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One Woman Leads to Another—Female Identity in the Works of Margaret Atwood

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead;
When she was good, she was very, very good,
And when she was bad, she was horrid!

English children's rhyme in Margaret Atwood's
"The Spotty-Handed Villainesses..."

Mothers like worn gloves
Wrinkled to the shape of their lives,
Passing the work from hand to hand
Mother to daughter,
A long thread of red blood, not yet broken

Margaret Atwood, "The Red Shirt," Selected Poems

In 1979 Elaine Showalter, one of the most influential feminist scholars of literature, wrote that "critics are beginning to agree that when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation" (11). Margaret Atwood clearly belongs to this continuum. She not only takes an active part in creating the female tradition, but also comments on it in her works, many of which are playful meta-texts of feminine genres (notably, as I will argue, the tradition of the female gothic). On one level—the realist one—Atwood is simply preoccupied with women as characters. The main subject of her fiction is the way women feel, think and act. Further exploration, however, reveals a meta-textual level, on which the author constantly refers to themes, problems, and images recurrent in works written by other women writers.

The aim of this article is to examine the central theme of Atwood's writing—visible on both the level of plot and on the inter-textual level—a specifically
female search for identity. Each of her characters is desperately trying to acquire a stable self-concept. In the course of their struggle, they are often confronted with the Other: an evil woman, who is often also the protagonist’s double (Zenia in The Robber Bride; Cordelia in Cat’s Eye), or her monstrous mother (Jane’s mother in Lady Oracle). These “other” women—gothic characters in the tradition of Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason—are usually threatening to the woman’s self, because of their transgressive, unfeminine behavior. They are boid, mock social expectations, project a aura of subversive energy, and their influence on the plot is always crucial. In short, they embody the daring, wild, unconscious side of femininity: the one which raises female identity as established by the patriarchal society. I will argue that in Atwood’s world these dark figures play a crucial role in the process of establishing female identity. In order to function as independent individuals, women have to face their fears and accept these aspects of their selves which stand in opposition to society’s requirements.


Atwood emphasizes the presence of “bad girls” both in literature and life. In one of her speeches she asks whether it is necessary for women “to be condemned to virtue for life, slaves in the salt-mines of goodness?” (“Spotty-Handed...” 4). She warns that within patriarchal culture there is a long-standing tendency to restrict the multidimensionality of female identity, and suggests that the same is being done by some feminists. Polarizing morality by gender always results in oversimplifications about what women are really like. “The spotty-handed villainesses” should not be considered as a type of female personality, but rather as a force present within every single woman. Atwood claims that:

Female bad characters can (...) act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of human freedom—because everyone’s choices are limited, and women’s choices have been more limited than men’s, but it doesn’t mean women can’t make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. (“Spotty-Handed...” 5)

In a society where all women are supposed to be “good” in order to be recognized as “real women,” being “bad” might be considered a matter of preference, an act of daring and dangerous insurgency. In fact, the “badness” Atwood muses on includes very diverse acts. Little girls tormenting their girlfriends, a predatory femme fatale capable of murder, or simply sexually active unmarried women—they are all “bad” according to patriarchal society’s standards. Thus, the category of “bad” behavior is somehow wider for the female members of society. To Atwood, however, it is even more important that the very existence of bad behavior as an option, changes the meaning of the choice to “be good.” It becomes the effect of a personal decision, and only a free person can make a choice. Thus, perversely, the ability to be wicked may broaden the sphere of women’s freedom.

In order to show how evil characters function in Atwood’s prose, I will analyze two important figures: Cordelia from Cat’s Eye, and Zenia from The Robber Bride. The two characters function in a similar way: they are present throughout the plot, and play a crucial role in the personal development of the narrator (or narrators, as is the case in the second work). Moreover, their relation to the narrators changes: friends at the beginning, later they are involved in a victim-oppressor relation (although in Cat’s Eye they make friends again as teenagers). It is worth examining and comparing these two characters carefully because they represent crucial elements of Atwood’s vision of femininity, namely the ability to do evil and to reach for power.

The motif of cruelties and persecution taking place in a group of little girls is recurrent in Atwood’s work (e.g. it appears in Lady Oracle and The Robber Bride), but Cat’s Eye is the only novel where it remains the main subject. The narrator is Elaine Risley, a painter in her forties, who returns to her hometown Toronto for a retrospective and finds herself overwhelmed with memories of her childhood. She tries to reconcile herself with her past, to get rid of the scared little girl lurking somewhere inside her. It seems that the only way to do this is by confronting Cordelia, once her best friend and worst tormentor, the girl who introduced the nine-year old Elaine to the world of malicious games and power relations.

Much like The Robber Bride, the book tells a story of four female characters. Here, it is a friendship between four little girls growing up together in Toronto suburbs, in the 1940s. The leader of the group is Cordelia, the most daring and self-confident of the four. Gradually, she turns the relation between herself and Elaine into that of a school bully and her victim. Cordelia manages to engage the two other girls in the process of “improving” Elaine, by watching her constantly and telling her that everything she does is wrong. It seems that there is no way of escaping the tormentors:

Once I am outside the house there is nothing to be done. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers into my ear: “Stand up straight! People are looking!” Carol is in my classroom, and it’s her job to report what I do and say all day. They’re there at recess, and in the canteen at lunchtime. They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them, or behind. In front is worse because they tell me everything I do wrong. “Don’t hang over,” says Cordelia. (120)

The girls’ world is a closed microcosm, where a part of Elaine’s soul is trapped forever, like a doll locked up in a box, forgotten but still there. As a grown woman she suddenly realizes that she remembers everything that happened to her, that all the troubles and tears she went through are still vivid. The girls’ tortures
seem quite subtle and sophisticated: constant observation, malicious remarks, and disqualification from the group during games and joint excursions. All this is done for the victim’s own “good,” in order to improve her bad manners, to make her a “good girl.”

It is interesting to note the sources of ideas about what is proper for a girl or a woman. The girls cut clippings from women’s magazines like Good Housekeeping, Ladies Home Journal or Chatelaine. They cut out pictures of frying pans, pieces of furniture or clothes. Sometimes they also cut out the figures of women who: “put germ-killers onto germs, in toilet bowls; (...) polish windows, or clean their spotty complexes with bars of soap, or shampoo their oily hair; (...) get rid of their unwanted odours, rub hand lotion onto their rough wrinkly hands, hug rolls of toilet paper against their cheeks” (138). They choose those images simply because they are the only ones available. Even for Elaine, whose mother is far from pretending to be a lady, they become the source of information on what it means to be the right kind of woman, or the wrong kind.

Other pictures show women doing things they aren’t supposed to do. Some of them gossip too much, some are sloppy, others bossy. (...) Some of the women have a Watchbird beside them, a red and black bird like a child’s drawing, with big eyes and stick feet. This is a Watchbird watching a Busybody;” it says. This is a Watchbird watching YOU.” (138)

The three girls act like a Watchbird, following Elaine everywhere. Exposed to such pressure, the girl feels trapped: there is no way of escaping the Watchbird, no way of getting rid of the eyes that observe and judge. These eyes stay with her as a woman. “I see that there will be no end to perfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even when you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your face or stupid act, somebody frowning” (138).

Thus, in Cat's Eye Atwood penetratively describes how society reproduce social roles. As Foucault argues in Discipline and Punish, the ultimate goal of society is to produce individuals (subjects) who always obey the rules, even when alone and unobserved; to turn individuals into docile beings performing their roles with perfect predictability. Foucault does not pay special attention to the differences between the position of men and women in this respect, but it is clear that in a patriarchal culture the latter are supposed to be more docile. Under the constant gaze of her Watchbirds, Elaine quickly learns to restrain herself, and does so even when unobserved. She learns her lesson—at the end of the novel she feels ashamed when crying although she is alone in the room: “This is the kind of thing I should look out for: crying without reason, making a spectacle of myself. I feel it’s a spectacle, even though no one’s watching” (414). In The Robber Bride one of the female characters expresses it even more explicitly:

Even pretending you aren’t catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy; pretending you’re unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (391)

This logic of this monologue corresponds to the idea expressed by John Berger in Ways of Seeing: women see themselves as if they were being looked at by men. This determines not only the relationships between men and women, but also the way the female members of society perceive themselves and each other. As Sandra Lee Bartkey points out, the voyeur inside a woman’s head can be perceived as the Other, an agent of patriarchy: “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (64).

In fact, Atwood not only points out that certain images of femininity are imposed by specific mechanisms of power, but also shows how these mechanisms function. In Cat’s Eye the reader finally learns why the little girl tormented her friend. Among many phrases used by Cordelia to hurt Elaine’s feelings, one appears very often: “Wipe that smirk off your face.” This is the final proof of Elaine’s unpardonable stubbornness and arrogance—there is a smirk on her face, so whatever happens she surely deserves. The origin of this expression is revealed when the two girls meet several years later, and Cordelia speaks about her father:

[as a child] I wanted some place that was all mine. (...) I used to think that if I kept very still and out of the way and didn’t say anything, I would be safe. (...) When I was really little, I guess I used to get into trouble a lot, with Daddy. When he would lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it. “Wipe that smirk off your face,” he would say. (252)

Thus, the monstrous Cordelia turns out to be a fairly predictable product of a world where “all fathers (...) 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. There is more to them than meets the eye” (164).

At this point, we need to refer to Atwood’s classification of victim-victor relationships in Canadian literature, as presented in Survival. The author argues that there are four possible victim positions:

- Position One is to deny being a victim, which leads usually to channeling the frustration and anger towards one’s fellow victim instead of the real cause of the victimhood.
- Position Two is to acknowledge that one is a victim, but displace the cause from the real source of oppression to something unchangeable like the will of God, or biology, or fate. “The basic game in Position Two is Victor/Victim” and anger is directed against oneself or other victims.
Position Three is to acknowledge one's own status as a victim but to refuse enduring it, which means that the real cause of oppression is identified and an individual consciously repudiates the Victim role.

Position Four is a position of a non-victim or an ex-victim, when the person in question can be creative and concentrate on her or his life instead of trying to escape the victim position. (37-38)

Clearly, in the case of Cordelia the mechanism of a victim/victor relation is at work. Unable to challenge the source of her misery, she turns against somebody who is powerless. However, the power of Cordelia's father, or men in general, is not the sole reason why Elaine has to undergo the process of creating a docile and obedient woman out of a wild, independent girl. Other women, especially the mothers of her school friends also contribute to the campaign of discipline and punishment. At the beginning, Elaine is sure that she cannot tell on her oppressors, because it is a secret they all share and betraying friends is the worst thing one can do. Yet, at one point she overhears one of the other girls' mother and learns that grown-ups know already: "I stand there on the top of the step, frozen with hate. (...) Mrs. Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right" (180). All of a sudden, Elaine realizes that it is not just one or two girls against her, but an entire community of women, who see some intrinsic fault in her character and ascribe ill will to her. In fact, they need Elaine to fail at whatever she does, because this will fulfill their expectations, prove that they were right. She simply cannot please:

"I have memorized the names of all the books of the Bible, in order, and the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer (...) I've been getting ten out of ten on my Bible quizzes and my memory work, but I'm beginning to falter: (...) Grace watches me. She watches everything I do on Sundays, and reports on me, master-of-factily, to Cordelia. (...) And it's true that I got ten out of ten, again, and Grace only got nine. Is it wrong to be right? How right should I be, to be perfect? The next week I put five wrong answers, deliberately. She only got five out of ten on Bible," Grace says on Monday.

"She's getting stupider," Cordelia says. (124)

Cordelia, her father and Mrs. Smeath all function as agents of social pressure. As fictional characters they are all rather overdrawn, their wickedness overstressed, as if to undermine their status as realistic characters. Did Cordelia exist at all? When Elaine walks down Toronto streets looking for her, seeing her in every older woman who passes by, when she expects her to show up in the art gallery— is she looking for a real person? The answer is not obvious. When the two girls meet as teenagers, Elaine takes over the role of the tormentor, and thoroughly enjoys her power over her former oppressor. Notably, the scene when the narrator realizes her power is set at a cemetery where the two girls go after school: Elaine suddenly claims that she is a vampire. By discovering her own evil side, the former victim becomes a victor, and is one during the remaining years of school.
Arguably, what brings Zenia into being and keeps her alive are the desires and fears of women, rather than men. The axis of conflict runs through female characters; the male ones remain marginal. It is clear that Zenia does not steal the other women’s partners because she wants to establish an emotional relationship. What she wants is power. Interestingly, violence and intimidation prove to be unnecessary to enter the homes she finally destroys. Although she seems to be the strong one, the fighter type, Zenia is most effective when she pretends to be weak and fragile (emotionally, as well as physically). “Weakness [is] the ultimate weapon” (213) says one of the narrators. The nature of her influence is, however, more complicated than that. Obviously, she evokes envy. As one of the narrators reports:

it’s partly her appearance: Zenia is the incarnation of how plainer, more oblong women wish to look, and therefore to be: it’s a belief of theirs that such things can be arranged from the outside in. She is thought also to be brilliant (…). Brilliant, and also fearsome. Wulfshe, feral, beyond the pale. (149)

The more distant she seems to be, the greater the gratitude of the women allowed to be her friends. They are enchanted by fake friendship, closeness and frankness. In fact, they identify with her. “Tony [Fremont] looks at her, looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. Tommef Nout. Herself turned inside out” (167). The image of ideal womanhood is tempting even for those who finally struggle against it. Zenia gives each of her victims what they want: one needs someone to listen to her, another wants to make sure her father was a hero during the war. Zenia is able to use those needs and turn them against the ones who feel them. In order to manipulate Charis, the sensitive one, “earnest and distracted, and with an inner light” (30), Zenia puts on a show of suffering from cancer and asks for help. Charis tries various methods of therapy, uses unconventional medicine, and, at the beginning, feels happy because she can help someone in need. When she begins to feel uneasy about having Zenia live in her small house, she is unable to change the situation. The “idyll” ends after a few months, when the guest leaves the house together with Charis’s lover, after killing all of Charis’s hens.

The same mechanism of projection is analyzed in Survival, where Atwood analyzes Sheila Watson’s novel The Double Hook. One of its female characters is an evil woman who refuses to accept life and denies others the feeling of happiness and the right to exist. Finally, she kills herself and returns as a ghost haunting the living ones. Atwood explains that her:

ghost is an afterimage; as ghost she is not necessarily evil, but the characters’ attitudes towards her can have life-denying consequences for them (…). The vision, of course, is in the eye of the beholder: the old lady has [finally] ceased to be fearful because the living characters have ceased to be afraid of fear (sic). (203):

Clearly, there is more to Zenia than meets the eye. At the beginning there is no doubt that she is the Hecate figure in Venus’s disguise: destructive and sinister, she pretends to bring “love, sex and fertility” but instead comes hatred and death. This, however, is not the only role she plays in the course of events. Interestingly, at one point it is suggested that, sterile herself, she contributes to the conception of Charis’s child by possessing her body. To make things still more complicated, at the moment of conception Zenia’s figure merges with Karen, Charis’s repressed self (266). Arguably, then, Zenia is not just Hecate in the disguise of Venus, but also the potentially fertile but victimized Venus pretending to be Hecate. The three goddesses finally merge into one another, as three faces of the same woman.

In my view, there are at least two levels on which the relations between “bad” and “good” women can be analyzed in Atwood’s writing. At face value, the texts suggest that the bad woman is the conqueror, and all the other women are the conquered. But is it the only possible interpretation? Perhaps every angel requires a demon of her own, somebody like Cordelia or Zenia, a screen for her repressed fears and desires. On the one hand, the relationship between the women seems to be clear: the Cordelia/Zenia figure is the enemy; she represents all the dark sides of femininity; but on the other hand, she serves as the source of vital powers for her victims. Finally, Zenia has the power to wake other women from destructive daydreams about Prince Charming and happy-endings.

Atwood’s own classification of victim roles seems to be key to the analysis of the relationship between the tormentors and victims in her novels. The very distinction between goodness and badness proves to be useless, because the evil characters are also victims, unable to recognize their victim status or
channeling their anger onto the fellow-sufferers. Zenia is a factor that leads the other women to recognize their victim status. This begins the process of movement from Position Two (acknowledging one's own victimhood but displacing its cause) to Position Three (acknowledging the status of a victim and refusing to endure it). Of course, it does not mean that the struggle for non-victim status is necessarily won. The classification takes into account the position of women in modern society in general, stipulating that social pressure significantly influences one's status as a victim, as well as one's chances to move upward between the categories. Atwood explains:

"If, for instance, your society is in Position Two, perhaps you can't move through Position Three into position Four except by repudiating your society, or at least its assumptions about the nature of life and the proper behaviour. (Survival, 40)"

Roz, Charis, Tony and Elaine do not yet function as creative non-victims at the end of their stories and they may not be able to become non-victims in the future, but they do stop playing the victim/victim game. Finally, they are able to identify patriarchal society and not other women as the true cause of their oppression. The goal is not only to survive but to be self-conscious, to reject the given roles and acquire an insight. This idea is expressed at the end of Surfacing, whose nameless protagonist realizes what is the most important benefit of her life-long journey:

"This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recast, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. (...) The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (183)"

It is interesting to consider the function of the evil woman in Atwood's prose in the context of the popular genre of fiction known as the Modern Gothic. In her study "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic" Joanna Russ describes the figure of the Other Woman, a key element of every plot of this kind. She is invariably: "beautiful, worldly, glamorous, immoral, flirtatious, irresponsible, and openly sexual. (...) adulterous, promiscuous, hard-hearted, immoral, criminal or even insane" (668). She is also often a ghost. Clearly, Zenia fits this description perfectly. She functions in the way described by Russ, being "at the same time the Heroine’s double and her opposite (668). We need to note, however, that in traditional Modern Gothic tales the heroine is usually passive and idle, and her ability to fight the Other Woman is almost nonexistent. In Atwood's prose female narrators try to change their lives by themselves—standing up to Zenia proves to be, in fact, their first step towards independence and fulfillment.

The conflict with the evil woman, who represents the grotesque ideal of femininity, finally leads her victims towards independence and enables them to regain control over their lives. The Zenia/Cordelia figure might be perceived as an outward incarnation of the forces that "good girls" struggle with within themselves: the patriarchal Other that Bartkey refers to, as the site of internalized rules and standards of society. As Gubar and Gubar famously demonstrate in their study of Jane Eyre (336-371), the figure of the evil woman in female gothic functions as a screen onto which the narrative's heroine and its reader project fears and desires. Her role is to help them both recognize and reclaim those feelings, and finally reject their victim status.

2. My monster, my self—the figure of the mother

The connection between the mother and daughter as essential to a woman's life was first taken up by feminists in the sixties and seventies. Breaking with the Freudian idea of the father as the central figure in the drama of a girl's emotional development, they focused on the complex relations between the female members of the family. Motherhood was analyzed as an institution, not simply as a state natural to women. Nancy Chodorow's theory of "the reproduction of mothering" is the best known example of such an approach. To Chodorow, motherhood is "neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training" (7). The fact that it is women who do the mothering is the effect of psychological processes which are socially embedded and structured, and which constitute women's identity. Thus while mothering remains a very personal and intimate experience, it is also a role: one quite strictly defined and controlled by society.

Clearly, Atwood is aware of, and intrigued by, this ambivalence. In her prose mothers tend to be either good and loving but absent from their daughters' lives, and thus unable to protect them (e.g. Elaine's mother in Cat's Eyes); or present and powerful, but at the same time destructive and monstrous. It is, of course, the latter case that is of interest to us in the present analysis. The figure of the bad mother on the one hand resembles the evil character, and on the other hand represents the protagonist's double, her twin or a mirror reflection—the internalized patriarchal Other that Foucault refers to.

The text that provides us with an especially complex vision of a destructive mother/daughter relationship is The Robber Bride. Early in the book one of its narrators, Tony, tells us about her mother, Anthea, who used to call her Guppy. The origin of the nickname is soon revealed: the child had to spend some time in the incubator after being born, and, according to Anthea, when lying under the glass covering it was opening and closing its mouth like a fish. Tony used to think that Guppy "was something warm and soft, like puppy, and she was hurt and insulted when she discovered it was a fish" (141). The mother, unhappy in her marriage and unfulfilled in life, fails to show any warm feelings towards the child. Unable to recognize the origins of her misery, she shifts the burden on to Tony. It
is the daughter who gets punished for her mother’s dashed hopes, by being gradually excluded from her life.

This nickname [Guppy]—enclosed by quotation marks—is penciled in below Tony’s baby picture, in Anthea’s white-leather My Baby photo album: “Guppy,” 18 months; “Guppy” and me; “Guppy” and her Dad. After a while Anthea must have stopped taking those pictures, or stopped sticking them in, because there are just blank pages. (142)

We can find the same pattern in The Handmaid’s Tale, which portrays troubled relations between a feminist-mother who rebelled against patriarchal society and her daughter, who, to complicate matters even further, lives in a society transformed by a fundamentalist revolution, where women become slaves subjected to rigid control in every aspect of their lives. The daughter is deprived of the right to an identity of her own, even her name is taken away from her. The story is told from her point of view; the reader follows her attempts to recompose her self using memory. Interestingly, the fragments referring to her mother are very similar to Tony’s account of her childhood:

You were a wanted child, God knows, she would say at other moments, lingering over the photo albums in which she had me framed; these albums were thick with babies, but my own replicas thinned out as I grew older, as if the population of my duplicates had been hit by some plague. She would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn’t turned out entirely as she’d expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. (130)

In both novels, the mother begins to resentment the child as it grows older; the more the daughter resembles the mother, the more likely she is to be rejected. This pattern may be explained if we refer to the concept of “a heritage of self-rejection and anger” (Johnson 2), an outcome of the compulsive character of maternal love. Nancy Friday, the author of My Mother. My Self, claims that mothers and daughters are often unable to establish an emotional relationship precisely because they both yearn for and seek a state of idealized symbiosis, unattainable in real life. Thus, they keep lying to each other, believing that the failure originates in a shortage of true love.

The very concept of motherhood as identity contains the source of an inevitable split: a woman is a sexual being—she needs to be one to be able to conceive a child—but, as a mother she has to abandon this part of herself. As soon as the child is born, she has to reject her own needs as an individual, focusing exclusively on her children’s well-being. The fact that a mother can feel towards her offspring emotions other that love is a taboo even nowadays (the postpartum depression syndrome has been “discovered” only recently). Adrienne Rich explores this problem in her famous book Of Woman Born, where she claims that contemporary culture abounds with unexamined assumptions concerning the relations between mothers and children:

First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless ... (3)

Clearly, the way Tony’s mother expresses her feelings towards her reveals the mechanism in question:

Anthea sits down beside her on the piano bench and slides her left arm with its leather-gloved hand around Tony’s shoulders. “I want you to know,” she says, “that Mother truly, truly loves you.” (...) She never says “I truly, truly love you.” It’s always Mother, as if Mother is someone else. Rethom, thinks Tony. Evol (author’s emphasis, 140)

Obviously, although trying to behave like one, Anthea is unable to identify as a “Mother.” In this scene she is unable even to touch Tony without a pair of gloves. There is no bond between them and the little girl is aware of this. She sees the mirror reflections of her mother’s words: mother/rethom, love/evol. The expressions are meaningless, a vacuum waiting to be filled with some significance. The actual mother, with her “leather hand [which] is lifeless and cold, like the hand of a doll” (140) repeats the mirror-reflections pattern. Her painted face is a mask, and she a “three-headed monster” alien and dangerous. This figure is described vividly in Lady Oracle: The protagonist’s mother is preoccupied with how things look from the outside. She is always organizing objects and people around the house, which, in fact, is the only site of her power. Her aim is to smooth out her daughter’s life, just like one smooths out a tablecloth. She arranges the house’s interior in an artificial manner and applies the same procedure to her daughter’s body. As Joan (the daughter) informs us, the “relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product.” (67)

A mother’s excessive expectations toward her daughter are a recurrent theme in Atwood’s fiction. In The Handmaid’s Tale the following dynamic is described: “I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made” (132). In Lady Oracle we are aware of the monstrous nature of the narrator’s mother from the beginning. “My mother was a monster,” claims Joan, “I can never remember calling her anything but Mother, never one of those childish diminutives; I must have, but she must have discouraged it” (68). Superficiality, pretences and constraints—clearly, the figure of Mother-as-Monster represents the dark side of domesticated femininity; the Hecate-like character, trapped in the chrysalis of an identity which the society forced upon her. Or was it she who accepted it?

In the image of her that I carried for years, hanging from my neck like an iron locket, she was sitting in front of her vanity table, painting her fingernails a murderous red and
sighing. Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Bette Davis, which gave her a curious double mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow. (68)

The mother clearly wants her child to identify with the socially accepted model of femininity, i.e. to perceive herself as a victim. She acts like an evil fairy, who casts her spell on the child in the cradle, in order to control her fate. Joan wonders about the nature and extent of this power:

Did she name me after Joan Crawford because wanted me to be like the screen characters she played—beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men—or because she wanted me to be successful? (73)

Critics often analyze Lady Oracle in the context of the gothic genre, although Atwood herself claims that she “probably started with the Gothic romances, but that was a long time ago and (...) [her] books tend to evolve into something quite unrelated to the original idea” (Ingersoll, 45). There are, however, certain elements of this genre—both the classic (female) gothic tale and its contemporary formulaic clones—present in the novel: there is a Heroine in need of love, constantly escaping various dangerous situations; there are men in her life who may or may not turn out to be Villains. And there are several options as to who the Other Woman might be: Joan’s mother, her shadowy double, her husband’s female friend, etc. At one point, the narrator herself refers to the idea of the dangerous twin, claiming that:

... It was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I’d never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-mirror reflection. She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her. (Lady Oracle, 251)

Atwood’s novel also presents us with the ultimate classic among female gothic motifs: the mirror in which the protagonist sees a strange woman. This woman leads Joan towards darkness and danger, but her presence serves also as an inspiration to write. MacLean argues that this dark figure represents a part of Joan’s self and, at the same time, the other voice shouts “fearlessly and with ferocious delight:

On! On!

(154)

Unconsciously, the daughter wants to be abandoned by the mother, because this is the only way to gain independence, to free herself from the narratives invented by the mother. It is also the moment of gaining voice: the girl screams and, at the same time, the other voice shouts “fearlessly and with ferocious delight.”

Conclusions

An exploration of “selfhood” and the “otherness” of the mother figure in Atwood’s writing must take into account the question of perspective: it is usually the daughter who describes the mother, not the other way round (the only exceptions being short fragments of The Robber Bride and Cat’s Eye where the narrator herself becomes a mother). Thus, the problem of mothering turns out to be
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intertwined with the question of narrative authority of the woman writer, and the problematic of autobiography. In her essay “My Monster/My Self” Barbara Johnson shows these three issues to be interrelated. Analyzing Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Dorothy Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* and Nancy Friday’s *My Mother. My Self*, she points out that “the monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embodied within the question of female autobiography” (10). As a result, a woman writing an autobiographical narrative struggles with the necessity “on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not feminine, imagination” (10). Writing an autobiography is a process comparable to giving birth to oneself—the writer symbolically “kills off” the mother and constitutes her own identity. This idea is expressed quite literally on the back cover of Nancy Friday’s book where the opinion of Leah Cahan Schaefer, the author of *Women and Sex* is cited. Schaefer claims that “it is luminously clear that in creating this book, [the author] has given birth to herself. The reader is not likely to read it without sharing in this process of personal expansion.” The problem of mother/daughter relations is thus textualized. The daughter, just like Tony in *The Robber Bride*, tries to escape her mother’s scenarios, though the latter “hated having [them] foiled” (136). She gets entangled in the narratives and needs to “figure out what [and whose] story she’s in.” Succeeding, she may be able to “retrace her steps, [and] change the ending” (387).

The desire to create a being that resembles oneself is understandable, but in the case of women it leads to the reproduction of victims. Within a patriarchal society, an upbringing of a girl that would allow her to reject the victim status would consist in the denial of the very idea of upbringing. The only good mother is the one who refuses to be a Mother. And the only good “woman writer” is the one who allows her characters to live and speak for themselves, not requiring them to express any clearly defined party line. Margaret Atwood does precisely this.

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**WORKS CITED**


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The Robber Bride, Margaret Atwood’s eighth novel, opens at the trendy Toronto restaurant Toxique, where middle-aged friends Tony, Charis, and Rox have their monthly lunch. Although they come from different backgrounds and their personalities are much at odds, they share a common denominator: All have lost a lover or spouse to the nefarious, ravishing she-devil Zenia. Friends since their 1960’s days at Toronto University, over the last thirty years they have helped each other in turn survive Zenia’s poisonous onslaughts. Although Zenia is dead they attended her cremation in order to be sure the