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Margaret Atwood's transformed and transforming Gothic

Tennant, Colette Giles, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1991

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MARGARET ATWOOD’S TRANSFORMED AND TRANSFORMING GOTHIC

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate

School of The Ohio State University

By

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1991

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To my husband, Stuart, and
children, Shannon, Jeremy and Andrew,
and in memory of my father,

Clarence Henry Giles
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I express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Barbara Hill Rigney for her support and encouragement throughout this research. I also offer my sincere thanks to Dr. Patrick B. Mullen and Dr. Daniel R. Barnes for their help on this project. To my husband, Stuart, thank you for being such a wonderful friend and helper for these long years. And to our children, Shannon, Jeremy and Andrew, and to my mother, Jean Giles, thank you for your love and patience. Most of all, I thank God, the wonderful source of all blessings in my life.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood has observed that ". . .a writer does not have to repeat his tradition unaltered." Certainly, in her treatment of the Gothic tradition of the novel, Atwood has taken her own admonition to heart, for she transforms the traditional Gothic genre so that her Gothic novels free and empower her readers. The paradox is extreme, for Atwood chooses a genre that is full of exploitation and victimization--especially of women. It is ironic that Margaret Atwood, who is most often quoted as writing, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim," should borrow so much from a tradition that is filled with so many victims, almost always female.

From the Gothic novel's beginning in England, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, women have suffered at the
hands of men. Ann Radcliffe, perhaps the best known writer of
traditional Gothic literature, slightly revised Walpole's
approach to the genre. In her novels, at least, the central
heroines are not murdered. However, they are victimized
throughout the works, escaping from the villains only in the
last few pages. Walpole invited revision of the genre even as
he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*. Referring to himself in the
third person, in the Preface to the second edition Walpole
wrote, "...yet if the new route he has struck out shall have
paved a road for men of brighter talents, he shall own with
pleasure and modesty, that he was sensible the plan was
capable of receiving greater embellishments than his
imagination or conduct of the passions could bestow on it."

In the first Preface, Walpole wrote, "Terror, the author's
principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing. . . ." Radcliffe revised that aspect of Walpole’s literature, for while
her novels are filled with terror, fear is not the predominant
aim of her works; rather, her purpose is to instruct as well.

Religion plays a major role in Radcliffe's novels; agents of the Catholic Church are often portrayed as evil characters who conspire to destroy good, truly faithful characters. Likewise, Atwood's novels, while not religious, are didactic, and her revision, her re"see"ing of the Gothic tradition helps make them so. While the traditional Gothic didacticism was basically limited to moralizing, Atwood's didacticism leads her readers to a kind of emancipation through informed self-knowledge. Thus, from the outset, Atwood transforms the genre from one of female victimization to one of empowering awareness.

Atwood understands the attractive and psychologically positive ramifications of terror, and yet she also perceives how dangerous it is to be enthralled by the role of victim. Her characters are often anxious, fearful, and lonely, but most of them finally refuse to be enthralled by the idea of their own
victimization. Atwood's Gothic predecessors often created implausible situations for their victims—who were tormented by extremely unlikely circumstances. More frightening is Atwood's Gothic, where the shadow of the monstrous lies just below the surface of our imperfect world. In *Second Words*, Atwood writes that "in order to change any society you have to have a fairly general consciousness of what is wrong... In other words, to fight the Monster, you have to know that there is a Monster..." (147). Elsewhere in *Second Words*, Atwood explains her theory about the four victim positions, the third one being "to acknowledge that you are a victim, but refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable" (144).

Atwood goes on to explain that in "a sexist society, a woman can:

1.) Ignore her victimization, and sing songs like "I Enjoy Being A Girl."
2.) Think it's the fault of Biology, or something;
or you can't do anything about it; write literature on How Awful It is, which may be a very useful activity up to a point.

3.) Recognize the source of oppression; express anger; suggest ways for change. (145)

Within her Gothic novels, Atwood has painted a clear picture of the various Monsters that threaten to victimize women and men—monsters within themselves as well as those without.

Atwood's Gothic is also transforming in that it implies the beginning of a process, for to become aware of something—in this case one's victimization—is to become aware that there is a problem, a problem that is potentially resolvable. Such awareness is transforming in that it is dynamic; it leaves Atwood's reader with the sense that something can—and ought—to be done.

Atwood's unique gift is to be able to take elements of the traditional Gothic and transform them in such a way as to make
her novels contemporary and psychological yet still distinctly "Gothic." Four aspects of the traditional Gothic which Atwood transforms by her craftsmanship are the use of settings, the role of men, the prevalence of violence, and the transformation and blurred identity of characters.

In her use of settings, Atwood includes the traditional locales of the genre: castles, dungeons, ravines and graveyards, but very often she suggests that such settings are within the minds of her characters. Thus, one's psyche becomes a kind of graveyard. Dungeons become the deeper recesses of one's psyche into which characters must "descend" in order to confront their own monsters. "Ghosts" are often the ghosts of one's childhood, often unresolved issues. The trappings of the elder Gothic are there—yet their presence is more psychological and symbolic than literal. For example, modern museums become contemporary Gothic graveyards in a quite deliberate way. Atwood transforms the tangible, physical
settings of the tradition into the frightening settings within her characters' minds that are no less effective in their power to haunt.

Settings also assume gender-related connotations, echoing the "power resides in place" theme. For example, Offred, the Handmaid, resides in Gilead, suggestive of the Biblical land of stolen daughters. Also, Peter's apartment in The Edible Woman features a weapons collection, symbolic of his male predatory nature.

Another way Atwood transforms the original genre is that her male characters are not clearly drawn. Atwood's readers do not encounter the easily recognizable types in traditional Gothic literature: the villains, evil and manipulative, and the chivalric, unremittingly heroic men. Atwood's male characters, far from being clearly delineated, are shadowy and ambiguous. For example, some of her male characters seem at first to be gentle and protective, yet
eventually almost all of them fall short of being heroic. Her father figures are often either absent or so withdrawn as to be alienated from their families as well as from society. Atwood's "heroes" are cartoons, parodies, comic book heroes. Other types of shadow males found in her novels are mad scientists and destructive artists.

Traditional Gothic fathers, the supposed evil father of Adeline in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* or the controlling patriarch in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," seek either to harm in the first instance or to "protect" through isolation in the second. Atwood's fathers are harmful, too, but in a more psychological way. Thus, Joan Foster's "absent" father and his lack of caring for Joan's mother; the narrator's alienated father in *Surfacing*, and Elaine Risley's analytical, scientific father in *Cat's Eye* inflict emotional harm on their daughters.

An often humorous counterpoint to the heroic, "good" men
in the traditional Gothic is Atwood's introduction of comic book heroes. Joan Foster endures more than her fair share of such heroic failures as she goes from Paul to Arthur to the dramatically named Royal Porcupine—all of whom fall pathetically short of heroism. Nate in *Life Before Man* has very little of Vallencourt and too much of Walter Mitty in his character. And even the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale* looks like "something being dried" once he is out of his uniform.

Atwood's mad scientists do not, through misguided experiments, create monsters like Shelley's Frankenstein or kill their wives like Hawthorne's Aylmer. However, they do try to control and manipulate, such as the narrator's father in *Surfacing* setting himself up as a kind of god, or Ed, the cardiologist in the short story "Bluebeard's Egg," coldly scrutinizing Sally's heart.

Perhaps most threatening are Atwood's destructive artists who, more than the other male characters, treat the
women in their lives with malice. For instance, in *Surfacing* there is Joe, who mutilates his pots, and the art teacher who impregnates the narrator and then manipulates her into aborting her child. Likewise, the art teacher in *Cat's Eye* ominously tells Elaine: "We will see what we can make of you."
Perhaps it is because art is so much the expressions of one's self and the selves of Atwood's artistic women characters that the male artists are so destructive and threatening in their behavior. Also, the potential for objectifying women is so omnipresent in art, and women have historically been viewed as art objects.

Having "named the monster" by providing a litany of males who, though not as overtly frightening as the traditional Gothic villains, are nevertheless threatening, Atwood also transforms Gothic forms of violence and violation, specifically vampirism, cannibalism, and rape. Vampirism and cannibalism, in Atwood, do not literally involve drinking blood and eating
flesh, but are more subtle forms of victimization. In the midst of various power struggles, characters feed off each other's pain and weaknesses. For example, Peter triggers Marian's anorexia with his overt "hunter" behavior, and Mrs. Foster "cannibalizes" her insecure daughter, Joan, with hurtful remarks and verbal demands. Metaphorical as well as real rapes occur in Atwood's Gothic works. Again, her use of violence and violation is more often psychological or suggested, rather than literal.

Atwood's final transforming of the older Gothic occurs in her treatment of her characters. While change occurred in the characters of the traditional Gothics in often monstrous, frightening ways, change for Atwood's characters is most often psychological— even developmental—in that characters can be viewed as "working through" issues of personal development and growth. Thus, for example, the narrator of Surfacing in seeking to find her father succeeds in freeing herself by
acquiring a better sense of self knowledge. Of course, not all of Atwood's characters are so successful. For example, the grotesque suicide of a character in *Life Before Man* triggers a number of emotional issues for Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje, but none of them really transforms for the better.

The ultimate achievement of Atwood's Gothic is that she takes the character change motif of the older Gothic and transforms it from something that is frightening and makes a convincing case for such change being necessary and even positive. After all, if women are to overcome their status as victims, they must understand that they are, first of all, victimized, and that through self knowledge they have the power to cease being victims. Such a lesson is at the very heart of Atwood's didacticism. By transforming traditional Gothic elements, she enables her readers to transform themselves.
CHAPTER I

ATWOOD'S GOTHIC SETTINGS--A NECESSARY HAUNTING

"By discovering your place you discover yourself."

(Second Words 113)

The first criterion of traditional Gothic literature against which Atwood's fiction can be measured is the setting. The importance of Gothic settings is attested to by the fact that so many Gothic novels' titles are names of places: Wuthering Heights, The Castle of Otranto, The Mysteries of Udolpho, The Romance of the Forest, etc. These works contain standard Gothic settings: castles, dungeons, ravines, and graveyards (to name a few). Atwood's Gothic novels include elements of those settings as well, but the most frightening settings her heroines encounter are those within their
own minds. Almost one hundred years ago, Emily Dickinson wrote a poem which can serve to introduce a discussion of the Gothic settings in Margaret Atwood's novels. Dickinson's poem begins, "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted... The Brain has Corridors—surpassing/Material Place." By way of comparison, in her poem "I was Reading a Scientific Article" Atwood writes that the brain "is an earth, its fibres wrap things buried." Dickinson continues, "Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,/The Stones a 'chase— / Than Unnamed one's self encounter— /In lonesome Place." Likewise, in her poem "Journey to the Interior" Atwood writes, "There are no destinations / apart from this... Whatever I do I must / Keep my head. I know / it is far easier for me to lose my way/forever here, than in other landscapes." Finally, Dickinson writes, "Ourself behind ourself, concealed - Should startle most..." To Atwood, the most frightening Gothic landscape is the place at the center of one's psyche, or being.

Similar observations about Atwood's Gothic treatment of the psyche have been made by other critics. Judith McCombs in "Atwood's
Haunted Sequences," discusses the Gothic elements in the poetry of *Circle Game* and *Power Politics*: "Most important, the Circle has throughout a single single setting in which the Gothic terrors gather. The female is herself the setting of this Gothic; the chamber of horrors is interior to her consciousness" (37). Likewise, Frank Davey, in his book on Atwood observes, "...subterranean threats and horrors belong to the literary Gothic...a genre in which a threat comes variously from primitive, underground, underwater, or subconscious sources" (99). Also, in her own critical work, *Survival*, at the beginning of the chapter on Nature the Monster, Atwood quotes from Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* and Douglas LePan's poem, "Coureurs de bois." Both refer to the wilderness within: "I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature...It is not a terror of the dangers or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something these things manifest" (225). "Where can you turn, where can you travel? Unless / Through the desperate wilderness behind your eyes..." In the first paragraph
of that chapter, Atwood writes, "...landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind" (49). The same could be said about the settings in her novels. Atwood's heroines are often caught in a double trap--the trap of their physical circumstances, and the more threatening trap of their mental processes. Her heroines are haunted from within as well as from without. The pattern that emerges in her seven novels is that the heroines must make that necessary journey to the interior, becoming aware of what lies buried in their psyches before they can ever hope to escape the exterior traps that surround them. Atwood's heroines are placed in settings which are often symbolic burial grounds, mirroring the repressed thoughts in the heroines' minds. In Fiction and the Unconscious Simon Lesser's comments about layers of meaning in fiction are pertinent in examining Atwood's multi-layered, symbolic settings:

...any given reader may sense that a story has many different meanings, layer upon layer of significance. To
use the term adopted from dream psychology, fiction may be overdetermined; the fiction we regard as great invariably is. . . . topographically one would have to picture the various meanings of which an over-determined work admits as extending not outward in space, but downward or inward. . . . In a surprising number of cases, over determined works refer simultaneously to external problems and interpsychic conflicts. (113-114)

While much of Atwood's Gothic sense derives from the interior, or psychological landscapes of her heroines, there are unique external aspects to her use of physical landscape as well. Atwood's novels are almost always set in Canada. Writing from a Canadian perspective, Atwood is fully aware that Canada, until very recently was a colony; perhaps even now Canadians have a residual feeling of being colonized. To be colonized is to be victimized and exploited, to live in somebody else's space. The colonization metaphor runs throughout Atwood's novels as the reader discovers that almost all of her heroines live in other people's territory. Similarly in the elder Gothic (a term borrowed from McCombs), the traditional heroines are often kidnapped from their homes - or displaced in some way so that
they often live in someone else's space. For instance, in Jane Eyre, Rochester's wife, far from her Caribbean home, goes mad, locked in the attic room of Thornfield Hall. Jane, too, can only marry Rochester after finding her true "home" and receiving her inheritance at Moors End. In Atwood, both what is external in the setting and what is interior to the psyche intertwine. Similarly, many of Ann Radcliffe's heroines are kidnapped by villains, but during their displacement, like Jane's journey to Moor's End, they often discover their pasts. They, too, usually receive an inheritance after finding out their true identity. Of course, in Radcliffe's novels, the heroines often literally descend into lower chambers, for instance, the dungeon of a castle or abbey - and there discover some piece of evidence or missing link to their pasts so that they can more fully realize who they are. But Atwood depicts her heroines figuratively going underground, a more perilous journey, to their own lower recesses in order to explore unchartered areas of their psyches.

Atwood takes the traditional Gothic pattern of entrapment and
escape and not only internalizes it, but also enriches it with a paradoxical turn. Her characters, by becoming entrapped, must enter a subconscious world and there free themselves of internal hauntings as well. In other words, for Atwood's characters to survive in their Gothic settings, they must eventually come to some sort of self discovery as a result of their retreat to the interior landscapes of the mind. Therefore, an Atwoodian Gothic formula could logically be stated as such: If one never realizes that one is trapped, then one can never really escape. Nina Auerbach makes a similar point in her introduction to *Romantic Imprisonment* where she writes about "the motif of the double prison, in which a journey of apparent liberation from captivity leads only to a more implacable arrest. In such a journey, 'Romantic concepts of freedom become a deeply ironic snare'" (6). Many of Atwood's characters get caught in just such "a deeply ironic snare," for although they descend into their psyches, some return refusing to acknowledge what they discover there. And some of Atwood's characters lose their way in the landscape of their
memories - never fully returning from their journey to the interior.

In an article on Atwood in *Saturday Night*, John Ayre notes:

Atwood plays the role of psychic iconoclast, pulling the categories of existence apart... she demands uncomfortable confrontations that most people would obviously prefer to avoid... [Atwood's] psychological approach is primary because... the fiercest barrier to freedom is the restrictive sense of inferiority that people hold about themselves in their own mind. (Nov. 72, 23-26)

Juliet Mitchell, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, makes a similar point which could be applied to Atwood's use of Gothic setting (including burial grounds) in her novels: "Psychoanalysis makes conscious the unconscious, not only as a therapeutic technique, but also as the task of its theory. It reconstructs the unperceived [buried], fragmented and incoherent myths and ideas held within the unconscious mind" (368-369). In some of Atwood's novels, her heroines make the journey to their internal burial ground and return with what Bayer-Berenbaum calls an "expanded consciousness." In
The Gothic Imagination she writes that the graveyards, dungeons, and burial vaults are "trademarks of the early Gothic novel. They symbolically echo the dimension of the Gothic reality. . . . beneath the Gothic gimmicks, the essential tenet is an expansion of consciousness" (21). Similarly, some of Atwood's characters escape their Gothic landscapes to lead an enriched life after experiencing a very necessary haunting.

The novel that most clearly illustrates Atwood's use of the Gothic setting is Lady Oracle. At the beginning of this novel, Joan Foster has made "a journey of apparent liberation" which "leads only to a more implacable arrest." There is basically only one setting in the novel: Terromoto, Italy (Terromoto meaning "the earth moves"). There are other settings in the novel, but they all originate in Joan's mind, as she sits in Terremoto recalling her past. In the beginning of the novel, the heroine and narrator, Joan Foster, explains that she has escaped her former life in Canada by orchestrating her supposed death and retreating to Italy. However, unlike the elder Gothic heroines who
leave home and go on what ultimately becomes a journey of self discovery, Joan uncovers relics of her past while at this retreat; but she refuses to use them to gain self awareness. The name of the one main setting of the work, Terremoto, is significant because the idea of moving earth implies digging, and of course, in Gothic terms, burial. The theme of burial is important in *Lady Oracle*. Joan, thinking she has escaped her former past—with all of her multiple identities—buries her wet clothes, the clothes she was wearing when she supposedly drowned, beneath her cottage in Terremoto. Joan describes the ritualistic burial:

They smelled of my death. . . . . Jeans and a navy-blue T-shirt, my funerary costume, my former self, damp and collapsed, from which the many-colored souls had flown. . . . I still felt as though I was getting rid of a body, the corpse of someone I'd killed. . . . Perhaps, hundreds of years from now, someone would dig up my jeans and T-shirt and deduce a forgotten rite, a child murder or a protective burial. (17-18)

The phrase "protective burial" is a clue to Joan's sense of
entrapped. She is trying to free herself from her unhappy past but is unsuccessful. Joan is caught in an ironic snare. All her former selves lie just beneath the surface. Instead of hiding her "dead" selves, Joan is paradoxically digging up what she is trying to avoid—her past.

One way that Atwood uses the setting to emphasize the idea of Joan looking down into herself and back into the past is through perspective. Joan is almost always on the balcony with her eyes focused downward. On the first page of the novel, Joan tells the reader, "I'd always been fond of balconies." And a few pages later, after envisioning all the significant people from her past (both living and dead) walking by on the beach, she thinks, "I was safe, I could begin again, but instead I sat on my balcony..."(6). Why use the conjunction "but" here except to point out that Joan is not safe, because she is choosing to look down, look back. Of course, when the reader learns about Joan's complicated past, as she digs back further and further, one understands that Joan must look down. She
must move the earth away and confront her haunting past if she is to liberate herself fully from it. Towards the end of the novel, Atwood reiterates the balcony idea. Joan is still up there, and the poignancy of this ironic snare becomes evident when Joan asks, "Where was the new life I'd intended to step into, easily as crossing a river? It hadn't materialized. . . . I was caged on my balcony waiting to change" (342). Still at that point trying to excise her past from her present, Joan comes to a significant realization: "...all the time my own country was embedded in my brain. . . ." (342). This line from *Lady Oracle* sounds so much like the sentiment expressed by Dickinson, "The Brain has Corridors--surpassing Material Place", as well as the line from Atwood's poem that the brain "is an earth, its fibres wrap things buried." The idea of burial is also echoed on the previous page where, at the beginning of Part Five, Joan says, "I was sitting on the balcony in my underwear. . . ." (341). It is very ironic that Joan dresses so often in her underwear and writes Costume Gothics, hiding the manuscripts in
her underwear drawer. Her heroines wear elaborate costumes, but
the imagination from which these heroines spring is repressed by
Joan Foster, beneath her superficial pose. The idea of underwear,
clothes underneath the costume, emphasizes the idea that the real
Joan is hidden underneath the facade of the various "costumes" in
which she pretends to be other people to the world. Just as Joan's
various poses are stripped away by characters such as Fraser
Buchanan, so terrible things happen to the costumes of her Gothic
heroines, as she admits: "Bad things always happened to the clothes
of my heroines: bottles of ink got poured over them, holes were
burned in them... Once they were buried in a cellar" (146).

Joan's clothes are disinterred before the end of the novel.
They are dug up by her curious Italian landlord, Mr. Vitroni, and his
father. Mr. Vitroni explains, "My father, he has seen them in the
earth, down there where are the carciofi" (357). (Atwood folds
symbol upon symbol, having Mr. Vitroni mention that Joan buried her
clothes among the carciofi - or artichokes. The layered artichokes
are symbolic of Joan's various layers of clothing and hint at the
layers of her psyche.) Just before accepting her cleaned and pressed
clothes that have been exhumed by the Vitronis, Joan puts on her
"last set of underwear" and tries to empty her mind. She cannot, of
course. In fact, the opposite happens. She imagines her clothes
taking shape beneath the house:

> Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I'd buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out, like a huge mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony. . . . (353)

This symbolic exhumation of the clothes is appropriate since,
at this point in the novel, Joan has dug up her repressed past by
reviewing significant events in her life. She has moved the earth
away from parts of her life she had previously hidden from others as
well as from herself. This episode calls to mind the horrible scene
from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" when Madeline, Usher's
supposedly dead twin who has temporarily been entombed beneath the house, appears and the twin Ushers together collapse in death on the chamber floor. Joan also imagines her supposedly dead twin (the Fat Lady) absorbing and obliterating her at this point.

The poem "The Haunted Palace" which Poe includes in "The Fall of the House of Usher" also sheds light on Joan's disinterment of her past life. In the first stanza of the poem, Poe writes that the "Radiant palace" stood "In the monarch Thought's dominion." And, Poe continues:

And round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

As Joan moves the earth away from "the old time entombed" in the haunted palace of her mind, the reader finds two other predominant Gothic settings there, both involving Joan's relationship with her mother. The first of these is a ravine near Joan's childhood
home. She remembers her adolescent years when she tried to understand her own sexuality and at the same time tried to please her mother. Joan, as a child, has to cross the ravine to get to her Brownie meetings: "My mother was terrified of this ravine: it crawled with vines and weedy undergrowth, it was dense with willow trees and bushes behind every one of which she pictured a lurking pervert. . ." (54). Thus, Joan's first encounter with her own sexuality is a warning from her mother that she has something that can be violated. This burden of knowledge of something lurking, menacing in the ravine, makes Joan feel guilty about that possibility: "And the way she put it made me somehow responsible, as if I myself had planted the bushes in the ravine and concealed the bad men behind them, as if, should I be caught, it would be my own doing" (55). At one point, she feels so mistreated by her Brownie "friends" and her mother that she wishes the "bad man" would come out of the ravine and get her. Soon afterwards, Joan is confronted by a flasher in the ravine. She takes the daffodils he offers her, unafraid. After the next Brownie meeting,
the other Brownies tie Joan to the bridge in the bottom of the ravine, the scene of her confrontation with the "bad" man, and leave her there.

A man comes along and unties her, but as she heads home with the man, Joan sees her mother running towards her. She jerks Joan out from behind the man and slaps her across the face. Joan is confused by this incident. The slap is a wordless message from her mother, blaming Joan for her sexuality. Joan's ambivalent feelings about her sexuality are evident in her imaginings at the end of the incident:

But he [the man who had untied her] was elusive, he melted and changed his shape like butterscotch or warm gum, dissolving into a tweedy mist, sending out menacing tentacles of flesh and knotted rope, forming again as a joyful burst of yellow flowers. (67)

Because of these ambivalent feelings about men and her own sexuality, Joan repeatedly has bad dreams that involve her mother and the ravine. In the first one, she is walking across the bridge with an anonymous man when the bridge starts to collapse. Her mother can save her, but as Joan reaches out for help, her mother ignores her.
This frightening dream is symbolic of Joan's perilous journey into sexual maturity, unaided by her mother who ignores her cry for help in crossing the bridge. Sybil Korff Vincent, in her essay on Lady Oracle writes, "Here is the mingled terror and desirability of the pending sexuality of the prepubescent girl. She longs for the forbidden sexual act which will deliver her from her helpless childhood state, but also feels fear, guilt, shame, and a need for punishment" (160).

Aside from the ravine, one of the most dominant Gothic settings in Lady Oracle is Joan's mother's bedroom, specifically, the spot in front of her mother's triple mirror. Joan's mother's presence tortures Joan's childhood as well as her adult life, even after her mother dies, and the image, the setting, that best represents their relationship is the place in front of that mirror. Her mother's mirror played an important role in Joan's childhood; it fascinated and yet terrified her. Joan recalls a recurring nightmare she has involving the mirror and her mother:
My mother always had a triple mirror. . . . In the dream, as I watched, I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn't frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I'd always known . . . my mother was a monster. (70)

Claire Kahane, in "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity," a feminist/psychoanalytic discussion of traditional Gothic settings, makes an observation that also could apply to Joan and her mother in their triple mirror setting:

Ultimately, what I confront are the mysteries of identity, which turn on discovering the boundary between self and a mother-imago archaically conceived who threatens all boundaries. To this confrontation, the characteristic response of the Gothic heroine is escape. . . . The conventional Gothic heroine puts herself outside female sexuality and aggressivity. But in this excluding a vital aspect of self, she is left on the margin both of identity, and of society. . . . At the Gothic center of the novels, the dragon lady in the mirror remains, waiting to be acknowledged. (52-53)
Kahane's description of the presence of an all-powerful mother is very similar to what Joan writes when she tries automatic writing while sitting in front of her mother's three-way mirror. Joan calls the long poem she creates there "Lady Oracle," but what she actually creates is an explicit reflection of her image of her mother. In thinking of the central figure in her poem, Joan explains, "...she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building.... She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power" (248).

Earlier, Joan remembers her mother's unhappiness, again with a burial metaphor. Joan writes that life had "betrayed her, stranding her in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (201). Joan goes on to quote significant lines from her poem, lines which echo her ambivalent feelings about her mother sitting before the mirror:

She sits on the iron throne
She is one and three
The dark lady oracle of blood, she who must be obeyed forever (252)

This description is of Joan's mother, haunting, all-powerful, the three-headed monster Joan tries to please, then failing, tries to escape. The triple mirror acts as a blinder from reality, first for her mother, and then for Joan. Joan's mother fantasized about how glamorous her life might have been if she hadn't married Joan's father, and Joan's fantasy life also overtakes her reality as she assumes different identities. The three-way mirror becomes a literal setting for Joan's "lives": as Joan Foster, the writer of "Lady Oracle," as L. Delacourt, author of dime store romances, and as the narrator of Atwood's novel, *Lady Oracle*, telling the reader this story after assuming yet another identity in Italy. Certainly, Atwood intends the title "Lady Oracle" for Joan's poem, as well as *Lady Oracle*, the title of the novel itself, to be ironic, especially if one remembers the most famous oracle--the Delphic Oracle--with its inscription: "Know thyself."
To the end of the novel, Joan avoids coming to any sort of honest self examination. She is still trying to figure out ways of freeing herself from the "clutching fingers" of her past. Even though Joan is an avowed "escape artist," she will have to work hard if she is to succeed in avoiding her "buried" self, for in the last glimpse the reader has of her, she has left Terremoto and has entered Rome, the city of catacombs, with all of those past lives hauntingly just below the surface.

Another of Atwood's novels that centers around the Gothic setting of a burial ground is *Life Before Man*, and like Joan Foster, the characters who live there never really move toward a point of self analysis and growth. However, unlike Joan, who tries to avoid her buried/disintered past, the characters in *Life Before Man* are mesmerized by their own histories. Therefore, they are fitting relics in the Royal Ontario Museum, a celebrated repository of history.

Whereas much of the setting of *Lady Oracle* is in Joan's mind, there is in *Life Before Man* the exterior setting of the museum as a kind of
Gothic castle/graveyard. However, the museum also symbolizes the thought processes of the main characters: Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje. Atwood's poem, "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum" is a companion piece to *Life Before Man* (as demonstrated by Barbara Rigney in *Margaret Atwood*), clearly illustrating the museum as an image of the mind:

Who locked me
into this crazed man-made
stone brain
... ...
Under that ornate
golden cranium I wander
among fragments of gods, tarnished
coins, embalmed gestures
looking for the exit sign
but... the labyrinth holds me.
... ...
and I am dragged to the mind's deadend, the roar of the bone-yard, I am lost... .

The characters in *Life Before Man* are likewise lost in the
boneyards of their pasts, and so, like Joan, buried alive. The quote from Dante in the lobby of the museum becomes significant as a commentary for the mistaken perspective of these characters trapped in this Gothic setting:

THE HEAVENS ARE CALLING YOU AND WHEEL AROUND YOU
DISPLAYING TO YOU THEIR ETERNAL BEAUTIES
AND STILL YOUR EYE IS LOOKING ON THE GROUND (62)

The characters in *Life Before Man* are all buried together in the museum, fossilized monuments to their pasts. Early in the novel, Elizabeth's Aunt Muriel worries about getting all of her family members together in the same cemetery plot, which can be read as a hint from Atwood that the characters in the novel, although "living," are interred together in the museum/mausoleum. The first scene in which the three main characters appear together occurs in the museum, when Nate and Elizabeth take their children to the museum and Lesje is their guide. Nate senses the museum's hold over him, and,
as he enters the museum with his children, he wants to warn them not
to fall prey to its frightening hold:

Monsters loom over them, reptilian, skeletal, wired
into poses of menace as in some gargantuan tunnel of
horrors. Nate feels his bones eroding, stone filling the
cavities. Trapped. Run Nancy, run Janet, or time will
overtake you, you too will be caught and frozen. (71)

At the end of this section on the visit to the museum, Atwood
writes that "he'll visit the mummies and after that the suits of
armor, and he'll try to avoid seeing any of these artifacts as images
of himself" (73) but the reader can sense that it is already too late -
Nate is entombed there. Also, as Lesje, the paleontologist, is giving
the children this tour of the museum, she remembers the first time
she made a significant discovery of dinosaur bones: "she'd wanted to
cry, like some Old Testament prophet, like God, throwing up her arms,
willing thunderbolts; and the strange flesh would grow again, cover
the bones, the badlands would moisten and flower" (69). (In a
previous section, Lesje remembers that her choice of profession, paleontology, came about as a result of her fascination with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*. She cannot see the irony in her fascination with a fictitious world. In fact, she remembers, “She didn’t like stories that weren’t factual. But *The Lost World* was different” (37). In her final comment on Doyle’s book, Atwood and her readers understand the irony missed by Lesje: “She still has the book. She didn’t exactly steal it, she just forgot several times to renew it and then was so embarrassed by the librarian’s sarcasm that she lied. Lost, she said. *The Lost World* is lost” (37). Lesje is unable to sense her own lifelessness, even though Atwood compares her to a mannequin on display: “The children stare through the glass at the rigid paleontologist, who the more you look resembles a corpse... with his pallor and fixed eyes” (69). Recalling the earlier quote from Dante about eternal beauties, it is especially ironic that while Nate and the children tour the museum with Lesje, Elizabeth decides to “kill the time” (64) by going to a planetarium show. After learning fascinating
bits of information about stars and other heavenly bodies, Elizabeth cynically remembers where she is and "stares up at the sky, which isn't really a sky but a complicated machine with tiny lights projected by slides and push-buttons. People do not become stars of any kind when they die" (67). This scene reinforces the theme of looking down and back to the past as Elizabeth cynically realizes looking up is unrealistic for her.

In one important sense, the museum is the only permanent dwelling place for the characters who have no other "homes." Aunt Muriel buys Elizabeth and Caroline from their mother, kidnapping them and destroying the only home they had ever known. Chris wants Elizabeth to break up her household for him, and when she refuses, he kills himself, and succeeds in disintegrating her home in that way. Lesje's two grandmothers try to disrupt her family, and Nate abandons his "home" with Elizabeth and their children. William and Lesje dissolve their housekeeping arrangement when she moves in with Nate. And while Elizabeth and the children still live in her house, she
thinks of it as "a foreign country" (29). Atwood's use of ruined homes is an echo of traditional Gothic in which the destruction of homes is a recurring theme. The most obvious examples, just from their titles alone, are *Wuthering Heights* and "The Fall of the House of Usher." For a recent example, there is the evil house belonging to Luther Nedeed that is destroyed by fire at the end of Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills.* *Jane Eyre* also provides an interesting illustration of a Gothic house destroyed when Thornfield Hall burns to the ground. Atwood's lifeless, homeless characters in *Life Before Man* seek out the Royal Ontario Museum as their only permanent dwelling, and within the mausoleum-like setting, they haunt each other. Lesje haunts the Mesozoic age of the dinosaurs, and is tortured by the memory of her two grandmothers. Nate is tormented by his "heroic" father and his mother's "goodness." Elizabeth's presence pervades Lesje and Nate's relationship. Aunt Muriel, Caroline, and her mother haunt Elizabeth, and Chris haunts everyone. Atwood reinforces the haunting idea with time as well as setting. The first few significant scenes of the novel
occur on Halloween. Elizabeth remembers "what night this is" and thinks "All Souls. Not just friendly souls but all souls. They are souls, come back, crying at the door, hungry, mourning their lost lives" (44-45). The next time frame for the novel is Remembrance Day, and again, Elizabeth recalls the hymn they sang as children:

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

A Canadian wrote that. We are the dead. (49)

Elizabeth, Lesje, and Nate are, in a sense, the dead--dead to their present. And in the last glimpse the reader gets of them, they are all in or around the museum, their final resting place. In the penultimate section devoted to Elizabeth, she buries Aunt Muriel while listening to "the summoning voices she can hear from underground, the dissolving trees, the chasms that open at her feet" (278) and she thinks, "She's built a dwelling over the abyss, but where
else was there to build it?" In Lesje's last section, she realizes that
the museum holds "secrets perhaps but no wonders" (283). Obsessed
with the past, she marvels that "whole chunks of time lie here, golden
and frozen; she is one of the guardians, the only guardian" (284).
Lesje's eyes, like Elizabeth's, are still on the ground, guarding the
irretrievably remote past she deems so precious. In the
next-to-the-last Nate section, the reader sees Nate wanting to "Join
the walkers; those homeward bound, those merely wandering; he will
lose himself among the apathetic, the fatalistic, the uncommitted,
the cynical, among whom he would like to feel at home" (282). Of
course, the "homeward bound" Nate heads straight for the museum.
The Royal Ontario Museum becomes for Elizabeth, Lesje, and Nate a
Gothic inversion of Noah's ark, preserving death, not life, as
symbolized by the room where Chris worked: "Specimens, two of each
kind, in little pull-out metal drawers, like an animal morgue" (55).
The museum holds no hope for them; the Planetarium with its
man-made heavens displays no "eternal beauties" to those merely
wandering below.

Like *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man*, Atwood's most recent novel, *Cat's Eye*, has as its main setting a figurative burial ground. And like the two works previously discussed, time is represented spatially so that the past is intermingled with the present, interred just below it. Atwood stresses this idea in the first paragraph of the novel: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once" (3). Atwood's heroine, Elaine Risley, proceeds to do just that—to travel backward (inward) while existing in the present as well. The title, *Cat's Eye*, refers to a marble, but symbolically, it represents a crystal ball through which Elaine Risley, the narrator as well as the central character, can look not into the future, but back into the past. Atwood strongly implies this interpretation of the title near the end of the novel. Elaine, as an adult, is sorting through her childhood clutter with her mother when
she finds her old cat's eye marble. As she looks at it, she thinks to herself, "I look into it, and see my life entire" (418). Throughout the novel, Elaine looks down into her past—buried just below the surface. At the beginning of the work, Elaine explains: "But I began to think of time as having shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it. . ." (3).

Similar to Joan and her downward perspective in Lady Oracle and the characters of Life Before Man with their eyes on the ground, Elaine's last name, Risley, with its root word "rise," implies that she has a vantage point from which she can look down at her past. However, unlike Joan, who constantly tries to avoid a confrontation with her past, or the characters of Life Before Man who are not really alive in their present, Elaine has purposefully returned to the burial ground of her past (Toronto). Ostensibly, she is there because an art gallery is featuring her works, but even that fact is used by Atwood to underscore Elaine's confrontation with her past, for her show is
called a retrospective.

Elaine acknowledges that Toronto is a burial ground for her: "Up ahead there are huge oblong towers, all of glass, lit up, like enormous gravestones of cold light" (9). But to emphasize her perspective, Elaine explains, "I don't look much at the towers though... Instead I look down at the sidewalk, like a tracker" (9). In the beginning of Chapter Three, Atwood hints at the oxymoronic quality of Elaine's last name as representing her ability to dig into her buried past:

...since coming back here I don't feel weightier. I feel lighter... With all this lightness I do not rise, I descend. Or rather I am dragged downward, into the layers of this place.... (13-14)

In this chapter, Elaine also explains that she hates Toronto and has moved to British Columbia in order to get "as far away from Toronto as I could get without drowning" (15). Elaine describes Toronto as "Malicious, grudging, vindictive, implacable", but actually she is describing her childhood "friends" (three girls: Carol, Grace,
and the leader, Cordelia). While in Toronto, Elaine is staying at her former husband's apartment. In her downward perspective, looking out of Jon's apartment five stories up, Elaine thinks, "From this angle the pedestrians appear squashed from above, like deformed children" (19). Her reference to deformed children is a hint that the most frightening ghosts she must confront in Toronto are those of her childhood friends.

Elaine's family moved to Toronto when she was eight years old. Her memories of their arrival at their new house contain burial overtones: "The house is hardly on a street at all, more like a field. It's square-shaped. . .surrounded by raw mud. On one side is an enormous hole in the ground, with large mud piles heaped around it" (33). Until they moved to Toronto, Elaine lived in the backwoods while her father conducted entomological studies. She viewed the house as a trap. As the new girl in the neighborhood, Elaine was put through various torturous trials by Carol, Grace, and especially Cordelia. They make Elaine so nervous that she bites the ends of her
fingers until they bleed. As Elaine confronts her past, she starts to
chew her fingers again, the taste of blood bringing back memories of
the things she suffered as a child. One of Elaine's terrifying
memories reinforces the graveyard idea as she is buried by Cordelia,
Grace, and Carol in Cordelia's backyard:

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in
Cordelia's backyard. They pick me up by the underarms
and the feet and lower me in the hole. Then they
arrange the boards over the top.

Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then
I can't hear them... When I was put into the hole, I
knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel
sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness
pressing down on me; then terror. (112)

Symbolically, the buried child image could reflect Elaine's past
now being disintered as she remembers these painful experiences.

In her memories, Elaine is most often tormented by the
three girls as they walk to school. The bridge over the ravine that
they must cross on their way to school becomes a central setting—a
very Gothic setting. Elaine sees all of Toronto as a figurative
graveyard, but within that lies buried this more sinister setting,
another cemetery. The ravine setting in *Cat's Eye* is reminiscent of
the ravine Joan had to cross in *Lady Oracle* where she was tormented
by her Brownie companions. Cordelia's Gothic description (probably
embellished by the horror comics she and Elaine read together) of the
bridge and the stream it crosses terrifies Elaine as a child:

Cordelia says that because the stream flows right out
of the cemetery, it's made of dissolved dead people.
She says that if you drink it or step into it or even get
close to it, the dead people will come out of the
stream, all covered with mist, and take you with
them. (79-80)

To add to the terror of the spot, Elaine notices "deadly
nightshade" growing there. This plant has "berries red as Valentine
candies," but they are poisonous. The beautiful but deadly nightshade
foreshadows the suffering Elaine will endure at the hands of her
"friends." Interestingly, Radcliffe's *Castle of Udolpho* is also
surrounded by nightshade. When Emily St. Aubert first sees the castle, she notices "its lofty walls, overtop with briony, moss and nightshade, and long-suffering and murder came to her thoughts" (228). The castle of Udolpho is the site of Emily's most severe torments, and one of the most horrible occurrences of Elaine's childhood takes place in this bridge/ravine setting surrounded by nightshade. (Also, Atwood's poem "Nightshade on the Way to School" is almost a summary of Cat's Eye.) When Cordelia is at her most proficient in torturing Elaine, she pulls her cruelest prank on her as they are crossing the bridge. She takes Elaine's hat away from her and throws it over the bridge into the stream below. Cordelia proceeds to tell Elaine that if she goes down and gets her hat, she will be forgiven. Afraid of what Cordelia might do if she refuses, Elaine descends to the stream below. As she reaches for her hat, the ice breaks and she falls into the ice-cold stream. She manages to get to the edge of the stream, fighting the cold that almost overtakes her. Elaine hears a rustling noise in the branches. Since the three girls
have already abandoned her, she decides, "It's the dead people, coming up invisible out of the water, gathering around me. Hush, is what they say" (200). Elaine survives the incident and soon after the bridge is torn down. She goes to watch the bridge being pulled down, and as she looks below into the ravine, she thinks, "I have an uneasy feeling, as if something's buried down there, a nameless, crucial thing..." (214). Again, the "crucial thing" Elaine cannot quite name is herself as the buried, tormented child, whom she will finally resurrect when she returns to Toronto.

Years pass, but this incident changes Elaine—it strengthens her and in some way empowers her so that she begins to dominate her three girlfriends. When Elaine finally confronts Cordelia with her new-found power, they are, fittingly, in the cemetery. Elaine and Cordelia go to the graveyard for some sort of a game. In the midst of their kidding, Elaine tells Cordelia that she is a vampire. Elaine, sensing Cordelia's fear, explains, "I'm just telling you the truth. You're my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I'm really dead. I've
been dead for years" (245). In a sense, Elaine is telling the truth. 

Cordelia's cruelty did kill something within Elaine—her childish
innocence and naivety—that day she almost died in the stream below
the ravine's bridge. The "resurrected" Elaine is a much more cruel
version of her former self - a ruthless survivor.

Before she leaves Toronto, Elaine decides to go back to the
ravine, the bridge, and her old neighborhood. The time setting for this
venture, as in Life Before Man, is Halloween, a night when the past
returns to haunt the characters in Atwood's Gothic novels. Elaine,
thinking of Halloween, remembers:

> In Mexico they do this festival the right way, with no
disguises. Bright candy skulls, family picnics on the
graves... Everyone goes away happy, including the
dead. We've rejected that easy flow between
dimensions... Our dead as a result are thinner,
grayer, harder to hear, and hungrier. (407)

As Elaine enters her old neighborhood, she thinks, "I don't want
to be nine years old forever... I am standing still. And yet I walk
head down, into the unmoving wind" (421). Elaine wants to confront her nine-year-old ghost, and she returns to the "cemetery" to put her ghost to rest forever. Atwood describes Elaine's figurative descent into her past also in a literal way. Elaine thinks, "Down below me is the bridge. From here it looks neutral. I stand at the top of the hill, take a breath. Then I start down" (441). And as she nears the bridge, she realizes that although the terrain looks more "pruned and civic" than when she was young, there is "Another, wilder and more tangled landscape rising up, from beneath the surface of this one" (442). Along with confronting the buried child within her in the tangled landscape of her subconscious, Elaine encounters the ghost of Cordelia there:

I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me, along the path, someone will be standing there. . . . I see that it's Cordelia. I am the older one now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late. (443)
Elaine is projecting her own fear onto this vision of Cordelia. If Elaine stays here, she will, in a sense, be the one frozen in time, continually haunted by her memories of Cordelia. Elaine realizes this, for her next act is to free Cordelia's ghost: "I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right,* I say to her. *You can go home now*" (443). Of course, in releasing Cordelia's ghost, Elaine actually frees herself from this potentially ensnaring landscape. Atwood writes in her poem "Journey to the Interior": "Whatever I do I must/Keep my head. I know it is far easier for me to lose my way/forever here, than in other landscapes." Elaine Risley, at the end of the novel, can safely "rise" above her old landscape. Atwood figuratively represents Elaine's triumph. The last glimpse the reader gets of Elaine, she is on a plane, rising up, flying out of Toronto, toward her home in British Columbia, ascending from the haunting past that might have ensnared her forever.

Another heroine who successfully confronts the Gothic landscape of her past is the nameless narrator of *Surfacing.* Like
many elder Gothic novels—particularly Anne Radcliffe's works, where heroines end up in ancestral halls, castles, or abbeys and in those often crumbling dwellings find clues to their parentage, such as how their parents died or what they bequeathed the heroines, the nameless narrator of *Surfacing* is literally returning to the deteriorating cottage of her childhood in an attempt to find her missing father. As in the other novels discussed thus far in this chapter, graveyard images abound in *Surfacing*. Also, as the title strongly suggests, symbols of descent and ascent play an important role in the work, indicating the narrator's journey into her subconscious. Atwood writes in *Survival*: "Part of where you are is where you've been. If you aren't too sure where you are, or if you're sure but you don't like it, there's a tendency, both in psychotherapy and in literature, to retrace your history and see how you got there" (112). Barbara Rigney makes a similar point in *Margaret Atwood*: "Her [the narrator's] immersion in the wilderness as well as her religious ecstasies are metaphors for her journey through her own subconscious mind, that
place in which she can discover her past and affirm her identity, much as in a process of psychoanalysis" (53). The heroine and her friends, Joe, David and Anna, head North toward the isolated island on which the home is situated, and Atwood writes that "there was nothing in the North but the past" (11). However, when they get close to the area of the cottage, the narrator thinks, "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (14). The territory seems strange to her because she has avoided it for years. The heroine is emotionally unequipped to return yet, as the guilt she felt then resurfaces. She reflects:

We're here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can't really get here unless I've suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears. (18)

When the narrator, David, and Anna get to the cabin, the heroine notices how the house has aged:

The house is smaller... It's turned grayer in nine
years too, like hair. The cedar logs are upright. Cedar isn't the best wood, it decays quickly. Once my father said "I didn't build it to last forever" and I thought then, Why not? Why didn't you? (39-40)

The deteriorating condition of the house mirrors the fact that the heroine's parents are not immortal. She remembers the slow death of her mother by cancer, even though at this point she still refuses to believe that her father has died. Bayer-Berenbaum writes:

The decay of a building, so much more solid and permanent than human flesh, consciously or subconsciously raises the question of death. Gothic scenes never seem complete without their share of crumbling architectural remains, rotting old houses. This attraction to ruins might initially appear to oppose the notion of an expanded reality by emphasizing a temporal, physical world in decay, yet considered from another angle, ruins indicate the limitless power of nature over human creation. (26-27)

The narrator of *Surfacing*, in confronting her past as well as her own mortality, begins to understand the limitless power of nature and uses that power as a means of overcoming the burdensome guilt
The lake (as she refers to it - the dark mirror) is an obviously important setting in *Surfacing* because the narrator's confrontation with her past and with her mortality is symbolized in her descent into the lake. The first time she dives into its waters, she remembers an episode when her brother almost drowned. The narrator thinks, "If it had happened to me I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that; I would have returned with secrets..." (85-86). Eventually, she does return from the lake...
with secrets, but only after a painful process. For instance, she recalls her abortion, comparing it to drowning: "They slipped the needle into the vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anaesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I could remember nothing" (133). Only now can she delve into her past and return with the formerly repressed memories of her abortion. The narrator dives into the lake, searching for her drowned father. She finds the body "drifting toward [her] from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs" (167). The heroine surfaces from the dive, thinking, "the lake was horrible, it was filled with death, it was touching me" (167). At this point, the lake acts as a graveyard, holding memories of death for the heroine. The image of death clouds the heroine's mind after the dive. She thinks the dead thing she saw in the lake was her drowned brother but remembers that he did not actually drown. Then she remembers the aborted fetus--"drowned in air... They scraped it into a bucket, and threw it
wherever they throw them, it was traveling through the sewers by the time I woke up..." (168). She also recalls that after her abortion, she felt as though she had been emptied and that "they had planted death in me like a seed" (169). Thus, after her abortion, she feels as if a burial ground is within her.

A few pages later, she realizes that the "lake was the entrance for me" where she can lay to rest her memories and resurface to life. The narrator and Joe make love at a time when she hopes to become pregnant. She leads him into the forest, where they will be surrounded by the restorative powers of nature. She seems to understand now that a person who cannot accept the processes of nature becomes divorced from the principle of life. The descent and ascent images continue as the narrator imagines her womb filling once more with life, not death: "He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long" (191). Likewise, the narrator herself goes through a ritualistic burial/resurrection after she is left
alone on the island: "I lie down on the bottom of the canoe and wait. The still water gathers the heat...the swamp around me smolders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire" (197). Significantly, she chooses the swamp as a scene of regeneration, for she formerly used it as a burial ground. This is where she "threw the dead things" from her brother's secret laboratory. In a sense, she felt as though she were freeing the dead animals, trapped in his artificial environment. Similarly, she believes she has "freed" the dead baby she imagined in the jar after her abortion. Thus, her discovery of new life takes place in the swamp, where what appears to be dead is actually fermenting new life.

After confronting her abortion, the nameless narrator must deal with the death of her parents. Atwood, in an interview with Graeme Gibson, referred to Surfacing as a ghost story, and in the haunted landscape of her past, the narrator envisions the ghosts of her mother and her father. Like the aborted baby, symbolically resurrected by the new life within her, the narrator's mother's ghost
is freed of the human limitations that had bound her. At first, the narrator sees the ghost of her mother doing something her mother typically did - feeding the birds. However, as the heroine approaches, her mother disappears and the birds fly away. (Earlier she recounts how her mother broke both of her ankles when, as a child, she tried to fly.) Then she sees a vision of what she thinks is her father's ghost--but then realizes that it is not her father but the creature drawn on the cliff faces. The vision of her father, or this being he has become, is not as positive as the vision of her mother, but then she understands these are only visions. No one other than herself is really there. She goes to the spot where she thought she saw her father's ghost standing, looking for evidence that he was actually there:

"When I go to the fence the footprints are there. . . . I place my feet in them and find that they are my own" (219). The narrator finally understands the significance of the decaying house in the beginning of her journey back: her parents are dead. "Our father, Our mother, I pray. Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow,
become what they were, human” (221). At this point, the narrator's surfacing is almost complete. On the penultimate page she announces: "I reenter my own time" (223), leaving this haunted landscape of her past behind, returning to the present with the valuable lessons about life and death she has learned in this Gothic setting, after experiencing a very necessary haunting there.

The burial ground of the subconscious is not the only Gothic setting occurring in Atwood's novels. Just as the heroines of the previously discussed works are empowered by an expanded consciousness received after they descend and return from their journey to the interior, the focal characters of the three remaining novels also receive a certain amount of self awareness from their Gothic settings when they realize that their landscapes are so male dominated. These heroines are also necessarily haunted—and thus often freed—by a sense of their own place. Judith Wilt makes a similar point in *Ghosts of the Gothic*:
Unmistakably, power resides in place, from Scott's covenanter guarding his cave to Bronte's Heathcliff claiming his Cathy from Penistone Crags, to the scores of great houses that loom, wind-generating, behind the fascinated females on the covers of today's drugstore Gothic. Power, the Gothic says, resides in place, and as we can see from these examples, overwhelmingly, the kind of power that resides in place, in placement seems to be male, and the power that challenges it, evades it, or that seeks place from a position of placelessness, is female. (276-277)

Atwood most clearly paints a picture of a male-dominated, Gothic setting in The Handmaid's Tale. When the handmaid is assigned a Commander, she is given a room in his house, and his powerful male presence dictates existence there. The first time the handmaid enters "her" room, she compares it to a nunnery, a reference which recalls that so many of the heroines in Gothic novels are controlled by men who trap them in nunneries. The handmaid refuses to think of the room as hers: "not my room, I refuse to say my" (8), since everything there—including the handmaid herself—is owned by the Commander. Her new name, Offred, indicates that she is his possession. The house is not hers, and at one point she mentions that in its sitting room, she
can never sit, but must stand or kneel.

The Commander's wife, although more powerful than the handmaid, does not have any real ownership in the house either. When the handmaid first arrives, she notices that the Commander's wife, "just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so" (13). However, the handmaid soon realizes that is just a ploy. The Commander is in control. The Commanders' wives are given the gardens as "their" space, and the handmaid perceptively notes, "it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (12). She goes on to observe: "Sometimes the Commander's wife has a chair brought out, and just sits in it, in her garden. From a distance it looks like peace" (12). Considering the fact that the Commanders' wives' infertility creates the need for their handmaids, it is ironic that the only space allotted to them is the garden. The weeping catkins and fading daffodils, noticed by the handmaid as she first enters the garden, are mocking symbols of the faded virility of the Commander
and of his wife's infertility. Also, the Gothic garden landscape brings
to mind the walled garden in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's
Daughter," where the domineering Rappacini poisons the nature of his
daughter, trapped in a landscape and completely in his power.

Even though the handmaid feels the powerful presence of the
Commander pervading her landscape, she finally gets a sense of place
"from a position of placelessness" when, later, she thinks, "My room
then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even
in this time" (50). She claims the space after she discovers that
somebody else has lived in the room. Offred feels as though the ghost
of the previous resident, who hanged herself, is there with her in the
room, partly because she left her replacement a message: "Nolite te
bastardes carborundorum," which, she later discovers, translates as,
"Don't let the bastards grind you down." The former handmaid, before
"escaping" the male-dominated space to which she was relegated, left
the message for the next Offred to decipher, in hopes that she could
discover a way to reclaim a space or at least resist the male power
The handmaid feels a sense of sisterhood—even though it is a sisterhood of victimization. There is no mirror in her room, but the present Offred is reflected (doubled) by the now dead previous Offred. Similarly, in Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the heroine, Emily, when she is given a room at the Castle Udolpho, receives the "double chamber". She is, in a sense, twinning the previous women victimized there. The handmaid likewise sees herself as being doubled by Ofglen, her secret friend, who is also killed during the novel. Offred realizes she is doubled by such victimized women, and when she catches a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror, she thinks she looks "like a distorted shadow. . . . A Sister, dipped in blood" (11).

The male-dominated setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* is also underscored by the name of the country: Gilead. The name Gilead gains its significance for this novel from a Biblical reference: in the thirty-first chapter of Genesis, Jacob steals Laban's daughters and
takes them to the hill country of Gilead. Thus, Gilead is the land of
the stolen daughters. Offred has been stolen and placed into a life she
never bargained for; her family has been taken from her, and her own
daughter stolen also. The heartache of broken families that pervades
this novel is reminiscent of another Gothic novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Even Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, which
at first glance does not seem to be nearly so Gothic as *The Handmaid's
Tale*, contains male-dominated Gothic settings, at least as perceived
by the heroine, Marian. Peter, her fiance, lives in an apartment
building which, in Marian's mind, appears to be animated, not unlike
many Gothic settings including Poe's house of Usher. Marian
observes:

> Inside, the shiny surfaces - tiled floors, painted walls,
mirrors, light-fixtures - which would later give the
building its expensive gloss, its beetle-hard internal
shell had not yet begun to secret themselves. The rough
grey shell underskin of subflooring and unplastered
wall-surface was still showing, and raw wires
dangled like loose nerves from most of the sockets.(58)
Toward the end of the novel, the personification of the building continues: "Gradually the clutter of raw materials, pipes and rough boards and cement blocks, had disappeared, transmuted by an invisible process of digestion and assimilation into the shining skins that enclosed the space..." (23). Peter, to Marian, is like his building; he is cold, calculating, and able to assimilate or consume her. Like Poe's Usher family, Peter takes on the appearance of the place in which he dwells: "The arm was like the bathroom: clean and white and new" (61). Likewise, Peter's name, meaning the rock, suggests that he is cold, impenetrable, inanimate. The coldness of the building is reflected in the furnishings of Peter's apartment. There is an "austere square desk, dark wood" in his bedroom, which also contains Peter's weapon collection: "two rifles, a pistol, and several wicked-looking knives" (59). Marian perceives Peter as the hunter and herself as the prey, or Peter as the consumer and herself as "the edible woman."
Another quirk of Peter's that bothers Marian is his cleanliness. For one thing, his apartment is too clean, unnaturally ordered compared to the other almost always disorderly settings in the novel. The first time the reader encounters Peter, he is bathing. As Marian enters his apartment, she "could tell by the sound of running water that Peter was taking a shower: he often is" (58). Later on, Marian says, "He [Peter] smelled of soap all the time, not only when he had recently taken a shower. It was a smell I associated with dentists' chairs and medicine" (61). She also resents his clothes, hanging too neatly in the closet: "...she was regarding the clothes with an emotion close to resentment. How could they hang there smugly asserting so much invisible silent authority? But on second thought, it was more like fear" (236).

Marian, fearful of Peter, continually escapes from him throughout the novel. Often, when fleeing from Peter and the landscape he dominates, she encounters the other male protagonist in the book, Duncan. Ironically, Marian imagines Peter as a killer,
stalking her, but it is Duncan who is surrounded by death images, and it is Duncan who is drawn to dark landscapes, dragging Marian with him. For instance, when Duncan tells Marian about his hometown, he explains that he misses its barrenness:

The thing I like about the place I came from... it has no vegetation... It's barren, nothing but barren rock, even grass won't grow on most of it... I used to go out of the town and sit on rocks, about this time of year, waiting for the snow. (147)

There is something about this scene that recalls the regions in which Frankenstein's monster wandered--in the Alps and finally in the frozen ice flows of the Artic.

Duncan, later, leads Marian to another barren setting, the ravine in the middle of the city, informing her that they are escaping. However, when they arrive, it is to a type of nothingness. Marian is suspicious of the setting: "It seemed wrong to have this cavity in the city: the ravine itself was supposed to be as far down as you could go."
...it looked possibly hollow, dangerous, a thin layer of ice, as though if you walked on it you might fall through" (269-270). However, Duncan explains his love for the scene:

I like this place. Especially now in winter, it's so close to absolute zero. It makes me feel human. By comparison, I wouldn't like tropical islands at all, they would be too fleshy, I'd always be wondering whether I was a walking vegetable or a giant amphibian. But in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing. (271)

Duncan's rejection of life is portrayed in an earlier Gothic setting in the novel, when he takes Marian to his favorite place in the city: the mummy room of the museum. He tells her he will show her his "womb symbol," but ironically, what he actually shows her is a corpse that looks like a dead child in the fetal position:

He led her to the far corner of the room. At first in the rapidly fading light she couldn't make out what was inside the case. It looked like a heap of rubble. Then she saw that it was a skeleton, still covered in places with skin, lying on its side with its knees drawn up... the body was so small it looked like that of a child.
Duncan is attracted to lifeless settings, repulsed by vitality and fertility. And Marian, instead of trying to establish a place for herself, free of male domination, is drawn to Duncan and his barren landscape. She allows herself to be led toward the Gothic wastelands by Duncan and rejects and fears fertile settings, like the garden in which she finds her pregnant friend, Clara. Unlike the bleak garden in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the garden landscape in *Edible Woman* is filled with fertility images, but Clara sees them as grotesque: "She [Clara] lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower" (31). Marian's fear of life can be seen as a Gothic theme. Juliann Fleenor writes in *The Female Gothic*, "As a psychological form, [the Gothic] provokes various feelings of terror, anger, awe, and sometimes self-fear and self-disgust directed toward the female role, female sexuality, female physiology, and procreation. . ." (15). Marian's rejection of her own sexuality is
evidenced in her rejection of Clara's motherhood. When she visits Clara in the maternity ward, she does not even ask about the baby and does not bother to see it. As Marian leaves the maternity ward, "she had the sense of having escaped, as if from a culvert or cave. She was glad she wasn't Clara" (135). Thus, Marian, in rejecting a natural female role, does not establish a place for herself in a world dominated by men--first by Peter and then by Duncan. In the last section of the novel, Marian starts to try to make some sense out of her life by cleaning the apartment she and Ainsley had shared. Marian explains, "I had to go about it layer by layer" (283). While the reader senses that Marian's cleaning spree should turn inward, uncovering her various troubling thoughts, layer by layer, no such introspection takes place. As she eats the cake she has made of herself, Marian, "plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head" (280) symbolically refusing even to begin examining her own space - her own psyche. In fact, it is significant that she lets Duncan eat the head of the cake.
*Bodily Harm* offers more overtly threatening male-dominated settings. Rennie Wilford, the main character in the work, has an apartment in Toronto, but like a passive little girl, she allows her live-in boyfriend, Jake, to decorate it. Her apartment becomes male-dominated in frightening ways. Jake hangs posters of victimized women on the walls:

In the living room he hung blowups of Cartier-Bresson photographs, three Mexican prostitutes looking out of wooden cubicles. . . . In the bedroom he hung a Heather Cooper poster, a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed. (105)

These images of women all symbolize the way women can potentially receive "bodily harm" at the mercy of men. Rennie's space is also frighteningly male-dominated in that one day after Jake has moved out, she comes home to find that an intruder has broken into her apartment. The police are called by a neighbor and they frighten him off. When Rennie arrives, the police explain what happened:
We don't think he was a burglar. . . . He made himself a cup of Ovaltine. He was just waiting for you. . . . He had a present he'd been saving up. He walked past me into the livingroom and then into the bedroom. . . . There was a length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt.

(13)

Rennie, needing to escape from her reality—her fears of death from her recently diagnosed breast cancer and the more immediate threat left by the intruder, decides to go the Caribbean or, as she calls it, to create a small absence from real life. Of course, Atwood allows no such escape; Rennie ends up in a Gothic setting more horrible than the one she leaves behind. She arrives at Queenstown, St. Antoine, one of two twin islands. The name of the place, Queenstown, is ironic because this turns out to be another male-dominated space. The threatening nature of the island is symbolized by the cover of a brochure Rennie picks up when she arrives:
On the front is a tanned white woman, laughing on a beach, sheathed in one-piece aqua Spandex with a modesty panel across the front. A black man in a huge straw hat is sitting on the sand beside her. . . . Behind him is a machete propped against a tree. He's looking at her, she's looking at the camera. (67-68)

The brochure cover is a version of the grim reaper, with the woman as potential victim. The islands are caught in a political struggle. The local government is getting ready to hold its first election since the British withdrew. Three men, Dr. Minnow, Ellis, and Prince of Peace, are running for the position of Prime Minister. It takes Rennie a long time to figure out that women are used as pawns in this power game, and she unwittingly becomes involved in the midst of the struggle almost as soon as she arrives. In fact, Rennie thinks of her situation as "massive involvement," darkly punning on her fear that her cancer has spread. After the election, Dr. Minnow is declared the winner, but is killed within twenty-four hours. As things turn violent, Rennie realizes that she has not escaped the threats of reality. Paul, a "friend" turned sexual partner, earlier has
told Rennie, "Yes, there will be trouble. No, you won't get hurt. You're a tourist, you're exempt" (78). However, she isn't exempt. Instead of escaping her frightening realities in Toronto, she is thrown into jail as a political prisoner. Her cellmate, Lora, is another victimized woman who trades sex with the guard for permission to see her boyfriend, who has actually already been killed.

Rennie shuns Lora's companionship in the female space of their cell, surrounded by the male-dominated prison. However, during her incarceration, Rennie cannot hold off the memories of another female-dominated setting, Griswold, the town in which she spent her childhood. Claire Kahane, in her feminist/psychoanalytic discussion of Gothic literature, notes that Leslie Fieldler points out, "Beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last. Beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies the maternal blackness, imagined by the Gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber" (47). Rennie is haunted by her spectral grandmother,
whose presence dominates that grim world of Rennie's past. Rennie views Griswold as an ensnaring female-dominated space, from which her mother could never escape her grandmother. Rennie can never really escape it either - it haunts her mind. Atwood's description of Griswold is not unlike Kahane's description of the dungeon of maternal domination: "Griswold is what they call her background. Though it's less like a background, a backdrop - than a subground..." (18). The female presences in Rennie's subground have to be dealt with.

Atwood's poem "The Landlady" examines this very idea. "This is the lair of the landlady./She is a raw voice/loose in the rooms beneath me." Similarly, in Survival, Atwood writes, "In Canadian literature the family is handled quite differently. If in England, the family is a mansion you live in, and if in America it's a skin you shed, then in Canada it's a trap in which you're caught" (131).

Rennie's Griswold is peopled mostly by women: her grandmother, mother and aunts. She has a horrible, guilt-ridden memory about being punished by her grandmother: "I want
forgiveness, but she's prying my hands away finger by finger.... I know I'll be shut in the cellar by myself" (53). She is thrown down into the dark space of the basement as a punishment. Rennie also remembers Griswold filled with silences and "decent" objects, she being one of these objects. There was a great emphasis on passing along these things from one generation to the next. Sybil Korff Vincent, in her article on Lady Oracle, makes a general observation about the emphasis of a woman's possessions in Gothic novels by women:

Women in particular are often isolated from contact with others and have comparatively few opportunities to assure themselves of their own reality through sports, say, or to gain fame and recognition through achievements. Identity, is gained through things: "I am my china, my pictures, my perfume. I know I exist because I cleaned this cup." At times this dependency on things creates an illusion that things dominate the person. (157)

Rennie remembers objects from her childhood as threatening:
They were considered important because they had once belonged to someone else. They were both overpowering and frail: over-powering because threatening. What they threatened you with was their frailty; they were always on the verge of breaking. . . . It was understood that you could never sell these objects or give them away. The only way you could ever get rid of them was to will them to someone else and then die. (54)

The objects of Rennie's childhood become part of the Gothic trap from which she must escape, and the silences become a negative space. The women's view of decency was "having your clothes on, in every possible way" (55), thus denying their sexuality. Rennie remembers her senile grandmother wandering "around in the yard, prowling through the frost-bitten ruins of the garden" (58).

At the end of the novel, however, Rennie makes an important discovery about Griswold, realizing that she should not reject everything it offers. In the midst of that female-dominated Gothic setting, there was the potential for human kindness and tenderness. Right after Lora is given a terrible beating by the guards, Rennie has
the following flashback about Griswold:

Rennie is in the kitchen. . . . Her grandmother comes through the doorway. . . . I can't find my hands, she says. . . . Rennie cannot bear to be touched by those groping hands, which seem to her like the hands of a blind person, a half-wit, a leper. She puts her own hands behind her and backs away.

Rennie's mother looks with patience and disgust at Rennie. . . . Don't you know what to do by now? she says to Rennie. Here they are. Right where you put them. She takes hold of the grandmother's dangling hands, clasping them in her own. (297-298)

After recalling this incident, Rennie takes Lora's hand into her own, trying to will life back into her bruised body: "She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born" (299). Rennie, perhaps too late, realizes that caring for others doesn't have to be a trap - it can be a life-affirming role as well. In confronting her female-dominated setting of Griswold, Rennie frees herself from her fear of that world, realizing the special bond
between mother and daughter that is passed from one generation to
the next. In her poem "A Red Shirt" Atwood makes a similar point:

This is the procession
of old leathery mothers,
the moon's last quarter
before the blank night,
mothers like worn gloves
winkled to the shapes of their lives,
passing the work from hand to hand,
mother to daughter,
a long thread of red blood, not yet broken.

Rennie, thus, establishes a female space for herself, even in
the midst of the male-dominated prison, realizing that what a mother
can pass down to her daughter from hand to hand can be a "resource
rather than a destiny."

Like so many of Atwood's heroines, Rennie has undergone a very
necessary haunting, and by recognizing valuable truths in this Gothic
landscape, she has freed her mind and expanded her consciousness.

At the end of the novel, the reader cannot be sure if Rennie is literally
freed from her male-dominated prison cell, but the image of flight, even if only imagined, symbolizes a type of achieved freedom, as it does at the end of *Cat's Eye*. In the final pages of the book, Atwood writes of Rennie, "Wherever else she's going it will not be quietly under" (300).

In conclusion, all of Atwood's heroines undergo a necessary, potentially liberating haunting within the Gothic settings of the seven novels. Rennie, in *Bodily Harm*, Elaine, in *Cat's Eye*, and the nameless narrator of *Surfacing* all take the perilous journey to the frightening landscape of their subconscious and return with a truer sense of their identity. Similarly, Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, undergoes an expansion of consciousness so that within her nightmarish environment she establishes a place for herself from a position of placelessness. Like Offred, Marian, in *Edible Woman*, lives in other people's landscapes, but because of her fear of undertaking the necessary interior journey, she allows herself to be led into others' haunting landscapes rather than establish a place of her own. Joan
Foster, in *Lady Oracle*, also experiences a very necessary haunting but continually tries to avoid the buried message she so desperately needs to acknowledge and understand. Likewise, the main characters in *Life Before Man* are trapped in ensnaring mental processes - never freeing themselves from the Gothic Royal Ontario Museum that stands as a monument to "the mind's dead end" from which none of them escapes. Many of Atwood's critics have noted that her works are didactic. Certainly the reader has been instructed by Atwood's main characters, each of whom attempts to extricate herself or himself from Gothic settings - both external and psychological. Atwood reiterates the fact that no one is exempt from the need for such extrication. Significantly, in one of her *Circe/Mud* poems, Atwood suggests that everyone has an interior chamber of horrors that must be visited in order to return with an expanded consciousness: "You may wonder why I'm not describing the landscape for you... Why should I describe the landscape for you? You live here, don't you? Right now I mean. See for yourself."
CHAPTER II
THE SHADOW MALES IN ATWOOD’S GOTHIC

"Men's novels are about how to get power. . . . In women's novels you get the power by getting the man is the power."

("Women's Novels," Murder in the Dark)

"How many times have you awakened in the moonlight and seen those indigo shadows instead of eyes, and thought, I'm in bed with a killer?"

("Him," Murder in the Dark)

"It's hard to have a sense of humor in a cloak, in a high wind, on a moor."

("Women's Novels," Murder in the Dark)

Margaret Atwood's heroines, along with making a frightening journey to their own interiors, confront another
danger: the men in their lives. Men in Gothic novels often prove threatening to heroines because male characters, especially villains in the traditional Gothics, possess extreme power.

Almost every critic commenting on Gothic literature describes the good, passive heroines who are victimized by evil, all-powerful men. William Patrick Day in *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* writes that Gothic heroines represent "unfallen innocence and appear to exist simply to serve as the prey of the rapacious and dangerous male characters who imprison, rape and murder them. Their ineffectiveness implicitly equates goodness with victimization, respectability with passivity" (103).

Day's theory is an overgeneralization even for Ann Radcliffe's heroines who are not totally passive, although many critics, especially male critics want to assert that. Day's theory about the genre more greatly differs from Atwood's Gothic when he writes that "...the Gothic fantasy could provide
no empowering, positive mythology of identity, a vision of self integrated and fulfilled" (10). As we have already seen in Chapter One, Atwood's Gothic novels are didactic. In their frightening world, Atwood's heroines find themselves forced into situations that offer them the potential for expanding their consciousness and discovering a positive identity. David Punter writes in *The Literature of Terror* more aptly describes Atwood's use of the Gothic tradition:

Gothic enacts psychological and social dilemmas: in doing so it both confronts...limitations and offers...modes of imaginary transcendence, which is after all the dialectical role of most art. (417)

There are two basic ways in which Atwood's novels differ from elder Gothics in regard to male/female relationships. First of all, elder Gothics have clearly drawn male characters--heroes and villains. Secondly, the traditional
Gothic heroine is a necessarily innocent, basically passive victim. Atwood's Gothic novels take these traditional Gothic patterns and turn them completely around. By placing her heroines in a Gothic world, filled with men who appear ambiguously neither good nor bad, neither hero nor villain, she forces her heroines to accept responsibility for their own survival.

In *Second Words*, Atwood writes:

One of the possibly harmful psychological advantages of being a "victim" is that you can substitute moral righteousness for responsibility; that is, you can view yourself as innocent and your oppressor as totally evil, and because you define yourself as powerless, you can avoid doing anything about your situation. (134)

Atwood makes a similar point about responsibility in *Survival* in which she "reads" Canadian literature through the lens of her theory about the four basic victim positions,
established in the beginning of that work. (Atwood applies this theory to men as well as to women, but for this study, it will be used especially as applied to female victims.) Characters in Position One don't realize they are victims. In Position Two, the characters know they are victims, but think the position is inevitable. In Position Three, the characters realize they are victims but refuse to accept that as an inevitable role; and in Position Four, characters are creative non-victims; either they have never been victimized, or they are no longer victims.

In delineating her four victim positions, Atwood clearly places the ultimate responsibility for victimization back on individual women (as well as individual men). She makes a similar case in Second Words: "And for women to define themselves as powerless and men as all-powerful is to fall into an ancient trap, to shirk responsibility as well as to warp reality" (429). Atwood never makes it easy or even possible for the heroines in her novels to achieve Positions Three or Four
because she places them in a Gothic world, peopled with
Shadow Males. The term "Shadow Male" comes from Joanna
Russ's article, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My
Husband: The Modern Gothic." Russ defines the Shadow Male as
"a man invariably represented as gentle, protective,
responsible, quiet, humorous, tender, and calm. The
Shadow-Male either wants to marry the Heroine or has... This
personage is revealed as a murderer..." (34). Russ goes on to
point out that "The emotional center [of Gothic novels] is that
'handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a
lunatic or murderer" (44).

All of the men in Atwood's novels are Shadow Males,
cloaked in ambiguity. Atwood writes in Second Words, "Heroes
and villains have much in common, after all" (221). Since
Atwood's heroines are so unsure about how to view the men in
their lives, their uncertainty becomes a source of fear - and
fear is a central characteristic of Gothic literature, as Ellen
Moers points out in * Literary Women:

But what I mean - or anyone else means - by "the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace...with one definite authorial intent: to scare. (90)

The traditional Gothic heroines feel some relief from the fear that predominates those works in the scenes in which they are under the protection of the heroes, but Atwood's female characters find very little solace in the company of any of the male characters because of their ambiguity.

There are four basic types of Shadow Males in Atwood's Gothic novels who serve as a source of fear for their heroines: alien and/or absent fathers, comic book heroes, mad scientists, and destructive artists. Many of Atwood's heroines are subtly victimized by their fathers, or the heroines witness
their fathers' abuse of their mothers, thus teaching them by
negative example that a woman's role is that of victim. Or the
father's absence or lack of attention can serve as a source of
insecurity for the heroine. Atwood's female characters,
disillusioned or ignored by their fathers, look toward men to
fill these voids in their lives, but instead find only comic book
heroes. These often grotesque characters' egos drive them to
strive for heroics, and although they end up looking absurd,
their need for power makes them threatening, especially to
women who are passively looking for a rescuer. The mad
scientists tamper with the heriones' perceptions of the world;
these men find a feminine world view illogical and
unjustifiable. Like their elder Gothic forerunners, the mad
scientists, even when they seem to mean well, can be
calculating and cruel. The destructive artists, like the
hero/villain of traditional Gothic literature, want to create
their own versions of reality and in doing so victimize
Atwood's heroines by using them as material on which to create. Or they are jealous of the heroine's creative powers, thus discouraging her attempts at self expression. Because the Gothic world is a nightmarish world, lines cannot always be clearly drawn. In Atwood's novels, some of her male characters possess traits from more than one of the character types above, with one type predominating in each man's personality.

The heroines' fathers are often absent, and their absence can serve as a source of fear for their daughters. The same is true in traditional Gothic novels in which fathers are often absent and/or their identity is unclear. For instance, the plot of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* revolves around the heroine, Adeline, and her confusion over who her father really is. Adeline thinks her father is trying to kill her. Actually, the person she thinks is her father is not even related to her. Her father has been dead for years, murdered by his brother, Adeline's uncle, suitor, and would-be assassin. The
best example of a shadowy, absent father in Atwood's novels is Joan's father in *Lady Oracle*. Dr. Delacourt doesn't take an active interest in Joan's life. He is away at the war when Joan is born. As Joan grows up, she views her father's participation in the war with suspicion. A shadow of ambiguity falls over his war service because even though he is a doctor, she is not sure if he was a healer or murderer during the war: "His position was the position of a man who has killed people and brought them back to life, though not the same ones, and these mysteries are hard to communicate" (154). What exacerbates Joan's misgivings about her father is that the type of medicine he practices is anesthesia. He literally has the power to put people in a death-like state and bring them back again.

Later, this ambiguity surrounding Dr. Delacourt resurfaces when Joan's mother dies in a mysterious way. Joan does not trust her father at this point. She knows he is a professional healer, but she strongly suspects that he is
capable of killing her mother, his wife. When she returns home after receiving the telegram about Mrs. Delacourt's death, Joan's first glance at her father arouses her suspicions about him. Her view of him is obscured and his appearance shadowy:

"His face was more furrowed than I'd remembered it. . . . the features had been erased, but not completely, they were smudged and indistinct as if viewed through layers of gauze. . .

"(198), Atwood's visual representation of the ambiguous Dr. Delacourt. After her mother's death, Joan realizes how her mother had been subtly victimized by Dr. Delacourt and his lack of caring. He left both of them emotionally starved for his affection. Whether or not his hand literally shoved Joan's mother down the basement stairs, Joan understands that he victimized her mother just as surely and was in some way to blame for her death. Joan continues to describe her suspicions:

His eyes pleaded with me to believe him, join the
conspiracy, keep my mouth shut. I had a sudden image of him sneaking out of the hospital, wearing his white mask so he would not be recognized, driving back to the house... He was a doctor, he'd been in the underground, he'd killed people before, he would know how to break her neck and make it look like an accident... (200)

At this point, Joan realizes how she and her mother had been abandoned by Dr. Delacourt. For the first time in her life, Joan sympathizes with her mother, who had lived her life "in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit," who "had made her family her career as she had been told to do, and look at us: a sulky fat slob of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her..." (200).

Joan's home was a prison for her mother, and her father was the villain who entrapped her there. Kate Ferguson Ellis, in *The Contested Castle*, writes that "the middle-class home, though it theoretically protected a woman in it from arbitrary male control, gave her little real protection against male anger. The Gothic novel of the eighteenth century foregrounded the
home as fortress, while at the same time exposing its
corruptions" (xi). Another alienated father who traps his
wife in his home is the narrator's father in *Surfacing*. In
trying to protect his family from the turmoil of World War II,
he cuts off almost all communication between his family and
the rest of the world. His wife lives an isolated existence.
Even though the narrator's mother proves herself to be very
capable of surviving in the wilderness (she saves her son from
nearly drowning and frightens a bear that comes too close to
their camp), she becomes unable to have any meaningful
relationships with others. Her lack of connection is symbolized
by Atwood in her only being able to talk about the
weather—even as she dies in the hospital. Ellis goes on the
write, "In the feminine Gothic the heroine exposes the villain's
usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should
have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite,
a prison" (xiii). Neither Joan nor the narrator of *Surfacing*
realizes until long after her mother's death the subtle torture
she endured by a father who chose to alienate himself from his
home, and in the case of *Surfacing*, to cut off his family from
the rest of the world.

Like Joan, the narrator at one point in *Surfacing*
suspects that her father has become a potential killer. In *Lady
Oracle* Dr. Delacourt's absence in their home was deliberate; he
chose not to take part in the life of his wife and daughter. The
plot of *Surfacing* revolves around the narrator's search for her
missing father. Throughout much of the novel, she, as well as
the reader, is not sure if his absence is deliberate or not. At
one point, she suspects that he has gone insane and is lurking
outside the windows of the cabin. Perhaps her confusion is due
in part to the fact that throughout most of his life, her father
chose to alienate himself from society, establishing their home
far from any other people. This alienation from others created
an independence in the heroine and yet a fear too that she did
not know how to fit in when the time came for her to enter into society. Elizabeth MacAndrew, in The Gothic Tradition in Fiction writes, "Gothic techniques also appear in works depicting the psychological aspects of alienation, the most prevalent of human conditions in an Absurd universe" (245). Her father assumed that he was trying to protect his family by separating them from others, and yet, ironically, this isolation led to the heroine's victimization and sense of alienation once she did venture off the island. The narrator writes of her father, "He didn't dislike people, he merely found them irrational..." (68). In that sense, Surfacing seems to echo a theme in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter," another Gothic story about an eccentric father who goes to extraordinary extremes to protect his daughter from the evils of the world. The narrator of Surfacing refers to her parents' isolated retreat as a type of garden similar to the one in which Beatrice, Rappacini's daughter, is trapped: "Their own
innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse" (169). Ironically, in Hawthorne's story, Rappacini becomes the most evil force in Beatrice's life. (Also, like Rappacini, the father in *Surfacing* is a type of mad scientist, and this trait in his character will be discussed in that section of this chapter.)

Ellis makes a similar point about the controlling Gothic male who isolates himself and/or his family from the rest of the world: "The masculine Gothic asks, can a man be 'innocent' in a world that makes seclusion from 'the world' a prerequisite for that state? Necessarily the answer is no" (xv).

While the narrator's father in *Surfacing* is presented in more ambiguous terms, the reader does get the sense that his influence has poisoned his daughter's nature. She has a real problem relating to others in a meaningful way. Toward the very beginning of the novel, she tells the reader that Anna is her best friend, and yet she has only known her for two months.
Or she thinks the phrase "Am I my brother's keeper?" would most appropriately be spoken in an insane asylum. She is an emotional cripple, and her distorted character is in part the result of her father's alienating influences on her life.

The narrator's father is at times thought of as a grotesque figure by his daughter. She writes, "...my heart speeded up as if I've opened what I thought was an empty closet and found myself face to face with a thing that isn't supposed to be there, like a claw or a bone. This is the forgotten possibility: he might have gone insane. Crazy, loony" (p. 69).

Carson McCullers, as quoted by Elizabeth McAndrew, makes a similar point about characters she creates who are misshapen by their inability to love:

And speaking of one of her major themes, she explains that love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about--people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or
In the last vision the narrator of *Surfacing* has of her father, he appears as a grotesque sort of monster. Atwood writes, "He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. . . .I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it; it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes. . . . It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself" (218). This description of the father in *Surfacing* conforms to McCullers' description of the grotesque figure of isolation in modern Gothic.

The father in Atwood's most recent book, *Cat's Eye*, also alienates and isolates his daughter. He is described by his daughter, Elaine Risley, in kinder, although still grotesque, terms: "From my cramped vantage point in the back I have a
good view of my family's ears. My father's, which stick out from under the brim of the old felt hat he wears to keep twigs and tree sap and caterpillars out of his hair, are large and soft-looking, with long lobes; they're like the ears of gnomes, or those of the flesh-colored, doglike minor characters in *Mickey Mouse* comic books" (22). Later on she also refers to her father as a gnome. Atwood writes, "There's an outbreak of forest tent caterpillars, the biggest in years: this is what fills him with glee, makes his eyes of a gnome shine in his head like blue-gray buttons" (70). One is reminded of the gnomes, trolls, and other Gothic figures in children's fairy tale books. A gnome is a forest creature that hides a buried treasure. Perhaps the buried treasure that Elaine's father hides from her is a glimpse at his inmost thoughts. Later on in the novel, Elaine remarks, "But the bad heart is also compelling. It's a curiosity, a deformity. A horrible treasure" (62). Like the father in *Surfacing*, Mr. Risley views the world from a stark, scientific
Elaine recalls collecting caterpillars with her father: "The alcohol smell is on my fingers, cold and remote, piercing, like a steel pin going in. It smells like white enamel basins. When I look up at the stars in the nighttime, cold and white and sharp, I think they must smell like that" (24).

Also, like the father in *Surfacing*, Elaine's father's work isolates her for the first eight years of her life, and when her family finally moves to Toronto, she is easy prey for the neighborhood bullies (as was discussed in Chapter One). Once the Risleys move to Toronto, Mr. Risley no longer isolates them from the rest of society; however, he does alienate himself from their home. His sphere of operation is the Zoology Building on the campus where he teaches. The Zoology Building appears foreign and grotesque to Elaine's female friends but not to Elaine. Ellis also comments on Gothic males, alienated from female spaces: "The masculine Gothic gives the perspective of an exile from the refuge of home, now the special province of
women. [And she goes on to write] "If we look at the Gothic novel as an increasingly insistent critique of the ideology of separate spheres, it is clear that the male exile is no more empowered, ultimately, by the division than the female prisoner. . . . it is a double alienation, from the world and from the home. . . ." (xiii-xv). Elaine is also doubly alienated; she cannot establish a fulfilling relationship with her father, removed to his masculine sphere, nor can she understand the rules in the feminine world of her friends' homes.

Thus, these alien, often absent fathers leave a void in their daughters' lives. The heroines in Atwood's novels do not have a meaningful relationship with their fathers, so that when they leave (escape from) their homes, they strive to fill the need for a strong male in their lives. Unfortunately, in Atwood's Gothic world, they often turn to comic book heroes. Joanna Russ in *The Female Gothic* writes that "The Super-Male may indeed be a disguised version of the Heroine's (wished-for)
father" (48). Similarly, Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes that the traditional Gothic heroine has "a propensity to almost deify her lovers, to over-idealize love bonds" (97). In *Survival*, Atwood explains a related idea, the "Rapunzel Syndrome":

Rapunzel is the main character; [along with] the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or husband, sometimes her father [my emphasis]. . . and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. . . . In the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help . . . . The Rescuer's facelessness and lack of substance as a character is usually a clue to his status as a fantasy escape figure. . . .

(209)

And William Patrick Day's description of male protagonists in Gothic fiction sounds very much like Atwood's comic book hero types: "The male protagonists of the Gothic fantasy . . . [are] self-blinded and duplicitous, a monstrous parody of the id they attempt to assert. . . . They become their own victims in pursuit of masculine selfhood, and this renders
them not heroic, but absurd" (102).

Joan Foster is a good example of a heroine who, left with a void in her life from an absent father, searches for a larger-than-life male. It is no surprise that the first man she becomes involved with is older than she. Joan is attracted to him also because he is supposedly a Polish Count. The Count (Paul) impresses her with the story of his escape from Poland during World War II. Atwood, through use of subtle description, suggests that Paul is really a comic book hero: "He seemed to belong to a vanished and preferable era, when courage was possible. I limped through the Tower of London on his rather stringy arm.... I felt sorry for him because of the sufferings he had undergone, I admired his daring, I was flattered by his attention...and grateful for it" (165). Paul takes on a less-than-heroic nature when the reader finds out that he writes romance novels under the name of Mavis Quilp. Even Paul himself realizes the absurdity of his situation when
he sighs, "Ah, Quilp... This is a character from Dickens, it is a deformed, malicious dwarf" (173). But even as a comic book hero, Paul appears threatening and shadowy to Joan. Joan eventually senses his ambiguous nature, "I couldn't tell about Paul's identity either... I thought about the revolver... what was I doing with this madman, how did I get into this thoroughly sealed place, and how could I get out?" (177).

Joan does escape from Paul, but without learning how to free herself from her helpless, dependent stance. Thus, she looks for another comic book hero and finds one in Arthur. When Joan first meets Arthur she thinks he is "sort of like Lord Byron," and later she says, "I didn't love Arthur for his theories, although they lent him a kind of impersonal grandeur, like a crimson-lined cloak" (188). Later, Arthur becomes too shadowy and disappointing, so she turns to yet a third comic book hero, The Royal Porcupine. He is a character who literally dresses in a cape, one of the things that first attracts Joan to
him. As with Arthur, Joan thinks that "there was something Byronic about him [The Royal Porcupine]" (283). Joan is completely disillusioned when she sees The Royal Porcupine without his "costume"...as an ordinary man. To Joan, even comic book heroes are preferable to "real" men, and she bemoans, "For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for me it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape" (301). Perhaps because of her faulty relationship with her father, Joan is not able to establish a love for a man without imagining herself and her lover in ridiculous Gothic roles, the hero and the helpless one. Finally, she seems to be able to glimpse the reality of this when she admits, "I felt I'd never really loved anyone, not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine, not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine brightly enough to return my own reflection, enhanced and sparkling" (314-315).
The Commander of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a quite different kind of comic book hero found in Atwood's Gothic novels. His title is Atwood's first hint that he is a comic book hero--his facade is so macho as to be absurd. Day in *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* writes:

The ridiculous and absurd qualities of the Gothic male remind us that these characters are parodies, self-created parodies of their own masculine identity. In attempting to attain the God-like power of the completely masculine patriarch, they create visions of themselves that range from the monstrous to the pathetic and that are always grotesque distortions of what they think they are. (99-10)

One would be hard pressed to find a more apt description of The Commander. And as one learns along with Offred the Commander's true nature, one realizes that he is, in a sense, as pathetically trapped in the Gilead Empire of his own making as Offred is. Even though he and the other Commanders have established this new government as an ideal arrangement, he is
miserable in it. Offred's Commander is at the top of the Gilead
government (Offred learns from Ofglen), but he lives a hidden
life defying his own rules. For instance, he sneaks Offred into
his room at night so that they can play games of Scrabble (a
treasonous act since reading of any kind is prohibited).

Still, the Commander is a threatening, shadowy male to
Offred, even though he allows her various forbidden activities
and gifts. She is never sure of his motivation. She is never
sure who he really is: "The Commander has on his black
uniform, in which he looks like a museum guard. . . . After that
he looks like a midwestern bank president. . . . Now he looks
like a shoemaker in an old fairy-tale book. Is there no end to
his disguises, of benevolence?" (113). Offred goes on to
conclude, "No wonder he's like a boot, hard on the outside,
giving shape to a pulp of tenderfoot. That's just a wish. I've
been watching him for some time and he's given no evidence of
softness" (113). Atwood continues to use the boot symbol as
representing the Commander almost every time he appears. That symbol recalls to mind Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy," in which Plath pictures her father as a cold, authoritative Nazi.

Plath begins the poem by calling her father a "black shoe" and includes the well-known lines, "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." What Plath is implying in these lines could apply to the Gothic relationship of heroine/villain—the passive victim in some sort of warped way "enjoying" her victimization.

Offred, however, is not enjoying her victimization, but at times she enjoys the glimpses she gets beyond the Commander's authoritative facade. For instance, when they go to the brothel and have a chance to be alone together, Offred notices, "Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried" (331). Also, she observes, "Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble" (271). Again, Offred says, "I imagine freckles on him, a
cowlick" (242). Offred is confused by and fearful of the Commander's duplicitous character, and although at one point she says that he is "more than a shadow" (210), she remains fearful of him nonetheless: "It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do, although it's of an equivocal kind. . . . Right now I'm not afraid of him. It's hard to be afraid of a man who is sitting watching you put on hand lotion. This lack of fear is dangerous" (272). Unlike Joan Foster, who seeks out her comic book heroes, Offred does not have a choice. Her society has placed her in this Gothic, nightmarish role. And the reader understands her wisdom in refusing to accept the Commander as any sort of hero for her, no matter how kind he appears to be. In one of her last thoughts about the Commander, Offred writes, "I visualize his shoes, black, well shined, impenetrable, keeping their own counsel" (374), realizing that while at times he appears absurd, his power makes him a man to be feared.
There is one more obvious comic book hero in Atwood's novels, and that is Nate Schoenberg in *Life Before Man*. He differs from the other absurd male characters discussed thus far because he is more passive than any of them and yet he is at least as dangerous. In *Survival*, Atwood asks, "...like Walter Mitty, does each man contain within him both an ordinary, limited and trivial self and a heroic concept and if so, which should we be writing about?" (426) She answers that question, in part, by creating the character of Nate Schoenberg.

Nate is definitely like Walter Mitty: throughout the novel he has fantasies of his own heroics; in actuality he is anything but a hero. When Nate faces reality, he knows he is not cut out to be a hero:

> Other people walk through doorways, he hits his head. . . . Feeble-minded creep goes into booth, removes clothes, stands there waiting for Superman to take over his body, while people stare from passing cars and some old lady calls the police. (27)
However, throughout the book, Nate's fantasies persist. Perhaps he wants to see himself in heroic terms because of the men he feels he needs to compete with—first his father, whom Nate believes for most of his life to have been a war hero, and then Chris, his wife's lover, who killed himself in a shocking way. In the very first Nate section, Nate is portrayed as wanting to do something dramatic; he "wants to do something, perform something, smash his hand through the kitchen window. . . . Whatever he does now will be absurd. What is smashing a window compared with blowing off your head?" (9) Still, Nate's Walter Mitty daydreams continue throughout the novel: "He [Nate] has a brief vision of himself on a balsa raft, floating down the Amazon. . . . A crocodile, or would it be an alligator, raises its head from the murky green water. . . . Lunging for him. Deftly he inserts a stick between its open jaws. . . ." (235).

Nate's fantasies take on ominous implications for the women in his life. For example, when Nate first fantasizes
about Lesje, "he wants to leap onto his bicycle and pedal like a maniac over to Lesje's apartment building, walk like Spiderman up the wall, swoop through the window. Don't say anything, he'd tell her. Come with me" (62). Another aggressive fantasy about Lesje occurs later on: "She [Lesje] sits behind a lighted window, draped in soft white. . . . Growling, he leaps through the glass" (119). Nate also has violent fantasies about his mother and Elizabeth. Like Walter Mitty, he is intimidated by these powerful women in his life and so becomes passive aggressive towards them. For instance, when visiting his mother, Nate cannot communicate how much her attitudes frustrate him, so instead, he fantasizes that he is outside her window "himself a wolflike monster in tattered clothes" (118). Similarly, Nate has a violent fantasy about Elizabeth which is triggered when he is sitting in the bathtub feeling vulnerable because Elizabeth is in the bathroom, watching him scrub with his loofah.
Himself, in aqua water, a knife between his teeth, cutting the raw sponge loose from the coral rocks. . . . Eyeball-to-eyeball combat with a giant squid, one tentacle cut loose, then another. Nothing to think about but getting free. Clouds of ink obscuring the water. . . . Plunging the knife right in between its eyes. (91-92)

It does not take a leap of fantasy to recognize that Elizabeth is the squid in this daydream. Thus, in his passive, self-doubting stance, Nate is still a dangerous comic book hero to the women in his life. He views them as landscapes through which he enacts his fantasies: "...it [Lesje] would be somewhere he's never been before. Some place utterly unlike the country inside Elizabeth's blue dressing gown, or the planet of Martha, predictable, heavy and damp" (62). In her poem, "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy", Atwood writes,

Starspangled cowboy
Your righteous eyes, your laconic
trigger-fingers
people the streets with villains:

and you leave behind you a heroic
trail of desolation...

Nate seems to leave behind him his own trail of
desolation in *Life Before Man* as he stumbles from one
"backdrop" to another. He leaves Elizabeth, his wife, as well as
his two daughters, for Lesje. Atwood writes that "he makes a
gift of himself, handing himself over to her [Lesje], mutely"
(101). Yet as the book ends, Nate has probably impregnated
Lesje, but, dissatisfied with their relationship, seems to be
looking for another "backdrop" against whom he can play out his
fantasies. In one of the last Nate sections of the novel, he
thinks of himself as "the solitary wanderer, under the cold red
stars" (265). If this self view were true, Nate would not be a
dangerous comic book hero, but when he involves women in his
fantasies, he victimizes them. Atwood concludes the poem
"Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" with the following pertinent lines: "I am the space you desecrate / as you pass through."

Atwood's heroines are also victimized by mad scientists, also prevalent in traditional Gothic fiction. Elizabeth MacAndrew has written in *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* that "these scientists are all mad in that they follow their investigations and experiments obsessively, unable to stop themselves. . . . These scientists are all intellect, and they are violators of Mother Earth and her secrets. . . ." (178-179). This description sounds very much like the father in *Surfacing* who functions as a mad scientist as well as an alienated father (as discussed earlier). The narrator's father is definitely all intellect, as the narrator explains, "... his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain" (179). He views all of life from a cold, logical point of view. The narrator recalls that early in her life, as she searched for answers to life's mysteries, she would at times, approach her father. The
following is his explanation of the possibility that there exists
a higher power:

He said Jesus was a historical figure and God was
a superstition, and a superstition was a thing that
didn't exist. (124)

But the narrator sees her father's logic as a method of
wielding his power over others: "If you tell your children God
doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god"
(124). And isn't this the major flaw of many mad scientists in
Gothic literature--from Shelley's Frankenstein molding his
"Adam"--to Hawthorne's Aylmer, trying to perfect Georgiana,
whom he views as God's flawed creation? Likewise, both
Frankenstein and Aylmer deny the feminine element.
Frankenstein rends apart his female "monster," and Aylmer
destroyed his wife because she is a woman and thus flawed (as
Judith Fetterly explains in *The Resisting Reader*).
An instance of the narrator's father's cold logic occurs when she asks him about death and the possibility of life thereafter. Her father replies, "...but people are not onions, as he so reasonably pointed out, they stay under" (124). Her father was all intellect, denying a spiritual (more feminine) perspective, which confuses the narrator during her childhood: "My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell" (85). Accordingly, when the narrator realizes her father must be dead, she writes:

I tried to recall him, picture his face, the way he'd been when he was alive, I found I couldn't; all I could see was the cards he used to hold up, testing us: 3 X 9 =? He was as absent now as a number, a zero. (123)

Still, the narrator senses (or hopes) that just before his death, her father possibly had a religious vision; Atwood
writes, "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" (171). However, the narrator's father appears to have succumbed to his logic after all. Unable to "see" the spiritual significance of the rock drawings he had discovered, he drowned with a camera around his neck. Even at the end, he was "seeing" through this logical, mechanical "eye," somehow violating "Mother Earth and Her secrets" (MacAndrew).

Another mad scientist who also doubles as an alienated father is Mr. Risley in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. His character is similar to the narrator's father in *Surfacing* in that he embraces an empiricism which rules out imagination--a concrete rather than a metaphoric outlook. Mr. Risley depends solely on logic to dictate his worldview, and he believes that "Science . . . is dispassionate and without bias, it is the only universal language. The language is numbers" (266). He denies
spiritual possibilities, also looking at life through a technical, logical lens. Elaine sees her father denying religious possibilities early in the novel. Her brother sings a song "Coming in on a wing and a prayer," which Elaine views as a sad song because her father says, as a toast, before dinner "You can't fly on one wing" (25). Elaine writes, "So in fact the prayer in the song is useless" (25), and in fact her brother cannot fly, as his death indicates.

Her father's purely logical view of life is illustrated in the scene in which Elaine watches him grading the drawings for his entymology class.

Sometimes he laughs to himself while doing this, or shakes his head, or makes ticking noises through his teeth. "Idiot," he says, or "blockhead." I stand behind his chair, watching the drawings, and he points out that this person has put the mouth at the wrong end, that person has made no provision for a heart, yet another cannot tell a male from a female. This is not how I judge the drawings: I find them better or worse depending on the colors. (37)
In this scene, Atwood not only demonstrates Mr. Risley's logical perspective, but also hints at Elaine's artistic leanings. Also, the reader can see what, at this point, may not be evident to Elaine—the irony in the fact that Mr. Risley criticizes his student for making "no provision for a heart," when his world view makes no provision for one either.

Mr. Risley also demonstrates a scientifically-based very negative attitude toward the doomed human race. Elaine writes:

My father explains why the human race is doomed. This time it's because we've discovered insulin. All the diabetics aren't dying the way they used to, they're living long enough so that they're passing the diabetes on to their children. Soon, by the law of geometric progression, we'll all be diabetics, and since insulin is made from cows' stomachs the whole world will be covered with insulin-producing cows, the parts that aren't covered with human beings, who are reproducing much too rapidly for their own good anyway . . . Also we have to worry about deserts, and erosion.
If we don't get burped to death by the cows we'll end up like the Sahara Desert, says my father cheerfully, finishing up the meatloaf. (229-230)

Like the narrator in Surfacing, Elaine can sense that somehow, her father has a certain power over her, as she writes, "I want my father to be just my father, the way he has always been, not a separate person with an earlier, mythological life of his own. Knowing too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened" (230-231).

Sally, in "Bluebeard's Egg" is another central character who is confronted by a mad scientist in her life: her husband, Ed. Ed is a "heart man," a medical doctor, a cardiologist. Even though Sally thinks she understands her husband, she is mistaken. Ed's simplistic facade hides an ambiguous, shadowy interior. Atwood writes, "Ed is a surface, one she [Sally] has trouble getting beneath."
Ed's true, dangerous character becomes evident in the scene that takes place in his office, when he symbolically dissects Sally. Sally cannot see beneath Ed's surface, but Ed literally peers into her heart:

Sally lay prone on the table, feeling strangely naked. "What do I do?" she said. "Just lie there," said Ed. He came over and tore a hole in the paper gown, above her left breast. . . . "There," he said . . . Ed moved the probe, and they looked at the heart from top to bottom, then the top. Then he stopped the frame, then changed it from a positive to a negative image. Sally began to shiver . . . He seemed so distant, absorbed in his machine, taking the measure of her heart, which was beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control. (128)

This scene is reminiscent of episodes in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" when Aylmer closely studies Georgiana, dissecting her with his scientific gaze.

Another heroine who feels controlled by her Gothic lover/mad scientist is Marian in The Edible Woman. Marian
views her fiance, Peter, as threatening, appearing to be cold and scientific (even though he is actually a lawyer). He exerts his power over Marian by trying to control the way she looks. Atwood consciously echoes "The Birthmark" as she describes Peter's desire to mold Marian's appearance:

These days however he would focus his eyes on her face, concentrating on her as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through her flesh and her skull and into the workings of her brain. . . . Frequently she would open her eyes and realize he had been watching her like that, hoping perhaps to surprise a secret expression on that face. Then he would run his hand gently over her skin, without passion, almost clinically, as if he could learn by touch whatever it was that had escaped the probing of his eyes. (153)

"The Birthmark" contains similar episode:

. . . she was lost in slumber. Aylmer sat by her side, watching her aspect with the emotions proper to a man the whole value of whose existence was involved in the process now
to be tested. Mingled with this mood, however,
was the philosophic investigation characteristic
of the man of science. Not the minutest symptom
escaped him. (612)

As Marian submits to Peter's control, she succumbs to
his wish for a hairdo change. She enters the beauty salon,
feeling "as passive as though she was being admitted to a
hospital to have an operation" (215). The echoes from
Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval
Portrait" merge in this horrible, though superficially funny,
scene. Atwood writes, "She [Marian] had sat motionless,
handing him the clamps, fascinated by the draped figure
prisoned in the filigreed gold oval of the mirror and by the rack
of gleaming instruments and bottled medicines on the counter
in front of her" (215).

Peter is not the only shadow male in Atwood's novels
who tries to mold the heroine into the image he desires.
Atwood comments on the male desire to shape a woman's
appearance in her short prose piece "Iconography" from *Murder in the Dark*: "He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged. He arranges to want her" (52). Atwood concludes the piece: "That's what mirrors are for, this story is a mirror story which rhymes with horror story, almost but not quite." Peter is a transitional character in Atwood's fiction--part mad scientist--part destructive artist, using Marian as his canvas on which to create. Similar to the mad scientist in Gothic fiction is the artist, whose preoccupation with his art can turn into an obsession. McAndrew, in *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, writes, "When, in Poe's "The Oval Portrait," the artist is said to have been married to his art before his wife, as Aylmer was to science before his, art and science have figuratively been made female... Repeatedly, the male characters are torn between two kinds of female enchantment" (178-179). Atwood's male artists are often jealously "married" to their art; enchanted by and yet insecure about
their own artistic talent, they definitely feel threatened if the women with whom they are emotionally involved are also successful artists. They become obsessed, not only with using their creative powers to remold the women in their lives, but also with dominating their lovers and/or wives so that they will not surpass them in the field of art.

Marian, in *The Edible Woman*, views Peter as a destructive artist when he tries to take her picture. She is terrified that he will destroy her if she allows him to take her photograph. This dread of cameras recalls scenes in Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* where cameras are also viewed with suspicion. Peter uses his camera to freeze Marian in the image he has created. Another threatening, destructive artist who uses a camera in an aggressive manner towards women is David in *Surfacing*. The movie camera is the medium David uses to create what he thinks will be his greatest artistic achievement, *Random Samples*. However, David's
camera becomes a fairly obvious phallic symbol with which he symbolically rapes Anna, his wife. David forces Anna to strip off her clothes so that he can film her naked. David says to her, "You'll go in beside the dead bird, it's your chance for stardom" (158). This comment is significant, for the dead bird, the crucified heron, serves as a recurring symbol of innocence victimized in that novel. Atwood writes that, once Anna stripped, the camera was "trained on her like a strange instrument of torture" (160). At another point in the work, the narrator thinks, "I was afraid there was a machine that could make people vanish like that too, go nowhere, like a camera that could steal not only your soul but your body also" (139). At the culmination of her interaction with the others on the island, the narrator destroys the film in David's camera, freeing its images.

Joe, the narrator's boyfriend in *Surfacing*, is also a destructive, somewhat threatening artist. He is jealous of
the narrator's success as an artist, and feels that she has sold out as an illustrator of children's stories. He is a potter who makes overgrown pots and then mutilates them, "cutting holes in them, strangling them, slashing them open" (66). The narrator thinks, "Their [Joe's pots'] only function is to uphold Joe's unvoiced claim to superior artistic seriousness: every time I sell a poster design or get a new commission he mangles another pot" (66).

Joe's making and then mutilating overgrown pots could also symbolize a type of womb envy—his destruction of a type of creativity he will never be capable of. This interpretation coincides with the threatening action of another destructive artist in the novel—the art teacher who impregnates the narrator. It is ironic that the man who taught her about creativity is also the one who manipulated her into aborting their creation—their child. She recalls what happened when he picked her up after the abortion:
"I know it's tough," he said, "but it's better this way." Quote, unquote. . . . the voice of reason. . . . I kissed him on the side of the face. I was stalling for time, also I was afraid of him: the look he gave me as I drew away was one of baffled rage. (106)

The narrator's art teacher and Joe in Surfacing serve as fairly obvious forerunners of destructive artists in Atwood's most recent novel, Cat's Eye: Elaine Risley's art teacher, Josef Hrbik, and Jon, her first husband. Elaine senses the threatening nature of Hrbik when she first meets him at her art class: "He smiled at me the first time. He had uneven teeth. 'We will see what we can make of you,' he said" (290). Elaine also sees the veiled threat in another seemingly innocent comment Josef makes on the first night of class:

"You are an unfinished woman," he adds in a lower voice, "but here you will be finished." He doesn't know that finished means over and done with.
Even though Elaine seems aware of his threatening nature, she becomes romantically involved with Josef, and he continues to make statements that sound like direct echoes of Atwood's "Iconography." Elaine says that "Josef is rearranging me," echoing "He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged" ("Iconography"). However, the woman Josef explicitly victimizes in the novel is Susie—another student in his class. The class name, "Life Drawing," is ironic because, as in *Surfacing*, Susie becomes pregnant with Joseph's baby and also has an abortion. However, Elaine finally realizes Josef's duplicitous nature:

Josef offers me what he has always offered, *plus fear* [my emphasis]. He tells me, casually, in the same way he told me about shooting a man in the head, that in most countries except this one a woman belongs to a man . . . . He has taken to demanding speech from he; or else he puts his
hand over my mouth. I close my eyes and feel him as a source of power, nebulous and shifting. (336)

Here, Atwood draws a clear portrait of the Gothic shadow male in her fiction, silencing women, and in other ways overpowering them. Elaine escapes from Josef Hrbik into the arms of another destructive artist, Jon, and she admits: "As for Jon, I know what he offers. He offers escape, running away from the grown-ups" (337). However, Jon turns out not to be such an escape. This turn of events in Cat's Eye could be described by what Atwood writes in her poem "Marrying the Hangman":

She has been condemned to death by hanging. A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman... What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another?

That is what Elaine does--leaves one locked room for
another, one destructive artist for another. (One also must wonder whether Elaine and the narrator of *Surfacing* get into these negative relationships with their art teachers because they are searching for the antithesis of their scientific fathers and see these older men who are interested in art as possible escapes from the mechanistic nature of their fathers.) Elaine marries Jon, but she feels insecure in their relationship. When she becomes pregnant, Jon is not thrilled: "I'm afraid to tell Jon. He will expect me to go and have it out, like a tooth. . . . He's said, often enough, that artists can't live like other people, tied down to demanding families. . . ." (356). Elaine keeps the baby, nonetheless, and starts to paint feminist works of art, and that is when their relationship really dissolves, in part because of Jon's jealousy over her art. Like Joe in *Surfacing*, Jon's anger towards Elaine becomes evident in his art. He "smashes things, and glues the shards into place in the pattern of breakage" (366). At the same time, he tells Elaine that her
paintings are "irrelevant" (366). Whereas Surfacing's ending is ambivalent, Elaine definitely escapes Jon's control, and eventually marries Ben. Significantly, the first thing Elaine mentions about Ben is that he is "not any sort of an artist, for which I am thankful" (15)

Jake of Bodily Harm is the final destructive artist who must be examined in this section. Early in the novel, Atwood writes that "What Jake did was design. He was a designer of labels, not just labels but the total package..." (103). Atwood continues, "It took her [Rennie--the novel's heroine] more time than it should have to realize that she was one of the things Jake was packaging" (104). Jake redecorates Rennie's apartment and then redoes Rennie herself. Rennie finally admits, "Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper,' she said, 'For you to doodle on'" (105). This statement is reminiscent of Susan Gubar's article "The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity": This model of the pen-penis
writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition
identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female
as his passive creation. (295) Gubar's comment definitely
relates to the Gothic heroine's passive victim stance in so
much of that fiction. Gubar also writes, "Woman is not simply
an object, however. If we think in terms of the production of
culture, she is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud
replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor" (293).
Certainly this statement is very applicable to Atwood's
destructive artists who use women as art objects. Also,
Gubar's comment about "mud replicas" very definitely recalls
what Atwood writes in one of her Circe/Mud poems:

When he was young he and another boy constructed
a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and
ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the
essentials. . . . His love for her was perfect, he
could say anything to her, into her he spilled his
entire life. She was swept away in a sudden flood.
He said no woman since then has equalled her.
Because Jake victimizes Rennie, she begins to fear not only him, but men in general. Atwood sets the tone for this fear at the beginning in which a man has broken into Rennie's apartment, leaving a twisted rope (a fairly obvious phallic symbol as well as a symbol of bondage) on her bed. Rennie becomes obsessed with fear of as she thinks about the rope:

And when you pulled on the rope, which after all reached down into darkness, what would come up? . . . At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger. (41)

Rennie's imaginings about the rope man continue right up through the end of the novel. Later, she imagines that all of the men she has been involved with are the rope man, shadow males:
Rennie is dreaming about the man with the rope, again, again... he was here all along... Sometimes she thinks it's Jake, climbing in the window with a stocking over his face... sometimes she thinks it's Daniel, that's why he has a knife. The face keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible, she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't really there, he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar. (287)

Rennie's statement could be spoken by any of Atwood's heroines, surrounded by shadowy men in an ambiguous, frighteningly Gothic world. Of course, part of their fear is a result of faulty perspective. Too many of Atwood's central female characters look to men to somehow rescue them from difficult situations, but usually end up in a worse predicament, trading one locked room for another. In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski writes:

In Gothic novels, the woman often suspects her lover or her husband of trying to drive her insane, or trying to murder her or both. [In comparing Gothic novels to Harlequin Romances, she writes]... the Harlequin heroine's feelings
undergo a transformation from fear into love, whereas for the Gothic heroine, the transformation is from love to fear. (60)

Atwood's heroines become involved with men they think they love, but their love quickly turns to fear as the men in their lives begin to wield their power against them. By giving her reader this litany of shadow males--the alien fathers, the comic book heroes, the mad scientists, and the destructive artists--Atwood has, in a sense, "named the Monster," as she asserts in Second Words:

...to fight the Monster, you have to know that there is a Monster, and what it is like (both in its external and internalized manifestations).... The problem facing all of us writers is: how to describe the Monster--in all its forms, including those in our heads.... (147 and 149)

By filling her works with so many of these shadow males, Atwood is, in a sense, teaching by negative example.
Also, she is demonstrating that part of the problem is the misconception of the female character who is still looking for her Byronic lover—her Heathcliff (and that misconception is the "Monster in her head"). Accordingly, elsewhere in *Second Words* Atwood asserts, "...poor Heathcliff has been relegated to the Gothic romance..." This doesn't mean she [the female novelist] hates men; merely that she's interested in what they look like without the cloak" (425-427). Similarly, Atwood writes in her poem "You Are Happy":

> Men with the heads of eagles no longer interest me or pig-men, or those who can fly... I search instead for the others, the ones left over, the ones who have escaped from those mythologies with barely their lives..."

While this may be Atwood's ideal—she gives the reader very few examples of "the ones who have escaped from those
mythologies." The one male character Atwood portrays as a legitimate rescuer is portrayed as such because he refuses to be viewed as a hero: Nick, in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When Nick and Offred first meet, he reassures her, "'No romance,' he says, 'Okay?' That would have meant something else once. Once it would have meant: no strings. Now it means: no heroics" (340). Ironically, Nick refuses to be thought of as Offred's hero, and yet he is one of the most heroic men in Atwood's fiction. Otherwise, since Atwood's novels are Gothic novels, the shadow males prevail.
CHAPTER III

VIOLENCE AND VIOLATION IN ATWOOD'S GOTHIC

"The air is dusty with blood."
(from "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein")

"Next time we commit
love, we ought to
choose in advance what to kill."
(from Power Politics)

One cause of the reader's uneasiness when reading
Margaret Atwood's novels is her rendering of violence or
violation of some sort. In the previous chapter, we have seen
that one source of fear for Atwood's female characters is the
men in the novels who are shadowy and ambiguous, most of
whom attempt to assert their power over the women in their
lives—and the ultimate assertion of that power is an act of violence against the person they wish to control. Once, while teaching a poetry class, Atwood asked her students about this subject. In *Second Words* she records her question and their response: "Then I asked some women students in a quickie poetry seminar I was giving, 'Why do women feel threatened by men?' 'They're afraid of being killed,' they said" (413).

Similarly, Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance*, writes, "Given the pervasive scorn for all things feminine, it is hardly surprising that since the beginning of the novel the heroine [operates] on the constant assumption that men are out to destroy [her]" (13). Atwood's heroines, likewise, are afraid of the men in their lives. Most of them may not overtly fear being murdered, but many of her female characters are threatened (by men as well as other women) with various covert Gothic horrors, from vampirism and cannibalism to violent sex and rape. The quote above, "The air is dusty with blood," is thus
significant for Atwood's novels because violence and violation lie just below the surface of her works, and as we know from many of her poems as well as by the title of *Surfacing*, in order to accurately read her text, one must go below the "surface," below the "dusty blood" that covers the text.

Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, as the title suggests, has as a fulcrum for its plot the theme of cannibalism. The heroine of that novel--Marian--eventually becomes convinced that her boyfriend, Peter, is trying to consume her. Her attitude seems, in part, to be triggered by a scene early in the novel involving an intimate encounter that is tinged with violence. Peter insists that they have sex in his bathtub, which Marian agrees to even though she finds his tub "uncomfortably hard and ridgey" (60). Marian decides she needs to appease Peter because he has just learned that he is losing his best friend, Trigger, to marriage. She wonders where Peter got this idea--for sex in the bathtub--and decides the source
might have been a hunting story in one of his "male magazines."

Or perhaps, in a murder mystery, but then Marian thinks, ". . .

wouldn't that rather be someone drowned in the bathtub? A

woman" (61). Marian continues with that fantasy, filling in the

funny and grotesque details:

That would give them a perfect bit to illustrate on
the cover: a completely naked woman with a thin
covering of water and maybe a bar of soap or a
rubber duck or a blood-stain to get her past the
censors, floating with her hair spread out on the
water, the cold purity of the bathtub surrounding
her body, chaste as ice only because dead, her
open eyes staring up into those of the reader. The
bathtub as a coffin. (61)

Marian and Peter's intimate encounter proceeds with

more pain than pleasure. Marian acknowledges, "Peter

stretched and yawned beside me, grinding my arm against the

porcelain" (63). She continues to question Peter's motivation
during this uncomfortable situation and concludes that because
it is so tortuous, it is a "modern version of hair shirts or
sitting on spikes" (63). Or even more horrifying to Marian is
the thought that this is Peter's way of objectifying her: ". . . did
he really think of me as a lavatory fixture?" (63) Even though
Marian wonders why Peter is acting this way, the reader
understands that Peter is asserting his power over Marian
since he is disturbed by the fact that his friend, Trigger, has
lost his power and has succumbed to marriage. In discussing
the male characters in Harlequin Gothic romances, Modleski
makes the point that "they are . . . asserting their masculine
superiority in the same ways men often do in real life: they
treat the woman as a joke, appraise her as an object, and give
her less attention than they give their automobiles . . . Male
brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation not of contempt,
but of love" (40-41). Certainly, this humorous and yet
threatening scene adds to the Gothic sense of this novel.

William Patrick Day, in In the Circles of Fear and Desire,
asserts that in the Gothic fantasy, "owing to the inescapable
collision between men and women, pleasure is never a
significant aspect of sexuality. Sex is really just a mode of
violence, part of the dynamics of power" (132). And Linda
Bayer-Berenbaum in *The Gothic Imagination* writes, "Vampires
and werewolves are blatantly cannibalistic, and their violence
has sexual overtones. . . " (36). Atwood herself makes a similar
point in two poems in *Power Politics*:

> I lie mutilated beside
> you; beneath us there are
> sirens, fires, the people run
> squealing, the city
> is crushed and gutted,
> the ends of your fingers bleed
> from 1000 murders

Also, in *Second Words*, Atwood explicitly acknowledges
the contradictory interconnectedness of sex and violence "from
*The Canterbury Tales* to T.S. Eliot" (200).
Peggy Sanday's comments in *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System* can shed light on Atwood's use of cannibalism, calling it "the ultimate act of domination" (3) and remarking that many societies show a high correlation between this practice and male aggression against women. Marian becomes more and more fearful of Peter as the novel progresses. She views Peter as a hunter--focusing on his fascination with guns, and sees herself as his prey. Of course, the gun is also an obvious phallic symbol. In this novel, the theme of cannibalism is also reinforced through Marian's job at a marketing firm, where she studies *consumers* and their habits. After a terrible night of feeling as if she needs to escape from Peter, Marian gets up the next morning and pours herself "a large glassful of tomatoe juice and drinks it blood thirstily" (85). Marian is a consumer as well as a possible prey to Peter's appetites, but as her fears of being eaten increase, Marian becomes anorexic. In her book *Margaret Atwood*,
Barbara Rigney notes, "Marian's anorexia is clearly linked with her vision of herself as an animal, a prey to the male hunter in the person of Peter. Her own victimization is thus mirrored in the sacrificial deaths of animals for food" (24).

Marian feels as if she is being pushed into marriage by the societal values around her. For instance, the women with whom Marian works in the office all view Peter as a good catch, echoing the hunter/trapper metaphor of the male language. Marian's reaction to Peter's aggression is ironic, for by becoming anorexic she is attempting to assert herself while diminishing her body. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make a similar point in *The Madwoman in the Attic*: "Sufferers from anorexia...are primarily adolescent girls...Such diseases are caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways. Most obviously, of course, any girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, self-lessness as in some sense
sickening." But Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge the paradox of anorexia: "...such afflictions as anorexia and agoraphobia simply carry patriarchal definitions of 'femininity' to absurd extremes, and thus function as essential or at least inescapable parodies of social prescriptions" (54). Perhaps Marian understands, finally, that anorexia is not only denying her "flesh" to Peter, but also a repression of her own appetites as well. Thus, in eating the cake which symbolizes herself at the novel's conclusion, she is reclaiming her own feelings and desires.

Another of Atwood's novels with a sense of violation metaphorically represented in eating disorders is *Lady Oracle*. Joan Delacourt Foster, the main character in this novel, is the opposite of anorexic—she overeats. Just as Marian's eating disorder is triggered by her feelings of being violated and victimized by Peter, so Joan's overeating is partly a result of her feeling violated and abused by her mother. During her
childhood, Joan is almost constantly verbally abused by her social-climbing mother, Fran Delacourt. Finally, when Joan realizes she can never please her mother, she starts gaining weight. Thus, on the one hand, Joan achieves a certain revenge by embarrassing her mother, but also she sacrifices herself to her mother's verbal demands—to her mother's covertly cannibalistic hungers. Joan, in a sense, allows herself to be the scapegoat, cannibalized by her mother's oral abuse, blamed for her unhappiness. Joan realizes her position as her mother's scapegoat when she admits:

If she'd [Joan's mother] ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure... a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (71)

Here, one can see the duplicity of Joan's stance—as rebel
and as cannibalized victim. As Joan's memories of her mother unfold, Joan subconsciously acknowledges Mrs. Delacourt's cannibalistic tendencies by focusing on the appearance of her mother's mouth:

In the image of her that I carried for years...she was sitting in front of her vanity table, painting her fingernails a murderous red and sighing. Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them...which gave her a curious double mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow. (71)

Joan finally gets the impetus to resist her mother's domination when her Aunt Lou wills Joan a small inheritance, with the stipulation that she loses her excess weight. Mrs. Delacourt's aggressiveness increases as Joan's weight decreases, until finally, when Joan reaches her goal weight, Mrs. Delacourt attacks her, stabbing Joan with a "paring knife from the kitchen counter" (136)--a significant detail
considering her cannibalistic tendencies.

Joan Foster is not only similar to Marian in that both are victims of symbolic cannibalism, but Joan, like Marian, encounters a sexual relationship tinged with violence. Joan's first sexual relationship is with the Count, Paul. Eventually, she decides to leave him because "making love to Paul had begun to resemble a shark fight" (180). Paul considers himself Joan's protector—but Joan views him as a threat. Appropriately, Joan has begun writing dime store Gothic romances, and the one she is working on as she considers leaving Paul is entitled *Escape from Love*. Joan writes about her heroine: "Alone, weak, unprotected--to what dissolute reveler might she not fall prey? . . .she had fled. . .seeking protection; but the protector had failed her" (183). Fiction, for Joan, is becoming a reality. Similar scenarios take place in many traditional Gothic novels. For instance, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Montoni poses as Emily's protector,
but she and the reader soon learn that the opposite is true.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, Joan escapes from the arms of the Count into the arms of another victimizer, Arthur Foster, who eventually becomes her husband. Their relationship is filled with symbolic cannibalism because he feeds on Joan's failures. For example, at one point Joan tells us that for Arthur, she "was just a kind of nourishing blob" (236). Another time she acknowledges his fulfillment received from her faults when she admits "The love of a good woman was supposed to preserve a man from this kind of thing [depression]. I knew that. But at these times I wasn't able to make him happy, no matter how badly I cooked" (237). Arthur—like her mother—literally feeds on Joan's failures. He revels in her ineptness.

Joan relates another incident in which Arthur tells her, "You're an intelligent woman" . . .His exasperation with me was like that of a father with smart kids who got bad report cards"
Also, like Fran Delacourt and her frustration with Joan's success in losing weight, Arthur feels threatened when Joan does succeed. When her book, *Lady Oracle*, is published, Arthur condescendingly suggests, "I could look it over for you, if you like. Fix it up for you" (253). Arthur, like her mother, cannot stand Joan's success, and so their marriage becomes worse. Joan's achievements no longer allow her to play the role of "nourishing blob" for these important people in her life who are so hungry for her failure.

The novel between *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, *Surfacing*, contains the theme of sex and violence at a much more intense level than either of the other two works. The nameless narrator of *Surfacing* is violated by a much older man, her art teacher, who impregnates her and then insists that she abort the baby. She feels so abused after the relationship that she no longer can feel normal emotions—she feels emotionally "cut off." There are many metaphors of
amputation throughout the work—symbolizing her feelings of being separated from her ability to feel and respond. She remembers leaving the place where she had her abortion and noticing, ""The fountain had dolphins and a cherub with part of the face missing" (105). Later she explains: "...after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two... The other half, the one locked away, was the only [half] that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or, no, something minor like a severed thumb..." (129). Again, she realizes she has no feelings: "I rehearsed emotions, naming them: Joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate... But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn't alive..." (132).

Along with the metaphors of amputation as the result of the narrator having been "raped" emotionally, there is also another rape in the novel. David and Anna, the nameless narrator's married friends, are constantly vying for some kind of power over the other, and sex is one of their favorite
weapons in this struggle. In one of the cruelest acts in the book, David metaphorically rapes Anna in a scene in which he forces her to strip in front of his movie camera: "David said [to Anna]. . . 'Now just take it off like a good girl or I'll have to take it off for you'. . . . She jerked away, then I saw his arms go around her as if to kiss her and she was in the air, upside down over his shoulder, hair hanging down in damp rope. . . ." (159-160). Anna retaliates against David's cruelty with sex. Soon after this incident, she seduces David's "best" friend, Joe. Atwood writes, "...but Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he [David] 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" (180)

The nameless narrator realizes that Anna and David have an abnormal relationship, feeding on each other's
pain—implying a sort of vampirism. At one point, the narrator views them in this sinister light: "The door slammed again, it was Anna; he [David] put his arm around her and they both studied me with the intent pouncing look they'd had at supper" (183). A few pages later, the narrator again hints at David and Anna's vampiristic tendencies: "It was all right as long as they stuck to dead things, the dead can defend themselves, to be half dead is worse" (195). Linda Bayer-Berenbaum observes that Gothic literature can help the reader understand David's and Anna's perverse behavior: "...the vampire (which is dead) feeds on life blood. The recurrent Gothic theme of the living dead or the dead alive strains the distinctions between ... life and death..." (33). Bayer-Berenbaum also asserts, "...sadism and masochism...are not perversions simply because they deviate from customary standards of sexual practice but precisely because they signify the one fundamental perversion: the binding of life and death. Herein lies the essence of the
Gothic perversion. . ." (137-138).

The kind of violence perpetrated by David against Anna is labelled by Bayer-Berenbaum as "compensatory violence" which she defines as "a substitute for creativity. . .a response to impotence. . . It is a way to manipulate others through humiliation, torture, or enslavement, the victim finally being rendered inanimate in the drive for total violation" (133). The narrator senses Anna's victimization that has rendered her David's object--his doll--when she sees Anna up early one morning, applying her makeup before David sees her. The narrator realizes that Anna has become as unreal as the fairy tale princesses the narrator draws for a living:

. . .pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, 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. . .Captive princess in someone's head. (194)
Cat's Eye also has violence, violation, and vampirism as a central part of its plot. Here, the central vampiristic relationship is not between men and women, but among children. The narrator, Elaine Risley, is victimized by "friends" she meets when she moves to Toronto. Cordelia, the leader of the group, feeds on Elaine's pain by torturing her in various ways in front of their other friends, Grace and Carol. Cordelia verbally abuses Elaine by threatening her in various ways. For instance, at one point in the novel Cordelia tells Elaine, "Think of ten stacks of plates. Those are your ten chances. Everytime I [Elaine] do something wrong, a stack of plates comes crashing down. I can see these plates. Cordelia can see them too. ..." (183).

Elaine's masochism manifests itself in these confrontations, and the humiliation and violation she undergoes cause her to, in a sense, cannibalize herself. She remembers, "In the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me, I
peeled the skin off my feet. I did it at night when I was supposed to be sleeping. . . . Then, with my fingernails, I would pull the skin off in narrow strips. . . . I would go down as far as the blood" (120). Like many Gothic victims who become mesmerized by those who violate them, Elaine is enthralled to her torturers. At the peak of her torture, Elaine admits, "... I am too numb, too enthralled." She passively submits to their torture, even to the point of forcing herself into a faint in order to appease her friends' vicious appetites: "Cordelia is subdued: blood is impressive" (185).

The violation Elaine undergoes at the hands of Cordelia culminates in the bridge/ravine scene, when Cordelia throws Elaine's hat into the stream that runs through the ravine, a stream Cordelia says is composed of melting dead people from the graveyard above it. Thus, Cordelia sends Elaine down to the land of the dead. Elaine emerges changed from the "water made from the dead people"; she becomes the most vicious vampire
in the book. Devendra Varma, in his *Gothic Flame*, writes that
"a person sucked by a vampire becomes a vampire himself, and
sucks in his turn" (159). Similarly, Toni Reed, in her book on
demon-lovers, writes: "He [Count Dracula] is evil because he is
Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. . . .
This view of Count Dracula implies that he is a villain because
he is an outsider and responds to alienation with destructive,
vicious behavior" (64). Cordelia creates an outcast, which
becomes a Frankenstein's monster. Elaine and Cordelia stop by
the cemetery one day after school, and Elaine begins her
"feast":

"Mrs. Eaton is really a vampire, you know," I say
slowly. . . . "We sometimes go together. Because
I'm a vampire too." "You're not," says Cordelia. . . .
"How do you know?" I say. . . .
"You walk around in the daytime," Cordelia says.
"That's not me," I say. That's my twin. . . . "You're
my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I'm
really dead. I've been dead for years." . . . I'm
surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to
know she's so uneasy, to know I have this much
power over her. (249)
Also in *Cat's Eye* Elaine describes her former husband's present activities: "He's temporarily in Los Angeles, doing a chain-saw murder, but he'll be back before my opening" (17). Actually, Jon is an artist who does special effects for movies. That is why his studio is littered with dismembered body parts. The scene reminds Elaine that when they were married, they were violent with each other: "What we share, Jon and I, may be a lot like a traffic accident, but we do share it. We are survivors, of each other" (17). Also, much later, Elaine remembers their relationship as "Technicolor wreckage. Amazing and agonizing and almost lethal" (284). But Jon has mellowed in his middle age:

Jon has told me he isn't sure this hacked-up body-part stuff is the sort of thing he should be doing. It's too violent. . . . [Jon's defense of his profession continues and one must notice the thinly veiled hint of cannibalism when he explains] But. . . you have to eat, and there's just more
demand for cut-off limbs. (18)

Violence also adds to the Gothic nature of another of Atwood's novels, *Life Before Man*. One act of past violence colors all that happens in that work. Elizabeth, has had an affair with Chris, who decided that since Elizabeth wouldn't submit to his demands, his only way to gain vengeance and a measure of power over her was, ironically, to kill himself. The ghost of Chris haunts the thoughts of all of the other main characters. Elizabeth senses Chris's presence in the "underwater light" of her living room, reminiscent of the narrator of *Surfacing* encountering ghosts of her past within the waters of the lake.

Chris is in the room with her, a weight, heavy... Sultry. Sultan. Sullen. But it isn't because he's dead, he was always like that. Backing her against the door. ... Leaning on her. I won't let you go yet. She hates it when anyone has power over her. Nate doesn't have that kind of power, he never had. (15)
Elizabeth recalls that the last time she met Chris, an air of violence pervaded the encounter. She could taste blood on her lips—unsure of its source, and while she tried to talk to the brooding Chris, he simply remained silent, twisting and untwisting her hair, "his fingers sliding now over her chin and throat. . ." (17). This scene is also reminiscent of Robert Browning's Gothic poem, "Porphyria's Lover." Like Chris, Browning's lover, frustrated because he cannot completely control and overpower his married lover, strangles her with her own hair. Of course, Chris Beecham takes his frustration out on himself, but he intends Elizabeth to be the real victim of his suicide. Chris's action can, in part, be explained by Ellis's definition of the Gothic Villain in *The Contested Castle*: "The villain, in turn, is not provoked by lust so much as by a wish to make his victim suffer for imposing limits on his male will" (46). A line from Atwood's *Power Politics* is applicable to
Chris's "love" toward Elizabeth: "If I love you / is that a fact or a weapon?" Likewise, in "Nothing" from True Stories, Atwood writes, "Nothing like love to put blood / back in the language."

Sex is also used as a weapon in Life Before Man. Two rapes occur in the novel, one in which Lesje is raped by William to punish her when he discovers that she is seeing Nate. Elizabeth, after sleeping with William in an attempt to gain a measure of revenge against Lesje and Nate, calls a man she met on the train, a man who sells obscene women's underwear for a living. He sexually assaults her while they are parked in his car. Actually, Elizabeth doesn't stop him because she is overwhelmed by how pathetic he is. It is a grotesque scene in which he holds his CB microphone to her throat so that his radio buddies can have a thrill by overhearing them.

Elizabeth is not really frightened by this incident; there is only one person who intimidates Elizabeth through various forms of subtle violence and that is her Aunt Muriel.
Muriel, like other of Atwood's characters, feeds on the pain and failure of others. Therefore, she is often portrayed as a symbolic vampire/cannibal. Elizabeth thinks of Aunt Muriel as "both the spider and the fly, the sucker out of life juice and the empty husk. . . . Auntie Muriel is gratified by this wrongness" (100). And later, Elizabeth mentions Aunt Muriel's "lust for slaughter." Atwood also hints at Auntie Muriel's vampiristic/cannibalistic tendencies in describing her obsession with gathering her deceased family members together in Mount Pleasant Cemetery: "In her story, she'd made no distinction between the living and the dead, referring to her own plot as though she herself were already in it and to the others as if they were guests at a picnic she was throwing" (108).

Aunt Muriel has fed on Elizabeth's family's failures for as long as Elizabeth can remember, making her feel "part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple, part insane" (109). When
Elizabeth's mother dies, Aunt Muriel's vampiristic/cannibalistic leanings again become evident because she plans the funeral "as if it were an important tea party" (161). Later on, Elizabeth explicitly views her aunt in this light: "the best defense against Auntie Muriel is silence. She [Elizabeth] wears silence around her neck like garlic against vampires" (200). Ironically, when Elizabeth finally has the courage to stand up to her aunt and throws her out of her house, Elizabeth's savage tendencies surface, and she feels as though "she could eat a heart" (201).

The reader can see that Aunt Muriel's treatment of Elizabeth leads to Elizabeth's need for power and control. Atwood offers this logical source for Muriel's viciousness: "Auntie Muriel had a strong personality and a good mind and she was not pretty, and patriarchal society punished her" (106).

The characters showcased in this "life" overshadowed by the museum are an endangered species in part because they are
so vicious and violent in subtle as well as explicit ways. One sees that in Atwood's novels, violence begets violence. It is not surprising that Elizabeth's one daughter always dresses as a monster on Halloween, perhaps taking her cues from her mother and great aunt.

Another of Atwood's works filled with violence and violation, as its title suggests, is *Bodily Harm*, which follows *Life Before Man*. The women who raised Rennie are like Elizabeth's Auntie Muriel in that they feed on each other people's pain and misfortune. Reminiscent of Auntie Muriel's funeral "tea party" is Rennie's description of her mother's circle of friends in Griswold: "in the front parlour, drinking tea and eating small cakes covered with chocolate icing and poisonous-looking many-coloured sprinkles, discussing their own and each other's debilities in hushed voices... The only thing they liked better was a funeral" (81). Later, Rennie recognizes the same vampiristic tendencies in the
Englishwoman who runs the significantly named Sunset Inn on the island where she is staying: "The Englishwoman looks at her with the gloating, almost possessive stare of one who enjoys giving unwelcome news" (261). This description is like the ending of Atwood's short piece in *Murder in the Dark* called "Horror Comics":

> Once we even hit someone [with a snowball], a middle-aged woman in a muskrat coat. She turned around and looked at us, white-faced and glaring. 'The look on her face!' we screamed. But we were terrified. It was the look on her face, pure hatred, real after all. The undead walked among us.

There is an unlikely violator in *Bodily Harm*, Daniel, the surgeon who operates on Rennie. Ironically, Daniel not only helps his patients, but also, not unlike the women in Griswold, feeds off of other people's sicknesses. After he operates on her, Daniel informs Rennie that he has very likely saved her
life, again ironically, by removing a part of it. In an unconscious reaction, she hallucinates that his hands are detached from his body and look like "an odd growth," subconsciously cutting off his hands--the same hands that have just cut off a part of her. Rennie does not trust Daniel, and in one daydream, she wonders if he "feeds" on his female patient's vulnerability: "Maybe there's a whole lineup of them [his patients], . . .each with a bite taken out of them, one breast or the other. He's saved all our lives, he has lunch with us all in turn, he tells us all he loves us" (142).

Despite her suspicions about Daniel, Rennie tries to talk him into having an affair with her. When he finally succumbs to her, Rennie feels raped because "she was supposed to be the needy one, but it was the other way around" (238). The last time Rennie thinks of Daniel, Atwood describes her scar as "her nibbled flesh, the little toothmarks on her" (284), hinting, again, at Daniel's cannibalistic tendencies. He apparently
receives an abnormal kind of fulfillment in figuratively “eating” the breasts of his sick patient

Literal as well as symbolic rapes occur in Bodily Harm.

Jake, Rennie’s boyfriend, liked to “play” at overpowering her during their intimate encounters. Atwood writes, “Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn’t move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing. Danger turns you on, he said” (207). Lora, too, suffers violence, having left home because her stepfather tried to sexually assault her, and she is raped by the guards at the fort where she and Rennie are held as prisoners. Lora trades sex with the guards in order to find out if her boyfriend is still alive. However, the guards take advantage of her because they know Prince is already dead.

A central symbol of the novel also hints at violence and rape—the rope left on Rennie’s bed by an intruder at the
beginning of the work is certainly a phallic symbol, threatening rape—or some kind of "bodily harm."

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women are also "legally" raped in the futuristic state of Gilead. In this work, Atwood's female characters are sorted, color-coded, completely objectified, and completely violated. The focal character of the work is a handmaid, who, like all women of her class, is dressed in red, the color of blood and violence. The sexual humiliation they must undergo is only part of the degradation they endure; they are also violated by being stripped of their entire identities, forced to forget their pasts, their families, indeed, even their names. Offred, having lost all self, is known only as a possession of "her" man.

The Gothic pattern of sex as unrelated to love has become an actual part of the "norm" in Gilead. One frightening aspect of this nightmare world is that which in Gothic fiction is only hinted at and in Gilead has become part of everyday life...
is participation of more than one woman in the sexual act, the wives cooperating and assisting in the grotesque ceremony. The Handmaid's role in the nightmarish world of Gilead is one of total degradation. In her introduction to *The Female Gothic*, Juliann Fleenor writes, "The Gothic world is one of nightmare, and that nightmare is created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role" (10).

Similarly, Roberta Rubenstein writes:

...the language and imagery...of Offred's narrative...demonstrate multiple inversions and violations of *nature* and *natural*. Not only is the female body used as a tool for reproduction, but bodies in general are objectified and described in terms of parts rather than wholes. In *Bodily Harm* Atwood implied that the reduction of the body to a "thing" is connected to its violation: in *The Handmaid's Tale* torture and mutilation...underscore the ruthless and repressive values that shape Gilead. (103-104)

Cannibalistic tendencies are no longer hinted at—they,
too, are a lawful part of this strange world. The Particication ceremony incorporates primitive, cannibal/scapegoat tendencies. A historian in the Historical Notes section at the end of the work describes the Particication ceremony of the Gilead regime:

...it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead. Scapegoats have been notoriously useful throughout history, and it must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while. (390)

After Offred and the other Handmaids tear a man to death in the Particication, cannibalistic tendencies surface as Offred shares her thoughts with the reader: "My hands smell of tar. . . . The smell makes me feel sick. But also I'm hungry. This is monstrous, but nevertheless it's true. . . . I think of the word relish. I could eat a horse" (361).

And it is interesting that the only outside activity the
Handmaids are allowed to shop for food. Significantly, they purchase their meat at a store called All Flesh, the implication being that all flesh is to be slaughtered and eaten. Not surprisingly, as soon as she and Ofglen leave All Flesh, she looks up at the sky and thinks the clouds look like headless sheep—sacrificial animals. She and Ofglen then walk past the Wall, where traitors are hanged—on hooks suspiciously like meat hooks. And when Offred sees the men dangling there, again, she figuratively describes them by comparisons to edible objects. Their covered heads look to her like “flour or dough” and they have “carrot noses” (43). Later on, after bathing, Offred says, “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (90).

It’s appropriate, although ironic, that one of the most well-known lines from Atwood’s works is “This above all—to refuse to be a victim” from Surfacing, because in the midst of all of this carnage, one message rings through the air that is
dusty with blood—violence and violation beget violence and violation. A Fran Delacourt who is abused and unloved will in turn feed off of the pain she causes her daughter. The Aunts, powerless and threatened in Gilead, will gladly control the Handmaids in their charge because "when power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (390).

The Aunts' way of dealing with victimization is to victimize the Handmaids. In *Romantic Imprisonment*, Nina Auerbach, discusses *Melmoth the Wanderer*: "the narrative moves from the prison of others' mediocrity to a vision of cannibalism inherent in all human bonds" (12). The Aunts' "cannibalization" of their charges is evident in every scene in which they appear. The following passages, spoken by Aunt Lydia, proliferate with eating images:

No worry about sunburn though, said Aunt Lydia. The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling them-selves like roast meat on a spit. . . .
And not good for the complexion, not at all, wrinkle you up like a dried apple. [After Aunt Lydia uses these similes comparing the Handmaids to food, it's no wonder Offred begins to focus on her mouth as Aunt Lydia lectures to her] . . . her mouth trembled, around her front teeth that stuck out a little and were long and yellowish. . . . Aunt Lydia pressed her hand over her mouth. (72-73)

[There is this telling lecture, again from Aunt Lydia.] We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savors in her mouth. . . . We make her salivate morally. . . . All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia, with satisfied good cheer. (145-146)

And in another lecture at the Center, Offred recalls being told that "your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you" (143).

The Handmaids might be too polluted for vultures but the Aunts still hunger for a feast of their vulnerable flesh. They gain power in Gilead by insuring the passivity of "their" Handmaids. Like vultures, they feed on the "deaths" of the Handmaids' former selves.
The image of a vulture feeding on the deaths of others parallels Atwood's use of the Gothic themes of cannibalism and vampirism in all of her novels. In her poem "Vultures" Atwood addresses the arbitrary stance of the artist: the vulture is a "frowzy old saint": ". . .What do you make of death, which you do not cause, which you eat daily?" And the vulture replies:

I make life, which is a prayer.
I make clean bones.
I make a gray zinc noise
which to me is a song.

Atwood's role as novelist—a Gothic novelist—is similar to the role of the vulture. She, as artist, does not cause the violence in the society—she digests it rather and creates a "song" by reflecting it in her works. Again, teaching through negative example, Atwood's didactic, Gothic novels demonstrate that violence begets violence, victimization leads to a heritage of suffering. Atwood, as artist, points out the
consequences of such violation. After questioning the
"bald-headed, musty" vulture, the speaker in Atwood's poem
concludes, "Well, heart, out of all this / carnage, could you do
better?" Atwood's heart is, in fact, the vulture to whom she is
speaking, and in another poem, "The Woman Makes Peace with
Her Faulty Heart" the speaker refers to her heart more than
once as a vulture. In the first stanza Atwood writes:

It wasn't your crippled rhythm
I could not forgive, or your dark red
skinless head of a vulture. . . .

In the same poem, she calls her heart a "cannibal eagle."

Atwood invites her readers into a complicit cannibalistic
relationship with her work. She, as a writer, "feeds" us this
violence, this "carnage" she turns into a "song." We, her
readers, feast on her novels, and come to a better
understanding of the reality of Gothic violence and violation in
the present world.
CHAPTER IV

GOTHIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN ATWOOD'S NOVELS

Your outline, skin
that marks you off
melts in this light
and from behind your face
the unknown appears. . . .

("A Soul, Geographically")

Through the tangle of each other
we hunt ourselves.

("A Pursuit")

One of the basic elements of Gothic literature is the
problem surrounding characters' identities. Often the conflict
of a Gothic plot revolves around character transformations.
People are not who they appear to be; their true identities come
to light through the course of the telling of the story. The
transformations that take place in Gothic novels differ from transformations that take place in other genres in that characters in Gothic works change and assume other frightening, often monstrous, identities. For instance, in a Bildungsroman, the transformation from youth to adulthood can be frightening and yet healthy and necessary, but in a Gothic work, transformations are often grotesque mutations. In Charles Brockden Brown's Wieland, for example, the action of the novel revolves around mistaken perceptions and false identities. What astounds Clara and keeps her from knowing the truth for so long is that the real villain is her brother, Wieland, who has gone mad. Appropriately, the subtitle of the work is "The Transformation."

Characters' perceptions of other characters alter drastically in the course of the Gothic tale. William Patrick Day in In the Circle of Fear and Desire, writes, "The Gothic
world is one of unresolved chaos, of continuous transformation, of cruelty and fear, of the monstrous that is the shadow and mockery of the human" (8). Certainly, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* revolves around the transformation of Dr. Jekyll into the monster that mocks and overshadows his former self. Often in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic works, the focal character, always a young, naive girl, unsure of the intent of those around her, becomes confused about who she is as well. For instance, as was discussed in Chapter Two, in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, plot complications are built around mistaken identities. Adeline's confusion about others increases so that she starts to doubt her own identity:

While she sat musing, her fancy, which now wandered in the regions of terror, gradually subdued reason. There was a glass before her upon the table, and she feared to raise her looks toward it, lest some other face than her own should meet her eyes. (134)
Changed by Atwood, a loss of identity is not a source of terror as much as it is a necessary rite of passage for her main characters. Mirrors are central in her novels, as her characters' perceptions of themselves are distorted and eventually transformed. Atwood hints at the positive nature of some transformations in *Survival* when she discusses her basic victim positions. Position Three is "To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable" (37). Atwood goes on to write that this role "is a dynamic position, rather than a static one" (38). So change for Atwood's characters can be a positive experience. Some of Atwood's characters, however, never undergo a transformation for the better, and some are changed against their will—victimized and transformed by others.

There are three basic types of Gothic transformations
that take place in Atwood's novels. One transformation occurring in her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, and in her latest novel, *Cat's Eye*, is a sort of melding of personalities with those of the protagonists. In these works, the central characters' identities are fused with other characters. This is a typical pattern in Gothic literature, as Mary K. Patterson Thornburg, in her work *The Sentimental/Gothic Myth*, observes, "In the Gothic, a sort of cultural nightmare in which boundaries of identity fixed in the normal world have little meaning, each character and object is in some degree part of the protagonist, as the people and objects in dreams are part of the dreamer" (52). Examples of this type of identity melding abound in Gothic literature, such as Cathy and Heathcliff believing they are a part of each other in *Wuthering Heights*, or critics' conjectures that Frankenstein and his monster are extremely different segments of one personality.
The second type of transformation that occurs in Atwood's Gothic novels is the change caused by the death of someone close to the protagonist at the beginning of the work. The main characters are altered or transformed by this loss—often the death of a parent. In Ann Radcliffe's novels, for instance, her heroines are usually left orphaned at the beginning of her novels, and this leads them on a journey—a quest—during which they discover previously unknown facts about their families and themselves. Three of Atwood's novels are centered around this type of transformation: *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, and *Life Before Man*. In *Surfacing*, the action begins after the disappearance (and we find out later, death) of her father. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood adds a twist to this formula by setting the action in this work after the narrator's "death"—Joan's faked suicide. The book written after *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, begins following the real suicide of a
character, Chris Beecham.

At times Atwood works within the Gothic tradition and at other times she transcends it. The third type of transformation in her novels involves such a transcendence in that characters are caught in transformations. Protagonists are trapped in altered states in *Bodily Harm* and the novel written right after it, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even though we are never sure if they escape their unwelcomed transformations alive, at least Rennie in *Bodily Harm* and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* live long enough to tell their own stories, and just the telling of their tales is, in an important sense, a means for them to begin to transcend the traps in which they find themselves caught, for awareness necessarily precedes acts of self-emancipation. From the title of Atwood's novel, *The Edible Woman*, one would think the central conflict is the threat that Marian, the may be consumed by those around her.
Certainly that concern is central in this work, and was discussed in Chapter Three. However, another problem Marian faces is who she is—who she is becoming. Many critics have suggested that Marian’s crisis begins when Peter asks her to marry him. But Marian’s identity crisis begins before that even occurs. Early in the novel, Marian wonders who—or what—she will turn into: "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn’t become one of the men upstairs, I couldn’t become a machine person or one of the questionnaire marking ladies, as that would be a step down" (19). Marian’s quandry about what to turn into is in part triggered by having to join the pension plan at Seymour Surveys. Marian tell us, "I signed, but after Mrs. Grot had left I was suddenly quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have" (19). True—it does bother her more than it should have, and this is when Marian’s neurosis begins. Marian’s thoughts of her signed
pension plan being filed away are filled with morbid, death-related images: "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" (20). Marian feels literally as if her fate is being sealed before she does something more with her life. The name of her employer, Seymour Surveys, takes on ironic overtones, for, at this point, a part of Marian feels that if she stays in this "dead-end" job, she will be unable to see more—unable to survey her other options.

Since Marian is beginning to wonder who she can or will turn into before it is too late, she focuses on two acquaintances who offer her two extreme possibilities: Ainsley, her headstrong roommate, and Duncan, a strange, surreal character she meets while conducting a beer survey. Ainsley is as carefree as Marian is uptight. The reader soon learns, along with Marian, that Ainsley, her single roommate, is
scheming to get pregnant. Ainsley does not necessarily want to
get married, but she does want to become a mother... a fact
Marian finds shocking. Ainsley explains to the unbelieving
Marian: “Every woman should have at least one baby... it's
even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest
femininity” (40). In order to trap a suitable father for her
baby, Ainsley changes into a caricature of an innocent,
wide-eyed girl. She shows up at a bar to meet her prey, and
Marian is shocked by her transformation:

She [Ainsley] had dug out from somewhere a cotton
creation I'd never seen before, a pink and
light-blue gingham check on white with a ruffle
around the neck. Her hair was tied behind her
head with a pink bow and on one of her wrists she
had a tinkly silver charm-bracelet. Her makeup
was understated, her eyes carefully but not
noticeably shadowed to make them twice as
large and round and blue, and she had sacrificed
her long finger-nails, biting them nearly to the
quick so that they had a jagged school-girlish
quality. I could see she was determined. (68-69)
Here Atwood is obviously humorously ridiculing the stereotypical "little girl" image that men find so attractive. Marian is somewhat frightened by Ainsley's grotesque mutation, but what really horrifies her is the prospect of becoming pregnant.

Marian's terror of motherhood is evident, first of all, when she goes to visit her old college friend, Clara, who is expecting. Clara's transformation, caused by her pregnancy, seems grotesque—even monstrous—to Marian: "She [Clara] lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and tiny pale-yellow flower" (31). Later on, Marian's fears of being trapped by motherhood in a patriarchal society are subtly aired in her description of Clara's maternity blouse, very similar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's description
of the yellow wallpaper in her chilling story by that title: "... her [Clara's] body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers. I studied the pattern of bright flowers on the maternity smock she was wearing; the stylized petals and tendrils moved with her breathing, as though they were coming alive" (36). So when Ainsley tries to get pregnant at the same time that Clara is expecting, Marian feels threatened by this—fearful that Ainsley's decision might affect her. That night, after Marian learns of Ainsley's desire for motherhood, she dreams that she is dissolving: "The alarm clock startled me out of a dream in which I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent" (43). Even though Marian had gone to bed worrying about what would happen to Ainsley, her dream focuses on
herself—disappearing and then what?—perhaps becoming
Ainsley. In fact, one significant detail of the book is that
Ainsley becomes pregnant by Len (Marian’s friend) in Marian’s
bed (the same day Clara has her baby).

When Marian hears that Clara has given birth, she again
thinks of Clara undergoing grotesque transformations:

She was thinking that now Clara was deflating
toward her normal size again. . . . she would no
longer feel as though she was addressing a
swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead . . . a
semi-person—of sometimes, she thought, several
people, a cluster of hidden personalities that she
didn’t know at all. . . . (117-118)

Here, Atwood adds a new dimension to Marian’s fear of
being like Ainsley and/or Clara. Her repulsion at becoming
pregnant is for her a Gothic possibility because pregnancy, in
her mind, becomes a metaphor for some other life hiding within
your own. Claire Kahane makes a similar point in her article "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity": "Pregnancy structures a drama with the body itself as subject, and thus often arouses primitive fears about bodily integrity so interrelated with one's sense of self" (57).

Thus, on the one side, Marian has an option of what to become, the examples of Clara and Ainsley—earth mothers who overwhelm her with too much life (or too many lives). Her other option is the other extreme—a character surrounded with death images, a character who celebrates nothingness—Duncan.

A central scene in the novel symbolically portrays Marian's view of these two possibilities. When taking a bath, Marian notices three reflections of herself in the faucet: "How peculiar it was to see three reflections of yourself at the same time...her body parts suddenly bloated [like Ainsley or Clara] or diminished [Duncan] "(224). The tripling images continue as
Marian gets out of the tub and sees herself reflected in the bedroom mirror—with two dolls, one on either side of her, the dark one (symbolic of Duncan with his raven hair) and "the blonde-one [with] the round blue eyes" (definitely representing Ainsley). One is reminded of the stereotypically Gothic women figures—the dark, sinister woman contrasted with the blonde innocent, typically, the heroine. Atwood writes, "By the strength of their separate visions they were trying to pull her apart" (225-226).

Thus, if Ainsley is pulling towards life, Duncan is pulling Marian towards death. Duncan is surrounded by a myriad of death images; Marian's descriptions of him are very Gothic. The first time she meets Duncan, she tells us, "He was cadaverously thin...an emaciated figure." Duncan's skin was "nearly colorless" (48), and he appears like a victim of torture: "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" (49). His room has a coffin-like appearance; when
Marian enters it, she describes the bedroom as "a white-walled
oblong box" (51). Later on, Marian meets him in the "white
space of the laundromat" (102) and notices that there "is
something [about Duncan] that suggested rather an unnaturally
old man, old far beyond consolation" (102).

Duncan draws Marian toward death in the sense that he is
attracted to death-like scenes and because Marian is curious
about Duncan, she passively follows him. Duncan literally
takes her by the hand and leads her to scenes celebrating
nothingness. At one point he describes for Marian his vision of
an ideal landscape:

I have this great idea for permanent leaves on
trees. . . . I'd have them white. Black trunks and
white leaves. . . . The thing I like about the place I
come from, it's a mining town. . . . . . it has no
vegetation. . . it's barren, nothing but the barren rock. . . . Nothing would grow there even if you planted it, I used to go out of the town and sit on the rocks, about this time of year, waiting for the snow. . . . (147)

Obviously, this vision is completely opposite that of the lush garden where Marian and Ainsley visit the pregnant Clara because, unlike them, Duncan is a necrophiliac—attracted to death and deserted landscapes. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum in *The Gothic Imagination* defines "necrophilia" as "death-oriented obsessions. . . literally the love of death, which involves a fascination with the inorganic" (134) and goes on to observe, "The necrophile is drawn to darkness, caves, or the depths of the sea, to the frozen white oceans we see in Frankenstein in which even vegetation is absent" (135). Duncan definitely fits this description. One of his favorite places in Toronto is a display of a dead body curled in a fetal position at the museum. He pulls Marian there and shows her the exhibit, which he
ironically labels his "womb symbol" (192). Marian finds the scene morbid and tells Duncan, "It's not natural to like it [death]" she protested, turning toward him. He was grinning at her" (192) a Gothic grin—to be sure. Later, Duncan asks Marian to escape with him, but, again, he leads her to a place celebrating nothingness: the ravine in the center of the city. Duncan tells her, "I like this place. Especially now in winter, it's so close to absolute zero... in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing" (271).

Marian suspects a strange bent in Duncan the first time they meet when she interviews him about Moose beer. In response to most of her questions, Duncan's replies involve some sort of grotesque death. Atwood's sense of humor is evident in this scene, where Duncan insists on his morbid non sequiturs no matter what the cue from Marian. Atwood juxtaposes the inane commercial phrases with Duncan's
unremittingly morbid responses. Marian asks him what the phrase "long cool swallow" connotes and he says, "It's a bird, white, falling from a great height. Shot through the heart, in winter" (52). Then she questions his response to "healthy hearty taste" and he replies, "It's one of those cannibal stories. . .the husband kills the wife's lover, or vice versa, and cuts out the heart and makes it into a stew or a pie and serves it up in a silver dish, and the other one eats it" (53). Marian is really frightened at this point but feels compelled to finish the interview, so she asks him about "Tingly, heady, rough-and-ready" and hears, "The first bit gives me an image of someone with a head made out of glass being hit with a stick" (53).

One questions why Marian would feel attracted to this sort of a character, and one also wonders when reading this novel if the necrophiliac Duncan may be just a figment of
Marian's imagination. His actual existence is questionable. An air of unreality pervades every meeting they have. For example, during the beer survey discussed above, things are said that make one unsure if the interview really takes place. At one point, Marian says, "That means I won't be able to count your interview" [and thinks to herself] I had forgotten for the moment that it wasn't real" (54). When Marian leaves his apartment, she glances down at the notes she had been taking during their interview and realizes that there are none: "...all I could see on the page was a blur of grey scribbling" (55).

The next time Marian meets Duncan (he mysteriously materializes at the laundromat), he makes an unusual remark about their first encounter: "It was quite strange when you walked in the other day and turned out not to be" (98). Likewise, Marian notices that the light in the laundromat makes him look "unearthly" and when she asks Duncan where he
is from, he won't answer her. As this meeting ends, Marian kisses him but "can remember no sensation at all" (103). Again, when she goes to the movie theatre one night, the night Ainsley conceives in her bed, she thinks she sees—or hears—Duncan seated in the row with her. Atwood writes that "he [Duncan] had suddenly materialized" (127). The location of Duncan's apartment is also nebulous and unreal. Marian goes there "almost automatically" and Atwood writes that Marian "had never given it any specific place in the city" (139). When Marian arrives, she finds that Duncan had broken the mirror because he was afraid he wouldn't be reflected in it. Duncan makes some significant comments to her during this encounter that, once again, put his existence in question. He says, ". . . really I'm not human at all, I come from the underground" (144). And two statements he makes at this pivotal point in the novel lead the reader to wonder if he is actually a part of Marian's
psyche: "You look sort of like me in that" Duncan says and a sort of melding of their personalities occurs. Atwood observes, "She [Marian] 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" (148). Later on we find out that Duncan has no birth certificate.

If Duncan is merely born out of Marian's imagination, the question of purpose remains. What is the function of this Gothic character? His perhaps imaginary existence could represent Marian's withdrawal from life. As was discussed in Chapter Two, one of the ways Marian's neurosis manifests itself is that she becomes anorexic. Is she, in some sense, emulating the starved appearance of the death-loving Duncan? Of course, Marian does begin eating by the end of the novel when she devours part of the woman-shaped cake she bakes.
Significantly, however, Atwood writes that Marian "plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head" (280). Atwood's readers, familiar with her repeated images, will recognize the separation of head from body as a negative symbol. Readers of Surfacing understand that its protagonist begins to heal when, toward the end of that novel, she again feels whole. However, even though the ending of The Edible Woman is somewhat positive in that Marian at least starts eating again, it is worrisome that Marian allows Duncan to eat the head of her cake, the last action that occurs in the novel. Certainly this ending, although ambiguous, cannot be viewed as a life-affirming act. Unfortunately, Marian does not listen to a seemingly insignificant speech Ainsley gives her toward the beginning of the work: "You're always thinking in terms of either/or. The thing is wholeness" (40). Marian, feeling uncomfortable about the role Ainsley (and Clara) offer her,
should realize there are many other options open to her and resist feeling compelled to convert to the other extreme, represented by the real or imagined Duncan.

The other Atwood novel that has as its central transformation a Gothic melding of personalities is *Cat's Eye*. Atwood alerts us to this central issue early in the work when she writes, "There is never only one, of anyone" (6). As was discussed in Chapter One, Elaine Risley returns to Toronto for her art exhibit, a retrospective, significantly named, for she returns to the scene of painful childhood memories and confronts them there. With mixed emotions, she looks through the streets of Toronto for her old friend and nemesis, Cordelia. Even after so much time has passed, Elaine feels close to Cordelia and realizes there is no one else but Cordelia with whom she would share her most private thoughts. However, when Elaine considers confiding in Cordelia, she thinks, "But
which Cordelia?" (6)

An ironic line occurs early in the book when Elaine
bemoans, "What I'd like to be is transformed, which becomes
less possible..." (46). The reader understands that Elaine is
transformed, although not in a positive way. A central symbol
in the work is twin sets (matching sweater sets) because
Elaine and Cordelia are each other's twin, transformed into a
part of the other because they feed off each other's pain
(discussed in detail in Chapter Three). First Cordelia
symbolically vampirizes Elaine by torturing her. Then Elaine
turns monstrous, tormenting Cordelia like an expert. In a
sense, they become Gothic blood sisters, twins--reflections of
each other's cruelty. At one point, Elaine sees herself twinned
in Cordelia's eyes: "There I am in her mirror eyes, in duplicate
and monochrome, and a great deal smaller than life-size" (322).

Atwood presents a central scene in *Cat's Eye*, like the
scene in *The Edible Woman* of the two dolls doubling Marian in the mirror, to symbolize the complex relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. Cordelia steals two horror comics from a local drugstore, and she and Elaine read the seemingly silly, yet gruesome stories on the way home. These comics, dime-store Goths for children, richly symbolize the way Cordelia and Elaine are inextricably connected. All of the stories involve a transformation of some kind. First, Cordelia reads aloud a story about young girls who supernaturally trade places:

Cordelia reads a story about two sisters, a pretty one and one who has a burn covering half her face... The burned one hangs herself in front of a mirror, out of jealousy. But her spirit goes into the mirror, and the next time the pretty one is brushing her hair in front of that mirror, she looks up and there's the burned one looking back at her. This is a shock and she faints, and the burned one gets out of the mirror and into the pretty one's body. (225)
This story of the ugly and beautiful sisters trading bodies is obviously symbolic of the street-wise Cordelia victimizing the then-innocent Elaine until something "dies" within Elaine and she becomes the tormentor, replacing Cordelia in that role.

Elaine reads "one about a man and a woman who drown at sea but find out they aren't dead exactly. Instead they are enormously bloated and fat. . ." (226). Elaine's story, although seemingly unrelated to any occurrence in the action of the novel, again represents the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. The image of rising, undead, from the water is very reminiscent of that episode when Elaine rises from the freezing waters of the ravine, a changed person. The fact that there are two "resurrected," bloated people in her story could symbolize Elaine and Cordelia's feeding off each other's pain.
(their vampiristic/cannibalistic tendencies).

Finally, the third horror comic story mentioned is another one of a weird resurrection from the water. Atwood writes, "Cordelia reads one about a dead man coming back out of a swamp, covered with dripping, peeling-off flesh, to strangle the brother who pushed him into the swamp in the first place. . ." (226). Here again, Elaine is like the vengeful, undead brother, with her "peeling-off flesh" from her hands and feet, results of a form of self mutilation because she feels so victimized by Cordelia. In case the reader misses the significance of this scene, at the end of it Atwood has Elaine share these thoughts: "I'm afraid I'll find out that there's someone else trapped inside my body; I'll look into the bathroom mirror and see the face of another girl. . . (227).

Atwood also spells out the transformational change of identities in the scene where Elaine describes the only picture
she has ever done of Cordelia:

_Half a Face_, it's called: an odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall, like emblems in the Renaissance, . . . is another face, covered with a white cloth. (243)

The white cloth is much like a shroud, covering the "dead" half of both of them. Here, as in the earlier scenes, Atwood plays on the idea of being two faced. The picture itself becomes a pun on being two-faced--double-faced, or actually sharing half of the same face. Atwood reiterates this idea because just before Elaine describes this picture of Cordelia, she is wondering what to wear to the opening of her art exhibit and thinks, "I could strap on some of Jon's axmurder special effects, the burnt face with its one peeled bloodshot eye. . . ." (242). Significantly, earlier Elaine had described this mask
that fascinates her: "also there's part of a face, with the skin
blackened and withered, made to fit over the actor's real face.
A monster, warped by others, bent on revenge" (18). This
description is also very much like the horror comic tale of the
two sisters, one with the burned half of the face. Elaine
continues the description of the picture:

Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am
afraid of Cordelia. I'm not afraid of seeing
Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in
some way we've changed places, and I've forgotten
when. (243)

When Elaine first becomes interested in art, the reader
can sense that she is drawn to it as a means of expressing her
inner pain that she has carried with her for years. Particularly,
she is "fascinated with the effects of glass, and of other
light-reflecting surfaces" (347). Elaine is especially
interested in Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*, focusing on two figures reflected in a pier glass on the wall. Atwood writes, "These figures reflected in the mirror are slightly askew, as if a different kind of gravity, a different arrangement of space, exists inside, locked in, sealed up in the glass as if in a paperweight. This round mirror is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking..." (347). Although Elaine cannot understand the attraction she feels toward this piece of art (actually titled *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*—a work known for its subtle symbolism), the reader knows that Elaine subconsciously is fascinated with it because the seemingly minor detail of the pier glass locking in two figures symbolizes her and Cordelia twinning each other. Atwood's mistaken title for the work is surely intentional, used as a means of emphasizing the idea of two becoming one. And Elaine's description of the round mirror as a single eye is
reminiscent of another central image of the work—the cat's eye marble—and another important theme in the work, being able to see things clearly. At this point in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine intuitively is attracted to these pier glass figures although she cannot yet clearly see why. An air of sadness pervades *Cat's Eye*, a sense of loss, for Elaine has lost half of herself to Cordelia. They became part of each other through diminishment, not growth. The significantly named "Half a Face" chapter begins with this idea of something lost—something missing. Elaine explains, "...I would go into churches...I didn't know I was looking for something..." (211). She doesn't know what to look for because she still has not admitted her complex relationship to Cordelia. Then she tells of an instance in a church in Mexico, where she and Ben were visiting:
Then I saw the Virgin Mary. . . . She didn't have a crown. Her head was bowed, her face in shadow. . . . and all over her black dress were pinned what I thought at first were stars, but which were instead little brass or tin arms, legs, hands, sheep, donkeys, chickens, and hearts. I could see what these were for: she was a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost. (212)

Elaine can understand the point in praying to this Virgin Mary, but she doesn't pray to her because she "didn't know what to pray for. What was lost, what could I pin on her dress" (212).

Toward the end of the novel, Elaine realizes that she and Cordelia "are like twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (434) (like the two figures locked in the pier glass). But because Elaine never sees Cordelia back in Toronto, even though she expects (and hopes) to run into her everywhere she goes, the novel ends with Elaine feeling a sense of longing for something irretrievably lost. Elaine finally understands
that she has "been prepared for almost anything: except absence, except silence" (435). In the final pages of the novel, Elaine knows that she and Cordelia will never again meet and so they will never really be whole because they will not be able to undo the pain they caused each other as children and grow up to be friends—old friends like the two women Elaine sees on the flight back to Vancouver. The star imagery, earlier symbolizing lost things on the Virgin Mary's skirt, returns here when Elaine recalls the scientific fact that stars are also, in a sense, irretrievably lost, "not eternal as was once thought" but rather "echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing" (445).

Elaine cannot retrieve the transformed part of her that has become Cordelia, but at least she finally realizes this and lays that part of her to rest. However, Joan Foster, the narrator/protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, can never accept the fact that she is transformed. Even though Joan sheds her former
overweight self physically, she can never do so emotionally.

Elaine, in *Cat's Eye*, feels a part of herself is missing, whereas
Joan, in *Lady Oracle*, confronts too many identities.

When Joan arrives in Terremoto, Italy, as part of her
escape she assumes a new identity, cutting her hair and
ritualistically burning it strand by strand in a candle's flame.
Subconsciously, Joan must realize even then that she has only
created another trap for herself, because after cutting her hair,
she says she looks like a concentration camp inmate...an
obvious simile of entrapment. Her transformation is not a
success; she is recognized almost immediately by the owner
of the house in which she is staying. Joan "commits suicide" in
order to kill her former selves, but ironically, this book is as
much a retrospective as is *Cat's Eye*, for Joan keeps reliving
past events. Even though she has supposedly disposed of her
former identities in order to live a new future, very little of
this novel takes place in the present. Joan tries to live in a fantasy world, and although she is secretly a writer of Gothic romances, in reality, she cannot gloss over her fat self lurking just below the surface. Joan admits, "...there were really only two kinds of people: fat ones and thin ones. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me..." (239).

The image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant is a telling one, for the combining of something big flying is related to a significant occurrence early in Joan's life that damages her self-esteem perhaps irreparably. She was taking dancing lessons, with the prodding of her mother. Joan enjoyed the lessons and was excited about the dance recital in which she
would perform as a butterfly with the rest of the girls in her
class. The chubby young Joan was looking forward to
transforming--even for one night--into a beautiful butterfly.
However, a horrible transformation occurs; instead of getting
her wings, Joan is forced by her teacher and her mother into
playing the part of a mothball because they think she looks
ridiculous in her butterfly outfit. While the acquisition of
wings empowered Dumbo, the denial of her wings serves to
lessen Joan's self-esteem even more. Thus, she mutates into
something monstrous and literally repelling. Joan remembers:

"This isn't me," I kept saying to myself, "they're making me do it"; yet even though I was concealed
in the teddy-bear suit [to look like a mothball] which flopped about me and made me sweat, I felt
naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it.
(51-52)
Joan continues to play the part of the ridiculous dancer throughout her life. As was discussed in Chapter Three, she acts the bumbler to feed Arthur's ego—as well as her mother's for a time. The distorted mirror in the funhouse that Joan and her Aunt Lou visit so often is an important metaphor used by Atwood to portray Joan's self image. When she looks in a mirror—even when thin—Joan is unable to see the beautiful reflection, but only a distorted image of an overweight, unlovable child. The canned laughter constantly playing in the background of this rather Gothic amusement park attraction symbolizes the laughs and derision the bumbling Joan plays to throughout her life.

Joan tells us, even in the first line of the novel, "I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it." Joan as an adult looking back on the dance recital
admits, "I was hoping for magic transformations, even then"

(47). We can see that she is still hoping with this supposed
suicide for a magic transformation that does not take place.

Even toward the end of the novel, when Joan decides to relive
her failed dance recital and claim the part of the butterfly,
disaster strikes:

From now on, I thought, I would dance for no one
but myself. . . . I raised myself onto my bare toes
and twirled around, tentatively at first. . . . I
remembered the music, I remembered every step
and gesture [from that recital long ago]. . . . I
closed my eyes. Wings grew from my shoulders. . .

_Shit._ I'd danced right through the broken glass, in
my bare feet too. Some butterfly. I limped into
the main room, trailing bloody footprints. . . .

(368)

Alas, Joan still has no wings with which to escape from
reality. Instead, her dreams are "mothballed."

_Because she attempts to view herself in such a romantic_
light, Joan's imagination tries to transform other
people--especially men--into larger-than-life figures also.
Then Joan becomes disillusioned when she realizes that the
men in her life are only average after all. Ironically, Joan
thinks the men transform, refusing to understand that, in
reality, it is just that her fantasies eventually fail her. Just
as her "suicide" fails to transform her, Joan's men also fail to
satisfactorily transform. This pattern begins with her
relationship with Paul, a Polish count. Joan is intrigued by
Paul's story about his escape from the Nazis and by the
romantic image this conjures up. But the more she learns about
Paul, the less heroic and more pitiful he is. As was discussed
in Chapter Two, Joan discovers that Paul writes nurse novels
as Mavis Quilp. Even Paul is disgusted with the transformation
he has undergone since escaping to England. As Paul becomes
less heroic in Joan's eyes, she perceives this only as a change
within him—not in her perception of him: "I couldn't tell about
Paul's identity either, for as time went on he began to change.
Or possibly I merely learned more about him" (176-177).
Actually, when reality threatens to move in, in the form of his
mother, Joan makes up her mind to move out. Joan thinks to
herself, "How could I be sleeping with this peculiar man, who
was no Bell Telephone Mercury, without being in love with
him?" (178). Joan had only been attracted to a fantasy of
hers—Paul had never really changed.

In escaping Paul, Joan meets Arthur, and again tries to
perceive him in a romantic light. Hoping for a fairytale
relationship, Joan makes excuses for Arthur's indifference:
"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...confess his
long-standing devotion. I would confess mine, and we would be
happy" (219). Alas, the same pattern repeats itself with
Arthur. When Arthur's heroic/romantic side fails to
materialize, Joan thinks it is because he has changed--has
transformed: "Once I'd thought of Arthur as single-minded,
single-hearted, single-bodied. . . . But I soon discovered there
were as many of Arthur as there were of me" (236). Eventually,
Joan loses interest in Arthur, as she did in Paul, because she
thinks Arthur is no longer romantic when really he never was.
Joan explains: "I'd given up expecting him to be a cloaked,
sinuous and faintly menacing stranger. . . . cloaked strangers
didn't leave their socks on the floor or stick their fingers in
their ears. . . " (24).

Joan thinks she has finally found the hero her heart has
been longing for in The Royal Porcupine. He even wears a cape.
However, the fantasy affair cannot be sustained either. He gets
too serious about Joan and reveals his true identity to her: ".
there was an ambush waiting for me. The Royal Porcupine was there, but he was no longer the Royal Porcupine. He'd cut his hair and shaved off his beard. He was standing in the middle of the floor, no cape, no cane, no gloves; just a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that said Honda on it. . . . He looked plundered" (301).

To be "normal" is a travesty in Joan's eyes perhaps because her mother could never love her as she was. Therefore, Joan carries with her the idea that to be loved—you have to be someone, or something, different than you really are. Early in the novel, Joan remembers, "The only way I could have helped her [her mother] to her satisfaction would have been to change into someone else. . . ." (56). Pitifully, even at the end of the work, Joan is looking for another means of escape through transformation: "I was searching for a city I could move to, where I would be free not to be myself" (155). We see her on her way to Rome to be a science fiction writer. Ironically, the
reader realizes what Joan does not. She will never be free not
to be herself.

Life Before Man, Atwood's next novel after Lady Oracle,
also begins with a suicide—a real one—unlike Joan's staged
suicide. Chris Beecham killed himself by blowing his head off
with a shotgun. He leaves the other characters stunned by this
grotesque transformation. The mutilated shadow of the
headless Chris haunts Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje. Once they
accept the possibility that someone they know could change in
such a grotesque manner, Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje imagine
each other also mutating in bizarre, monstrous ways. Chris's
suicide with its attendant physical mutilation allows the other
characters to realize that this kind of transformation is
possible. They daydream about horrible changes in those close
to them.

Elizabeth, the focal character of the work, has suffered
from her strained relationship with her Aunt Muriel. She believes that Muriel was responsible for the deaths of her sister, Caroline, and of her mother as well. While Elizabeth can intimidate almost anyone, even she feels cowed in her aunt's presence. Outwardly, Elizabeth fears Aunt Muriel's power over her, but inwardly, Elizabeth compensates by fantasizing about her demise: "If she [Elizabeth] pronounces that ultimate magic word, surely Auntie Muriel will change into something else; will swell, blacken, bubble like burned sugar, giving off deadly fumes" (200-201). When Elizabeth discovers Aunt Muriel is, in fact, dying, even then her imagination runs wild with revenge: "Or she'll [Elizabeth] threaten to bury her somewhere other than her own cemetery plot. She'll cremate her and sprinkle her over Center Island, where the Italians play soccer" (258). However, Elizabeth softens when she sees how changed Aunt Muriel actually is: ". . .this is not Auntie Muriel. The Auntie Muriel of
Elizabeth’s childhood has melted, leaving in her place this husk
..." (260). Because her aunt has transformed into a far less
threatening person—a "husk" of her former self—Elizabeth is
able to comfort her aunt even though she can never forgive he

While Elizabeth entertains these Gothic fantasies about
her aunt, her husband, Nate, and his new love, Lesje, project
similar monstrous changes onto Elizabeth. Ironically, at one
point, Elizabeth concludes that "...living with Nate has been
like living with a huge mirror in which her flaws were
magnified and distorted" (189). However, even Elizabeth cannot
imagine how much distortion her flaws undergo in the mind of
Nate. When Nate meets with Elizabeth to ask about their
divorce, Atwood writes: "He has a swift desire to stand up,
lean over her, put his hands around her neck and squeeze" (238).
Nate’s imaginings continue and "he resorts to an amusement of
his high-school days, when he would practice silent
metamorphoses on his teachers. *Hocus pocus*, and Elizabeth is a giant white sponge. . . . *Kapow*, and she has bubonic plague.

The mother of his children gasps, turns mottled and purpled, swells and bursts" (238).

Lesje also imagines grotesque mutations for Elizabeth:

To pass the time she begins to classify Elizabeth, a familiar exercise by now. If she had Elizabeth on a shelf, nicely ossified, the label would read: CLASS: *Chondrichthyes*. . . . Today she classifies Elizabeth as a shark; on other days it's a huge Jurassic toad, primitive, squat, venomous. . . . (245)

Lesje perhaps should not feel so free to imagine these "silent metamorphoses" of Elizabeth, for isn't she, in a sense, taking Elizabeth's place as Nate's love interest? For example, an important detail in *The Edible Woman* is Ainsley's sexual encounter in Marian's bed. In *Life Before Man*, a similar
melding takes place when Lesje and Nate have sex in Elizabeth's bed. In a sense, Nate is symbolically putting Lesje in Elizabeth's place with this violational act. Lesje senses this, for immediately afterward, she daydreams about how molecules dissolve and recombine in new shapes:

All the molecular materials now present in the earth and its atmosphere were present at the creation of the earth itself. . . . These molecular materials have merely combined, disintegrated, recombined. . . . Lesje contemplates this fact, which she finds soothing. She is only a pattern. She is not an immutable object. There are no immutable objects. Some day she will dissolve. (153)

While Lesje's wonderings about these kinds of scientific theories seem so unrelated to what has just happened, her thoughts are not illogical when one understands the Gothic transformations taking place within the minds of the
characters of this novel. Lesje's ideas about this soon become
more focused and she wonders if, in fact, she is transforming
into Elizabeth: "Maybe she's been thinking too much about
Elizabeth. . . . If she isn't careful she'll turn into Elizabeth"
(247). Again, Atwood introduces the Gothic idea of shared
identity here; lines that delineate one person from another
blur. No wonder Lesje's final grotesque imagining is about the
baby she believes she is expecting: "Surely, no child conceived
in such rage could come to much good. She would have a
throwback, a reptile, a mutant of some kind with scales and a
little horn on the snout" (270). If the imagination can
transform so that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," then
surely the grotesque is, likewise, in the eyes of Elizabeth,
Nate, and Lesje

A death is also the catalyst that launches the action in
Atwood's novel Surfacing. The nameless narrator has been
called back to the remote island on which she grew up because her father is missing. At the beginning of the work, she does not yet know or will not accept the fact that he is dead. The narrator fears that her father has gone insane because of the isolation of the island. She recalls that, even in her early childhood, she feared that her father would change in some frightening way:

It's like the times he used to play hide and seek with us in the semi-dark after supper, it was different from playing in a house, the space to hide in was endless; even when we knew which tree he had gone behind there was the fear that what would come out when you called would be someone else. (58)

The fear expressed here is not only Gothic but distinctly Canadian as well. Whereas Americans view uncharted territory as land of opportunity, Canadians, laden with the vast expanse
of unsettled wilderness to their north, view it as threatening
and overwhelming. The narrator also considers this Canadian
viewpoint as she struggles to complete an illustration of a
princess for a children's story: "...this isn't a country of
princesses, The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of the Seven
Splendours don't belong here. They must have told stories about
something as they sat around the kitchen range at night:
bewitched dogs and malevolent trees..." (62-63). The
bewitched dog image (much like the Gothic werewolf) comes up
again a few pages later when the narrator, still believing her
father has gone mad, recalls something he said when she was
young: "They believe if you don't go to Mass you'll turn into a
wolf." 'Will you?' I said. ...Maybe that's why they didn't waste
any sweat searching for my father, they were afraid to, they
thought he'd turned into a wolf..." (65). The narrator in a sense
hopes that her father is insane rather than dead--his
transformation would be better than his cessation. However, she fears for their safety if he is lurking outside the cabin, "hidden on the island somewhere and attracted by the light perhaps, looming up at the window like a huge ragged moth..."

(71). The image chosen by Atwood here is a significant one because the narrator's father was an entomologist who studied the insect life of the trees in the area. As such, one of his duties was to study moth infestations. The narrator comparing her father to something he had earlier studied is indicative of her unconscious hope that he has transformed into a more sensitive, less analytical, being, that instead of studying nature with a cold, controlling, patriarchal eye, he has become a part of it. This idea is echoed later when the narrator thinks, "Perhaps he would be unrecognizable, his former shape transfigured by age and madness and the forest" (94). The word "transfigured" connotes a positive, spiritual transformation.
Ironically hoping that this is the case, the narrator is disappointed to find the strange drawings her father had completed before his disappearance were not the result of an alteration in his mental or spiritual outlook, but merely copies of Indian drawings he had discovered in the lake. Atwood writes, "I had the proof now, indisputable, of sanity and therefore of death" (123). At this point, the narrator feels not relief so much as grief because "crazy people can come back, from wherever they go to take refuge, but dead people can’t, they are prohibited" (123). She understands that her father is dead, incapable of transforming any longer, having undergone no positive transformation. The narrator grieves not only for the loss of her father, but also for his loss at a chance to be someone different. Therefore, Atwood ironically changes the Gothic werewolf idea from something threatening to something necessary. Traditionally, the werewolf is feared as a human
being who has turned into a savage animal. However, to Atwood, ideally people should not try to ignore their animal characteristics, but rather embrace them so that they can understand their elemental nature, a change the narrator's father could now never complete.

Similarly, there is a central scene in *Surfacing* that illustrates Atwood's ideas about people understanding and incorporating their dual natures. The narrator, Joe, David, and Anna go on a fishing trip. They encounter a dead heron, hanging upside down from a tree, grotesquely transformed by its killers. At this point, the narrator considers a seemingly odd thought: "I wondered what part of them the heron was, that they needed so much to kill it" (141). However, understanding Atwood's theory that the "animal" part of a human being is the most basic, therefore most honest part, the reader can see that the heron's killers destroyed the animal because they were
afraid to face that part of their own identity that the heron represented. The narrator assumes that Americans, exploiters of the Canadian wilderness, killed the bird. When she realizes that the heron was, in fact, killed by fellow Canadians, she is forced to admit that people are not always who they seem to be. Forced to acknowledge the possibility of mistaken, or hidden, identities at this point, she thinks:

But they'd killed the heron anyway. 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... Like the Late Show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you... (153)

From this point on in the novel, the narrator begins to understand that she can no longer trust surfaces—that beneath the surface lies an unknown that needs to be reckoned with.
She also sees all the characters around her as transforming in frightening, threatening ways, turning into Americans.

Actually, the narrator thinks the characters around her are changing when it is her perception of them that alters. For instance, she comes to understand the true, monstrous person lying just below the surface of David: "The power flowed into my eyes, I could see into him... Secondhand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him..." (178-179). Joe also transforms within her perceptions. At one point she refuses to make a commitment to him and then fears his response to this: "He was growing larger, becoming alien..." (104). And after the heron incident, she fears that Joe, like David, is becoming an American: "...he was rising out of the fur husk, solid and heavy; but the cloth separated from him and I saw he was human...he was one of the killers" (172). She is
upset to realize that Joe is one of the Americans in the sense that he is a killer of the heron and that he is shedding (denying) the natural, animalistic part of himself. To become "Americanized" is not so much to transform as it is to become deformed. Joe's animal-like qualities are what had attracted the narrator to him in the first place. Anna never undergoes a frightening transformation in the narrator's eyes, except later, she sees all three of them as Americans and therefore as dangerous: "...they are all Americans now" (199).

The narrator's fear of other people increases until she feels she must escape—from all human beings and immerse herself in the wilderness. Again using the central heron image, Atwood describes the narrator's transformation into a sort of madness: "I remember the heron... My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between life and death, I multiply" (197). Here,
in a sense, the narrator resurrects the animal part of her that had been dead for so long. Also, ever since she had the abortion, the narrator has felt as if part of herself is missing. Thus, the novel is also filled with amputation images (as discussed in Chapter Three). But believing that she is again pregnant, the narrator feels driven to protect the vulnerable life within her. Atwood also uses the narrator's pregnancy as a metaphor for that part of her identity that has been hidden and distorted by the societal values around her. Thus, her previous abortion can also be viewed as the time when she "killed" her inner self in conforming to patriarchal norms around her. Now she is letting that part of her resurface.

As with significant transformations in other works, Atwood uses the mirror image in Surfacing, when the narrator realizes: "I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face. . . .reflection intruding between
my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me. . ." (205).

Her "face" has been "distorted" by the societal values that surround her. The narrator had begun to realize the shallowness of the life offered to her and other women when, upon her return to the cabin, she had rediscovered her old scrapbooks. "They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling toeless high heels. . . . On some of the pages were women's dresses clipped from mail-order catalogues, no bodies in them" (109). These role models were not living, breathing people—all surface, all facade, no flesh and blood underneath. The narrator also remembers at this point, "A lady was what you dressed up as on Halloween when you couldn't think of anything else and didn't want to be a ghost. . ." (109). Again, Atwood reiterates the idea of lack of choices—a girl could either die, or become a lady.
The idea of becoming a lady or a ghost could also have been what influenced Atwood to refer to *Surfacing* as a ghost story, for it is the story of a woman who chooses to refuse the role of the lady and so, in the sense of the dichotomy presented above, becomes a ghost. Thus, although the narrator is undergoing a mental "breakdown" here—it is a necessary one. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Much Madness is divinist Sense— / To a discerning Eye." The narrator’s "insanity" is not a trap but a freeing experience during which she can finally see with her discerning eye. Atwood presents a similar idea in her prose piece "Instructions for the Third Eye" in *Murder in the Dark*: "What's the difference between vision and a vision? The former relates to something it's assumed you've seen, the latter to something it's assumed you haven't. Language is not always dependable either" (61). This is also reminiscent of what takes place in *Surfacing*, for at the point of the narrator's
transformation, she also rejects the language of the society that has so long ensnared her: "The gods, their likenesses: to see them in their true shape is fatal. While you are human; but after the transformation they could be reached. First I had to immerse myself in the other languages" (185). The most significant transformation that occurs in Surfacing is the narrator's belief that she is turning into an animal. She imagines herself growing fur, she avoids the outhouse, leaving her droppings on the ground, she hollows a lair near a woodpile. All of this becomes her strategy for avoiding traps, her strategy for survival. Finally, her ultimate escape is to become completely inanimate: "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (213). By transforming herself ultimately into a place, the narrator begins a process by which she will eventually achieve control over herself. Judith Wilt in Ghosts of the
Gothic describes the Gothic character's desire "to manipulate the outer world to the model of his inner world; his self-control is the most precious thing in the universe to him" (37). Atwood's character imagines literally reaching this goal; her inner world becomes the outer one.

The narrator successfully descends into madness so that her true self can surface, a madness she, subconsciously, hoped her father had discovered. The narrator symbolically washes her eyes in the lake water and then plunges under the surface. Atwood writes, "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface..." (208). As the narrator begins to recover from this necessary madness, she performs a significant action: she turns the mirror back around. At that point she realizes that "withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death" (223), but her transformation—if only temporary—has opened her "third eye"
and allowed her to see life and her role in it with renewed vision. For the narrator of *Surfacing* the second type of transformation, involving the death of someone close to the protagonist, serves more successfully to transform her—in a positive, self-knowing way, than for the protagonists in *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man*.

In the last two works discussed in this chapter, Atwood, in back-to-back novels, creates heroines who are caught in transformations not of their own doing, but within these transformations, Rennie of *Bodily Harm* and Offred of *The Handmaid's Tale* are also ensnared by their own complicity. Unlike the narrator of *Surfacing* who leaves her false body floating on the surface of the lake, Rennie and Offred are doubly trapped—in "false bodies" thrust on them by outside forces—and by fearing to let the world see them as they really are. Rennie and Offred, afraid of society's straitjackets, aim for a
sort of neutrality with the world around them, but the price of this feigned peace is not just neutrality but also invisibility, their true selves hidden from sight.

Very early in *Bodily Harm*, Atwood writes, "This is the effect she [Rennie] aims for, neutrality; she needs it for her work, as she used to tell Jake. Invisibility" (15). Rennie has opted out as a reporter. She is afraid to write about flesh and blood issues: "Other people make statements, she said. I just write them down" (15). She's an entertainment writer who carefully avoids serious issues. Rennie manages to take trips in order to write travel pieces and refers to these ventures as "small absences from real life" (16). Atwood addresses Rennie's superficiality early in the work when she writes that "her articles on fake trends were just as plausible as the ones on real trends: sometimes more so..." (25). The versed Atwood reader understands that Rennie's perception of life is
more than slightly askew when she confesses: "I see into the present, that's all. Surfaces. There's not a whole lot to it" (26). Rennie soon learns differently, however. First, she is forced to face the prospect of death—her own—from breast cancer. Her surgeon, Daniel, in a sense transforms her by literally cutting away some of her body's surface. This process forces Rennie to begin to look underneath surfaces. Still trying to avoid looking beneath the surface of her life, Rennie chooses escape from so much reality, hoping, again, for an absence from life. She asks for an assignment on tropical islands. When she arrives, she is again hoping no one will see the real her:

She discovers that she's truly no longer at home. She is away, she is out, which is what she wanted. The difference between this and home isn't so much that she knows nobody as that nobody knows her. In a way she's invisible. In a way she's safe. (39)
The reader soon learns that Rennie is not really invisible and is definitely not safe. However, still believing the illusion of invisibility, Rennie is pleased when she enters her motel room and finds that the mirror is so small that "she isn't reflected anywhere" (48). But her bout with cancer has made it impossible for Rennie physically and also mentally to completely ignore life's depths. The first night she sleeps in the small motel room, Rennie "runs the fingers of her left hand over the skin of her breast, the good one. . . . From the surface you can feel nothing, but she no longer trusts surfaces" (48). Rennie's positive transformation is beginning. Ironically, through facing death, she is becoming more alive.

Rennie's discomfort with looking beneath her own surface becomes evident when she has irrational thoughts about her interior. One of her fears after her surgery is that her body will suddenly transform in a grotesque way: her
stitches will pull loose and her insides will spill out. Also, she
confesses to her surgeon, Daniel: "I don't feel human anymore. . .
I feel infested. I have bad dreams, I dream I'm full of white
maggots eating away at me from the inside" (83). Looking
beneath the surface, for Rennie, means that perhaps she will
encounter something unknown, frightening, even grotesque.

However, Rennie comes to understand the need for going
beyond superficial appearances while on the Caribbean islands
when she realizes that almost no one else is who they say they
are. Rennie begins to see that "almost nobody here is who they
say they are at first. They aren't even who somebody else
thinks they are" (150). For instance, she notices an older
couple and is taken in by their "old folks" facade. Later, she
learns that they work for the CIA. She gets ensnared in the
dirty politics revolving around the election taking place on the
islands, but not until one of the candidates is killed and another
the welfare of the people on the islands, Dr. Minnow, tries to
persuade Rennie to help his cause by reporting the truth about
the political situation on the islands. Rennie refuses, still
avoiding the important stories in her life. Her attitude here
reminds one of Atwood's ironic admonition in her poem "True
Stories": "Don't ask for the true story; / Why do you need it?"
Rennie finds out why you need it (the truth) and undergoes a
meaningful transformation by becoming a genuine reporter only
after she has been locked in a cell in the old fort on the
island--ironically the same spot where she denied Dr. Minnow's
request. Rennie begins to understand that to tell what happens
is to repel the evil some people inflict on others. Although
Atwood intentionally leaves the end of the novel ambiguous,
one thing is clear: Rennie has undergone a positive transformation. She has decided to become a serious reporter, no longer writing articles about the trend in earrings this year, but important articles on issues that go beneath the surface, that affect people's lives. Atwood writes, "She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time, then she will report" (301).

Like Rennie, transformed first by Daniel's mutilation of her body and secondly, by her ordeal in prison, Offred, the Handmaid, is caught in an outward transformation which leads, ironically, to a freeing one within. As in Rennie's case, her positive transformation is indicated in that Offred becomes, in a sense, a reporter, for Atwood's sixth novel is her tale. And within the story Offred tells about her ordeal as a handmaid, she does not describe herself as a heroine. The Offred the reader hears about through most of her tale is as complicit and
maleable as Rennie is in *Bodily Harm*. Offred goes along with the demands of her Commander; she attempts to accept her role without question. And like *Bodily Harm*, her tale ends ambiguously; Offred is, like Rennie, supposedly being sent to prison. Complicit right up to the end of her story, Offred allows herself to be led away without a fight. She tells us: "I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" (378).

Even though the ending is ambiguous, Atwood goes on to include a "Historical Notes" section after Offred's tale so that her readers will not miss the fact that Offred does tell her tale after being led away that day. Offred, according to the historians studying her story, reports her trials in Gilead by recording her story on old music tapes. The historians are not sure if she did this while in captivity or after an escape. But the importance for Atwood's readers is that Offred tells her
story and in so doing transforms from a passive victim to an active participant, thus becoming a force in her time and in the times that follow. Although she was victimized in the Gilead regime, Offred transcends that experience by reporting it. By leaving her story for those that follow her, Offred succeeds in refusing to "let the bastards keep her down."

All is not well, however, in the "Historical Notes" section, for although Offred escaped oppression in her lifetime—if only for a short while—her story is left to the discretion of the listener. Thus, just as she gives herself over to "the hands of strangers" at the end of her tale, so too her tale is left "in the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped." Unfortunately, Offred's text is left in the hands of a chauvinist man, who bestows upon himself the power of legitimatizing her "text" (her story) as recorded on the tapes. Throughout his presentation of Offred's tale, he makes sexist
comments and trivializes the handmaid's story. For instance, at one point he says of her tale, "I hesitate to use the word document" (381).

Thus, Rennie in Bodily Harm and Offred in The Handmaid's Tale succeed in some sense in recapturing ownership of their lives by owning "the word." Rennie and Offred transcend their own realities, moving from the passive stance as other people's objects to active participants—the subjects—of their own stories.
Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale, with their emphasis on the importance of transforming from passive victim to active participant and the attendant emphasis on telling one's story, serve as examples of the very kind of freeing and empowering that Atwood wants her readers to experience. Atwood is transforming her readers too, teaching us to pay attention not only to the stories being told but to the way they are interpreted. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Atwood has designs on us, her readers, as she suggests in "Murder in the Dark":

You can say the murderer is the writer, the detective is the reader, the victim is the book. Or perhaps, the murderer is the writer, the detective is the critic and the victim is the reader. ... In any case, that's me in the dark. I have designs on you. ... (30).
Through her didactic use of the Gothic, Atwood admonishes her readers to proceed through her fiction with care, to read the world around them with caution. Just as Atwood's characters recreate versions of themselves in attempts at "self-domination," rather than domination by others, so Atwood herself revises the Gothic tradition as a means of freeing women from their perceptions of themselves as victims. She does not just represent women as passively accepting their fate; Atwood assumes ownership of the Gothic inscription by creating a potentially freeing fiction in a genre that is peopled with female characters and read by a female audience. Through her inversion of Gothic elements, Atwood terrifies her audience as a means of sensitizing them to the dangers inherent in their modern world, and at the same time, suggests that such dangers do not inevitably lead to entrapment and exploitation—that by "naming the monster," her readers can
take control and redefine their lives.
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