

**SURVIVING THE PATRIARCHY (MOSTLY) INTACT: MOTHERS AND
DAUGHTERS IN SELECTED WORKS OF MARGARET ATWOOD**

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DEDICATION

To my family, for their support and encouragement throughout this process; and to my very patient friends, particularly Marie and ‘the Gals’ for putting up with my continual whining about having to do something I decided to do for myself. You’ve helped me through some of the darkest and brightest days of my life, and I wish you all love and luck with your rainbows – I couldn’t chase mine without you!

ABSTRACT

Probably Canada's best-known author, Margaret Atwood has defined Canadian literature not only through her successful 'doing' of it, but also through her critical work. This thesis explores her first three novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Lady Oracle* (1976), as well as *Cat's Eye* (1988), through the lens of contemporaneous works by Luce Irigaray. Atwood's representations of women have one important consistency: the troubling, or outright subversion, of idealized concepts of women, particularly in the relationships between mothers and daughters. Women struggle both with and against each other in order to find, or keep, a sense of self-identity and path within the patriarchal, and often explicitly misogynistic, culture which permeates their lives. This focus exposes the often-contradictory social pressures and expectations held for women by the heteronormative and patriarchal culture which refuses to recognize women's legitimacy outside of their relationship to men.

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ABBREVIATIONS

I use abbreviations to indicate works by Luce Irigaray as follows:

WOTM – “Women on the Market”

S&G – *Sexes and Genealogies*

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Probably Canada's best-known author, Margaret Atwood has defined Canadian literature not only through her successful 'doing' of it, but also through her critical work. Atwood's first major critical contribution, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) is described by Frank Davey as Atwood's "most influential and controversial book" (153). Granted, Davey wrote his assessment the year before the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* and it is doubtful that anyone could have foreseen the impact of that work, or others of Atwood's considerable oeuvre in recent years. According to Frank Davey in *Margaret Atwood: Feminist Poetics*, at the time of *Survival's* publication there was intense academic debate¹ over whether such a thing as Canadian literature even existed (153). Atwood's critical work demarcated the characteristics of a definitive body of literature by identifying its distinctive patterns and common themes which helped to legitimize Canadian literature as a cohesive area of study.

¹ There is a comprehensive list of critical reviews in Frank Davey's *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*: "Margaret Atwood's most influential and controversial book is *Survival: 'A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,'* published in 1972. Even before the book was released, *The Toronto Star* reported its 'staggering first printing of 20,000, with college-course outlines snapping it up sight unseen.' On publication, critical opinion was – with only a few reservations – overwhelmingly positive. The *Star* headlined its review by Robert Fulford 'A Clever and Effective Analysis of the Literature of Canada,' the *Globe and Mail* review by Phyllis Grosskurth pronounced *Survival* 'the most important book that has come out of this country,' *The Listener* declared it a 'brilliant exploration of Canadian literature.' The reviewers' reservations were directed toward its style – 'slightly better than slipshod' (Fraser Sutherland, *Books in Canada*), its 'wrong-headed' ignoring of both achievements in literary form and writing which contradicted its thesis (Gary Geddes, *The Malahat Review*), its claiming for Canada of a 'dominant theme in the literature of our time' (Morris Wolfe, *Saturday Night*)" (153). Additionally, Atwood's introduction to the 2004 reprinted version of *Survival* includes her own characterization of the debate: "The few dedicated academic souls who had cultivated this neglected pumpkin patch over the meagre years were affronted because a mere chit of a girl had appropriated a pumpkin they regarded as theirs, and those who had taken a firm stand on the non-existence of Canadian literature were affronted because I had pointed out that there was in fact a pumpkin to appropriate. After the first decade of this, I began to feel like the mechanical duck at the fun-fair shooting gallery, though nobody has won the oversized panda yet because I still seem to be quacking" (4).

According to Atwood in the introduction to the 2004 edition of *Survival*, the controversy made her into “an instant sacred monster” and Farley Mowat told her “now you’re a target... and they will shoot at you” (3). Atwood, however, does not take the criticism or controversy personally. In a 1977 interview with J. R. (Tim) Struthers, she says:

I think a lot of the furor is extra-literary, that is it doesn’t have that much to do with my actual work. It has to do with the phenomenon of somebody of my age and sex and, as Marian Engel said, who looks like me, doing all these different kinds of books, and also making fairly strong statements, and what you have is a conflict of roles. If I were male and sixty-two, nobody would bat an eyelash about a lot of this, I’m sure. (27)

What Atwood is pointing out here is that what she has done, writing a thematically organized overview of Canadian literature, is not in and of itself so extraordinary a feat, until you recognize who she was at the time of its publication. Indeed, her response in the interview with Struthers is indicative of many of the concerns Atwood addresses in her novels and makes explicit the socially constructed nature of gender and the extent of its influence on things to which it really is irrelevant, such as the ability to engage in critical thought and to share it with a public audience.

Atwood is extremely aware of her own subject positioning and uses that awareness, as well as that positioning, in her fiction as well. As Coral Ann Howells puts it:

[Atwood’s] writing is grounded in a strong sense of her own cultural identity as white, English-speaking, Canadian and female; but she also challenges the limits of such categories, questioning stereotypes of nationality and gender, exposing cultural fictions and the artificial limits they impose on our understanding of ourselves and other human beings. (2)

Indeed, the female narrators in Atwood’s novels selected for this thesis also follow that pattern of subject-formation: they are white, English-speaking, Canadian, and female.

Atwood presents notable consistencies in the basic assumptions from which she works, particularly insofar as her female protagonists are concerned; it would be erroneous, however, to equate one protagonist with another, or for the author herself, although they often have some experiences in common.

This thesis explores the mothers and daughters in Atwood's first three published novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Lady Oracle* (1976), as well as *Cat's Eye* (1988) and devotes a chapter to each work. The focus is on the central characters' relationships as both mothers and daughters, and their struggles to express and explore their own identity and sense of self, a process which exposes the often-contradictory social pressure and expectations of women by the heteronormative and patriarchal culture in which they exist.

It is important to indicate here that the consideration of mothers and daughters is not proposed as a binary opposition such as male/female often is in literary analysis, and to view it as such is problematic. Such an opposition would indicate that one subject position is hierarchically and inherently preferable to the other. Instead, my concern is how women relate to and through each other, rather than essentializing or idealizing their experiences or identities. These are relationships which Atwood openly exposes throughout her fiction; as Coral Ann Howells points out:

The social dimensions of Atwood's fiction are always underpinned and sometimes undermined by representations of individual behaviour, for if there is a single distinguishing Atwoodian marker, it is her insistently ironic vision, which challenges her readers' complacent acceptance of easy definitions about anything.... With their combination of empirical and speculative intelligence, her novels challenge her readers to see more by seeing differently. (2)

Atwood draws her readers' attention and analysis to how women relate to each other, and to the world around them which insistently views them in their relation to each other, and

to men. Patriarchal cultures idealize Motherhood as the quintessential epitome of women's identity formation, a position illustrated through the character of Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* who is "convinced that no woman has fulfilled her femininity unless she's had a baby" (183). By presenting two very different versions of motherhood through the characters of Ainsley and Clara, Atwood reveals that the valorization of Motherhood, and the simultaneous vilification of mothers, are rooted in the same patriarchal values which render women powerless and passive while also relying upon them to perpetuate the systems which oppress them.

Representations of women in the works of Margaret Atwood are quite widely varied in terms of personality and voice, but they have one strong consistency: the troubling, or outright subversion of idealized concepts of women, particularly in the relationships between mothers and daughters. Women struggle both with and against each other in order to find, or keep, a unified sense of self within the patriarchal, and often explicitly misogynistic, cultures in which they live. Their intergenerational conflict in particular is one of give and take as characters negotiate their way through a process of integration and rejection, even as they feel their way through the realities of existing within a culture which can only view them through their relationships to men. In other words, by only allowing women access to legitimacy via the men to whom they are formally attached, whether as wives, daughters, or sisters, for example, these women strive for spaces within their culture to exist as themselves. Rather than allowing others to unproblematically define them by the relative roles they are allowed in their social and public lives, they contend not only for self definition, but to identify themselves as distinct and separate individuals on their own terms.

Mothers in Atwood's work are challenging in their individual instances, for readers and for the status quo, because they are not always in the expected places; some are physically absent, only remembered after their deaths, or seen through a child's eyes as in *Surfacing*. Others, such as in *The Edible Woman*, are either alive but physically absent and unvoiced as Marian's mother is or, as Clara and Ainsley each do, albeit in ostensibly different ways, they represent a form of womanhood and motherhood as a literal and painful extension of the purported values of the heteronormative, patriarchal system which produces them. In *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* there are many mothers; some are important substitutes and emotional support systems, as Aunt Lou is for Joan, while others, such as Mrs. Smeath, become focal points for Elaine's unflattering artistic eye. There are also examples of mothers who are by turns remote and hostile towards their children, such as Joan's mother in *Lady Oracle*, or well-intentioned but clueless and powerless to help their daughters evade the oppression which holds the mothers in check, as Elaine and her friends find in *Cat's Eye*. These women, whether represented in these texts as a mother or a daughter, or both as in Elaine's case, all struggle to differentiate their identities from each other and to find a way through a world which constrains them due to their physiology, and which ultimately compels them to reproduce the norms that hold them captive to its demands, regardless of what they want or need. Whether 'forced' to marry due to an unplanned pregnancy, as Joan believes her mother was, or whether the family life is what they planned for themselves, Atwood reveals the struggle women have in order to create an identity for themselves wherein they are not considered in relation to someone else – such as their mother or their daughter, or both. In other words, women struggle against the women closest to them and, through that struggle, with the patriarchy which permeates their lives and grants them legitimacy only through men. One way to

make some analytical and comprehensive sense of the forces these women face is to employ the theoretical frameworks of Luce Irigaray to a close reading of Atwood's novels.

My analysis of Atwood's works draws on scholarship discussing each individual work, but also relies heavily on the work of Luce Irigaray, and selected portions from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) and *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993) provide overarching concepts to tie the chapters together. In particular, Irigaray's essay "Women on the Market" will be vital to my analysis of Atwood's work for its discussion of women's position within a patriarchal social order where they exist as commodities and mirrors for the men who exchange them. Also helpful from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) is the discussion of women's restrictions to the positions and roles allocated them within a social order which erases their genealogy, and thus their matriarchal and natal identity. *This Sex Which Is Not One* is a text which will be particularly useful in addressing absence and broader implications of the erasure of half a person's family history. Equally harmful to a woman's sense of identity and self is the erasure of a woman's existence as co-creator of her children, as evidenced by that same simultaneous valorization of Motherhood and vilification of mothers that Atwood explores in her novels.

The relevant works by Irigaray are relatively contemporaneous with the publication of the selected novels, with *This Sex is Not One* originally published in French in 1977, a year after Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, while Irigaray's *Sexes and Genealogies* was published in French in 1987, a year before Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. Irigaray's works approach women's identity and experiences from a standpoint not dissimilar from Atwood's, though certainly from a more theoretical and philosophical orientation. The key to the consideration of how Atwood and Irigaray coincide lies in

their contemporaneous conceptualization of the development of women in cultures built around the heteronormative nuclear family, and the gendered division of labour which largely excludes women from a public workplace. There are deeper implications, however, both in Atwood's and in Irigaray's work which reveal the depths to which women are affected by the patriarchal system which surrounds them, a social environment which simultaneously urges them to become mothers, but denies that their sexuality exists outside of procreative sex. As Irigaray puts it in *This Sex Which is Not One*:

In the process of elaborating a theory of sexuality, Freud brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicitly, hidden, unknown: *the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse...* All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own 'specificity'. (69)

Thus, it is Irigaray's view that female sexuality, and other aspects of female identity, suffer from a lack of investigation, unlike the male side of the human experience, which has long been synonymous with the human species at large because, in Irigaray's view, "Man takes his orientation from his relation to his father insofar as his name and property are concerned and from his mother in relation to unmediated nature.... Gender becomes the human race" (S&G 3). The refusal to admit that men are connected by blood to women – and thereby to nature – results in a double standard surrounding women and reproduction. While valued for their ability to continue the species, women are simultaneously viewed askance because of their supposed inability to control their sexuality and, therefore, their reproduction. In Atwood's view, women are not only oppressed because of their reproductive capabilities, women also perpetuate the oppression of other women. For example, Marian in *The Edible Woman* knows that once

she marries, Mrs. Bogue, Marian's boss, "would be expecting her to leave her job whether she wanted to or not.... Mrs. Bogue preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past" (196). More critically, by locating social and legal legitimacy in the man whose name is passed on, the women – mothers and daughters both – are denied agency, identity, and the fact of their participation in the production of children.

In the works selected for this thesis, Atwood takes on the issue of women existing in a world dominated by men directly through her female protagonists, all of whom come of age in the 1960s as Atwood did, which points us back to Coral Ann Howells' assertion that Atwood's "writing is grounded in a strong sense of her own cultural identity" (2). That specific time frame encompasses life before, during, and after Second Wave feminism and its attendant cultural shifts which brought more women into the work force and other areas previously dominated by men. For Marian of *The Edible Woman* it means that she does not really have to hurry to get married and have children in order to have an identity, she can create that on her own while supporting herself. In *Surfacing* the changing social milieu is evident in the backlash of misogyny displayed by the character of David, whose anger is evident when he warns his wife Anna that he will tolerate "none of that Women's Lib... I won't have one in the house, they're preaching random castration, they get off on that, they're roving the streets in savage bands armed with garden shears" (115). Similarly, in *Lady Oracle* Arthur has issues when Joan's poetry sells well and garners her recognition on a level that his ego cannot compete with. It is initially out of concern for his ego, after all, that Joan hides the extent to which her success as a writer of gothic romances has supported them through the years, or so she says. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine struggles with whether she fits into the consciousness-raising

group which holds her complicit with the patriarchy and labels her a “nuke” (387) for her participation in a nuclear family. There are a few points of similarity not only between Atwood and the female protagonists she writes, but among the protagonists and their backgrounds, which leads us to consider the novels, in brief, before going into the individual chapters I have devoted to each novel.

In *The Edible Woman* (1969) Marian McAlpin is a young and independent woman who supports herself by working for a marketing survey company, and is in a relationship with Peter, a young lawyer who she thinks may soon propose. While her job is not exciting, it is only temporary as Marian’s path is laid out before her in much the same way that her mother, and presumably all her female forbearers, found before them: grow up, get married, have children. Far from being wildly in love with Peter, Marian is much more pragmatic about their relationship:

Peter and I should be able to set up a very reasonable arrangement. Though of course we still have a lot of the details to work out. Peter is an ideal choice when you come to think of it. He’s attractive and he’s bound to be successful, and also he’s neat, which is a major point when you’re going to be living with someone. (102)

Gina Wisker points out that “Atwood contradicts the traditional trajectory of stories in which the growth of the heroine parallels courtship so that the denouement and the achievement of identity both rest upon getting married” (37). Peter is essentially the embodiment of the heteronormative patriarchal system and has all the hobbies that he thinks all ‘real’ men pursue, like hunting and photography.

After Marian and Peter get engaged, however, her satisfaction turns to dismay, and at times terror, as she loses control over the narrative, shifting from the first-person “I” of a subject to the third person “she/her” of an object. Meanwhile, her body suddenly decides that it will tolerate only an ever-shrinking list of vegetables, and vitamin pills, an

unusual affliction which she hides from Peter lest he think she is strange. In the second part of the novel, Marian observes the women around her whose lives and jobs are dictated by husbands, marriage, and children – either the having of them or the desperate search for them – and finds herself increasingly extraneous to her own life. Marian, however, engages in an increasingly bizarre affair with Duncan and eventually gives Peter the opportunity to call it all off through a symbolic offering: a cake fashioned in her image. Marian presents it as something for Peter to devour in place of Marian; as Nora Foster Stovel puts it:

It is significant that the narrative returns to the first person for the ‘triumphant ending’ of the novel, for, by demolishing society’s synthetic stereotype of femininity through the ingenious mirroring-device of the cake, Marian frees herself to realize her own true identity. (53)

Alternatively, Jennifer Hobgood posits that: “Marian critiques her own ‘edible’ nature as a woman under capitalism... [she] witnesses the ways in which female energy and labour, [productive and reproductive] are consumed and appropriated by capitalism” (148). In Irigaray’s terms, “women are the symptom of the exploitation of individuals by a society that remunerates them only partially, or even not at all, for their ‘work’” (WOTM 188), work which is unpaid domestic labour and the work of reproduction. Despite Marian’s assessment that “as a symbol it had definitely failed” (271) the cake and the process of creating it prompt Peter to flee, essentially breaking the relationship off and, almost as a reward for finally seeing sense, her body removes the psycho-somatic restrictions on food and allows Marian to eat the cake herself in an act of reclamation and reconnection with herself.

Similarly, *Surfacing* (1972) takes on the loss of identity that marriage creates not only for mothers, but also for their daughters who view them with suspicion. Returning home after almost a decade away, she looks through her mother's photo album and finds:

glossy colour prints, forgotten boys with pimples and carnations, myself in the stiff dresses, crinolines and tulle, layered like store birthday cakes; I was civilized at last, the finished product. She would say, "You look very nice, dear," as though she believed it; but I wasn't convinced, I knew by then she was no judge of the normal. (111)

The narrator's judgement that her mother is not a capable "judge of the normal" indicates that she has discovered the limitations of her belief in the secret knowledge she is certain her mother has. As a child, she believed that her mother's knowledge came with the power to protect her from harm in the world, so that she may remain unchanged. What she discovers, however, is that there is no secret knowledge, and that her mother is as helpless as she is in a world she views without nuance, one she believes is made up of people who are either victims or killers.

In *Survival* Atwood explains that, "if you define yourself always as a harmless victim, there's nothing you can ever do about it. You can simply suffer" (14). In order for the suffering to have an end, the narrator of *Surfacing* has to move on, to process what happened to her – what she involved herself in – and to somehow figure out a way back to herself. In order to accomplish rediscovery and move on, she ultimately has to reject herself as a victim, which is a process she cannot undergo in the city. As Sherrill Grace notes, in Atwood's writing, "the struggle not to be victimized becomes a moral imperative; passive acquiescence does not absolve guilt or remove responsibility" (3). In *Margaret Atwood*, Barbara Hill Rigney writes:

The heroine of *Surfacing* is one of the few who rediscovers her mother, and thus rediscovers herself. Atwood's sister and mother figures, however, are human women rather than witches, goddesses or Demeter figures, and it is the

protagonists' recognition of this human status which is a key to the discovery of their own identities.” (11)

For the narrator, her return to the lakeside cabin not only brings her into a deeper connection with her mother, the natural landscape around her, and to her father, but the re-connections are accomplished by means of madness.

Atwood's nameless narrator – whom Atwood characterizes as “nuts” (219) in an interview with Jan Garden Castro – enacts a re-birth through madness. This is a madness which is a spiritual re-connection and re-cognition of the links between humans, animals, and thus to Nature which both gives life and allows it to be extinguished with equal disregard. According to Annis Pratt: “In affirming the power of birth as one among other attributes of a self reborn through the assimilation of green-world potency, Atwood creates a hero in a tradition shockingly new precisely because it is radically old” (160). Whether she is carrying a child or if the spark of new life she feels inside her is her new budding sense of self, the protagonist bears that spark with her, intending to shelter it and keep it safe. By selectively determining what knowledge she will use and what pieces of her old self she will leave behind, she takes the first steps into life not as a victim or a killer, but as a nuanced human being capable of both, simultaneously. Reconfiguring women's madness as knowledge is also how Irigaray reconciles the Oedipus complex and child sexual development theorized by Freud.

Irigaray writes about the original murder of the mother in order to balance Freud's Oedipus complex; she finds empowerment for women in exploring the power of the patriarchal culture to determine who is legitimate or not, mad or sane through constructs such as Freud's theory of childhood sexual development. Irigaray points out that madness – the definition of it, the treatments for it, the theories around how and why it develops –

are all constructed by men and so of course women look mad to men: women are not men. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray points out that “all Freud’s statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own ‘specificity’” (69). Further, female “sexuality is never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine” (69). Irigaray maintains that if women are viewed as having their own specificity in terms of their sexuality or sexual development, then women are not necessarily and automatically mad if their behaviour deviates from Freud’s model. Instead, women have their own way of being in the world – something which has been characterized as a negative by the same impulses that deny female sexuality its own specificity. Irigaray, in *Sexes and Genealogies* writes: “when we are able to understand and interpret all of this we are empowered to leave a world of madness that is not our own.... Let us rather take new hold of our own madness and leave men theirs!” (18). I also entertain the notion that the protagonist of *Surfacing*, as a result of her alienation and erasure from cultural participation, and thereby her existence in the world, except in the roles and spaces which facilitates her use by men, quite naturally and inevitably does go mad for a lack of any other option. Regardless, at the end of what Atwood, in an interview with Linda Sandler, calls a “ghost story” (11), the protagonist intends to take with her the certainty that she need not lose those precious connections again, and the novel ends on a hopeful, if indeterminate, note.

Any analysis of mother-daughter relationships in Atwood’s first two novels is shaped by the narratives into what Podnieks and O’Reilly call a daughter-centric perspective, which is a female-voiced narrative wherein the mother does not speak. In *The Edible Woman*, for example, Marian’s mother is not named, nor does she speak; in *Surfacing*, the first-person narrator is a woman whose mother passed away prior to the

events of the novel, so we are given access to her only through the narrator's memories and a ghost-sighting which can be read as an episode of insanity by those who do not cultivate a fascination with the supernatural even in literature. The protagonist and her mother also remain unnamed, and her mother exists within the text only as the relatively obscure, if magical, figure remembered by her daughter. Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle* has at its core a mother-daughter relationship which is complex and antagonistic, often to the point of verbal and emotional abuse, and one unexpected and extreme incident of physical assault.

Lady Oracle (1976) more explicitly expresses a post-modern concept of identity as multiplicity; rather than having one firm, stable identity over time, Atwood shows that women in particular, but everyone really, has multiple selves which come to the fore as needed. Joan, the talented poetess and successful writer of gothic romances, is the main character who is burdened by what Atwood terms a "monstrous mother" (47). In an interview with Cathrine Martens, Atwood says she drew upon a friend's experience to write Joan's mother, Fran:

I thought of this a lot because this woman could not seem to shake her [mother-monster]. She knew that she was awful and destructive and bad for her and wished her ill and all the rest of it. But she couldn't get rid of her. She couldn't just leave or tell her not to phone. And I thought, well, if a man has a bad mother it is not so destructive, because the mother is not the version of what he himself could become. But it isn't just men who have their first relationship with a woman, it is also women. And the mother is also the model on which they are supposed to form themselves. What can the daughter do? She somehow ceases to exist. The girl-child somehow has to cease to exist in some rather important way, unless she can find a good mother substitute. (47)

The factor that is interesting in readings of the monstrous mother in *Lady Oracle* is the expectation that mothers are all capable of unconditional love and support of their children. No one seems to question whether there was something in Fran's background

which would possibly render her incapable of loving her child, a child which she obviously did not want and, by her own words, would have preferred not to have. My main argument here is that Fran, Joan's mother, is not actually herself monstrous, or certainly no more so than other women; Fran is a product of her own mother and the patriarchal culture which shapes her and pulls her in ways she does not fit, and which she comes to resent. Fran's life, like Joan's, is a series of discarded identities which culminate in the final confrontation between Fran and Joan, and which marks Fran's final loss.

Without her daughter, Fran's identity frays into a form she does not want because she cannot answer the question of what or who to be without her overweight daughter there to push against and fight with. Fran's internalization of the heteropatriarchal norms regarding what constitutes a sexually attractive body is her primary objection to Joan's overweight body, but she comes to rely upon Joan's refusal to change as an anchor for her own identity. Fran's identity is contingent upon being a mother, a wife, a daughter; she wanted to be free of her daughter for years, but once Joan is ready to leave, Fran cannot go back to the young, attractive woman with an active social life and many male admirers she was before Joan's arrival. Finally having lost the tug-of-war with Joan, Fran descends into alcoholism and dies after a fall down her basement stairs, alone. Fran's end is presented as a fitting end for the monstrous mother, and yet she haunts Joan throughout her the narrative, until Joan finally manages to reconcile herself with her multiple – rather than monstrous – mother. That reconciliation is key to Joan's acceptance of all her own multiple parts rather than dividing them into archetypes to be rejected for their imperfections.

Early themes established within academic explorations of *Lady Oracle* include Sue Ann Johnston's engagement with "The Daughter as Escape Artist". Johnston posits

that daughters want to differentiate themselves from home and their mothers by leaving, often by means of marriage, while also simultaneously and desperately wanting to remain at home. Tracing the theme of women who are trying to – literally and figuratively – distance themselves from their mothers, while simultaneously craving a loving and emotionally intimate relationship with them, Johnston shows how characters such as Joan from *Lady Oracle* work through their identity issues and learn to accept their mothers as people, rather than viewing them as monstrous. Once that identification or connection is made, the daughters can then begin to accept themselves, as well; Johnston posits that the tension between these conflicting urges is internal within the daughter, but it is apparent that Joan’s conflict is also externalized in her often antagonistic relationship with her mother, a relationship which plays a key role not only in her own subject-formation, but also that of Fran, her mother. As illustrated in *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman* as well, the process does not end when the mother is not present for whatever reason; rather, the daughter begins to react to the static memory of her mother, as well as the internalization of her mother’s voice which echoes in her internal landscape, and is at times seamlessly enmeshed with her inner experience of self. Essentially, Joan finds it impossible to determine where she ends and her mother’s influence begins, or even if it does.

For Barbara Godard, however, “the monstrous mother is a projection of the daughter” (20) and thus figures Joan’s acceptance of Fran as a key aspect of Joan’s process of self-acceptance which necessitates her recognition of the multiplicity of her Self. Atwood’s use of the image of the triple-mirror of Fran’s vanity table shows how Joan “fragments her personality through multiplication, rather than division” (19) and how “mirrors become symbols of the fragmented self, providing a distorted image of the self, stealing one’s sense of real or complete self, robbing one of an identity” (20). The

mirroring or projection which occurs between mother and daughter, however, is problematic for both; as Sofia Sanchez-Grant writes: “[Fran’s] socially acceptable life is disrupted by her fat daughter... what ensues is a battle of wills centred on food... [and] for Joan, over-eating is a means by which she can reject her mother’s role; but for Joan’s mother, her proprietary interest in her daughter’s body is an attempt to justify that role” (88). The narrative is itself problematic due to Joan’s unreliability as a narrator, but also because she intends this retelling to be a reframing of her past through which she can alter her present. Additionally, she is telling her story to a journalist, a man who could expose her faked death to the rest of the world and who therefore has some power over her. While the narrative is designed to elicit his assistance in keeping her secret, it is also a re-invention of herself, making it an act of creation of, or co-creation with, her own creator: Fran. Thus, Fran is shaped by her creation – Joan – just as Joan is shaped by Fran’s influence and the stories Joan tells both through her writing and her act of reframing her personal narrative.

The reactivity between mothers and daughters is most explicitly addressed in *Lady Oracle*, but is also in evidence in *Surfacing* and *Cat’s Eye* as well, while Marian of *The Edible Woman* “seems to have little contact with her past and her family exists only as a shadowy projection of her own mind and attitudes” (McLay 123). Ainsley of *The Edible Woman* views motherhood as a social role which confers a concrete and stable wholeness of self on the mother, thereby precluding any need for personal growth or change on the part of the mother. Instead, the interactions between Fran and Joan are a simultaneous push and pull kind of dynamic which affects both of them. This dynamic informs Fran’s further interactions with the world at large, and particularly with the daughter who comes to replace her in the world, while also causing Joan to reject her mother and to find

substitutes to fill her emotional needs, such as Aunt Lou. Joan recognizes, finally, her own multiple identity and realizes that she is able to let her mother go, and that she does not have to give into the roles and tropes that she has thus far cast herself in as though she exists in one of her gothic romances. She also recognizes, or seems to, that she can control the narrative of her life through her choices, though the end of the novel is ambiguous in that her future actions are unclear. Elaine of *Cat's Eye* also participates in an act of self- and co-creation through a narrative of her past which is less about reframing than it is about remembering formative events previously unrecognized.

Cat's Eye is a story about a woman who becomes a successful painter with a healthy dose of imposter syndrome. Elaine Risley returns to Toronto after an absence of many years for a retrospective show of her paintings that brings her full circle in her life while also recognizing how far she has come as an artist. She finds that she remembers things she had forgotten or repressed in a bid for self-preservation and contends with the ghosts of the many women and girls who bullied her as a child. Looking at her paintings makes Elaine realize how far she has come from the girl she was, and she realizes that she no longer needs to carry the emotional moments which prompted their creation with her as a burden.

Elaine's father is an entomologist around whom the family is organized, and the early years of Elaine's life are nomadic and presented as an Eden-like origin in which she learned about the world without the issues of gender dominating her experience. The egalitarian beginnings lead to Elaine's self-consciousness as a young girl trying to fit in with her friends in Toronto, an environment with which she is unfamiliar because everything is organized by gender. School, clothing, games, toys; everything outside of her home is experienced through the lens of gender. For Elaine, gender is an artificial

imposition rather than a naturalized division, but she comes to believe that she desperately needs to learn how to conform to social expectations. The aspect of *Cat's Eye* which I will examine is Elaine's relationships with other women and her mother; while Mrs. Risley's attitude is to do as she pleases rather than worry about what other women think of her, Elaine rejects that attitude. Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Elaine believes that her mother lacks the essential knowledge needed to help her be more like the other girls, and in the process of rejecting her mother as a source of knowledge, Elaine makes herself vulnerable to the bullying by her peers through her eagerness to please others.

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood makes a strong statement about the patriarchal culture in which Elaine and the other girls are raised: blame and shame always land on the women, rather than the structures of the patriarchal culture which oppress them. Women respond by policing one another and promulgating the patriarchal norms which keep them isolated. They are the producers of the next generation of commodities and exchangers, continuing the cycle of oppression which blames women for that continuation and simultaneously denies them the agency required to alter it. In other words, women police each other as well as the female children, and the female children – supposed 'friends' of Elaine, for example – police each other in mimicry of the parents who by turns belittle and abuse them in order to ensure that they comply with the social norms of their class and gender.

Two examples of people who bully Elaine are Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath, who are similar in one important aspect: they both promise, in various ways, that Elaine is capable of 'improvement' and the acceptance that is implied as a consequence should she succeed. Ellen McWilliams posits that Cordelia's "power lies in a... promise of inclusion and affirmation.... Cordelia promises access to a secret sorority... one based on a cult of

femininity complete with exacting rules and expectations” (114). As Cordelia is the primary gatekeeper to the knowledge of how to be a girl, so Mrs. Smeath is a gatekeeper to a spiritual knowledge and community, inviting Elaine to church with the Smeath family on Sundays, and to dinner afterwards. As the mother of a brood of girls, Mrs. Smeath is a strict and utilitarian woman, one who takes Elaine in as Christian duty, but reserves the right to criticize her behind her back. Although engaged in gossiping, which is generally frowned upon, Mrs. Smeath turns the blame on Elaine for eavesdropping: “she gives me that smug smile, with the lips closed over the teeth. What she says is not to me but to Aunt Mildred. ‘Little pitchers have big ears’” (204). Mrs. Smeath’s attitude is that Elaine deserves to be bullied, and the hatred this revelation rouses in Elaine precipitates her break from Cordelia.

Radha Chakravarty discusses the many images of “mothers in flight – mothers who fly or, sometimes, flee from their maternal role [who]... represent an often overlooked dimension of Atwood’s novel: the attempt to deconstruct the idealized myth of motherhood, which masks the actual needs and desires of women” (104). One effect of the myth of motherhood in *Cat’s Eye*, writes Chakravarty, is that: “the mothers in this novel are presented only from the outside. They loom over the narrative, larger than life, but the narrative grants them no identity beyond their influence on Elaine’s psychology” (117). While part of this limitation is certainly due to the nature of first-person narration, Chakravarty is tapping into a concept which Irigaray further explores in *Sexes and Genealogies* when she discusses how a woman “is constituted from outside in relation to a social *function* instead of to a female identity and autonomy” (72). Irigaray points out that women are located in terms of their social function by being asked questions about their marital status, for example, or whether they have children, so that the

virgin/mother/prostitute roles can be identified and associated with each woman based on her responses. As will be discussed in various chapters, each social role or function women are permitted has a certain set of expectations, and the implications for the women depend upon which role she fits within, regardless of her personal characteristics or desires. Thus, women and their identities are determined not by themselves or their own personality, actions, or desires, but by the needs, wants, actions, and status of their husbands and, by extension, *his* children.

Unlike many of Atwood's protagonists, Elaine of *Cat's Eye* can identify exactly when she "lost power" (121): she is "Mary Queen of Scots, headless already" (120) and her friends bury her in a hole that Cordelia digs in the back yard to hide from her father. Of the back-yard burial incident, Perrakis writes: "while she escapes the burial physically unscathed, Elaine's sense of subjective self has been damaged, and she finds herself beginning to play the infant to Cordelia's sadistic mothering" (11). Molly Hite's interpretation, however, is that, for Elaine and Cordelia:

The relationship is not a restitution of the maternal bond, but it draws on some of the same conditions as this pre-oedipal dyad and evokes some of the same inchoate yearning.... Elaine's retrospective gaze reinterprets only her own relation to the past and to Cordelia. Like the stay-at-home space twin of Stephen's (and Einstein's) thought experiment, she has moved forward while the other has not, and now she is wholly and irrevocably separated in time. (150)

Like many other motifs and tropes in *Cat's Eye*, however, the positioning of Elaine and Cordelia as the twins in the Einstein twin theory is mirrored by Atwood. In Einstein's thought experiment, twins are separated, and one leaves Earth in a spaceship which can travel at the speed of light, while the other remains on earth. The twin who leaves travels, for example, 30 light years in a round trip, and does not age, while the twin who remains ages 30 years. Thus, in Atwood's mirror image of the original thought experiment, Elaine

is the twin who travels and returns to Toronto in middle-age while, for her at least, Cordelia remains in Toronto and a teenager, someone Elaine expects to glimpse just around every corner, or on the other side of the changing-room partition, a disembodied hand reaching for Elaine's wallet. Thus, Elaine moves from the child in need of mentorship, to the mother figure, effectively swapping places with Cordelia and taking on Cordelia's earlier power for herself and using it to create.

Radha Chakravarty writes: "as a female artist, Elaine herself represents an extension of the maternal metaphor, a contemporary version of the familiar connection between fertility and creativity" (112). Further, Chakravarty notes that, "as a mother and artist, Elaine contradicts the traditional idea that a woman can be either a creative artist or a mother" (117). Elaine is a mother of two adult daughters as well as a successful painter, yet her daughters do not attend the show and are almost absent from the narrative, giving Elaine the space to work through her narrative and identity without distraction from the task at hand. Elaine can, in their absence, evaluate her life and her sense of self without having to address her sense of identity in relation to her daughters and can focus on her paintings and the moments in her life which they signify for her.

None of the protagonists in these novels have a mother who is immediately present within their respective narratives. Often separated from the narrative 'now' by death, distance, or estrangement, the mother's absence does not preclude the ability to affect their daughter's life experiences in the present. Instead, there are times for each protagonist when that distance amplifies the voices they have internalized and the thoughts which they sometimes give voice to without seeming to realize that voice is not – or perhaps not *only* – theirs. In other words, each woman is haunted to different degrees by the memories of her mother, and each has deeply internalized her mother's voice so

that there are occasions of confusion as to the origin of certain thoughts or concerns. Part of their struggle for self-determination is attempting to figure out where the line is between their mother and themselves in their own internal landscape. Atwood leaves room to doubt whether that boundary exists at all, a concept which ties into not only the multiplicity of her protagonists' identity and sense of self, but to Irigaray's concepts around genealogy, naming conventions, and the extent to which female agency is possible in patriarchal cultures which are predicated on women's lack thereof. Beginning with *The Edible Woman*, it becomes clear that while women are limited in their agency in terms of how their reproductive bodies affect their participation in the world, women do have choices available that enable them to control their lives, and one such choice is who they decide to allow in. The first of Atwood's female protagonists to make such a choice, Marian's journey towards matrimony can be understood in terms of Irigaray's discussion of the patriarchal norms of exchange of women as commodities by men, a set of circumstances which affect women personally, socially, and professionally.

CHAPTER TWO: Being Her Cake and Eating it Too: Valorizing Motherhood and Vilifying Mothers in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

Margaret Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), follows Marian McAlpin's experience of dating and engagement as an independent young woman in Toronto during the 1960s. Part of the critique enacted by Atwood in *The Edible Woman* is an exploration of the socially acceptable roles for women, both in romantic relationships and in the world at large. These roles are found lacking by the women expected to fill them because they often compel women into helplessness or victim-positions demanded by a heteropatriarchal culture. Similarly, in her essay "Women on the Market" Irigaray discusses the expectations which stem from women's position as commodities within a patriarchal culture: "mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed upon women" (185). Irigaray's essay posits that women have little control over which role they inhabit, and that their relationship with men and the judgement of others determine their social standing within the patriarchal structure which saturates their lives. Atwood's portrayal of women generally, and certainly in *The Edible Woman*, holds women far more accountable for their lives and self-determination than Irigaray suggests is possible. *The Edible Woman* is an illustration of how women can choose to fit within those prescribed roles or, by rejecting the burden of complicity required to relegate them into those roles, can choose to exist in an liminal social space which, counterintuitively, is nevertheless full of potential for the woman who avoids the socially-sanctioned roles which attach them to the men by whom, the novel posits, they are consumed.

Even in her first published novel, Atwood uses what is now recognized as her characteristic blend of realism and comedic conventions to extend the ideal social expectations of women and their roles to their extreme limits of credibility, and thereby

reveals various ways by which women are oppressed by the heteropatriarchal culture. W. J. Keith reads the novel as an artistic work which loosely follows, or enacts inversions of, comedic conventions, but maintains that, although Atwood's realism is not "photographic" (15) it would be "wrong to suppose that Marian's experience is not to be regarded as a version (comic, to be sure) of a representative pattern in human life" (23). Despite its comedic moments, Sherrill Grace in *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* writes that the novel: "does not rest in absurdity for the book carries an ethical burden. The reader, if not Marian, is so placed that he can see beyond the either/or of the novel just far enough to realize that this vicious circle *ought* to be broken" (95). While there are comedic scenes, such as the Mad Hatter inspired dinner party at Duncan's apartment, and Atwood's humour is in evidence throughout, Atwood herself does not view *The Edible Woman* as an uncomplicated example of the comedic genre.

Atwood, in an interview with Graeme Gibson, characterizes *The Edible Woman* as an anti-comedy because of how it inverts the usual comedic sequence:

In your standard 18th-century comedy you have a young couple faced with difficulty in the form of somebody who embodies the restrictive forces of society and they trick or overcome this difficulty and end up getting married. The same thing happens in *The Edible Woman* except the wrong person gets married. And the person who embodies the restrictive forces of society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian. (12)

Whatever the genre, comedy or anti-comedy, Atwood does not allow her characters to wallow in an unproblematic state of victimhood. As Gayle Green points out, *The Edible Woman* is not "a text which allows the reader to be a passive consumer" (95) because Atwood exposes the mechanisms by which the women involved – Marian, Clara and

Ainsley in particular – are complicit with that culture and help to preserve it, which renders them conspirators rather than blameless victims.

Atwood writes women who, however they are situated, do not merely passively occupy the social spaces they fill according to the expectations of the social order.

Atwood's women make choices and act in ways which reveal their complicity with – and struggles against – that limiting social order. As Barbara Hill Rigney writes, “Atwood's view [is] that women share in the guilt for their victimisation” and as such, (11) women are not completely powerless within the patriarchal culture. This is particularly true for the cultural and social setting of the novel, which is 1960s Toronto where university-educated Marian works for a Seymour Surveys and shares the upper floor of an older home in a respectable neighbourhood with a female roommate named Ainsley. *The Edible Woman* begins with the two roommates getting ready for work, Marian nursing Ainsley by “pouring her a glass of tomato juice and briskly fix[ing] her an Alka-Seltzer, listening and making sympathetic noises while she complained” (3). Ainsley is feeling poorly due to a hangover which, Marian says, “put me in a cheerful mood – it made me feel so healthy” (3) but lingering in her sense of superiority a little too long means Marian must rush out the door lest she be late for work.

Unlike the other novels discussed in this thesis, the characters in *The Edible Woman* are presented as fully formed and two-dimensional, but their overall effect is dynamic, and Marian's experience is generalizable to women who share her particular social and cultural moment of 1960s Toronto. Catherine McLay writes that “Marian seems to have little contact with her past and her family exists only as a shadowy projection of her own mind and attitudes” (123). Part of this two-dimensionality is, as Keith points out, “what we expect in a traditional comedy of manners, and it would be

foolish to criticize Atwood for lack of depth in the presentation of her characters when her perfectly justifiable concern is with a grotesque world of superficial values and responses” (35). Gayle Green, however, points out that the characters in *The Edible Woman* “are caricatures rather than characters because Atwood is making a point about the impossibility of transcending ‘the system’” (95). In other words, not only are the shallow characters in keeping with the comedic genre, inverted or otherwise, their lack of substance is also emblematic of the materialistic and superficial social setting of their consumer culture, and the lack of authentic connection they find within it. These factors are also reflected in the lack of expository information about the characters which leaves out any details which do not pertain to the advancement of the plot. For these reasons, it would seem, Marian’s family of origin is largely absent from the narrative, making a direct and detailed analysis of her relationship with her mother, and how they affect each other’s identity, impossible. The value of *The Edible Woman* for this analysis, however, is not in Marian’s relationship with her own mother, but in the women around her and her correlation with them.

As pointed out in the introduction, the consideration of women as a binary opposition of mother/daughter is problematic, and my focus is how women relate to each other, their roles, and themselves. As such, it is important to recognize that, as much as Marian is her mother’s daughter, she is also the product of a specific culture, time and place, and the patriarchal structures which guide her life. So, while Marian’s relationship with her mother – and therefore the influence of her mother on Marian’s identity and sense of self – must be inferred due to a lack of direct exposition, the absence of Marian’s mother from the text is credible. That absence is explained thus far by the genre of the novel and the personalities of the characters in it, but Irigaray’s writing addresses factors

which have little to do with the genre or the superficiality of consumer cultures, and everything to do with how women are objects of exchange in patriarchal cultures.

The ways in which women are affected by the patriarchal organization of cultures are the focus of Irigaray's essay, "Women on the Market" (1997,) which was originally published in French in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, a 1977 collection of Irigaray's works. The founding premise of "Women on the Market" is carried throughout Irigaray's work and is strongly articulated in the essay's opening paragraph:

The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women.... The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo. (174)

Irigaray discusses the concepts of women as commodities in terms of Marxist economic theories and maintains that, as commodities within a social economy, women bring "men in touch with each other, in relations among themselves" (188). Irigaray, playing with the French word for men, *hommes*, also figures the exchange of women by men as an act of "hom(m)o-sexuality [*hom(m)-sexualite*]. Not in an 'immediate' practice, but in its 'social mediation'" (175). This statement and analysis is furthered by the term "homosociality", defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a term which "describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'" (1). In other words, the exchange of women by men is an act which is prompted by men who are prohibited from bonding directly to each other due to both heteronormativity and to women of their own family due to the incest taboo.

The reason to introduce homosociality alongside Irigaray's concept of women as commodities is that both approaches to inter-male relationships are facilitated by the

exchange of women by men, either through marriage or the triangulation of sexual relationships, but these really have nothing to do with the women in and of themselves. As Irigaray puts it, as a commodity, “*woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of men’s labour*. On this basis, each one looks exactly like every other” (177). Additionally, “*commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man*” and each woman is a mirrored surface which “contains nothing of its properties, its qualities, its ‘skin and hair’” (178). Women bear the value that others – men – give them by considering them in relation to others of their kind and against an unattainable ideal image (177). In other words, what women want, need, or who they are as individuals, is all irrelevant since their exchange is all about the facilitation of relationships and bonds between men. These comparisons – woman as commodity to be exchanged, and woman as facilitator for men’s social bonds with other men – are evident in the details of how Marian’s engagement to Peter comes about, a sequence which is terribly practical and passionless.

Peter’s marriage proposal is an emotional response prompted by the news that his friend Trigger is getting married; Peter rather awkwardly asks Marian to marry him – no romantic gestures here – not because he deeply cares for Marian specifically, but due to his own fear of social abandonment by all of his married friends. Marian explains: “Trigger was one of Peter’s oldest friends; in fact, he had been the last of Peter’s group of oldest friends still left unmarried” (23). Further, Marian says that “[Peter] and Trigger had clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed. Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty” (24). According to Irigaray, “One commodity cannot be mirrored in another as man is mirrored in his fellow man... [but] *commodities, women, are a mirror of value of*

and for man” (178). Thus, Peter proposes to Marian for two reasons: she will be able to be a mirror for Peter as a replacement for Trigger, and she will grant him social entrée into the scenes and circles that his friends and their wives engage in, a social milieu which often does not comfortably include single people. In other words, Peter asks Marian “how do you think we’d get on as... how do you think we’d be, married?” (91) because he does not want to be the ‘odd man out’ with his buddies, and Marian seems to lack an excuse to say ‘no’. Her acquiescence to his proposal can also be viewed as the first in what turns out to be a long line of concessions Marian makes to Peter’s preferences, and the beginning of her transition from subject to object.

The Edible Woman is a three-part novel and begins with Marian as a first-person narrator, but switches to a limited third person narration in the second part, after the engagement, a shift which indicates and imitates Marian’s shift in status from girlfriend to fiancée. Before that shift, when Peter asks Marian when she wants to get married, she says: “I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, ‘I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you.’ I was astounded at myself. I’d never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it” (101). Not only does she shift from ‘I/me/mine’ to ‘she/her/hers’ in the narrative, thereby moving from subject to object, but she begins to let Peter make more of her mundane decisions for her as well.

The second part also picks up the narrative several months after the engagement, which marks the beginning of Marian’s experience of a psycho-somatically-induced eating disorder in addition to her increasing indecision, forgetfulness, and dissociation from herself and her identity. When dining with Peter in a restaurant, Marian “had fallen into the habit... of letting him choose for her. It got rid of the vacillation she had found

herself displaying when confronted with a menu: she never knew what she wanted to have. But Peter could make up their minds right away” (170). Marian not only cedes her autonomy to Peter by allowing him to choose for her, she also avoids the responsibility which comes with the consequences of making decisions, a tendency which extends into her later actions. Marian’s loss of the subject-position is an ongoing transformation in the second part of the novel, but in Atwood’s typical style, Marian is not allowed to let go of the responsibility for her part in the relationship all that easily. Instead, Marian’s transition is complicated by her increasing awareness of the women around her and how they have chosen to allow themselves to be pushed into their various roles, or out of their employment, by marrying and having children. Regardless of how deeply Marian is dissociated from herself, she nevertheless views these other women with a critical, and sometimes judgemental eye. Marian does not necessarily judge the women themselves, but she definitely is disapproving of how they have managed their situations, regardless of context, particularly if she feels that they have not coped well or that their intentions are impractical. Two examples are the women who are closest to Marian: Ainsley, her roommate, and Clara, Marian’s high school friend.

Ainsley and Clara are both examples of what happens when reproduction is placed at the center of women’s identity and the touted ideals of womanhood are taken to their extreme. Characteristics such as Ainsley’s beauty and her belief that motherhood “fulfills your deepest femininity” (41), or Clara’s tractability and passivity, are taken to their ultimate conclusions. Existing on opposite ends of the spectrum of bodily autonomy, Clara is helpless to control her ever-reproducing body or anything else in her life, while Ainsley actively orchestrates her seduction of Len with what Marian says “bore a chilling resemblance to a general plotting a major campaign” (96). Ainsley’s purpose is not to

'trap' Len into marrying her; instead, she plans her seduction with the sole purpose of becoming a single mother. From Irigaray's discussion of mothers, it can be posited that single motherhood is anathema to a patriarchal culture; as Irigaray explains using concepts from Marxist theory, mothers represent both a "natural value" (184) in their bodily connection to nature through their "(re)productive" (184) capability, as well as a "use value" (184) which stems from their existence as commodities exchanged between men. Thus:

As both natural value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. Mothers are essential to its (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). (184)

Accordingly, Ainsley's plan to become an unwed mother is problematic; as a mother she cannot be exchanged, but as an unmarried woman she cannot grant her child legitimacy, so she is at once unattached and untouchable. Marian's first response when Ainsley explains her plan to intentionally become a single mother is to question the practicality of the decision, believing that Ainsley is not fully understanding the social prohibitions she will face as an unwed mother.

The conversation between Marian and Ainsley about her intended path to unwed motherhood reveals the extent to which Marian has internalized the patriarchal view of the 'proper' route to motherhood. Marian says, "so what it boils down to... is that you've decided to have an illegitimate child in cold blood and bring it up yourself" (42).

Focussing on the father as the locus of legitimacy has a few implications, as far as Irigaray is concerned, and she writes that mothers have the responsibility: "to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are

recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him” (184). In that view, Ainsley’s claim that “birth is legitimate” is hopelessly naïve in Marian’s view (42), though she cannot think of a way to make her counterargument persuade Ainsley. As far as Marian is concerned, in order to have children a woman should first be married but, as evidenced through her disapproval of Clara, Marian does agree with Ainsley that marriage entails motherhood, childcare, housekeeping, and all the other tasks of daily living when caring for children and husbands. What Marian does not realize is that, by arguing the patriarchal perspective of what constitutes ‘legitimacy’ in terms of children and stressing its importance, she is arguing from a perspective which valorizes motherhood, which is also Ainsley’s stance; thus, Marian’s ‘counterarguments’ do not work.

Ainsley decides that she wants to have a baby because, as mentioned, “it fulfills your deepest femininity” (41); this is not to say that Ainsley is a feminist in any way, however. Rather, it is an indication of the extent to which she has accepted and internalized the idealization of motherhood by the psycho-analytical perspectives she is so invested in. These are perspectives which valorize motherhood but are based in a patriarchal world view which is predicated on the idea that legitimacy is the province of men. The idea that requires that women’s children bear their father’s name in order to establish their legitimacy as members of a group is not at odds with Ainsley’s view that motherhood is the ultimate expression of her femininity. Rather, the ideas Ainsley uses to justify her concepts about motherhood come from an odd combination of behavioural psychology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, all areas of study grounded in the gendered assumptions of the patriarchal system which gave rise to them. As Irigaray points out in *Sexes and Genealogies*, the reason she critiques Freud is:

Because in the process of elaborating a theory of sexuality, Freud brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicit, hidden, unknown: *the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of any discourse...* Freud does not see *two sexes* whose differences are articulated in the act of intercourse and, more generally speaking, in the imaginary and symbolic processes that regulate the workings of a society and a culture. The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. (69)

Given that "the 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency" (S&G 69)

Ainsley's certainty that bearing a child is going to help her accomplish her selfhood seems naïve. The result of her fascination with the discourses and disciplines she chooses is that Ainsley holds some strong opinions on the proper way to raise children, despite having no experience with them, and despite her selfish intent of attaining selfhood through motherhood.

When it becomes obvious that her counterarguments are not working to convince Ainsley to change her mind, Marian looks around the apartment and wonders how difficult it will be to move out, and "whether the lady down below would consider Ainsley's pregnancy a breach of contract and take legal action" (41). The 'lady down below' is how Marian refers to their landlady, a woman who already has such a low opinion of Ainsley that she refuses to speak to Ainsley unless it is completely unavoidable. According to Gina Wisker, "the archaic mother [is] embodied in Marian's tyrannical landlady... [and evokes] Marian's fear of being dominated by or becoming her mother, and the irony of how Marian's sense of self is eroded through her relationship with Peter" (38). Marian's absent mother, unlike the lady down below, is only implicated in the narrative insofar as Marian has internalized the propriety of the polite exterior she was taught to present to the world, regardless of her thoughts. That misalignment of external behaviour and interior thought is apparent in Marian's furtive planning while

listening to Ainsley talk about her plans for single motherhood, even though Marian knows that Ainsley has no experience with babies and has seen that Ainsley does not really like them.

Before their conversation about motherhood, Marian and Ainsley go to visit Clara, Marian's friend from high school, who is seven months pregnant with her third baby. Ainsley holds Clara's second child for a while, until Ainsley "gave a little cry and deposited the baby on the lawn. 'It's wet on my dress,' she said accusingly. 'Well, they do, you know,' said Clara" (31). Despite pointing out the obvious dislike that Ainsley shows for an actual baby rather than an idealized and non-existent one, Marian is unable to convince Ainsley that having her own baby without getting married to the father would create problems for her dreams of the future. "'What about the job at the art gallery? And meeting the artists?' I held them up to her like a carrot to a donkey. Ainsley widened her eyes at me. 'What has having a baby got to do with getting a job at an art gallery?'" (41). Ainsley fails to see Marian's point that her employment opportunities might be curtailed by the social scandal, and the burdens – financial, personal, or otherwise – of unwed motherhood. Indeed, she seems to not connect childbearing with the need to raise a child from infancy to adulthood since her focus is on pregnancy, not motherhood and child-rearing as such. Instead of listening to Marian, with the help of good lighting, makeup, and very carefully presenting herself as much younger and more innocent than she is, Ainsley imitates another role Irigaray discusses, the "virgin" (WOTM 185) and deftly uses its tropes to her advantage.

Len's attitude is decidedly against marriage but, with her looks, as well as a bottle of scotch, Ainsley is successful in her seduction of Len and she gets pregnant on her first attempt. In the early days of her pregnancy she is confident, happy, and goes so far as to

assume that her child is a boy because she “thought it might be better” though she does not specify why or for whom (158). Ainsley’s serenity is doomed, however, by her personal investment in modern child psychology, or perhaps psychoanalytic theory, and she later sobs to Marian:

I went to the Clinic tonight... they had this psy-psy-psychologist, and he talked about the Father Image.... He has all kinds of statistics and everything. They’ve proved it scientifically.... If I have a little boy, he’s absolutely *certain* to turn into a ho-ho-ho-homosexual!’ At this mention of the one category of man who had never shown the slightest interest in her, Ainsley’s large blue eyes filled with tears. (181)

There are a few interesting things going on in this passage; first, the idea that Ainsley should have a boy is obviously linked to Freud’s concepts of childhood sexual theories, which Irigaray thoroughly critiques in *Sexes and Genealogies*.

To summarize Irigaray’s interesting and thorough discussion of Freud and his theory of human sexual development, every little girl suffers from what Freud calls “penis envy” (40) to the extent that her desire to have a penis of her own alters from anger that her mother did not provide her with one to, upon sexual maturity, the desire to have a baby. Irigaray writes: “we must add here that the woman’s happiness is complete only if the newborn child is a boy, bearer of the longed-for penis” (41). Presumably, once Ainsley has a son, she can move from the inferiority complex that Freud posits that women develop as a result of having a female body, to pride of ownership in her son’s body and her successful production of him.

Secondly, aside from the obvious fact that Ainsley cannot determine the gender of her child before it is born, her homophobic horror at the prospect of ‘him’ being a homosexual is tied into her own sense of self and self-worth. Drawing from Irigaray’s work, Ainsley’s value as a commodity of exchange is in her allure for men; that is, her

self-worth is based in her value as a commodity, which is tied to how sexually attractive she is to men. Therefore, if she has a son who is a homosexual, he will not be attracted to her, and that has a strong implication for Ainsley. Her sense of self-worth is shattered at the thought that her unborn child will never look at her in the way that tells her that she has value, a male gaze upon which her sense of self is predicated. In response to these factors, Ainsley determines to prevent her child from the trauma stemming from her decision to be a single mother and – selfishly or selflessly? – determines to find a Father Image for her child. Thus, the tension between how Ainsley views motherhood as an act of self-fulfillment, and how she views her role in her child’s development, is finally alleviated by the simple decision to get married.

Ainsley changes her mind about marriage, reasoning that it would be better for the child to have a Father Image, but she has no boyfriend or prospects yet, though she does first approach Len. According to Gina Wisker, *The Edible Woman*:

Introduces themes and concerns popular throughout [Atwood’s body of] work, of entrapping relationships and versions of self which constrain, diminish, or subtly shape the way people, mostly women, see themselves, the world and their options.... The target is romantic fiction and society’s collusion in roles and narratives for women, which entrap them in a male gaze. (36)

Ultimately, despite trying to position herself in opposition to norms around motherhood and women in society, Ainsley ends up supporting and perpetuating the heteronormative patriarchal culture which produced her. In “Women on the Market” Irigaray writes: “as mothers, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the ‘natural’” (184). Thus, when Ainsley decides to tell Len about the baby his first hysterical response is based in his previous ability to deny that connection to nature. But now, knowing that he will be a father, he says: “now I’m going to be all mentally tangled up in Birth. Fecundity. Gestation. Don’t you realize

what that will do to me? It's obscene..." (185). Ainsley's response is to accuse Len of "uterus envy" (185), in an inversion of the previously mentioned concept of penis envy, before soothing him. Nevertheless, when Ainsley concludes that she must find a 'Father Image' for her child she invites Len over to talk to him about marriage. Len's previous reaction is mild in comparison and the confrontation on the staircase in front of the tea party guests of 'the lady down below' ends with Len screaming "you won't get me!" (251) as he storms out, and Ainsley's eviction.

Undaunted, Ainsley is determined that if she cannot convince Len to be the Father Figure for her child, then she will "simply get another one, that's all" (252). Ainsley meets Fischer 'Fish' Smythe, an English graduate student and acquaintance of Marian's, at Peter's party. Ainsley announces to everyone that she and Len are going to have a baby, and Len pours his beer over her head saying it is a "baptism in utero" (282). Fish comes to her rescue, and "pulling his woolly turtleneck sweater over his head... he began to dry her off with his sweater. His eyes were damp with solicitude" (283). Thus, Ainsley is essentially exchanged by Len and Fish who, unlike Len, immediately reveres Ainsley. Fish is described by Coral Ann Howells as "the most passionate advocate for the maternal principle... a male Jungian literary critic... who is obsessed with archetypal womb symbols and who in turn becomes fascinated with the pregnant Ainsley as an Earth Mother figure" (26). Fish and Ainsley elope and, as Ainsley is no longer available for exchange between men, she thus upholds the norms of the patriarchal culture. Ainsley subsumes her identity in that of her husband in name, and in her child in her role of mother, which brings the aspect of social discord to a resolution via marriage, in keeping with the comedic genre. The conflict around Ainsley's ambiguous status as a mother is resolved by her marriage, but Marian, with some dismay and disapproval, observes Clara

and her version of motherhood, moving between Ainsley's idealization of motherhood and the less idealized, messier concerns of being a mother.

Ainsley may believe that motherhood, or the bearing of a child at least, is the most complete expression of femininity a woman can achieve, but she views Clara and her husband, Joe, with a judgemental eye. Clara is seven months pregnant with her third child, and she sits in the garden with her first two while Joe does the cooking and the dishes. On the way home from Clara's, Ainsley says to Marian that "you can't say the sort of household Clara and Joe are running is an ideal situation for the child. Think of how their mother-image and their father-image will be; they're riddled with complexes already" (40). Ainsley is deeply invested in traditional family roles and the gendered division of labour, as well as the sanctity of the mother-child bond, going so far to state the opinion that since breastfeeding is so much better for that bond that Joe must have pressured Clara into weaning her baby early. Marian's comment that "it's got teeth" (40) falls on deaf ears as Ainsley maintains that "North American men hate watching the basic mother-child unit functioning naturally, it makes them feel not needed" (40). On the one hand, Ainsley has all kinds of plans about how she will mother her children and is critical of Clara's inability to manage her own house, yet Ainsley's room is so messy that when it comes time to seduce Len she uses Marian's room instead of her own. Thus, Atwood introduces some of the many conflicting judgements held about mothers, attitudes which reveal a powerful disconnection between the valorization of motherhood and the vilification of mothers.

To some degree, both Ainsley and Marian think that Clara should be doing all of the cooking, cleaning, and childcare in her home; as Ainsley puts it, Clara should just "cope" with it all (40), while in Marian's view Clara is overwhelmed and "simply stood

helpless while the tide of dirt rose around her, unable to stop or evade it” (37). Thus, as a less-than-ideal picture of motherhood, Clara is not only unable to cope and powerless, but also enacts a critique of the traditional gender roles and norms which say that Clara should never be tired or overwhelmed by her children and the housework.

Clara represents a form of femininity and motherhood which is a literal and painful extension of the purported values of the heteronormative, patriarchal culture which created her. Marian went to high school with Clara who was “a tall and fragile girl who was always getting exempted from Physical Education. She’d sit on the sidelines watching the rest of us” (34). Clara seems unable to control her life or her body; Clara and Joe married between her second and third year of university, and:

The babies had been unplanned: Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her, and her second with dismay; now, during her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism. Her metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock. (35)

Clara, as a mother and wife, is the ultimate helpless woman, an immutable object unable to foresee much less to prevent pregnancy, or to put her life in any kind of order that Marian and Ainsley feel is appropriate for a mother. Clara shows a passive acceptance of the inevitable and inexplicable, but completely natural, process of reproduction, but she does not show a lack of love and concern for her children though she is just as incapable of controlling them as she is of controlling her body.

Despite her immersion in motherhood and pregnancy, however, there is a note of warning in Clara’s words to Ainsley and Marian: “never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct... I don’t see how anyone can love their children till they start to be human beings” (33). Clara’s oldest, Arthur, is a wild little boy who uses the garden – or the floor space behind the door – for his toilet, and the house is a disaster of clutter and

dirty laundry, with Joe the only one visibly working towards keeping it all together. When Clara gives birth to her third child, Marian visits her in the hospital and finds that the drugs have removed some of Clara's inhibitions so that she is even more brutally honest with Marian than usual. Speaking of Joe and herself, Clara says: "you think we're both shiftless and disorganized and you'd go bats if you lived in all that chaos; you can't understand how we've survived without hating each other" (132). While this is in fact a true representation of Marian's impressions, Marian is shocked that Clara would "force the conversation out into the open like that" (132) and is relieved when a nurse interrupts them, re-establishing the status quo of a mother suffering in silence. As the novel progresses, Marian's ideas of marriage and relationships are challenged by the possibility that she may not be able to just 'cope' either.

Clara and Joe's relationship does not fit with Marian's concept of how a marriage should be, nor of how a household should be run, and Marian thinks that surely her marriage to Peter will not "turn out like Clara's. Those two aren't practical enough, they have no sense at all of how to manage" (102). There is the sense that Marian's experience at home was orderly and well-managed, though that is not explicitly stated and is only obvious in Marian's judgements about Clara's life and marriage. Similarly, Marian's assessment of the relationship between Joe and Clara has the idealism of someone who has not yet experienced the realities of motherhood and marriage, the spectre of which is fast approaching.

Marian is not a giddy bride-to-be and perhaps that is part of the reason for her escalating eating disorder: she will not admit to herself that marrying Peter is a bad idea, so her body rebels and refuses to let her eat. First, she is denied meat, then eggs, and the list narrows from there to the point that all she can eat are noodles and vitamin pills. As

her wedding date draws nearer, Marian realizes that “she had been trying to pretend there was nothing really wrong with her, it was a superficial ailment, like a rash: it would go away” (238). She hides the issue she has with eating because Peter “might think she was some kind of freak, or neurotic” (239) but Marian starts to fear that she may have to continue to hide her issues with food even after the wedding. Marian also takes no interest in the wedding planning, leaving those to her mother and Peter, and the day of the party at Peter’s, the day before her wedding, she gets out of the bathtub and “slid her engagement ring back onto her finger, seeing the hard circle for a moment as a protective talisman that would help keep her together” (256). Marian quits her job because her boss refuses to employ newly married women; the usually tidy apartment is a mess with dishes mouldering in the sink and things growing in her refrigerator, and two days before her wedding she still has to tell the landlady that she will be giving up the apartment. These are all signs that, like Clara, Marian is not ‘coping’ and she is not yet married, much less a mother. Before the wedding, however, she must endure a party at Peter’s place and, although she does not look forward to it with anticipation, she nevertheless does what she can to cater to what Peter wants from her.

Marian prepares for Peter’s party by letting other people dress her up as one would a doll, and she acquiesces without offering input or resistance. Peter suggested she “might have something done with her hair. He had also hinted that perhaps she should buy a dress that was, as he put it, ‘not quite so mousy’ as any she already owned, and she had duly bought one” (244). The saleslady insisted on a girdle, so Marian bought one, along with the red dress “she didn’t really think was her” (244). As for her hair, “she had walked through that gilded chocolate-box door of her own free will and this was the consequence and she had better accept it. ‘Peter will probably like it. Anyway,’ she

reflected, 'it will go with the dress'" (247). Ainsley paints Marian's nails and does her makeup for her saying, "you'd just do it in your usual skimpy way and come out looking like a kid playing dress-up in her mother's clothes" (260). Marian, about to be married, is thus moving further from her status as her mother's product and towards her status as commodity about to be exchanged by Peter and her father, and Marian's sense of self is not located in either of those statuses. The final result is that, looking in the mirror, she cannot see herself as a whole; instead, "her attention caught on the various details, the things she wasn't used to" (268) like her hair, Ainsley's makeup job and earrings, the painted fingernails. Finally, Marian sees her arms in the mirror, "the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible" (268). Quite literally 'dolloed up,' she does not recognize herself, and cannot escape the fear that follows her through every interaction with Peter that night as he stalks her through his apartment with a camera.

Part of the increase in tension is that Marian has invited Duncan and his roommates, Fish and Trevor, and she is concerned how Peter will react. For one thing, Marian has been carrying on an affair with Duncan and, as Pamela S. Bromberg writes, "for Marian to see Duncan without Peter's knowledge is an act of self-assertion and betrayal of him and of her fiancée role. Keeping a part of herself private and secret from Peter, she remains partially unseen and uncontrolled" (19). Bromberg posits that, by inviting her friends without clearing it with Peter first, Marian is enacting "her first willed assertion of self in relation to Peter since the engagement" (17). Rather than feeling thrilled that they would be married within a day or two, Marian instead is nervous around Peter, drinks too much, and worries about what will happen when Duncan shows up.

If Peter is not the ‘defiant hero’ that Atwood says the traditional comedy would have Marian marry, neither is Duncan, though he is considered by many critics, including Gayle Green as Peter’s “antithesis. If Peter is a stereotype, Duncan is a shapeshifter, someone who deliberately changes his reality and disorients others” (107). Rigney however, figures Duncan as “Marian’s anorexic and hungry self.... Acting as a link between Marian’s fantasy world and her real one, he appears mysteriously in illogical places where Marian least expects him” (30). Reading *The Edible Woman* intertextually with two works by Lewis Carroll, David L. Harkness characterizes Duncan variously as “the Mock Turtle and the White Rabbit” (107) or perhaps even the “March Hare” (108). Keith writes, “Duncan’s function in the novel gradually emerges as the voice of Marian’s instincts and intelligence, as a kind of spirit-guide from a ghostly underworld who can dispense a paradoxical wisdom” (41). However, he is interpreted by a reading, Duncan works in the novel as a kind of guide for Marian, taking her through the Royal Ontario Museum’s mummy collection, a symbolic visit to the underworld.

The night of the party, Duncan does not actually enter Peter’s apartment; refusing to meet Peter, Duncan says “No, no... I can’t. It would be a bad thing, I can tell. One of us would be sure to evaporate, it would probably be me; anyway, it’s too loud in there, I couldn’t take it” (281). He tells Marian he’s going to the laundromat and leaves her at the party, which she flees after the flash of Peter’s camera startles her. She realizes that she is drunk, but also that Peter has not yet caught her in a photo and that “once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (287) so she flees the party to find Duncan. They spend the night in a cheap hotel, and the next morning they go on a long walk through the wilder areas of

Toronto, and Duncan guides Marian down the paths and the ravines which also feature in both *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* while she tries to decide what to do.

Despite being her guide, Duncan does not lead Marian by the hand to enact the final resolution of the story for her. Duncan refuses her request that he talk to Peter, and eventually just points her to the path home, leaving her responsible for her decisions and their consequences. According to Harkness “just as [Duncan] has shown her the way to leave the valley – and has himself been left behind – so has he shown her that now she must look to herself rather than to an external model to decide how to live her life” (107). Shortly after they met, Peter told Marian “that it was my aura of independence and common sense he had liked: he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life” (66). The contrast between Peter and Duncan reveals that Marian is not as independent as she thinks she is, but Duncan also engenders in Marian the awareness that she will be a mere ornament, a trophy in Peter's life whereas for her, Peter will be the focal point of her world once they marry, and that Peter expects no less. Duncan refuses to allow Marian to use him as a rescuer, or to allow her to rescue him, and Marian finally comes to recognize that the only route is to rescue herself.

Duncan is a figure who helps Marian to move from living life unconsciously – i.e., as a mind ignoring the body, or a person ignoring her own complicity in her helplessness, in her treatment as an object – to being conscious within her own life. When she asks Duncan how she should handle the situation with Peter, Duncan replies, “don't ask me, that's your problem. It does look as though you ought to do something: self-laceration in a vacuum eventually gets rather boring. But it's your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you'll have to think of your own way out” (311). Marian develops an awareness of the nature of the social pressures around her, and of how to refuse to allow

them to force her down a path she does not want to take, and Duncan plays a large role in developing that awareness. Ultimately, however, Marian must take control of her own life, and so she leaves him to his brooding by the pit to do just that.

Rather than taking definitive action by verbally breaking off the relationship, Marian intentionally creates a situation whereby Peter will do it for her, thereby manipulating the norms of their relationship which casts him as an active subject and her as a passive object. Peter views Marian's flight from him and their pre-wedding celebration as a mental breakdown, but I tend to view it as an existential breakthrough as Marian's act is a deliberate and subversive one. When Peter calls, she calms him down and invites him over, and: "she made her voice sweet, conciliatory. She was conscious of her own craftiness" (314). Delaying the final confrontation to give herself time to decide what to do, she has a bath and then determines that "what she needed was something that avoided words, she didn't want to get tangled up in a discussion" (315). For the first time in months she does not need a grocery list, because "she knew what she needed to get" (315). She buys new bowls and pans rather than clean the ones in the sink and bakes a sponge cake upon which she carefully and thoughtfully "began to operate" (317). She manipulates the cake into a female form and then decorates it so that it "looked like an elegant antique china figurine" (318). When finished, Marian looks at her creation and says:

"You look delicious," she told [the cake/woman]. "Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food." At the thought of food her stomach contracted. She felt a certain pity for her creature but she was powerless now to do anything about it. Her fate had been decided. (318)

Marian has Peter take a seat in the living room and, rather ceremoniously, she brings the cake into the room and offers it to him as "a substitute" (320) and Peter's "eyes widened

in alarm. Apparently he didn't find her silly" (320). Marian's odd – perhaps slightly mad – behaviour in presenting Peter with a woman-shaped cake to devour in place of herself enables Peter to save his ego and masculinity by breaking the relationship off because he is the active participant while she passively accepts his decision. Peter's action also preserves Marian's self-identity and social reputation despite her pre-marital sexual activity with Peter and her affair with Duncan, activities which do not fit within the 'virgin/mother/prostitute' roles outlined by Irigaray.

As the spurned woman, Marian is thus freed to explore a new beginning as she devours the cake effigy of herself; the text anticipates the literary interpretations of this act in Ainsley's horrified response: "Marian! You're rejecting your femininity!" (321). In addition, Jennifer Hobgood comments that "the novel's consummating act, the baked and served 'edible woman,' has generally been interpreted as either an act of defiance and liberation or as an indication of her reinsertion into the economic and social machine of capitalism" (147). I prefer to view Marian's carefully intentional act – shopping for all of the ingredients she needs, including buying new pans, baking the cake, carefully shaping and decorating the cake to resemble herself, her deliberate and ceremonial presentation of it to Peter – as a reconstitution of her sense of self and identity. Marian finally knows exactly what she needs to do and how to go about it, and to devour the fruits of her labour in an enactment of the idiom 'you are what you eat' is symbolic of her nourishing herself, of accepting responsibility for her life, and reaffirming Atwood's position that women are not passive victims. That Duncan later finishes the cake is symbolic, but the most notable part of that action is that he eats the parts she has decided to allow him, or perhaps the parts she does not need any longer for her own sense of physical and psychic integrity and sustenance. In that moment, at least, Marian is rejecting marriage and the inevitability of

the mother/virgin/prostitute roles which the patriarchal culture leaves open to her, and it is at this point where the absence of Marian's mother is perhaps most significant, as it enables Marian to reject the conventions which would erase her identity through marriage.

Patriarchal culture views marriage as the only legitimate fate for women, thus, Marian's mother is not a strong role model of resistance as marriage is a fate that her mother failed to evade. According to Nancy Peled, in Atwood's writing, a mother's "powerlessness was expressed in their silence, their passivity, and, most devastating of all, their absence when their daughters most needed them" (59). In some ways, the absence of Marian's mother is what enables Marian to break, or at least delay, the generational cycle of 'grow up, get married, have children' that precedes her through previous generations. As noted previously, Irigaray maintains that mothers are ultimately responsible for perpetuating the social structure which renders them powerless and oppressed. If women are not given the time and space to explore their identity and what they want or need in between leaving their father's home and moving into their husband's, then they are less likely to gain the tools and knowledge which enable them to teach their children anything but conformity and covert or token acts of resistance. That liminal space of the single, independent and unmarried woman is important for Marian as it allows her the time and freedom to take stock and figure out what she needs and wants, as opposed to what she 'should' do.

While marriage and motherhood remain amorphous, distant, and external states of being which Marian cannot directly relate to her own life and body, Marian has, through her personal journey, realized that she is only as powerless as she allows herself to be. The broader scope of possibilities Marian has created by taking control of her life open

the ending up to an optimistic energy as Marian, in the very short final part of the novel, finally reclaims the subject position and the first-person “I”. Robert Lecker writes: “Marian MacAlpin’s [sic] story is triumphant *because* it is ambiguous, not only in its ending, but from the start” (178). Atwood illustrates that Marian does not always need to have a plan, and be organized, and know what is coming next, to be happy. She does not have to know what she will do with the rest of her life to be content in that moment and to be happy with where she is rather than worrying about where – or who – she ‘ought’ to be. For the protagonist of *Surfacing*, however, concerns over personal happiness are overshadowed by anxiety and confusion as she starts out on an unexpected quest for her missing father, and ends up finding herself along the way.

CHAPTER THREE: “That Madness Which is Not Ours”: Mothers, Irigaray, and Atwood’s *Surfacing*

Margaret Atwood’s second novel, *Surfacing* (1972), is a rich and fascinating work which openly explores numerous complexly interwoven themes, including Canadian nationalism and identity, the changing social reality of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada, and issues of environmental stewardship. Atwood also continues to critique the misogyny of the patriarchal culture in which her characters exist and participate, as well as the deeper implications for female subject-formation and identity within that culture. The various ways the narrator is alienated align with the work of Luce Irigaray, particularly Irigaray’s *Sexes and Genealogies* (S&G) which goes beyond the essay “Women on the Market” (WOTM) which chapters one and four of my thesis both draw heavily upon. In *Surfacing*, Atwood continues to expand on a point she made strongly in *The Edible Woman*: although women exist within a culture which commodifies and oppresses them, they have enough agency to choose to *not* be victims. Like Marian’s symbolic creation and consumption of the woman-shaped cake, the *Surfacing* narrator’s madness is a re-constitutive act, one of re-connection and re-cognition which enables the narrator to recover the parts of herself that she needs before she can go back out into the world a whole person. In *Surfacing*, the narrator’s rejection of the role and self-identity of victim enables the critique of the mechanisms by which women are alienated from themselves, their mothers, and from the natural world. *Surfacing* is one woman’s search for the legacy she is certain that her mother has left her, a legacy of knowledge and associated power which is only available after a descent into, and return from, a state of madness.

At its most basic, *Surfacing* is a novel about the narrator's homecoming, though it is figured as a quest or pilgrimage rather than a nostalgic trip down the proverbial memory lane. The narrator, with several friends from the unnamed city to the south, travel to a remote Quebec village to search for her missing father. Ashamed and traumatized by an illegal abortion, the narrator is absent from the area for almost a decade, during which time she is certain that, regarding her parents, she "could leave and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier" (5). In an interview with Linda Sandler, Atwood says that "*Surfacing* is a ghost story.... [the narrator] is obsessed with finding the ghosts" (11). According to Tom Marshall, "the atmosphere [in *Surfacing*] is correspondingly tense and eerie, because this is a psychological ghost-story... the ghosts, the woman's parents, are lost parts of herself that she must recover. She has been numb for years" (93). Considering that she reveals early in the novel that her mother died in a city hospital, delusional and disoriented from illness and morphine, it is apparent that the narrator is unreliable and emotionally conflicted by her return which will prove her mental image of her parents as safe and remote is a fantasy, but this narrator has many personal fictions.

She wears a fake wedding band, a leftover prop from her relationship with her "fake husband" (201) a prop which made it easier for them when checking into hotels but is now a safeguard against questions from the villagers. Similarly, the way she views the landscape of her childhood is conflicted: "now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (7) but she returns, nevertheless. She is the only family member able to search for her father, since her brother is in Australia and her mother is dead; thus, she returns home in a literal quest for her father.

Peter Klován reads the narrator's return home as a dual quest: not only must she return home to find her father, she must also "succeed in penetrating... the more complicated maze of the false memories she has constructed to evade moral responsibility for her abortion" (3). The narrator also admits to creating a detailed fantasy including a wedding and failed marriage, and she substitutes an ex-husband and estranged son in place of the reality of an exploitative relationship with her married art professor and the illegal abortion which concluded it. Klován further attributes the narrator's madness to her "neurotic personality whose roots can ultimately be found in the limited relationships she experienced while growing up in an uncommunicative family living in a remote area" (3). Klován goes on to say that the narrator's childhood has left her viewing the world at large as "fearfully harsh and dangerous" (13). While this analysis is not inherently incorrect, I think that Klován overlooks the deeper social and personal implications of her being a woman and, as discussed in the first chapter, the roles Irigaray posits that the patriarchal culture permits women to fill: "mother, virgin, prostitute" (WOTM 185). Further, by grounding his reading of her psychological issues in her denial of "moral responsibility for her abortion" (Klován 3), Klován denies that the narrator experienced any undue trauma in the world, despite her sexual exploitation by an older, married man in a position of authority over her. Additionally, Barbara Hill Rigney, writes:

The abortion itself, however, is not a cause for but an effect of the protagonist's split psyche. If a complete self had been in control, she is ultimately to realize, the operation would never have occurred. In order to become an autonomous, completed self, however, the protagonist must heal another kind of split – that between 'good' and 'evil'. She must come to terms with herself as perpetrator as well as victim, or at least as a correspondent in her own victimization. (97)

It is reasonable to argue that the protagonist's perspective that the world is, to use Klován's words, "harsh and dangerous" (13) is not only justified, but that her experiences

are predicated on her existence as a daughter in a patriarchal culture which denies her an identity and value which is not predicated on her relationship to a man. Further, having learned a black and white worldview which has victim/killer as a primary opposition by which to judge people, the narrator, more urgently so than Marian of *The Edible Woman*, must find her own, third option for her own path and identity, yet she begins the novel without the basic stability granted by a name.

While it is unusual for a first-person narrator in a novel length work such as *Surfacing* to remain nameless, this narrator controls the narrative through the first-person “I” in such a way that the omission is obviously intentional. There are a few points at which someone calls out her name, yet she deliberately chooses not to reveal what that is. This purposeful obfuscation makes it useful to think of the narrator in terms of Irigaray’s *Sexes and Genealogies* which maintains that women’s genealogy is denied through patriarchal naming conventions. Women take on the names of their fathers or husbands, which effectively makes their connection to men explicit while simultaneously denying their mothers’ “blood bond” (2). Women take on their husband’s name when they marry to signify the accomplishment of their exchange and, as discussed regarding *The Edible Woman*, to grant their children legitimacy through their father’s name.

Changing a woman’s name upon marriage, Irigaray points out, ultimately means that “male and female genealogies are collapsed into a single genealogy: that of the *husband*” (S&G 2) and Atwood takes on the issue of genealogical sublimation early in *Surfacing*. The protagonist notes that when she was a child the only store in town “was in the front part of a house, run by an old woman who was... called Madame: none of the women had names then” (24). ‘Madame’ is a noun which denotes only a woman’s gender and her marital status, thereby simultaneously denying a woman’s personal identity or

access to anything but a selfhood which depends upon her husband's identity and name. Unlike Marian of *The Edible Woman* who narrowly escapes that annihilation, the married women from the Quebec village in *Surfacing* are simultaneously identified and rendered indistinguishable from other married women by that noun which indicates their simultaneous loss and attainment of identity through marriage.

The inconsistency in women's names, and therefore their identities, over time and through marriage brings to light some of the issues that the narrator has with language in general as well, as it raises questions about the link between the name and the person or thing that the word identifies. For Irigaray, it also raises the question of what enables men's names to grant legitimacy over the blood connections between mother and child. Irigaray writes: "the family name, and even the first or given name, always stand at one remove from that most elemental identity tag: the scar where the umbilical cord was cut... [and names] slip over the body like clothes, like identity tags – outside the body" (S&G 14). Atwood and Irigaray reveal the constructed nature of the alienation of daughters who are cut off from their mothers' families so that they may be subsumed within the patriarchal culture. Irigaray maintains that "neither the little girl nor the woman needs to give up the love for her mother. To do so is to sever women from the roots of their identity and their subjectivity" (S&G 20). Thus, the narrator of *Surfacing* deliberately avoids giving the names of her family members, and her insistence on referring to them throughout the text only as, for example, "my mother" (17) is an act of resistance by which the narrator enacts a possession which is normally the province of men. Making the family members accessible and identifiable only through their relationship to that nameless – female – narrator, Atwood actively inverts the norms of the family dynamics in a patriarchal culture. Atwood also exposes the troubling alienation of women from

themselves and their own identity through their renaming upon marriage. The protagonist's acts of inversion and resistance, combined with her tendency to admit that she spins fantasy from partial truths, does put her position as an authority in her own narrative into question, but that is a familiar device that Atwood uses to render the reader complicit with the narrator.

By drawing the reader through the narrative with an active suspicion of the narrator, Atwood, as in *The Edible Woman*, does not allow the reader to be a passive consumer of *Surfacing*, but requires a present and active reader to assist the narrator in her journey in a few ways. The careful selection of the moment, the *now* of the fictional present, which is the moment in which the narrator tells her story, combined with the first-person narration, result in no – or very little – time lapse between the narration of events and the present moment of them in *Surfacing*. This is a distinction which Andrea Schwenke Wyile discusses as “immediate-engaging narration” (189). This kind of narration, Wyile writes, “has the potential to reveal the character of narrator-protagonists in a way that emphasizes the immediacy of their subjective experiences” (189). Karla Smart Kadrmas writes that Atwood “permits readers access to the narrator’s growth, tracing her changing self-descriptions and revealing her increasing self-knowledge” (76). Tina Trigg also points out that “Atwood complicates the analytical process by highlighting the roles of its participants (reader, characters, author) and their respective complicity in all constructs of normality or madness attained through the acts of interpretation” (160). Essentially, the reader of *Surfacing* experiences what the narrator does, particularly her descent into madness, in the present moment as it happens, which closes the distance between the narrator and the reader.

Atwood forces the reader to engage with the narrator and her experience of the world in order to determine where she is at developmentally, and mentally, but Atwood does so while purposely playing up the ambiguity of language. Jerome H. Rosenberg points out:

[The] problem in epistemology – in coming to grips with the process of knowing and with the effect of language on that process – is at the core of *Surfacing*; and it helps explain some of the power this novel exerts over its readers, as they involve themselves in the narrator's turmoil, sometimes mistaking reality even after she has plunged to the depths of her spirit and seen the truth. (108)

In other words, rather than Atwood revealing how fully – or if – the narrator has recovered her sense of self, or whether her madness is cathartic or debilitating, it is left to the reader to gauge how and whether she successfully recovers her sense of self and/or her sanity. Given that the madness is a vehicle for her own rebirth and reconnection with vital elements which have been denied to her for a decade some uncertainty is understandable, but there are a few reasons to believe that she does in fact successfully recover beyond the end of the novel.

According to Erinc Özdemir's reading of *Surfacing* in terms of psychoanalysis, power and gender, "*Surfacing* embodies the view of female madness as an expression of powerlessness and revolt against the patriarchal authority" (66). In Irigaray's writing, however, women are viewed as mad not because they are expressing powerlessness, but largely because: "serious scientific discourse and practice remain the privilege of men who have control of politics in general as well as of our most private sphere as women" (10). Further, Irigaray writes: "each sex has a relation to madness. Every desire has a relation to madness. But it would seem that one desire has been taken as wisdom, moderation, truth, leaving to the other sex the weight of a madness that cannot be acknowledged or accommodated" (10). In other words, women are no more prone to

madness than men are, and female madness is often – again – the alienation of women as a result of men’s monolithic power to legitimize. In *The Edible Woman*, men’s power to legitimize has to do mostly with children, and this is accurate for *Surfacing* as well, but in *Surfacing* the legitimacy of women and women’s experiences and knowledge are more obviously brought into question through the definitions of what insanity and sanity are. As the protagonist puts it: “this was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity” (202). Thus, women are not mad ‘as an expression of powerlessness and revolt’ but as a result of their lack of access to the systems by which they are evaluated. For the narrator, then, her madness is a cycle of the rejection of language and civilization, and a re-connection with the natural world and the elements of her parents still in existence – as parts of herself – in an act of re-constitution and re-cognition of self and Other.

What brings about the final push towards her most animalistic state is diving to find rock paintings and finding her father’s body instead: “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” (147). Atwood creates ambiguity for the reader in this moment through language and overlaid images as oxygen-deprivation and the protagonist’s mind conflate what she sees with images of her drowned brother, then the creatures he used to keep in jars, and finally settles on the truth of her affair and abortion. Gasping for breath at the bottom of the canoe, she realizes in that moment that “I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (150) and that she can no longer see herself as a blameless victim in this situation. She takes on the responsibility for giving in and allowing the

abortion to happen, and by locating the blame and condemnation internally she positions herself as complicit with her “fake husband” (201). No longer able to view herself as purely a victim because she feels responsible for her own grief and guilt, she is particularly angry with herself for ceding her autonomy to him, and angry with him for his abuse of that responsibility for his own ends.

The emotional numbness and the distance that the narrator feels between her mind and body are elements of isolation and disaffection which have their basis in more than just her experience of abortion, however. As pointed out by Rigney, the abortion is not the cause of her “split psyche” (97), but the effect; likewise, she is not pushed into insanity by returning to the lakeside cabin in her quest for her father, but by the success of her quest. Her mis-recognition in the moment she finds her father’s body enables her to hide her pain in the same way a wild animal will hide a wound, and she instead becomes preoccupied with the gods she is certain have led her to the truth and towards a healing power which undoes the delusions and falsehoods of marriage and a child. Atwood normally does not try to tell people how to read her books but, in an interview with Graeme Gibson, she reveals that “the assumption of the book, if there is one, is that there are gods that do exist here, [in Canada] but nobody knows about them.... The authentic religion has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way” (19). *Surfacing* evokes the potency of those domestic and personal gods for the narrator who, in her deepening delusions, becomes their acolyte.² Irigaray discusses women and religion and

²Atwood’s full passage is this: “Everybody has gods or a god, and it’s what you pay attention to or what you worship. And they can be imported ones or they can be intrinsic ones, indigenous ones, and what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else. And if you import a god from somewhere else, it’s fake; it’s like importing your culture from somewhere else. The only good, authentic thing is something that comes out of the place where you are, or the reality of your life. // Christianity in this country is imported religion. The assumption of the book [*Surfacing*] if there is one, is that there are gods that do exist here, but nobody knows about them. Anyway this gets us into metaphysical

points out that “women have no right to officiate in public worship in most traditions, even though that worship serves as the basis and structure for the society” (S&G 78). That means that women are cut off, alienated from spiritual rites and the social ties that those rites affirm and leaving them outsiders. Women are enveloped in a social community which rejects them as unworthy of religious participation much less leadership, but which also refuses to let them go find their own way by determining what is sacred and what is blasphemy, what is sane and what is insane.

This moment of discovery is pivotal and, rather than feeling grief or despair at the passing of her father, she feels that she needs to leave a shirt behind in thanks to the “gods... unacknowledged or forgotten, [who] were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely” (150). These unknown gods, she thinks, are who or what her father had been searching for through his quest for the rock paintings, and more, that he managed to find “new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision: at the end, after the failure of logic” (151). It was these gods who gave him back to her along with the realization and acceptance of her complicity; she says that the gods’ “gift had been greater, more than a hand or an eye, feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that’s been asleep” (151). Her experience, rather than alleviating the disconnection between her and others increases it

realms. The other thing that the imported gods will always tell you to do is to destroy what is there, to destroy what is in the place and to make a replica of the god’s place, so that what you do is you cut down all the trees and you build a Gothic church, or imitation thereof. The authentic religion has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way. How that fits in with the book I don’t know, but I’m sure it has something to do with it.” (19) I do not equate Atwood’s use of the idea of ‘indigenous’ gods which spring from the protagonist’s insanity and her connection to the natural world as one of appropriation of First Nations spirituality. Instead, I am invoking a definition of indigenous which is linked to place, rather than to people. Rather than taking on the Judeo-Christian beliefs of the colonizers, the protagonist is relating to the land and its characteristics by creating her own gods. Or, finding them through her recognition of the power of the natural world around her, and her connection with it through her own physical body which, no matter what tools we create, cannot be transcended completely.

and leaves her “wishing I could tell [Joe] how to change so he could get there, the place where I was” (151). Nancy Peled writes that, as opposed to princesses in fairy tales who lose their mothers early in the story and later find happiness with a prince, “in Atwood’s novels, finding the prince – or having him find the princess/protagonist – is not the happy ending. That comes when the central character finds *herself*. Atwood’s mothers are both accountable and helpless when happiness eludes these princesses” (49). Thus, she does not tell Joe that she has found her father’s dead body, and when others bring the ‘news’ of her father’s death to her the next day, she does not trust them; she destroys the film that David and Joe use to capture images of Anna, and then hides from them when the boat shows up to take them back to the village, and from there to the city. Thus, she chooses to reject civilization and to move deeper into an interconnection with animals and nature, and to search out those forgotten gods which demand things of her, acts which she bases on instinct and intuition.

Fiona Tolan points out that there are many things in *Surfacing* which draw it “to ecofeminism; in particular, the belief in an innocent, authentic, natural self, regainable by escaping corrupting civilisation” (42). This narrator, however, is not innocent, but she does move to regain her sense of self, lost since her childhood, but through madness. Far from a revolt against a patriarchal culture, this descent into madness has echoes of religious purification as she sheds the trappings and concerns of civilization. She hides from her friends until they leave without her and denies concerns of personal appearance out of fear and the sudden knowledge that “the [hair]brush is forbidden, I must stop being in the mirror” (186). Rather than be trapped within that surface as Anna is within her compact, or in the film, both of which are symbolic of the male gaze, she turns the mirror to face the wall. She goes by feel, eating when hungry, sleeping when tired, and asking

“what sacrifice, what do they want?” (187). Then, “when I’m certain I’ve guessed what is required” (187) she goes back into the cabin and burns the things she thinks are holding her family’s ghosts from moving on from this world. She starts with her latest commercial artwork with its princesses and fairy tale themes, and when she burns the old scrapbooks containing her brother’s drawings of planes and bombs she thinks “perhaps at the other side of the world my brother feels the weight lifting, freedom feathering his arms” (188). She frees her brother in the same way that her earlier destruction of the film frees Anna and the other images captured by David and Joe. She also burns the photo albums to free her mother, and then says: “I slip the ring from my left hand, non-husband, he is the next thing I must discard finally, and drop it into the fire, altar, it may not melt but it will at least be purified, the blood will burn off” (187). Thus, disposing of the final tie to her victimhood, she burns the things she says, “must be translated” before moving on to the symbols of knowledge and language (188).

She pulls down her father’s books and burns one page out of each of them, one page symbolizing the whole because “to burn through all the words would take too long” (188). Fiona Tolan posits that “as the novel progresses, the narrator is increasingly persuaded by the belief that the rational society represented by her father is an aggressive and destructive force” (45). Thus, her destruction of his books also acts to free him from the trap of his own logic which “excludes love” (198) and all thoughts of spirituality or religion, any knowledge not rooted in empirical observations and scientific processes. From there, she goes to the lake which, as Nancy Carter writes: “functions as a rich symbol of the feminine; it is the womb-sea of birth, it is the unconscious and sexuality, it is the water of rebirth and renewal as well as of death” (334). Soaking in the warmth of the sun, she lays in the shallows until she is “clean” (189) and she sees a loon which, she

says, “sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land” (189). She leaves her clothing in the water as an offering for the gods and goes in search of food, trusting that the land will provide for her as it does for animals. Allowing herself to surrender her will and trusting that nature will nurture her as a mother would enables a connection with the land, animals, and herself.

Danielle Schaub connects the narrator’s descent into madness to a reconnection with the landscape of her childhood and, through that process, her subject position and physical body. Schaub writes: “the novel’s construction of female subjectivity indeed results from an individual woman’s re-entry into mother earth as womb and her rebirth through an internalisation of the untampered Canadian landscape” (85). It is worth noting here, however, that Atwood’s treatment of the male-as-culture/female-as-nature dichotomies is not so straightforward; the lake that is central to the narrator’s journey is a man-made structure, imposed on the landscape by the logging industry (13) or the power company (137) for whom her father was a surveyor. Viewed in this way, the narrator’s descent into her self, into the landscape-body she internalises, is in actuality a (re)connection with a female-as-nature/landscape-body which is itself constructed and controlled by men, for the purposes and utility of the patriarchal culture which relies upon the resources that body provides. Nevertheless, her (re)connection with the landscape and the animals within it leads to her rejection of other trappings of civilized, consumerist human society.

Her indulgence of the urge to destroy and thus free the people she associates with those objects turns into a whole-scale rejection of human comforts: clothes, bedding, dishes, suitcases, canned food – because animals need none of these things – and so she keeps only a slashed blanket around her “until the fur grows” (188). Eventually, she has a

vision of her mother feeding the jays and then disappearing with them as though a shapeshifter or a jay herself; either way, her mother is not there with her.

Nancy Carter discusses maternal absence using Jungian psychoanalysis and the myth of Demeter and Persephone and cites a lack of celebration of mother-daughter relationships in modern Western culture as a site of alienation both for women and men. Carter emphasizes that the alienation women experience is not only from each other, but from themselves as well. In regard to *Surfacing*, Carter writes: “if she had managed to keep her mother idealized, flying and disappearing into the forest with her secrets, emerging to give magic words and gestures, she might never have found her own Demeter aspect” (335). In other words, the daughter cannot move into the mother aspect herself until the mother is de-mystified, and the narrator’s mother remains a magical kind of mystery possessing “a foolproof magic formula” for chasing away bears and protecting her children (81). She also has a knack for standing still enough that the blue jays eat seeds from her outstretched hands and eventually turns into a bird herself. In the hospital, she describes her mother as having “skin tight over her curved beak nose, hands on the sheet curled like bird claws clinging to the perch” (18). Not only is her mother associated with birds and the seasons which she tracked in her diaries, the narrator is certain that she carries some hidden knowledge.

The protagonist also had the idea that her mother had secret information she refused to share, because “my father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn’t tell” (73). According to Kathryn VanSpanckeren who reads the development of the protagonist in terms of alchemical transformations, “the vision of the mother with her birds faintly suggests the winged creatures of alchemy, and their nourishing power” (6). The ghostly vision of her

mother, however, is soon followed by one of her father, in quick succession but of very different effect.

The vision of her father “turns towards me and it’s not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you’ve stayed here too long alone” (199). According to Banko Gorjup, “the protagonist initiates the transformation from the rhetorical to the essential self by drifting into the dark dimension of an incantatory animalistic ritual which, once she has made her point and has had her vision, must itself be transcended if the essential self is to be fully realized” (44). The moment that she recognizes that the wolf, perhaps much like her father, “does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself” (199), she begins to come back to herself. When she goes to the garden fence where she saw the wolf she finds that in the muddy path “the prints are too small, they have toes; I place my feet in them and find that they are my own” (199). In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood reveals that the kind of ghost story *Surfacing* is similar to is “the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one’s own self which has split off” (18). Essentially, the visions of her parents are in fact the final bits of herself which she lost at some point in the past, bits which she can now put back into their place and move on, returning to the city and, presumably, to sanity.

That she does return is made obvious in the last few pages when she finds that “the rules are over. I can go anywhere now” (200) and Rosenberg writes: “that part-hallucinatory merger with the wilderness – has provided her with knowledge.... But it is also clear that what she has learned is tentative, less an absolute ethical formula from the mystic beyond, more a realization of the strengths and weaknesses of one’s humanity” (110). She sounds almost ready to forgive when she says she “can remember him, fake

husband... and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow. He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions” (201). Annis Pratt, however, has a contradictory opinion:

The problem, as we have seen, is that ‘insanity,’ whether literary or clinical, is often a perfect mirror of the feminine persona’s place within society, an image of the enclosure and of its victims, and thus the transformed hero who has survived this layer of her unconscious is unlikely to be able to reintegrate herself fully into ‘normal’ society. (142)

According to Gorjup, however, the narrator transcends the visions and madness because: “if the elemental alternative were accepted, the essential self would correspond to a woman turned beast or, even worse, to a being condemned to reside within an ontological world” (45). Thus, she needs to reassert her humanity in order to complete her development from that black and white, victim or killer mentality. Her newly realized capability and need for connection with others shows that she does recover herself and her sanity. She takes a step towards Joe’s voice rather than remaining hidden from him because she no longer wants to be alone, and there is nothing left for her at the cabin but ghosts.

Her return to the city is also necessitated by the child she believes she carries; she admits that: “I can’t know yet, it’s too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed” (203). As Nora Foster Stovel writes:

Surfacing is more than a matter of survival; it is a question of salvation. The protagonist’s parents have taught her that salvation requires the resurrection of death through the conception of life... As the lost child surfaces, the mother achieves her long-sought salvation. Once she has buried her past, she can embark on her future.” (55)

Annis Pratt writes: “She initiates herself into the mysteries of femininity through her mother and into those of the power of nature through both her mother and her father and

induces Joe to impregnate her as part of a process of creative solitude” (159). The movement from daughter to mother creates an unending chain backwards for her, from her to her mother and on back in time. Pratt posits that “the lost child only partially represents the aborted fetus: it also represents the hero’s lost childhood and her lost inner self” (160). Her (re)connection with self, mother, and child – inner or actual – represents the legacy of her maternal line and the possibility of transcending her freshly healed, formerly-fractured self.

For Irigaray, the point in questioning the basis of patriarchal culture and the trope of mad women is to create an understanding of the basis of psychoanalysis, its grounding in the Oedipus complex, and the various ways and means by which women are denied as legitimate creators of the children they bear. Through understanding the tools used to discredit and dismiss women as either mad or irrelevant, Irigaray posits, “we are empowered to leave a world of madness that is not our own, cease to fear the night, the unidentifiable” (18). The narrator’s descent into, and return from, a madness which she did not create is necessary in order to heal the splits in her psyche, splits which are her internalized responses to social alienation by the patriarchal culture.

The patriarchal order Atwood critiques is characterized by a pathological devaluation of the feminine which affects women as individuals through their connections with their own identity, their blood kin, their bodies, and the natural world. As indicated in the introduction, even Atwood positions the narrator of *Surfacing* as insane, but her madness is a purposeful process of rejection, reduction, and integration. She ritualistically and symbolically strips away the cultural impositions in order to expose an underlying state of existence with which to build connection. According to Barbara Hill Rigney, Atwood “invariably associates the female principle with nature; she deals, not with nature

as a woman, but rather with women as nature. Therefore, although nature is not a mother in Atwood's novel, the protagonist's mother is aligned with nature, at home with it as an extension of herself' (111). That female form holds different priorities and kinds of knowledge which destabilize her gender-based social alienation. Likewise, her awareness on an almost mystical-spiritual level of her connections with her parents and, through them to the natural world, becomes her knowledge-base and legacy. It is this legacy which she feels both enabled and compelled to carry with her from the wilderness, for the benefit of herself and the child she is certain she has conceived. This protagonist has an optimistic outlook as she turns away from victimhood and back towards Joe, leaving the stories and fantasies to her previous iteration. Turning next to Joan of *Lady Oracle*, we find another protagonist who uses narrative for her own ends, but Joan's purpose is to reinvent and reconfigure her present life after she fakes her own death.

CHAPTER FOUR: Battle of the Wills: The Monstrous Mother and Disaster-Inclined Daughter in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is her third novel and the only one considered here to include a detailed examination of a mother-daughter relationship which runs the spectrum of sentiment from ambivalence to anger. Joan and her mother both struggle for identity within a patriarchal culture which, as discussed in Luce Irigaray's essay "Women on the Market," relegates women to the status of commodities which are exchangeable only between men and, as such, whose value is dependent upon male sexual attraction and their need for social bonds with other men. Irigaray's discussion of women as commodities and fetish objects articulates the deeper social repercussions concerning how women relate to each other, their children, themselves, and the world around them. Viewed through this lens, the struggle between Joan and her mother is not due to anything inherent in them as people but is that of objects attempting to transcend their status as commodities within a system which is predicated upon their inability to do so. There are a few basic assumptions within the academic discourse around this novel which affect how Joan's mother is discussed by Atwood's commentators and critics. Challenging these assumptions provides ample opportunity for an analysis of the reactivity in the processes of resistance and internalization in subject (re)formation which occurs between a mother and daughter. Further, it reveals that their conflict stems not from a struggle based solely on contrary personalities but is indicative of externally driven pressures on their subject positions, a conflict which derives from their relative social statuses as mother and daughter, commodity and product.

Despite the importance of the protagonist's mother as a haunting influence on her daughter throughout the text, the academic discourse around *Lady Oracle* largely fails to

deeply engage with the mother's abiding presence, to the extent that most scholars do not even mention her by name: Frances Delacourt, or Fran. *Lady Oracle* exemplifies what Podnieks and O'Reilly discuss as a twentieth century literary development which focuses on "daughter-centric stories (those which privilege the daughter's voice)" (2). Podnieks and O'Reilly also write that it is only "within the last four decades, as motherhood studies has emerged as a distinct and established academic discipline, [that] this daughter-centricity has been countered and corrected in both fiction and theory" (2). Thus, only relatively recently has the experience of the mother, rather than the mothered, been articulated and voice given to those "becoming and being a mother from the perspective and subjectivity of mothers themselves" (2). In an interview with Cathrine Martens, Atwood notes that: "*Lady Oracle* is all about mother-figures. The whole book is about that. I think if *Surfacing* was a search for the "double parent," *Lady Oracle* is a search for "the real mother" (45). As *Lady Oracle* is a first-person narration by Joan, much of the academic discourse takes its cue from the narrator and focuses closely on Joan's experiences and development, while leaving Fran an often unnamed and generally monstrous force that haunts Joan's narrative.

In reading a first-person narration there tend to be conflicting assumptions about the authority of the narrator which need to be balanced carefully in analysis. For example, while on the one hand it is Joan's life story and therefore she has a certain level of authority on the subject, it must be remembered that her narrative perspective is just one version of the story, and that she has ulterior motives for how she tells it. Margery Fee points out that "the audience of Joan's first-person narration is, in fact, not only the reader, but also the reporter, a character in the novel. In fact, the reliability of Joan's story is compromised by her desire to look good in his eyes, since... she is also beginning to

find him rather attractive” (19). Thus, Joan, like the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, is the one in control of the narrative insofar as what she reveals, at what point she reveals it, and how she does so. It must also be noted that she shapes the narrative along the lines of the plots of her Gothic romance novels, as well as the Hollywood films and fairy tales with which she grew up. Her authoritative position as narrator, however, is questionable not only due to her motives for telling the story and how, but also because Joan is not really an “I” so much as a “we.” Joan’s belated realization of her own multiplicity renders her relationship with her mother problematic because Joan does not allow her mother the space in which she, too, can be viewed as multiple, choosing instead to cast Fran as a monster.

Sherrill Grace points out that, in positioning Joan as the creator of the narrative, *Lady Oracle* mimics the form of autobiography, through which “Atwood questions the human desire for origins and our construction of genealogies” (191). Additionally, Grace writes, autobiography as a form shifts in response to whether the Subject – the speaking “I” – is male or female:

When the Object of the Subject writing autobiographically is a she, the assumptions and codes of the genre shift dramatically. To begin with, the Self is not as easily posited as an individual, if to be individual must mean to be separate, discrete, bounded, distinct from the Object of its own discourse as well as from all others.... The female model for autobiography, like the female concept of identity, stresses interdependence, community, multiplicity and a capacity for identification *with* rather than *against*. (191)

Thus, *Lady Oracle* illustrates the interactive quality of the continual subject (re)formation of both mother and daughter throughout their relationship, a reflexive relativity and connection which continues despite absence and beyond death.

As in her earlier novels, Atwood works with a concept of identity as multiplicity rather than as a single, stable, unified whole, which further brings into question the

autobiographical “I” as a singular, unified concept. As Sherrill Grace points out, “there are, in fact, five Joans – Joan Delacourt the fat girl, Joan Foster the thin, beautiful wife, Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan the cult figure, and Joan the narrator of *Lady Oracle* who contains the other Joans” (126). Joan also involves other imaginary personalities such as the Fat Lady of her childish daydreams, and the latest of her fictional villain/heroine dualities created by Louisa K. Delacourt, Felicia and Charlotte. Joan is a multiple-faceted character and her eventual acceptance of that multiplicity is an important part of her development.

Joan’s realization that she is not the only multiple character, as evidenced by her statement near the end of the novel that “every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn’t even know about” (414). This realization is important for Joan’s development because by this logic even her mother is multiple, and it is the multiplicity of women, of wives in particular, which allows a more thorough reading of Fran’s presence in Joan’s narrative. The extent of the connection between mother and daughter or, viewed another way, the lack of definition of clear boundaries between Joan and Fran in Joan’s internal landscape, also brings the authority of Joan’s autobiographical “I” into question. Thus, Joan’s subject-position is problematic within a narrative that she purposely builds to recontextualize the past experiences which lead to her hiding out in Italy after faking her death. Essentially, then, at issue is how much of the narrative is constructed by Joan, and how much by Fran, and this is not a question with an easy answer, but echoes of Fran come through most strongly in Joan’s poetry.

One of the few examples of the narrative voice in Joan’s poetry asks:

Who is the one standing in the prow

Who is the one voyaging

...in the death boat, why does she sing (268).

It is only much later that Joan realizes that Fran is “the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn’t stand the view from her window, life was her curse” (399). Fran is also evident in situations such as when Joan says: “I noticed that my nightgown had a rip halfway down the seam, at thigh level... Why don’t you take better care of yourself, a voice said, don’t you want to make something of yourself?” (26). The question echoes the judgmental and demanding tone that Joan often attributes to Fran, and the presence of an external ‘voice’ in Joan’s internal landscape points towards Joan’s internalization of her mother’s judgments. That Fran’s words and tone break through Joan’s internal monologue without comment from Joan reveals the extent to which she is accustomed to Fran’s domination of her subject position, which further undermines Joan’s authority despite her position as a first-person narrator. Her position as narrator is also undermined in some ways by Joan’s tendency to incorporate or manipulate the narrative into the direction of her beloved gothic romances. While they appeal to Joan’s aesthetics, they do somewhat limit the directions her narrative can take and still fit with those tropes; Joan is not the only one who struggles to make her narrative fit those archetypes, however, as some of the scholars reading *Lady Oracle* do as well.

Numerous readings have looked at *Lady Oracle* through the lens of myths or fairy tales; Nancy Carter includes *Lady Oracle* in her application of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which is discussed more thoroughly in the chapter on *Surfacing*, but Carter has a more difficult time fitting *Lady Oracle* into the framework of the Demeter myth. Carter attributes that difficulty to Joan’s paradoxical rejection of her mother because

“underneath the apparent rejection she over-identifies with all the negative qualities she finds in the mother and ends up rejecting her own self” (338). As I discussed in the introduction, however, the reduction or limitation of either Fran or Joan to one side of the mother-daughter relationship is a false essentialization of their experiences and identities, an act which obscures how women relate to and through each other. The Demeter myth fits *Lady Oracle* much more easily, therefore, when Fran is recognized first as a daughter and secondarily as a mother because Fran casts herself as the central heroine in her story just as strongly as Joan does in her own first-person narrative. The result is that Fran views herself as the tragic victim or, using Shuli Barzilai’s discussion of *Lady Oracle* in terms of the gothic “Bluebeard Syndrome” and its two key roles – the mistreated woman and an enigmatic man who may turn out to be dangerous – Fran obviously believes herself to be the ‘mistreated woman’.

Like Joan, Fran tries to make her life fit that gothic pattern, but her husband, Phil, who specialized as an anesthesiologist to satisfy her social ambitions, is a quiet and mostly absent husband and father. Fran, however, tries to force him into that role of an enigmatic man when she drunkenly brags to their friends that during the war Phil killed people “up close” (86) and says “the funny thing is, he doesn’t like me to mention it... the funny thing is, he told me once that the frightening thing about it was, he started to *enjoy* it” (86). Later, Joan looks at her father speculatively after her mother’s death and resists the urge to imagine him as her mother’s murderer not because she cannot imagine him sneaking out of the hospital somehow during the day to push Fran down the stairs, but because such duplicity seems so outrageously out of character for Phil. Thus, both Fran and Joan try and fail to cast Phil in that role, and he eventually drifts out of Joan’s life. It is also possible that Joan dismisses him as an unnecessary prop as he did not attend her

wedding and he is not mentioned much after that point. According to Barzilai's reading, *Lady Oracle* is a novel which accomplishes Joan's self-invention even as it critiques the social forces which make the task necessary, but it is also a reflection of Atwood's denial of uncomplicated victimhood for any of her characters.

Fran's life story is related in fragments throughout the narrative but in chapter seven we find the bare bones of her biographical information. Fran's "parents had both been very strict, very religious... She'd done something that offended them – what it was I never learned – and she'd run away from home at the age of sixteen and never gone back" (77). This revelation fits with Joan's other gothic romance heroines, however, so the extent of the 'truth' behind this information is questionable, particularly in view of Joan's continual and compulsive fictionalization of the past in order to alter the present. Joan's tendency is to show Fran in a light which casts her as what Barbara Hill Rigney calls "a Walt Disney version of evil, an anomaly in Atwood's complex fictional world in which characters are seldom so simplistic" (64). Irigaray's "Women on the Market" however, enables a reading of Fran which is not based solely in Joan's narration but on Fran's status as a woman in a patriarchal culture founded on the exchange of women as commodities.

As indicated already, the primary premise of "Women on the Market" is that "the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (174) and, from that premise, Irigaray asserts that "the circulation of women among men is what establishes the operation of society, at least of patriarchal society" (184). While at home with her family, Fran would, in Irigaray's concepts, be her mother's product – a product which her mother would not have been compensated for producing – but which would bear the father's name, thereby marking her as a reflection of his wealth and status.

Transitioning from product into commodity requires, by Irigaray's notions, that women be "divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies': her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values" (180). Fran's value as a commodity depended not upon her personal estimation of her own value, or anything intrinsic or inherent in or about her: "the virginal woman... is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange" (185). Instead, Fran is extremely aware that her value, or worth, is based in male sexual attraction and enjoys some degree of popularity in her youth while living as a single woman. Unlike the earlier years of Fran's life, Joan has seen proof of this transitional period in her mother's life through the photos Fran keeps from her days as an independent, unmarried young woman.

In the photos, Fran wears "party dresses and bathing suits, with various young men, her looking at the camera, the young men looking at her. One young man recurred often, in white flannels, with a big motor car. She said she'd been engaged to him, more or less" (77). As proof of her past popularity, these photos are important to Fran because "commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man... [and a commodity's] ...value is never found to lie within itself" (Irigaray 178). Essentially, this means that the young men in the photos who are looking at her rather than the camera, do so because they see their own reflections in Fran. Further, "in order for a product – a woman? – to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) her" (181) and "woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex, constituted as a transcendental value: the phallus" (186). Thus, as a commodity/mirror in high demand, as evidenced by the numerous men she is pictured alongside, Fran's self-worth is contingent upon the man whose gaze she

captures. While her exchange value is correspondingly high, her external locus of self-worth is not a concern for her, but later, however, it becomes problematic when she marries Phil, effectively bringing an end to her youthful days of social popularity.

Early in the novel, Joan discloses the juicier bits of her parents' arguments she contrived to overhear, and she reveals statements from Fran such as: "it's not as though I wanted to have her. It's not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job if you ask me... You're a doctor, don't tell me you couldn't have done something" (89). Fran's decision to marry Phil, if predicated on pregnancy, would be in line with the patriarchal norms for mothers in the early 1940s in Canada. In Irigaray's words, women's "products [i.e., children] are legal tender... only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him" (184). For Fran's unborn child to have a place in the patriarchal social order, for them to grow into a commodity or, if male, to participate in the exchange of commodities, the child needs to have a father's surname to protect them. The monopoly on legitimization rests with men and their surnames in the patriarchal culture, a situation which leaves Fran little choice as a young woman.

As an unmarried mother, Fran would be a social outcast because "as both natural value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the existence of the social order" (184). The early years of Fran's experience as a wife and a mother are further complicated by Phil's absence due to World War II which leaves her to cope alone despite her marital status. Thus, Fran goes from a vibrant social life as a single woman whose self-worth and social capital is based not on her intrinsic qualities but on how she reflects men's qualities back to them, to what is basically isolation in single motherhood. The problem for Fran regarding motherhood is

that, in her case, the assumption that every woman is somehow naturally inclined to be a nurturing and loving mother is incorrect. For whatever reason, whether due to her home life as a child, or just simply a lack of desire to be a mother at all, she is not emotionally equipped to be the unconditionally loving and caring mother that women are expected to be, if any woman really is.

According to Joan, when she tried to help around the house as a child, Fran “wasn’t a very patient woman; she told me quite soon that she would rather do things right herself the first time than have to do them over again for me” (60). Fran treats Joan as an inept adult rather than as a child, while also shaming Joan for her emotions: “‘sometimes I think you haven’t got a brain in your head,’ my mother used to say. When I was crying, for some invalid reason or other. To her mind, tears were an evidence of stupidity” (90). Even in the face of genuine grief, Fran is relentless; Joan’s goldfish dies, and Fran tells Joan “it was my fault, I overfed it” (92). As a teenager, Joan says: “I disgraced myself at... [Aunt Lou’s] funeral by crying too much and too loudly” (142). Thus, Joan shows that she internalizes the criticism of her emotionality by Fran and comes to employ it against herself, as mentioned previously when the tear in her nightgown prompted that voice to ask: “don’t you want to make something of yourself?” (26). Fran’s denial of the validity of Joan’s emotional experience is a symptom of the split which Fran experiences as she looks at her daughter: for Fran, Joan is the monstrous one, the one Fran struggles with and against for self-definition in a process of rejection and internalization. That Fran’s version of self-definition requires a certain amount of conformity puts her into direct conflict with Joan, who is certain that she will never be able to conform to what Fran wants her to be, so she lashes out in the other direction

completely. As a result, neither of them is satisfied with who they are or who the other forces them to be.

Nora Foster Stovel sees Joan and Fran's relationship as one of "mirror reflections... [which] move in opposite directions" (57). In Joan's childhood, then, Fran would see Joan's presumed ineptitude and emotionality as a weakness which she, Fran, does not have – or has overcome – and therefore feels herself superior to Joan. Joan maintains that: "our relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product.... She wanted me to do well, but she wanted to be responsible for it" (76). The repression of Joan's own instincts is a key for Fran's 'success' in the venture, but it is her attempt to suppress Joan's imagination and fascination with plot which ultimately thwarts Fran. In one of the few essays which name Fran, Kiley Kapuscinski writes: "Joan inherits from her mother, Frances, and other women in her early life the notion that abiding social scripts of femininity means not pursuing one's own imaginative expression" (908). Fran has internalized the patriarchal norms around mothers, women, and girls which combines with what seems to be an internal self-hatred, all of which she turns on Joan. Fran has an instinct to keep Joan practical and focused on the things Fran views as important – such as her physical appearance – factors which lead Fran to some questionable, if not toxic, mothering moments.

Fran has a very specific idea of what her daughter should look like, what she should do, wear, and be; unfortunately for Joan, the manner with which Fran pressures Joan to conform to expectations pushes Joan further away from those kinds of performances of self. Resisting Fran's pressures, Joan transforms herself physically, overeating and gaining weight as insulation against her mother's acidic comments. Joan

persists until she absolutely cannot fit with her mother's ideal image of her in a way that cannot be hidden. Fran essentially tries everything she can, whether it is healthy for Joan or not, to get Joan to lose weight because, as Margery Fee points out:

Apart from the role of opera singer... fat women are offered no roles to play in our society that provide both respect and a good income. As Joan discovers, they are either invisible or far too obvious because they are not sexually attractive to men, and this makes it painfully clear that women's main social function, still, is to be attractive to men. (14)

Thus, Joan's refusal to lose weight is more than a child's stubborn denial of her mother's will over her; for Fran, Joan's body is an indictment of Fran's failure to live up to her responsibilities as a mother by failing to produce a young woman who can become a viable commodity.

Joan's overweight body reflects Fran's failure as a (re)producer, as a mother, and conflicts with the assumption at the basis of Fran's identity and sense of self-worth: male sexual attraction determines the value of a woman / commodity. This assertion is confirmed when Fran sends Joan to a – male – psychiatrist: “‘I like being fat,’ I told him, and burst into tears. He sat looking at me with the tips of his fingers together, smiling benevolently but with a trace of disgust as I gasped and puffed... ‘Don’t you want to get married?’ he asked” (95). The problem for Fran, then, is not that Joan is fat and therefore possibly unhealthy or ill; rather, the problem is that Fran's personal self-worth is determined by male attention, which her daughter is not the focus of, so Fran is cut off from even a vicarious enjoyment of that attention. No matter how she tries to address her daughter's weight, however, Joan stubbornly refuses to change for her mother's sake, as though sensing that is another trap and that if she falls for it, then Fran will be smug and belittle Joan for that as well. Thus, Joan continues to eat, and Fran continues to judge and

berate her for it while also baking cakes and leaving them unattended in the kitchen in not-so-subtle acts of sabotage masked as mothering.

Fran's neglect in the academic discourse also reflects her powerlessness within her own life, which is in keeping with Nancy Peled's assertion that domineering mothers in literature have "subjugated their daughters not by choice, but as a result of the lack of their own power within the framework of their lives" (59). Similarly, Irigaray discusses the powerlessness of women as a necessary aspect of the exploitative social structure which is built upon their exchange as commodities, and which they are unable to break free of since all mothers' "responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it" (184). Thus, Fran is powerless within the academic discourse, as well as in the novel, because as a mother within a patriarchal culture, Fran faces constraints which force her into perpetuating the system which oppresses and exploits her. Powerless and accessed only through her relationship with Joan, Fran is a powerful influence nevertheless because Fran is a pervasive presence, but one key image in the text is that of Joan watching Fran at work in front of her tri-fold vanity mirror.

The process Fran undertakes, which young Joan so avidly describes, of watching "Mother put on her face" (74) is a complex moment in the text. From Joan's perspective, Fran sits before her vanity table's triple mirror in order to transform her appearance using all kinds of mysterious processes, products, and brushes. Joan thinks that Fran does not seem happy about the results:

She often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied.... Instead of making her happier, these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate; and when she was finished she was always a little cross. (75)

Fran is 'a little cross' because her finished appearance does not measure up to the idealized vision in her head, or perhaps even that of her own appearance as a younger woman. Though Joan later has a recurring dream of her mother sitting before that mirror and having, instead of three reflections, "three actual heads" (75), which is a moment greatly discussed in the academic discourse, there is more going on here than Joan realizing a "truth about my mother" (75). The figuration of a triple reflection is an echo of *The Edible Woman* when Marian looks at herself in her bedroom mirror which is flanked by two dolls, and somehow Marian manages to see herself through their eyes as well as seeing her own reflection between them. This moment has deeper implications for Joan than a simple case of a child turning her mother into a monstrous figure for the purposes of rejection, and thereby the facilitation of a separate sense of self. When viewed through the lens of Irigaray's work, both Fran and Joan are participating in acts which are tied to their respective roles as producer and product.

Firstly, Fran is engaging in an activity required of her by a patriarchal system in which she is a commodity. Irigaray writes that: "the division of 'labor' – sexual labor in particular – requires that woman maintain in her own body the material substratum of the object of desire" (187). Fran thereby is engaging in an activity which is intended to make her attractive to men which, as mentioned previously, is strongly tied to Fran's assessment of her own self-worth. Secondly, Fran is assuming a subject position while looking at her reflection as an object, thus mimicking the male gaze to evaluate her results while distancing herself from the body reflected in the mirror. Irigaray maintains that "for the commodity, there is no mirror that copies it so that it may be at once itself and its 'own' reflection" (178). In other words, Fran is undergoing a schism whereby she cultivates an un-natural form in order to produce a body with social or exchange value, a

value which is based on her comparison to other commodities, a comparison which is ultimately accomplished by men.

So, where once her beauty regimen garnered her male attention based on her beauty, now Fran goes through the process in order to create and maintain an appearance which reflects her husband's wealth and status as a doctor. Additionally, as a married woman and a mother she is not viewed as an exchangeable commodity any longer, filling the role of producer instead. This change in status means that Fran's insistence upon her careful self-presentation and the importance that she places upon the male gaze for her feelings of self-worth are at distinct odds with the outcome. Her husband, Phil, does not seem to be outwardly appreciative of her efforts, and he is largely silent in the novel, if not absent. For example, when she put on the dinner party at which she entertained the guests with tales of Phil's wartime experience, she invited people and "paid no attention when he said that it didn't matter one iota to his career whether she had these people to dinner or not.... When she finally realized he'd been telling the truth, she stopped giving dinner parties and began drinking a little more heavily" (84). There is a sense that Fran blames Joan for her loss of identity, but the reality of that relationship dynamic leads Fran to deeper despair when Joan finally starts to lose the weight Fran has been pushing her to lose for years.

In order to claim her inheritance from Aunt Lou, money which would fund her flight from Fran's home, Joan begins to lose weight of her own initiative. Stovel points out that Joan and Fran reflect each other but move in opposite directions, so that: "as Joan becomes increasingly emancipated, her mother becomes correspondingly despondent" (57). Joan's teenage intractability regarding her body suits Fran's concept of herself as a

victim, as a put-upon mother with an overweight, unattractive child which Fran is helpless to do anything about.

The extent to which that helplessness is true is, of course, debatable; Fran may have sent Joan to a psychiatrist, but “he told my mother it was a family problem which couldn’t be resolved by treating me alone, and she was indignant. ‘He has his nerve,’ she said to my father. ‘He just wants to get more money out of me. They’re all quacks, if you ask me.’” (99). In other words, Fran finds blaming Joan for their conflict acceptable, but as soon as the larger family context – which includes her – is posited as a problem, she refuses to continue paying the psychiatrist and does not suggest finding another one. Aside from a likely fear that psychoanalysis would reveal her as the problem rather than the victim, Fran believes she has tried so many ways to get Joan to lose weight that success seems impossible. Indeed, without Joan’s determination to leave home, combined with the incentive of the inheritance from Aunt Lou and an infection from an unfortunately placed arrow wound, it might have been impossible.

As Joan starts to lose weight, Fran comments, “it’s about time, but it’s probably too late” (146) and later, when Joan starts to see results from essentially starving herself, Fran says that the weight loss will destroy her health. Joan says, “she went on baking sprees and left pies and cookies around the kitchen where they would tempt me, and it struck me that in a lesser way she had always done this” (146). As Joan slims down, men start to consider her with “a speculative look, like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant” (146) and Fran grows more “distracted and uncertain” (146) and starts drinking more heavily than ever. The mirror-reflection relationship between Fran and Joan is such that, as Joan takes control of her body and her life, Fran loses control over her own. Fran has by this point moved from commodity to producer, virgin to mother, and there is no other role for her to

move to as a married, empty-nest mother. Fran's sense of identity is precarious, but her descent into alcoholism coincides with a sudden lack of effort put into her appearance. Fran's obviously disturbed mental state and large amounts of scotch precipitate the final, poisonous, confrontation between Joan and Fran.

After school one day, Joan comes home and is confronted by Fran who "wandered in from the living room, a glass of Scotch in one hand, still in her pink dressing gown and furred mules" (147). When Joan tells Fran how close she is to claiming her inheritance and moving out, Fran becomes violent:

She looked at me with an expression of rage, which changed quickly to fear, and said, "God will not forgive you! God will never forgive you!" Then she took a paring knife from the kitchen counter... and stuck it into my arm, above the elbow.... Neither of us could believe she had done this. (148)

Fran's response is bizarre, not only because of her unsettled mental state and physical attack on Joan, but because Fran "had never been a religious woman" (148). There is in this statement a bit of a conflict, because Joan also says: "my mother went to church for social reasons; she'd subjected me to several years of Sunday school" (123) but this is the only point at which Fran mentions God, and the only obviously violent act she makes against Joan; for whatever reason, Fran until this moment has satisfied herself with verbal and emotional abuse rather than physical.

Fran may not have been religious in Joan's experience but, as Joan relates, Fran's parents were "very strict, very religious" and "she'd done something that offended them" (77), resulting in her departure from her father's house as an unmarried young woman. Fran's response to Joan's impending departure, violent and uncharacteristically out of control, has the feel of an automatic response to a deep emotional wound, a reaction which perhaps echoes her own mother's voice when Fran left home. There is nothing in

the novel that mentions this specifically, but it is supported in terms of how Fran's voice intrudes upon Joan's subject position. If Fran can intrude on Joan, it is reasonable to assume that Fran, a daughter long before she becomes a mother, also undergoes the same basic development as Joan and, like Joan, ends up with her mother's voice tangled up with her own.

The process of differentiation between mother and daughter is one of tension and pressure, of internalization and integration versus resistance and rejection, of the norms and statuses that the mothers and daughters represent for each other, and those that the heteronormative and patriarchal culture puts on them. There is a point at which a person's individual will or sovereignty of self comes into question, at which point the external pressures become internalized and can no longer be separated from the individual as originating outside of them. As Margery Fee puts it:

We are born into a language and culture that structures us far more than we structure it. Although we are taught to believe that we are free to choose as individuals what is best for us, in fact the possibilities are stringently limited, not only by our talents and tastes, but also by our class, our race, and our gender. (14)

While Fee goes on to analyze how this applies to Joan's sabotaged butterfly ballet scene, it also applies to how Fran experiences her life in a long fall from youthful popularity to the dejected, depressed, alcoholic, and dead woman at the bottom of her basement stairs.

Fran begins to haunt Joan long before her death, however; attending the spiritualist 'church' with Aunt Joan and her boyfriend, teen-aged Joan is told that "there's a woman standing behind your chair" (130) and the description is of a woman in a navy-blue suit which Joan recognizes as her mother. Speaking to Leda Spratt, the medium says that "I had the feeling she's been trying to contact you for some time. She must be very concerned about you" (131). Joan does not believe Leda because Fran's "concern always

meant pain” (131) and so, Joan never returns to the little ‘church’ sessions. When Fran shows up a second time, Joan can see her: “in her navy-blue suit with the white collar.... Her face was made up, she’d drawn a bigger mouth around her mouth with lipstick, but the shape of her own mouth showed through.... she was crying, soundlessly, horribly; mascara was running from her eyes” (208). Joan learns five days later through a telegram from her father that her mother died the day that Joan saw her in the living room in London, England. Joan decides that she must go back to Canada because she “needed to know she was really dead” (210) and that the telegram from her father was not somehow a trick by her mother to get Joan to come home. Joan, after the visitation of her mother’s spirit, rearranges the furniture as Leda Sprott suggested years earlier, in hopes of confusing her spirit and keeping her from returning. Joan never goes back to the house which is also a ‘church’ but it is Leda Sprott who tells Joan that she has “great powers” (132) and should attend the workshop called “Automatic Writing, on Wednesdays” (132). Leda Sprott warns Joan that trying automatic writing “without supervision there’s some danger” (132). Years later, when she does place a candle in front of a mirror to go into the required trance, Joan takes a little while to get onto the knack of it but persists. She eventually uses the fragments of automatic writing to create her poetry, which is received with considerable acclaim.

Joan is credited with writing the volume of poetry, also titled *Lady Oracle*, and it is Joan’s work but, in typical Atwoodian style – it also is not *only* hers. Through the vehicle of automatic writing, Joan disowns it; first by the method itself, and then by saying that it came from her mother. As presented in *Lady Oracle*, automatic writing is supposed to enable Joan to tap into the spiritual realm and to interact with the spirits of the dead, but Atwood’s use of it allows access to Joan’s subconscious. As a child, Joan

says that she is the only one who knows that Fran really is “a monster” (75), and, as mentioned previously, Joan watches Fran put on her makeup and later dreams that Fran “had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks” (75). After her mother’s death, Joan becomes determined to try automatic writing and sets a candle in front of her own triple mirror where “there was more than one candle, there were three, and I knew that if I moved the other two sides of the mirror toward me there would be an infinite number of candles” (266). Joan goes into the mirror in order “to find someone. I needed to find someone” and (266), according to Barbara Godard, Joan did find someone – she found Fran. Godard suggests that in this passage “the monstrous mother is a projection of the daughter” (20), a tool in the process of differentiation which Irigaray locates in the commodification of women. Irigaray writes:

Just as nature has to be subjected to man in order to become a commodity, so, it appears, does ‘the development of a normal woman.’ A development that amounts, for the feminine, to subordination to the forms and laws of masculine activity. The rejection of the mother – imputed to woman – would find its “cause” here. (186)

Irigaray’s concepts support the reading that the rejection is not linked to either Joan or Fran as people or personalities, but to their positions as commodities and products. As a commodity, Fran is a “dual entity as soon as its value comes to possess a phenomenal form of its own, distinct from its natural form: that of exchange value” (181). The monstrosity of Fran, then, is not connected to Fran’s body, personality, or behaviours, but to the culture which divides her and ignores her ‘natural form’. Godard’s point about the automatic writing is that Joan “goes on to recognize that she can never make this mother, this vortex, this dark vacuum, happy, and she should stop trying and just let things be” (21). Similarly, Emily Jensen points out that, with this realization, “Joan moves from the despair of not being able to please others through to the victory of knowing that such

dependency on the approval of others is self-defeating” (44). Jensen also posits that the automatic writing process, and the poetry that Joan produces through it, accomplish much more than simply recognizing the futility of holding onto the angst over her dead mother.

Emily Jensen views the poetry Joan generates through automatic writing as momentous because the key images reveal how Joan relates to her mother. Jensen writes that Joan “comes to realize that her mother is the inspiration behind [the poems] ... Not only is her mother the voice behind the poems, she is also the primary subject of them” (42). Fran, long after her death, has thus taken over the authorial Subject position in Joan’s poetry, while also being its subject:

At first the sentences centered around the same figure, the same woman. After a while I could almost see her: she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me. She wasn’t like anyone I’d ever imagined. (269)

Jensen’s reading of Fran as the narrative voice offering up the image of the mysterious woman in this passage, combined with the multiplicity inherent in Joan, and in Fran, brings into question how stable Joan’s Subject position is within the narrative, as well as whether she creates or merely records her poetry.

It is also possible, however, to read Fran as the subject in poetry which Joan has put together from a well-established Subject position she does not openly own up to. Unlike Elaine of *Cat’s Eye*, Joan tends to disavow her role in the creation of her artistic work because, having seen the movie *The Red Shoes*, Joan knows the pitfalls of being an artistic woman: she would have to choose between her creativity and Arthur. As a teenager watching the dancer on the screen commit suicide rather than making the choice between her dancing and her husband, Joan says “I wanted those things too, I wanted to dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor, both at once” (93). Thus, her

duplicity in regard to the authorship of her work is a necessary fiction for her to get what she wants: both the man and the art. Her purposeful subterfuge is evidenced by her use of a pen name and in the fact that Arthur has no idea that she writes gothic romance novels, much less that writing those novels is how she manages to pay their bills. So, while Joan is tapping into her subconscious, or her less consciously ordered mind, the images that she pulls up are of her mother when she decides that they are; it is far easier for her to attribute a haunting by Fran as the source of her words than to admit that she meant to become a successful poet on purpose.

Fran and Joan are in a constant struggle with each other for identity, and Joan has internalized her mother's judgmental voice to the extent that she seems, at times, unaware of it. They engage in a tug-of-war of resistance and internalization which is a convoluted relationship in which neither of them can really be said to come out ahead. Instead, they sabotage each other and seem incapable of breaking the deadlock, or of walking away from the struggle for their own welfare. According to Alan Dawe, comparing Atwood's first two novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, "make[s] the reader aware that beneath the apparently comic surface of *The Edible Woman* another emotion runs – and it is rage" (5). That rage underlies *Lady Oracle* as well, but it is Fran who carries it most explicitly as she feels trapped and underappreciated, stuck in a marriage she did not want due to the arrival of a daughter she had not planned on having. The result is that Fran's voice comes through in many ways, sometimes subtly and at other times explicitly, but it is usually apparent that, quite frankly, Fran is angry, and she directs that anger at Joan regardless of the actual source of the wrongs. Fran and Joan are in a continual process of differentiating themselves from each other, a process which began when they were first physically separated into two individual bodies, and a process which continues to Fran's

grave and beyond as Joan rises from a faked death to make herself anew. The grave is a familiar place for the protagonist of the next novel: Elaine Riskey of *Cat's Eye*, through a childish game with dark undertones and intent, learns that some things will never be buried completely and, from her brother, that “nothing ever goes away” (3) no matter how long or far you travel.

CHAPTER FIVE: “Hatred Would Have Been Easier”: Mothers, Daughters, and the (Fe)Male Gaze in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*

Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988) is a novel about identity and female subject formation which juxtaposes Elaine Riskey’s first-person, auto-biographical text with her descriptions of her paintings and the explicitly feminist interpretations imposed upon them – and by extension, upon her – by others. Triggered by her return to Toronto after an absence of several decades, Elaine’s act of creating her narrative is a personal re-constitution and re-inscription through which she incorporates long-repressed childhood memories and reflects upon her life and the forces which shape her sense of self. *Cat’s Eye* explores the many ways by which mothers and daughters are not only oppressed by the heteronormative patriarchal culture that permeates their lives, but are ultimately blamed – by others and often, perversely, themselves – for the acts of oppression which perpetuate and maintain the status quo, while leaving the underlying mechanisms of oppression unaltered, thereby assuring their perpetuation. Elaine’s access to those long-lost memories, and the retrospective show which brings her paintings together in one place and time, enable Elaine to reflect and come to terms with the co-creative processes of subject-formation which have affected her life.

Elaine’s narrative is guided by her statement on the first page, that “time is not a line but a dimension.... you don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away” (3). Implicit in this is the idea that her past influences how she experiences her present self, even if the actual memories are repressed and not consciously available. Elaine is haunted by people from her past, particularly Cordelia, her childhood bully and teenage friend, and Mrs. Smeath, the mother of another of her childhood friends, who is

depicted in many of Elaine's paintings. The narrative is anchored in Elaine's experience of the fictional present in the days around her show and alternates between bits of her present and long episodes from her past until her narrative catches up to her present.

Although Elaine's narrative is largely chronological, Sherrill Grace points out that: "events are not laid out causally... they do not build to a decisive climax, some point from which Elaine can look back and say that everything culminates in and is made sense of by this event, this achievement, this *now*" (201). Nevertheless, Elaine is unequivocal about how she divides her narrative, if not her sense of self, when she says: "until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (22). This statement is darkly foreshadowing as it introduces the idyllic portion of her life while simultaneously suggesting the certainty of its ending in misery. As Janine Rogers writes, Elaine's early years are "depicted as a sort of Edenic prehistory to Elaine's life: a dark, leafy, earthy, timeless period in which she is more aware of the world around her than she is of her own existence" (6). While Elaine's youth during that time period contributes to Rogers' perspective on the atmosphere of this section of the narrative, Elaine's sublimation within the family dynamic at this point is also significant, because Elaine's parents recognize only the division between adult and child and do not discriminate between Elaine and Stephen on the basis of their gender.

Socially isolated, the siblings are left to their unstructured play and, when adult discipline is necessary, Stephen and Elaine are treated together and equally, no matter who starts the fight or why, which means that "we don't tell on each other.... the satisfactions of betrayal are scarcely worth it" (27). The sense of equality and solidarity between the siblings is obvious, and no apparent limitations or special considerations are put on Elaine because she is a girl; instead, she is encouraged towards inquisitiveness and knowledge just as Stephen is. Janine Rogers posits that "for the classical scientist like Dr.

Risley, observational science liberates the individual, encourages critical thinking and compassion toward others, and builds bridges between diverse communities” (6). In her analysis of the relationships between fathers and daughters in the patriarchal culture shown in *Cat's Eye*, Sally Karmi goes so far as to say that Dr. Risley “brought up Elaine and Stephen, his son, in a gender free environment. He talked to them about scientific experiments and environmental concerns” (127). While it is accurate to say that Dr. Risley’s active role as a parental presence rather than as a distant authority figure, and his dinner lectures can be viewed as indications of an egalitarian attitude, it is impossible to ignore gender as an organizing force at work within and around the Risley family once they do settle in Toronto.

As discussed in the chapter about *Surfacing*, in *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray states that “Hegel is unable to think of the family as anything but a single substance within which particular individuals lose their rights” (1). Irigaray also writes that: “*gender is always subservient to kinship*.... [because] the family serves the interests of property, of material patrimony, and of the reproduction of children. The family is not a small unit in which individual differences can be respected and cultivated” (4). What this means for Elaine in a practical way is that Dr. Risley’s work dictates the family’s nomadic existence, and their later seasonal patterns of movement between Toronto and the bush camps.

The centrality of Dr. Risley in the family dynamic is illustrative of the heteronormative patriarchal nuclear family concept which leads Elaine to conclude that “all fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers. But fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power” (187). Dr. Risley is an exception in Elaine’s mind not only because he is her father and

therefore familiar to her, but because he is a participatory father, unlike the distant authority figures the other fathers in the novel are. Despite her positioning of her father as an exception, however, Dr. Risley's work dictates where they live and that, by extension, determines the clothes they wear and what is defined as acceptable behaviour, both of which are defined along the lines of gender.

Like the women called "Madame" in *Surfacing*, Mrs. Risley's first name is never revealed, nor are those of the other adult women from Elaine's childhood. For example, even at her retrospective show in middle age, Elaine refers to one of the primary figures in her paintings as 'Grace's mother' or 'Mrs. Smeath' with no indication that Elaine even knew her first name or would ever dream of using it. Irigaray views the variability of women's names as one implication of how "male and female genealogies are collapsed into a single genealogy: that of the *husband*" (2). This collapse has further consequences in Irigaray's view:

This means that the love between mother and daughter, which the patriarchal regime has made impossible (as Freud in fact reinforces for our benefit), has been transformed into the woman's obligation to devote herself to the cult of the children of her legal husband and to the husband himself as male child. (2)

Thus, Dr. Risley and his career are the underlying causes for the family's nomadic life, and when he is hired as a professor at the University of Toronto the nomadic life becomes seasonal as the family settles in a house in Toronto. Elaine notes that her father's appearance alters to include ties and jackets, but that it is her mother who undergoes the biggest change as she starts to wear dresses, lipstick, nylons, and "a coat with a grey fur collar and a hat with a feather in it that makes her nose look too long" (37). For Mrs. Risley, however, there are additional implications not for the type of work that she does

every day, but certainly in the fact that they now have a permanent home and other social expectations to deal with which do not apply in the isolated bush camps.

Mrs. Risley and the other mothers do what Marian of *The Edible Woman* supposes her friend Clara *should* be doing: the daily tasks of cleaning, cooking, child rearing, and shopping, all of which are unpaid, and therefore unrecognized and unvalued, labour. In Irigaray's view, "when we ask a woman to work for nothing, when we, as women, refuse to accept or seek society's remuneration for our work, that constitutes a *repression*, or a *willingness to acquiesce*" (S&G 81). Thus, Irigaray acknowledges that, while for some women the heteronormative nuclear family is what they want in life and they are willing – if not happy – to submit to the patriarchal culture by staying at home with their children, for others it is oppressive. No matter how egalitarian her relationship with Dr. Risley is, Mrs. Risley is sequestered in the home and the domestic sphere and is therefore limited to a social sphere consisting of women and children.

Born in the middle of World War II, Elaine does not question the logic or equity behind the gendered division of labour until she is herself a mother in the 1960s and Second Wave feminism catches up with her. Irigaray maintains that "as long as women never become conscious of this repression, as long as they ignore and deny it, they will perpetuate it. It is thought to be normal, moral, a sign of good policy, for a woman to receive no payment, or low payment, to be asked to do *charity work*" (S&G 82). This is evidenced in Elaine's experience after she marries, when her daughter is about two and she joins a meeting of women who ask questions Elaine has never considered before. "Why, for instance, do we shave our legs? Wear lipstick? Dress up in slinky clothing? Alter our shapes? What is wrong with the way we are?... What is wrong with us the way we are is men" (386). As a married woman in the group, referred to as "'nukes,' for

nuclear family” (387), Elaine feels as though she is on shaky ground because “if you stay with the man, whatever problems you are having are your own fault” (387). Elaine, in her tumultuous marriage with Jon, discovers that what she thought as a child holds true for her marriage: “in the daily life of houses, fathers are largely invisible” (10). As an adult, however, she feels the disparity inherent in the family unit’s organization around gendered divisions of labour, and the deeper implications which go beyond the individuals of the household.

By gendering the organization of individual households, the heteronormative nuclear family serves a further function in the overall social organization of the patriarchal culture. As Molly Hite explains:

The panoptic goal of individualizing subjects by partitioning them off in enclosures is insured by the institution of the nuclear family and its postwar containment in the single-family house, a unit that serves the disciplinary purpose of fixing hitherto nomadic populations like Elaine’s own family. In particular, such houses pin down mothers, who are supposed to occupy them continually... (141)

Thus, Elaine’s mother, and all the mothers Elaine knows as a child, perpetuated a structure which is accepted by some women but is experienced as oppression by others. For Elaine, growing up in the 1950s in Toronto, gender creates a means by which the family is sub-divided regarding labour and expectations, though less so in her home than in those of her friends. Likewise, between households the relative social class and income levels of the families greatly affect the experiences of mothers and daughters.

Davey posits that Elaine’s friends are representative of “three clearly distinguished class-based practices – the working-class evangelical-church-attending Smeath family, the middle-class family of their friend Carol, and the upper-middle-class family of Elaine’s persecutor, Cordelia” (235). Certainly, class differences are apparent in

the various households, which affect the ways that these women accomplish the work of daily living in their homes. Cordelia's mother has a "cleaning lady... [who] is called the woman" (80) who does the housework while Cordelia's mother is "tiny, fragile, absent-minded" (81). Mrs. Smeath, however, "has big hands, knuckly and red from the wash" (64), and wears unfashionable housedresses and bibbed aprons while Mrs. Campbell, Carol's mother, is partial to twin sets and pageboy hairstyles. Elaine suddenly finds herself lacking knowledge that seems so important to her friends; for the first time she is aware of people going to church every Sunday, that her family is not wealthy, and that she has no idea what a 'twin-set' or 'page-boy' are. Her first friend at school, Carol, "tells everyone at school that our family sleeps on the floor. She gives the impression that we do this on purpose, because we're from outside the city; that it's a belief of ours... it's as if she's reporting on the antics of some primitive tribe: true, but incredible" (55). Thus, while Elaine may be grouped in the middle class insofar as her father's income and lifestyle are concerned, Elaine is nevertheless singled out by her peers as unusual, a situation she responds to with shame.

Elaine's belief that there is something 'wrong' with her, that she needs her friends to monitor and correct her behaviour, is not unique to her – all of her friends want to fit in – but it is taken to the extreme in Elaine's case. Molly Hite points out that "*Cat's Eye* shows the more subtle means by which the relatively liberal society both marginalizes middle-class girls as a group and individualizes each girl, making her responsible for her own marginalization" (138). Elaine closely observes her friends, their mothers, their houses, and how their homes are kept, and it is through these comparisons that Elaine learns that "there's something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women" (87) and notes that although her teacher "is not what anyone thinks of as a girl, she is also not

a boy” (91). The desire to avoid social rejection is implanted early on in Elaine’s psyche, and she is motivated by shame to do whatever she has to in order to fit in with her friends, but her sense of shame has deeper, more devastating consequences for her psyche.

Laura Martocci discusses the power of shame, and she writes: “shame indicts. It dissolves the hived self, correlating what one has done with who one is. Inadequacies and flaws, once sequestered in the context of behaviours... come to frame identity, betraying essence and impeaching character” (154). Elaine accepts the bullying by her friends because she genuinely believes that it “is for my own good, because they are my best friends and they want to help me improve” (131). As a child, Elaine is unable to perceive her friends’ behaviours as bullying because, as Irigaray writes, “it is only after the fact that the subject might possibly be able to analyze his determination as such by the social structure” (WOTM 188). Thus, it is not until Elaine removes herself from that social situation that she can properly put it into perspective, as she does as a middle-aged woman looking back at a past that she can finally see for what it was. The key moment of recognition in the novel comes for Elaine when, cleaning out the basement of her mother’s house, she finds her old purse with her favourite blue cat’s eye marble in it. Disappointed that her mother does not know her well enough to know that the marble is Elaine’s and not her brother’s, it is a pivotal moment for Elaine because: “I look into it, and see my life entire” (449). Finally, she can remember the year of torment at the hands of Cordelia and the others, the memories of which allow her to tell what she feels is a complete story about her life. As a child Elaine may be motivated by shame to submit to her ‘friends,’ but shame also prevents her from reaching out to her family, even to her brother with whom she shares a special bond, for help.

The overall absence of men from the early portions of the novel creates a situation in which the female characters are often read simply as cruel oppressors who victimize each other for some kind of satisfaction in their otherwise powerless and bitter existence. Molly Hite points out that “many reviewers’ responses to *Cat’s Eye* have indicated how eagerly readers will seize on an opportunity to assign blame – most obviously, to blame female characters for Elaine’s victimization, without taking into account anything of the political surroundings of this victimization” (155). In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Luce Irigaray discusses this sort of victimization as a by-product of the patriarchy, which is invested in the erasure of women from the public sphere by virtue of its need to maintain the status quo of the exchange of women by men as commodities. This is an exchange which, as discussed in previous chapters, Irigaray posits is the ultimate basis of patriarchally-organized cultures. Isolated physically and socially by the nuclear family unit in their individual houses, women are also restricted from full participation in their social communities based on their gender.

In her discussion of the denial of women’s participation in their community at large on the basis of their gender, Irigaray makes this statement:

Forbidden to celebrate ritual or to participate in social institutions, women are reduced to the polemics and rules of the private sphere. Women are habitually confined to the home and to relations with other women, with children, with mothers and daughters.... Revenge is taken, outside of law or right, in the form of private attacks, whether concerted or not.... [preventing a sense of sorority]. Real murders occur as well as (if the two can be separated) cultural murders, murders of the spirit, the affections, the intelligence, that women perpetuate among themselves. (85)

Thus, the treatment of Elaine by her peers, and her ultimate betrayal by Mrs. Smeath, can be explained as a particular consequence stemming from the social isolation and oppression of women inherent within the heteronormative nuclear family unit.

Molly Hite connects that alienating experience to female identity more explicitly, writing: “the anxiety attendant on achieving full feminine identity comes from the requirement that the adult woman internalize the permanent belief in her need for improvement.... The mitigating factor is that she can also... police other women and female children” (142). Whether connected to female identity, or to the denial of women’s full participation in their communities, the conflict between women and their daughters is also the result of the simultaneous and conflicting social pressures which both valorize motherhood and vilify mothers.

As previously noted, in “Women on the Market” Irigaray emphasizes that every mother’s “responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender... only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him” (184). Nancy Peled discusses the inability of mothers to protect their children from the patriarchal social pressures which, she writes, is because “the mother, or the mother substitute, is invested in propagating the ‘law of the father’ and functions as an enforcer of social norms that denigrate women, to the detriment of her daughter” (49). Similarly, Sally Karmi writes that: “to be accepted within the social structure, girls must become collaborators, disciplining and persecuting other girls and women. Conversely, they must be obedient and submissive in their relationships with men” (125). Thus, the women and girls who bully Elaine are responding to the pressures to submit while also attempting to preserve their sense of self, a situation which Atwood illustrates through Cordelia.

Cordelia, whose motives are not apparent until later in the novel, is the ringleader of Elaine’s bullying, but some readings view her as a complicated victim rather than an

uncomplicated aggressor. Carol Osborne remarks that “Cordelia is simply acting out of the loneliness and rejection she feels within her own family, even echoing her parents’ words in her reprimands of Elaine” (102). Bethan Jones also views the cycle of abuse as a sequence or chain and characterizes Cordelia’s treatment of Elaine as “a method by which [Cordelia] can acquire power, dominance and popularity, thus deflecting the impact of her own cruel treatment onto another” (38). In Molly Hite’s analysis, “Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category ‘girl’ and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of the patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their own fathers” (137). Other readings view Elaine and Cordelia as inextricably linked in a mirroring relationship; Gillian Alban describes Cordelia and Elaine as “two girls trapped in a perniciously symbiotic *doppelgänger* gaze” (163). Similarly, Nicole de Jong writes: “Elaine’s relationship to Cordelia is marked by mirror images that divide them into Self and Other, Subject and Object, or two halves of a twin” (99). In other words, when Elaine and Cordelia look at each other, each feels shame for her own lacks and shortcomings while seeing elements of the Ideal Other embodied in the other girl. The shame they each feel precludes them from reaching out to anyone for help, particularly Elaine, who believes that she deserves the treatment she gets at Cordelia’s instigation, but cannot completely hide the situation from her mother.

Mrs. Risley is aware that Elaine is experiencing conflict with her friends, at least in a general sort of way, as she tells Elaine “to have more of a backbone” (178); unfortunately, Elaine inverts the message from the intended support into an undermining criticism. Mentally connecting her own backbone to that of sardines, Elaine thinks: “this must be what my own backbone is like: hardly there at all. What is happening to me is my own fault, for not having more backbone” (178). Additionally, Mrs. Risley says “I wish I

knew what to do” (178) which Elaine latches onto as “a confession. Now I know what I’ve been suspecting: as far as this thing is concerned, she is powerless” (178). Elaine resists the opportunity to unburden herself, and Mrs. Risley, consequently, is denied the opportunity to help her without invading Elaine’s privacy. Kiriaki Massoura writes that: “by showing the power struggles between girls and women, Atwood questions the social pressure on women to express sisterhood, to confide in each other and be supportive of each other” (219). In this instance, Elaine’s internalized shame prevents her from telling on her ‘friends’ while Mrs. Risley is reluctant to get involved. Even as an adult helping her mother to clear out the basement Elaine is “aware of a barrier between us. It’s been there a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back” (448). Mrs. Risley never knows the true extent or the primary perpetrator of the bullying, but in the academic discourse around *Cat’s Eye* Mrs. Risley’s defiance of the social norms is often posited as a reason Elaine is bullied in the first place, thus blaming the mother for the social rejection of her daughter.

In the analysis of *Cat’s Eye*, the underlying causes of Elaine’s bullying are frequently connected to her mother; for example, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis sees Elaine’s vulnerability to external pressures as stemming from “pre-oedipal issues revolving around the constitution of the sense of self and the relationship to the mother” (1). Perrakis goes on to discuss how Elaine’s internal experience is not mirrored adequately back to her by her mother, so that Elaine uses Cordelia and the other girls as mirrors rather than her own mother who picks her own flowers rather than buying them to create arrangements as Cordelia’s mother does, goes for walks in the ravine alone, and enjoys ice skating. All of these are behaviours which Elaine points out when she says that “my mother is not like other mothers” (177). Davey takes this statement to mean that “Elaine cannot locate her

mother in terms of class... and [Mrs. Risley] is a potential embarrassment for Elaine” (235). Nancy Peled says that Elaine’s mother “cannot, or will not, protect her... [because Mrs. Risley] is ‘different’ from the other mothers and unavailable to her” (48). Part of the reason for this attribution can be found in Molly Hite’s discussion of shame and blame in which Hite writes that: “mothering is passionately imagined as the force that can reverse the partitioning, blaming structure of the whole society” (145). And yet, the power dynamics of the family, and the patriarchal culture they promulgate, prevents mothers from doing so. Thus, the conflicting social expectations of women and motherhood are illustrated not only through Atwood’s works, but also in the process of their analysis, which often blames women for their own powerlessness rather than exploring the effectiveness of the various means by which they are rendered powerless.

In a similar vein, although without pointing directly to Mrs. Risley, Bethan Jones posits that Elaine’s vulnerability to bullying is due to her early nomadic life and social isolation which leave Elaine “alien to the nuances and intricacies of girlhood interaction.... [Elaine] adopts Carol and Grace as role models: for her they represent the pathway to the acquisition of her own femininity” (30). Laura Martocci also posits that, in learning how to play with her new female friends, “Elaine learns the attributes integral to femininity.... she begins inscribing feminine virtues (self-effacement, conformity, and submission to authority) on her psyche” (150). Additionally, Martocci writes that:

Femininity must be ontologized. And it is her growing compliance on an ontological level (e.g., her newfound deference to purveyors of an abusive male gaze) which leaves Elaine susceptible to, and unable to differentiate between, the requirements of femininity and other, malevolent conditionals attached to her new ‘friendships’. (151)

Essentially, Cordelia mimics the ‘abusive male gaze’ and employs it as her own (fe)male gaze; by turning it on her friends, she temporarily avoids being the object of the gaze

while the girls she focuses on mirror her (mis)appropriated power back to her in those moments. Nancy Peled, however, says that Elaine's unquestioning submission to Cordelia's dominance is not due to a gaze, but because: "the voice of Cordelia mimics the voice of the Father, awarding or denying social acceptance, which is, in essence, love" (51). In many of these readings, it is ultimately Elaine's need for external validation of her existence which results in her unquestioning submission to her friends.

Middle-aged Elaine identifies one specific moment at which she experienced another division in her sense of self, a moment, she says, is "the point at which I lost power" (121). Elaine's missing time and memories form a gap, book-ended between the not-so-subtle symbolic burial in Cordelia's back yard as "Mary Queen of Scots, headless already" (120) and the point at which Elaine crawls, alone and soaked, out of the ravine. If the bullying is, as Hite maintains, the result of the girls using Elaine as a surrogate victim, or as a stand-in for themselves, then the girls who bury her in the back yard and eventually abandon her in the creek, which Cordelia claims is "made of dissolved dead people" (84) are essentially burying and abandoning parts of themselves to die. Gillian Alban marks this as the moment when that "symbiotic *doppelgänger* gaze... is deflected by a divine maternal icon rescuing Elaine in extremity" (163). Elaine, hypothermic and hallucinating, sees a vision of the Virgin Mary who tells her to "*go home now.... It will be all right. Go home*" (213). Elaine's mother soon finds her and takes her home, but Elaine develops a fever and is sick for days, repressing a year of memories in the process. These two incidents, a symbolic but traumatic death and an almost fatal re-birth which is facilitated by a supernatural vision, lead Elaine to the safety of her own mother after a year-long progression through an underworld wherein Elaine, a shade of her former self, is held in thrall by Cordelia. Rising to a new awareness of herself and her identity, Elaine

becomes aware of the true secret which the patriarchal social structure, using Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath and their (fe)male gaze, tries so hard to obscure: there is no sorority to aspire to within a culture which positions women as commodities for exchange by men, because as commodities they are in competition with each other.

After Elaine's realization of Mrs. Smeath's betrayal, and the vision of the Virgin Mary which sends her home, Sherrill Grace writes that "what the Virgin restores is a conscious awareness of what she already has or is, of what she has forgotten" (201). Crucially, nine-year-old Elaine is now able to recognize Cordelia's orders not as imperatives, but as "an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game" (217). In other words, Cordelia is playing the role of mother and, until this point, Elaine participated in earnest believing that her own lack of knowledge was a lack in her as a person and that Cordelia could help her overcome that. Sally Karmi remarks that "the making of the self... is not a process of autonomous shaping. It is a collective process which emerges when individuals exert influence over each other's lives" (122). The removal of the power of Cordelia's influence enables Elaine to move on to make other, different friends and not associate with her bullies anymore. As a result, the three girls fade out of Elaine's experience, made insubstantial because Elaine no longer mirrors their power back to them while acting as a surrogate for the expression of their own self-hatred. Instead of concerning herself with how other people are looking at her, she starts to develop her own way of looking at the world instead.

According to Massoura, "in order to cope with the emotional scars caused by Cordelia and with the judgemental gaze of patriarchal society represented by the mirror, Elaine adopts a more effective weapon than [Cordelia's] disguise: the professional, one-way stare of the painter" (216). It is the development of her artistic eye which holds the

key for Elaine's success in life and as a painter and, after high school, Elaine moves on to university classes in art history, and night classes like Life Drawing, where she begins to cultivate her own style and skills as an artist. To do so, she must continually negotiate her way through social norms which are tied to her gender while learning how to develop her artistic eye.

Not yet trained to the male scopophilic aesthetic in regard to the female form at this point, Elaine relates to the model as a person rather than a living object to be represented on the canvas. Thus, Elaine finds it challenging when they use female models in the Life Drawing class; as Massoura writes: "on the naked model's torso Elaine reads the restrictions of a culture that silenced her mother from talking to Elaine about female sexuality. Now she is afraid of all female bodies, including her own" (217). According to Massoura, Elaine's difficulty with the female body is connected to her treatment as a child at the hands of other women and girls: "what Elaine does not appreciate is that the female malevolence she experiences is not innate in women but largely stems from an oppressive society.... The result of her ignorance is that her third eye is ruthless with women and tolerant with men" (217). Elaine must learn to see with the gaze which objectifies the female physical form and turns it into *something*; the female model is a living object without agency in that room, as she is told how to pose her naked body, rather than *someone* with whom Elaine can relate. In order to develop that gaze, she must further disengage herself from the category of "woman" in order to stop seeing herself in the model's female form which Elaine says she is "afraid of turning into" (269). Elaine is not only scared that she will become "not beautiful" like the model (269), but that she will also and always be reduced to an object by the (fe)male gaze, the gaze that essentializes her as female and dismisses her as nothing on that basis.

Throughout the novel, it is not so much that Elaine divorces herself from the category of female as it is that she forgets – or refuses to recognize the absoluteness of – the lines between herself and the categories of ‘boy/man’ or ‘girl/woman’ and counts herself, always, as an exception to the disparaging nature of that binary. As Molly Hite puts it, “Elaine manages to detach herself, albeit only to a degree, from the category of ‘women’ by substituting an abstracted, observing eye for an engaged, interdependent I. That is, she achieves a quantum of power by self-division or self-synecdoche” (139). As a young girl, Elaine says, “I know the unspoken rules of boys” (52) and that “boys are my secret allies” (185); as a teenager, Elaine knows all of the derogatory words that teenage boys use to describe teenage girls, and she says: “I don’t think any of these words apply to me. They apply to other girls” (267). In Life Drawing class, Elaine thinks of Susie as “a silly girl who’s just fooling around at art school” (315) and counts herself as a painter when her male peers say that “if you’re bad, you’re a lady painter. Otherwise you’re just a painter” (312). Elaine is fully aware that the men use her as “their passport” (312) when they invite her to the beer parlour and pay for her beer, because of the liquor laws at the time. Elaine explains that there are two sides to the bar, and “the Ladies and Escorts sections are cleaner and quieter and more genteel, and smell better. If you’re a man you can’t go into them without a woman, and if you’re a woman you can’t go into the Men Onlys” (311). The men dominate the conversations with discussions of women and the various models for their Life Drawing class, sometimes in insulting and misogynistic ways, but again she says: “I don’t resent any of this. Instead I think I am privileged: I am an exception, to some rule I haven’t even identified” (314). Part of Elaine’s disorientation regarding her gender is due to, and illustrative of, the same process of reasoning Luce Irigaray points out when discussing human history and patriarchal cultures.

In a patriarchal culture, human history is literally a history which is made by men, written about by men, and discussed by men. Similarly, art is a theory of the world as seen by men, the mimetic value of which is coloured by the various assumptions and privileges of the masculine gaze as it looks at the world, a world which is constructed by men, for the benefit of men. In the patriarchal way of thinking about things, therefore, 'human' means 'male', not 'male and/or female'. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Luce Irigaray explains it this way:

Man takes his orientation from his relation to his father insofar as his name and property are concerned and from his mother in relation to unmediated nature. Woman must submit to her husband and reproduction. This means that gender as sexuality is never sublimated. *Gender is confused with species*. Gender becomes human race, human nature, etc., as defined from within a patriarchal culture. Gender thus defined corresponds to a race of men... who refuse, whether consciously or not, the possibility of another gender: the female. (3)

Gender is the reason why Elaine is uncomfortable with claiming the term 'painter' for herself: because the term "lady painter" (312) indicates that her work is not of value, but without the qualifier of 'lady' it implies the painter as Subject is male, thereby excluding her and leaving her no space to be a woman who paints as a profession rather than a hobby.

Ultimately, women's art is automatically subversive because the artists are women who take on that Subject position and take for themselves that (fe)male gaze. Their engagement in the creation of art also requires them to step outside the previously discussed function-based social roles that their patriarchal culture allows them: virgin, mother, prostitute. These women are also, however, able to push the limits of artistic license in ways that men cannot: as Elaine puts it, "because it doesn't matter what I do, I can do what I like" (388). Elaine learns that this statement is not entirely accurate when a woman tells Elaine that she is "disgusting" (397). Nevertheless, the woman throws her

bottle of ink at Elaine's painting rather than at Elaine, in an act which is not unlike blaming women for being Elaine's oppressors, or blaming Mrs. Smeath for being the woman she is, independent of understanding her context.

Unlike Elaine's previous experiences with the judgemental (fe)male gaze, however, this time Elaine benefits from it. She says:

I will be looked at, now, with respect: paintings that can get bottles of ink thrown at them, that can inspire such outraged violence... must have an odd revolutionary power. I will seem audacious, and brave. Some dimension of heroism has been added to me. (398)

There is a deflection of the (fe)male gaze in this instance; instead of looking at Elaine, the woman is looking at her art and judging Elaine, but she is nevertheless directing her actions towards the painting rather than at Elaine. In a way, Elaine's painting shields her from the personally devastating effects that Cordelia's use of the gaze previously enacted upon her body. The gaze is not entirely rendered impotent, it is merely diffused, split between Elaine and towards her creations, but Elaine learns a valuable way to deflect the (fe)male gaze from her, to an object which is constructed to be looked at. Putting her experiences onto the painted surface also enables her to, literally and figuratively, stand away from them, to view her processes and her life at a safer distance, and thereby gain perspective on herself. Elaine realizes, however, that her interpretation and knowledge about the paintings, the objects and people represented, and how she created them is not apparent to the public which views them.

In a rare opportunity to stand apart from everyone at the retrospective show and observe her work and its impact, Elaine thinks:

A leaky ceiling, a match and some kerosene would finish all this off. Why does this thought present itself to me, not as a fear but as a temptation? Because I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over. (462)

That the idea of losing control over her works is less abhorrent to her than the thought of destroying them indicates that Elaine's motivations for painting are not tied up in thoughts of wealth, popularity, posterity, or her legacy. Instead, Elaine is aware of her paintings not as children, but as artifacts of her life which have done their work on her just as she put her creativity to work on them. Now, with her memory restored and, in an emotional place and physical space where she can stand back and look at it all, she is ready to move on and away from these paintings. Similarly, she is ready to move on and away, emotionally and physically, from memories of Cordelia and Toronto which no longer hold her in their thrall. Their work done, she is ready to let go of her paintings and does not care how others interpret them through other lenses, she is ready to let them mean whatever other people want them to mean.

Barbara Hill Rigney views Elaine's response as indicative of Atwood's attitudes about art; Rigney writes: "the role of the artist, particularly in contemporary society is, for Atwood, shamanistic.... There is the inherent moral obligation to use one's art to create life rather than reduce it to artifact, to avoid the misuse of art" (7). Rather than Elaine viewing her paintings as children who have displeased her by not communicating what she wanted them to, this view of art implies that Elaine is morally obligated to use her creativity to paint them, but to use other instincts to let them go into the world to mean whatever people want them to. Irigaray points out in *Sexes and Genealogies*, that: "we are always mothers just by being women.... we give birth to many other things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things, but this kind of creativity has been forbidden to us for centuries" (18). The act of creating art is cathartic for Elaine, but it also a way of controlling the (fe)male gaze, of giving it an

alternate focal point so that she does not directly feel its devastating effects. The feedback that she experiences as a result of people like the reporter, or the gallerists, who insist on interpreting her work through a feminist lens irritate her for that reason: they are trying to see through the painting to see her, but the reality is that they are looking in a particular way she knows does not represent her, but the interviewer's politics and ideology. In Chakravarty's reading:

The older Elaine finds herself out of step with the aggressive 'political correctness' of feminists who seek to appropriate her work to further their own agenda. The personal meaning of her paintings eludes other viewers, as inevitable a fact as a mother's separation from her child: Elaine must relinquish control over the 'meaning' of her paintings, once released for public viewing. (118)

Although art is Elaine's way to access her own past and make sense of her emotional hang-ups, it is more than therapy for her; by painting, Elaine is also creating a tangible female tradition when she paints, something which she did not have as an art student.

Elaine is extremely aware of social context and the type of gaze to which she is subjected, which she feels turns her into something that she does not intend. Elaine is certain that the reporter "would like me to be furious, and quaint" (101), but Elaine refuses to allow her experiences to be framed through a specifically feminist lens. Elaine does not want to mention anything about Joseph Hrbik, for example, not because he did not exploit her sexually – which he definitely did – but because to do so would overshadow the importance of her art and what she learned from him. Martha Sharpe's critique takes on the issue of feminism in *Cat's Eye* by disengaging Elaine from her paintings:

Elaine's works can be considered feminist without her being a feminist, just as they can be considered misogynist without her being a misogynist. But this fact doesn't necessarily bode well for feminism; indeed, making the principles the priority and the artist secondary seems antithetical to feminist ideas such as

particularity and self-creation. Elaine's experience seems to suggest that these are being superseded for the sake of what she produces for the feminist cause. (185)

Because people are interpreting her paintings and their meanings on their own, without benefit of her narrative as a guide, the distance between Elaine and her work has become a necessary one for her. It is that distance which prevents her from feeling that people like the reporter are, by extension, telling Elaine what to mean, rather than asking her what her paintings mean to her.

The distance between Elaine and her works, a distance of time and life experience, enables her to see what she could not before: Mrs. Smeath's eyes, which she used to think were only full of self-righteousness "are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man" (457). Additionally, Elaine can finally see herself as a child through Mrs. Smeath's eyes in an act of mirroring three or more decades in the making. What Elaine sees is:

A frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where, a gypsy practically, with a heathen father and a feckless mother who traipsed around in slacks and gathered weeds... Some of this must be true. I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. (457)

Elaine is able to see what she missed before because, as Martha Sharpe points out, Elaine's "paintings are like stars. The light they shed is ancient and remote; they occur in the past. And different observers see them differently, or discern different meanings from them, relative to their positions in space-time" (184). Elaine's subject position has changed; while the light that her paintings give off has stayed the same and is representative of her inner landscape in the various moments of time during which she painted each one, Elaine is finally in a position to look back with an element of clarity previously unavailable to her. Elaine can finally free herself of the burden of inferiority and hatred which Mrs. Smeath previously roused within Elaine, and she is able to step

beyond the limitations of those feelings into a new and better understanding of herself. Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, and Joan of *Lady Oracle*, Elaine must reconcile herself with the notion that people – including Elaine – are multiple and nuanced rather than occupying one side of the victim/killer or good/evil binaries.

The effect is that Elaine's various selves, multiple in past and present, shift and are reflected in the paintings, but also in the transition between paintings, in their changing subject matter, symbolism, and techniques used to execute her inner vision. Her paintings are hung in a chronological order, so Elaine takes a tour of her visual representations of her life from earliest works to her most recent while also noticing how her own style shifted over time. For Janine Rogers, the "retrospective exhibition accomplishes two things: it makes her remember and it allows her to begin to solidify her fragmented and blurred reality" (17). The retrospective and the narrative that it prompts enable Elaine to make sense of her life, and her self-identity, things which she is unable to really do prior to her return to Toronto. In "Women on the Market" Irigaray writes: "it is only after the fact that the subject might possibly be able to analyze [their] determination as such by the social structure" (188). Although the show comes at the tail end of the novel so that which prompts what – whether the narrative prompts the show, or the show prompts the narrative – is in question, the final moment of consolidation helps Elaine gain perspective. Finally, Elaine is able to view her creations in a dispassionate way as things which exist separately from her, and to recognize that she is no longer responsible for the meaning-making process which previously bound artist and creation. Instead, that process has moved outside of her as others view the paintings with their own lenses and notions of symbolic meaning.

Elaine, through a process of internalization and resistance of the cultural norms, particularly those surrounding gender and the socialization of women, manages to establish her own precarious sense of self and identity. Her unusual level of awareness of the inherent instability of identity is not indicative of – or due to – her own instability, though she sometimes seems to perceive it that way. Instead, Elaine’s concept of identity is informed, rather than disturbed, by the knowledge that “there is never only one, of anyone” (6). Therefore, in Elaine's experience, a person cannot have a single, stable identity over any period of time. That time is not a line, but a dimension where nothing is ever lost, means that people will always have those other selves, they do not just go away. Elaine has managed, through a process of reflection and retrospection, to create a sense of self which is more resilient than that which triggered the repression of her memories. Thus, Elaine, through her narrative and her paintings, enacts a process of co-creation and triangulation which manages to deflect the oppressive (fe)male gaze from Elaine. The novel ends with Elaine on her way back to Vancouver, back to her ‘real’ life, the life in which she is more than a painter, and more than a mother; she heads into the west and an unknowable future once again, because that is the one thing that gaze, whether male or (fe)male, cannot see.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION(S)

In reading these selected works of Margaret Atwood with mothers and daughters as the primary focal point, several things become apparent: first, I stated in the introduction that the idea of regarding Atwood's protagonists and their mothers as a binary opposition is problematic. To do so confounds the essential multiplicity of Atwood's protagonists, reducing the women to a singular, imposed social function in a false binary of mother/daughter which does not allow for them to operate as both simultaneously, as Elaine experienced in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine's suicide attempt is triggered not only by her dissatisfaction with her marriage to Jon, but also by her inability to both mother her infant daughter and be a creative artist at the same time. In other words, Elaine's collision with the social expectations of wife, mother, and her own sense of herself as a painter, drive her into a deep depression in which she thinks that "whatever is happening to me is my own fault. I have done something wrong... I am inadequate and stupid, without worth" (419). Elaine's depression drowns her in "a sluggish wave" (420); she thinks she has failed on multiple fronts: as a wife, or Jon would be faithful and loving; as a mother, or her daughter would like her more than she does Jon; as a painter, or she would find more time and do better art; as a woman, or she would be able to handle it all.

Elaine's internalized shame creates the space for Cordelia's voice of condemnation to goad her into slicing her wrist with one of Jon's knives. Like Pavlov's dog, when Elaine is feeling at her most worthless, the voice of Cordelia goads her to believe that: "I might as well be dead" (420) even though Elaine, at the time of her most serious instance of self-harm, could not actively recall the year of bullying she endured as a child. It is difficult to tell what triggered which, whether the internalized voice of

Cordelia came first or the familiar feeling of worthlessness. Elaine is haunted throughout the book by both and shows that reducing women to a mother/daughter as a binary is insufficient to address the range of experiences and social pressures on women in Atwood's fiction.

Additionally, a mother/daughter binary relies upon a simplistic definition of who – what? – constitutes 'mother' or 'daughter', though at its most basic it would seemingly rely upon definitions of mothers and daughters which are based in physiology and childbearing. Such a definition excludes people like Aunt Lou in *Lady Oracle*, whereas in fact she is often viewed as a substitute mother to Joan, even by Atwood herself in her interview with Cathrine Martens in which Atwood says that, in *Lady Oracle*, "the 'real' mother, the good mother, is the aunt" (46). Aunt Lou supplies Joan with the emotional and spiritual support that Fran, Joan's biological mother, was not equipped to provide. Further, limiting women to one 'side' of that false binary as their own identity is concerned also enables and promulgates the either/or, black/white kind of thinking and hierarchal binaries which patriarchal cultures, by their very nature, are based on. That kind of black/white, victim/killer, mentality holds the protagonist of *Surfacing* in her victimhood for almost a decade. It is significant that her development is predicated on giving up that mentality, as it is the same kind of thinking that Irigaray posits as the basis for her statement that "gender becomes the human race" (S&G 3). The beginning premise in Irigaray's logic is that since women are viewed as the binary opposite of men, that "gender thus defined corresponds to a race of men... who refuse, whether consciously or not, the possibility of another gender: the female" (3). Thus, the human race is really made up of one gender, which has a monopoly on legitimization, and which excludes women from its constituency as participants.

Examining mothers and daughters and how they relate to and through each other necessitates the consideration of the broader social context which informs, if not instigates, their struggles for identity and individuality alongside and against each other. Thus, considering Atwood's women in isolation from the larger social context of the patriarchal society which bounds their lives, renders the social forces and norms a mystical, stealthy nature. To only read the actions of women in these novels renders people such as Elaine's mother culpable for how Elaine is treated by others and leaves the other women and girls around Elaine complicit with those forces and thereby at fault as well. Meanwhile, the men and the way they are notably absent creates otherwise inexplicable gaps through which the culprit escapes notice, much less analysis. The culprit, of course, is the heteronormative forces of the patriarchal structure of the culture in which Atwood's protagonists enact their self-determination.

Their various acts of resistance and subversion, acts which disrupt social expectations and allow them to sidestep the forces which threaten to push them into self-destruction, are survival strategies. As such, they are only partially successful; Elaine is permanently marked by a nihilistic inner voice she cannot identify as hers, or Cordelia's, which tells her she is nothing. She has at least learned how to survive it: "when I start feeling shaky I lie down, expecting nothing, and it arrives, washing over me in a wave of black vacancy. I know I can wait it out" (429). Unable to tell the difference between her own internal voice and that of her mother, Joan is unable to reconcile herself with her own agency, casting herself instead as a victim in a gothic tale until the very end of her narrative. Joan does at least recognize that her mother abides in Joan's inner world, whereas previously she denied Fran as a monstrosity in order to deny her own. Similarly, the narrator from *Surfacing* coming up out of her madness is not certain whether she will

be able to return to a state of humanity or not, and the last description of her catches her mid-step. The reader is left to infer her ending, and whether that step is towards or away from Joe's voice. Marian, on the other hand, has realized that she does not need to buy into the system that would render her an ornament in Peter's life rather than the active agent in her own. And yet, she does not close the door on the possibility of marriage and a family, either; instead, she abides in a place where she knows that her choices are hers and that she cannot be pressured or pushed into giving up more of her power than she wants to. One aspect of the pressures of the social world on Atwood's female protagonists generally, is the way in which those forces act upon their internal sense of self in relation to the world to create situations in which they must determine the extent to which they are willing to play the victim.

Atwood's central characters negotiate their way through a process of integration and rejection of social norms and ideals, and there are degrees to which each consciously acknowledges the influences and pressures of the social expectations upon themselves and the women around them. Atwood's work shows that women, however they are situated, do not merely passively occupy the social spaces allotted them by the expectations of the social order. Women make choices and act in ways which reveal their complicity with – or struggles against – that limiting social order, and it does not always enable them to help each other, regardless of the connection between daughter and mother, or otherwise. Women grow up and in turn raise children within the same strictures that chafed them as young women, often engendering the same limitations in a new generation, by virtue of the different norms and expectations of them in their 'new' roles. There are a few key moments in these novels which identify the ways in which women have given up their power; in other words, there are certain moments in each

novel when the protagonist reveals the key moment in which she lost – gave up? – control over aspects of her life.

For Marian of *The Edible Woman*, the moment is when she starts letting Peter make decisions for them both because it was just easier for her. For the narrator in *Surfacing*, it was the moment she failed to hold herself responsible for allowing the termination of her pregnancy. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan casts herself as a victim of a severe and controlling mother, while Fran also casts herself in the victim role, though with a recalcitrant daughter as the root of her bitterness. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine identifies the moment that she allows her friends to bury her in a hole in the back yard and leave her there until she blocks the memory of it, and the following year, for a few decades. For all these women, getting their power back is an act which reverses the act which causes them to lose it; for Marian it was deciding to not get married; *Surfacing* required a pregnancy and a reconnection with Nature and her parents; *Lady Oracle* a reconciliation and acceptance of Fran's influence in Joan's life and S subject position; and *Cat's Eye* required middle-aged Elaine, in the company of her mother, to look into the cat's eye marble from her childhood and restore her memories. These acts, or moments of insight, enable these women to acknowledge the responsibility they have for their own lives, and to heal some of the splits in their psyche that festered for years.

These splits are created by the patriarchal culture and its contrary pressures which not only cast these women in the role of helpless passivity, but then blames them for their helplessness when they accept that role. Like Ainsley, who thinks that giving birth to a baby boy is an ultimate expression of femininity but also blames Clara for the mess of her house and her inability to get everything done, regardless of her physical and emotional well-being or capability. Worse than others blaming these women for not living up to the

vaunted and unrealistic ideal, Elaine, and to a lesser – or different – degree the other female protagonists as well, start to blame *themselves*. There is a twisted fetishism in a social structure which denies female sexuality but relies upon it for its own survival while subverting the act of creation by locating legitimacy not in childbearing and birth, but in the names of those with the social power to exchange women as commodities. A culture which denies women the connection to their communities through spirituality or participation in its most sacred rites, while also restricting them to those systems of belief sanctified by the patriarchy, is unfathomably cruel. These are the elements which the narrator of *Surfacing* overcomes by losing her Self in the Other and then transcending that state of madness. She brings back with her a sense of the sacred, of her connection to her parents and, through them, to the natural world which gives life to everything on the planet; it is that understanding and (re)cognition which is her legacy.

For Marian, Joan and Fran, and Elaine, however, madness is not really their method; instead, they evade or reject the gender norms to varying extents and degrees and participate in their own reconstitution of self: Marian through eating her cake, which is perhaps a mad act in Peter's opinion; Joan through finally accepting her mother and creating a new story to carry them forward; and Elaine by recognizing the past as a perspective which depends upon where you stand when the light reaches you from it. These daughters work – sometimes with, sometimes against, and sometimes for – their mothers and, as mothers they do the same with their own daughters, or their art, which is even more legitimately *theirs* than children are in a patriarchal culture. These women, daughters all and some mothers, are enabled by the changing social culture around the Second Wave of feminism. As noted previously, Irigaray writes that “it is only after the fact that the subject might possibly be able to analyze his determination as such by the

social structure” (WOTM 188). With this in mind, it is understandable that Atwood does not address or incorporate the consciousness raising sessions, such as those attended by Elaine, in her first three novels, all of which were published at various points within that Second Wave. Certainly, feminism is a part of the changing cultural milieu somewhere in the background of the other novels, it definitely shows up in *Surfacing* as David rails against it with misogynistic brutality. But Atwood does not concern herself with explaining those activities which question the social norms, and question equality. Instead, by operating on the assumption that inequality *is* unacceptable, but that it is a reality of life for her protagonists, Atwood engages in the doing of feminism and thereby exposes the contrary, simultaneous forces which push mothers and daughters apart and yet hold them together as though they are inseparable and identical.

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