éthique de la maternité, et cette préoccupation peut être dépitée dans les stratégies narratives qu'utilise Atwood. Les choix esthétiques faits au moment de la construction de chaque oeuvre de fiction sont liés de façon intégrante au commentaire que fait Atwood sur la morale. Cela atteint son plus haut niveau dans les positions politiques et artistiques prises dans *La servante écarlate*.

In her story/essay, "putting the Great Mother together again or how the cunt lost its tongue," Sarah Murphy describes the search for the Mother as a difficult one:

I know it will be as hard as it must be for those who wake from a coma with only the tiniest parts of the self intact, and all the relatives bent on their getting well, on their being whole again, standing around telling stories to assist in the recovery of language, of memory, still I love their voices getting louder and louder. Even if I know it will not be easy to tell which the real memories are and what the knowledge that flows out of them. That it might even take ages to sort between the genuine and the man made, the fragments that have been assimilated to the attempt to control us. (p. 16)

I am not sure if Margaret Atwood is one of the relatives at the bedside, "assisting in the recovery of language, or memory," or the woman waking from the coma, or perhaps both, but she certainly searches for the Mother in her work. I find that Atwood's search, as illustrated in her novels, is a terribly painful one, as painful as waking from a coma to discover one's injuries. Yet I find in it a growth, an unfolding in an ethical as well as an aesthetic sense, an

increasing incorporation of the "fragments" that, despite Atwood's dark vision, argues for the underlying optimism of her work. Part of the "unfolding" can be seen in Atwood's increasing concentration on maternal concerns in the content of her novels, and part of it can be found in the way her maternal concerns affect the narrative strategies of her novels. These consist primarily of such features as the variety in narrative stances adopted by Atwood, in her unusual and imaginative uses of traditional genres such as romance, science fiction, travel narrative, and women's autobiographical forms, the special characteristics of her narrators, and her use of the narrators' memories in building her narratives. It is through her special use of narrative, an aesthetic concern, that Atwood is able to make known her ethical concern regarding maternity in the contemporary world.

Where does Atwood begin in her search for the maternal? Where does any woman writing start? We start from a position on foreign territory, so to speak, a condition similar to the one occupied by Atwood's heroines and described by Frank Davey as being that of a "flesh and

blood girl in the timeless ceremonial garden of patriarchal mythology" (p. 17). This "girl" I find, is looking for a mother. Our culture's understanding of the archetypal mother is still defined very much by androcentric views as in Jungian theory. In "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," Jung writes feelingly of the

maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate. (pp. 333-34)

In any description, any evocation, from Christian myth to Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, we will find these polarities, these goddess-like, impossibly inhuman negative and positive poles, between which actual human females and the fictional characters that reflect the female condition, must negotiate, must find their way.

Jerome Rosenberg recounts Atwood's anecdote concerning the first time she heard the "Snow White" story, a tale in which we certainly do see the archetypal poles portrayed. Atwood says that her mother read her the tale when she was a young child: "Mother thought I was being very quiet because I was enjoying it. Actually I was [riveted] with fear. The transformation of the evil queen into the witch did me in forever" (p. 2). The phrase "did me in forever" appears to be merely a comic exaggeration, natural to a satirist. But, in fact, that magic power of transformation, the way in which the "feminine," as our culture perceives it, suddenly becomes its opposite, has profoundly affected Atwood's vision of femaleness.

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood explores the life of Marian McAlpine, who is afraid that by some magic transformation she will become the thing she most fears, an adult woman, a wife and mother. She and her roommate live ever cautious of what the narrator refers to as "the lady down below" (p. 14). In the novel's surface world, the lady down below is their landlady, who is a snob, a moral prig, and who has a fifteen-year-old daughter so dominated by her mother that Marian calls the girl the "cretin." The "lady down below" quickly becomes a symbol of the mother as hag, an image of motherhood that recurs throughout the book, as Marian spots what she fears most in every older woman, from the fur-coated consumers she sees on the streets to the middle-aged women at her place of

work. But these women lack the magic, the mystery and the power of the dark side of the mother archetype, the true hag. They are the worst thing imaginable for Marian—for any woman—hags without magic, old women without power. They are what Marian will become if she allows herself to enter any further into adult womanhood. Her friend Clara suffered this mysterious transformation. She once reminded Marian of "ladies sitting in rose-gardens." She married her "ideal match," but has, with three children, "subsided into a grim but inert fatalism. Her metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock" (p. 36).

Marian's reaction to her fear of this transformation is to become anorexic. Marriage means being eaten up by the demands of the maternal. Marian wants no part of it, so she absents herself from the food chain. She will not make food of herself by eating. Traditionally, such girls require male rescuers. Atwood creates Duncan, the parody of the heroic rescuer of romance tales. Duncan is a graduate student in English literature. Besides having all the insecurities and eccentricities of that breed, he is Marian's double in many ways, as he has a kind of anorexia of the spirit, refusing to grow up into adult relationships, preferring to be the surrogate child of two other English graduate students, Fischer and Trevor. He even prefers to keep sexual feelings at a distance so that his real passions can be devoted to scholarship. And when Marian feels a maternal gesture coming on, Duncan warns her "you might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know" (p. 100).

The trinity of literary graduate students leads Marian toward the symbol system she uses to try to escape her predicament. First, Duncan takes her to the Royal Ontario Museum and shows her his favorite womb symbol, an ancient skeleton in the fetal position preserved in its tomb of sand by the dry deserts. Then Fischer explains the "Alice in Wonderland" story as an illustration of a young girl rejecting womanhood because only negative roles are offered her. At dinner, Fischer holds forth on his proposed thesis which will prove that poets turned from maternal metaphors of creation to sexual ones around the time of the Romantics, because they were part of a cultural move to control the world's population by devaluing motherhood. Fischer waxes poetic at the end of his lecture: "What we need is a new Venus, a lush Venus of warmth and vegetation, and generation ... big-bellied, teeming with life, potential, about to give birth to a new world in all its penitence, a new Venus rising from the sea" (p. 200). The patriarchal world may need a new Venus, one more Rubenesque than Botticellian, but Fischer cannot fool Marian,

it will still be a male-defined Venus. Marian tries to escape all the definitions offered her while giving her fiancé the consolation prize of the symbolic edible woman. Unfortunately, Marian has to eat her cake as well as have it, symbolically accepting male definitions. Yet she emphasizes the price of these definitions in her last gesture when she “plunge[s] her fork into the carcass” of the cake-woman “neatly severing the body from the head” (p. 275).

That is exactly what Atwood does in her strategic choice of writing the short first and third sections of the novel in first person narration and the longer middle section in third person narration. At the end of the first section, Marian becomes engaged to be married, and the narration is on the verge of moving into stream-of-consciousness narration. But such a narrative strategy would indicate at least an attempt at new self-knowledge. Marian’s story is not one in which hidden knowledge will be rescued from the unconscious or new discoveries made about her psyche. Atwood herself has called Marian’s story “a circle” (Sandler, p. 14), thus stream of consciousness would be unsuitable. Marian does not want to get closer to her female self; she wants to escape it. A quick switch to third person, a form of narration which, as Sherill Grace points out in *Violent Dualities*, is really Marian talking about herself, facilitates Marian’s separation of her thinking faculty from her body (p. 88). Fear of adult womanhood has made her distance herself from herself. She confirms this distance in the symbolic ending.

*The Edible Woman* is comic in style and form and thus its ending should be an affirming one. But this book is really anti-comedy which does not offer the traditional comic reaffirmation of the social order. Other critics have noted the same unaffirming nature of Atwood’s comedies. For example, Robert Lecker notes that both *Woman* and *Surfacing* “corrupt the prototypical romance movement from descent to ascent by demonstrating that the upper world is merely a reflection of the lower world of darkness, ambiguities and isolation” (p. 203). It is not surprising that Lecker’s description of Atwood’s world is very similar to the condition of coma that Murphy posits as the female world without the Great Mother. Atwood finds it impossible to affirm a social order in which the individuals, men and women, fear the feminine-maternal or equate it with consumerism; she cannot affirm a society which imprisons any woman who attempts to realize her maternity in the bonds of a powerless matrimony. Such a bleak vision must adopt the strategies of comedy while denying its affirmations. Here, as in later novels, Atwood makes satiric use of traditional forms. The endings deny traditional unambiguous solutions for her heroines by offering

them small shreds of accomplishment or by giving them, like Marian, only temporary escape.

Maternity continues to be the principle concern which influences Atwood’s narrative strategies in the novels which follow *The Edible Woman*. Atwood has called *Surfacing*, her second novel, a “ghost story” (Sandler, p. 14). As in any ghost story, the perception of the witness is absolutely central, and our acceptance of the vision of that witness is essential to the success of the story. The nameless heroine who goes in search of her parents speaks directly to us, in a stream-of-consciousness narration that must be pervasive and convincing — even while we accept her need to tell herself lies — if we are to accept her experience. Part of acceptance depends on our realization that beneath the surface search for her father, the woman is in great need of a maternal concept that will allow her to leave her victim position in which she has allowed others to control her body, even to the point where she has had an abortion because the father of her fetus wanted it. In one way, the book is an answer to the question implicit in the ending of *The Edible Woman*. This “reflectiveness,” that Eli Mandel has noted about Atwood’s novels, is one way in which we can detect a movement or unfolding in her prose works (Mandel, p. 165). The question asked by *The Edible Woman* and to be answered by *Surfacing* is: What happens if a woman cuts off her head from her body, denies responsibility for its life? The answer that *Surfacing* offers us is that the unintegrated female and maternal elements fall under the control of others.

Unlike her female companion Anna, who must put on her makeup mask each morning to please her husband, the protagonist has managed a measure of freedom through remaining silent and watchful. She has become remarkably sensitive to her environment and its nuances and uses this sensitivity to replace the lack of feeling capacity in her own body. As the blind develop increased hearing ability, so this woman’s associative imagination develops to compensate for her blind body.

However, she wishes unconsciously for sight, for a vision. In the place where her parents raised her, she is brought quickly to memories of a mother who was able to maintain a positive expression of femaleness. One of her clearest memories, so clear she calls it a picture, is of her mother facing down a bear: “she had been so positive, assured, as if she knew a foolproof magic formula: gesture and word” (p. 79). This stronger view of maternity is reinforced throughout the text by the various memory sequences. Importantly though, the mother is seen as outside the contemporary urban world. When the protago-

nist and her brother have to face the world each fall when the family leaves the bush, her mother's morality does not help them in the wars of the school playground (p. 72).

Although now an adult, the woman feels bereft, in the way that a child does, at her mother's early death. She is "disappointed in her" (p. 35), and seeks messages in the mother's diary and her own childhood scrapbooks. The message she finds is the primitive drawing of a child inside the mother's belly, herself inside her mother, the central fact of femaleness. It is significant that although the narrator's vision of the father at the end of the book is of an animal-god force, the vision of the mother is a very human incorporation: "She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them [the birds]; one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (p. 182).

This iconographic rendering of the mother as a part of the natural world is what the protagonist has needed to take her into a life where she will be the mother. Because this vision of the mother is outside the vision of the contemporary world, it is necessary for her to find it in the unconscious. Thus the use of stream of consciousness, the method by which excluded material is recovered, is a suitable narrative strategy. As well, Atwood's choice of the psychological "ghost" story is apt. The mystery story of the father's physical disappearance lies on the surface of the form; however, the mother's story is the other story that is surfacing in this book, just as the mother as a powerful but positive figure has existed in a muted form in contemporary life — a ghost so to speak — which is now surfacing.

If *Surfacing* is an evocation of the positive aspects of maternity, then *Lady Oracle* conveys the message that the Terrible Mother is part of our present existence and cannot be excluded from our view of the maternal. Joan Foster's mother is not just the vain queen who applies her makeup in front of her three-sided mirror, but the wicked witch who in Joan's dreams, "had three actual heads"; she is, in fact, "a monster." Joan's mother attempts to shape her in her own image by, as Joan puts it, becoming the "manager, the creator, the agent" (p. 64), of Joan's development. She would seem to be everything that is powerful but terrifying in a maternal figure. Joan rebels by putting on weight, by cloaking her body in protective layers of flesh. She truly needs these layers because, at one point in their deadly battle, Joan's mother actually attacks with a

knife. Joan seeks a mother surrogate in her maiden aunt, Lou, who is, in a sense, a professional mother. Lou writes to all the little girls who ask the sanitary napkin company questions about sexuality, fertility, and the menstrual cycle, questions which are not answered by their own mothers in a world that makes the female cycle an obscenity.

Joan's life is a continuing attempt to escape her mother, but even after Mrs. Foster's death she will not leave Joan alone. She literally haunts her. When Joan sees her mother's ghost, what terrifies her most is that the figure is weeping (p. 173). Behind the Terrible Mother is this powerless weeping woman, this victim, who has fought her own victimization by victimizing her daughter in turn.

Atwood chooses the form of the *Kunstlerroman*, the progress-of-the-artist book, to evoke the Terrible Mother. However, it is an ironic use of this form, a kind of anti-development story, for Joan's progress as a writer is more apparent than real. When Joan finally produces a so-called serious work, the long poem *Lady Oracle*, the reviewers, true to our culture's tendency to exclude the maternal, see the book as being about the state of the battle between the sexes, not perceiving that what Joan has finally begun to do is to come to terms with the mother in her terrible aspects, "the dark lady" (p. 228) of her manuscripts.

Why does Atwood show the mother figure, especially in her terrible dimensions, as so important in a book about the female artist figure? Atwood's *Lady Oracle* reminds us that as long as the woman artist exists in a society that attempts to define her in unnatural or limited terms she will have to behave as a female picaro figure, a subversive who slips in and out of identities, playing a game of now you see me, now you don't, in order to avoid being pinned down to a definition that is incomplete and/or false. By using a picaro figure as the narrator of *Lady Oracle*, Atwood emphasizes the subversive nature of female creativity in the contemporary patriarchal culture. As well, the fact that Joan can only change the style and content of her writing when she begins to come to terms with the implications of her relationship with her mother, emphasizes the relationship between creativity and maternity. Importantly, this coming to terms with the mother, and the power implied by her terrible aspect, leads Joan away from costume romance — a closed, stereotypical form — to science fiction, which is possibly a more speculative, freer form for a woman writing. If one places the mother figure in the future instead of the present or past, who knows

what dimensions of power might be discovered by the fertile brain of the writer.

Rowland Smith has noted how the "omnipresent nature of hysteria marks the development [of Atwood's novels] from *The Edible Woman* through *Surfacing* to *Lady Oracle*" (p. 144). Smith is correct if we think of "hysteria" in its original medical meaning as the condition of a "wandering womb." In a very real as well as symbolic sense, the form and content of Atwood's early novels are a maze-like wandering that the female self takes through the various dead ends of the "garden of patriarchal mythology." In this "garden" she finds fragments of the maternal, holds them up a moment for examination, perhaps places one or two in a pocket of memory, much as the awakening coma patient records voices around her, hoping for some resonance inside her own head. In Atwood's later novels, she will not need to explore the maze or make the quests carried on in the first three. She is able to zero in quite explicitly on the problems of maternal definition.

In both *Life Before Man* and *Bodily Harm*, rather than deal with women who take themselves out of the familiar world in order to discover some aspect of maternity, Atwood tells the stories of women who cannot escape the consequences of living in the mundane world. The manner in which the point of view is split between Nate, Elizabeth and Lesje in *Life Before Man* is a way of reflecting that being a woman in the world is not a one-dimensional task. Atwood's decision to use the dates which imply a kind of diary emphasizes the dailiness of the task. For many women, like Lesje, the discovery of their maternity is not carried out in some visionary experience on a northern lake, or in the choice to write science fiction instead of costume romance, but in the daily interactions with other women and men.

In the same way, it is important that Elizabeth, the motherless child who must become a mother, be revealed to us in a sympathetic manner, so we can appreciate what she has triumphed over in her own past to become, if nothing else, a woman who manages for the sake of her children to prepare peanut butter sandwiches, hold down a job and build "a dwelling over the abyss" (p. 302). In a more stereotypical narrative stance, we would either be asked to take Elizabeth's part against the "other woman," Lesje, or asked to see Elizabeth as a castrating, unloving wife who Nate justifiably leaves. By giving each a narrating voice, Atwood asks us to examine the maternal possibilities of both of these women. As well, she refuses to succumb to blaming the man since she gives Nate equal time in the narrative structure.

Lesje often dreams about a world before humans. In their essay on *Life Before Man*, Arnold and Cathy Davidson point out that the title of the work is a play on words referring to Lesje's yearning for a "primordial existence, for a life before man" (p. 205). The title is wordplay in another sense, in that these women, Lesje and Elizabeth, must make maternal decisions about themselves, their psyches and their bodies, "before man," before they can consider men, *a priori* to the place of men in their lives. Elizabeth's decision to survive and grow as a mother is made knowing there is no man to help her in that task. Lesje's decision to become a mother is made without consultation with Nate.

Lesje's decision seems to confirm an alternating pattern in the Atwood novels: Marian in *The Edible Woman* flees maternity, *Surfacing's* heroine embraces it, Joan Foster opts for art, and Lesje concludes that, "if children were the key, if having them was the only way she could stop being invisible, then she would goddam well have some herself" (p. 293). The fact that motherhood is undertaken to avoid invisibility confirms Atwood's dark view of contemporary society: a culture impoverished in its constructions of femaleness.

Rennie, the heroine of *Bodily Harm*, has just had a mastectomy because of cancer. Pregnancy and motherhood are no longer an option for her and yet of all Atwood heroines up to this novel, it is she that manifests the most maternal behavior. Like the man who must become a fool to be wise, Rennie must lose a part of her physical womanhood to realize her maternal self. When loving would seem impossible, it is Rennie who manages to love. She ends up in prison, caught up in the senseless violence of a Caribbean coup d'état. Rennie and her casual acquaintance, Lora, are forced to share the closeness of their prison cell. "What do you dream about?" Rennie asks. Lora answers: "Being on a boat. My mother. Sometimes I dream about having a baby. Except I never know what to do with it" (p. 282). Lora only knows how to use her body to get things; in the prison she trades it for chewing gum, toilet paper. Rennie is disgusted, as disgusted as she was as a child with her grandmother's need to touch her. She has a deep fear, sometimes even a loathing, of other females. But it is the fear of men and their potential and actual violence against each other and against women that brings the two unlikely companions together. In the end, the act of love is a very small one, the holding of a hand in a moment of agony, but it exists:

She's holding Lora's left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, and yet she

knows 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, she's gritting her teeth with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning, it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done.

The images are suggestive of birthing, but in the next paragraph become more explicitly so:

She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born. (p. 299)

If the passage does not tell us that this is Lora's rebirth, it certainly indicates that this is Rennie's birth into maternity.

The form of the novel is in part an anti-travel book. In real travel books, the travel writer allows us to vicariously experience another culture, usually the most pleasant aspects of it. These books often have that "happy smiling natives" element and never deal with unpleasant things like politics and human rights. Atwood throws her travel writer into the middle of a fascist world. Her heroine learns to love another woman and, like *Lady Oracle's* Joan, fostering her contact with the maternal inside herself, allows her to change as a writer. At the end of *Bodily Harm*, Rennie tells us she is no longer a travel writer, but a reporter (p. 301). As well, we see Atwood using a form of narration that might be called, not stream of consciousness, but "consciousness assembling." The reader assembles the fragments of Rennie's identity as the narration moves backward and forward between Rennie's past, her present, and at the end of the book, her future. With the heroine we learn to reassemble our maternal heritage. One of Rennie's most vivid memories in prison is of her own mother helping her grandmother to find her hands:

Rennie's mother looks with patience and disgust at Rennie, at her grandmother.... Don't you know what to do by now? She says to Rennie. Here they are. Right where you put them. She takes hold of the grandmother's dangling hands clasping them in her own. (p. 298)

Prison teaches Rennie what her mother knew instinctively, that gestures of maternal love are ceremonies, rituals of healing and magic, that defy the rational. They are ordinary, simple gestures which are extraordinarily difficult to perform because they come from a lost tradition of love between women, a tradition in which women teach other women, mothers teach daughters, how to love one another.

Love between women, being able to think well enough of femaleness to care for another woman, is an important element of the maternal. The existence of this love in a prison house poses a question: Is Atwood's choice of setting proposing that such love is only possible in conditions where male oppression forces women to care for one another?

As usual, one Atwood book seems to speak to the problems posed by her previous work, for *The Handmaid's Tale* is concerned with just such a patriarchal fascist world, and Atwood makes use of the narrative strategies of science fiction, fantasy, utopian and fabular forms.

Amin Malak has said that *The Handmaid's Tale* is part of the "dystopian tradition" as opposed to the utopian, another of Atwood's anti-forms. The book may also be seen as a cautionary tale in the way that *1984* is, because throughout Atwood links Giliad's fascism to our society's failures. The constant lesson of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that, if we continue to behave as we do now, desperate men will arise with desperate solutions. Atwood invites us to see this as a moral fable, first by calling the book a tale and then by having the first person narrator, the handmaid, explore her own past, which is our present. This allows Atwood to warn contemporary women against specific behaviour.

For instance, the narrator's mother was a fighting feminist who took her daughter to a book-burning, to burn pornography. The caution here is that if feminists seek fascist solutions they are ultimately condoning fascism. Throughout the book, the narrator recalls her own and her friends' lack of a coherent morality as females, their inability to make up their minds whether men were the enemy or the beloved. The whole plot of the book is a constant reminder that women of today have not taken leadership in such issues as the morality of surrogate motherhood. Throughout the book, the narrator recalls her own and her friend's lack of a coherent morality as females, their tendency to mind their own business and feel no social responsibility. Quite clearly, in Atwood's tale it is this lack of a female/maternal ethic, this too personal a lifestyle on the part of women and their resulting powerlessness, that has led to the fascist takeover.

The "Historical Notes" at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* brings the realization that the tale, or dystopia, has taken the form of an autobiography, not written down originally, but recorded furtively on tape while the narrator is in hiding. Such a realization makes me take a second

look at the way in which the formal elements work in this book.

Women, in this century, are increasingly discovering (or considering our past, re-discovering), the usefulness of forms such as the memoir, the diary, the journal, the autobiography, as a means of expressing the female experience. The memoir allows a woman to write of the self, not as an isolated developmental entity, but as something joined in its very definition to its community. This is a useful form for those women who most often see identity in terms of their relationships — rather than in terms of an ego self — as mother, wife, daughter, etc. The journal form emphasizes the importance of the daily, the undramatic, the mundane, and the intimate, in shaping a life. It has the characteristic of extreme intimacy because it joins the trinity of writer, narrator and protagonist into one voice. The narrator of Atwood's tale is telling her story in retrospect, but she continually tells us she wants to restructure it, as best she can, as it was on each occasion. This present time narration emerges as a diary without dates.

Mary Mason, in her exploration of prototypical women's autobiographies, describes real women's autobiographies as characterized by the use of the "other" to define the self. Similarly, Atwood's narrator's story seems to be as much about a series of self-reflecting significant others as it is about herself. The nameless women, known only by the name of the man who currently owns her, has had her old identity destroyed with her old world, our world. She records the details of her life as in a journal. Considering the new popularity of the oral history as a method of recording female experience, it is suitable that Atwood proposes this as a tape-recorded story. An interesting irony arises when we realize that the "Historical Notes" show the *Tale* to be under investigation by anthropologists, not literary historians. Like her real-life counterparts, the handmaid's autobiographical achievement is not part of the accepted literary "canon."

The handmaid is the first Atwood heroine, except for Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, to have engaged actively in the work of mothering a child. She lives a good part of her time in a kind of fantasy/memory world, in which the most important element is her lost family, her mother, her husband, her friends, but most especially, her child. Before the takeover, the narrator had a five-year-old daughter, who has been taken from her and given to a deserving religious family. Her memory passages concerning this daughter are rendered in sensuous and loving detail, culminating in the moment when the narrator has been

allowed to see a picture of her daughter as she is now, years after the separation:

Is this her, is that what she's like? My treasure.

So tall and changed. Smiling a little now, so soon, and in her white dress as if for an olden-days First Communion.

Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand, left by a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph, a shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there.

But she exists, in her white dress. She grows and lives. Isn't that a good thing? A blessing?

Still, I can't bear it, to have been erased like that. (p. 240)

Once again, the duality of the nature of motherhood is always present in Atwood's work. Motherhood prevents a woman's invisibility, as Lesje tells us; motherhood erases a woman eventually, *The Handmaid's Tale* tells us. As Sherrill Grace has shown, Atwood is concerned with "violent dualities." Here, it would seem to be the violent dualities of the archetypal mother, as defined by our patriarchal culture. Yet there is a difference between the way in which maternity is seen in the earlier works and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Now we are experiencing maternity not as it is seen from the outside, as say a Jung or a Neumann or a Marian McAlpine would, but maternity as seen from the inside, from the point of view of a woman who has had the archetypal experience flow through her, make her and unmake her. In *Life Before Man* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood reminds us that motherhood creates and destroys. She tells us that becoming a mother is, for many women, an instinctively necessary act for full identity, yet it is also a rush towards invisibility, towards death. For many women, the womb is indeed the tomb.

Atwood's vision of maternity, although dark, is not necessarily pessimistic. For *The Handmaid's Tale* announces a theory of art that evokes the more positive side of the maternal in its implications. The telling of her story is the taking on of maternal power for the narrator. At the same time, she invites the reader/listener to form identity and thus take power by making story:

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 I can do to change it.

I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?

Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough; wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (p. 279)

The search for maternity in the work of Margaret Atwood achieves a joining of ethical and aesthetic concerns with this statement. Ethically, Atwood's narrator makes a statement about the need to tell the story, not only to unburden and recreate the teller, but also (and this is an important part of the maternal import of the text) to create the other. The narrator will give future women a ground of identity by making her story. Aesthetically, the female storyteller creates her reader/listener as well as creating a form in which her story can be told. This "created" reader is one who appreciates storytelling that is not seamless, or pure, not a symbolic structure that abstracts an essence of life. It is, rather, a telling that attempts to assemble "fragments" (and the struggle to assemble shows) a "sad and hungry and sordid," a "limping and mutilated story," as one might tell if one had been "pulled apart by force," or if one were waking from a long coma, and were just beginning to reassemble one's identity. It is the kind of story one would tell if she were "Putting the Great Mother together again."

If *The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's effort to heal contemporary views of the mother, what in her most recent novel, *Cat's Eye*, would indicate such a healing? I find it in her choice of the fictional memoir, one so intimately close to women's lives of Atwood's generation that the writer feels she must deny its autobiographical roots in the copyright page of the text. I have proposed, in my article "Early Canadian Women's Memoirs," that the memoir has been a fortunate choice for many Canadian women who wish to show their self-construction as intimately involved in the day-to-day lives of their families and communities. It is a return to the community of her childhood that triggers the memorialist instinct in Elaine Risley. I find it notable that the two figures with whom Elaine is most preoccupied are her mother and the "friend," a friend who was both the victimizing, powerful, maternal figure of her childhood and, in her adulthood, becomes the "madwoman" victim of the patriarchal system that denies women full personhood and then locks them up when hysteria results.

For Elaine, the good mother remains imprisoned in her memory, in a glowing childhood place of safety that ended before puberty, as the good mother is once again shown incapable of protecting the child against the outside world. The power of her order and her ethics is only domestic. As well, although the heroine recognizes that her "terrible" mother, her bullying childhood friend, is really an imprisoned female, she cannot rescue her.

Where is the optimism in this dark vision? I find it in the narrative choice of the memoir in which the artist-figure Elaine, remembering and reappraising the past, memorializes it and realizes her own lack of solidarity with women. This may not be a very optimistic or "bright" view of the condition of contemporary women, but as the narrator of *Cat's Eye* concludes: "It's an old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by" (p. 421).

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