

Men and Masks

An Examination of the Roles Played by the Men in Margaret Atwood's

The Edible Woman, Surfacing and Lady Oracle

by

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Thesis advisor: Peter Noel-Bentley

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates the important roles played by Margaret Atwood's male characters in the central quest of her female protagonists. Too frequently critics have considered the male creations of Margaret Atwood to be mere appendages of her female heroines, cast from the same dull mold; these critics ignore the centrality of their place in her works. Through a careful examination of the changing relationships between the men and women of The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, this thesis illustrates that Atwood does indeed portray a range of male types in her work. Further, the intent of this thesis is to show that the men of Atwood's creation vary through four main types, as defined by their place in the novels; these types, while not mutually exclusive, are those of the predator, the father-guide, the trickster, and finally the "half-formed" man. Centring upon Atwood's first three novels, which all depict quests of female characters, this thesis demonstrates the vital functions performed by the men in the protagonist's life as she attempts to come to terms with her own identity and her place in the world around her.

Dedication: This thesis is  
dedicated to my mother,  
without whose support I would  
not have been able to complete  
my work.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis demonstrates that the male characters, however apparently minor in Margaret Atwood's fiction, are instrumental to the success of the female protagonist in her search for self-knowledge; that in Atwood's work the quest for self-discovery corresponds with a working out of relationships between the female protagonist and the male characters of her experience. Atwood's male figures are used to reflect the female protagonist's growth. In terms of the male-female relationships and the heroine's quest for psychic awareness, the men exhibit diverse dispositions; they can behave as predators, father-figures or guides, take on trickster aspects, even, though rarely, attain spiritual growth parallel to that of the female protagonist. In sum, the men are either "counterparts" or "complements" who act as signposts for us in the heroine's struggle to achieve self-awareness. While this delineation of propensities might appear to suggest further categorization, its merit is that it opens rather than restricts possibilities for our reading of Atwood's men, who, until now, have been ignored in critical studies. The four dispositions cited above arise from the various roles in which I see Atwood's men participating. Thus far, Margaret Atwood has been accused by a number of critics of being incapable of creating a "real" male character.<sup>1</sup> If "real" for these critics means dynamic as opposed to static, of human rather than satirical dimension, then, I would argue, the fault lies not with Atwood but with the reading. That many of Atwood's men

are rarely memorable as fictional characters and are often less than finely detailed cannot be denied; such men serve, however, mainly as instruments for growth and reflection on the part of the protagonist and as such do not require highly individualized characterization. Further, in Atwood's portrayal of the ubiquitous male predator, she is not maligning an entire sex; he is merely representative of one human type in her work and has his female counterpart in Atwood's predatory female. Rapacious characters, male and female, are simply the least spiritually developed of her figures, serving to illustrate the desolation of soul that results from the manipulation of others for self-gratification.

Not all Atwood's men are drawn in such minimal proportions; Joe in Surfacing and A. in "Giving Birth" are precursors to Atwood's highly sensitive and individualized male protagonist, Nate, in Life Before Man, a character who expresses his own personal longings, fears and frustrations. Personally compelling and vital, he represents the strongest rebuttal to the critics' argument that Atwood cannot portray a "real" male. Atwood has become interested for the first time, in Life Before Man, in fully articulated male characters.<sup>2</sup> In the light of this latest novel, those critics who claim Atwood's men to be invariably lifeless may develop a new interest in her treatment of the male. In turn, such an awareness may lead the critics to a re-examination of the male characters in the earlier novels. For the present, Life Before Man seems to support the argument of this thesis, that the men in Atwood's canon have not only intrinsic merit, but are vital to the working of the themes of the novels and short stories, even of the poetry.



One of the dominant qualities of Margaret Atwood's creative writing is its tendency to categorize the male/female relationship in terms of what she herself has called the victor/victim framework.<sup>3</sup> In Power Politics Atwood denounces the traditional or romantic male/female relationship, as one requiring male victors and female victims, while in her interviews she stresses the dangers implicit in conventional male/female mythologizing. Atwood has spoken of male costumes or masks and the destructive result these have,<sup>4</sup> demonstrating her point with short stories, poetry, and novels where the males dress and act variously, for example, as Bluebeard, Dracula, and Superman. Unfortunately, critics and readers have often responded with further categorizing of their own, rarely examining what is behind the male masks and thus often dismissing the real complexities of Atwood's male figures and their relationships with the protagonists. This analysis of Margaret Atwood's poetry by John Wilson Foster is typical:

Margaret Atwood's current popularity stems in part from the fact that her poetry explores certain fashionable minority psychologies. With its cultivation of barely controlled hysteria, for instance, her verse is that of a psychic individual at sea in a materialist society. This hysteria, however, assumes specifically feminine forms and lends Atwood's work certain affinities (of which current popularity is the least important) with that of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. For like these two predecessors, Atwood confronts her own sexuality and the contemporary roles laid down by men for her to play. A minority psychology similar to that which informs her identity as a woman informs her national identity, for Atwood is a contemporary Canadian aware of belonging to a minority culture on the North American continent and in reaction recollecting and re-enacting her pioneer ancestors' encounter with the wilderness and with the native people. Appropriately, the Canadian ancestral experience-- repository of the spiritual identity of a people--happens to be best commemorated in the journals and memories of

some remarkable women, including Catherine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie and Anna Jameson.<sup>5</sup>

Atwood is undeniably concerned with these issues--feminine consciousness, the exploitation of Canada by larger forces, and the need for re-discovery of our ancestral roots. But such statements lend themselves to a criticism that circumscribes rather than explores Atwood's themes. As a writer, Atwood is, to use Northrop Frye's words, investigating a terrain which is "post-Canadian, as it is post-American, post-British, and post everything except the world itself."<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Atwood's fiction takes the fairly traditional form of the Bildungsroman, portraying the journeys of its central characters toward self-knowledge. Atwood's female protagonists begin with an awareness of their disaffection for their society as exemplified in their relations with men, cast off the roles assigned them, flee their tormentors and, in a state of isolation from society and their men, come to realize their own identities. Typically, Atwood's fiction is written from the point of view of a central female protagonist, although a few short stories mark the exception. While at times, as in the three parts of The Edible Woman, the narrator refers to herself in the first, then the third person, and then back again, it is virtually always the central female figure who relates events to the reader. The unnamed female protagonist of Surfacing narrates her story entirely in the first person, as does Lady Oracle's Joan Foster. In Margaret Atwood's collection of short stories, Dancing Girls, the vantage point is once again essentially that of the female protagonist.

As a result of this restricted viewpoint, the reader, who is made intimately aware of the protagonist's fears, crises, biases, and desires, may become caught up in these to the exclusion of all other concerns in the novel. It is not difficult for the reader, feeling sympathy for the protagonist's goals and being swept up in her search for self-knowledge, to ignore the roles played by the secondary, especially male, characters. Yet in Atwood's fiction, the progress of the protagonist's psychic quest is mirrored in her relationships with men along that journey. In her article "Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," Annis Pratt states that in the classic male Bildungsroman, "as in Joyce and Lawrence, the heroes pass through a similar series of relationships with women who must be subdued, escaped, or turned into images before the hero's development can be completed."<sup>7</sup> While Atwood's heroines grow beyond using their men in this way, they pass through similar stages in their relationships with men before coming to terms with their own identities.

## NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>For a consideration of this issue, see I. M. Owen's review of Dancing Girls, "Margaret Atwood as Comic Genius," Saturday Night, No. 92 (Nov. 1977), pp. 60-61; Vivian Frankel, "A Personal View," Branching Out, 2 (Jan.-Feb. 1975), pp. 24-26.

<sup>2</sup>Life Before Man explores contemporary male/female relationships through the voices of three central characters, one of whom is Nate. I regret that Life Before Man--published after the writing of this thesis--cannot receive treatment here, as the dynamic character of Nate supports my thesis that Atwood is fully capable of creating multi-dimensional men in her fiction.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1972). In her critical survey of Canadian literature, Atwood uses Canadian literary works to demonstrate five positions within a victim/victor framework. She explores these categories within our literature, examining the ways in which characters relate to each other and the environment. Atwood's fifth position is one she merely postulates as a mystical possibility rather than as one she can define and make use of.

<sup>4</sup>Atwood has pointed out the appeal and the dangers of romantic mythology in her interviews. One such warning is to be found in the article by Joyce Carol Oates, "A Conversation with Margaret Atwood," The Ontario Review, No. 9 (Fall-Winter 1978-9), pp. 5-18.

<sup>5</sup>John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Margaret Atwood," Canadian Literature, No. 74 (Autumn 1977), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck, first edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 848.

<sup>7</sup>Annis Pratt, "Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," Contemporary Literature, No. 13 (Autumn 1972), pp. 482-83.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE MANY FACES OF ADAM

For the past decade, critics of Margaret Atwood's writing have applied many and varied critical approaches in an effort to define the artistic centre of her material. Several of these critics have noted Atwood's ability to draw from myth. One, Gloria Onley, has been particularly perceptive in recognizing the rationale behind Atwood's use of mythology. She notes that "what Atwood calls 'mythologizing' is usually a conscious or unconscious enforcement of the sexual 'polarities' inherent in the myths of romantic love, nuclear marriage, the machismo male, and the 'feminine' woman." In Atwood's work, such male/female role-engulfment is deadly. Of the protagonist in Power Politics, Onley writes:

The self is lost to the social role of romantic lover, warrior, wife, superman: fulfilment means incarnation within the archetype. . . . The protagonist's quest must be always for some alternative to the sadistic penetration and destruction. . . , for some 'reality' behind the engulfing political role, and for some communion with that 'reality'.<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Hinz, in her article "The Masculine/Feminine Psychology of American/Canadian Primitivism: Deliverance and Surfacing," concludes that if James Dickey's America is essentially masculine, then Atwood's Canada is essentially feminine and that Atwood, "a Canadian female, is critical of the feminine character of the Canadian ethos."<sup>2</sup> This same

principle is defined, I believe more sharply, as "Atwood's woman-centred critique of the men's nature myth,"<sup>3</sup> in Judith McCombs' treatment of nature as arising from a feminine rather than a Canadian context, and therefore as having a kinship with the concepts of nature held by female American writers. Other critics see Atwood's tendency to mythologize in a clearly negative light. Reviewing the poems in You Are Happy, W. H. Pritchard has protested:

all of them concentrate only on piling up imagistic horrors, invocations of non-communication, bloody limbs a-falling off, nature at her dirtiest work barely an adequate metaphor for what the poet feels. . . . One thinks of Keats' advice about how when the poet feels seedy he/she should go take a shower, put on a clean shirt, and tie up the shoelaces. Get out of that dungpile, Margaret Atwood!<sup>4</sup>

While Pritchard's tone is decidedly sanctimonious, he has a following of like-minded critics.<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Sullivan, in reviewing Two-Headed Poems in her article "Atwood's New Directions," concludes: "The predictable Atwood contrivance is clear in 'Five Poems for Dolls,' where you know before you begin that there will be dolls snarling behind glass and that we make dolls of each other."<sup>6</sup> Sullivan's reading is a dogmatic one which denies the rich thematic range to be discovered in Atwood's latest collection of poems.

Those critics who do not wholly ignore Atwood's men tend to limit their treatment of them to their satirical function, their masculine willfulness, or their potential for rescuing the heroine; more than one critic has belabored the issue of whether, in The Edible Woman, Duncan would be a more suitable mate than Peter. In sum, then, the men are

typically ignored or treated superficially. Robin Skelton writes of The Edible Woman that "the men in the book are all totally without presence. They are a collection of gestures, words, and idiosyncracies, but they are not at all human."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to hypothesize that Atwood has intended this novel as a fable which demonstrates that "Human beings are, perhaps, when viewed only in terms of their appearances, habits, environments, and appetites, both ridiculous and despicable",<sup>8</sup> concluding that Atwood has great potential as a satirist. According to Skelton, Atwood's intention is Swiftian. Critics of similar persuasion judge the novel as a delightful but not-so-serious piece of social whimsy.<sup>9</sup> Part of the novel's problem may stem from The Edible Woman's locale. As John Moss has illustrated in Patterns of Isolation, "For authenticity of external reality in closest conjunction with acute perceptions of the human condition, the Canadian imagination seems to demand a rural setting."<sup>10</sup> His point is well taken if one considers the difference commonly perceived between The Edible Woman and Surfacing; the condition of Surfacing's protagonist has, to most critics, a far more profound and haunting quality in its forest setting than has Marian's in its urban context. Whereas the power of Surfacing's psychic journey is often noted in criticisms of that novel, it is the rare critic who sees The Edible Woman as a serious piece of literature; more sheer terror is evoked in the woods than in Marian's cityscape.

Douglas Hill's review of Dancing Girls interprets Atwood's men in a more sinister light than that used by Skelton. In Hill's view,

the reader should not laugh at the threat they pose:

The whole book might well be viewed as a collection of rape fantasies, if it were understood that the image of the physical act is most often a metaphor for profounder violations, for more dangerous forcible entries into the cubicle of selfhood. . . . the real and serious enemy, the one that threatens actual annihilation, is simply Men. The male antagonists all seem stamped from the same die. Like Joe in Surfacing (the buffalo on the nickel), they are lamely creative, insensitive, stolid, stupid--aging unidealistic dropouts from the sixties who turned on but couldn't tune in. One is tempted, after a while, to call them all stereotypes, and shrug off Atwood's offensive--her feminism--for being too simplistic; too easy. One hesitates at last to do this, because of the nagging possibility that she has hit the mark dead centre.<sup>11</sup>

Hill then suggests that "perhaps, these stories argue, men--in particular and in general--are shallow stereotypes of irrational behaviour, stronger physically, destructively stronger, but relatively inadequate in most other ways."<sup>12</sup> Hill's complete denunciation of the male--in particular and in general--carries ironic weight, coming as it does from a man. He seems to have fallen under the spell of Atwood's plaintive sirens, and sounds here as disenchanted with his sex as Marian is with her own throughout most of The Edible Woman. While more extreme feminist critics might endorse Hill's assessment, this treatment leans too heavily upon male culpability; in this interpretation the men have been given a role, but it is entirely a destructive one. I have quoted at length from Hill because his article is representative of much written about Atwood's men; those who regard Atwood as a feminist writer interpret her characterizations as a withering condemnation of the male chauvinist stereotype.<sup>13</sup> There



is no balance in such an assessment of her men. Atwood's females are not all victims of man's inhumanity to woman. Much of the time, indeed most of the time, the women are threatened from within and betrayed by themselves as much as by their men, however often they may cry rape.

Critics who make use of Atwood's victor/victim framework often interpret the intent of Atwood's novels correctly. One such critic, Francis Mansbridge, perceives that:

A similar pattern emerges in each of Atwood's three novels. A young woman struggles with varying degrees of effort and success to emerge from the controls of a false society in her quest for personal fulfillment. Or--to put it in more Atwoodian terms--she refuses to be a victim.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the accuracy of such general perceptions, Mansbridge neglects the men to such a degree that he misses the point more than once; he sums up The Edible Woman and Surfacing, for example, by declaring that "Chances of a satisfying relationship with either Duncan or Joe are minimal, but there are fewer supports offered by society if the attempt fails."<sup>15</sup> His pairing of Duncan with Joe is distressing in that he fails to see Duncan's dangerous allure or Joe's inherent worth. His final analysis of Lady Oracle is even more misguided. Having recognized of Joan Foster that, "Like the maze of her gothic novel, her own life is directionless, as she muddles her way around the next bend," Mansbridge goes on to declare blithely:

She has given up gothic romances at the end of the novel, even if she does contemplate taking up science fiction. She decides to stay in Italy with her new-found reporter friend rather than go home, ready for a new life, although she has no illusions of it being any better.<sup>16</sup>

This reading is inaccurate on several counts: Joan, at the novel's conclusion, does in fact appear headed back to Toronto; the reporter's interest in her and hers in him suggest not a new life but more of the old worn romantic pattern; furthermore, Joan's apparent readiness to take up science fiction hints darkly that from this moment she will merely spin fiction based upon a Gothic future rather than a Gothic past. Atwood suggests that her protagonist needs to write about the present as a first step in ordering the chaos she has made of her life; in terms of literary genre, social realism would have provided a more promising beginning than does her choice of science fiction.

Using a feminist focus, Marge Piercy, in her article "Beyond Victimhood," traces Atwood's protagonists through her poetry and fiction, ending with Survival. Hers is one of the more lucid treatments of Atwood's themes; yet finally, even Piercy is moved to pose what is a common question for Atwood's critics:

Can a victim cease being one except through some victory? Easily she renounces the victor games; she has never been anything but a victim. Atwood says yes, but I wonder even in her own terms. . . . To cease to be a victim, each of her protagonists fights an entirely solitary battle. Their only allies are the dead, the forces in nature and the psyche, their own life energies. Yet they must live among others. Somehow the next step is missing.<sup>17</sup>

The next step is not entirely missing; we find it offered cautiously and tentatively by Atwood in Surfacing, where the hope for the future and for Marian rests with men like Joe, to 1978 the most promising of Atwood's male figures.

One final critical approach to Atwood is the psychoanalytic. It

appears to lend itself rather well to Atwood's works, especially as Atwood herself has described Canadian experience as schizophrenic/psychotic and has herself created protagonists who are fragmented and threatened by their environments. Like R. D. Laing, Atwood exposes the madness of our world and the sanity of our "sick" individuals. Using Laing's theories of madness and sanity, Barbara Hill Rigney has written a thought-provoking study in four sections that deal with the works of Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood. She uses the texts of Jane Eyre, Mrs. Dalloway, The Four-Gated City, and Surfacing in order to demonstrate that madness is part of the female social condition within a patriarchal society. According to Rigney,

Each novel presents a criticism of a patriarchal political and social system, a universe dominated by masculine energy, which, in itself, manifests a kind of collusive madness in the form of war or sexual oppression and is thereby seen as threatening to feminine psychological survival. Many of these novels depict a female protagonist who, in spite of such oppression, achieves a superior sanity and at least a relative liberty in the assertion of self.<sup>18</sup>

Rigney, in her feminist/psychoanalytic approach, dismisses the language and ideology of orthodox psychology as useless for her analysis. She sees, however, in R. D. Laing's theories a convenient and workable "counterideology". Laing, Rigney suggests, "echoes many feminists in his plea for the abandonment of role prescriptions and the restoration of the whole person, the undivided self" (p. 9).

Like Laing, Atwood is interested in a restoration of the "whole" person, and so it appears that Rigney's application of psychoanalysis

to Atwood's work is productive. Indeed it is, until we come to her specific treatment of Surfacing. For Rigney, all the men in Atwood's works are without vision and cannot be redeemed. While she concedes that the women are human and therefore killers, there are, for them, mitigating circumstances. The protagonist, she claims, "kills animals only for food and then only with a kind of religious reverence for the creature she has destroyed" (p. 101). Conveniently, Rigney fails to mention the aborted foetus at this point in her interpretation of the novel. When the protagonist attains her vision and the divided self heals, according to Rigney: "The protagonist has united the two halves of herself, found her parentage, reconciled the male and female principles within the self" (p. 110). At this stage,

For Atwood even more than for Woolf the male principle is ultimately expendable. The female principle alone and in itself incorporates and resolves opposites. Life and death, good and evil, exist within the protagonist, within all women, as they exist in nature. (p. 111)

Life and death, good and evil exist within men as well, the reader is tempted to add, although Rigney would refuse to admit the notion. Surfacing ends, for Rigney, with "ringing affirmation"; the protagonist is blessed with a new life, a new vision, and a new "messiah" (p. 115). There is, to my mind, something perversely illogical in Rigney's conclusion, although I am in accord with much she has written with regard to the novel. Suddenly, by Rigney's conclusion, we have returned full-circle to the mythology of male/female power politics that Atwood denounces in her work. Here, Superman has been unseated only to be replaced by Superwoman! Rather than a sense of affirmation and

wholeness, the reader is left with the uneasy feeling that the male/female principles are forever divided and that sexual warfare is inevitable.

None of the critics cited considers the role played by the male in the quest motif I have described in the Introduction as the central unifying theme in Atwood's fiction. The female protagonist's quest for self takes essentially the same form in Margaret Atwood's fiction and poetry, with the male figures reflecting the protagonist's growing psychic awareness. The progression through stages seems a common pattern, if not a rigid one, whereby the female protagonist is compelled to flee a state of dependency and self-deception and learn a new way of relating to others and to her environment. The journey is not without its setbacks. Initially, males defined as predators and described through such hunting metaphors as gun, knife, and even camera, seek to capture, confine, and control the protagonist, causing her to run from the threat she perceives. The quest she enters upon often involves her being repelled by or drawn to men who reflect her growing self-awareness.<sup>19</sup> Males acting as guides provide the illumination needed to pursue what is often a harrowing and painful quest. Others acting as tricksters, a blend of hunter and guide, appear to lead the female out of her predicament, but are later revealed as stalkers through whom she learns, nonetheless, penetrating truths about herself. In the final stage of the quest, the protagonist achieves true self-enlightenment; only seldom is this stage obtained by the male figure, who, like the protagonist, has been searching for spiritual awareness. Together,

they become male/female complements who achieve wholeness by meaningful union with each other. These last figures are Atwood's most positive and most rare. To 1978, one novel, Surfacing, and one book of poetry, You Are Happy, best illustrate these moments of rare affirmation in human relationships.

The first male type, that of predator, is the most common characterization for men in Atwood's work, both fiction and poetry. They have many masks but only one fundamental attitude: the predatory. In The Edible Woman, Peter is the quintessential example of this role; the protagonist speaks of feeling like a rabbit and a deer in his presence. We can trust her awareness, as his conversation is full of guns and knives and of the joys of hunting with his male cohorts. His attempts to "capture" Marian on film add much to her horror of being devoured. The novel contains other threatening males who feel the same compulsion to acquire by deceit and to crush what is helpless, whether animal or female. In Surfacing this compulsion to ravish takes on another dimension: as Atwood elsewhere expresses it, "man is to woman as technology is to nature as the United States is to Canada as dominator is to dominated."<sup>20</sup> Less abstractly, what we have in The Edible Woman is woman, the frail victim, pursued by predatory man who wants to possess her as he does other valuable objects. What we have in Surfacing is exploitation of the weak at three levels: woman is weaker than man, nature is weaker than technology, Canada is weaker than the United States. Because of their tripartite exploitative nature, the male Americans of the novel are rendered a triple threat. It is not important that the "Americans" of Surfacing are finally revealed as Canadians, for it is their attitude that matters; they have a mindless,

violent, predatory style. They impress themselves upon their territory whether it be female, pastoral, or national. Lady Oracle virtually teems with these predatory types, but all of them are creations spun from the insecure mind of the protagonist. The heroines of Joan Foster's Gothic tales have barely time to catch their breath with the exit of one cloaked romancer before his double is introduced, teeth bared and eyebrows arched ominously. They are Atwood's own parody of Bluebeard, the quintessence of predatory man. What these men have in common with those in the private life of Joan Foster is that they reflect the confused needs of the protagonist; while they threaten to possess and control the heroine, and, in the case of the Gothic hero, kill her if she gets out of hand, they also add piquancy to the protagonist's otherwise flat existence. While the men in Joan's life demonstrate multiple possibilities, she sees them only as potential rescuers or destroyers, as mere extensions of her Gothic figures. Predictably, Joan Foster and her heroines spend the entire length of their respective novels running to avoid the clutches of potentially predatory males.

The second male type, that of guide or father-figure, is more rare in Atwood's fiction. This male still has strong predatory instincts; but there is a duality about him, and his prime function in Atwood's works is to act as a springboard for the protagonist's spiritual release, prodding her toward renewal. The duality of his nature stems from the fact that he has not grappled with his predatory side, yet is capable of spurring on the female protagonist in her quest for self-awareness. In The Edible Woman, for example, Duncan helps release Marian from her spiritual torpor by goading her from

her "secure" engagement to Peter. While he helps Marian, he cannot help himself; in fact the images that cluster about Duncan--paper, stale cigarette smoke, dry thin bones, whiteness, snowy landscapes and sinister ravines--are, without exception, deathlike. He is not a figure who can combine with the female in any fruitful way; he merely guides her a certain distance and then leaves her to her own instincts.

In Surfacing the guide is, in fact, the protagonist's father, who, though now dead, has left clues for her to follow in her later life. He lacked the requisite awareness to complete the journey himself, but he has prompted the protagonist to quest for self-awareness. He is described as a believer in the power of rational thought; he teaches the narrator as a child that there is no God, and so she substitutes her father, believing that he can save them both from anything. As a botanist, the father has supreme faith in science and has learned to put everything in categories. For Atwood this extreme rationalism is fatal; the father lives only with his head and so it is appropriate that he drowns, camera looped around his neck, while searching for a vision, betrayed by his "gods of the head." His final wisdom, however, is a gift he bestows upon his daughter, to be used in her own quest. Of this vision the narrator states, "he had found out about . . . the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth. . . . He had discovered 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" (p. 145). Using the clues her father has left, she dives, for the third and last time, deeply into the lake; there she encounters her past in the spectral shape that is at once her father, her half-



drowned brother, and then the child she has denied birth. What has been so long repressed now surfaces to the conscious level of the protagonist's awareness; she faces ghosts of her own devising. Insight is her father's legacy to her.

Upon first reading, Lady Oracle appears to lack this male figure. Joan has a father, but she remembers him as notably absent in her childhood; furthermore, this man may be her stepfather, rather than her natural parent. The father types and guides of Lady Oracle are hazy figures who suggest equally hazy possibilities for the protagonist's future; because they do not function in a clear-cut manner, Joan refuses to listen to them. Her father, the Daffodil Man, and the gardener in Terremoto are among the men who suggest, by their actions, the limitations of the protagonist's awareness. Joan's outmoded categories restrict her relations with others and deny her vital growth. Thus the movement of Lady Oracle becomes necessarily circuitous, as the protagonist desperately gathers her delusive fantasies about her in an effort to stave off the assault of the real world.

The two male attributes of predator and father-guide are not unusual in fiction. Atwood's men exhibit a third characteristic, that of the previously mentioned trickster, an uncommon type for Atwood within that group of males who act as catalysts for change. In this role he merges with the predator, his intention being to seduce by false appearance; he is constantly changing his shape in order to entrap the protagonist. Unlike the predator, he has a tendency to ask probing questions and to make illuminating remarks; his tricks have the ability to jar the female into an awareness of her condition.

While he does not offer answers for the protagonist, he does underline the dangers of her present state. If the female ignores his warnings of impending danger, becoming emotionally dependent upon him, he will destroy her as surely as will the predator. But he, like the predator, defines a necessary step in the protagonist's journey toward self-awareness.

Duncan, in The Edible Woman, is the only clear-cut example of this figure in Atwood's novels, but most, if not all, of the men in Lady Oracle have this dimension in their characters. There, Redmond, the Daffodil Man, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine, represent the duality of Joan Foster's creations and her male associates. What they appear to be is not at all what they are. If Joan Foster and the females in her Costume Gothics were capable of using their awareness of duplicity, they would look to themselves for salvation and not to their men. By the end of the novel, however, nothing is resolved; while Joan Foster decides to return home and set right her scrambled life, one senses she is yet awaiting rescue by her newest male acquaintance, the reporter she has knocked unconscious with a bottle. Duncan, the trickster of The Edible Woman, uses the guise of innocence and inexperience to seduce Marian; she feels the shock of betrayal when he reveals he has tricked her, but she learns from this episode that she must not use others as shelters from life's storms, a lesson Joan Foster does not learn. Joan fails to see that she must protect herself by removing her mask of defencelessness. The need for self-sufficiency is not a lesson to be learned in the arms of the predatory men to whom she is fatally attracted; the predator's strength lies in his keeping the victim weak and ignorant, for in knowledge lies strength, hence freedom.

The fourth male type examined in this thesis is what Atwood herself terms the "half-formed" man (Surfacing, p. 192). His union with the female represents wholeness of spirit and the commitment to a new beginning which is potentially Edenic. He is set apart from the first three types by a vulnerability stemming from his ability to feel deep emotional pain, first perceived by the protagonist as weakness. The most clearly defined example of this male in Atwood's novels to 1978 is Joe in Surfacing. This figure is also to be found in Atwood's poetry, particularly well developed in You Are Happy, and in the short story "Giving Birth" from the collection Dancing Girls. His features are softer, more animal than human. Initially, Joe is described by the narrator as being "like the buffalo on the U. S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-nosed, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction. That's how he thinks of himself too: deposed, unjustly . . . Beautiful Joe" (p. 8). Later feeling threatened by him, the narrator describes him in more ominous terms:

His hands descended, zipper sound, metal teeth on metal teeth, he was rising out of the fur husk, solid and heavy; but the cloth separated from him and I saw he was human. I didn't want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers, the clay victims damaged and strewn behind him, and he hadn't seen, he didn't know about himself, his own capacity for death. (p. 147)

Here the narrator regards Joe as technological man, a rapist intent upon destruction, a killer because he is human. She is mistaken in grouping Joe with the predators; he neither takes from his environment nor tries

to destroy the protagonist. For both Joe in Surfacing and the male in You Are Happy, the final position of refusing to be an aggressor is one not easily achieved. Both men undergo fundamental changes during the course of the books. At the beginning of Surfacing, the narrator stays with Joe because he is physically attractive and does not force communication; he demands nothing. By the end of the novel, Joe is no longer passive. Having returned to find his lover, he calls for her, "balancing on the dock which is neither land nor water, hands on hips, head thrown back and eyes scanning. His voice is annoyed; he won't wait much longer. But right now he waits" (p. 192). Clearly, the protagonist cannot put him off with non sequiturs because now he is aware of their mutual need for union. Whereas the other novels stop short of the protagonist's achieving definitive spiritual gain, in Surfacing potential for a happy future exists once the female has bridged the gap between her head and body and can truly experience thought and feeling contemporaneously. She has her complement in Joe, a father for the child she may have conceived in the woods. With Joe, the figure of "half-formed" man takes over where the father-figure or guide leaves off. It is he who mediates for the life-force and the real world and who helps the female protagonist move toward completion. In Surfacing, the narrator is not left stranded on the shore of past mistakes. Similarly, You Are Happy closes on a note of quiet celebration with the lovers coming together in trust and openness:

. . . you open  
 yourself to me gently, what  
 they tried, we  
 tried but could never do  
 before . . .  
 to take  
 that risk, to offer life and remain

alive, open yourself like this and become whole (p. 96)

As described in the last short story of the collection Dancing Girls, "Giving Birth" also contains a male figure who is supportive and helps his wife through the life-giving process.

Clearly, then, Atwood's men are not all one-dimensional chauvinist types; her men wear many faces. In Atwood's fiction, as I intend to illustrate in detail later in this thesis, where there are no positive male characters the female protagonists remain spiritually barren. They are either masculine counterparts of the female figure, as with the males of The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle, or, as in the case of Joe in Surfacing, spiritual complements. I use these terms as Atwood has defined them during an interview:

Your counterpart is someone who is the mirror reflection of yourself, and your complement is someone who supplies those elements that are lacking in you. . . . And what I'm interested in tends to be complements, image structures in which other people are perceived not as necessarily you, you inside, or hidden you, but as something quite other.<sup>21</sup>

Of Atwood's novels and poetry, Surfacing and You Are Happy contain the best examples of male/female complementary figures. The men and women in these works attain enough personal vision to recognize the strengths of the other and then to affirm their recognition by open trust. Rather

than being counterparts or mirror-images, as are the figures in The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, and Power Politics (Atwood's book of poems exploring sexual manoeuvres), they are complementary halves that couple in the hope of becoming one, thus attaining completeness.

Chapter Two of this thesis will treat the novel The Edible Woman, examining the overlapping proclivities of the key male figures to act as predator, guide, and trickster. It will indicate the roles played by these men in the protagonist's search for self and will draw tentative conclusions as to what the absence of a "half-formed" male signifies for the protagonist's condition at the novel's close. Chapter Three will similarly consider the importance of the male roles found in Surfacing, demonstrating the significance of Joe, the "half-formed" man, in the narrator's search for fulfillment. Chapter Four, in its examination of Lady Oracle, will focus on the three figures of predator, guide and trickster and examine their significance for the protagonist's quest. Chapter Five will conclude the thesis, highlighting the male roles in each of the three novels, and stressing their place in Atwood's design of male/female counterparts and complements.

## CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>Gloria Onley, "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," Canadian Literature, 60 (Spring 1974), 22-3. Among other treatments of the use of myth by Atwood, see Josie Campbell, "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Mosaic, 11 (Spring 1978), 17-28; Nancy E. Bjerring, "The Problem of Language in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Queen's Quarterly, 83 (1976), 597-612; Frank Davey, "Atwood's Gorgon Touch," Studies in Canadian Literature, 2, No. 2 (Summer 1977), 146-63; George Woodcock, "Playing With Freezing Fire," Canadian Literature, 70 (Autumn 84-6; Rosellen Brown, "The Poetry of Margaret Atwood," The Nation, 212 (June 28, 1971), 824-6.

<sup>2</sup>Evelyn Hinz, "The Masculine/Feminine Psychology Of American/Canadian Primitivism: Deliverance And Surfacing," Other Views: An International Collection of Essays from the Bicentennial, (Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>Judith McCombs, "Atwood's Nature Concepts: An Overview," Waves, 7, No. 1 (Fall 1978), 71.

<sup>4</sup>W. H. Pritchard, "Despairing At Styles," Poetry, 127, No. 5 (Feb., 1976), 296.

<sup>5</sup>In particular, see Greg Gatenby's review of Two-Headed Poems in Quill and Quire, 44, No. 16 (Oct. 1978); A. W. Purdy, "Atwood's Moodie," Canadian Literature, 47 (Winter 1971), 80-4; Scott Lauder, "We Are Not So Happy," Canadian Forum, (Nov.-Dec., 1974), pp. 17-8; Rosemary Sullivan, "Breaking the Circle," Malahat Review, 41 (Jan., 1977), 30-41.

<sup>6</sup>Rosemary Sullivan, "Atwood's New Directions," Tamarack Review, 76 (Winter 1979), 109.

<sup>7</sup>Robin Skelton, review of The Edible Woman, Malahat Review, 13 (Jan. 1970), 108.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>See Jane Rule, "Life, Liberty And The Pursuit Of Normalcy," Malahat Review, 41 (Jan., 1977), 42-9; John Stedmond, review of The Edible Woman, Canadian Forum, 49 (Feb. 1970), 267; George Jonas, review of The Edible Woman, Tamarack Review, 54 (Winter 1970), 75-7.

<sup>10</sup>John Moss, Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Hill, "Violations," Canadian Forum, 57, No. 677 (Dec.-Jan. 1977-8), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> A feminist treatment is also to be found in the following: Rosemary Sweetapple, "Margaret Atwood: Victims and Survivors," Southern Review, U. of Adelaide, 9, No. 1 (Mar. 1976), 50-69; Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision," Signs, 2, No. 2 (Winter 1976), 316-30; Judith Plaskow, "On Carol Christ on Margaret Atwood: Some Theological Reflections," Ibid., 331-9; John Hofsess, "Atwoodioni Presents. . .," Books in Canada, 6 (Nov. 1977), 27-8; Scott Symons, "The Canadian Bestiary: Ongoing Literary Depravity," West Coast Review, 11, No. 3 (Jan., 1977), 3-16.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Mansbridge, "Search For Self In The Novels Of Margaret Atwood," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 22 (1978), 106.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>17</sup> Marge Piercy, "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood," American Poetry Review, 2 (Nov.-Dec., 1973), 44.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Wolf, Lessing, and Atwood (Wisconsin: Wisconsin Univ. Press, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Rigney notes that all four authors use the doppelgänger "who acts as a guide in the exploration of the wild places of the self" (p. 122). She sees these guides as "wild, mad, and holy"--she also sees them as exclusively female. Rigney accurately pinpoints the place of these doubles and the importance of their function; inaccurately--or perhaps unjustly--she fails to observe that in Atwood's work these figures are both male and female. My own concentration on the males is not a denial of the roles played by female guides, but rather an attempt to treat those aspects of the male figures which are typically overlooked in studies of Atwood's canon.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Atwood, "A Reply," Signs, 2, No. 2 (Winter 1976), 340.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Atwood, from an interview with Margaret Kaminski, Waves, 4, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), 12.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EDIBLE WOMAN

The first of Atwood's novels, The Edible Woman, contains several male figures who impede or aid the female protagonist in her journey toward self-knowledge and independence; none of the men in the novel attains the "half-formed" state achieved by Joe in Surfacing. Indeed, the sole questing character in Atwood's first novel is the female protagonist, Marian MacAlpin.

Initially, the protagonist's position is one of detachment and non-commitment. Within the span of a few critical months, however, Marian undergoes a radical shift in her perceptions of the world about her and her place in it. As the novel opens, Marian questions the validity of the life she leads. She spends her days adapting consumer questionnaires for Seymour Surveys so that they can be more readily understood by the general public, sensing vaguely that she is meant for some better fate, and that her position in the company is too loosely defined to be satisfying. Her place of employ she describes as

layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists - referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men - who arrange things with the clients. . . . Below us are the machines. . . . Our department is the link between the two: we are supposed to take care of the human element, the interviewers themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Marian is thus presented as stuck in the gooey middle of life, arranging words on cards which help industry manipulate the public into buying products they do not need. Her lack of meaningful involvement is reflected not only by the place in which she has chosen to work, but also in her question, "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys?" (p. 20). By Marian's phrasing, Atwood alerts us to the fact that Marian anticipates, in her station at Seymour Surveys, a type of personal metamorphosis which will, miraculously, require no effort on her part.

To the external world and even to herself, Marian presents the façade of a well-adjusted young woman, with a normal healthy appetite for the sensual pleasures of life, in particular food and sex. But by the end of Part One her dissatisfaction with a "secure" and predictable future is evident, brought into focus by her panic in being forced to join the Pension Plan at work; she panics because her signature on the Pension Plan Application seems magically to bind her to a distant future without her having lived any form of meaningful present:

Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, pre-formed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater. Perhaps I would have a hearing aid, like one of my great aunts who had never married. . . . I thought of my signature going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked. (p. 21)

It is Marian's fear of being buried alive that causes her to accept an offer of marriage, what appears on the surface to be a truer commitment to the future. That it is no such thing, only another form of remaining

uncommitted, is a lesson Marian must come to learn, although she senses something to be very wrong almost immediately upon accepting the proposal.

For Marian, one clear indication of commitment to life lies in the possession of a healthy appetite. In Part Two, this appetite disappears; Marian's anxiety over the fear that she may have made the wrong decision in her engagement to Peter manifests itself in her body's gradual rejection of food, commencing with steak but ending in a rejection of even orange juice. At this stage Marian faces one of two alternatives: she can effectively refuse commitment to life, passively allowing death by starvation to overtake her, or she can actively enter into a struggle to maintain a balance between the pressures of commitment and personal integrity. Sensing the destructive aspects of humanity, she attempts to deny her carnivorous side; she refuses to feed on other life. The mounting limitations of what Marian's body ingests parallel her desire for an emotional safety which can be achieved only at the great cost of disengagement from society. The food metaphor dramatically symbolizes Marian's refusal to participate in the give and take of healthy human relations. Throughout much of the novel, Marian runs from an acceptance of personal responsibility, letting others make critical decisions about her life for her, becoming thoroughly absorbed by them; by the end of the novel, however, she learns that freedom and self-fulfillment demand one's discipline, honesty, courage and commitment to the future.

The operative metaphor for the protagonist's struggle is that of the consumer and the consumed. Around this central metaphor of

victimization several images cluster, the most significant being food, hunting, photography, and the maze. Of the various food images, the most dominant are those which represent likenesses of self; Marian's soft helplessness is represented in a feminine-looking, spongy confection she bakes for her fiancé Peter. The exposed helplessness of one of the male characters is depicted in a cracked egg. Images of the hunt take graphic forms, at both the natural and social levels. The camera is viewed as an extreme mechanical extension of the hunt metaphor, with people "shot," "captured," and "collected," on film. Peter and Leonard are two predators, types who take pride in their camera collections, discussing the complex strategies of exposure. For Atwood, the camera is capable not only of robbing, but also of destroying the soul of the victim "captured" on celluloid, and replacing it with a glossy but superficial mirror image. As Marian becomes progressively more terrified of the future, her head fills with images of herself running blindly down mazes, looking for the way out. Marian literally flees Peter and Leonard early in the novel, leaping hedges and dodging into black alleys in an attempt to avert her captors. Later, at the engagement party, Marian senses once more the feeling that Peter intends to devour her. She flees in panic down several flights of stairs, seeking asylum. Obviously, the maze she enters offers no escape; Marian's sanctuary is every bit as dangerous as her active pursuer, Peter. At the centre of the maze lies Duncan and, ostensibly, safety. The maze, Marian learns, rather than affording protection, is actually another trap.

In the novel the males act in one or more of three ways: as

predators, father-figures or guides, and as tricksters. All the key males in Marian's life are capable of becoming devourers if Marian remains passive: Peter, her fiancé, with his guns, cameras and knives; Duncan, the bright graduate student Marian meets in the laundromat, with his chill, cadaverous presence; Joe, the husband of Marian's school chum Clara, with his disarming sympathy for women's problems; Leonard, a long-time friend, with his fatherly protectiveness toward Marian. Each has the basic predatory instinct. Marian's progress at each stage of the psychic quest is defined by these male figures, as well as being mirrored in the central metaphor of victor/victim. Duncan, the graduate student in whom Marian seeks refuge, is a trickster figure who also acts as Marian's guide for part of her psychic journey. The father-figures in the novel are comically fragile: Joe has an impossible time juggling children, meals, and cleaning, while Len refuses the role altogether, sickened by the very idea of birth. There is no positive portrayal of the male, no "half-formed" man, although one character, Joe Bates, pretends to the role.

Peter, the protagonist's fiancé, is the ultimate predator in the novel. Before the engagement, he is concerned with one form of hunting, the killing of rabbits and deer, and with maintaining his status as a confirmed bachelor, safe from what he ironically perceives as the predatory grasp of desperate women; after his engagement to Marian, he is transformed into a stalker, intent on capturing on film the protagonist's image for all time. She envisions going down corridors, only to meet him cleaver in hand, bent on her destruction; to her

further alarm, she sees no escape routes. By the end of the novel, having lost Marian, and now convinced that marriage is an essential component of his image as successful young lawyer, Peter is off in pursuit of another female willing to serve as his domestic trophy. He finds comfort in Lucy, telling Marian: "'it's nice to know there are some considerate women left around'" (p. 266).

Duncan, the trickster<sup>2</sup> and guide of the novel, is a graduate student in English whom Marian meets while conducting a consumer survey. He smiles cynically throughout Marian's descriptions of her future marriage, and voices her own disquiet about the nature of reality and the danger of inertia; by his relentless questioning of her motives, his insights into her character weaknesses, and his final deceitful seduction of her, he jolts Marian into an awareness of her limitations. She learns from Duncan that she must assume responsibility for herself, that otherwise others will take advantage of her, adapting her to their own purposes.

Len and Joe are secondary male characters and friends of Marian. At the outset, both appear strong, competent, and masculine, capable of taking care of themselves and their weaker, female counterparts. By the end of the novel, however, the roles are largely reversed. Clara, Joe's fragile but "lovely little wife," is babysitting Len, who has regressed to infancy and fights for the possession of toys; she is able to cope admirably with what is a highly bizarre household and sounds, says Marian, "more competent than usual" (p. 280). Of Joe, nothing at all is said. Both men are final proof for Marian that male is not synonymous with solid, as she had previously thought.

All these males reflect aspects of Marian's own character. Her early counterpart is Peter. Like her, he is easily influenced by appearances. He works at maintaining a tough image of self-sufficiency, having surrounded himself with other carefree bachelors who bolster his carefully constructed image. Marian describes Peter's increasing panic as these protective old buddies marry, concluding with his closest friend, Trigger:

It had been like an epidemic. Just before I'd met him two had succumbed, and in the four months since that another two had gone under without much warning. . . . He 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. (p. 27)

With the demise of Trigger, Peter turns to Marian for solace. As each friend of Peter's "succumbs" to marriage, Marian is made to pay the price, a sexual mortification of her flesh. While the protagonist often questions what is behind Peter's almost brutal treatment of her, she acquiesces in all he suggests. Each marriage is marked by progressively more sadistic love-making sessions: on Peter's floor, then in a farmer's field, and finally in his bathtub. When Marian wonders, "What kind of a girl did he think I was?" (p. 62), Peter obligingly answers the unvoiced question with his comment that she would look great in a kimono. For him she is the ultimate geisha, willing to service the needs of her man, no matter how fantastic, with little regard for self.

Peter demonstrates his overtly predatory nature before he becomes engaged to Marian. His bedroom walls fairly bristle with weapons--

pistols, rifles, assorted knives. Up until the engagement, Peter shows his need to dominate by killing nature's small, harmless creatures. He relishes the memory of his hunting exploits, as exemplified in this description of his killing a rabbit:

"So I let her off and Wham. One shot right through the heart. . . . Trigger said, 'You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts'll fall out.' So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards . . ." (p. 69).

This story, with the female rabbit's guts and blood strewn everywhere, vividly displays Peter's hostility and contempt toward those things that cannot convincingly defend themselves.

The same impression of Peter is given in the dinner scene of Part Two, where Marian watches him eat his blood-red steak. She marvels at his ability to cut the meat expertly, with just the right amount of pressure, no tearing, no ragged edges. Suddenly, the image of Peter, carnivore, merges with that of the hunter from Moose Beer commercials: "The hunter who had killed a deer stood posed and urbane, no twigs in his hair, his hands bloodless" (p. 150). The hunter of the commercial is Peter, now a more tidy killer. During dinner, Marian thinks of the cow "that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar" (p. 151). In humanizing the cow, she assumes identity with it, and consequently loses her appetite for meat. Ironically, Peter, who is oblivious to what has just occurred, pronounces proudly, "A good meal always makes



you feel a little more human" (p. 152). The implications for the protagonist are ominous. As Peter revels, here, in his appetite for bloody meat, Marian looks on timidly and helplessly. And so she must; having rejected her own assertive nature, she rightly assumes identity with all exploited creatures. Until Marian can stand independent of Peter, and make her own decisions, she will be at his mercy. With his engagement, Peter has given up the need to hunt rabbits and deer, but has taken on the equally aggressive male posture of Marian's defender, possessor, and, she fears, devourer.

This new pattern emerges the morning following the proposal. References are made to pride of ownership; Peter acts as if he were appraising a newly purchased car; Marian responds with chrome-plated smiles and she hears herself talking in a voice she has never heard before, a voice soft and flannelly. Of Peter's transition, the narrator states, "he was changing form in the kitchen, turning from a reckless young bachelor into a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability" (p. 89). Ostensibly, Peter's proposal has, Marian feels, rescued her from an unhappy future. As Marian sees it, all she has to do is float, and Peter will take care of the rest. But her instincts do not accord with this rational assessment. During the proposal her response, physically, is quite telling: "I drew back from him. A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (p. 83). Her response indicates that the price of security with Peter is a life of small dimensions. Once Marian hands over her life into Peter's safekeeping, he starts to work the

changes in Marian that will provide him with the perfect showcase for his successful career. The final phase is reached at Peter's party. He has suggested that she "do something" with her hair and buy a more provocative dress than she usually wears. Upon her arrival at Peter's, there is little left of the Marian the reader has met in Part One. She is lacquered, sequined, encased in a red dress that causes her to feel uncomfortably like a target and Peter to murmur, "Yum." With Peter's help, she has indeed become the edible woman, a tribute to the upwardly mobile lawyer.

Peter, too, reaches his final point in transformation at the party. If Marian feels like a trapped animal, he must be seen as her captor and tormentor. Reflecting serenely upon the "real" Peter, she happily conjures up an image of a "home-movie man"; then she sees a series of corridors and rooms, maze-like, each holding a version of Peter, Peter with barbecue fork, Peter with cleaver, and then, one last door:

Peter was there, dressed in his dark opulent winter suit. He had a camera in his hand; but now she saw what it really was. There were no more doors and when she felt behind her for the doorknob, afraid to take her eyes off him, he raised the camera and aimed it at her; his mouth opened in a snarl of teeth. There was a blinding flash of light. (pp. 243-44)

What she has made Peter, what Peter has made her, come together in one blinding revelation of the predator and its prey. Marian runs one final time, realizing that "Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (p. 245). The power Marian sees Peter as having is one she has unwittingly given him in relinquishing her own freedom to

make decisions. At least momentarily Marian intuits the nature of her relationship with Peter and the damage done. Her real fear is that, having allowed Peter to create an artificial image of her, she will be locked into the role of feminine doll, unable to change, forever. The burden of such a role is overwhelming. Her last impression of Peter as she flees is that of a "homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (p. 246), and she is his perfect target. "She should never have worn red" (p. 244), she feels.

Marian's relationship with Duncan coincides with that of her engagement to Peter. In fact she meets him the very day that Peter proposes and it is to Duncan that the protagonist turns, with increasing frequency, as her marriage draws near. Thus it is Duncan, acting as guide and trickster, who illuminates Marian's troubled condition and draws her into an awareness of the implications of her refusal to take charge of her life. It is understandable, if not appropriate, that Marian should seek protection with Duncan when she runs from her fiancé. In many ways, Duncan is Peter's opposite. Peter, surrounded by images of a consumer society, is described as nicely packaged, while Duncan is an ad-man's nightmare.<sup>3</sup> Peter's body has the scent of fresh soap, Duncan's the reek of stale cigarettes. Physically, they have little in common. Peter, according to the protagonist, is

ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads. . . . sometimes I wanted a reassuring wart or mole, or patch of roughness, something the touch could fix on instead of gliding over. (p. 61)

By way of contrast with Peter's soft-skinned smoothness, Duncan appears on first sight to be positively spectral:

He was cadaverously thin; he had no shirt on, and the ribs stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval woodcut. The skin stretched over them was nearly colourless, . . . the sallow tone of old linen. . . . The eyes, partly hidden by a rumpled mass of straight black hair that came down over the forehead, were obstinately melancholy, as though he was assuming the expression on purpose. . . . There were dark circles under his eyes, and some fine lines at the outer corners . . . he didn't look as though he ever drank anything but water, with the crust of bread they tossed him as he lay chained in the dungeon.

(pp. 48-49)

These descriptions of Peter and Duncan say much about the protagonist. Marian, always influenced by appearances, has chosen them both (p. 36). Peter, by his packaging, is in every way presentable, the very incarnation of a consumer society's ideal husband. Yet Marian has no faith in Peter's seemingly acceptable surface; she is alarmed by the glossiness of his image and feels something sinister hidden beneath the veneer.

Duncan's appeal, then, is obvious. He has the look of a suffering ascetic, with his tortured, emaciated frame and dark, hollow eyes. Marian does not fear him as she does Peter, for Duncan is so obviously frail, helpless, and childlike. Marian is drawn to him as someone she can mother and nurse. In fact, Duncan assumes for Marian the very role Peter has required her to play. Duncan, as he tells Marian, is very flexible. With their second meeting, in the laundromat, Duncan and Marian fall into a game where he is patient, she analyst. He recognizes early her need to feel competent, to play nurse; Marian is led to admire his ability to open up and expose his inner fears, the daily

inertia that robs him of vitality, his inability to recognize truth. These are actually Marian's own anxieties; clearly Duncan is unmasking her rather than himself in the soulful monologues which form their game. Once he has established Marian in her role of sympathetic listener, he destroys the carefully-constructed façade of intimacy and exposes her selfish motivations. He warns her:

"I can tell you're admiring my febrility. I know it's appealing, I practise at it; every woman loves an invalid. I bring out the Florence Nightingale in them. But be careful." He was looking at me now, cunningly, sideways. "You might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know." (p. 100)

Marian cannot realize, at this stage, what it is that might be destroyed by her propensity for playing nurse, but Duncan does manage with this first telling thrust, to jar the smug, complacent superiority she feels in the presence of those less able than herself to cope; she too, he suggests, is predatory.

Duncan's role is not in the least that of a romantic figure. His first kiss leaves her with no impression at all, other than the taste of cigarettes and

an impression of thinness and dryness, as though the body I had my arms around and the face touching mine were really made of tissue paper or parchment stretched on a frame of wire coat-hangers. . . . (p. 100)

Even later in their relationship, when Duncan has Marian wrapped in his robe and they are alone in his bedroom, his embrace remains unsatisfying, for Marian suspects that Duncan's affection is grounded in narcissism:

"Hey," he said finally in a different voice, "you look sort of like me in that." He reached out a hand and tugged at the shoulder of the dressing-gown, pulling her down. . . . She was not sure what was happening: there was an uneasy suspicion in one corner of her mind that what he was really caressing was his own dressing-gown, and that she merely happened to be inside it.

(p. 144)

While Duncan calls himself the universal substitute, he is not, in fact, Peter's replacement. Throughout the novel Duncan displays a disarming self-centredness; Marian seems not to mind, indeed prefers Duncan's offhanded insults to Peter's warmer endearments. Because he offers nothing, refuses even to discuss anything but his own problems, Marian is bullied into a false sense of security. She is the giver, Duncan the recipient. She has, by this time, forgotten Duncan's warning about emotional cannibalism.

Her compulsion to give and refusal to receive ultimately reduce her to a state where she cannot eat and has taken to speaking of herself in the third person. She is quite willing to let Duncan drain her emotionally, all the while maintaining the illusion that she is in control of the situation and thus safe. But, however painful for the protagonist, Marian's relationship with Duncan is essential to her growth. It is he who teaches her the degree of privation involved in living a life where no risks are taken, no commitments made. He guides her through his own world, a world that is egocentric, cold, and ultimately sterile. Marian's refusal of nourishment is the physical equivalent of Duncan's attempts to limit life to its narrowest confines. He tells her that he irons because he likes to smoothe things out. He expresses frustration and disapproval that clothes become

wrinkled, that trees shed their leaves, and that one must eat to stay alive. His favorite haunts are the ravine in winter and the Museum's Mummy Room; he tells Marian that his fondness for his birthplace has to do with the memory of its slagheaps, the acrid chemical odours hanging in the air, and the fact that none of the trees was capable of bearing leaves. He admits to feeling human only in those places where life has been robbed of its lush growth, reduced to what Duncan refers to as "close to absolute zero." While he informs Marian that he would like to achieve immortality, what he really means is death, a state in which he would not have to expend energy, where there would be no change. The condition to which Duncan ideally aspires is no more than an extreme exaggeration of Marian's present life.

The full impact of Duncan's lesson registers with Marian the night she runs from Peter's party to Duncan's arms for safekeeping. In an earlier encounter with her guide, Duncan had left her a small pile of pumpkin shells over which she had mused:

They were like some primitive signal, a heap of rocks or a sign made with sticks or notches cut in trees, marking a path or indicating something ahead, but though she stared down at them for several minutes while the handful of moviegoers straggled past her up the aisle, she could not interpret them. (p. 126)

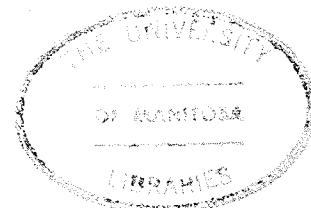
At last Marian is able to understand Duncan's meaning; she understands what is ahead. Peter, like his prototype in the children's nursery rhyme, will devour her emotionally if she marries him. Having acquired this initial insight, Marian flees from her predatory fiancé to the passive Duncan for shelter. Predictably, Duncan takes up his role of

innocent man-child; Marian, hers of level-headed nurse. Earlier, he has convinced her that she might be the one to coax him out of his sexual shell by approaching the problem in her characteristically starched, clinical fashion. He has made his case even more compelling by drawing on her own inner fears: "I mean if we went to bed, god knows you're unreal enough now, all I can think of is those layers and layers of wooly clothes. . . . maybe you're woolen all the way through. It would be sort of nice if you weren't. . . ." (p. 202). The ploy, as Duncan knows, is irresistible. He extracts from Marian her finest performance as mother-nurse. The attempt to launch Duncan into manhood is, of course, an utter failure:

She was tense with impatience and with another emotion . . . the cold energy of terror. At this moment to evoke something, some response, even though she could not predict the thing that might emerge from beneath that seemingly-passive surface, the blank white formless thing lying insubstantial in the darkness before her, shifting as her eyes shifted trying to see, that appeared to have no temperature, no odour, no thickness and no sound, was the most important thing she could ever have done, could ever do, and she couldn't do it. The knowledge was an icy desolation worse than fear.

(p. 254)

And so Duncan possesses Marian in a lovemaking session that has all the joys of necrophilia. The experience is far more chilling than the one in Peter's bathtub. What causes Marian's desolation is a recognition that she has not been in control of the relationship all this time, that she cannot, at will, evoke an earth-shattering response from Duncan. Duncan does not risk Marian's missing the point of the charade he has led her through:





"No," he said, "you have to unbend. Assuming the foetal position won't be any help at all, god knows I've tried it long enough." He stroked her with his hand, gently, straightening her out, almost as though he was ironing her.

"It isn't something you can dispense, you know," he said.  
 "You have to let me take my own time." (p. 254)

Clearly, it is not Marian who has initiated Duncan into sexual awareness. He is experienced. Marian, however, refuses to grasp what he is telling her. The next morning she awakens with a feeling of "weary competence"; mistakenly, she sees Duncan as a triumph, her one accomplishment; she is proud and self-satisfied. As she sees it, the previous night has had nothing to do with the chain of events in her real life. While she will have to face Peter, she will not have to explain what has happened "because explanations involved causes and effects and this event had been neither. It had come from nowhere and it led nowhere, it was outside the chain" (pp. 256-7).

At this last piece of wilful self-deception, Marian's body cuts itself off, instinctively acknowledging what her intellect refuses to accept; her utter lack of self-knowledge has reached its most profound level. Panicking, Marian tries to grab hold of the only solid experience she has had in months. Her one achievement, as she sees it, has been in helping Duncan to find sexual gratification. But Duncan will no longer allow Marian the comforting fantasies she has been weaving. He unveils his trickery and the truth is devastating:

"You want me to say it was stupendous, don't you?" he asked. "That it got me out of my shell. Hatched me into manhood. . . . "Sure you do, and I could always tell you would. I like people participating in my

fantasy life and I'm usually willing to participate in theirs, up to a point. It was fine; just as good as usual."

The implication sunk in smoothly as a knife through butter. She wasn't the first then. The starved nurse-like image of herself she had tried to preserve as a last resort crumpled like wet newsprint; the rest of her couldn't even work up the energy to be angry. She had been so thoroughly taken in. She should have known.

(p. 264)

The experience is a painful but necessary one. Duncan has been instrumental in teaching Marian a valuable lesson; she must take care of herself. Marian responds in a healthy manner. She does not waste her energy with angry reprisals, but acknowledges that the time has come for her to decide what to do with her life. Duncan's role as trickster and guide is over; he explains that she must leave the ravine alone, must make her own way. He has guided her as far as he can by providing her with valuable insights into her own personality and by deceiving her into an awareness she has been lacking, of what it means to assume the role of victim. The rest she must do for herself. Leaving Duncan in the ravine as she takes the road on her own, she announces, "Now she knew where she was" (p. 265).

Two other males serve to enlighten Marian by their own relationships with other women. The first of these is Joe. He is a philosophy instructor married to Clara, an old school friend of Marian's. Throughout the novel, Joe is seen changing diapers, cooking unpalatable suppers, ministering to his frail wife's needs, and constantly, earnestly, lamenting the erosion of Clara's "core" in her role of wife and mother. Ironically, it is Joe who provides the mothering for

their children. Clara sees him as a kind of knight in shining armour; Ainsley, Marian's room-mate, regards him as a martyred but valiant soul; and, at least initially, Marian seems to evaluate him as well-intentioned. In the latter part of the novel, however, the night of Peter's party, another Joe emerges. He is, indeed, yet another variety of male predator. Clara has been playing the part of weak incompetent motherhood to Joe's mock-heroic fatherhood. His real attitude toward the crisis of woman's identity surfaces in what he offers as a workable solution. Condescendingly he suggests to Marian:

"Maybe women shouldn't be allowed to go to university at all; then they wouldn't always be feeling later on that they've missed out on the life of the mind. For instance when I suggest to Clara that she should go out and do something about it, like taking a night course, she just gives me a funny look." (p. 236)

As is the case with Peter, under Joe's mask of woman's defender and champion lies the reality of the possessor and predator.

Len is predatory in a more obvious fashion. Marian regards him, at first, as a complex blend of cynicism and idealism; her view is based on her limited knowledge of one fact, that he "corrupts" only innocent young girls. As Marian initially interprets his actions, "The supposedly pure, the unobtainable, was attractive to the idealist in him; but as soon as it had been obtained, the cynic viewed it as spoiled and threw it away" (p. 87). Len is given too much credit by Marian's sophisticated rationale for his behaviour. What masquerades under the guise of "cynical idealism" and "inverted morality" is plain and simple emotional immaturity.

It is Ainsley's "seduction" of Len that reveals his true colours. Ainsley tracks him, with her wide blue eyes, bitten fingernails, and pink and blue gingham garb, in order to have a child; Len is the chosen father. Unaware of Ainsley's age and sophistication, he is more than happy to participate in the seduction. When the event does take place, Len is horrified to learn that he himself has been snared by a predator--female. He is further stricken when he comprehends the purpose of the seduction; he finds it unfathomable that anyone would actually want a child. He has, until now, assumed that they are all accidents. Suddenly he reveals a side that Marian has never guessed at:

"Birth," he said, his voice higher and more distraught, "birth terrifies me. It's revolting. I can't stand the thought of having" - he shuddered - "a baby."

"Well, it isn't you who's going to have it, you know, Marian said reasonably.

Len turned to her, his face contorted, pleading. The contrast between this man, his eyes exposed and weak without their usual fence of glass and tortoise-shell, and the glib, clever, slightly leering Len she had always known was painful. . . . She felt as though she should take him upon her knee and say, "Now Leonard, it's high time I told you about the Facts of Life." (p. 157)

Leonard cannot cope with the idea of fatherhood. It reduces him to emotional rubble as he thinks of how a child shall capture his image forever. At the end of the novel, he is afraid to venture out of Clara's house, fearing something he is too inarticulate to express. He allows Clara to protect him and to referee the battles he has over toys with Arthur, Clara and Joe's eldest child. In the final pages, it is a considerably more composed Clara who seems to have taken charge of

both Leonard and her husband. For if Len has regressed, Joe has aged markedly by the novel's end.

Joe and Len, while minor male characters, are important ones, for they serve to refute one of Marian's earlier assumptions. Surrounded by women at Seymour's office party at Christmas, Marian had felt that she was drowning in a "thick sargasso-sea of femininity" (p. 167). She had equated everything from tomato juice to garbage with the female sex. Women were organic, fluid; men were not. Men were like Peter, solid, clear; "she wanted Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down" (p. 167). By the end of her personal quest, Marian has gained the fundamental awareness that men, like women, are involved in the flux that affects all humanity. They are no more immune to the stresses of life than are women. The men in The Edible Woman serve, in their various relationships with Marian, to illustrate this truth and to demonstrate that the protagonist will have to make her own way in the world. Additionally, activities such as Duncan's ironing, Ainsley's seduction of Len, Joe's housekeeping and Marian's own sexual "initiation" of Duncan serve to make a lie of sexual role-playing. Marian comes to learn that strength and weakness are relative to the individual rather than the sex.<sup>4</sup>

Through much of the novel, the nature of the characters and of their relationships is revealed in terms of the operative metaphor of consumer/consumed and its four major manifestations of food, hunting, photography and the maze. Not only are we told of Peter's fascination with cameras, guns and knives and his appetite for meat, but there are

also the two long chase scenes in the novel describing Marian's flight from Peter; these abound with hedges, gravel paths, brick walls, long corridors and several doors. The images suggest the essence of the relationship; it is a maze, wherein the pursued "catch" of Part One, Peter, becomes the affianced pursuer of Marian in Part Two. The relationship is doomed; Peter does not have the potential to become Marian's complement. In fact, there is reason to believe that Peter, in the last pages, is attracted to Lucy, one of Seymour's "office virgins" who is most commonly described as dangling lures for eligible bachelors. She is ready bait for Peter's acquisitive appetite. As Marge Piercy notes in her article "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood,"

Peter is a type Atwood identifies elsewhere as an American American, whether or not he is born and bred in Ontario; slick, ambitious, empty, laden with expensive gadgets that give him a sense of power (fancy camera, fancy guns, the accoutrements of the businessman playing sportsman), conscious of his image and locked into his head, alienated from his body, his sexuality, his emotions, whatever they may be, most happy when he is destroying something or consuming something.<sup>5</sup>

While I agree wholeheartedly with Piercy's appraisal of Peter, I cannot agree with her estimation of Duncan. She argues that Duncan is the opposite of Peter, present in the novel as a viable alternative to the "perfectly packaged playboy prince." Atwood has more insight than to present the reader with Duncan as the solution to Marian's problems. If there is an answer, Marian must find it within. If there are no tangible mazes present in Marian's scenes with Duncan, there is the ravine as well as the entire fabrication of lies by which Duncan lures Marian into a destructive relationship she must find her way out of.

While Duncan has no interest in guns, cameras, or knives, neither has he the need for them. He is a craftier, quieter predator. Unlike Peter, he is not a steak and potatoes man. Duncan will eat anything; the meatballs Marian flings his way across Trevor's table, Marian's cake-woman, all are palatable, more so because he hasn't had to work for them. Duncan earlier states that if he could manage to arrange it, he would prefer to be fed intravenously because it would simplify life. Atwood also has him disclose at one point, "At last I know what I really want to be," . . . "An amoeba" (p. 200). How appropriate. Amoebas lack shape, colour, and character. There can be no possibility that Atwood intends Duncan, the potential amoeba, as a complement for Marian. Duncan's element is snow; he thrives in the cold where no potential for growth and development exists. In a novel greatly concerned with the need for maturation, Duncan's development remains arrested. By the novel's end, Marian herself must be well aware of the dangers of liaison with him. When she bakes the surrogate of herself, intended as a symbolic gesture for Peter, she tells it, "You look delicious," . . . "Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food" (p. 270). Duncan has shaken her badly. Surely she would recognize her own words in his mouth, words that end the novel: "'Thank you,' he said, licking his lips. 'It was delicious.'" The ice which falls in the final chapter is more than the result of Marian's having defrosted the refrigerator. It is an indication that, for her, winter has ended and with it the need for shelter in Duncan's icy embraces.

One last image of food might be mentioned: that of the egg. Len's fragile psychic balance is shattered by Ainsley's desire to give birth to his son. Len refuses the honour, telling her that the very idea of birth is repulsive and pleading with Marian to have Ainsley arrange for an abortion. He offers to pay for it. When Len breaks down, the breakdown itself is depicted through egg imagery. First there is Len's explanation of his loathing for babies:

"She made me do it," he muttered. "My own mother. We were having eggs for breakfast and I opened mine and there was, I swear there was a little chicken inside it, it wasn't born yet, I didn't want to touch it, but she didn't see, she didn't see what was really there, she said Don't be silly, it looks like an ordinary egg to me, but it wasn't, it wasn't and she made me eat it. And I know, I know there was a little beak and little claws and everything. . . ."

Following this disclosure, there is Marian's description of Len as she now views him:

It amazed her though that it had taken so little, really, to reduce him to that state. His shell had not been as thick and calloused as she had imagined. It was like that parlour trick they used to play with eggs: you put the egg endwise between your locked hands and squeezed it with all your might, and the egg wouldn't break; it was so well-balanced that you were exerting your force against yourself. But with only a slight shift, an angle, a re-adjustment of the pressure, the egg would crack, and skoosh, there you were with your shoes full of albumin. (p. 160)

Finally, there is the process of Marian's spiritual journey which has covered roughly nine months, from July to March. Marian's quest is punctuated in its several phases by her attitude toward food: her body's rejection of meat just following her acceptance of Peter's



proposal, her final inability to ingest even fluids as she refuses to come to terms with the reality of Duncan's trickery, and her eventual recovery of appetite, marked by her eating of the cake. It should be noted that the cake connotes a careful beginning. It is baked with fresh ingredients in a pristine baking pan, and it is created, unlike anything Marian has attempted previously, entirely on impulse. Marian does not make her habitual list as she leaves for the store, does not use a recipe, but acts out of her own inspiration. Furthermore, in her body's acceptance of this food, Marian is digesting the errors of the past in order to start anew. While critic John Stedmond has called this a "crummy ending,"<sup>6</sup> it is, nonetheless, a good beginning.

## CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1973), p. 19. All subsequent references to the text will be to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>I owe the term and initial concept of Duncan as a trickster to T. D. MacLulich who presents a parallel study of The Edible Woman and the children's fairy tale "The Gingerbread Man" in his article "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: Levi-Strauss, Bettelheim, and The Edible Woman," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 11 (Summer 1978), pp. 111-29. MacLulich argues convincingly that The Edible Woman, no less than Surfacing, is a mythic narrative where action and image provide an index of the central character's state of mind. He also argues that Marian's problem is squarely her own rather than a societal one, that Peter is merely an ordinary if conservative fellow and that Duncan eats the cake as a cake and not as a symbol. With these three last points I am not in accord. MacLulich is helpful, however, especially for those who wish to pursue a study of the novel by sexual archetypes.

<sup>3</sup>Perry Nodelman, in his article "Trusting the Untrustworthy," sees, quite correctly, that Peter and Duncan both reflect options to which Marian is initially drawn, and that these options are mirrored in their dress styles. He states, "Having learned from Peter the danger of packaging as camouflage, and from Duncan the danger of packaging as defence, she can step outside her shell . . . she has learned from both Duncan and Peter that there is less to be afraid of without a shell than there is wearing one." Journal of Canadian Fiction, No. 21 (1977-78), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup>This point is well made by Nodelman when he counters Linda Rogers' assessment of Atwood's women. What Rogers sees as the numb, unfeeling, ungiving Atwoodian female, Nodelman sees as a positive escape from the traditional trap of feminine "humanity". He concludes of Marian, "her triumph is that she does not sink into that warm 'sargasso-sea of femininity.'" Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>Marge Piercy, "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood," American Poetry Review, 2, column 9 (Nov.-Dec., 1973), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>John Stedmond, Review of The Edible Woman, The Canadian Forum, No. 49 (Feb., 1970), p. 267.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SURFACING

Surfacing<sup>1</sup> has many attributes in common with The Edible Woman. Like The Edible Woman, it is written in three parts which trace the spiritual development of its female protagonist through her relationships by and large with male characters. Its contents parallel the tripartite structure of Atwood's first novel: Part One explores the narrator's failure to come to terms with her life, particularly her past: Part Two involves the commencement of the narrator's search for self following her realization that she is intellectually and emotionally fragmented; and Part Three depicts the awakening in the protagonist of emotions of guilt, pain and desire long dormant. Like The Edible Woman, Surfacing is concerned with the process of birth; the egg that causes Leonard to experience fear and revulsion in the first novel becomes the protagonist's aborted foetus in the second. The hunt metaphor begun in The Edible Woman continues in Surfacing, Peter's camera now wielded by another male who shares his need to trap people permanently on film. The Edible Woman's dapper hunter from the Moose Beer commercials is realized in Surfacing in the more frightening form of the "American" hunter who occupies the territory of the novel. Even the land, with its tricky lake, its maze-like paths, and dark, dank, swampy interiors, is parallel to the interior mazes of Marian's nightmares in The Edible Woman. Marian's preoccupation with the idea of

being sexually devoured reappears in Surfacing as the narrator's dread of rape, a violation perpetrated upon woman's body, spirit, and even the natural environment of northern Québec. Surfacing's narrator feels the same oneness with helpless animals that Marian does; in Surfacing the withdrawal from humanity which results from this identification is more complete. Like Marian, the narrator of Surfacing feels threatened by forces beyond her control until she learns that she herself is responsible for the nightmare of her past life; in abrogating her responsibility, she denies her very humanity and subsequently attempts to merge with the violated landscape, coming slowly to realize that she, too, is a violator. Additionally, in both novels it is the protagonist's body which instinctively rebels against encroaching victimization, signalling to her psyche that the time is ripe for self-examination.

The novel features what readers of Survival have by now come to see as familiar Atwoodian syntheses: the problem of victimization, the despair over foreign exploitation of the land, the growing sense of personal isolation in a world technologically gone mad. Many critics have drawn elaborate parallels between Atwood's thematic guide and Surfacing;<sup>2</sup> but the novel is more than just a set piece demonstrating, however eloquently, the abstract principles of Survival. In several ways, the novel explores territory not touched on in Survival. The bullet-riddled sign reading Bienvenue at the novel's opening preludes real war rather than announcing the victimization that results from what Survival calls "paranoid schizophrenia"; the ravaged welcome sign is an indication that sides have been taken and that the outcome will have its winners and losers. What appears in the novel to be foreign

exploitation of the land, and therefore a strong statement of the need for Canadian national identity, is actually the sad revelation that we need not look outside the country for spoilers of raw beauty. The novel's examination of personal isolation in a mechanical world offers no solutions; the final statement in Surfacing suggests that if civilization is corrupt, insensitive, and exploitive, it is nevertheless a human world to which the narrator is bound by blood ties. There is no permanent escape for her away from insidious urbanization to the natural setting.

At the opening of the novel, the narrator returns to a small island in northern Québec, once her home, where she hopes to locate her father, who is missing and feared dead. Accompanying her on her search are her lover, Joe, and two recently-acquired acquaintances, Anna and David, whom, misguidedly, she considers her best friends. The serious implications of the journey are initially unknown to the group of searchers. David is on the trip because he feels it is a good opportunity for him to capture with his camera a rugged life-style; Anna is treating the expedition as a party, getting away from it all; Joe is just along for the ride. Even the protagonist, who provides the impetus for the search, is hoping to find nothing; she states flatly that she wants to be absolved from all knowledge. Her uneasiness on the island is evident, although she has originally seen the trip as a journey back into her happy childhood. If the protagonist voices discomfort in her feeling that home is foreign territory, then her friends display theirs by having brought the trappings of civilization with them to blot out their anxieties at being "naked" in the wilderness.

By escaping the city in their trek into the interior of the northern Québec bush, they feel that they are leaving behind the industrial pollution and urban decay they have come to associate with America. That they are weighted down with the latest advances American technology can offer lends a certain irony to their contempt for the American life-style and further suggests that they have internalized the decadent spiritual values they deride. The protagonist and her friends see the Americans as representing everything reprehensible; the Americans are held responsible for the disease the birches bear, the torture of innocent wild animals, the flooding of the lake, and the gradual "progress" being made through the Canadian backwoods of Coca Cola signs and hydro poles.

As is the case with Marian in The Edible Woman, Surfacing's protagonist defines her world in terms of the hunters and the hunted. Gradually, hunting becomes the focal metaphor in the novel. The protagonist begins with an intense fear and hatred of Americans, seeing them as stalkers who plunder, capture, and kill or mutilate whatever they find; she discovers herself identifying with their victims. As the world becomes more threatening to her, she extends her definition of the hunter to include: David, whose camera is viewed as only another type of gun; Joe, whose pursuit of the protagonist takes on the earnestness of a hunt; and her brother and father, who, in their scientific inquiries, have labelled, dissected, and brought under control the natural world.<sup>3</sup> The very memory of her first lover's clinical control of her body and the psychic damage he has caused result in her use of a defense mechanism whereby he is transformed into

a comfortable, middle-aged husband from whom she has been divorced. As suggested by their choice of weapons for the hunt, the men whom she encounters are different in the degree to which they are attracted to violence, but this does not occur to the narrator until much later; she sees in them the same intention--the manipulation and control of their worlds--and she condemns them equally. They are not equal; David's excitement in his desecration of nature's harmless creatures is unmatched by any act the other males commit, although paralleled in the urban setting by the smugness of the narrator's first lover in engineering her abortion. The father and brother in their quest for rational order use their scientific knowledge to confine and control nature, but they do not destroy with the lusty abandon seen in David. Nor do Joe's clumsy assaults on the narrator have the military precision of David's skirmishes with Anna.

In his sadistic manipulation of his wife, David finally brings upon himself the narrator's most vitriolic denunciation. Like Peter in The Edible Woman, his prize possession is a camera, and much as Peter glories in his hunting prowess, David prides himself on his ability to hunt and catch living creatures in the lake, although he is unable to do his own killing. His squeamishness in the face of actual death and his use of the camera attest to David's need to live his life at a comfortable remove from reality. While he denounces the Americans for their rape of nature, he insists that he be photographed with his trophy of carefully arranged fish guts, a testament to the pride he takes in his power to snare what is harmless. In the opening pages, the protagonist is willing to laugh at David's antics and gullibly

believes that his relationship with Anna constitutes an ideal marriage. Later she perceives that David hates his wife as much as he hates Americans. He treats Anna with the same calculating malice as the fish he hooks, catching, exposing, and filming her in her nakedness, stripped of all the accoutrements which, as he realizes, cloak her vulnerability. He taunts her with the details of his extramarital affairs, laughs at the pain he inflicts, and abuses her sexually. Before the narrator witnesses David's spiritual bankruptcy, she identifies with what she sees as his inability to express love; he provides a mirror for her own emotional coldness. Later in the novel she leaves David and Anna to their well-worn roles of stalker and hunted; their mutually destructive pattern comes to illustrate what the narrator-protagonist must avoid in her relationship with Joe.

At the beginning of the novel, Joe, the narrator's lover, strikes the same kind of apprehension in her that Peter creates in the narrator of The Edible Woman. Initially she is drawn to him because she sees in him a man harmless, gentle, and physically attractive. While she does not like his creations in pottery, she admires the purity of his work. Joe, she feels, is considered a failed artist because he refuses to adapt to the demands of the marketplace as the narrator has done; his pots are so full of gashes and folds that they cannot serve a utilitarian function. The narrator is right to be vaguely distressed by Joe's work; each time she is successful in selling an illustration, he mutilates another pot. The narrator senses that Joe, too emotionally inhibited to vent his hostility upon her directly, projects his pent-up frustrations on his pots. Consistent to type, Joe is only an assistant



to David in his film project. He is also David's accessory in his inability to denounce David's clearly savage exploitation of Anna. Like the narrator, he appears helpless, but his difficulties with action and expression do not make him innocent. In fact, his proposal of marriage heightens the narrator's uneasiness in his presence. She takes his proposal for what it is, a desire to control what he cannot understand or otherwise deal with. Like Marian in The Edible Woman, the protagonist spends much of her time running from her lover. But unlike Peter, Joe is not a static character. While he commences with the sexual games of the predatory male, in the course of the novel he moves beyond the impulse to dominate and becomes capable of positive union with the female protagonist. As her complement, he too undergoes a process of spiritual illumination.

The narrator's father has used reason as his weapon. Long before the narrator's birth he has renounced the community of men to set up a home for his family on this remote island in northern Québec, feeling that nature is more logical than humanity. Instead of accepting nature in its real state, however, he has gone about improving it, covering the land with better "foreign" soil, fencing off a garden, and ripping out the natural plantlife that, in his eyes, is useful only as specimens. As a botanist, the father has used his logic to control a world he has seen in the natural state as too unpredictable, too untamed. Minimizing the emotional and spiritual aspects of life, he has convinced his daughter that books can teach one anything one needs, that evil is merely the absence of reason, and so Hitler represents a "failure of reason" rather than a spiritual void; the child had questioned none of

this wisdom and the early lessons have left an indelible mark upon the adult she has become. Like her father, she has ignored her emotional nature and has concentrated upon the intellectual side of her person, resulting in a deadly psychic split. The father has left, consciously or otherwise, notes, maps, and drawings, which guide the protagonist to the rock paintings he has been studying, and incidentally, to himself. Ironically, through the vision of his drowned body, he teaches her the error of his earlier lessons, of relying totally upon logic for salvation; he has killed himself while trying to photograph rock paintings in order to get a better grip on their meaning. The father's death becomes the catalyst for the protagonist's spiritual awakening.

The narrator's brother, as a geologist, shares his father's need to understand his world logically. His hunt involves ripping through layers of rock to get to the interior which can then be exploited as raw material for progress or catalogued and itemized in an effort to satisfy his appetite to know, cognitively, his physical environment. The protagonist recalls her brother as a manipulator who established his own vicious morality early in life. He has the same attitude toward nature as his father; he hunts and captures specimens, sets up his own laboratory in the woods, and exercises control over the life and death of harmless creatures, as he fancies. Like his father, he refuses to accept nature in its original state. Where there is no morality, he invents it by defining good and bad leeches; conveniently, he can torture those designated bad without feeling pangs of conscience. He orders the natural world by creating two types of everything he encounters; his ability to view evil as something outside himself

simplifies life but also hardens him. The narrator grows beyond this simplistic morality when finally she is able to face the reality of universal guilt and her own individual culpability.

The brother's black and white morality is one also assumed by the narrator's first lover. He, too, is a calculating predator who believes in his right to control life. The hunting metaphor in his case is suggested by his need to ferret out and kill the helpless foetus which he regards only as an animal. For him, there are good foetuses, who grow up and have birthday parties, and bad foetuses, who must be caught and killed. The narrator's abortion is one arranged and paid for by him. Additionally, his profession--that of teaching lettering--suggests one which structures and confines what would otherwise be natural communication. Finally, it is he who, in his need to dominate the weaker female, advises the narrator that she should become an illustrator; there are no famous female artists, nor have there ever been, he tells her. Trusting his knowledge, the narrator stifles her creative energy and learns to copy and imitate what others--men--require of her. She is competent and miserable.

The most blatant hunters in Surfacing are the "Americans" who, with improved guns, nets, boats, fishing rods, and technology, not only destroy the forest creatures but also transform the land so radically that the protagonist imagines them camped in a concrete bunker hidden in the centre of the woods. Their power is deadly yet subtle and irresistible, as evidenced in the metaphor that represents them--a creeping rot spreading slowly from the south. They are not visible, but their passage is. What they cannot eat they mutilate, as attested

by the heron the narrator finds hanging from a tree. Because they see themselves as the centre of their universe, they feel justified in taking whatever suits them. Witnessing the carnage they have wrought upon the landscape, the narrator is relieved to be able to dismiss their ways as "American". In learning that they are Canadian, however, she is forced to accept that what they symbolize is not foreign to her nature, not external, but the destructive urge inherent in all humans, which must be recognized and conquered from within.

Surfacing's male characters, in summary, reflect aspects of the narrator's personality. Initially, her dwarfed capacity to give and receive love is mirrored in David's coldness toward Anna. With Joe she shares a reluctance to communicate anything personal or important. She, like her father and brother, orders her world intellectually; as well as labelling others, she uses a technique of restructuring the past which affords the protection she feels necessary in order to cope with her memories. While the Americans' rending of the land and her first lover's methodical disposal of the foetus are real, they are also projections of the narrator's own capacity for destruction and a denial of her personal guilt. As is fitting, these characters disappear as she makes her psychic journey to awareness; only Joe, who travels the same spiritually enlightening path, returns to her, reflecting and affirming the growth she has achieved.

That the protagonist has much in common with those she fears is not something she consciously suspects in Part One of the novel. What the reader sees, as Surfacing opens, is a woman divided within as well as isolated from others. Her closest friends are people about whom she

declares, "I like them, I trust them, I can't think of anyone else I like better, but right now I wish they weren't here" (p. 16). She is neither honest nor happy with herself or others. Not unlike Marian in The Edible Woman, she feels that her life should have magically created its own happy ending without her active participation. As she ruefully admits, "I thought it would happen without my doing anything about it, I'd turn into part of a couple, two people linked together and balancing each other, like the wooden man and woman in the barometer house at Paul's" (p. 40). Instead of achieving this apparent wholeness, the narrator is clearly a divided personality. At the start of the novel, she considers the reading of her palm which Anna has done earlier: "she said, 'Do you have a twin?' I said No. 'Are you positive,' she said, 'because some of your lines are double.' Her index finger traced me: 'You had a good childhood but then there's this funny break'" (p. 8). The narrator's hand shows what she refuses to recognize: that there are two identities within her and that the aggressive instincts she so clearly projects upon others also belong to her. As indicated in the reading of her hand, her problem has begun when she leaves home. In journeying back to the north of Québec, she is making a spiritual pilgrimage which, by exposing her destructive past, will allow her to begin drawing the two halves of her personality back together. As the narrator's father has earlier pronounced, there is nothing in the North but the past (p. 9); it is the past she must confront and answer for before she can move on in her life.

If the protagonist's past is a failure, her present life also demands scrutiny: she has split away from her parents even before her

mother's death and her father's disappearance; she speaks of having undergone a divorce that was like an amputation; her relationship with her present lover is one that exacts from her no commitment; even her career has required a separation between what she is capable of as an artist and what she is expected to do as an illustrator. Rather than probing into life with the insight of an artist, she has committed herself to compromise and imitation. Her life has assumed a veneer beneath which she refuses to look. The reader is alerted to her essential dishonesty when she speaks of her memories:

I have to be sure that they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi; it fits, it's all there till the time I left. Then static. . . . To have the past but not the present, that means you're going senile. (p. 73)

Obviously, the narrator has cast several "versions" of her life and she maintains a death grip on her past, working and reworking its episodes. We come to see that the narrator's iron control over reality serves to protect her from an awareness of her own capacity to cause harm. The cost of such control is not senility but death, for her life has stopped with her leaving home; the past is a fabrication, the present mere "static." The protagonist's guilt-laden vocabulary discloses for the reader what she is attempting to submerge; the narrator is running from a crime she has committed; she is not the innocent victim of her memories.

The early counterpart of the narrator is her brother. What she suppresses as a child, he expresses openly. Her own adult need to regard the enemy as external, whether in the guise of an American hunter or a sexist male, is one paralleled in the young boy. As a child he saw the enemy costumed as German soldiers; in one of his games they were responsible for crippling his sister and himself. His near drowning, an event that acts as prelude to the protagonist's successful "surfacing," teaches him nothing; he sees it merely as a confirmation that one must be careful. The brother's caution is a moral one; he carefully defines the enemy. It is he who teaches the narrator that leeches with red dots are good, those mottled grey and yellow, bad. Like the narrator, he seems to have acquired a legacy from the father in that he keeps his killing logical. In torturing only mottled leeches, the brother plays by the rules of the game, even if he has been responsible for setting those rules himself. His laboratory illustrates his calculated cruelty; the brother does not merely ready himself for an attack from the outside world, he schools himself in aggression. He collects jars filled with frogs and insects, hides them in the woods, and lets them starve to death or suffocate according to his whim. He is filled with fury when his sister frees his collection. His treatment of the leeches is worse; these he places in the campfire, watching them crawl painfully to the cool edges of ash and then guiding them with sticks back to the centre of the flame. Like his father, he is a scientist informed by a moral code; he justifies this sadistic experimentation on harmless life by his categories of good and evil.

The narrator's initial impression of the brother is not that he is

sadistic, but rather that he is realistic. While she, as a child, had painted escapist rainbow-hued landscapes peopled with talking rabbits, he had populated his darkened skies with war planes and fiery death.

The narrator recalls:

I didn't want there to be wars and death, I wanted them not to exist; only rabbits with their coloured egg houses. . . I wanted everyone to be happy. But his pictures were more accurate, the weapons, the disintegrating soldiers: he was a realist, that protected him. He almost drowned once but he would never allow that to happen again, by the time he left he was ready. (p. 131)

As an adult, the narrator relinquishes her early escapist landscapes, accepting the bloody visions of her young brother as more "realistic." Experience has taught her that life is war. Through the memory of her brother, the protagonist comes to see that children are not immune to the barbaric impulses of adults; the urge to inflict suffering upon others is "innate" (p. 132). Only the choice of weapons and victims is different.

Catherine McLay, in "The Divided Self," contends that not only the father but

The brother too is vital to the search, as a complement to the sister. Together they form two halves of the divided self. From an early age he has been attracted to science, to the rational, and also to violence. . . . He reduced life to simple opposites. . . . 4

I agree with McLay's analysis; the brother and sister are halves and so neither of their visions is complete. The brother's youthful concentration on evil is as unbalanced as the narrator's early depictions of innocence. As an adult the protagonist erroneously reduces life to her



brother's simple opposites of good and evil, resulting in her own duality and Anna's impression that she has a twin. To suggest that the brother is a complement<sup>5</sup> does not imply that the two halves, brother and sister, add up to a whole. In fact, according to Atwood's definition, the brother is a counterpart rather than a complement. The sister has been victimized by the cruelty of a world where "There were only two things you could be, a winner or a loser" (p. 71). She has opted out of the struggle voluntarily, early on in life. The brother, sensing the same options and pursuing victory, has chosen to fight the enemy, as symbolized by the swastika. As Nancy E. Bjerring notes,

His scrapbooks are full of drawings of war, fighting planes, and adventure and any plane bearing the swastika, the evil symbol, was fair game. The badge made it morally okay to kill because the badge or the surface appearance conferred the moral condition. His other drawings are . . . of fabulous purple science-fiction jungles with . . . well-aimed explorers in spaceships "bristling with gadgets." He is clearly on the side of the technological domination of nature, as well as the moral. If having the moral and mechanical upper hand over something or someone means that you are in control, then [the brother] is going to make sure that he has the power. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Although their responses are different, the sister cowering and submitting, the brother attacking, they are responding to the same vision. They both see evil as something external to themselves. For the brother, the enemy is the German, the mottled leech; for the sister, the enemy is the American, the male, and finally the human. She denies her own complicity first by fabrications of her past and, ultimately, by a rejection of her own humanity. For much of the novel, then, the narrator's insights are merely the obverse of her brother's mistaken

notions; he reflects her lack of self-knowledge.

If the brother reflects the narrator's refusal to accept personal evil, then David too exhibits her lack of awareness when confronted with reality. An ex-disc jockey who teaches communications, he is drowning in a superficial wash of inane jokes, baseball statistics, and anti-American slogans. The narrator notes that his conversations with others lack substance and direction. His ability to mimic Goofy, Woody Woodpecker, and Popeye serves to distance him from emotional reality, shielding him from situations he cannot handle. David's paranoid reaction to Americans, "Bloody fascist pig Yanks" (p. 9), mirrors the narrator's attempts to blame the corruption of Canadian soil and culture on outsiders, "Americans." Ironically, there is little to distinguish either David or the narrator from the Americans they despise; they sound American, and for Atwood "language is everything you do" (p. 129). David roots for the Mets, uses American slang to revile the Americans, and, according to the Canadians he and the narrator have previously mistaken for Americans, looks like an American with his long, shaggy hair. The "Americans" fear the narrator and her companions for the same reasons they themselves have been feared; their appearance is not Canadian enough. Although the narrator denies the profound similarity of her companions to Americans, she herself has felt uneasy, early in the novel, that the natives of northern Québec might mistake their appearances; she knows, at some level, that they look American. The irony of David's contempt deepens when one considers the pride he takes in his ability to comprehend American politics; after all, he tells the others, he has studied for four years in New York.

What most reflects David's essentially "American" attitude of domination and superiority is his hostile treatment of Anna. The narrator, having started out in admiration of the relationship, becomes aware that

. . . Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war. (pp. 153-54)

This balance of power is the narrator's own misapprehension of the situation; if the relationship is a war, then David is clearly the victor. The personal pain, as well as the basis of the relationship, is clarified in a metaphor that links Anna with simple animal suffering; heard by the narrator during a "love-making" session with David, she makes sounds not of pleasure or release, "but [of] pure pain, clear as water, an animal's at the moment the trap closes" (p. 82). Crystallized in the narrator's consciousness is the knowledge that David and Anna are locked in a struggle that offers, at best, survival for Anna, domination for David. Anna wears a cosmetic face that acts as a protective camouflage; in fact, David has never seen her without make-up. For the narrator, however, the cosmetic face has become the real one. What is left of Anna is an enamel image, a vestigial shell remaining from the conquest David has made in his war on her body. Beneath Anna's mask, the narrator recognizes

a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel

in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all. (p. 165)

Of David, the narrator has earlier noted:

retaliation was his ultimate argument: he must have felt it was a duty, an obligation on my part, it would be justice. Geometrical sex, he needed me for an abstract principle; it would be enough for him if our genitals could be detached like two kitchen appliances and copulate in mid-air, that would complete his equation. (p. 152)

Even his lust is false, merely another strategic weapon to be used in his war with Anna, who, he suspects, has bedded Joe. His need for the narrator, then, is not sexual but mathematical; she will offset his loss. David manipulates others to demonstrate his authority; he has a compulsion to direct. His weapon is the camera he uses to film "Random Samples." While the film is intended to document what the "Americans" have done to Canada's pure North, David's arrangement of shots and his responsibility for much of the film's brutal footage belie the original focus and "randomness" of its samples. The film becomes an orchestration of David's own violent male fantasies as witnessed by his filming of Anna against her will in the nude. The narrator recognizes David's oneness because she experiences it within herself:

David is like me, I thought, we are the ones that don't know how to love, there is something essential missing in us, we were born that way. . . . Joe and Anna are

lucky, they do it badly and suffer because of it: but it's better to see than to be blind, even though that way you had to let in the crimes and atrocities too.

(pp. 136-37)

The protagonist finally understands that there is no solution for David and Anna; they are locked in frozen dance positions. They cannot be helped because they have long ago accepted the mythology society traditionally offers men and women: "The barometer couple in their wooden house, enshrined in their niche on Paul's front porch, my ideal; except they were glued there, condemned to oscillate back and forth, sun and rain, without escape. . . . they had reached a balance almost like peace" (p. 138).

The balance earlier believed to be ideal by the narrator is now revealed in its deadly rigidity by the actual relationship of David and Anna. Yet critic Susan Fromberg Shaeffer misses the essential parallel between David and Anna's marriage and the barometer couple's union in her interpretation, analyzing to the contrary that

Throughout the book, the narrator has wanted to believe in love, but only if it was permanent. Whenever there was trouble between David and Anna she offered her solution: get a divorce. But the ideal couple is not like the wooden couple on Paul and Madam's barometer. Bad as David and Anna's life had seemed to her, "they had reached a balance almost like peace."<sup>7</sup>

David plays aggressive male to Anna's retiring female (like the barometer couple, indeed), and each has accepted an "emotional commitment" to destroy the other person in his own bid for survival. David is, in the worst sense of the word, "civilized." He is dismissed by the narrator because

I could see into him, he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, affiches, verbs, and nouns glued on to him and shredding away. . . . he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true. (p. 152)

She does attempt to free Anna, however, by dumping the footage "capturing" her nude body into the lake; the gesture is lost on Anna. Fittingly, David and Anna are returned to the society that created them; their future is rooted exclusively and permanently in their past and they are condemned to live there without having acquired any self-knowledge that might save them. The narrator, however, does learn something of value from the couple. Her real anger, especially over Anna's inability to give birth, and the vehemence of her descriptions of Anna as a vacuous sexual vessel for David's use, tell us that she has been down this road herself and still bears the scars. Her fury and disdain seem levelled more at what she has been in the past than at what Anna is revealed as being.

For much of the novel, the narrator plays tricks with her very painful past. Clever tricks at that. She is so convincing that several critics have lamented over the loss of her former husband and the child he had "imposed" on her.<sup>8</sup> Of course, there has never been a husband and her child has been aborted. The narrator's first lover, her lettering teacher, is the "husband." His domination of her life has precipitated the fragmentation of her being. The experience of her abortion has been so painful that she has been able to cope only by

disguising it as a wedding. The lover understands nothing of her trauma; he patches over the psychic wound with cliches, suggesting that she forget her experience. As one critic has pointed out, if the brother creates good and bad leeches, the lover creates good and bad foetuses.<sup>9</sup> He is surprised, even hurt, that she has not appreciated his arrangement of the abortion, and is further alarmed when she breaks away from him. Early in the novel, the protagonist describes the first lover as her teacher; this proves to be an ironic truth. As he had used his display of family photographs to shield himself from real involvement with the narrator, so the narrator protects herself from Joe's actual "three-dimensionality" with a false confession that masks the very real wounds incurred in her first sexual encounter:

"Look," I said, "I've been married before and it didn't work out. I had a baby too." My ace, voice patient. "I don't want to go through that again." It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding, everything in order, a spool. I would always be able to say what I'd just finished saying: I've tried and failed, I'm inoculated, exempt, classified as wounded. It wasn't that I didn't suffer, I was conscientious about that, that's what qualified me. (p. 87)

But she cannot, as she confidently declares, go throughout life telling the same comfortable lie in order to escape involvement, for Joe proves to be very different from her first lover; he does not scuttle off when faced with rejection.

Joe, in contrast with David and the first lover, moves, over the course of the novel, toward an accretion of values that place him in Atwood's category of half-formed males rather than mechanical predators.

Like the narrator, Joe has had a painful past. If she cannot dream, he cannot deny the recurrent nightmares that mar his sleep. As the narrator relates:

In the middle of the night there was a roar, Joe having a nightmare. I touched him, it was safe, he was trapped in the straitjacket sleeping bag. He sat up, not yet awake.

"This is the wrong room," he said.

"What was it?" I asked. "What were you dreaming?" I wanted to know, perhaps I could remember how. But he folded over and went back. (p. 125)

Joe reflects the protagonist's wariness with the opposite sex and her obsession with the past. He, too, is trying to recompose his life. For Joe, this translates as finding himself in the right room with the right person. At this stage he recognizes the unsatisfactory nature of his relationship with the narrator, but not the cause of it. He sees, merely, that he is in the "wrong room." The reader sees little of Joe's transformation, as the psychic quest of the protagonist takes precedence in the novel. That he does change, however, is evident, and the reader assumes that Joe's quest is resolved in a way parallel to the narrator's.

At the outset, the narrator, using the evaluative technique taught by her brother and father, classifies Joe's virtues. They are few: "he's good in bed, better than the one before; he's moody but he's not much bother, we split the rent and he doesn't talk much, that's an advantage. . . . it would be nice if he meant something more to me" (p. 42). Clearly, the narrator is with him because the arrangement is an easy one. Joe, too, is misguided in his reasons for staying with the narrator; he has been attracted by her calm, unemotional behaviour after



their love-making. What is actually emotional frigidity in the protagonist, Joe interprets, initially at least, as admirable control. He shares with Peter of The Edible Woman, at this stage, an exaggerated concern with the techniques of sexual gratification and a cowardly disapproval of loving commitment. When Joe proposes to the narrator, his proposal is based upon cold logic rather than love:

"We should get married," Joe said. . . . "Why?" I said.  
 "We're living together anyway. We don't need a certificate for that."  
 "I think we should," he said, "we might as well."  
 "But it wouldn't make any difference," I said. "Everything would be the same."  
 "Then why not do it?" He had moved closer, he was being logical, he was threatening me with something. . . .  
 "No," I said, the only answer to logic. It was because I didn't want to, that's why it would gratify him, it would be a sacrifice, of my reluctance, my distaste.

(pp. 86-87)

As the narrator has noted earlier of Joe, "speech to him was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time, heavy and square like tanks" (p. 77). She cannot accept his proposal because at this point in the novel Joe is declaring war rather than love.

After her rejection of him, the narrator speaks of Joe and the relationship in terms of orders, truces and compromises. She states "He didn't love me, it was an idea of himself he loved and wanted someone to join him, anyone would do, I didn't matter so I didn't have to care"

(p. 110). Both Joe and the narrator use each other; the protagonist requires him to register the emotional responses she herself cannot feel, while he needs her to provide him with physical release and the assurance that he is worthy of love. They both fail; they must find

their own truths and personal strengths before uniting. The protagonist is aware of their failure, noting that "he needed to be rescued himself and neither of us would put on the cape and boots and the thunderbolt sweatshirt, we were both afraid of failure; we lay with our backs to each other, pretending to sleep, while Anna prayed to nobody through the plywood wall" (p. 112). For the characters in Surfacing, human relations momentarily appear futile.

Following his unsuccessful proposal, Joe requires of the narrator the very weakness David foists upon Anna, while the protagonist demands strength in her men. She announces, "I think men ought to be superior" (p. 111). Joe does not measure up and his attempt to act out the traditionally superior role results in the disastrous near-rape of the narrator:

"Don't," I said, he was lowering himself down on me, "I don't want you to."  
 "What's wrong with you?" he said, angry; then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument. (p. 147)

Joe is described here in images used for Atwood's most deadly male types. Gone is the positive "furry" quality that linked Joe with the animals and allowed the protagonist to feel somewhat comfortable with him. He is transformed into something very close to David; man as machine, an engine that inflicts pain, denies warmth, and batters what obstructs its will. The protagonist has asked for a superior man and has thus contributed to the creation of a monster. Only the fear that she may become pregnant cools Joe's aggressive passion. "It was the

truth, it stopped him: flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them" (p. 147). At this stage in the novel, Joe has reached his most negative point. He has the same will to oppress and control his female counterpart apparent in the first lover and David in Surfacing and in Peter in The Edible Woman. Both Joe and the narrator must come to terms with their own ability to hurt, must discover themselves before they can come together in affirmation of their relationship. Necessarily, the narrator flees her stalker, categorizing Joe with the Americans, as she runs off to hide in the bushes of the island.

The narrator's own quest to "know about" herself starts early in the novel. Shortly after her return to Québec she begins to realize that she has insulated herself from her emotions, that she has felt nothing for some time: "At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase" (pp. 105-06). Intuiting that this is a loss which has occurred earlier, she enters upon a quest that opens doors long sealed. She examines childhood albums, no longer concerned with her father's death, but with what she sees as her own: "perhaps I would be able to tell when the change occurred by the differences in my former faces, alive up to a year, a day, then frozen" (p. 107). In the narrator's categorizing of the Americans, her father, her brother, David, Joe, and finally all humans as killers, she creates a very convincing personal mythology that sets her apart from the "death agents" she so dreads. Her definition of the "American" is not very different from the Hitler of her childhood. As she thinks of the heron's fate she realizes:

It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. . . . If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them. . . . (p. 129)

She no longer believes that eliminating one man--Hitler--would vanquish all evil. Unhappily she recognizes the degree of evil in the world: "The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human" (p. 130).

Salvation for the narrator begins with her decision to dive into the lake, looking for the drawings mentioned in her father's notes. She is seeking a sign that will prove the wisdom of his logical structuring of the universe. She states "it would be underwater, I would have to dive. If I found something it would vindicate him, I would know he'd been right" (p. 133). In vindicating her father, she hopes also to prove that she has been right in her intellectual ordering of life. With the dive, a plunge into the subconscious she has been avoiding, she comes up against what she calls "senseless killing." She sees the heron as a sacrifice for mankind: "Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us" (p. 140). Still, she calls the killers "they," distancing herself from all complicity. She plunges more deeply. On her third entry into the lake the veil of distortion is ripped from her eyes by her confrontation with death and the past. She recognizes what she meets:

It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (p. 142)

The vision is one of her half-drowned brother, her father, and finally the foetus she had destroyed. This is the reality long avoided by the protagonist. She states:

Ring on my finger. It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrap-book, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now. (pp. 143-44)

Finally she is facing her past, a past that holds no marriage, no husband, no child, nothing but a death that has led to her duality. Like David, she has been a pastiche condemning others for their crimes, but absolving herself from complicity in them. The abortion has caused her to divorce herself first from her parents, then from her emotions. Her father's body floating beneath the surface of the lake is a revelation. Logic does not lead to salvation. She, like her father, has confined her life, shaping and modifying it to suit her needs. Such manipulation has led to death for the protagonist. Her senses, released after nine years of bondage to her mind, suddenly respond: "I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (p. 146).

The quest does not end with the protagonist's awareness of her failings. She has experienced a vision of reality, but does not know what to do with it: "When the heartline and the headline are one, Anna

told us, you are either a criminal, an idiot or a saint. How to act" (p. 159). It is wholeness, a union of heart and head, which the protagonist desires now; but she does not know how to attain it. She is, at least, beyond her previous image of the barometer couple as an ideal future. How to act is something that she must now discover through instinct rather than reason. Up to the time of learning about her father's death, the narrator had denied life, been dead to emotions.

Suddenly, when the expected logical response to official word of her father's fate would be despair, her behaviour becomes, in the eyes of her companions, "inappropriate." She understands their puzzlement: "they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (p. 159). A new awareness has dawned in the narrator; she no longer accepts appearances as reality. As her past life has produced a death, now she sees her father capable of producing life out of his death. She combines with Joe, having rejected him earlier, in a ritual of love-making that occurs in nature rather than in the cabin where David and Anna are. The act is intended to give life to what has earlier been sacrificed. It is now Joe's human skin that the narrator describes as being unzipped. The contrast in imagery between this love-making and the previous near-rape is encouraging:

My hands are on his shoulders, he is thick, undefined, outline but no features, hair and beard a mane, moon behind him. He turns to curve over me; his eyes glint, he is shaking, fear or tensed flesh or the cold. I pull him down, his beard and hair fall over me like ferns, mouth as soft as water. Heavy on me, warm stone, almost alive. . . . I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry . . . I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me. . . .

(pp. 161-62)

The first encounter is marked by images of mechanical coldness, the second by those of natural softness and fertility. Yet while the flux and softness of this passage are hopeful signs, the vision is one obviously exclusive to the narrator. In contrast with the protagonist's fertile experience, the fulfillment Joe is seeking and giving is, for the moment, sexual. The next morning Joe has clearly misinterpreted the situation, and the narrator starts to feel the noose of male possession tightening about her neck. In panic, she lumps Anna, David, and Joe with the Americans and then runs from them, preferring the isolation of the island to the city's empty noise.

Paradoxically, though the narrator flees her friends, she has stopped running from her life; she realizes that the city represents a return to all of her old patterns of spiritual blindness. Alone, the narrator releases her hold on her false past in a rather violent fashion. She destroys all those things that represent for her the falsehood of civilization:

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. Everything from history must be eliminated. . . . I rummage under the mattress and bring out the scrapbooks . . . perhaps at the other side of the world my brother feels the weight lifting, freedom feathering his arms. (pp. 176-77)

The purpose of the ritual smashing is to "clear a space" in which she can live. Gradually, all aspects of humanity are shed: the cabin, the processed food, the enclosed garden, finally even language. Her body, too, is carefully purified in the lake. In the words of Paul Delany,

the protagonist now embarks on a "psychic voyage that society would define as break-down, but which for her is a necessary submission to all the submerged or distorted voices of her past, and of her unconsciousness."<sup>10</sup> At the height of this extreme isolation, the narrator merges with her natural environment: "I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (p. 181). She rejects totally her link with humanity, embracing a kind of madness that places her beyond society, at one with the rocks and trees. She watches a fish:

From the lake a fish jumps  
 An idea of a fish jumps  
 A fish jumps, carved wooden fish . . . . flesh turned to  
 icon, he has changed again, returned to the water.  
(p. 187)

The fish must return to its physical form; it has its place in nature. So too, the narrator can take her transformation no further: the process has become too dangerous. As Gloria Onley points out:

The dissolution of all mental structures returns man completely to nature: he becomes it. By first experiencing a dissolving of the ego into landscape and then objectifying in a human figure with wolf's eyes the consequences of maintaining this "participation" as a state of consciousness, the narrator is able to visualize the furthest limits to which the dissolution of mental structures can be pushed without the permanent merging with the landscape that occurs in insanity . . . from which there is no returning.<sup>11</sup>

The protagonist's final vision of her father is that of wolf/man, with lambent yellow eyes (p. 187). This ultimate transfiguration of the father as an element in nature may well be Atwood's mystical fifth position, but the living cannot achieve this stage, except in a temporary way.



The narrator is forced to return to sanity, to humanity, and to society. She confronts in the mirror a creature who is dirty, scabby, and incoherent, a vision which invites incarceration or mockery. But the apparition is a deceptive one. Free from the madness of her past, the protagonist is ready to return to civilization, bringing with her hope for the future in the shape of the child she may have conceived. She recognizes that this child will be no God, but perhaps "the first true human" (p. 191). Significantly, it is Paul's boat, "thick and slow and painted white" (p. 191), which comes to return her to society. There is promise in the image of Paul as a mediating presence between the known past and the unknown future of the narrator; there is strength in her conviction not to become a victim again; and finally there is hope in the return of Joe, who will lend her the support needed in the world they are re-entering. No longer can she refuse to care for Joe on the grounds that she is unimportant to him. She does matter to Joe, as is proven by his return to the island. As the protagonist now realizes, to love is to let go, to trust. The place Joe has been searching for throughout the novel fuses in the last page with the "place" the narrator has become in Part Three. Both have completed their journeys toward psychic awareness, and their union promises to be a pairing of complementary halves, male and female. While failure is highly possible in the imperfect world to which they are returning, at least, as Atwood points out in Survival, "having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all" (p. 246). I am inclined to agree with Gloria Onley, who states:

Northrop Frye suggests that in Canada "Who am I?" at least partly equals "Where is here?" Here, in Surfacing, is the liberated naked consciousness, its doors of perception symbolically cleansed; the "place" is the Canadian wilderness, which becomes the new body or rediscovered original body of the psychosomatic human, Canadian man/woman in contradistinction to American schizophrenic man/woman, exiled from the biosphere and from himself/herself. . . . The return to an "Americanized" society is not easy, no matter how much self-knowledge and knowledge of others the cleansed human consciousness has attained.<sup>12</sup>

Fully aware of the need for a return to society, no matter how painful that return will be, the female protagonist tenses forward toward a future of questions and demands as Surfacing ends. She and her chosen male complement, suitably named Joe, have undergone a pilgrimage leading to the spiritual purification of their past lives. Through the union of two positively changed individuals, Atwood offers the only hope she sees in a world that is fallen; that hope is necessarily muted.

## CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Atwood, Surfacing. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>For critical comparisons between Surfacing and Survival see Rosemary Sweetapple, "Margaret Atwood: Victims and Victors." Southern Review, 9, (1976), p. 150; Bruce King, "Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 12, No. 1 (August, 1977), 29; Gloria Onley, "Margaret Atwood: Surfacing In The Interests Of Survival," West Coast Review, 7, No. 3 (January, 1973), 51-54; George Woodcock, "Surfacing to Survive," Ariel, 4, No. 3, (July, 1973), 16-28.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Hill Rigney, in her book Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel, notes--with undue caution--"those characters in Atwood's works who victimize others with cameras are themselves victims of faulty vision. David perhaps more than Joe sees reality only through a lens, which clouds and distorts. Perhaps it is also symbolic of a lack of vision that the protagonist's father is associated with cameras; it is the weight of a camera which prevents his drowned body from 'surfacing.'" Her assessment of cameras is correct, though far too tentative--as is also the case with her distinction between David and Joe. See chapter three of Rigney's book, "'After the Failure of Logic': Descent and Return in Surfacing," (Wisconsin: Wisconsin Univ. Press, 1978), p. 95.

<sup>4</sup>Catherine McLay, "The Divided Self," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 4, No. 1 (1975), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>It needs to be pointed out that in her use of the word "complement," McLay runs counter to Atwood's meaning, given on p. 21, Chapter One of this thesis. Furthermore, Atwood's meaning is the one used throughout the thesis.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy E. Bjerring, "The Problem of Language in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Queen's Quarterly, 83 (1976), 603-04.

<sup>7</sup>Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, "It Is Time That Separates Us," The Centennial Review, 18, No. 4 (Fall, 1974), 335. Much is wrong with Schaeffer's interpretation. She ignores the deadly image of the axe used by Atwood in her description of the "barometer husband;" she ignores the fact that the "barometer couple" is glued together and wooden in their composition. The image of the couple, then, is one the narrator is meant to take as a warning, as is the arrangement reached by David and Anna in their marriage. Finally, to mistake the balance which is like peace for peace itself is a reading that misses Atwood's

intentions; often her warring couples reach a stalemate of mutual loathing; there is nothing positive in the "balance" achieved by David and Anna.

<sup>8</sup> Among the critics who accept the reality of the narrator's husband are: Rosemary Sweetapple, "Victims and Survivors," p. 52, 59, 60; Bruce King, "Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," p. 25; Margaret Coleman, "Surfacing," Descant, No. 6 (Spring, 1973), p. 70; and Roberta Rubenstein, "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey To The Interior," Modern Fiction Studies, 22 (Autumn, 1976), 388 and 398.

<sup>9</sup> Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision," Signs, 2, No. 2 (Winter, 1976), 322.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Delany, "Surfacing: Clearing a Canadian Space," New York Times Book Review, (March 4, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Gloria Onley, "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," Canadian Literature, No. 60 (Spring, 1974), pp. 39-40.

<sup>12</sup> Gloria Onley, "Margaret Atwood: Surfacing In The Interests Of Survival," pp. 52-53.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LADY ORACLE

In The Edible Woman, the reader is able to recognize the slow but sustained movement of the female protagonist toward clear vision and self-definition as she grows beyond her former dependence upon male support. Surfacing carries its protagonist further along, to the conclusion of her journey, providing her with a male companion who has undergone a similar spiritual illumination. Upon first reading, Atwood's third novel, Lady Oracle,<sup>1</sup> appears to be an abrupt departure from the serious and familiar Atwoodian concern for self-knowledge. Careful examination of the novel suggests otherwise. Lady Oracle is written with deliberate literary irony, and thus presents Atwood's typical thematic concerns in parodic and satiric form rather than departing from them. Form and content conspire to produce a "heroine" who is comically lacking in vision, one who journeys throughout much of the novel but repeats the same errors again and again. Unlike the descent aimed at psychic discovery which allows the narrator of The Edible Woman and Surfacing heightened awareness, the path of Lady Oracle is circuitous and unprofitable; the physical terrain shifts from Terremoto, Italy to Toronto to London, then back to Toronto and Terremoto, with each desperate flight of the narrator. In contrast with the protagonists of the first two novels, Joan, who is hopelessly addicted to romantic fantasies, seeks evasion

rather than vision; the geographical landscape, with its dusty paths, broken glass, murky water, haunted mazes, and ominous shapes lurking in the bushes or hiding behind doors, is repeated in the tortured interior landscapes of the protagonist's mind.

While the negative categorization of humanity by the narrator of Surfacing initially makes her a nameless exile from the community of mankind, the categorizing tendencies of Lady Oracle's protagonist carry her much farther toward schizophrenia: as an author she creates pulp Costume Gothics under one name and sophisticated social poetry under another; as a thin and somewhat striking adult beauty, she carries in her head a permanent picture of the plump and ugly child she had been earlier; as a wife she is a level-headed, competent woman who supports her husband's causes, yet she is also the frivolous mistress who dances--wrapped only in a tablecloth--with a lover closely resembling one of her own Gothic creations. The twins of her psyche--one light, one dark--deny integration within one personality; each demands a totally independent existence and requires men who reflect the contradictory images of self at war within the protagonist.<sup>2</sup> At the conclusion of the novel, Joan Delacourt Foster's decision to continue her career as a creator of fiction symbolizes her continuing need for escape from reality. She identifies too completely with the characters she constructs, is too thoroughly immersed in the fantasies she calls life, to find herself; instead she seeks out others, men, who will continue to support her dreams.

Late in the novel, the protagonist comes to an awareness of the essential sameness of all the men in her life. In a panic, she runs,

feeling that

Every man I'd ever been involved with . . . had had two selves: my father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? (p. 295)

The duplicity of all Joan's men initially attracts her to them, but later causes her to desire escape from them. In her men Joan sees herself, and the reflection is oddly attractive and repulsive in turn. Rather than accepting the duality of human nature, Joan seeks a "new" life, always in the form of another man. Like herself, the men she encounters are torn between the security of dull reality and the adventure of fantasy; each man harbours a shadowy "other" self which Joan fears and therefore runs from. Caught between her husband and her lover, the Royal Porcupine, for example, she reflects, "What did I want, adventure or security, and which of them offered what?" (p. 272).

This confusion of the protagonist about the nature of male/female relations began early in her life, having been introduced by her mother's two categories for men. Until she was five she had not met her father and had to rely upon her mother's descriptions of him. Alternately, he was the bearer of presents or punishment, depending upon whether the small child had been good or bad, as her mother judged. As she awaits her father's return from the war, Joan wonders, "What would he bring me, what would he do to me? Was he a bad man or a nice man? (My mother's two categories: nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you)" (p. 66). Although her father brings nothing and does nothing, Joan

fails to change her basic expectations of the men she encounters; as an adult she continues to seek out those who will provide her with an identity. She uses their estimations of her as a mirror that reflects her worth--the good girl--or her lack of it--the bad girl. Notably, Joan attempts to bring security and adventure to her life by finding the men who will provide these elements. Herbert Rosengarten accurately assesses the neurotic basis of the narrator-protagonist's relationships with men when he writes:

tormented by a lack of self-confidence, a fear of exposure and failure, . . . she is driven to hide behind other identities: mistress of a Polish émigré, wife of an immature student radical, adulterous lover of an artist-- in each relationship she acts out a role determined for her by her partner, seeking to be what he desires, too insecure to be herself.<sup>3</sup>

As is the case with her penchant for categorization, this role of helpless female is a legacy from her mother. Her dependence upon men who will do things to/for her exacts a heavy penalty; having abnegated responsibility for her own life, like the early protagonists of The Edible Woman and Surfacing, she prefers to float rather than fight her way through life's storms.

The facile categories Joan learns from her mother become further muddled by the key men in the protagonist's childhood: her father and the Daffodil Man. From her mother Joan learns that her father was with Intelligence during the war and has been responsible for the deaths of double agents. Back in Canada he becomes an anesthetist who brings suicide victims back to life. The child is left to absorb and reconcile these contradictory roles of killer and "resurrectionist". Depending



upon which activity Joan views, her father is a very bad man or a very good one. Joan's father remains an enigma to her. She states:

I wanted him to tell me the truth about life, which my mother would not tell me and which he must have known something about, as he was a doctor and had been in the war, he'd killed people and raised the dead. I kept waiting for him to give me some advice, warn me, instruct me, but he never did any of these things. (pp. 74-5)

Instead, the father avoids communication at all costs, and Joan, returning home after her mother's death and seeing the calculated violation of her mother's immaculate kitchen, draws her own conclusions; she suspects her father of murder, having decided that he was capable of "anything." Unlike the father in Surfacing, a genuine guide figure who does provide his daughter with valuable insights about ways of seeing, the father in Lady Oracle withdraws from his function, merely smiling noncommittally at the narrator and suggesting by his lack of words and his awkwardness that he wishes to be left in peace. The protagonist relates:

I stayed with my father for nine days, watching my mother's house disintegrate. Her closets and dresser drawers were empty, her twin beds stood made but unused. . . . My father did not exactly resent my presence, but he didn't urge me to stay. We had been silent conspirators all our lives, and now that the need for silence was removed, we couldn't think of anything to say to each other. I used to imagine that my mother was keeping us apart and if it weren't for her we could live happily, like Nancy Drew and her understanding lawyer Dad, but I was wrong. In fact she'd held us together, like a national emergency, like the Blitz. (pp. 181-82)

Joan's memories of the war with her mother evoke deadly metaphors, while her "relationship" with her father is more fantasy than fact. In the mind of the protagonist, her father's remarriage is the final

betrayal, leaving her stranded.

The appearance of the Daffodil Man causes similar confusion in the child's life. Joan's mother cautions her about the bad men who lurk in the ravine, but her actual encounter with one leaves her far more bemused than frightened. The Daffodil Man is an exhibitionist (a parody, of course, of the figure of the predator) who attempts to shock Joan; to his disappointment, his exposed condition produces smiles rather than screams. Recovering his composure, he offers Joan the bouquet of flowers which has covered his genitals. Later, what appears to be the same man materializes to unknot the ropes with which the heroine's "friends" have bound her, just as the sky is darkening. Her mother views the liberator as a "nice man" who has rescued her daughter, but to Joan he looks oddly like the man who had earlier exposed himself. She asks:

was it the daffodil man or not? Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?

I turned this puzzle over in my mind time after time, trying to remember and piece together the exact features of the daffodil man. But he was elusive, he melted and changed his shape. . . . (p. 61)

Although her early experiences with her father and the Daffodil Man provide important clues to the complexity of human behaviour, the protagonist retains the simplistic lessons taught by her mother and she persists, throughout her adult years, in dividing men into the categories of good and bad. These figures suggest a difficulty for Joan in distinguishing the predatory from father-guide and from trickster, at least in real life.

The lovers of Joan's later life are much like the men of her unhappy childhood; as human beings they are equally capable of acts of kindness and cruelty. These men, too, are parodies of types found elsewhere in Atwood's canon. The predators, father-figures, guides, tricksters, and half-formed men of the first two novels make their appearances in Lady Oracle as well, but here they are lampooned variously as aging, fumbling, pathetic romantics who share with the protagonist a blurred vision of self and others.

Paul, the first of the lovers, takes Joan from the mundane world of English "bed-sitters" into the more exciting one of the Polish expatriate community. Regarding his rather dumpy frame and balding head, Joan mistakenly files him under the category of "aged and therefore harmless men" (p. 147). Her rescuer soon deflowers her, but Joan misses the significance of the violation, choosing, in a typically misguided fashion, to see the incident as the result of a misunderstanding and to think of Paul as a mild-mannered, "good" man:

In some ways he reminded me of the man with the bouquet of daffodils who had exposed himself in that chivalrous and touching way on the wooden bridge when I was a young Brownie. Paul too had that air of well-meaning but misplaced gallantry; they were both, I thought, gentle and harmless beneath their eccentricities; asking only simple gratifications that didn't impose too much on the partner or watcher. And both of them had rescued me, perhaps, though the identity of the daffodil man was still not clear to me.

I couldn't tell about Paul's identity either, for as time went on he began to change. (p. 158)

Paul does not change. Like all of the characters in the novel, he juggles the real world of mundane details with the fantasy world of exotic adventures.<sup>4</sup> He is both Tadeo, the daring Polish aristocrat

who escapes the Communists, and Paul, the sad, practical, stodgy little man who writes escapist novels as Marvis Quilp and wears boxer shorts. Like Joan, he leads three separate existences, signalled by three names; he shares as well, with Joan, a need to establish categories, and thus roles, for the opposite sex. Joan muses, "It's an odd term, 'mistress,' but that was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged: wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover" (p. 150). Like Joan, Paul feels the need for a fantasy life, introducing her to a world of escape through words rather than action. His specialty, the nurse-novel, has been carefully chosen to comfort him, because, as he informs Joan, "Escape literature . . . should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader" (p. 155). Soon Joan, too, is writing in order to escape her otherwise dreary life.

The darker side of Paul's personality soon surfaces; he is not merely a benign mentor for Joan's creativity. Having misread Paul's character as that of a kindly older gentleman, the narrator becomes alarmed by his increasing jealousy and aggressive, even predatory, behaviour toward her:

Making love with Paul had begun to resemble a shark fight, he was no longer gentle, he was pinching and biting and coming into the library on weekdays. It would have been alright except for the baleful glances and the oppressive silences, and the revolver, which was making me nervous. (p. 161)

Like The Edible Woman's Peter, Paul has become the predatory devourer; and like Marian, Joan has been willing to ignore this side of Paul's

personality, although he has warned her of it in his opinions that the Jews were responsible for the Holocaust and that rape and murder victims are instigators of their own sorry fates.

The initial façade of her second lover, Arthur, who becomes her husband, is one Joan finds compellingly romantic: "He was wearing a black crew-neck sweater, which I found quite dashing. A melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron, whose biography I had just been skimming. . . . I would've preferred it if he'd had a British accent; unfortunately he was only a Canadian, like me, but I overlooked this defect" (p. 165). In Arthur, Joan sees the answer to her own aimless life. As she says, "the right man had come along, complete with a cause I could devote myself to. My life had significance" (p. 172). She hopes to be enveloped by the soothing certitude of heroic Arthur. But she learns, in marrying him, that her hero is a quite ordinary man, indifferent to her person, who uses causes like life-preservers; they prevent him from drowning in a world of mundane routine. While we see little of Arthur himself, and cannot know his thoughts, we do see Joan's attempt to keep her vision of the romantic hero intact without Arthur's active involvement in the myth she needs to sustain her own interest in him:

His aloofness was intriguing, like a figurative cloak. Heroes were supposed to be aloof. His indifference was feigned, I told myself. Any moment now his hidden depths would heave to the surface, he would be passionate and confess his long-standing devotion. (Later I decided that his indifference at that time was probably not feigned at all. I also decided that passionate revelation scenes were better avoided and that hidden depths should remain hidden; façades were at least as truthful.) (p. 197)

Paul and Arthur are complementary opposites. Whereas Paul's sinister side was masked by an overlay of ordinary level-headedness, Arthur's heroic veneer conceals his ultimate commonness. As with her father and the Daffodil Man, Joan is left confused over whether to trust her lovers (as fathers, as guides) or to fear them (as predators, as devourers).

If Arthur is a knight at all, he is a perverse one; his pursuit of causes results from a self-seeking need to prove his moral superiority over others. For Joan, Arthur has become, in the course of their marriage, downright priggish:

I knew he was morally right; he was always morally right. This was admirable, but it was beginning to be a strain. . . . Arthur respected Don's mind, he told me. He was very good at respecting people's minds, initially. But he would always manage to find some flaw, some little corner of dry rot. "Nobody's perfect," I would tell him. Not even you, I increasingly wanted to add. (p. 230)

She accuses him here, perhaps justly, of demanding perfection from others. What she fails to recognize is that she has been just as narrowly demanding, that perfection is what she requires of Arthur; when he fails to meet her rigorous standards as the heroic male deliverer, she escapes to her dream world, beyond the disappointment and boredom of sustained reality. Her own neuroses are soothed, for a while, by her neat separation of reality from fantasy:

There were two kinds of love, I told myself; Arthur was terrific for one kind, but why demand all things of one man? I'd given up expecting him to be a cloaked, sinuous and faintly menacing stranger. He couldn't be that; I lived with him, and cloaked strangers didn't leave their socks on the floor or stick their fingers in their ears or gargle in the mornings to kill germs. I kept Arthur in our apartment and the strangers in their castles and mansions, where they belonged. (p. 217)

In the figure of the man she knows as the Royal Porcupine, Joan finds what she believes is the answer to Arthur's cloying self-righteousness. He seems a magical reflection of the image she has of herself in her fantasies:

He too had red hair, and he had an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled upward at the ends, the beard pointed. He was wearing a long black cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills. (p. 241)

Not only has the Royal Porcupine the same colouring as the protagonist, he even acts as if he has stepped out of the pages of her Costume Gothics: "His green eyes lit up like a lynx's, and he walked toward me, growling softly." Her own response is equally gothic: "The backs of my knees were weak with lust, and I felt a curious tingling sensation in my elbows" (p. 246). As was true of Arthur initially, Joan finds her new lover "Byronic". Understandably, her Gothic Romances suffer from the new relationship, for she no longer has a need to write out her fantasies; she is living them in the loft belonging to the new hero. At first she is euphoric:

Finally I had someone who would waltz with me, and we waltzed all over the ballroom floor of his warehouse, he in his top hat and nothing else, I in a lace tablecloth . . . he was a walking catalog of ephemera, of the irrelevant and the disposable. Everything, for him, was style; nothing was content. Beside him I felt almost profound. (pp. 256-57)

But the Royal Porcupine's magic is revealed to be a blend of falseness and trickery; he is as dully pragmatic, finally, as the others.

Early in their relationship, her romantic hero gives hints that he is not all "style". He exhibits traits of jealousy and possessiveness when he learns of Arthur and tries to arouse reciprocal jealousy in Joan with heavy hints about his other lovers. More to the point, he offers the insight of the trickster, in bringing forth the recognition that they are acting out roles borrowed from traditional male/female mythology.

As was the case with Duncan in his association with Marian, the Royal Porcupine is willing to enter into his lover's fantasy life at the outset of their relationship. But like Duncan, the Royal Porcupine eventually tires of the game and becomes for Joan just another in a series of demanding males. With the Royal Porcupine's disclosure of his identity as Chuck Brewer, a commercial artist, and in his attempt to form a permanent bond with Joan, the door to reality is opened and the carefully constructed balance between her two lives collapses. As the Royal Porcupine becomes more and more the ordinary Chuck, Joan asks herself, "Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" (pp. 271-72). The protagonist has typecast her men since childhood, expecting heroic behaviour from some, villainous treatment by others. Her passion for unadulterated mythology is thwarted by the materialization of Chuck Brewer: under the guise of her "Byronic" hero hides one rather ordinary man who dresses in blue jeans and a Honda T-shirt. Gone are the beard, the long hair, the Gothic costume; in short, gone are all those magical illusions which kept Joan intrigued. Horrified at the wanton plunder of the romantic mystique which granted Chuck Brewer heroic dimensions, Joan responds as she has always responded to the



invasion of real life: she runs, lamenting "I didn't want him to spoil things, I didn't want him to become gray and multidimensional and complicated like everyone else" (p. 271).

Joan's solution to her dilemma is, as with Marian in The Edible Woman, to allow herself to undergo a 'gastric' form of death, by being swallowed in the garbage of Lake Ontario. The description of the event parodies the psychic plunge in Surfacing:

I was unprepared. . . . It was much colder than I'd expected, and it tasted like stale fins and old diapers. I rose to the surface, coughing and gasping. . . . I spat out more of the lake and lay back . . . if there's one thing I knew how to do it was float. . . . I pulled myself onto the shore . . . orange peels, dead smelts and suspicious looking brown lumps eddied around me. . . . I lurked in the underbrush . . . dripping and shivering and avoiding the poison ivy and the drying mounds of human shit and melting toilet paper. (pp. 305-06)

The refuse that Joan falls into, unprepared, is much like the detritus of her life; she floats through both, blithely ignoring the decay in which she is immersed. While the description is highly comic, the comedy is black; Joan's life is no more than the sum total of a series of false starts and "accidents" from which she emerges the victim, slightly bruised but no further enlightened than before.

She comes to Terremoto to start anew. Once more she takes up the disguises which she finds easier to handle than the truth. She cuts her hair, dyes it mud brown, and burns the evidence. The natives respond by treating her as if she has the evil eye. She buries the clothing she has "drowned" in; the natives dig them up and return them to her, with the message that it is unwise to dispose of perfectly good

clothing. Joan refuses to acknowledge the wisdom of the messages she is given, even those of her subconscious. Her "new life" lacks the baptismal overtones celebrated in Surfacing: "I took a bath, though the water was pink and unpleasantly like warm blood. . . . I sat . . . and tried to empty my mind. Brainwash. . . . I grew sodden with light; my skin on the inside glowed a dull red" (p. 322). Moreover, Joan senses that she has not truly escaped. Beneath the house, she feels, her former body, the Fat Lady, is rising up to enclose and obliterate her (p. 322). The past refuses denial. It is almost as stubborn as Joan's conviction that danger lurks outside, in the form of various male predators. In a state of self-delusion, she promises herself: "From now on . . . I would dance for no one but myself. May I have this waltz? I whispered" (p. 335). The result is disastrous: "Shit. I'd danced right through the broken glass, in my bare feet too" (p. 335). She has achieved no ontological vision of self-hood as a result of her submersion in the water of Lake Ontario. The "Other Side" of Terremoto, Italy, is not the paradise she has been lusting after, but a second-rate inferno.<sup>5</sup>

Joan's relationships with men are doomed to failure, based as they are upon her own sophistry. At the start of her affair with the Royal Porcupine, the protagonist has noted:

This was the beginning of my double life. But hadn't my life always been double? There was always that shadowy twin. . . .shining white pupils glowing in the black sunlight of that other world. . . . I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, . . . there was more than one life to come, there were many. The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension, cleverly disguised as a freight elevator, and one of my selves plunged recklessly through.

Not the others, though. (p. 247)

As did Marian, in The Edible Woman, and the narrator of Surfacing, at least initially, Joan refuses any definite form of commitment. She plays the tragic heroine, having convinced herself that love is the one thing she has sought throughout her life, but failed to find. Because her notion of love is based upon the romantic male/female mythology of her novels, it seems to Joan "impossible that anyone could ever really love anyone, or if they could, that anything lasting or fine would come of it. Love was the pursuit of shadows" (pp. 284-85). Rather than follow this line of reasoning, which might lead her toward self-discovery, Joan places the blame for her own inability to love upon the nature of love itself, ignoring the importance of her own gothic-derived, destructive/romantic cravings. She seeks a static world, where wounds are merely ritual and love is "as final as death" (p. 286), in short the world of her fiction, where nothing happens and all endings are happy ones. It is not only the world of Joan's vulgar Costume Gothics, but also the backdrop of her seemingly more intellectual, yet equally vapid treatise, Lady Oracle, advertised as the author's haunting tale of "Modern love and the sexual battle, dissected with a cutting edge and shocking honesty" (p. 236). More candidly, Joan herself sees her story, the torrid love affair between a woman in a boat and a man in a cloak (with icicle teeth and eyes of fire), as a Gothic gone wrong. She notes that "There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love" (p. 234).

Joan has earlier been warned that she must not deny her gift or it would make use of her; the warning goes unheeded. Instead of using her art to probe into the recesses of her own psyche, she has created a world of fantasy inhabited by characters who are as multiple as herself. This "other" world becomes so appealing to her own need for escape, that she becomes "hooked" on her art and loses both artistic and emotional freedom.<sup>6</sup> The Gothic males of both her literary and actual worlds are projections of her own inner turmoil--cynical, cold, "Byronic" figures, predators and rescuers after whom she lusts, and whose emotional sterility she shares. Redmond, the Earl of Otterly, Sir Edmund De Vere, the Earl of Darcy and Francois are all the same man; tall, dark, handsome and sinister, he is married to an evil, faithless, fiery and intensely beautiful woman when the heroine appears on the scene. The heroine is always an orphan, abused by an uncle, delicate yet dauntless, and of independent though modest means. Tracked by mysterious, cloaked killers, the heroine flees, falling into the hero's arms, after which the wife succumbs to a convenient and fatal illness. The plot is thread-bare, yet it is one that provides the reader--and more importantly, the author--with the requisite escape from dull reality. Joan identifies implicitly with her heroine, each time giving these pure, but secretly libidinous, maidens her own red hair and green eyes. And the hero is always the mixture of good (father/guide) and bad (predator) which characterizes her father, the Daffodil man, and her lovers. Joan's crisis as an author emerges with the last of her Costume Gothics. Her heroine, Charlotte, is having as much trouble as Joan is herself in escaping into the arms of a hero. The artist, having

begun to sympathize with Felicia, the wife, refuses to write the delivery that must come:

I knew what had to happen. Felicia, of course, would have to die; such was the fate of wives. Charlotte would then be free to become a wife in her turn. But first she would have a final battle with Redmond and hit him with something . . . any hard sharp object would do, knocking him out and inducing brain fever with hallucinations, during which his features and desires would be purified by suffering and he would murmur her name. She would nurse him with cold compresses and realize how deeply she loved him; then he would awaken in his right mind and propose. That was one course of action. The other would be a final attempt on her life, with a rescue by Redmond, after which he would reveal how deeply he loved her, with optional brain fever on her part. These were the desired goals, but I was having trouble reaching them. (pp. 317-18)

Suddenly Joan is fed up with her hero and heroine; as fantasy had made its way into her own life, now reality threatens to break into the carefully controlled world of her Costume Gothic. She unmasks Redmond as a poseur: "He was turned toward the window, raising his left eyebrow at himself in the reflection on the pane. An unkind observer might have said he was practicing" (p. 320). She portrays her heroine as affectedly coy and expresses her irritation with Charlotte's pure terrors and tidy habits. She finds that "wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt" (p. 321). Yet, intent on her own need for happy endings and clearly incapable of writing a "real" novel, where characters have "hangnails, body odors and stomach problems" (p. 321), Joan sends her heroine along the only path she knows, into the maze. Once again, reality intrudes. The maze is blooming with the flowers of the narrator's youth; Joan herself sits, in her child's ballet costume, on a bench where there are two duplicates of her adult self, and it is

Felicia, rather than Charlotte, who is the heroine. The others, mirroring Joan's own multiple personality, tell the heroine "every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about" [emphasis mine] (p. 342). What is true of wives--and Joan in particular--is true as well of husbands; Joan's male counterparts, too, are multiple. Reality and fantasy merge for Joan as Felicia opens the door that has closeted reality. Out come all of Joan's repressed fears about men. They are similar to the fears expressed by Marian in The Edible Woman; the male, thought to be the protagonist's defender, is revealed as predatory pursuer. She is about to throw herself into the hands of her rescuer, when she realizes that here is the murderer who has been stalking her. Recognizing that doom awaits her if she crosses the threshold that separates them, she refuses to succumb to Redmond's charms.

Rapidly the identity of the killer undergoes several changes for Felicia/Joan: starting as Redmond, he becomes her father, then Paul, the Royal Porcupine, the Daffodil Man, the male lover from The Lady Oracle, Arthur, and is finally revealed to be Joan herself. It is she who has desperately desired the replacement of her potentially fat, messy self with her perfectly thin and composed dark twin. Having earlier dubbed this figure her "funhouse-mirror reflection," she had noted: "She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place" (p. 252). It is herself that Joan must fear, for she is drawn to a world that dazzles by its superficial perfection, yet holds only spiritual death--the skull beneath the fetching flesh. Tragically, the protagonist cannot free herself from the deadly mythology of the perfect couple.

wedded in a happy ending. As both writer and woman, she is cursed by a failure of imagination, as well as a limited vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> The rigid categories, the fairytale composites of ogre/prince and witch/princess, fail to be applicable in real life, where there are no easy answers.

Lady Oracle, with its several parodies, is not a simple straightforward novel but one which demands careful reading--and re-reading. Through an ingenious use of the Costume Gothic sections in the novel, Margaret Atwood has been able to illustrate graphically (and comically) the dangers of romantic mythology for a protagonist seeking psychic awareness. Marian, in The Edible Woman, tells Duncan that she must decide what she is going to do with her life; the nameless protagonist of Surfacing, having secured her own vision of life, concerns herself thereafter with the enactment of that vision; Joan Foster, unlike the others, spends her days waiting to be acted upon, like the heroines of her own Costume Gothics. She, like her heroines, has the resources to become independent; Joan has supported herself while living with Paul, has sent Arthur to university, and has paid for the Royal Porcupine's meals. Yet she becomes mysteriously incapacitated when faced with a decision that involves her future, choosing to await rescue by a heroic male. Her personal values are reflected in her choice of the type of fiction she writes, as well as in her choice of men. Rather than face reality and the possibility of uncertain or unhappy endings, she turns to the promise of a popular new kind of fiction: science fiction. The emotional sterility there is, if anything, more lethal than that found in the stifling mazes of Joan's Gothic novels.<sup>8</sup> Finally,

Lady Oracle bears a familiar Atwoodian message; as Patricia Morley puts it,

the way out of the Victorian maze, for those who don't fancy joining the other victims at the centre, lies in recognizing the duplicity of human nature, including one's own. Atwood's novel is a statement of the necessity, for men and women alike, of inner freedom, self-reliance, and growth.<sup>9</sup>

The protagonist of Lady Oracle, Joan Delacourt Foster, fails to find her way out of the maze she has constructed with the help of her male counterparts. She learns nothing new from them, nor do they learn anything worthwhile from her. All of the major characters in the novel remain in a state of spiritual blindness, using others and being used in turn; unlike the protagonists of The Edible Woman and Surfacing, beyond this type of relationship they do not move.<sup>10</sup> The novel gives us the familiar figures of predators, father/guides, and tricksters; but they are parodies based on Joan's fantasy life. For this novel's puerile woman, there can be no developing half-formed man.



## CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (Toronto: Bantam Seal Books, 1977). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>For a lengthy account of male duplicity in Lady Oracle and an examination of its implications see Arnold E. and Cathy M. Davidson's fine article "Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle: The Artist as Escapist and Seer," particularly pages 170-74, Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No. 2 (Summer 1978).

<sup>3</sup>Herbert Rosengarten, "Urbane Comedy," Canadian Literature, No. 72 (Spring 1977), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Maclean, "Lady Oracle: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art," Journal of Canadian Fiction, No. 28-29, (1980), p. 190; Maclean's article analyzes the shifting identities of Lady Oracle's characters and concludes that judgment of human nature is tenuous at best.

<sup>5</sup>In Herbert Rosengarten's article "Urbane Comedy," the critic reads Joan's staged drowning and subsequent flight as a new beginning, insisting that "at the end she literally breaks through the glass, to an acceptance of herself as she really is," p. 86. However, as Joan dances upon the glass he refers to--and cuts her feet badly in the process--I feel the reader has little choice but to see the "new beginning" as merely another in the series of false starts the protagonist has been pursuing throughout the course of the novel.

<sup>6</sup>In her article "Calling Back the Ghost of the Old-Time Heroine," Catherine Sheldrick Ross has noted that "The opposition of this side and 'the other side' is a recurrent metaphor used to distinguish between life and art" in the novel. See Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Calling Back the Ghost of the Old-Time Heroine: Duncan, Montgomery, Atwood, Laurence, and Munro," Studies in Canadian Literature, 4, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 48.

<sup>7</sup>Margaret Griffith explores the complex relationship between art and life and the critical role played by language, noting that in Atwood's work the failure of language on the part of the protagonist represents a serious emotional inadequacy as well. See her article, "Verbal Terrain in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 21, No. 3 (1980).

<sup>8</sup>Atwood herself in an interview has called Lady Oracle as "anti-Gothic" exploring the perils of Gothic thinking where "you have a scenario in your head which involves certain roles--the dark, experienced man, who is possibly evil and possibly good, the rescuer, the mad wife, and so on--and that as you go to real life you tend to cast real people in these roles as Joan does. Then when you find out that the real people don't fit these two-dimensional roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real person or discard the real person." J. R. Struthers, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," Essays in Canadian Writing, No. 6 (Spring 1977), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Patricia Morley, "The Gothic as Social Realism," Canadian Forum, 56 (December 1976-January 1977), 50.

<sup>10</sup>A similar viewpoint is expounded in Wilfred Cude's reading of the novel: "The Truth Was Not Convincing," The Fiddlehead, 112 (Winter 1977), p. 135. For an opposing, more optimistic reading of the novel's conclusion, see Francis Mansbridge, "Search for Self in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," Journal of Canadian Fiction, No. 22 (1978), particularly p. 116.

## CONCLUSION

In the three novels examined, we come to see that each of Atwood's female protagonists embarks upon a voyage of self-discovery which will take her beyond the limited roles delineated by her society; the three narrators achieve varying degrees of insight and success. As we have discovered by Atwood's characterization of the male figures in her novels, their real significance lies in their position in the quest made by the female protagonist. In their relationships with the females, they are the signposts by which the reader can gauge the relative progress made by the heroine in each novel. As critic Russell M. Brown points out in "Atwood's Sacred Wells,"

The quest from the earliest of Atwood's writing to the most recent work has been for a sacred space. . . . The space may be sought in the external world--in Canada, Mexico, Italy--but that world can at best offer entrances to the true locus, which is an interior one. . . . The discovery of the gateways to that internal world become [sic] the final goal to which all other efforts are directed.<sup>1</sup>

Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of The Edible Woman, at first sees her men as giving her definition. Through marriage to Peter, she expects to become someone significant; later she attempts to use Duncan as an escape from commitment to the future; finally she is able to see the destruction that results when people manipulate others to satisfy their own selfish designs. By the end of the novel, Marian is freed of victim/victor games and is fully capable of directing her own future. The novel ends on a hopeful note; spring has arrived and with it renewal.

Aware of the dangers of emotional dependency, Marian has found her "sacred space".

The psychic journey of Surfacing's nameless protagonist ends on an even happier note, but its opening tones are darker. The quest for self-knowledge takes the narrator back into her past, physically and psychologically. Like Marian, at the start of the novel the protagonist is using her lover, Joe, to protect her from the knowledge of her destructive past. While she recognizes the world to be a hostile place, she prefers to think of herself as a victim and of others, notably men, as the aggressors. What ostensibly commences as a trip to locate her missing father becomes the voyage whereby the narrator is put in touch with her own humanity. At the outset, the protagonist is manipulative; her relationship with Joe reflects the destructive pattern both have accepted. Neither one is trusting. Later, through her discovery of the dead body of her father, she is made aware of her own role as a dealer of death. No longer capable of seeing herself as an innocent sufferer, the protagonist is ready to accept responsibility for her own unhappy past, to see that men are not merely predators, but human beings with a full range of emotional responses. As the narrator questions her future, Joe returns for her. Like her, he has come to terms with his own need for commitment in this fallen world, having undergone a personal quest parallel to that of the protagonist. Surfacing ends with the possibility of a new beginning, in the form of the child that may have been conceived on the island.

The third novel, Lady Oracle, explores what happens when the

protagonist fails to achieve the insight sought after throughout the quest. Joan Foster's search for self presents a series of false starts which lead her to various locales, but ultimately nowhere. Her path runs full-circle and she is none the wiser for the journey. The protagonist begins and ends the novel comforted by her delusion that there exist two types of men; her own quest revolves around finding the "right" man, rather than discovering herself. Throughout her life, several males, from her father, her first lover, her husband, to her last lover, the Royal Porcupine, illustrate that there is no one type of man. Joan refuses to accept the full range of possibilities presented by each human being. She rebounds from one false experience to the next, always seeking delivery rather than illumination, and finding neither. Her head and her books remain predictably peopled with caricatures of the persons she has met but never known, and so Lady Oracle culminates in one last rescue scene, suggesting not a new beginning for the protagonist but further self-delusion in her understanding of the nature of her men, her self and her world. In this third novel, Margaret Atwood has created a hilarious satire of her own Bildungsromans and in Joan Foster the perfect parody of her questing heroic females. While the treatment is radically different, Atwood's theme remains the same: men and women must meet on equal terms, without the costumes that disguise their essential humanity.

This pattern of the quest for self is not exclusive to Atwood's novels; the same concerns are voiced in the male/female relationships described in Atwood's poetry and short stories. Power Politics, in particular, examines the spiritual sterility that results from masculine/

feminine sexual stereotyping in much the same manner that Lady Oracle does. The positive breakthrough made by the complementary male/female figures in Surfacing is paralleled by the poetry of You Are Happy. And Atwood's collection of short stories, Dancing Girls, includes both stories which examine traditional romantic relationships, pointing out their deadliness, and stories which suggest the more positive patterns of male/female relationships beyond the stereotypes. The canon of her work bears a unifying message; sexual games destroy both the manipulator and the manipulated. Atwood's positive male and female figures attain a spiritual interdependence based upon mutual self-knowledge, trust, and sharing; her negative figures reflect an opposite state, relating to others as predators or parasites. Atwood's most affirmative characters gain a place in their universe by virtue of honesty with self and openness with others.

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