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A Comparative Study of the Female Character in Margaret Atwood's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The following presents a comparative study of Margaret Atwood's heroines in her four novels The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, and Life Before Man. To each heroine is dedicated a chapter, where she is discussed separately. The discussion is based on general topics like: each one's background (origin, childhood, background), the response to their surroundings (friends, job), the relationships to their male partner (husbands, lovers). This detailed discussion of each heroine is followed by a comparison of the heroines to each other as well as to other women portrayed by contemporary women novelists. This comparison shows us constant, recurrent themes in Atwood's fiction which are intimately linked. The first is abormality which manifests itself through escapes, flights into fantasy, overeating, not eating, madness, suicide. The abnormalities which the female characters show, develop in response to threatening situations and are confined either to the heroines themselves (The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle) or to secondary characters as happens in Life Before Man. In the former case it is a stage of life the heroines go through and a possible learning-process, while in the latter it represents destruction and, therefore, must be avoided by the protagonists. The abnormalities affect the relations between the women and their male partners and tend to reflect the lack of success in those relationships. This lack of success is due to various factors: male oppression (The Edible Woman), lack of trust in people and fear to suffer (Surfacing), lack of self-acceptance (Lady Oracle). In Life Before Man there is not one factor respon-

sible for failure, but failure is inevitable, since the characters (male and female) are incapable of overcoming their flaws. The third recurrent theme in Atwood's novels is the treatment of adultery/betrayal as a possible alternative to unsuccessful relationships. It is seen either as an escape from reality or as an attempt at a new-beginning with another partner. Examining Atwood's position, we can say that it is critical without being radical. The feminist point-of-view presented in The Edible Woman is gradually replaced by a critical position towards the female protagonists themselves as happens in Surfacing and Lady Oracle. In Life Before Man, however, this critical position involves both sexes who present, basically, the same flaws.

RESUMO

O seguinte trabalho apresenta um estudo comparativo das da heroínas nos quatro romances de Margaret Atwood - The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle e Life Before Man. A cada personagem é dedicado um capítulo em que esta é examinada separadamente. A análise é baseada nos tópicos gerais como: "background" das heroínas (origem, infância, pais), sua reação ao meio-ambiente (amigos, trabalho), o relacionamento com seus parceiros (maridos, amantes). A esta análise detalhada de cada heroína segue-se uma comparação entre as próprias heroínas bem como um comparação com outras mulheres descritas por escritoras comtemporâneas. Esta comparação mostra-nos temas constantes e repetidos na ficção de Margaret Atwood. O primeiro tema é a anormalidade apresentada por personagens femininas e que se manifesta através de fugas, refúgio no mundo da fantasia, comida demasiada, fastio, loucura, suicídio. Estas anormalidades apresentadas pelas personagens femininas desenvolvem-se em resposta a situações ameaçadoras e restringem-se ou às própria heroínas (The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle) ou então a personagens secundárias em Life Before Man. No primeiro caso trata-se de uma fase na vida das heroínas e de um possível processo de aprendizagem, enquanto que no segundo caso a anormalidade representa destruição e, portanto, deve ser evitada. Estas anormalidades afetam o relacionamento entre as mulheres e seus parceiros e tendem a refletir a falta de sucesso destes relacionamentos. O insucesso baseia-se em vários fatores: opressão masculina (The Edible Woman), falta de confiança nas pessoas e medo de sofrer (Surfacing), falta de aceitação própria (Lady Oracle).

Em Life Before Man não há um único fator responsável pelo fracasso, mas este é inevitável, já que as personagens (masculinas e femininas) mostram-se incapazes de superar suas próprias fraquezas. O terceiro tema nos romances de Margaret Atwood é a apresentação do adultério/traição como uma possível alternativa para relacionamentos fracassados. É visto ou como fuga da realidade ou como uma tentativa de recomeçar com outro parceiro. Examinando a posição de Margaret Atwood, podemos dizer que é uma posição crítica sem ser radical. O ponto de vista feminista apresentado em The Edible Woman é gradualmente substituído por um posicionamento crítico em relação às personagens femininas em Surfacing e Lady Oracle. Em Life Before Man, entretanto, este posicionamento crítico envolve ambos os sexos que apresentam , basicamente, as mesmas falhas.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM:

Our time is a time of changes, especially concerning the role and the place of women in society. Changes involve a disconnection from familiar modes of behaviour as well as the attempt at a new-beginning, and this process cannot be seen as a guarantee of an easy life or even happiness, for it bears doubts, desperation, failures, but also hope. These aspects, however, are worthwhile being captured and recorded in literature - they are characteristic of the human condition, for they show our limitations, the desperate struggle between the real and the ideal.

> Happiness one merely lives. A burden one expresses in order to comprehend it, in order to free oneself from it. 'The person correctly utilized does not need to think about himself,' says Heinrich Mann. 'The world under which he suffers does not provoke an opposition. Words and sentences, among other things, are also opposition. A totally happy age would not have any literature.'[1]

Human beings in general and women in particular are not "correctly utilized." They need to search for their identity, for buried possibilities, and for self-realization, in spite of or apart from so-called normal feminine duties in order to (re)discover

their truly human essence.

What fascinates me is to see how these changes are reflected in the treatment of the female character in novels written by contemporary women novelists. I chose Margaret Atwood, one of the most exciting and acclaimed writers of Canadian literature, who deals with women as main characters throughout her fiction, which consists of four novels: The Edible Woman (1969), Surfacing (1972), Lady Oracle (1976), and Life Before Man (1979). So, my focal point lies on Atwood's treatment of the female character she consistently draws, similarities among her heroines' situations, her understanding of feminist issues, the picture of the man-woman relationship the novels present, and the possible evolution in the way the heroines are presented from The Edible Woman to Life Before Man.

In order to consider Margaret Atwood's novels in a larger context, it will be useful to compare her women with other women characters in novels written by contemporary women novelists. I opted for six young authors: two American, a Brazilian, an English, a French, and a Swiss-German. This group reflects a large spectrum: from a pseudo-liberalism to an even angry, radical feminism. This comparison will make possible an evaluation of Margaret Atwood's position on a more objective basis, as well as giving an idea of how other women novelists portray women.

REVIEW OF CRITICISM:

As one might expect, the quantity of criticism written about Margaret Atwood is somewhat limited at this point, the novels being as new as they are. The material on her can be divided

into three separate kinds: interviews, shorter reviews of her work in newspaper and magazines, and article-length essays on her fiction and published poetry.

The interviews are interesting because they give us a view of Margaret Atwood's thoughts - her commitment to Canada, its national values and culture, the refusal to be forced into one position, and her shy reserve concerning her private life and public role. First, her interest in matters of national culture.

> INTERVIEWER:
>
> Why do you view the increase in American influence with such alarm?
>
> ATWOOD:
>
> Well, if you take the position that Coca-Cola is good for the world, and that Australia ought to be populated by nothing but Kentucky Fried Chicken stands and people who sell Ford motor cars, and show US films in all the movie theatres - doing away with the Australian film industry - then there's nothing wrong with it whatsoever. However, if you happen to believe, as I do, that populations are best represented by people who live among them, and that you ought to have a vote which will help to determine what happens to you, and that there should be ... No Taxation Without Representation, then the situation is appaling. As it is in Australia.[2]

Margaret Atwood's view of the feminist movement:

> And if one has to ask me, Do you think it's a good thing or a bad thing? or, Are you a feminist or aren't you a feminist? you have to say the same thing you would say about any political movement, namely, something that has immeasurably improved the lives of a great number of people has to be a good thing, and, as to whether or not I will give it my support, I have given it my support by having chosen to live the kind of life that I've chosen to live. And I don't have to make ideological statements. It seems to me that the freedom to do what you want to do is what the feminist movement is aiming towards. And I've

done what I wanted to do.[3]

In another interview, she stresses her unwillingness to commit herself to one particular movement.

> As I said before, I'm not a politician, and it's wrong to suppose that the artist is a vanguard revolutionary. A literary work may have some political content, but it's not a book of methaphysics, it's not a book on economics. It can include these ideas because they exist in the real world, because they are filtered through people's minds, they come up in conversation and they influence people's behaviour.[4]

She expresses her uneasiness concerning her role as a public figure.

> Some people love this kind of attention, they revel in it. I don't. I don't particularly like being a public figure. It's not something I set out to do, it's something I found happening to me. I was quite unprepared, and rather horrified by some of the results. I couldn't understand why people I had never met would go in for malicious personal attacks. Now I'm prepared for just about anything. What else can one do but laugh at it?[5]

Atwood does not appreciate questions about the relation between her fiction and her own life. She even emphasizes the fictional as opposed to the autobiographical elements in her novels. "Shakespeare is in an enviable position. Nobody knows a thing about him, and they can speculate all they like but what they have to deal with is his poems and his plays. And that's what counts. You don't need biographical informations unless the work is unintelligible without it."[6]

The shorter articles and reviews to which I had access appeared in The Time Literary Supplement, The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker and the magazine Ms. They concentrate

mainly on Atwood's earlier works The Edible Woman and Surfacing, focusing primarily on Surfacing, Margaret Atwood's best known novel, although there is one review of the novel Life Before Man published in the Magazine Ms. These reviews, as happens with reviews in general, are characterized by a general survey of the work, whereby peculiarities and specific aspects are often omitted, so that a certain superficiality prevails. They are useful only in so far as they give us a concentrated view of the novels and a first-glimpse impression of a given novel's probable popularity.

Articles which deal with Margaret Atwood's work in a more specific and profound way have been published in magazines like Book Forum, World Literature Written in English, Modern Fiction Studies, Mosaic, The Malahat Review (with its 41st edition entirely dedicated to Margaret Atwood), and in a book Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novels: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood.[7] These articles deal either directly or indirectly with the theme I have chosen for my study - the analysis of the female protagonist. Although they do not treat this topic in detail, they broach the theme or deal with aspects useful for my discussion. The objectification and victimization theme (whether the protagonist is a victim or not) is an aspect common to four articles: "Transformation Mask for Margaret Atwood,"[8] which deals, although superficially, with her two earlier novels The Edible Woman and Surfacing; "Margaret Atwood Under and Above Water,"[9] discussing again The Edible Woman and Surfacing, where the serach for one's self, the identity with one's body,instincts as well as country is seen as a central

concern to Canadian culture. In "Margaret Atwood: The Stoic Comedian" the discussion covers Lady Oracle besides The Edible Woman and Surfacing. The author Rowland Smith discusses Atwood's comedy "which pictures the banal reality in every wry detail, the hellishly commonplace."[10] The article is helpful in so far as it discusses Atwood's heroines, whom he sees basically as victims and who, at the end, refuse this condition. Victimization and objectification as well as the handling of this theme throughout Atwood's fiction (The Edible Woman and Surfacing) is also the main concern of "'Neither Victims nor Executioners' in Margaret Atwood's Fiction."[11] Objectification and victimization are crucial aspects for the analysis and understanding of the protagonists' behaviour and response to others, the articles being, therefore, helpful as well as clarifying.

The search for normalcy in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle is discussed in "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy. The Novels of Margaret Atwood." According to the author, while the characters "struggle to embrace normalcy, they are often pursued by it." In The Edible Woman, Marian is pursuit by Peter, in Surfacing the "quest for normalcy is prematurely fulfilled by the protagonist's married lover, which leads to lies on both sides."[12] In Lady Oracle the lies and fantasies the protagonist invests are useful to make her normal.

The main focus of existing criticism, nonetheless, is on Surfacing. This is due to the fact that Lady Oracle and Life Before Man are relatively recent publications, while The Edible Woman is considered a "lesser work than the later Surfacing." (Roberta Rubinstein in "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the

Interior.") The four articles which deal specifically with Surfacing, discuss the main theme of the novel - the protagonist's search for identity or a complete self and are, hereby, of high value, since the discussion of the female character is intimately linked to the search for a whole self. Surfacing, which is seen as "a journey of self-discovery" in the article "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing,"[13] its "structure and meaning informed by the mythic-heroic quest," obeys the mythical pattern Separation, Initiation, Return. In this article as well as in "'After the Failure of Logic': Descent and Return in Surfacing,"[14] and in "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior,"[15] the analysis is based on the protagonist's quest for an identity and a complete vision of self, which means the connection of the two internal worlds - the male principle and the female principle. The search for these lost values and the consequent fusion of the two worlds leads to a rebirth and resurrection of the protagonist, now able to cope with reality. Eli Mandel in his article "Atwood Gothic,"[16] where he discusses aspects in Atwood's poetry as well as in Surfacing, gives a different outlook on the novel which he sees as a "ghost story." Nevertheless, his analysis covers the main theme of the novel: the protagonist, in order to achieve wholeness, must conquer her ghosts who are a mother, a father, a lost child, and dead animals. According to the author, they are symbols for our real humanity that has disappeared and must be brought back.

Interesting and helpful is "Margaret Atwood: A Patchwork Self" which discusses Lady Oracle and Dancing Girls, a collection of short stories. According to the author Elspeth Cameron,

"Atwood's central theme is the 'self', and her answers to these questions show that, especially for the artist, the 'self' is a complex and fascinating mixture of reality and fantasy."[17] She discusses the protagonist's several identities, her several roles as well as the need for such roles and their destructive reflection on the man-woman relationship, a crucial aspect for my topic.

As I have said before, the articles discuss questions which are linked to my topic. Their view and discussion of problems therefore help to throw light onto aspects which, otherwise, would remain either incomplete or undiscussed.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

What is the substance of Margaret Atwood's heroines? How do they behave in relation to their surroundings, to men, and to people in general? How do they face their role - do they accept it without questioning, in a rather conforming way or do they rebel against the demands society imposes upon women? What kind of answers (if any) does Margaret Atwood provide us with? These questions I will try to analyse throughout the following chapters. I have decided to reserve one chapter for each novel and to follow those chapters with another in which the four novels will be seen as whole and then in comparison to six other novels written by contemporary women novelists.

The chapters present the following specific questions:

CHAPTER TWO: THE EDIBLE WOMAN

This chapter deals with Margaret Atwood's first novel The Edible Woman. The questions which grow out of a closer read-

ing are Marian's (the protagonist's) response to her surroundings and to her friends; the view of the man-woman relationship the novel presents; the significance of Marian's inability to eat; and an interpretation of the cake affair.

CHAPTER THREE - SURFACING

In Surfacing the analysis rests on the protagonist's relationship to the past - to her childhood, her parents, her previous love life, as well as on the relationship to friends and to her present lover. Another main focus is her retreat into nature and the consequent denial of civilization as a necessary step in order to re-evaluate her life.

CHAPTER FOUR - LADY ORACLE

Chapter Four presents a view of Joan's (the protagonist's) unhappy childhood, the landmark for her agitated life, which is characterized by the relationship to her oppressive mother and by the problem of her becoming overweight.

Joan's analysis of herself as an adult is based on her relationships to men as characterized by the discrepancy between her literary careers as the author of Costume Gothics and the young, promising poet and by the necessity of her several escapes.

CHAPTER FIVE - LIFE BEFORE MAN

Instead of one main character, this novel presents three: Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje. The main foci here are: Nate's and Elizabeth's marriage, their past history; Lesje's development; Nate's and Lesje's relationship; Margaret Atwood's view of the

man-woman relationship as distinct from the oppressor-oppressed model.

CHAPTER SIX - THE NOVELS CONSIDERED AS A WHOLE, WITH REFERENCE TO OTHER WOMEN NOVELISTS

This chapter deals with the common aspects in the four novels, which are, basicallly, three: abnormality as flight or challenge (the handling of this theme throughout the four novels, tracing parallels to other novels written by contemporary women novelists), the nature of the man-woman relationship in the four novels (comparing Atwood's view to the treatment of this theme in other women novelists), and the presence of adultery in Atwood's novels and its respective treatment by other women novelists.

The basic conclusions to be drawn from this analysis are: the presence of abnormality in the four novels shows itself to be a response to threatening situations such as oppression and unsuccessful relationships. These abnormalities in their different manifestations (escapes, overeating, not eating, madness, suicide) are seen as a stage in the life of the heroines and a possible learning-process in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, while in Life Before Man they are confined to secondary characters and mean destruction. The abnormalities, on their part, affect the relations between the heroines and their male partners and reflect the lack of success of those relationships. This lack of success and the failure of the man-woman relationships are due to various factors: male oppression, the

heroines' own flaws, and the inability to overcome one's own weaknesses. Adultery/betrayal presented as alternatives to failed relationships are pictured either as an escape from reality or as an attempt at a new-beginning with another partner. Through the women Margaret Atwood draws, she shows herself to be critical, embodying radicalism in The Edible Woman, but refusing this one-sided view gradually, until she detects the responsibility for failure equally in women and men, seeing it as a basic human flaw.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

01. "Glück lebt man, Belastendes spricht man aus, um es zu begreifen, um sich davon zu befreien. 'Der richtig Verwendete muss über sich nicht nachdenken,' sagt Heinrich Mann. 'Die Welt unter der er leidet, reizt ihn nicht zur Gegenwehr. Worte und Sätze sind u.a. auch Gegenwehr. Ein ganz und gar glückliches Zeitalter hätte keine Literatur.'" Maxie Wander in the preface to her book which deals with women in the German Democratic Republic Guten Morgen, du Schöne, Hermann Luchterhand Verlag GmbH, Darmstadt und Neuwied, 1978

02. "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," conducted by Jim Davidson, Meanjin, July 1978, nº. 37, p. 193

03. Ibid., p. 202

04. "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," conducted by Lina Sandler, The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, p. 23

05. Ibid., p. 9

06. Ibid., p. 16

07. Rigney, Barbara Hill, Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood, U. of Wisc. Press.

08. Woodcock, George, "Transformation Mask for Margaret Atwood," The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, pp. 52-56.

09. Marshall, Tom, "Atwood Under and Above Water," The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, pp. 89-94

10. Smith, Rowland, "Margaret Atwood: The Stoic Comedian," The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, pp. 134-144

11. Lyons, Bonnie, "'Neither Victims nor Executioners' in Margaret Atwood's Fiction," World Literature Written in English, nº. 17, pp. 181-187

12. Rule, Jane, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy - The Novels of Margaret Atwoof," The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, p. 42.

13. Campbell, Josie P., "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Mosaic, vol. 11, nº. iii, pp. 17-28

14. Rigney, Barbara Hill, "'After the Failure of Logic': Descent

and Return in Surfacing," Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood, U. of Wisc Press.

15. Rubinstein, Roberta, "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior," Modern Fiction Studies, nº. 22, pp. 387-399

16. Mandel, Eli, "Atwood Gothic," The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº. 41, pp. 165-174

17. Cameron, Elspeth, "Margaret Atwood: A Patchwork Self," Book Forum, 1978, vol. 4, nº. 1, p. 36.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EDIBLE WOMAN

Marian McAlpin, the protagonist of The Edible Woman[1], came from a small town, went to college, and settled down in Toronto. She has a somewhat vague job at Seymour Surveys, a market research company, in which she is supposed to revise questionnaires putting them into normal language. Her job is vague, because its limits are not clearly defined.

> Sometimes I wonder just which things are part of my job, especially when I find myself calling up garage mechanics to ask them about their pistons and gaskets or handing out pretzels to suspicious old ladies on street corners.[2]

She does not have an accurate idea of what she really wants professionally. She only knows that she is capable of something more. "At times I'm certain I'm being groomed for something higher up, but as I have only hazy notions of the organizational structure of Seymour Surveys I can't imagine what."[3] The company's structure obeys traditional patterns, where positions which demand more responsibility are occupied by men.

> On the floor above are executives and the psychologists - referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men - who arrange things with the clients.[4]

The department which takes care of the human element is occupied and commanded by women, except "the unfortunate office boy."[5]

Marian's job has to be seen more like an occupation than a real vocation - necessary because through it she gains independence, but not essential, because it does not fulfill her.

Marian's behaviour in relation to other people is marked by a wish to please them, to be comprehensive and helpful, which makes her feel slightly superior.[6] This is clearly shown in her attitude towards her roommate ainsley.

> She had a hangover, which put me in a cheerful mood - it made me feel so healthy - and I poured her a glass of tomato juice and briskly fixed her an alka-seltzer, listening and making sympathetic noises while she complained.[7]

Ainsley is described as quite the opposite of Marian. She does not come from a small town, is self-assured, uncoventional, and mostly interested in herself. Her peculiar ideas of how to fulfill her femininity are characterized by commonplace statements out of anthropology articles about primitive cultures. From such articles she has taken the idea of having a baby. "Every woman should have at least one baby. ... It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity."[8] This cold-blooded decision she pursues with admirable energy, leaving Marian puzzled and indecisive as to how she should react.

> Though I could hope this was just a whim she would get over, was it any of my business? I would simply have to adjust to the situation ... but would it be right to leave Ainsley on her own? I didn't want to behave irresponsibly.[9]

Ainsley stands for the pseudo-liberated woman who acts according to fashionable patterns and not out of an inner conviction of being right.

A group quite antagonistic to Ainsley are Marian's three

friends called collectively "the office virgins" - Lucy, Millie, and Emmy. They represent a great number of women still tied to conservative and traditional values, whose aim is "to get married and settle down."[10] Therefore, they look for available men who are inspected as possible, suitable candidates. They have different reasons to remain virgins which, nonetheless, transmit their inner fears of assuming themselves completely.

> - Millie from a solid girl-guide practicality ('I think in the long run it's better to wait until you're married, don't you? less bother.') Lucy from social quailing ('What would people say?'); ... and Emmy, who is the office hypochondriac, from the belief that it would make her sick, which it probably would.[11]

Clara, a friend of Marian's youth, and her husband Joe stand for the young couple, lost in their marriage, characterized by too many children in too a short time. Their life is restricted to babies, household, routine. Clara, unpractical, always pregnant, displays a phlegmatic attitude.

> The babies had been unplanned; Clara greeted the first pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen to her, and her second with dismay; now, during her third, she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism.[12]

Joe is pictured as the tormented husband and family man, who, besides his job at the university, copes with the household and children. So, both, Joe and Clara, do not have time for each other and for themselves.

Finally, there is Leonard Slanks, Marian's friend from college. He is the convinced bachelor whose interest is restricted to seducing and corrupting young girls. "A nice type though but he's horrible with women, sort of seducer of young girls. He

says anything over seventeen is too old."[13] He, who always uses women, ironically is chosen by Ainsley to be the father of her child, being reduced to a mere begetter, the means through which she gets her aim. What we have here is the complete exchange of roles, for he is used by her.

> All along you've only been using me. What a moron I was to think you were sweet and innocent. ... Oh, they're all the same. You weren't interested in me at all. The only thing you wanted from me was my body.[14]

The situation is characterized by a complete inversion: those are things women usually say to men, and men do to women.

So, Marian's friends are representative of different viewpoints and ways-of-life. There is Ainsley's supposed emancipation; conservatism with all its consequences embodied by the "office virgins"; the fecund young couple represented by Joe and Clara; and misogynism in the figure of Leonard Slanks. Marian contrasts with them in the sense that she does not incorporate into any of those views. She does not accept radicalism as it is shown by Ainsley and the "office virgins", neither does she approve a marriage like Joe's and Clara's. Her position is characterized by a superiority, for she stands for normalcy. This is assured through Peter, her lover, who is the necessary complement for her being accepted as a normal woman in society.

Peter is presented as a promising young lawyer, successful and handsome.

> He was, as Clara had said, 'good-looking'; that was probably what had first attracted me to him. People noticed him, not

> because he had forceful or peculiar features, but because he was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads.[15]

His manliness is stressed by is hobbies - photography, weapons, hunting.

> To one side of the bookcase is a pegboard with hooks that holds Peter's collection of weapons: two rifles, a pistol, and several wicked-looking knives. I've been told all the names, but I can never remember them. ... Apparently he used to go hunting a lot with his oldest friends. Peter's cameras hang there too, their glass eyes covered by leather cases.[16]

In their relationship he sets the tone, and she adjusts herself. "Of course I had to adjust to his moods, but that's true of any man, and his were too obvious to cause much difficulty."[17] The first sexual encounter turns out to be a failed seduction, a defeat of his manhood.

> However the first time I had gone to his apartment had almost been the last. He had piled me with hi-fi music and brandy, thinking he was crafty and suave, and I had allowed myself to be manipulated into the bedroom. We had set our brandy snifters down on the desk, when Peter, being acrobatic, had knocked one of the glasses to the floor where it smashed. ... The mood had been shattered.[18]

Usually, his sexual fantasies are realized, which seem to be rather strange to her, and she wonders where he got them. Not much involved, she does not complain or demand anything, leaving the initiative to him, adapting herself to the situation.

> I was wondering why he had insisted that we get into the bathtub. I hadn't thougt it was a good idea, I much prefer the bed and I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortably hard and ridgey, but I hadn't objected. ... However I had taken the bath mat with me, which softned the ridges.[19]

He does not really care for her opinion and believes firmly in his charm and good performance.

> 'How was it for you? he asked casually ... 'Marvellous,' I murmured; why couldn't he tell? One of these days I should say 'Rotten' just to see what he would do; but I knew in advance he wouldn't believe me.[20]

Peter's view of women is essentially misogynistic, and his greatest fear is to be caught in a marriage against his will, like he pictures his friends. Marian is confined to and accepts the role of the sensible listener and cannot be seen as a real partner. According to his view, she, although a woman, is able to understand him because she is more "sensible", more comprehensive than the others. "God, Marian, ... I don't know what I'd do if you didn't understand. Most women wouldn't, but you're so sensible."[21]

Marian, for her part, consents to see herself as Peter sees her. Although her consciousness is alert enough to entertain doubts about Peter's ability to love her in the way she would really like to be loved, her self-image is too weak to allow her to protest out loud. When her anxiety and discontent intensify to the breaking-point, she can only express her hostility by inarticulate, irrational actions. The first time this occurs is in a bar during the encounter of Peter and Len. Both men exchange their viewpoints about women, their experiences about hunting and photograph not integrating Marian and Ainsley in the conversation. The reactions she shows to their behaviour are inexplicable to her. First, she locks herself up in the ladies' room, crying without any tangible reason. "I couldn't understand what was happening, why I was doing this; I had never done anything like it

before and it seemed to me absurd."[22] Then, after they leave the bar, she suddenly begins to break into a run, fleeing the group, in what at first seems to be a game which then turns serious and threatening. The whole scene reminds us of a chase, in which she behaves like an animal, running instinctively and blindly, without knowing exactly where to. And as in a hunt, the pursuers reveal themselves to be stronger and better equipped.

> All at once it was no longer a game. The blunt tankshape was threatening. It was threatening that Peter had not given chase on foot but enclosed himself in the armour of a car.[23]

When she is finally caught, her attitude is characterized by relief and thankfulness, because she is brought back to the well-known reality.

> I leaned against him and put my hand up to touch his neck. The relief of being stopped and held, of hearing Peter's normal voice again and knowing he was real, was so great I started to laugh helplessly.[24]

Since her flight is an unconscious outburst, it is coupled with fear and incomprehension. She prefers, therefore, reality, because she knows its expectations and demands.

Peter's proposal of marriage takes place significantly in his car right after her outbreak. There she sees herself mirrored in his eyes, that is to say, as a poor copy of him.

> A tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes.[25]

His sudden reversal from the convinced young bachelor to a serious

aspirant of marriage has to be seen as an expression of social convenience together with a pragmatic attitude towards life. All his friends are married, and he himself is in the suitable age to settle down and think about the future.

> A fellow can't keep running around indefinitely. It'll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife; people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking your're a queer or something.[26]

Marian is the happy woman of his choice, because she shows herself to be more sensible, that is, better than most women.

Immediately after the proposal, Marian loses identity and initiative of her own, embodying a rather immature and childish behaviour. "I'd rather have you to decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you. ... The funny thing was I really meant it."[27] This loss of identity culminates in her losing her subjectivity, because, from now on, the story is told in the third person singular. This shows at the same time a deterioration of her identity as well as necessary step in her growth. Her complete self-denial leads her, later on, to free herself from oppression. She decides to leave her job right after marriage, although Peter does not demand this from her. This decision implies her total dependence on him, which she does not question at all.

> But ever since she had become engaged and had known she wasn't going to be there forever (they talked about it, Peter said of course she could keep working after the wedding if she wanted to, for a while at least, though she didn't need to financially -- he considered it unfair to marry, he said, if you couldn't afford to support your wife, but she had decided against it).[28]

Since now she is in a apparently privileged position, her

attitude is impregnated with a friendly disdain, especially in relation to the "office virgins", to whom she embodies total success.

> They might as well know there's hope in the world yet, she rationalized. ... She smiled glowingly at them, watching the expression in their eyes change from expectation to dismay.[29]

Although she seems to be perfectly adjusted to the new situation, she feels that Peter tries to make an object of her.

> He was sizing her up as he would a new camera, trying to find the central complex of wheels and tiny mechanisms, the possible weak points, the kind of future performance to be expected: the springs of the machine. He wanted to know what made her tick.[30]

Since after Peter's marriage proposal her "objectification" is complete, she becomes unable to consume, to make objects of things. This inability is shown in her gradual incapacity to eat what had once been alive and, therefore, had a right to live like any being.[31]

> She looked down at her half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for the streetcar.[32]

Her rebellion is an instinctive one, the motives being unclear to her. So, she begins identifying herself with food in the sense that just as food serves one principle - keeping people alive - the vindication of her existence is to be Peter's fiancé and future wife, the substance for feeding his ego.[33]

She begins to feel threatened by other, mostly older women and sees herself mirrored in them. Their varicose veins,

their shapeless bodies, and their artificiality become her own, leaving her suffocated and feeling the wish to escape.

> For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be - or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical ... she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity.[34]

Her inner dissatisfaction and wish to escape grow stronger and culminate at the party Peter decides to give for his friends, who are pictured as an amorphous mass "all well-dressed and on the verge of being successful, and they all had wives who were also well-dressed and on the verge of being sucessful."[35] Her decision to buy an extravagant dress and to go to the hairdresser where "they treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented"[36] is the complete adjustment to her situation. Although she does not "enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an flesh, an object,"[37] she lets things be done to her in a passive attitude. At the same, the decision to invite her own friends can be seen as an attempt at self-assertion, though she fears Peter's reaction. This contradictory attitude - adjustment and rebellion - shows clearly Marian's state of mind. Apparently she accepts her situation and tries to fulfill Peter's expectations on her. Unconsciously, though, there lurk rejection of and rebellion against her situation, and this makes her behave in a contradictory way.

Peter's decision to photograph her at the beginning of the party stands for his wish of possessing her completely. This is reinforced by the image of the camera through which he tries to fix her and, consequently, make an object of her.[38]

> Her body frozen, gone rigid. She couldn't move, she couldn't even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter release but she couldn't move.[39]

Again, inertia and passivity characterize her behaviour, and she seems unable to react and assume an energetic attitude.

The party turns out to be a very traditional one with a strong separation of the sexes - women on one side and men on the other.

> Already the group in the living-room was beginning to divide itself into the standard territories, wives on the sofa-side of the room, men on the hi-fi side, an invisible no-man's-land between.[40]

Suddenly, she has a vision of Peter - a home movie man, with a pot-belly at forty-five, predictable and normal. "The real Peter, the one underneath, was nothing surprising or frightening, only this bungalow-and-double-bed man, this charcoal-cooking-in-the-backyard man."[41] The result of this vision is a complete disenchantment and, as a consequence, she decides to run away before it is too late to escape definitely. This decision is the only way to get out of this suffocating situation, but now she has a clear aim - she wants to meet Duncan.

Marian owes her acquaintance with Duncan to a public research on a new beer brand she has to perform. Her first impression of him is that of a fifteen year old adolescent. "And I found myself being looked at by a young boy whom I judged to be about fifteen ... He was cadaverously thin."[42] In the beginning her attitude toward him is characterized by amazement and curiosity which is a result of his peculiar behaviour. Gradually, though, his importance increases, for he becomes the counter-balance to

Peter's demands on her.

Duncan is what could be called Peter's opposite. The only common trait they share is age - both are twenty-six. He is still dependent, not only economically since he is still a student, but also on other people, mainly on his two rommates. His lack of masculinity is stressed by his thinness and immaturity, giving the impression of a great child and not of an adult.

Besides his studies, he spends his time ironing for relaxation and sitting in launderettes for pleasure, both activities showing basic traits of his character: a lack of social interaction coupled with a highly developed egotism. He is basically in love with himself and interested in his world alone.

> As she sat watching him she recognized in herself a desire to say something to him, to intrude, to break through the white cloth surface of his absorption: she did not like being so totally closed out.[43]

His interest in Marian is not genuine; she is accepted as another way of distraction, admitted only as long as she fulfills his requirements.

Duncan awakes in her the comforter which is part of the attraction in the relationship with him.[44]

> I felt calm, serene as a stone moon, in control of the whole white space of the laundromat. I could have reached out effortlessly and put my arms around that huddled awkward body and consoled it, rocked it gently.[45]

His later confession of sexual inadequacy makes her feel "very exprerienced and professional: almost matronly. The situation, she thought, called for stout shoes and starched cuffs and a leather bag full of hypodermic needles."[46]

Other characteristics which attract her to Duncan are his unpredictable attitudes in opposition to Peter's, who reveals himself as being too predictable.[47] The motives are not clear to her, the attraction being based more on irrationality and instincts. "Although she found herself being glad that he had suddenly materialized in that seat, it was an irrational gladness."[48]

Another important aspect to be stressed in their relationship is the lack of demands which Duncan places on her, which reflects his main interest in his own person. So she does not need to dissemble or to perform the image of the perfect, sensible woman Peter expects her to be. Of course, Duncan also makes an object of her, in putting her in the same category as the laundromats and the ironing, but she knows she is being used. There is no disguise of the real motives; thus she is aware of his expectations. It is quite different from Peter's attitude, who objectifies her in the name of love.

The places Duncan and Marian usually meet are worthwhile examining more closely. Once it is a park which is pictured as an island, a place far from the real world. "It was a huge-dimly white island in the darkness of the night. The cars flowed around it, counter clockwise."[49] There, far from danger and menace of being consumed, she regains her sense of reality. "She felt quite safe ... now she found her own reactions rather silly"[50] The other time, they meet at the museum, also a place apart from the pulsating life, static and motionless, with a church-like atmosphere.

> Once they were inside it didn't seem right to take hands again. The churchlike atmosphere created by the high gold-mosaicked dome under which they were standing discouraged any such fleshly attempts.[51]

Even the launderettes bear an almost clinical, unwordly atmosphere, not ideal for social encounters but made for a quite individualistic activity, that of washing clothes. This reinforces the sharp contrast to the places she usually meets Peter - at bars, restaurants, or his apartament.

In the same measure as Peter likes her totally artificial appearance at the final party, Duncan dislikes it. In fact, he is the only one who does not appreciate it and does not have the least scruples to say so.

> He stood a moment peering silently at her from under his hair, examining every new detail. 'You didn't tell me it was a masquerade, 'he said at last. 'Who the hell are you supposed to be?'[52]

Disgusted with the party, Duncan leaves. Hours later, half-drunk, she suddenly slips out of the party unnoticed and begins her second flight. The escape from the oppressive party atmosphere in particular and the suffocating relationship with Peter in general results in an irrevocable wish to seduce Duncan, whom she finds at a launderette. The seduction takes place at a shabby, cheap hotel, and Marian reminds us of a prostitute with her short, red dress, the extravagant ear-rings and make-up. The event itself has to be seen less as a really erotic involvement than a battle, where she takes the initiative giving orders and instructions.

> Marian felt a surge of desperation. Something had to be done. 'Look,' she said, 'for heaven's sake put down that

> damned ashtray and take off your clothes and get into that bed!' / Duncan hung his head like a rebuked child. 'Oh, all right,' he said.'[53]

Her despair grows into desolation at Duncan's incorruptibility. She feels she has to break down his resistance and the barriers which enclose him in himself, at the same time being impotent and helpless to manage the situation.

> She was tense with impatience and with another emotion that she recognized as the cold energy of terror. At this moment to evoke something, some response, even though she could not predict the thing that might emerge from beneath that seemingly-passive surface, the blank white formless thing lying insubstantial in the darkness before her, shifting as eyes shifted trying to see, that appeared to have no temperature, no odour, no thickness and no sound, was the most important thing she could have ever done, could ever do, and she couldn't do it.[54]

Why is it so important for her to get out of the affair as a victor? Duncan is Peter's opposite, the denial of all the values Peter stands for, and therefore lacks his charm, strength, and activity. Since in the Peter-Marian relationship she embodies passivity, the mere and final touch to his successful future life, a victory over Duncan could signify a victory over herself, over passivity, lack of strength, and energy.

When Duncan finally decides to get corrupted, Marian sees quite clearly that she cannot face Peter and what he represents any longer. It is no use to expect help and advice on Duncan's side, since he lives in a world of fantasies. "It ought to be obvious ... that I'm the last person to ask. They tell me I live in a world of fantasies. But at least mine are more or less my own, I choose them and I sort of like them, some of the time."[55]

The outlet she finds for her intricate situation is to

bake a cake in the shape of a woman as a substitute for herself and to offer it to Peter.

> 'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you ... you've trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?'.... His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he didn't find her silly.[56]

Peter rejects the cake, running away scared. Instead, Marian and Duncan, who came to see her, consume it.

A cake usually implies something sweet and soft, easily consumable and, therefore, liked by most people. Marian's cake, in the shape of a woman, is described as "doll-like and vacant," "delicious and appetizing"[57] as food should be, destined to be consumed. So, the cake could be taken as the personification of all the (negative) qualities commonly applied to women which society demands of them: young, tender, sweet, passive, doll-like, easily consumable. In eating the cake, Marian destroys this image, that is to say, she overcomes the pre-established vision of herself and, consequently, she is able to find her real self.

Consuming the cake could bear another implication, that is, the rejection of her femininity, as Ainsley puts it. But here we have to ask us what femininity really means. In this particular case it seems to be passivity, subjection and assimilation to male values - in other words, the lack of a self-identity. So, rejecting her so-called femininity seems to be the healthiest thing Marian can do; it is the first step towards the search of an own personality and own values.

After the cake-affair, she recovers the ability to eat, that is, she is brought back to reality, able to consume.

> 'Well, are you eating again?' Duncan asked after a moment of silence. / 'As a matter of fact I am,' I said. 'I had a steak for lunch.' This last remark had been motivated by pride. It still was miraculous to me that I had attempted anything so daring had succeeded.[58]

The three section structure of the novel reinforces the "objectification" theme: the first part of the novel, before she becomes engaged, and in the third section, after she gives Peter the cake, the novel is told in the first person, while the long middle section is in the third person. This seems to indicate that during this period Marian has no self, no "subjectivity", and thus cannot tell her own story.[59]

Marian's situation at the end of the book is characterized by an outer instability which manifests itself through the absence of a job and the loss of security her future marriage would bring. So, apparently, her situation gets worse, compared to the initial position she holds. After all, she fails to be successful in the traditional, commonly accepted way, refusing to assume the role of the wife of a successful husband. Her choice, however, implies a personal liberation which is not based on intellectual statement but on situations she has lived through. Her final position is the result of negative experiences and examples like Joe's and Clara's marriage, Ainsley's and Len's obstinacy, and Peter's demands on her. Since she is not really conscious of her revolt, it shows itself through displacement and through escape. Therefore, the inability to eat and her several flights are the expressions of her inner rebellion which she herself can hardly explain. The impossibility of an objective explanation could be seen as the result of an inability to think and speak about herself, being more accustomed to listen to and

think about others. The cake represents the culmination of her dissatisfaction and, at the same time, the possibility for a new-beginning. Food is there to be eaten, it is its final destination and its 'raison d'être'; whoever behaves like food, that is, who allows himself to be treated like an object and to be consumed, suffers the same destiny. As Marian says, "You look delicious ... very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food."[60] Rejecting this image of herself in eating (destroying) the cake, she denies the role of an object and searches for her personal freedom.

NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

SURFACING

The unnamed narrator of Surfacing[1] grows up in a French speaking small village in Northern Quebec. There, life is characterized by calmness and the absence of hectic demands modern society produces.

> A few men work on the railway maintenance, one freight train a day; a couple of families run the stores, the small one where they used to speak English, the other where they wouldn't. The rest process the tourists, businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages, and wives, if they come, who sit in twos on the screened blackfly-proof porches on the single-room cabins and complain to each other while the men play at fishing.[2]

During her childhood the Catholic Church exerts a strong influence on the mentality of the people in the village, who, therefore, keep firmly to traditional values, which result in prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

> The old priest is definitely gone, he disapproved slacks, the women had to wear long concealing skirts and dark stockings and keep their arms covered in the church. Shorts were against the law, and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits.[3]

Since her parents are English-speaking people, language constitutes a natural barrier, as does the different culture and education they embody. "Les maudits anglaise, the damned English, they meant it; they're sure we're all damned literally."[4] This

alienation is reinforced by the place they choose to live - an island with difficult access, apart from the village life. Nonetheless, her childhood is a happy one, far from the problems of that time.

> Anna was right, I had a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, flecked gray newsreels I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems. But I didn't know about that till later, when my brother found out and told me. At the time it felt like peace.[5]

This protected childhood she owes to her parents who convey to their children the necessary basic elements for a more or less unproblematic childhood - warmth, an open dialogue, and the knowledge of being protected and safe. Her father, a botanist, stands for rationality and logical pinciples, denying mysticism and religion.

> He admired what he called the eighteenth-century rationalists: he thought of them as men who had avoided the corruptions of the Industrial Revolution and learned the secret of the golden mean, the balanced life, he was sure they all practiced organic farming.[6]

He embodies the best characteristics of a world commonly assigned to the male principle - rationality and logic, but a logic which aims at health, in contrast to the macho male logic demonstrated by the American men who want to deforest the area.[7] His rationality saves him from religion and spares his children a Christian outlook, with its distortions, prejudices, and false morality. "Christianity was something he'd escaped from. He wished to protect us from its distortions. But after a couple of years he decided I was old enough I could see for myself, reason would

defend me."[8] As the protagonist gets in contact with the outer world through the local parochial school and schoolmates, she learns about religion as other children learn about sex and reproduction; like all forbidden or unknown things, it bears a special attraction for her. "They terrified me by telling me there was a dead man in the sky watching everything I did and I retaliated by explaining where babies came from."[9] Her father, who "explained everything", stands in sharp contrast to her mother who never "did [explain] , which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell."[10] As the father provides the children with answers and explanations, her mother takes care of their physical welfare. She is almost pictured as a clucking hen whose role is to nourish and protect her children. This image is reinforced in the scene where she courageously confronts a bear which invaded their camping-side in the search for food.

> That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified. When she told the story later she said she'd been scared to death, but I couldn't believe that, she had been so positive, assured, as if she knew a fool proof magic formula: gesture and word.[11]

The mother stands for the female principle - the nourishing source, the magic power, the existence beyond reason.[12]

The consequences of their free education and secluded life make it difficult to relate with other children; it is the price they pay for being different.

> Some were disappointed, they found my hermitcrab habits amusing, they found me amusing in general. Each year it was a different school, in October or November when the first snow hit the lake, and I was the one who didn't know the local customs, like a person from another

> culture, on me they could try the tricks and minor tortures they'd already used up on each other.[13]

When she, as an adult, moves to the city, the contact with her parents is restricted to information about important events, as for example her supposed wedding, her later break-up of the marriage and her desertion of her child - facts which deepen the separation between her and her parents, for they cannot understand her attitudes. Although separate, her relation to her parents is strong, and she believes firmly in their immortality.

> They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave and return much later and everything would be the same.[14]

For her, parents are not supposed to die and leave their children. When they do in fact die, their death makes her suddenly conscious of her own mortality. When word reaches her of her mother's death, she is stunned; her decision to avoid the burial can be seen as an escape from facing reality. She does not want to accept her mother's death and, therefore, cannot stand to see her dead, to lose her definitely.

Then, after some time, she receives a message from her father's friend who informs her of her father's disappearance. She decides to go back to her native place together with friends - the couple David/Anna and Joe, her lover, in order to find out what really happened. On a symbolical level her journey home can be seen as a decision to face her past, an attitude which fills her with fear and the wish to escape.

> I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him.[15]

The decision to take her friends along with her has a practical reason. Since there is no public transportation in the area, she depends upon David's car. Her friends also prevent her from thinking too much about her father and, therefore, are a useful distraction.

> A little pot, some jokes, a little political chit-chat, the golden mean; we're the new bourgeoisie, this might as well be a Rec Room. Still I'm glad they're with me, I wouldn't want to be here alone, at any moment the loss, vacancy, will overtake me, they ward it off.[16]

Her relationship with them is based on superficiality; it is not a real friendship in which each one tries to understand and know the other. The relationship is so vague and artificial that "anyone of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice."[17] She calls Anna her "best woman friend," although she has known her two months. Anna embodies total artificiality, her face hidden behind layers of make-up, so that the mask becomes her real face.

> There's a zippered case on the counter in front of her, she's putting on make-up. I realize I've never seen her without it before; shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn doll's, her artificial face is the natural one.[18]

Anna's husband David teaches communications in an Adult Education program, and his use of fashionable slogans reveals his political attitudes, which are trite and commonplace, like "Rotten capitalist bastards" or "Bloody fascist pig Yanks." His decision

to make a movie called "Random Samples" is characterized by the same attitude - the wish to be fashionable, everyone does it now. "Anna, over by the stove measuring out the coffee, said everyone she knew was making a movie, and David said that was no fucking reason why he shouldn't."[19]

The basic characteristics of Anna's and David's marriage are fear and a complete adjustment to pre-established roles. The fear is coupled with a certain cowardice about facing a reality which reveals itself to be an empty, ruined marriage. The roles are neatly divided - he demands and she obeyes - showing a totally mechanical relationship.

> "Christ, am I wiped'he says. 'Somebody break me out a beer.' Anna brings him one and he pats her on the rear and says 'That's what I like, service.'[20]

They do not really care for each other, but are enclosed in themselves. David, for instance, is preoccupied only with his own pleasure and satisfaction, not caring about Anna's health and her reliance on birth-control pills.

> 'Bastards,' she said, 'They're so smart, you think they'd be able to come up with something that'd work without killing you. David wants me to get on, he says it's no worse for you than aspirin, but next time it could be the heart or something, I mean, I'm not taking those kinds of chances.'[21]

Egotism and "objectification" culminate when David and Joe decide they need a "nakedlady" for the movie "Random Samples." They choose Anna. First, she struggles for her dignity, but soon her resistance wearies, for they are stronger. She gives in, puts off her clothes and performs the part they expect her to play. She is pictured as an essentially tragic figure, destitute

of the basic characteristic which makes a person really human and autonomous - the right to decide for her own. The scene reminds us of a rape where the camera represents the male superiority and strength.[22] "Joe swiveled the camera and trained it on them like a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture and pressed the button, lever, sinister whirr."[23] So, David uses the power his role confers to get what he wants. He possesses her - "shut up, she's my wife"[24] - and this allows him to dispose of her the way it pleases him. Anna is the victim; she provokes this state, however, through her passive attitude. "She asks for it, she makes me do it."[25] The image of the camera as a product of the world of classification and "objectification", and therefore, always operated by men[26] we can also find in The Edible Woman. Through his camera, Peter tries to catch Marian, an act which fills her with fear and makes her flee from him.

The protagonist's position in relation to Anna and David is that of a mere spectator, not interfering in their problems, for she herself is also impotent confronted with male superiority. This is clearly shown throughout the camera scene where she remembers the battles with her brother during her childhood in which she always gave in in the end.

> I wanted to run down the dock and stop them, fighting was wrong, we weren't allowed to, if we did both sides got punished as in a real war. So we battled in secret, undeclared, and after a while I no longer fought because I never won. The only defense was flight, invisibility.[27]

Her relationship, or rather non-relationship, with Joe, the fourth member of the search-party for her missing father, is presented as a foil to Anna's and David's relationship. It began

with a casual meeting in a store, an invitation for a coffee followed by a sleeping-together where she displayed a cool, objective, uninvolved attitude.

> He said Do you live around here and we went to the corner for a coffee, except I had a 7-up instead. What impressed him that time, he even mentioned it later, cool he called it, was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't.[28]

Joe is pictured as being more animal than human, reminding her or "the buffalo on the US nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction."[29] He does not like to talk, is taciturn, not very communicative.

> He put his fingers on my arm, frowning at me, which may have meant he wanted to talk to me: speech to him was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time, heavy and square like tanks.[30]

Their relationship is based mainly on physical attraction and necessity - "he's good in bed, better than the one before; he's moody but he's not much bother, we split the rent."[31] Since the situation is balanced, their relationship seems to be an improvement over the dominant-inferior role playing Anna and David do, except that their lack of possessiveness seems based on refusal, on withholding, rather than on positive feelings. There is a lack of dialogue, understanding, and emotions, they do not really know each other, and communication is essentially confined to their physical relations, a condition which implies a total alienation from each other.

> In the early morning Joe wakes me; his hands at any rate are intelligent, they move over me delicately as a blind man's reading braille, skilled, molding me like a vase, they're learning me; they repeat patterns he's tried before, they've found out what works, and my body responds that way too, anticipates him, educated, crisp as a typewriter. It's best when you don't know them.[32]

The situation here is extreme - each one uses the other the way she/he needs. Emotions are locked out, the split between body and mind is complete.

Joe's later proposal of marriage has to be seen as an attempt to try a deeper relationship. Her refusal fills him with regret and rage at her indifference in relation to him. But she is unable to lie, to tell him she feels love when she does not know its meaning.

> It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love.[33]

Her inability to open herself for deeper feelings could be seen as a defense against being hurt and suffering. This attitude is a consequence of her supposed previous marriage, a traumatic relationship with a man who was her first lover. Displacement and distortion of the reality are complete, for what she pictures as her marriage at the novels beginning, turns out to have been a love affair with a married man.

Only gradually do we become aware that the protagonist-narrator, such a sturbborn truthteller in her responses to Joe and her analysis of Anna and David, still harbors falsehoods about herself. Her first love affair remains capable of filling her mind with fantasy. This relationship is still undigested,

filling her with bitterness and mistrust in relation to him as well as to herself. "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again."[34] The reminiscences of her child and its birth are disguises for the abortion she allowed to happen. Displacement here is so complete that what in her mind stands for her wedding, in reality is the day she aborted the child. Her guilt is her passivity, the lack of rebellion against her lover's decision to abort the child. Consenting to it, she becomes an accomplice.

> He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal, I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said No but I didn't, that made me one of them, a killer.[35]

She is unable to face her own guilt in the murder, and, therefore, separates herself not only from her private past, but from her parents, and from all emotions.[36]

So, the protagonist's basic flaw is her inability to face her reality, coupled with passivity and a loss of feelings. The first step towards regaining her feelings and cope with the past is her decision to go back home, that is to say, to go back to her origins. And here the lake which surrounds her home island plays an important role. A lake implies profundity, darkness, as well as mysterious and hidden life. Her decision to immerse herself in it at the end of Part 1 can be taken as the will to immerse herself into her personal past, her own psyche, in order to discover herself.[37]

An important aspect which then becomes clear to her is

the split between head and body - between the logical, objective point of view represented by the male principle (father), and feelings represented by the female principle (mother). In order to become a completed self she must heal this split, which leads to destruction and alienation from reality.[38] On the logical, objective side she has the nostalgic example of her father. But there are also more negative examples of rational, scientific behaviour. The presence of Americans, for example, comes to be a symbol for all destructive, mechanical, and artificial elements. They stand for a civilization which is based on logic, occupied with exploring and classifying everything.

The destructive force of rationality and "objectification" is further reinforced through David's and Joe's camera, a product of logic, which emphasizes division, for it catches only fragments of an outer reality.[39] The dead bird (heron) which Anna, David, Joe, and the protagonist discover on one of their exploratory excursions represents the culmination of useless destruction, its death vindicating its destroyers' superiority over weak, defenseless beings and nature itself.

> Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. It must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them.[40]

The four are "Americans", too, in the sense that they allow the killing with their passive attitude, not revolting against it,

becoming accomplices in the crime.[41] There can be traced a correlation between the dead bird and the protagonist's aborted child - both died out of a passive attitude towards life, therefore being allowed to be killed. The protagonist must face and understand her load of responsibility and guilt in order to become a whole person, where good and evil coexist as natural parts of the personality. She must see that she is a perpetrator as well as a victim. Here we can trace a parallel to The Edible Woman, where Marian at the end recognizes her complicity in her "objectification", for she allowed men to destroy her, and therefore carries responsibility. When she understands this, Marian becomes able to eat again.[42]

On the journey back to a complete self in Surfacing, the legacy of the main character's parents plays an important role. Her father leaves her a map and rock drawings, which she tries to find with the help of her friends on a trip across the lake. They do not find them, and she decides to undertake a second trip, now alone. She finds the place and her second diving into the lake represents a deeper immersion into her unconscious.[43] On the bottom of the lake she is confronted with her father's dead corpse, that is to say, with the cruel reality which she now is forced to accept and cannot escape from any longer. She recollects her lost child, evokes it and, for the first time, admits the abortion. The image of the fetus reminds her of her guilt in having destroyed life and killed a part of her own psyche.[44]

> It was there where I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of my self or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one. I didn't allow it.[45]

The power from her father means knowledge, the ability to be honest and face her reality, but this is not enough to make her grow into a whole person.[46] She now can see, but she must learn to feel.

> The power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers ro rooted in the barin. Not only how to see but how to act.[47]

Her mother's guidepost is a drawing the protagonist herself made during her childhood and her mother saved in a scrapbook, a drawing the protagonist rediscovers as she hunts through the cabin for a clue to herself - "a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail."[48] According to Roberta Rubinstein in her article "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior," the drawing suggests:

> The subject of the picture is her own past: herself in the fetal state in her mother's womb, and the collective representation of the feminine principle expressed through maternity - which she had aborted. The male figure 'opposite' in the drawing represents the complementary aspects of these elements: it is simultaneously her father, the masculine principle, a god (who, with his horns and tails, mends the Christian rift between God and Devil, good and evil), and, specifically, the nature deity of the rock paintings whose sacred place discloses the truth. In order to become whole, the narrator must "translate" the pictograph - immersing herself in its metaphoric language by living out all of its implications.[49]

So, the drawing suggests wholeness - the intermingling of good and evil which has to be accepted as something natural as well as normal, that is to say, the protagonist must accept life's contradictions which are contained also in herself: the coexistence of

rationalism/emotions, bad and good, dark and bright. Only then she will grow into a truly human being.

The first concrete step she takes towards her rebirth as a complete person is to get pregnant by Joe. Though he is reduced to a mere functional role - the necessary begetter - he is chosen because "for him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words"[50] He stands, therefore, in opposition to Anna and David who are already turning into metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside"[51] - totally artificial and inhuman. During Joe's and the protagonist's sexual relation, she feels,

> My lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me,
> rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long,
> its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp,
> interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds.[52]

Her lost child is to be born again, which means that she accepts her past and links it to the future where she includes failure and hope. The conception stands for her psychological rebirth, the healing of the divided self.[53]

Since the protagonist's missing father has been found, the group decides to leave the island. She flees from them, takes a canoe and waits until the others depart. Then, she returns to her mother's garden, where she cries for the first time, mourning for her dead parents, feeling emotions again. Her next step is the refusal of all products of logic which lead to a division of the self. The mirror, symbol for the split self, for it reflects only momentary impressions, is turned to the wall; her clothes, which are disguises and social demands, are destroyed, the same

happens to her wedding ring, books, photographs, in short, all artifacts society created.[54] "Everything from history must be eliminated, the circles and the arrogant square pages."[55] Her following and third immersion in the lake symbolizes her purification - the renunciation of all false attributes - and, consequently, an opening to receive the new reality.

> When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock.[56]

After the purification she has to obey certain rules: everything which can be associated whith human civilization is forbidden and she tries to enter as much as possible into a kind of animal state, hoping to communicate with her parents. They do in fact appear - her mother feeding the birds, her father in the shape of a wolf-like creature, but they do not see the protagonist. The communication is broken, they have become part of nature. Accepting their definite loss means the final growing-up, that is to say, she must seek for answers and wholeness in herself.

> I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them.[57]

The maturity she achieves through facing herself alone and summoning up the presence of her dead parents reveals itself at the very end in her decision to cope with reality and in her wish to face and live with people again. She rejects passivity for she refuses to be a victim.

> This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the

> old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been.[58]

The end is positive - she decides to try a life with Joe, although she knows that sooner or later they will fail, for no relationship is absolute and everlasting. But the attempt is worthwhile.

> If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses are obsolete, we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to to begin. For us it's necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That's normal, it's the way it happens now.[59]

She realizes that life is commitment - the will to try.

Atwood seems to suggest that growing up demands a critical position towards commonly accepted values in particular and life in general, and this critical position can be obtained only by experience, which constitutes a painful learning-process. In this novel the learning-process leads to a positive ending: the protagonist decides to reject passivity which is the basis for victimization and "objectification" and, through this denial, becomes an autonomous person, able to decide for herself. The rejection of victimization and "objectification" is the first step towards an improvement of the human interrelation, especially concerning the man-woman relationship. The non-acceptance of passivity and the denial of victimization lead to a critical position regarding the distribution of roles within a relationship. This critical position might lead to an analysis and, consequently, to a re-evaluation of one's own behaviour, and this constitutes the basis for a change. As we will see, however, Margaret

Atwood's next novel, Lady Oracle, seems less certain of the reality or even the possibility of such a change.

NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

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CHAPTER FOUR

LADY ORACLE

Our first encounter with Joan Foster, the protagonist of Lady Oracle[1], takes place at Terremoto, Italy. There, after having abandoned her husband and her literary career, she recalls her past. Born in Toronto, she owes her name to the movie star Joan Crawford with whom she has nothing in common except the name. Fat and clumsy, she is the living deception of her oppressive mother, a bitter and unhappy woman, who projects her frustrations onto her daughter. Joan's father returns from war when she is five years old - a taciturn, reserved man who, later on, becomes an anaesthetician, fulfilling his wife's bourgeois dream of social ascension. Joan's chidhood is marked by humiliations, a lack of affection, and a sense of being excluded. She is the typical outsider; different from the crowd, she serves as butt of derision for the other children who do not include her in their games and secrets. As an adolescent Joan is obese and in order to be accepted, she plays the role of a comprehensive, unselfish friend, listening to the love secrets of the other girls, decorating the school rooms for parties, but never participating in those events.

Joan's suppression of own desires seems to be complete, although inside there lie scorn and rebellion against the others. Her impulse to rebel comes out into the open only in the presence

of her Aunt Lou, whom she seldom sees but who, as an uncommon, independent woman fulfills the mother role, supplying her with love, understanding, and warmth. She takes Joan to melodramatic love movies which are a welcome escape from the gray everyday life.

The unbearable situation at home leads Joan to take casual jobs, an attitude which erages her mother because it does not correspond to her view of the social status they have finally reached. Joan's refusal to reduce is another provocation to her mother, the visible rebellion against oppression. When Aunt Lou dies, she leaves her niece a good amount of money on condition that Joan must reduce one hundred pounds. Since this is the chance to leave home, she shows the willpower to lose weight. A violent argument with her mother makes her leave home sooner than planned. After losing the rest of the superfluous pounds away from home under her aunt's name Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan buys a plane ticket to London. Isolated and unhappy, she meets a Polish Count, a political refugee with whom she has an affair and lives. After discovering that he writes trashy nurse novels under the name of Mavis Quilp, she begins to write Costume Gothics adopting her aunt's name, an activity which reveals itself to be an easy money-making source.

Then, when the Polish Count's conservatism and jealousy begin to bore and worry her, she meets Arthur, a Canadian student, who is involved in the 'Ban the Bomb' movement. She falls in love, leaves the Count and moves in with Arthur. In the meanwhile she is informed of her mother's death returning, therefore, to Canada. After a time and some more odd jobs, she meets Arthur again, who left England some time before, and they decide to

marry. Besides her career as a Costume Gothic writer - an activity which Arthur ignores completely as well as her humiliating past as a fat girl - she starts a career as a poet through an experience with Automatic Writing. Her book of poems called Lady Oracle is an immediate success. At a party given for her she meets the Royal Porcupine, a "con-create" artist, who seems to correspond to the image she has of an attractive man. At the beginning, the affair is exciting, but when he turns more and more into Chuck Brewer, his real name, he loses his fascinating aura, so she decides to leave him.

Gradually, life becomes intolerable for her - Arthur alienates himself from her, she is blackmailed by a stranger for her past, dead animals appear in front of her door - so that she does not resist and plans a fictitious suicide with the help from friends. The plan succeeds, and her death is noticed in the newspapers. She escapes to Italy and lives there under her aunt's name Louisa K. Delacourt. In the meanwhile, the friends who helped her are suspected and jailed for murdering her. So, she plans to go back in order to clarify the situation. Still in Italy, she meets a young reporter to whom she tells part of the story of her life and possibly falls in love again.

The problematic relationship with her parents, especially with her mother, is greatly responsible for Joan's unhappy childhood and marks her personality. Her mother, once a courted, pretty girl, felt suddenly confronted with a pregnancy she did not want. She chose the traditional solution, a demand of the society of that time, and married the father of her child. The consequence is a feeling of rejecting her daughter, whose

simple presence reminds her of her error. The marriage and the child are a "bad Job", as Joan remembers overhearing her mother tell her father.

> It's not as though I wanted to have her. It's not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job if you ask me.[2]

Joan's mother is essentially worried with social welfare and externals, her attitude showing a Philistine and materialistic view of life. Her incapacity to love her daughter and offer her a protected childhood appears in Joan's nightmares, where her mother is unable to, and uninterested in, saving her from danger, or where the mother appears as a three-headed monster - the proof of her unnaturalness and insanity. Since her daughter does not correspond to the image of a successful, brilliant child, it is the welcome excuse to project her own frustrations and bitterness onto Joan, making her, indirectly, responsible for her own failures.

Joan's problem of being overweight has to be seen, therefore, as an attitude of flight and challenge. She eats to compensate for the lack of affection and security, materializing her failures. Since her body is the only thing which really belongs to her, it is the sign of protest against her mother's demands on her who wants a beautiful, intelligent, sociable daughter - a possible mirror-image of an equally successful mother.

> I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there. I was an accident, I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid.[3]

The destructive relationship between mother and daughter

is so strong that, after her mother's death, Joan feels guilty for having abandoned her, although this was the only way out of the destructive home atmosphere.

> I was overcome by a wave of guilt, for many reasons. I had left her, walked out on her, even though I was aware that she was unhappy. ... I felt as if I'd killed her myself, though this was impossible.[4]

The guilt is a consequence of the knowledge that she did not correspond to her mother's exigencies and, probably, wished her death - a kind of mental murder.*

Since she cannot expect love and help from her mother, Joan eventually remembers her father as a possible comforter. This becomes clear during the show of her ballet school, where she has to perform the part of a mothball in the piece "The Butterfly Frolic", a humiliation which she partly owes to the interference of her mother. She regrets the absence of her father, who would have possibly saved her. "(Where was my father? He wasn't there.)"[5] So, her father, at the beginning, plays the role of the great absence - a phantom who varies according to her mother's mood: sometimes he is pictured as a nice, benevolent man who will bring lots of presents, sometimes as the responsible for her mother's frustrated life. When he becomes real, returning from war, he is a stranger, an unsignificant man,

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* An identical problem - a mother as the essentially destructive element who uses the daughter to project her own frustrations and failures - is the main theme of the novel by the French writer Cardinal, Marie, Les Mots pour le dire, Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle Paris; 1975. Here, the destructive and possessive mother leads her daughter into madness - the only way out of being totally oppressed. Madness and obesity therefore, have the same meanning here - they are challenge, defense, and protest.

unable to oppose his wife.

> But when the time came, a stranger walked through the door, kissed my mother and then me, and sat down at the table. He seemed very tired and said little. He brought nothing and did nothing, and that remained his pattern.[6]

There is no dialogue between him and his daughter; their relationship is characterized by distance and the lack of feeling, and the atmosphere does not change with his presence. Her mother sets the tone, and father and daughter have to accomodate themselves to the situation.

The father's sister Louisa K. Delacourt, her Aunt Lou, plays an important role during Joan's childhood and youth. Her function is that of a substitute mother - a supplier of love, warmth, and "escape art". She takes her niece to melodramatic love movies and later on, as the movies lose their fascination, to mystical spiritualistic sessions. Her legacy is an extremely important one - she leaves Joan a good amount of money. The money means independence and liberation from her mother's oppression. But in order to be free and accepted, Joan has to be normal, since society excludes the different. So, the demand of Aunt Lou, that Joan lose weight to obtain the inheritance, is the demand for normalcy, the possibility for Joan to try integration and be fully accepted.

An aspect worth being noted is the importance of parents in both Lady Oracle and Surfacing. Parents here are crucial for the life and development of the protagonists of either novel; nonetheless they receive an entirely different, even opposite treatment. Whereas in Lady Oracle the parents, mainly the mother, are portrayed as destroyers and monsters, responsible for

their daughter's unhappy childhood and youth, in Surfacing they are described as protectors of the childhood - as mythical guides which help the protagonist to return and face everyday life. Another interesting point the novels share is that both protagonists grow up as outsiders, for both are different from the mass. Joan's exclusion is the consequence of her obesity, in Surfacing it is due to the fact that the protagonist is a stranger with a different language and a different education. Both novels, therefore, contrast with The Edible Woman where Marian's parents do not play an important role and the protagonist herself is perfectly integrated in society.

During Joan's adolescence, her unattractive appearance leads her into the role of an unselfish, supportive listener and adviser in order to be accepted by the others. This total suppression of own desires leaves her unsatisfied and frustrated and leads her into an inner rebellion against the unjust circumstances.

> What he didn't know was that behind my compassionate smile was a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying What about me? What about my own pain? When is it my turn? But I'd learned to stifle these voices, to be calm and receptive.

The lack of first-hand experiences and the discrepancy between theoretical knowledge about love affairs - sexuality learned from books or from listening to friends and her own complete innocence - result in a total naiveté which is the basis for her first love affair. After achieving normal weight in London, she meets Paul, a Polish Count, who is over forty, and can be called an old-fashioned gentleman. His characteristics are tidiness and pedant-

ry as well as political conservatism and old-fashioned ideas about virginity and fallen women.

> It's an odd term, "mistress", but that was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged: wives and mistresses. For him there was no such thing as a female lover.[8]

Joan meets him by accident and her status as his mistress is due to her extreme naiveté. She moves in with him, because she thinks he is a nice man. During the first night, she is confronted with his demanding the reward for his friendliness, depriving her of her virginity; he discovers that she is not the liberated art student she pretended to be. Although taken by surprise, she is glad it happened; it is the attestation to her normalcy - she is finally appreciated by men.*

> I was glad it had happened. It proved to me finally that I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was no longer among the untouchables.[9]

The relationship with Paul is characterized by a strong division between the male and the female world. He goes on working while she stays at home, and this illustrates his mentality - the man is the active part, whereas the woman embodies passivity and her strength and mystery lie in her body.

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* In the autobiographical novel by the Swiss feminist writer Stefan, Verena, Häutungen, Verlag Frauenoffensive, München, 1975 as well as in Les Mots pour le dire by Marie Cardinal, we find a similar approach to the theme sexual initiation. Although in both novels the protagonists plan their defloration consciously, contrasting therefore with Lady Oracle where Joan is taken by surprise, nonetheless the three women share common traits. The first sexual encounter serves as proof of their normalcy and has to be seen more out of a social demand than the consequence of physical or emotional necessities.

> 'Ah, but the mystery of man is of the mind,' Paul said playfully, 'whereas that of a woman is of the body. What is a mystery but a thing which remains hidden? It is more easy to uncover the body than it is the mind. For this reason, a bald man is not looked upon as an unnatural horror, but a bald woman is.'[10]

Paul stands for an essentially chauvinistic world view where both sexes are pressed into rigid roles with an over-valuation of virility which here is the synonym for courage, intelligence, and objectivity. He does not see women as people who should have the same possibilities for personal development as men, but as delicate, fragile beings, dependent on male protection and courage. Joan's response to this man and his ideas is adaptation to her new life and passivity, for she does not revolt against it. She even imagines that she is really in love with him.

> How could I be sleeping with this peculiar man, who was no Bell Telephone Mercury, without being in love with him? Surely only true love could justify my lack of taste.[11]

Arthur Foster, her second lover and future husband, is radically different from the Polish Count. Young, inexperienced, he stands to the left politically and is essentially pessimistic. As he is more interested in himself than in her, Joan performs the typical female role: that of the comforter, because she thinks she has finally found the right man.

> I myself was bliss-filled and limpid-eyed; the right man had come along complete with a cause I could devote myself to. My life had significance.[12]

Her efforts are rewarded after a time, for he decides to propose. A cheerless wedding is followed by an equally cheerless marriage where Arthur continues pursuing his several political goals,

finishes his studies and gets a teaching job in political science. Joan lives with two identities: she is both Joan Foster, Arthur's wife, who cooks him meals and pretends to follow his several political changes, and the Gothic novel writer Louisa K. Delacourt, a fact which she hides from Arthur together with her past as a fat, unhappy girl. So, their common life is based on lies and is not characterized by equality. This situation reveals itself to be more convenient, for hidden troubles do not bother and hurt.

> But I didn't want Arthur to understand me: I went to great lengths to prevent this. Though I was tempted sometimes, I resisted the impulse to confess. Arthur's tastes were Spartan, and my early life and innermost self would have apalled him. It would be like asking for a steak and getting a slaughtered cow. I think he suspected this; he headed off my few tentative attempts at self-revelation.[13]

Since Arthur becomes more and more involved and interested in politics, leaving Joan to herself, she flees into her literary activities. The result, a highly successful book of poems, makes her a public figure. When she meets the Royal Porcupine her dreams of a passionate, romantic lover seem to become true.

> This time I looked at him. He too had red hair, and he had an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled upward at the ends, the beard pointed. He was wearing a long black cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quiles.[14]

Joan's marriage break-up has to be seen, therefore, as a flight from boredom and from Arthur's increasing indifference towards her. The Royal Porcupine's role is that of the fulfiller of romantic love and unconventionality, and the relationship can-

not be seen as the search for a real partner. When he becomes common, assuming his real identity as Chuck Brewer, she rejects him.

In The Edible Woman there is a similar situation. Duncan attracts Marian because he is different and unconventional and his importance increases when Peter begins to suffocate her.[15] Betrayal, therefore, in Lady Oracle and in The Edible Woman is the result of the wish to escape from reality which is either suffocating, boring or both.

Joan's relationships with men are marked by failure. The reasons for this failure can be attributed to the fact that she always plays a role and does not accept or show herself the way she really is, and further that she does not want her partners to be too "real". With the Polish Count she pretends to be an art student, in the relationship with Arthur she is comprehensive and helpful, hiding anxiously her past and her literary activities from him, and with The Royal Porcupine she is Joan Foster, the cult figure.

> 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.[16]

Margaret Atwood seems to say that there is no chance for a relationship in which people play roles, fleeing into false identities. A relationship involves partnership which can be only obtained if the real "selves" are involved. Interaction between the roles people play is unsatisfactory and hollow.[17]

Joan's relationships with men are the expression of an inner problem: the incapacity of accepting her lovers as part-

ners and, consequently, the inability of constructing a relationship based on a mutual and complete acceptance of the other as a human being, that is to say, as a person with flaws as well as with the potentiality to overcome them. Her relationships are marked by romantic wishdreams which she projects into her lovers. So, the relationships fail, if they do not correspond to her expectations. The "right man", therefore, will not appear unless she changes her attitude becoming able to deal with people instead of expecting wishdreams to come true.

As it already has been noted, Joan's obesity during her childhood and adolescence is the visualization of her dissatisfaction and unhappiness. This escape into what is commonly considered abnormalcy is a common trait shared by the protagonists of the three novels - The Edible Woman and Surfacing as well as Lady Oracle. Marian's inability to eat, the protagonist's return into nature becoming nearly animal in Surfacing, and Joan's obesity can be seen as a rebellion against oppression. Madness or the flight from what is called normal is here the sign of mental sanity, a lucid position towards their situation.[18]

Joan's career as a Costume Gothic writer under the name of Louisa K. Delacourt is another way to escape from reality. Besides an easy money-making activity, it reveals itself to be the fulfillment of fantasies and wishdreams of her public as well as of her own. Since she was a patient listener and comforter of her schoolmates during her adolescence, she knows very well what people want to hear.[19]

> They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for

> them at the corner drusgstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers. They could be taken in capsule form, quickly and discreetly, during those moments when the hair-dryer was stiffening the curls around their plastic or the bath oil in the bath tub was turning their skins to pink velvet, leaving a ting in the tub to be remover later with Ajax Cleanser, which would make their hands smell like a hospital and cause their husbands to remark they were about as sexy as a dishcloth.[20]

Her public is composed of women, as usually happens with this kind of "kitsch" literature: trashy love novels or soap operas. Women seem to feel the necessity for this kind of escape; perhaps it shows their collective dissatisfaction with life as well as the naive hope and belief in a world where the good are rewarded and the bad punished. As Joan's life becomes more complicated and eventful, her novels begin to bore her, for she sees that there is no possibility for such a simplified world in real life and that this kind of black-and-white painting is childish. So she rejects her idealized heroines.

Besides her activity as a Costume Gothic writer, there is her starting career as a promising poet, and suddenly she becomes a public figure. She owes this career to experiences with Automatic Writing and also to the increasing emptiness of her marriage. As the situation becomes unbearable with pressure from all sides, she plans very carefully her fictitious suicide, leaving home as she once left home when she escaped to London.

At the end, Joan seems to have learned her lesson, she wants to solve the problems she left behind and clarify the situation. She seems able now to cope with reality.

> The first thing is to get Sam and Marlene out of jail, I owe it to them. ... And I'll have to see Arthur, though I'm not looking forward to it, all those explanations and

> his expression of silent outrage. After the story comes out he'll know the truth anyway. He loved me under false pretenses, so I shouldn't feel to rejected when he stops.[21]

Nonetheless the end is ambiguous. She meets another man and, apparently, tells the truth. "I didn't tell lies. Well, not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major."[22] It is not clear if she is able and willing to show and give herself, or if it is another role she is playing. She even renounces her career as a Costume Gothic writer, but she does not renounce escape, for now she wants to write Science Fiction.

The apparent happy-end is a common denominator to the three novels - The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle. In The Edible Woman Marian frees herself from Peter's oppression, but there is Duncan, and it is not clear what will happen to both. In Surfacing the protagonist digests her past and decides to return and try life with her lover. Lady Oracle follows the same pattern :- Joan meets another man and apparently has learned her lesson. The question here is if their expereiences have only a momentary effect, or if they are incisive enough to provoke a radical change in their behaviour. Margaret Atwood opted for a conventional solution in the three novels.- the (re)union of woman and man and, therefore, shows herself to be more conciliatory than radical, although pleading for the necessity of questioning and, if necessary, rebelling against traditional values.

NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR

01. Atwood, Margaret, Lady Oracle, Avon Publishers of Bard, Camelot and Discus Books, New York, 1978

02. Ibid., p. 82

03. Ibid., p. 83

04. Ibid., p. 198

05. Ibid., p. 51

06. Ibid., p. 73

07. Ibid., p. 100

08. Ibid., p. 167

09. Ibid., p. 168

10. Ibid., p. 186

11. Ibid., p. 178

12. Ibid., p. 191

13. Ibid., p. 240

14. Ibid., p. 266

15. Rule, Jane, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy. The Novels of Margaret Atwood," "The Malahat Review, 1977, nº. 41, p. 44

16. Atwood, pp. 314-315

17. For a similar interpretation see Cameron, Elspeth. "Margaret Atwood: A Patchwork Self," Book Forum, 1978, vo. 4, nº. 1, pp. 39-40

18. Ibid., p. 42

19. Smith, Rowland, "Margaret Atwood: The Stoic Comedian," The Malahat Review, 1977, nº 41, p. 141

20. Atwood, p. 34

21. Ibid., p. 379

22. Ibid., p. 378

CHAPTER FIVE

LIFE BEFORE MAN

Published three years after Lady Oracle, Life Before Man[1] (1979) represents Atwood's attempt to clarify an element of male-female relationships which she had previously left ambiguous: the question of whether one sex or the other is to blame for the failure of romance. The novel presents the life of three main characters: two women (Elizabeth, Lesje) and a man (Nate). The novel follows the inner structure of the characters - each chapter is dedicated to one character, where he/she affords an insight into his/her life, following a subjective truth - the truth of each protagonist. Each chapter is given a date as though we were reading diary entries, although these references do not obey a cronological order but vary according to the logic of the protagonists, that is to say, according to their inner necessity in bringing their story to light.

Elizabeth's life is marked by an unhappy childhood and youth with her irresponsible father deserting her mother and two daughters. Her mother, an unsteady and helpless woman, becomes an alcoholic, neglecting the two girls, whom Uncle Teddy and Aunt Muriel take charge of. This couple is characterized by oppositions - while he is an inexpressive, weak, and kind man, she is the personification of self-righteousness, oppression, as well as unhappiness. The good and expensive education Aunt Muriel

provides Elizabeth with serves as sign-board for her charity which she does not cease reminding her niece of. The lack of parental love together with her mother's tragic death - she dies of the consequences of serious burns - mark Elizabeth's childhood and youth and, as a consequence, harden her against difficulties. Her sister Caroline lacks this armour of self-defense and equanimity and, therefore, flees into madness and commits suicide in a mental institution. Elizabeth, on the contrary, constructs her life according to normal patterns.- she marries, has two daughters, and a job. After a time the marriage breaks up; nevertheless the couple decide to remain together because of the children while living separate lives and having love affairs. Elizabeth's last lover, Chris, commits suicide because of her unwillingness to leave her family and live with him.

Elizabeth's husband Nate grew up as an only child. His father, whom he never met, is pictured as a war hero by his mother, although Nate discovers afterwards that his father died of hepatitis and not on the battlefield. His mother flees into charitable and political projects defending the weak and oppressed, an activity which has to be seen as a compensation for the loss of her husband and the consequential lack of affection and deeper personal relationships. The same unselfish involvement she demands from her son, who feels overrun and overtaxed nonetheless trying to live up to her expectations. So, he becomes a lawyer without vocation and, after a time, changes to the production of wooden toys.

After the disappointment in his marriage and some occasional love-affairs, he falls in love with Lesje, a paleontologist.

This affair makes his intentions to hold his family together fade away, so he decides to leave Elizabeth for a life with Lesje. After leaving his home, his life is characterized by a conflict of feelings, which are divided between his daughters, his former life, and the new relationship he finds himself involved with. The divorce from Elizabeth forces him into his old job as a lawyer in order to be able to meet his financial obligations.

Lesje Green owes her name to her foreign origin - Ukrainian on her mother's and Jewish on her father's side. This differentiates her automatically from her surroundings, her special position being stressed by the fact that she does not share the usual preference for young girl's books, her interest lying instead in an unusual topic like geology. Her parents' only child, she grows up rather isolated lacking a cultural identity, since she is neither Ukrainian nor Jewish, for her parents want a rapid and radical adaptation to the English - Canadian environment. So, she does not have access to the values of her ancestors. Her insecurity and shyness, therefore, have their roots in her isolation and the knowledge of being different.

She becomes a paleontologist out of necessity and flight. Necessity because it fulfills her and corresponds to her interests, and flight because she can construct a world apart from reality according to her own rules and dreams.

> If she were to discover a country which had never been discovered before (and she fully intended to do this sometime), she would of course name it after herself. There already was a Greenland, which wasn't at all the sort of place she had in mind. Greenland was barren, icy, devoid of life, whereas the place Lesje intended to discover would be tropical, rich and crawling with wondrous life forms, all of them either archaic and though extinct, or totally unknown even in fossil records.[2]

Her love life is not very eventful until she meets Nate. Her two previous lovers are inexpressive, insipid young men, so that the affairs and their respective break-up do not strike her her as especially painful or worth bothering about. The relationship with Nate means Lesje's entrance into adulthood and pulls her out of her world of dreams, fantasies, and simplified patterns.

Elizabeth's main characteristics are bossiness and an urge to control situations. These traits have their roots in her childhood and youth where the circumstances teach her that she can rely only on herself, for she lacks the protection and security parents usually provide their children with. After her father deserts her mother, Elizabeth assumes the responsibility for two helpless beings - her mother and her sister.

> Elizabeth had not wept or crawled. When it became obvious that their mother was not going to get up out of the chair and fix them dinner, she counted the quarters she'd been saving, the ones Uncle Teddy had been slipping down the front of her dress on their infrequent visits to Auntie Muriel's big house. ... Then she'd let herself out of the apartment, using the keys from her mother's purse to lock the door behind her. She'd gone to the little grocery store three blocks away and bought some bread and cheese and marched back carrying the brown paper bag, stamping her rubber boots hard on the stairs as she climbed up. ... 'Eat this,' she'd said to her mother, furious with her and with her sister. 'Eat this and stop crying.'[3]

Both mother and sister flee into abnormalcy and suicide - the mother becoming an alcoholic and burning herself, Caroline (the sister) taking refuge in madness and finding a final solution in drowning herself in a bathtub. As in the three previous novels The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, abnormalcy is also

present in Life Before Man. In The Edible Woman it manifests itself in Marian's inability to eat, in Surfacing it is the protagonist's flight into an animal-like state, and in Lady Oracle it is Joan's problem of overweight, an escape from her oppressive mother as well as a challenge to her. From these experiences, the protagonists of the three novels emerge apparently strengthened: Marian in The Edible Woman frees herself from her oppressive fiancé, the protagonist in Surfacing gains self-knowledge, and Joan in Lady Oracle understands that escape is no solution at all. In Life Before Man, however, abnormalcy which is confined to secondary characters, is not portrayed as a stage of life, but as a final solution, thereby condemning the same patterns of isolations.

Living together with Aunt Muriel does not contribute to make Elizabeth's youth happier. This unmerciful woman is personified intolerance and misconceived religiosity. Although hating her aunt, Elizabeth cannot escape from the influence these characteristics exert on her.

> Auntie Muriel's attitude towards Elizabeth was equivocal. Elizabeth's mother was no good, therefore Elizabeth herself was no good. But Elizabeth was Auntie Muriel's niece, so there must be something to her. Auntie Muriel worked at developing those parts of Elizabeth that most resembled Auntie Muriel and surpressing or punishing the other parts. Auntie Muriel admired backbone, and Elizabeth feels that, underneath everything, she herself has the backbone of a rhinocerous.[4]

Aunt Muriel's influence is so strong and destructive that Elizabeth finds the strength to oppose her openly only after her separation from Nate, and this opposition is a sign of maturity for it means the liberation from childish fears and impotence towards author-

ity.

> Auntie Muriel, face set, heaves herself erect, and Elizabeth picks up the object nearest to her and throws it at the repulsive white hat. She misses, and one of her beautiful porcelain bowls shatters against the wall. But at last, at last, she has frightened Auntie Muriel, who is scuttling down the hall. The door opens, closes: a bang, satisfying, final as a gunshot.[5]

Elizabeth's relationships to men are marked by an indirect rebellion against Aunt Muriel. During her adolescence, she picks up boys in the streets, an attitude which contrasts sharply with the sophisticated background and education her aunt provides her with. The rebellion is significant because Aunt Muriel is the personified negation of sexuality and eroticism, so Elizabeth's promiscuity is the denial of Aunt Muriel herself. Although Aunt Muriel ignores this provocation completely, it is important because, through it, Elizabeth shows strength and initiative of her own.

Since Elizabeth learns very early that weakness means defeat and destruction, she has the urge to control her relationships and to use men according to her necessities. "She hates it when anyone has power over her. Nate doesn't have that kind of power, he never had. She married him easily, like trying on a shoe."[6] She marries Nate in order to feel safe, in order to prove to herself and to the others that she is able to make a home despite of her unhappy childhood.

> Nate was a good man and she recognized goodness, though she could not withhold a slight contempt. In their wedding day, what had she felt? Safety, relief: at last she was out of danger. She could become a homemaker, she could make a home. This in itself seemed to her improbable, even at the time. ... She'd made a home, but she

> could not quite believe it, make it solid. And safety was not all she wanted.[7]

As soon as the marriage breaks up, they each have their own affairs, remaining together because of the children. The freedom Elizabeth gives Nate is a controlled one, for she likes to know his lovers, discussing problems with them, "being civilized about these things," as she calls it. When she finally loses him to Lesje, the power-play continues, for there are the children and the money matters which she can always use to interfere in his life with Lesje.

Her earlier relationship with Chris has failed because both have different expectations. She wants an affair, that is to say, she seeks an erotic adventure, while he expects them to live together. She uses him until he begins to be inconvenient and troublesome.

> Chris wanted her to quit her job, leave her home and her two children. For him. Throw herself on his mercy. His tender mercy. She'd have to be crazy, he'd have to be crazy to think she ever would. No visible support. He should have left things the way they were.[8]

Since she does not correspond to his expectations, he commits suicide. This attitude bears desperation as well as revenge. Desperation because he sees his hopes frustrated and revenge, because, through his death, he can hurt her and make her feel guilty of hurting him.

Elizabeth uses men according to her necessities, making objects of them. Nate leaves her, refusing his role of the inobtrusive, kind being, always there when she needs him. Chris also rebels against the situation she created for him, committing

suicide. So she, an apparently free woman with economic independence and the possibility to choose her partners, fails to achieve satisfying relationships, because she copies the common behaviour which characterizes the man-woman relationship - the wish to gain power over the other and, through this power, to overcome one's own weaknesses. This apparent strength and control hide her fear to remain alone as her mother did. The cruelty with which she treats her husband's lovers, especially Lesje, is due to the fact that they represent a threat to the life she constructed with difficulty.

Elizabeth's daughters play an important role in her life. She wants them to be happy, so that their happiness stands as a proof of her capacity to provide them with a protected childhood, in other words, to fulfill her mother role adequately. This capacity then will differentiate her from her mother and her aunt who failed disastrously. Both girls can be seen also as a projection of herself and her sister Caroline - through her daughters she can relive her childhood as it should have been. The nightmares in which the two children appear dead show her fear of losing them, since loss is a constant in her life. On the other hand is she conscious about losing them sooner or later - the normal destiny of a mother. Her view is realistic, without illusions.

> M u m m y. A dried corpse in a gilded case. M u m, silent. M a m a, short for mammary gland. A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed. If you didn't want trees sucking a at your sweet flowing breast why did you have children? Already they're preparing for flight, betrayal, they will leave her, she will become their background. They will discuss her as they lie in bed with their lovers, they will use her as an explanation for everything they find

> idiosyncratic or painful about themselves. If she makes them feel guilty enough they'll come and visit her on weekends.[9]

Possibly, her strength of self-insight in regard to her children carries over to her relationships with men, so her impulse to control them bears the recognition that they want her to mother them, since they are weaker than she is. But this recognition tires her, for she does not want always to take care of others. "She once thought of having plants in this room as well as in her bedroom but she decided against it. She doesn't want anything else to take care of."[10] Elizabeth, who is apparently so strong and self-sufficient, is probably the one to most need affection, friendship, and understanding - a lack she carries with her since her childhood. Nate fails to see and understand it, as she fails to make it clear to him.

> The evening before, she knocked at the door of Nate's room, holding a pair of socks he'd dropped in the living room, presumably because they were wet. When he opened the door, he had no shirt on. Suddenly she, who hadn't wanted him to touch her for over two years ... she wanted him to wind his arms around her, string on bone but warm bone, press her, comfort and rock her, she wanted to say: Can anything be saved? Meaning this wreck. But he'd stepped back and she'd merely held out the socks, wearily, mutely, as usual.[11]

There is no longer a bridge between her and Nate, communication is broken. They missed each other, and the price she pays is disillusionment and loneliness.

Nate is presented as the opposite of the strong, opressive male. He is the kind of person who tries to please everyone, to be nice and understanding. "Nate finds it hard to blame anyone for anything. He's been able to understand her bitterness, most

of the time. He just hasn't been able to do much about it."[12] This mentality he owes to his background, since this is mother's political view - the demand to protect all weak beings and to fight against injustice. His marked conscience leads him to an inner conflict between the clear awareness of injustice on one hand, and on the other, the knowledge of his own impotence and weakness. This clash of feelings, which promotes hesitance rather than action and therefore can be seen as a sign of weakness, shows sensibility and reflection, preventing him from blind activity.

> He was one among those who felt the universe should be just and merciful and were prepared to help to achieve this state. That was his mother's doing. He recalls his convoluted pain, his sense of betrayal when he realized how impossible this was.[13]

His job as a lawyer shows the same discrepancy between what it promises to be and the prosaic reality where idealism is lost in paragraphs and clauses. Nate's reaction is total disillusionment, the renunciation of his career and the beginning of an opposite activity - the manufacture of wooden toys, despite his mother's disapproval.

The marriage with Elizabeth, which once began in a promissing way, gradually begins to lose significance until there remain empty formulae which feign a relationship deal long ago.

> He doesn't know what "love" means between them any more, though they always say it. For the sake of the children. He can't remember when he started knocking at her door, or when he stopped considering it his door. When they moved the children into one room together and he took the vacant bed. The vacant bed, she called it then. Now she calls it the extra bed.[14]

He usually corresponds to her expectations, doing what she expects

him to do, so she can count on his helpfulness and his presence. Sympathetic as Nate likes to see himself, he is still capable of contributing his share to the uneasiness of his marriage. From childhood on, his life has been influenced by strong women. From his mother he learns that, in order to be appreciated, he must be kind, unselfish, polite, since she despises violence and aggressiveness. Children, however, are aggressive and it is necessary for them to let their aggressions out. Nate, as a normal child, shows the same wish to fight as the other children, but he knows that without a good cause his mother would never agree to his fights. So, in order to be allowed to do what he wants to do, he hides the real motives behind reasonable causes. "Nate hypocrite at six and two inches taller than any of his tormentors, fought with fierce joy, inventing new injustices to account for his triumphant black eyes."[15] Thus he achieves his aims rather by pleasing others, disguising his real feelings behind a mask of friendliness and helpfulness than by being openly aggressive as Elizabeth is, for instance. He possesses a keen observation, which borders on sarcasm and contrastswith his behaviour. This is clearly shown in the way he sees Elizabeth, not a flattering view at all.

> He'll have to make macaroni and cheese again, which is all right since the kids love it. Elizabeth will not love it but she will eat it, she'll wolf it down absently as if it's the last thing on her mind, smiling like a slowly grilling martyr, staring past him at the wall.[16]

He manipulates Elizabeth, that is to say, he makes Elizabeth do things he has no courage to do himself, so he forces her into action. He exhibits this behaviour clearly when he decides to try a

life with Lesje and does not show the courage to face an open confrontation with Elizabeth, provoking an initiative on her side through actions clearly planned to fulfill this aim.

> He fully intends to implement this plan, but with a crucial difference he doesn't think he needs to discuss with Lesje: he wants to wait until Elizabeth asks him or even orders him to leave. It will save a lot of trouble later if he can give her the impression she's making the decision herself. He isn't yet sure how he is going to arrange this.[17]

Despite their personal problems, Nate as well as Elizabeth are what can be called good parents. Both take their role seriously, avoiding involving the children in their personal dissensions, providing them with love and security. Nate is a responsible father, respecting his children and suffering with the separation after his deserting Elizabeth.

Nate's search for strong, motherly women, who protect him and with whom he can feel safe, is the sign of his insecurity and lack of initiative. He apparently grows up, that is to say, he frees himself from this dependence on other people's strength, when he finds Lesje. She is the denial of what Elizabeth stands for - efficiency, extinct love and disillusionment, rules and prohibitions. Lesje promises a new beginning, the resurrection of emotions and dreams. Since she represents a wishdream, he does not see her as a person of flesh and blood, but as the realization of a fantasy.

> He's in love with her, with that cool thin body, the face turned in upon itself in a statue-like contemplation. She sits behind a lighted window, draped in softwhite, playing the spinet, her moving fingers luminous against the keys. Growling, he leaps through the glass.[18]

Soon he discovers that she is not the wishdream he imagined her to be, but a person with weaknesses and demands like all the others, and that life with her also bears difficulties. In addition to that he suffers the consequences of the separation from his old life - his home and his children.

> He thought that by moving to Lesje's he could rid himself of the need to be in two places at once. But he's still spending almost as much time at his old house as at the new one. Lesje isn't supposed to know this, but she behaves as if she does anyway. ... He knew in advance, in theory, that separation is painful, he did not know it would also be literal. He has been separated; he is separate. Dismembered. He is no longer a member. His own house rebukes him, fills with ravens: N e v e r m o r e. It's this pain of his, sentimental, unbearable, that Lesje resents and Elizabeth ignores.[19]

Why did Nate choose Lesje? She certainly means the rediscovery of romance, of lost dreams and feelings. Besides these sentimental elements, the attraction she bears for him could be based also on a much more pragmatic reason. Since she is the opposite of his mother and Elizabeth - apparently undemanding and weaker than he is - she could be the means through which he can assert himself as being the strong, protective male he proved all his life he is not. At the end, Nate stands where he once began - at his old job but now at a lower position. What differentiates him from the old times is the lack of illusions, his life being hopelessly divided between his daughters and a pregnant Lesje, so that there is no room left for dreams.

In Margaret Atwood's previous novels the male characters are presented as clichés which serve to illustrate and clarify the female protagonists' situations. There are more or less handsome

chauvinists like Peter in The Edible Woman, David in Surfacing, and the Polish Count in Lady Oracle; apparently liberal students like Duncan in The Edible Woman and Arthur in Lady Oracle, to cite only some. Each of these men stands for one or another facet of male behaviour and taken singly do not add up to a real human character. In Life Before Man, however, Nate is first a person an and then a man, that is to say, he is portrayed as an independent character despite his biological condition. Through the deliberate inclusion and portrayal of Nate as a main character, on a part with the women Elizabeth/Lesje, it is not praticable any more to lay the responsibility for failures in the relationships on stereotyped conceptions of the "strong" male.

Lesje uses her knowledge of paleontology as a refuge to hide her insecurity and shyness. This insecurity in relation to people and life is due to the fact that she grew up as an outsider, a status she owes to her foreign origin as well as to her peculiar interest in science. She is apparentely objective and realistic a demand of her job as a paleontologist. This activity, however, gives her also the possibility to flee into an imaginary, pre-historic world inhabited by saurians instead of people, showing her anti-social attitude and protecting her from dealing with people. The alienation from reality - the flight into science and her fantasy world - is responsible for her lack of self-knowledge as well as the lack of empathy for other people, which makes her withholding, afraid of criticism. "Even in the women's group she went to in graduate school, mostly because her roommates shamed her into it, she'd been cautious, afraid of saying the wrong thing, of being

accused."[20]

Her life is not very eventful, being divided between her job, the apartment, and William, her lover before Nate. They live together, and the relationship is characterized by convenience, habit, and a lack of enthusiasm.

> Right now men means William. William regards them both as settled. He has no reason why anything should ever change. Neither does Lesje, when she considers it. Except that she can no longer daydream about William, even when she tries; nor can she remember what the daydreams where like when she did have them. A daydream about William is somehow a contradiction in terms. She doesn't attach much importance to this fact.[21]

The relationship also means the predictable and is, therefore, comforting and realiable. It continues so until she meets Nate who pulls her out of her simplified life. When William realizes that he has lost her, he rapes her. This attitude shows his helplessness and inability to cope with the situation as an adult. At the same time, it shows his hurt male honour, which he vindicates through his physical superiority - a typical "macho" response. It is also symptomatic of their relationship - the lack of understanding and dialogue being hidden behind childish attitudes.

After meeting Nate, Lesje's life changes completely. In the same way he makes an image of her, she keeps one of him, considering him the personification of wisdom, whose detachment of mind contrasts to her insecurity. "He's older, he must know things, things she can only guess at; he must have accumulated wisdom"[22] Her feelings in relation to him are divided between attraction and resentment. She resents his division between her and his home, an attitude which manifests her selfishness and immaturity, at the same time showing the dissatisfaction with her

undefined situation as Nate's lover. Soon she discovers the power Elizabeth still exerts over him through the children and even financial questions which can be easily used to interfere in Lesje's and Nate's life. She learns that life is not a mathematical formula and that the entrance into adulthood is a painful process. Her longing for an uncomplicated life, therefore, means the refusal to be adult.

> She thinks with nostalgia of her life with William, which she sees now as having been simple-minded and joyously adolescent. The beauty of William was that she hadn't seriously cared what he thought about her. Once she wanted something less two-dimensional. Now she has it. It's true that she didn't love William, though she had no way of knowing this at the time. She loves Nate. She's no longer sure she's out for love[23].

Lesje's decision to get pregnant without Nate's knowledge means to force a situation. She uses her biological condition in order to tie him irreversably to herself, considering a pregnancy as a guarantee of his presence and his love. This attitude shows manipulating strategies Elizabeth and Nate use in relation to people. In a way it resembles the same childish gesture William chooses when he rapes her, expressing defiance and weakness to cope with the situation instead of using fair means.

At the end, Lesje learns that there is no pre-historic world as she used to daydream. On the contrary, she sees that people are the main factor in a person's life and more complicated to deal with than fossils. With Nate begins her process of growing up - life is not that tranquil, easy, and boring idyll she lived with William, where they rather played an adult man-woman relationship than really lived one.

The wish to gain power over the other and over his sur-

roundings is a main human characteristic which cannot be denied and which is one of the factors responsible for a society based on inequality and injustice. The idea of power is coupled with oppression, the relationship between an oppressor and an oppressed. But how does this dominance manifest itself? Is it the privilege of activity and, therefore, unavailable to those who are passive? In the specific case of Life Before Man, manipulation which means the use of the other,reducing him to a mechanical function which can be considered as a form of dominance, is present in all the characters. It is present in Elizabeth's urge to control people, in Nate's kindness and hidden strategies as well as in Lesje's withholding and resentment. So, if in this novel the relationships fail, the responsibility for failure lies in the characters themselves and not on the male-female condition. This is clearly shown through the portrait of the women. Elizabeth and Lesje do not have to fight for social equality, they have their economic independence through their jobs and, consequently, hold a respectable position in society. They contrast in this sense, for example, with Nate who flutters around searching for the ideal activity, an attitude which translates his inner strife. They contrast also with the women we have encountered in all three of Atwood's earlier novels, whose disappointing experiences have been presented in terms of male-female incompatabilities.

The question here goes beyond essentially male-female patterns, it deals with the human condition itself. Atwood avoids, therefore, clichés which would make difficult a realiable presentation of relationships. Avoiding clichés, which are based on a one-side view of things, it is the

commitment to truth; therefore each character is presented as a unique, free, and credible being despite his condition as male or female.

Manipulation is one of the factors responsible for the failure of love-relationships here and since it is present in all the protagonists, it seems to be a basic human characteristic and, therefore, hardly avoidable. What else characterizes love-relationships: is it possession, mutual service, the possibility of self-assertion, flight from and fear of loneliness, the need for protection and security? It leads us to the question - what is love? Since there is no objective definition possible, it can only be grasped tentatively through its manifestations, that is to say, through the responses of each character to the other. Love between man and woman here bears the wish to receive more than to give, the wish the other should behave according to a pre-established vision. This behaviour is marked by intolerance and impregnated with selfishness. The image each one carries does not cover the reality which is made of several, even contradictory facets and, actually, is much more interesting than fantasies.

Atwood, in choosing characters with opposite characteristics, gives us a rather complete vision of human beings. As we have seen, they present, either hidden or openly, the same basic flaws. This can lead to the conclusion that these flaws are essentially human and that the relationships, since they are human, are doomed to fail.

NOTES

CHAPTER FIVE

01. Atwood, Margaret, Life Bebore Man, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1980

02. Ibid., p. 92

03. Ibid., p. 136

04. Ibid., p. 137

05. Ibid., p. 218

06. Ibid., p. 23

07. Ibid., p. 26

08. Ibid., p. 139

09. Ibid., p. 250

10. Ibid., p. 23

11. Ibid., p. 100

12. Ibid., p. 31

13. Ibid., p. 48

14. Ibid., p. 14

15. Ibid., p. 83

16. Ibid., p. 15

17. Ibid., p. 198

18. Ibid., p. 134

19. Ibid., p. 244

20. Ibid., p. 64

21. Ibid., p. 19

22. Ibid., p. 65

23. Ibid., p. 221

CHAPTER SIX

THE NOVELS CONSIDERED AS A WHOLE, WITH REFERENCE TO OTHER WOMEN NOVELISTS

The following is an attempt to compare Margaret Atwood's four novels among one another as well as to other novels written by contemporary women novelists. We will see how common traits are handled throughout the books, what consequences they have and how they reflect Margaret Atwood's position in relation to the discussion of the female character.

The presence of other women novelists who deal with the female character is justified in so far as it provides the opportunity to judge Atwood's treatment of women on a more objective basis. I have chosen to limit the context of comparison to contemporary authors, since the analysis deals with the female character as it is presented here and now, in the general reevaluation of female experience which living women novelists have chosen to undertake.

A common trait Atwood's four novels share is the treatment of abnormality as flight or challenge. In The Edible Woman it shows itself in Marian's gradual refusal to eat. This refusal constitutes her revolt against oppression personified by Peter, her fiancé. His demands are the usual demands society places upon women - self-abandonment in order to feed the male's ego, living in his shadow and identifying with him.[1] So, she denies the role of an object inflicted on her, refusing to eat, that is

refusing to destroy objects. Marian flees into abnormality because it is the only way she finds to express her dissatisfaction and revolt, being unable to put it on an intellectual level. This may be analyzed as symptomatic of her feminine condition - the lack of intellectual training leads her to express her needs in inexplicable actions rather than by a conscious attitude, like for instance by the technique of reasoning.[2]

The flight into abnormality the protagonist in Surfacing undertakes is the result of a conscious decision to know herself and grow into a whole person. Her denial of reason is based on the understanding that logic and objectivity are not enough to provide her with a complete vision of herself. She denies the artifacts of civilization becoming nearly animal. Civilization with all its artificial values and laws makes her unable to build a bridge between her and the others, so that communication is false, making it impossible to really meet the other. Her denial of human values and, consequently, the escape from reality, make her emerge more human, that is to say, with the knowledge of herself and her needs.

Whereas in The Edible Woman and Surfacing abnormality is an experience the protagonists go through as adults, in Lady Oracle it is a process which begins in Joan's childhood. It manifests itself in an overweight condition and is the direct response to her mother's oppression, the materialization of the lack of love and security she suffers. Her obesity is, therefore, an escape from the suffocating reality, at the same time as it functions as a challenge to her mother. This early experience can, possibly, stand as the responsible cause for Joan's several

escapes which become a constant in her life.

Abnormality, herewith, is a stage of life the protagonists of the three novels go through. It is a sign of strength which shows their dissatisfaction with the given circumstances. The question which arises here is if the three women really learn from their experiences or if the effect is only a momentary one. In the Edible Woman, Marian breaks up her engagement to Peter, freeing herself from his oppression and, after this, being able to cope with reality again. On the other hand there is Duncan, and it is not clear whether he will remain with Marian or not. A possible relationship between them does not mean necessarily the overthrow of pre-established roles, it is not a synonym for Marian's final liberation, all the more because Duncan's role is an essentially dubious one. As he says it, "But the real truth is that it wasn't Peter at all. It was me. I was trying to destroy you."[3] So, Duncan may be a great bluff, who hides the same oppressive characteristics Peter embodies behind a mask of apparent weakness and clumsiness. If Marian is strong enough not to walk into the trap is a question which remains open.

In Surfacing the protagonist emerges from her experience with a clear consciousness about herself and about what she expects from life. She learns that withdrawal is no solution and that the artifacts of civilization are a necessary evil, which, nevertheless, have to be re-defined and re-evaluated. The decision to try a new-beginning with Joe is the will to break her isolation. This is positive in so far as the intention to begin anew has its validity, but it is no guarantee for a radical change.

As in Lady Oracle Joan's problem of being overweight which is a form of escape, happens at the beginning of her life; this may explain her later tendency to make her life a constant escape. Apparently her escapes come to an end after her fictitious suicide, when she decides to accept her past and flaws, unwilling to continue her constant role-playing. But is questionable if she is able to translate theory into action. She tells the truth to the young reporter she meets at the end, at least she does not tell very many lies. It is not clear, though, what this new man really means. He can stand for a possible new relationship, based now on truth; on the other hand he may represent another welcome escape, the possibility to continue the destructive role-playing which characterized her previous relationships.

In Life Before Man, however, abnormality, which here is the synonym for madness, is confined to secondary characters, so that the protagonists are not directly involved. They do not share, therefore, the experience of the protagonists of the previous novels. Abnormalcy in this novel is seen as a final escape, madness here leads to self-destruction, that is to say, to suicide. So, while in the other novels abnormality is a sign of strength, its treatment here bears the connotation of weakness, the impossibility of coping with reality. On the example of her mother and sister, Elizabeth, therefore, learns that madness means weakness and, consequently, destruction, and has to be avoided in order to preserve herself. Nate and Lesje lack this experience which makes Elizabeth the strongest character in the novel.

The dealing with abnormality/madness as the exeriorization

of dissatisfaction and revolt against oppressive circumstances is treated in the novels Schattenmund[4] and As Parceiras[5]. Schattenmund (Les Mots pour le dire) is the autobiographical novel by the French author Marie Cardinal, which, published in 1975, was distinguished with the Prix Littré in 1976. The author suffers from the rejection and lack of love of her mother who tries to press her daughter into a role she has inflicted on her.[6] Madness spreads itself between what she is supposed to be and what she cannot perform - an alarm-bell which shows the danger she is running.

> In course of the years I crawled into her like in a black cave. Thus I came to know the woman she wanted me to be. Everyday I had to confront her doggedness which she used to mould me into a perfect being according to her ideas. I had to run against her immense willpower, with which she distorted my thoughts and my body in order to keep me on the track she intended for me. Between this woman she wanted me to be and myself, as I really was, the thing (my madness) had spread itself. My mother had made me her doll and performed this job so perfectly, so profoundly, that I was not even conscious of it, I could not imagine it differently.[7]

The problem, here, is solved through psychoanalysis, where the author is re-born, discovering and accepting her real self which is quite different from the image she had of herself. Under apparent softness and docility, she discovers an aggressive, self-willed woman who is eager to explore life.

As Parceiras is the first novel of the South-Brazilian writer Lya Luft and was published in 1980. Lya Luft is well-known for her poetry and chronicles as well as for her translations of Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Virginia Woolf. As Parceiras deals with an essentially suffocating feminine

universe, where dissatisfaction results in madness, peculiarity, and biological insufficiency. It is the story of the life of women where unhappiness is a constant, provoked by revolt against sexual and social impositions. It begins with Anelise's (the protagonist's) grandmother who, at fourteen, has to marry - the common function of women at that time. Her husband, sexually insatiable, is the one responsible for her profound horror in relation to sexuality and life which, as a consequence, leads her to flee into a world of her own where she tries to regain her lost innocence and youth.

> And Catarina succumbed to a profound horror of sex and life. Not the fearful itch of many brides of her time, but an anxious compulsion to flee. Since the few and timid laments in the letters to her distant mother obviously did not produce any response, she took refuge where she could: a white and clean world she had invented, and where she buried herself more and more. She assumed the distracted air which would characterize other women in the family after her, and which I recognized many times on my mother's face.[8]

Anelise is conscious of the abnormality in her family and inherits the fear of life which she hides behind a hectic mania for normalcy. But at the end she knows she cannot flee from the frailties of her family and of her own. Madness and fear of life, here, have an essentially feminine connotation. They express the non-adjustment to so-called normal feminine patterns: the passive acceptance of the role as wife and mother.

Abnormality , throughout all these novels, is described either as a stage of life, as happens in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, and Schattenmund, or as a final solution, in Life Before Man and As Parceiras. In the former case, the

experience is depicted as positive, leading to self-knowledge; in the latter, it has to be avoided since it contains destruction.

Another crucial aspect in Atwood's novels is the discussion of the man-woman relationship. In The Edible Woman it is described as essentially oppressive for women, showing the self-centered, strong male (Peter) hunting a scared, helpless female (Marian) who, in order to defend herself against oppression, flees into an apparently inexplicable behaviour. The situation here is pictured, obviously, as a caricature in order to show the power-relation between both. To counterbalance Peter's strength and manliness there is Duncan - fragile and childish.

But, as has been said before, Duncan's role is not clear. It is, in fact, a dubious one, for the reader does not know whether, behind his mask of immaturity, he hides the same wish to destroy and oppress Peter shows so clearly. This vagueness is shown in the cake affair. It is Duncan, not Peter, who eats part of it. And this attitude can bear a positive as well as a negative connotation. In destroying the cake, he rejects the passive, doll-like image of Marian. On the other hand, in eating it, he accepts this image and likes it. "Thank you," he said, licking his lips. "It was delicious."[9]

The protagonist's experiences in Surfacing are not satisfying at all. Her first affair with a married man is characterized by lies, an abortion, and guilt. Her later relationship with Joe is based on a mutual exchange of benefits, so both use each other. The refusal to commit herself to him in a less superficial way is a consequence of her lack of trust in people,

and this lack of trust is the result of her previous deception. She overcomes this weakness after her experience of self-discovery, being willing to try a new beginning with Joe.

In Lady Oracle, the relationships Joan enters into are based on role-playing and, therefore, failure is implicit in them. She falls in love with the male in his various facets: the conservative, reactionary type embodied by The Polish Count; the intellectual, politically engaged one in the figure of Arthur; the unconventional artist with the curious name The Royal Porcupine; and, finally, the well-informed, young reporter. As soon as these men become real persons, the relationship loses its lustre, and Joan seeks another adventure. So, the relationships lack authenticity, all the more because she does not show her real self, hiding it behind her several identities: Joan, the Costume Gothic Writer; Joan, the poet; Joan, the housewife.

Margaret Atwood's last novel Life Before Man deals at its very heart with relationships and their failures. It is not seen as a question of guilt or war between the sexes; in fact, each one carries his load of responsibility. Elizabeth shows the urge to use and control people, in particular Nate, who, in his turn, chooses the way of passive resistance. This passivity coupled with his indecision makes life with him difficult. Lesje, for her part, shows immaturity and inability to cope with reality, which does not contribute for the success of her relationship with Nate. So, the relationships fail because the people involved fail and because failure is essentially human.

Failure is a constant also in the other novels written by women novelists. Häutungen[10] is a novel written by the femi-

nist Verena Stefan and published 1975 by Verlag Frauenoffensive, München. Born 1947 in Bern, Switzerland, she lives now in Berlin (West), where she is active in feminist groups. She is considered one of the promising emerging women writers in Germany. Verena Stefan sees the man-woman relationship as based on a deformed sexuality, where the human being is lost in pre-established roles. The woman, in order to purchase social appreciation and a minimum of affection, performs the role of the giver of warmth and understanding.

> When will men begin to talk with other men about their personal lives, to touch other men if they want to feel another person's warmth? for that exist women. they are pushed between the men who, alone with themselves, would mangle each other. women talk with women and with men. if women deal only with women, they are told to be hostile toward men. men define women who like other women as being hostile toward men. but men refuse to deal with other men, they behave hostile toward men. "It's asking too much to deal with a man in private!" Samuel defends himself.
>
> Why can one expect a woman to take this role?[11]

She questions the need to classify all manifestations of sexuality into categories and pleads for an interhuman communication where physical contact would be part of the process. Then sexuality would have a new meaning. It would be one way to know the other human being apart from the condition as male or female. Classifications, therefore, would become obsolete.

Small Changes[12] is the novel by the US author Marge Piercy, published in 1974. It follows the same line of thought, showing how destructive relationships can be, if people play the old, traditional parts. The consequence is the partial annihilation of the personality, since there is no recognition of the

other's otherness, the respect and acceptance for the other's right of freedom and self-development.* Both, Verena Stefan as well as Marge Piercy, say that man and woman have to change in order to modify the situation, that is to say, each one has to question given circumstances and try to overcome pre-established roles. Then it will be possible to construct a really human relationship.

In As Parceiras and Schattenmund, the authors describe women who suffer specifically because of their feminine condition. The centuries-old training to be docile and accepting makes them victims of the male's abuse, as in As Parceiras happens with the protagonist's grandmother and in Schattenmund with the protagonist's mother. Life, here, is described as a burden where many awkward duties like sexuality, pregnancy, and household have to be fulfilled without complaint.**
Even the younger generation throughout these books suffers from this misery - they struggle stubbornly to fulfill the demands imposed on women, at the same time being conscious of how destructive this pressure can be.
This reflects on the relationships to men which lose excitement and joy and therefore cause the protagonists to try to prove their

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* "An authentic love should assume the contingence of the other; that is to say, his lacks, his limitations, and his gratutiousness. It would not be a mode of salvation, but a human interrelation."[13]

** "The chief misunderstanding underlying this line of interpretation is that it is natural for the female human being to make herself a feminine woman: it is not enough to be heterosexual, even a mother, to realize this ideal, the 'true woman' is an artificial product that civilization make, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed 'instinct' for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as it is phallic pride in man."[14]

femininity.

Isadora Wing in Erica Jong's well-known bestseller Fear of Flying[15] gives the impression of a liberated woman, if we judge from her numerous sexual adventures which she describes in detailed language. This apparent liberation, however, smells of a fraud performed both on the reader and on herself. Emancipation or liberation means a critical position towards oneself, the other, and society, which can be obtained by reflection and evaluation of one's own behaviour and imposed values. This deeper reflection which also leads to self-knowledge, Isadora seems to dispense with. She makes the man the center of her existence when it should be a part, hunting hungrily after always new, exciting affairs.

> All my fantasies included marriage. No sooner did I imagine myself running away from one man than I envisioned myself trying up with another. I was like a boat that always had to have a port of call. Without one, I felt lost as a dog without a master, rootless, faceless, undefined.[16]

The relationships show clearly a male dominance - intellectually, economically, as well as sexually. The book gives the impression of the protagonist's desperate attempt to be free without knowing exactly what freedom means.

Margaret Drabble, the author of Jerusalem the Golden[17] has been referred to as "one of the best English novelists writing today" by the New York Times. She is the author of six other novels, a biography of Arnold Bennet and numerous articles which appeared in noted American and British periodicals. Clara, the protagonist of Jerusalem the Golden, is the young woman eager to learn, to taste fully what life can offer. This also includes a

relationship with a married man whose marriage is reduced to a play of habits and conveniences which, nevertheless, are binding and hard to break through. Clara's and Gabriel's relationship is exciting because it represents the new, the forbidden, the escape of boredom and solitude. It is made of clandestine rendezvous, a stolen week in Paris, but, above all, of a lack of deeper commitment, remaining an affair. The situation for both is entirely different. Gabriel has his settled life, his family, and his job. Clara, therefore, represents the rediscovery of romance, eroticism, and forbidden pleasures. For Clara, however, the situation is different. Single, unsettled, she is waiting for love and adventure, so Gabriel is unique in Clara's life, while she is only the other in his. At the end, Clara accepts the situation as an exciting part of her life, but she does not see it as the all-fulfilling event any more, valuing herself above all.

> She went upstairs to bed again, and she lay on the bed, looking forward, all of it running into her head, all the years of future tender intrigue, a tender blurred world where Clelia and Gabriel and she herself in shifting and ideal conjunctions met and drifted and met once more like the constellation in the heavens: a bright and peopled world, thick with starry inhabitants, where there was no ending, no parting, but an eternal vast incessant rearrangement: ... Her mother was dying, but she herself would survive, because she did not have it in her to die. Even the mercy and kindness of destiny she could survive; they would not get her that way, they would not get her at all.[18]

Margaret Atwood's if not pessimistic at least critical position towards the man-woman relationship finds full resonance in the other novels. In fact, it is a constant whether in obviously feminist novels like Häutungen and Small Changes or in more

moderate ones like Jerusalem the Golden or Schattenmund. Her analysis deals with various factors which characterize the human behaviour and make difficult the man-woman interaction. If The Edible Woman presents the feminist point-of view, pleading against the "objectification" of women as the great factor responsible for a relationships's failure, in Surfacing it is the fear of a serious commitment, the lack of trust, which complicates the relationships. Lady Oracle deals with the criticism of constant role-playing, seen as essentially destructive. In Life Before Man, finally, there is not one explicit factor responsible for difficulties, but failure is implicit in the relationships; failure is human and, therefore, inevitable.

Since love relationships are seen as unsatisfactory in general, Margaret Atwood as well as the other authors discussed above show ways out of these uncomfortable situations: concrete or desired adultery (betrayal) or then the (re)discovery of women as partners even in love. Adultery, actually, is present in all the novels. If adultery is so unanimously represented throughout the books, it is as important as the relationships themselves and stands for their failure, at the same time meaning the attempt to try again with another person.

The patterns of adultery, though, vary: it may be only the escape from reality as happens with Marian in The Edible Woman; with the professor, the protagonist's first lover in Surfacing; and with Joan in Lady Oracle, who exchanges her partners as soon as they become too real and, consequently, begin to bore her. Another choice is a real new-beginning, that is to say,

what begins as escape grows into an attempt of a more serious relationship - the case of Isadora/Adrian in Fear of Flying, as well as Lesje/Nate in Life Before Man. In the former case - adultery as escape from reality - the elected lover often suffers from the status of feeling used, since the relationship lacks commitment and loyalty. This feeling of rejection may lead to total self-annihilation, as is the case of Chris, Elizabeth's lover in Life Before Man, who commits suicide, an act which has to be seen as a protest against the situation, while at the same time it represents the wish to hurt the other, making her suffer as he did. Another result is the burial of feelings, which, as a consequence, give place to coolness, mistrust, and fear, as happens with the protagonist in Surfacing after her affair with a married man. Adultery, since it often encloses the egotistical use of the other, cannot be seen, therefore, as an authentic solution. It stands, at best, for a way out of a situation which revealed itself to be oppressive, unbearable, or boring.

The possibility of relationships with other women is shown only in the novels Small Changes and Häutungen. Seen as a real alternative to the man-woman relationship, this possibility is based on a free choice of the characters and is characterized by a mutual giving, generosity, and real affection.

> Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to recreate the self through her; separation is abolished, there is no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality.[19]

These relationships, as they are described, may produce a spontaneity and good-will often lost in the man-woman relationships, and this makes them succeed.

Margaret Atwood's position, finally, can be called a critical one without being radical. She differs, therefore, essentially from feminist writers like Verena Stefan and Marge Piercy who plead for a radical overthrow of values, showing possibilities of a new behaviour. Neither does she identify with Erica Jong, for instance, who, behind a mask of apparent liberation, perpetuates modes of behaviour which do not contribute to an improvement in the man-woman interrelation. Margaret Atwood detects various factors responsible for the difficulties in relationships, and this flexibility in her position is the proof of her lucidity - she sees that reality is not based on one point-of-view, but is constituted of various facets which have to be considered. So, if The Edible Woman deals with the feminist point of view, laying the responsibility for the failure of relationships mostly on male oppression and not on the protagonist herself, in Surfacing and Lady Oracle the horizon is enlarged. The responsibility for failures, here, lies basically in the protagonists - the lack of trust in people and fear to suffer as happens in Surfacing, or the lack of self-acceptance hidden behind constant role-playing in Lady Oracle.

If in her three previous novels Margaret Atwood shows the struggle of women, in Life Before Man the conflict becomes more generalized through the introduction of a male protagonist. So, oppression is no longer a male privilege, neither is passivity

essentially feminine. The characters here behave not in pre-established schemes, but according to their personal characteristics. And it is the difficulty to overcome their own flaws which make the relationships fail. Margaret Atwood suggests that only a critical judgement of one's own behaviour together with a constant re-evaluation of values can lead to a really human interaction. Without this reflection, relationships will continue to fail, even if the partners change.

NOTES

CHAPTER SIX

01. For a similar analysis see Beauvoir, Simone de, The Second Sex, tr. H.M. Parshley, Vindage Books, New York, 1974, p. 368

02. Ibid., pp. 517-518

03. Atwood, Margaret, The Edible Woman, Fawcett Popular Library, New York, 1976, p. 287

04. Cardinal, Marie, Schattenmund, tr. Gabriele Forberg and Asma El Moutei Semler, Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, Hamburg, 1979

05. Luft, Lya, As Parceiras, Editora Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro, 1980

06. For an analysis of the mother/daughter relationship see de Beauvoi pp. 540-588

07. Cardinal, p. 57:

"Im Laufe der Jahre bin ich in sie hineingekrochen wie in eine schwarze Höhle. So lernte ich die Frau kennen, die sie aus mir machen wollte. Tagtäglich musste ich mich mit ihrer Verbissenheit auseinandersetzen, mit der sie ein nach ihren Vorstellungen vollkommenes Wesen aus mir modellieren wollte. Ich musste gegen ihre ungeheure Willenskraft anrennen, mit der sie meinen Körper und meine Gedanken verdrehte, um mich auf den Weg zu bringen, den sie mir zugedacht hatte. Zwischen dieser Frau, wie sie sich sie vorstellte, und mir, wie ich wirklich war, hatte sich die Sache breitgemacht. Meine Mutter hatte mich zu ihrer Puppe gemacht und diese Arbeit so vollkommen geleistet, so tiefgreifend, dass ich mir dessen nicht mehr bewusst war, es mir garnicht mehr anders vorstellen konnte."

08. Luft, p. 14:

"E Catarina sucumbiu a um fundo terror do sexo e da vida. Não os medrosos pruridos de muitas noivinhas do seu tempo, mas uma agoniada compulsão de fugir. Como as poucas e tímidas queixas nas cartas à mãe distante não tivessem, obviamente, resultado, ela se refugiou onde pode: um mundo branco e limpo, que inventava, e onde se metia cada vez mais. Assumiu o ar distraído que caracterizaria outras mulheres da família depois dela, e tantas vezes reconheci no rosto de minha mãe."

09. Atwood, The Edible Woman, p. 287

10. Stefan, Verena, Häutungen, Verlag Frauenoffensive, München, 1975

11. Ibid., p. 36:

"Wann werden männer anfangen, mit anderen männern über ihr persönliches leben zu sprechen, andere männer zu berühren, wenn sie die wärme eines menschen spüren möchten? dafür sind frauen da. sie werden zwischen die männer geschoben, die sich, allein unter sich zerfleische würden. frauen reden mit frauen und männern. sind sie nur mit frauen zusammen, gelten sie sogleich als männerfeindlich. frauenfreundliche frauen werden von männern als männerfeindlich definiert. aber es sind männer, die es ablehnen, sich mit andern männern abzugeben, sie gebärden sich männer feindlich.
'Du kannst nicht verlangen, dass ich mich auch noch privat mit einem mann befasse!' wehrt sich Samuel?

Warum kann mann das von einer frau verlangen?

12. Piercy, Marge, Small Changes, Fawcett Crest, New York, 1974

13. de Beauvoir, p. 726

14. Ibid., p. 456

15. Jong, Erica, Fear of Flying, The New American Library, New York, 1974

16. Ibid., pp. 79-80

17. Drabble, Margaret, Jerusalem the Golden, Popular Library, New York,

18. Ibid., pp. 252-253

19. de Beauvoir, p. 465

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's heroines have a basic characteristic - they are unheroic people. What makes them unheroic are the traits which they show in response to threatening situations. These reactions manifest themselves through abnormalities which include escapes, flights into fantasy, overeating, not eating, madness, suicide. Although abnormality is present in all the four novels, its treatment in the three previous novels is radically different from the last one. While in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle abnormality is a stage of life and a possible learning-process the heroines go through, in Life Before Man it is confined to secondary characters, it is the synonym for self-annihilation and, therefore, must be avoided by the protagonists. The abnormalities, on their part, affect the relations between the heroines and their male partners. They develop in response to these relationships as happens in The Edible Woman and Surfacing and, generally, tend to reflect the lack of success in those relationships.

Unsuccessful man-woman relationships are another constant in Atwood's novels, although the reasons for failure vary. In The Edible Woman failure is due, basically, to male oppression, while in Surfacing and Lady Oracle the weight of the responsibility for failure lies on the protagonists themselves. In Surfacing it is the lack of trust in people and fear of suffering which makes the protagonist incapable of living a satisfactory relationship with her partner. In Lady Oracle, the lack of self-acceptance makes the heroine flee from herself and from her partners. In Life Before Man, we have three main characters instead of one - two

women and a man. All of them fail, so failure seems to be inherent in the characters and their relationships and, therefore, hardly avoidable.

Unfulfillment and lack of success in the relationships make the protagonists seek other solutions. The alternatives they choose are adultery/betrayal which stands for the relationships' failure and which is seen either as an escape from reality or an attempt at a new-beginning with another partner. Through the women Margaret Atwood created in her novels, we can seize her position, which is a critical one without being radical. If in The Edible Woman she embodies the feminist point-of-view, this is gradually replaced by a critical position towards the heroines themselves in Surfacing and Lady Oracle. In Life Before Man, the inclusion of a main male character shows Atwood's unwillingness to blame one sex for failure, laying the responsiblitily on women as well as on men.

What makes Atwood's heroines special is exactly their being ordinary and extraordinary simultaneously in the way they experience everyday-life situations which they try to master, although success is not a self-evidently granted factor. The uncertainty of succeeding is herewith responsible for their credibility, and identification between them and the reader is possible, since insecurity, loss, and failure are characteristic of the human condition.

And this seems to be Margaret ATwood's central concern-to show how people behave, the difficulties of finding an identity and a place in the world apart from, or in spite of, pre-established roles. And if in the three previous novels The

Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle the chief stress lies on a female universe, in Life Before Man the vision is enlarged through the inclusion of a main male character whose sensitive handling throughout the novel is the proof of Atwood's versatility concerning the comprehension of the human character and behaviour. This comprehension requires an entanglement with, as well as a commitment to, reality which is based on contradiction and opposition, on various possibilities of conduct, so that this may explain Atwood's refusal to commit herself to only one cause, and this refusal is the denial of radicalism itself. As she herself expresses it in an interview to Lina Sandler:

> What's important to me is how human beings ought to live and behave ... I doubt, for instance, that I would have gone along with Stalin, no matter how faithful he was to Karl Marx's theories. If people and up behaving in anti-human ways, their ideology will not redeem them.

Atwood's realism shows the clash between utopia and real life, that is to say, the discrepancy between ideals and good intentions and the difficulty or even impossibility of transposing them into everyday life. The same attitude is shown by the author Maxie Wander from the German Democratic Republic in her autobiographical book Leben Wär' eine Prima Alternative, which was published after her death in 1977:

> What matters is to show how people suffer, for they can never do what they want (if they know it at all), for their unused forces dry up, for they want to live and are condemned to a non-living by a blind, merciless environment, for their inner law calls in vain and is not heard nor understood.[2]

As contradictory as it seems to be, this attitude shows at the same time pessimism and positive hope. The pessimism lies

in the comprehension of human limitation but which, once uncovered, may lead to change. Here lies the importance of Atwood's fiction: it shows the varied possibilities of human interactions which complicate the real encounter between people. So it is a portrait of life as it is, life which depends on us to change.

NOTES

1) "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," conducted by Lina Sandler, The Malahat Review, January 1977, nº 41, p. 26.

2) WANDER, Maxie, Leben Wär' Eine Prima Alternative, Herman Luchterhand Verlag GmbH, Darmstadt und Neuwied; 1980, p. 150:

> "Wichtig ist zu zeigen, wie die Menschen leiden, weil sie nie machen können, was sie wollen (falls sie das überhaupt wissen), und weil ihre ungenutzten Kräfte verdorren, weil sie leben wollen und zum Nichleben verurteilt sind, von einer blinden, erbarmungslosen Umwelt, weil ihr inneres Gesetz umsonst ruft und nicht gehört - und meist nicht verstanden wird."

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