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THE USE OF FAIRY-TALE ELEMENTS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVELS

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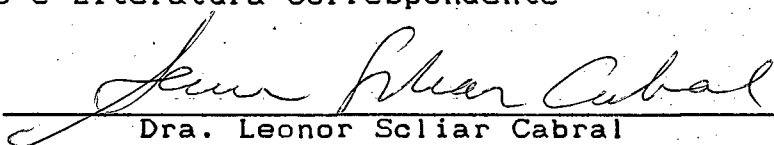Catarina

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a contemporary Canadian writer who has achieved international recognition. Her work has been the subject of a large number of studies by critics and scholars who have frequently called the attention to Atwood's great concern with questions such as personal and national identity and also the relation between power and victimization. It has been repeatedly pointed out that such themes are usually treated on the level of the artist, revealing the writer's equally serious concern with art and the artist, as well as with the social, political, and psychological implications of the choice for art, especially for female artists.

Among the different ways Atwood has found to convey her concern with the questions mentioned above, several critics have detected the recurrent appearance of elements from the magic world of fairy-tale and romance. The interesting thing about it is the fact that Atwood's use of such elements is usually

revisionist, that is, the stories are brought into scene, but from a new perspective which may considerably alter the original view .

Using the concepts of revisionist tactics presented by Rachel Du Plessis and Alicia S. Ostriker, this study investigates Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements especially to convey her concern with the question of female identity on both the personal and the artistic levels. In Chapter I the discussion focuses on the analysis of the mythic connotation of fairy tales, pointing out patterns of male/female behavior that usually emerge from these stories, and which may be playing a special role in the process of human socialization. There is also a brief review of the revisionist tactics presented by DuPlessis and Ostriker. Chapter II discusses how Atwood may be using fairy-tale elements to expose the indoctrination of sex role stereotypes embedded in tradition, and its effect on the development of female identity. Chapter III investigates Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements to convey her concern with the problems faced by women as artists. Although several novels by Atwood are examined, *Lady Oracle* constitutes the central focus of attention. In the final part of the study, some general conclusions are drawn about the writer's use of fairy-tale elements in her novels.

RESUMO

Margaret Atwood é uma escritora canadense contemporânea que alcançou reconhecimento internacional . Seu trabalho tem sido constantemente objeto de estudo por parte de um grande número de críticos e estudiosos que têm observado a grande preocupação da autora com questões de identidade, tanto do ponto de vista pessoal como nacional, e também com a questão do poder e da opressão. São feitas repetidas referências ao fato de tais questões serem geralmente tratadas pela autora a nível do artista, o que revela uma preocupação semelhante pela arte e pelo artista, especialmente pelas mulheres artistas.

Dentre as várias formas que Margaret Atwood encontrou para expressar sua preocupação com as questões mencionadas acima, vários críticos detectaram o frequente aparecimento de elementos do mundo mágico dos romances e contos-de-fada. É interessante notar que a autora faz um uso *revisionista* de tais elementos, isto é, as estórias são colocadas em cena, mas através de uma nova perspectiva que pode alterar sensivelmente a visão original.

Usando os conceitos de *táticas revisonistas* apresentados por Rachel DuPlessis and Alicia S. Ostriker, o interesse aqui foi exatamente investigar o uso que Atwood faz de elementos de contos-de-fada, especialmente para expressar sua preocupação com a questão da identidade feminina, tanto no nível pessoal como no artístico. No capítulo I, a discussão está centralizada na análise da conotação mítica dos contos-de-fada, apontando padrões de comportamento masculino e feminino que podem estar

desempenhando um papel especial no processo de socialização humana. Há também, nesse capitulo, um breve apanhado dos conceitos de *táticas revisionistas* apresentados por DuPlessis and Ostriker, que serão importantes para o presente estudo. No capitulo II, é feita uma apreciação de como Atwood pode estar usando elementos de contos-de-fada para expor a doutrinação de papéis sexuais estereotipados, cristalizados na tradição, bem como seu efeito no desenvolvimento da identidade feminina. No capitulo III é feita uma investigação do uso que a autora faz de elementos de contos-de-fada para expressar sua preocupação com problemas que se colocam para mulheres artistas. Embora vários romances de Atwood tenham sido discutidos, *Lady Oracle* foi mais detalhadamente trabalhado, merecendo atenção especial na análise. Na conclusão há uma tentativa de organizar os fatos observados, de maneira a traçar conclusões gerais a respeito do uso de elementos de contos-de-fada nos romances da autora.

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood -- poet, short story writer, novelist and critic -- occupies a significant position in contemporary Canadian literature. With her work published in fifteen countries, she has already achieved international recognition as well as several important literary prizes.

Daughter of a forest entomologist, Atwood had a quite different childhood as the Atwoods spent part of their time in the city and part of their time in the Canadian bush, due to Dr. Atwood's profession. For the Atwood kids these transitions were not something easy to deal with, and the contrast between the two different worlds deeply affected them. As Valerie Miner points out in her "Atwood in Metamorphosis: An Authentic Canadian Fairy Tale", the family developed two identities: one for the city and one for the bush (179), a polarity that often surfaces in Atwood's fictional work. Miner comments that the Atwood kids were also different from the other children for their understanding of nature and for their story-telling parents. It is said that neighbors gathered at the Atwoods' house just to listen to their stories in the evenings, and that Atwood's mother was fond of reading aloud from the Brothers Grimm and Beatrix Potter (177,179).

Margaret Atwood's early experiences with her family have, in fact, influenced her writing. In an interview to Linda Sandler, when asked about the reason for her great interest in *metamorphosis*, Atwood explains that it is possibly a result from

childhood experiences such as the contact with her father's experiments: "he used to bring home these 'things' in one form, they would go through some mysterious process and emerge as something else" (14). She also links the interest with her early reading, as "most fairy tales and religious stories involve miraculous changes of shape" (14).

Atwood has produced widely different books which include eleven of poetry, three collections of short-stories, seven novels and two books of criticism. What has impressed those who have been in contact with her work is her talent and diversity, which are greatly responsible for her success and for her broad appeal. Atwood's creation has already been the subject of intense debate and investigation. And it is not easy to determine the exact number of scholars who have felt compelled to *decipher* the possible message(s) of Atwood's work. As to her open-ended novels, for instance, it is interesting how demanding they are. Once in contact with them *massive involvement* becomes inevitable, as it is almost impossible for a reader to remain passive when face to face with Atwood's stories. And the ones who do accept the challenge of *diving deep enough* into this world are likely to *surface* bewildered by all the possibilities encountered. Barbara Hill Rigney is right, then, when she states that "Atwood's novels are never on one level" (1987: 18). Indeed, when dealing with Atwood's stories we should always have in mind that what at first sight seems to be as simple and clear as an elementary mathematical equation may surprise us as we are able to move beyond the stories' apparent simplicity. Apparent, because it is already a fact that Atwood is not a writer who offers the readers everything ready, finished, determined. On the contrary, to get

the whole effect of each piece of her work Atwood demands the
reader's participation in the *game*. Rigney even calls Atwood's
novels "quite elaborate detective stories in which the reader
must become the detective and Atwood herself. . . is the
criminal" (1987: 18).

As a result of her impressive ability to deal with language
and with human experience, Atwood is praised as the leading
Canadian writer of her generation. Hailed as "the first of her
generation to acknowledge that she was writing from within a
continuum of Canadian poetry" (Djwa 16), Atwood plays an
important role in the establishment of a literary tradition in
Canada. Although the contents of her work are not restricted to
Canadian subjects, its themes definitely echo the writer's great
concern with the country's cultural issues and dilemmas. One of
Atwood's major preoccupations is with Canada's condition as
colony in relation to the United States of America. And it was
exactly in Cambridge that Atwood felt the great impact of the
dominant culture on her self-image as a Canadian. During the time
she spent at Harvard to take her M.A. degree she "started
thinking seriously about Canada as having a shape and a culture
of its own" (Oates 9). Ildikó de Papp Carrington comments that
there Atwood "felt invisible, almost nonexistent", which in a way
explains why Atwood's writing "eventually developed into a search
for a visible identity on several levels" (26). The theme of
identity is, in fact, one of the major concerns of Atwood's
fiction.

Carrington recognizes the presence of the question of
identity throughout Atwood's novels. In her discussion of

Atwood's works in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, she affirms that "each novel reframes the question of identity" (40). According to Carrington, in *The Edible Woman* the problem is centered on the question of female identity, of what it means to be a woman. In *Surfacing* she sees both the preoccupation with the fact of being a human being and with the implications of being a Canadian. In *Lady Oracle* the attention is directed to the question of the self as artist. Still according to Carrington, differently from these first novels, in which the first-person protagonist "defines her identity by positive acts of locomotion and by separating herself from the ghosts, or doubles, and guides", the two novels which follow present "a deepening confusion about identity" (40). Carrington observes that in *Life Before Man* the attempt to define identity results in its negation: "instead of being defined, identity is dissolved through doubling, even tripling, characters" (41). In *Bodily Harm* the confusion about identity continues and the central questions presented by it are: "How can identity be accurately perceived?" and "what is a writer's moral responsibility?" (41).

It is interesting to observe that, although the question of identity is detected in Atwood's fiction by several critics, we do find different positions concerning its significance. Robert Lecker's "Janus Through the Looking Glass: Atwood's first Three Novels" sees these novels as implying that it is not possible to achieve self-definition. In each of them he sees "a parody of all of the conventions associated with 'search for identity' literature, and the suggestion that self-realization, as the term goes, is often not the product of a descent into nature, myth, or preconsciousness" (192).

Regardless of whether the question of identity appears in a positive or in a negative way, what remains as a fact is Atwood's concern with the question, not only on the personal, but also on the national level. Atwood's protagonists embody important Canadian characteristics, reflecting in a way the country's reality. Barbara H. Rigney stresses the fact that "[j]ust as Atwood's heroines must move from innocence to confrontation, so Canada as a nation must recognize and confront its own political identity" (1987: 3). *Surfacing* can serve as a good example: the attention given to the problem of what it means to be a Canadian, which becomes a very relevant aspect of the novel, illustrates Atwood's concern with the *colonized* condition of Canada in relation to the United States of America.

As we move through the novels, we notice that Atwood is also greatly concerned with the question of power, either personal or national. Though differently dressed, in each work the victor/victim theme reappears, offering a different perspective of the power mechanisms involved in relationships. One of her books of poetry, *Power Politics*, deals exactly, as the title suggests, with "the struggle for power", especially at the level of man/woman relationship, in which "[b]oth men and women are losers" (Rigney 1987: 28). If we observe attentively, most of Atwood's protagonists echo the refusal "to be a victim". We should observe, however, that the focus on the question of power is not the same in all novels. In Atwood's earlier fiction, such as *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, the writer is basically dealing with the problem on the level of the "battle of the sexes" trying to "delineate the psychological factors of sexual politics, the

behavior of women in conflict with men" (Rigney 1987: 103). What we see in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, is that the question of power in these novels is not restricted to the relationship between man and woman. This time, both are equally exposed to the games of power, being able to occupy identical positions. It is a look at *power* from a different angle. What matters, then, is not the fact of being a woman or a man, but the fact of being a human being, experiencing the polarity which does not seem to offer any alternative out of the victim/victor position. These novels are good examples, as they are "profoundly political; all represent the confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence" (Rigney 1987: 104).

Similarly to what happens with the question of identity in Atwood's fiction, we could say that the question of power and victimization is also connected with the view of Canada as a *colony*, as a *victim* in relation to its southern neighbour. Being a Canadian does have further implications in Atwood's novels. The protagonists, for instance, not only "share a symbolic identity with Canada in their victimisation and initial powerlessness, but they also affirm selfhood and power within the context of Canadian literary tradition" (Rigney 1987: 4).

Although Atwood's concern with questions such as the ones just presented here must be acknowledged, we should not forget that these questions are often treated in terms of the artist. Most of Atwood's protagonists are usually failed artists in search of a way to express themselves creatively, fulfilling what seems to Atwood to be the moral responsibility of the artist/writer — to tell, to report, to bear witness. In her

"Paradoxes and Dilemmas: The Woman as Writer", Atwood expresses her strong belief that "writers are eye-witnesses, I-witnesses" (256). As Barbara H. Rigney points out, Atwood, in her fiction, is basically concerned "with the role of women as artists and with the political implications of that role" (1987: 12). In *Bodily Harm*, for instance, we see Rennie refusing to accept her responsibility as an artist, as a reporter of truth. She opts for the world of surfaces, of trivialities, avoiding confrontation with reality, with truth, what doesn't mean she won't have to face it someday.

In one of the attempts to explore the world Atwood's writing opens before us, it is possible, for instance, to notice the recurrent appearence, here and there, of allusions to fairy tales, especially Grimm's and Andersen's, often associated with images of voice and body, representing, respectively, the power of speech and the power of movement. The identification of these elements is not very difficult as a good number of them are used quite explicity in Atwood's work. The interesting and more complex task, however, is that of trying to point out the possible effect(s) they may be producing in the novels.

The magic world of fairy tales made part of Margaret Atwood's childhood experiences. The impact of these stories on the adult writer can be felt when we see them reflected in the novels, filtered by Atwood's own world view. The fairy-tale elements meet our eyes again, but this time, from a new light, from a new perspective. The idealized fairy-tale views of male/female relationship with their several implications seem to constitute important tools for Atwood to expose the indoctrination of

fairy-tale images, that is, to point out how these images may contribute to the reinforcement of traditionally stereotyped roles. Stories involving dancing, singing, and speaking at the level of *art* offer Atwood good material to explore the implications of being an artist, mainly a woman artist, in a world which is predominantly masculine, and from this perspective to develop the themes of identity, power and victimization.

Several critics have already detected fairy-tale elements in Margaret Atwood's work. Elizabeth R. Baer observes, in her "Pilgrimage Inward: Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs in *Surfacing*", that "Margaret Atwood's fascination with folk and fairy tales is by now well-established, although not widely recognized by critics" (24). In the interview to Linda Sandler, Atwood declares that "*Grimm's Fairy Tales* was the most influential book [she] ever read" (14). She also talks about the relation of her art to *popular art*. When we speak of *popular art* we speak of stories that are usually repeating the same basic pattern, without examining themselves. Fairy tales do make part of the world of *popular art*, and in them Atwood finds relevant material to serve as a way to expose stereotyped images of men and women, as well as traditionally accepted patterns of behavior, so that it becomes possible to examine them. For Atwood, thus, "popular art is material for serious art in the way that dreams are" (10).

Although much of the criticism on Atwood deals with questions related to her use of fairy-tale material, few pieces of criticism go deeper in the study of this aspect of Atwood's writings. However, it should be said that what has already been written on the subject constitutes a relevant starting point for those interested in conducting a study in this specific field.

In his *Margaret Atwood*, Jerome Rosenberg affirms that fairy-tale images are "images Atwood would remember"(2), stressing the fact that Atwood was mainly attracted by the darker side of the tales. He even reports Atwood's reaction to Snow White's movie as she saw it at a very early age: "Mother thought I was being very quiet because I was enjoying it. Actually I was [riveted] with fear. The transformation of the evil queen into the witch did me in forever" (2). Perceiving fairy-tale elements in Atwood's fiction, Rosenberg compares Marian from *The Edible Woman* with Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, as he sees the events of the novel as being analogous to Alice's fairy tale descent through the rabbit hole and into the underground. In his view, with it Atwood is expressing her "realistic perception that some of us may be unable to bring anything of worth back from those underground journeys, may be unable to extricate ourselves from the societal circle games that entrap us" (102).

In "Pilgrimage Inward: 'Quest and Fairy Tale Motifs' in *Surfacing*" Elizabeth R. Baer points out, for instance, that Atwood's fascination with fairy tales is due to two aspects of these stories: "the motif of transformation", and "the positive images of women" found in a good number of them. The first aspect has also been observed by other critics. At first sight, the second aspect seems to be contradictory in comparison with what has been said, concerning Atwood's attraction by the *darker side* of the stories. But a careful examination of the two assertions shows that Atwood is really impressed by the *hard* facts of the stories, such as the cases of amputation, death through great suffering as punishment, etc., and that she does make use of

them. Indeed, it has been observed that she usually "teaches mostly through negative example" (Rigney 1987: 1). On the other hand, she is also impressed by the stories in which "women are not only the central characters, but win by using their intelligence" (Baer 24). In the analysis of *Surfacing* Baer finds "startling provocative" similarities between the novel and one of the Brothers Grimm's stories : "Fitcher's Feathered Bird", which is "a variant of the Bluebeard tale"(27). At the end, according to Baer, the protagonists of both stories "achieve vision and triumph" (28).

Susan MacLean's "*Lady Oracle*: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art" constitutes an interesting study of *Lady Oracle*, with particular emphasis on the "novel-within-a-novel structure and the questions this raises about the motive and craft of fiction and the relationship between art and life" (180). In the course of MacLean's analysis, fantasy becomes a point of special interest and it seems almost impossible not to talk about fairy tales. For MacLean "[b]oth Joan and her mother are victims of what Atwood has called 'the Rapunzel Syndrome'. Both are trapped in society's tower of traditional attitudes towards women" (181). She also makes reference to Atwood's use of the dilemma between love and a career, taken from the movie *The Red Shoes* based on Andersen's fairy tale. MacLean's observations reinforce the hypothesis that Atwood may be using fairy-tale elements to convey her concern about the problems faced by the woman as artist, as well as to expose traditionally stereotyped roles to examination.

Another fairy tale identified in *Lady Oracle* is that presented in Walt Disney's film "The Whale who Wanted to Sing at the Met", the story of a whale, an opera singer which found

death when singing arias near a ship. In Clara Thomas' view, "[t]his is the clue to the central mystery set up in Part I"(165), that is, the story of Fat Joan. Again, an example of Atwood's concern about the artist.

T. D. MacLulich found several motifs from the well-known fairy tale called "Little Red Cap" by the Grimms in *The Edible Woman*. In "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale : Lévi-Strauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*", MacLulich presents a comparative study of Atwood's first novel with two fairy tales involving eating: "The Gingerbread Men" and "Little Red Cap". Departing from the structural methods of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, MacLulich proceeds to the analysis of *The Edible Woman* in an attempt "to penetrate beneath the surface of this particular story, and bring its less explicitly stated themes to light" (186). With the aid of Bruno Bettelheim's view of "The Little Red Cap", MacLulich establishes the comparison between the tale and the novel, observing that in both stories it is possible to identify the images of eating with sexuality. According to MacLulich's analysis "Atwood has adopted the fairy tale plot structure -- her heroine survives -- but has transposed the tone of the story towards uncertainty. The result is. . . a problematic story. . . a sort of adult fairy tale" (187-88).

Sharon R. Wilson's "Sexual Politics in Margaret Atwood's Visual Art" deserves special attention. Although it is mainly concerned with Atwood's never published or exhibited watercolors, it does illuminate Atwood's presentation of one of her major concerns: sexual politics. Wilson comments on eight watercolors by Atwood, stressing in each case the parallel that may be

established between the visual art and the poetry and the fiction produced by Atwood. For instance, similarly to what happens in fiction, it is observed that "many of the archive watercolors. . .present gothic images of female-male relationship in fairy tales" (205). The eating imagery that is recurrent in fiction is also detected in Atwood's visual art, "linked to fairy tales as well as power politics" (206). In Wilson's interpretation of the untitled watercolor, archive-labeled "Insect in Red Gown with Bouquet", the figure evokes among other things, the Handmaids of *The Handmaid's Tale* whose uniform is red, and the Grimm's "Little Red Cap". According to Wilson, the figure in the watercolor may be seen as "satirically linked with the reduction of women's ancient images to quick-change costumes for the escape artist" (212). After presenting the analysis of the watercolors, Wilson concludes that Atwood's images serve as a way to challenge stereotyped views of roles in society. If we follow Wilson's analysis, we could say that the same may be applied to Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements in her fiction.

Barbara Hill Rigney is of particular interest as we speak of fairy-tale elements in Atwood's writings for her special attention to Atwood's extensive use of myth and fairy tale. In her *Margaret Atwood* (1987), she calls our attention to the fact that Atwood may be using fairy tales as metaphors for the psychological, social, and political problems of the woman as artist: her heroines "are always explorers through tradition and myth in search of a new identity and in search of a voice, a tongue, a language, an art, with which to proclaim that identity" (10). Rigney is one of the critics who perceives the recurrent appearence, in Atwood's fiction, of the fairy-tale image of the

dancing girl, the possessed victim in "The Red Shoes", and of her descendent, Moira Shearer in the movie version of the story. As she observes, "all of Atwood's heroines. . . are 'dancing girls' for at least a time, denying their identities as artists, permitting the removal of their tongues, and opting for victimisation in the games of sexual politics" (9-10). Rigney also stresses the fact that Atwood's use of fairy tales is usually revisionist as she always "disassembles the myth to reconstruct it in terms of the modern female psyche and the special circumstances of the contemporary female kunstlerroman" (10).

As this brief review of criticism clearly shows, Atwood's interest in and use of fairy-tale elements can hardly be ignored in an analysis of her major themes -- the question of identity and of its attending issues: power/powerlessness, and especially the artist as the epitome of the human condition.

As critics have already observed, Atwood's use of traditional narratives is usually *revisionist*, as she frequently *deconstructs* the inherited tales, offering a new perspective of them. In *deconstructing* the known tales, Atwood is probably exposing stereotyped ideas connected with women. This study aims at the investigation of how fairy-tale elements are being used by Atwood to convey central concerns in her novels. There will be particular interest in the possible effect(s) of such use.

First, the analysis will deal with those novels emphasizing the issue of identity in a more general sense. Then, in another chapter the attention will be focused on the question of the woman as artist, trying to show how this is, in fact, an

intensification of the identity conflict.

The Edible Woman(1969), *Surfacing*(1972), and *Lady Oracle*(1976) will be the major focus of analysis, though reference will be made to *Bodily Harm*(1981), *The Handmaid's Tale*(1985), and *Cat's Eye*(1988) as well. The investigation will be structured according to the different fairy-tale elements detected. The first step will be the identification of relevant fairy-tale elements in the novels, proceeding to the analysis of how Atwood is using such elements and what she probably means by it. There will be particular interest in the changes produced in the old stories as they are inserted in Atwood's novels. At this point it should be observed that the analysis may also refer to movie versions of traditional tales as, for instance, the ones that come to us through Walt Disney's productions.

The first chapter will present an analysis of the patterns of behavior that emerge from traditional fairy tales, such as the Grimms' and Andersen's, proceeding, then, to a brief investigation of the use of myth by contemporary women writers. Chapter II will discuss the possibilities of identification of some of Atwood's characters with well-known fairy-tale figures and its effect in relation to the exposition of stereotyped role models one encounters in these stories. Chapter III will focus on the analysis of the way Atwood is using fairy tales to convey her concern with problems women artists usually have to face. The use of tales which deal with the question more directly will be especially appreciated, centering attention on the analysis of the dilemma presented in "The Red Shoes", "The Little Mermaid", and *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing At The Met*. Finally,in the conclusion, I will be summarizing the importance of Atwood's use

of fairy-tale elements as one of the available and versatile ways
to convey her major concerns.

CHAPTER I

Myth & Fairy Tales

The more we become familiar with Atwood's work, the more difficult it is not to agree with Ronald Granofsky in that the writer has demonstrated "a perennial interest in the way that childhood experiences set patterns that are compulsively reenacted or confronted in adulthood" (52). If we just mention the special emphasis Atwood places on childhood events in her *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), and *Cat's Eye* (1988), we already have enough examples of this special interest. And fairy tales do constitute important elements of the universe of children over much of the modern western world.

Whenever one speaks of fairy tales, the idea of a very simple, recurrent plot comes to mind: stories that usually begin with the presentation of a helpless and victimized hero or heroine facing opposing circumstances, proceeding then to the depiction of the conflict in detail, and offering at the end a reversal of the initial situation, with the punishment and/or destruction of the antagonic force(s) and the hero's or heroine's access to power or to *everlasting happiness*. The simplicity of the plot, however, does not mean that fairy tales are as simple as that. This may be confirmed by the countless number of studies that have already taken place in this field. Fairy tales have proved to be a very interesting and controversial subject for scholars from the most different areas, such as anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, literary critics, and

so on. Throughout the world people have been paying special attention to these *children* stories.

Differently from what many people might suppose, fairy tales entered the realm of children's literature just two or three centuries ago, as they were not originally meant for young readers (cf. Tatar xiv). In fact, studies have demonstrated that a very large number of fairy tales are the product of the transformation of adult folk tales into something suitable for children. A classic example is found in the collection prepared and published by the German brothers Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm: *Kinder-Und Hausmarchen* (1812) *(The Household Tales).* It is almost impossible to speak of fairy tales without mentioning the Grimms, for the tales they collected have moved beyond the German boundaries, achieving great success and popularity throughout the world. This is, in fact, one point of interest in the study of the tales. Critics and scholars have frequently attempted to discover "the magic of the Grimms' tales" (Zipes 1988: 15-16).

The tales we find in the collection came basically from what the Grimms heard during oral performances and which they shaped and transformed into manuscripts, and then, into printed editions. Although they insisted that their work with the tales aimed at the preservation of the original folk material, the strong influence of their editing over the original stories is evident. According to contemporary studies, the Grimms conducted their shaping of the tales very much in accordance with their own world view. And they have been usually criticized for "[integrating] character judgements and moralizing pronouncements into the body of their texts" (Tatar 158). In spite of this we

cannot deny the importance of the Grimms in the creation of "an ideal type for the 'literary' fairy tale, one that sought to be as close to the oral tradition as possible, while incorporating stylistic, formal, and substantial thematic changes to appeal to a growing bourgeois audience" (Zipes 1988: 12).

The changes made by the Grimms in their editing of the tales have been analyzed by different scholars and critics. Among the things observed is the fact that Christian values were inserted in the tales (cf. Zipes 1988: 14), what may be explained considering that the Grimms were profoundly religious and that they "appeared to share the contemporary intention that children's literature should improve its readers religiously, morally, and socially" (Bottigheimer 19). Another aspect pointed out by critics is the removal of "erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality" (Zipes 1988: 14). The Grimms justified the elimination of such elements with the argument that they were not adequate to be presented to young readers. The interesting thing, however, is that the scenes of violence, which were also not considered proper for children were not treated in the same way. As Maria Tatar observes, the Grimms "had no such scruples about violence" (181) while editing the tales. On the contrary, "[t]he punishment of villains [was] invariably described in greater detail than the good fortune of heroes" (181). It is also common to find allusions to the fact that the Grimms "emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time" (Zipes 1988: 14).

The different treatment given to male heroes and to their female counterparts in Grimms' tales is something that deserves

being mentioned. As careful analyses of the tales have demonstrated, heroines are usually "portrayed as domestic figures or figures needing domestication", and heroes appear to the audience as "adventurers who need experience" (Zipes 1988: 56). Identically curious is the fact that while heroes are very frequently presented as humble men who succeed in rising in the world with the help of their humility, heroines "undergo a process of humiliation and defeat that ends with a rapid rise in societal status through marriage but that also signals a loss of pride and the abdication of power" (Tatar 94-95).

Besides these differences we also have to say that in the battle against opposing circumstances and enemies, male heroes very frequently win by demonstrating wisdom in dealing with words. Speech and intelligence, then, become means of reaching success, of having access to power. Female protagonists, on the other hand, "must exhibit silence and patience to survive and wed" (Zipes 1988: 69), not to mention the usual emphasis placed on the combination of hard work with beauty as tools to arrive at a *happy end*. Thus it is not through wit and active participation that they solve their immediate problems, but by "holding their tongue" and "exercising their muscles" (Tatar 116). Passivity and muteness appear too much linked to the image of heroines. Indeed, after close analysis of the language in which the tales are told, Ruth B. Bottigheimer perceives that "silence is almost exclusively female" (74) and that male silence is comparatively "briefer and much less restrictive" (76). This fact is of much relevance if we agree with her in that "discourse can be understood as a form of domination, and speech use as an index of

social values and the distribution of power within society" (51).
The results of Bottigheimer's analysis show that "several tales,
among them the best known, purvey images of women muted
narratively by the very language in which the tales are told
(52). Bottigheimer's conclusions concerning the patterns of
speech in "Cinderella", for example, bring amazing revelations.
One of them is the fact that through the revisions the tale
suffered, direct speech was removed from women and transferred to
men, clearly showing "a skewed view of the sexes and their speech
use" (69-70). This conclusion, as Bottigheimer says, may be
extended to what happens in most of the tales in the collection.

Another aspect of the tales that is mentioned by critics is
the contrast between hero/heroine and villain. As Maria Tatar
points out, in the German fairy tales the victimization of
hero/heroine is usually emphasized, contrasting with the
villain's "power, strength, and craft along with murderous
tenacity" (182). The victimization of the main characters, then,
is a pervasive theme which we frequently detect in fairy tales.
And, for female protagonists mainly, the way out of such position
generally lies out of their sphere of action.

Concerning villains in Grimms' tales we should not forget
that women constitute the great majority in this category, with
stepmothers in the leading position. Curious as it may be, these
women usually possess incredible creativity, energy, and more
importantly, power. They do act, react, and assume active roles
in the stories. But, at the end, what they almost inevitably find
is destruction or great physical and psychological suffering.

In fairy tales there is a general tendency to present
creativity, action, and power as undesirable feminine traits. The

women who display such characteristics are portrayed as anomalies, as monsters. Gilbert and Gubar have dedicated special attention to these male images of women, and their view of a "monster-woman" (p. 28) in the analysis of "Snow White", for instance, is quite interesting. They see the Queen as "a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are" (38-39). The Queen may stand for the uncountable number of women artists whose images have been imprisoned in "the mirror of the male inscribed literary text" (15), representing, thus, the power to go against traditional expectations for women, set up by patriarchy. And she does appear as someone who tries to write her own story. That is possibly why she is presented as an *abnormality* , a *monster* that must be destroyed. And, the refusal to fit in the predertermined acceptable female role leads the Queen to violent destruction as she ends up dancing to death in red iron shoes.

It is difficult to speak of villainy in fairy tales without touching aspects such as prohibitions, trangressions, and punishment. Bottigheimer has observed that in Grimms' tales things are different "depending on the sex of the offender" (91). She has found a general tendency to favor men in what concerns these aspects. Punishment, for instance, is essentially "part of female experience" (91). Besides this, women must usually be obedient in contrast to men who are rarely submitted to prohibitions. And even when men do not respect imposed limits they do not find serious punishment. Bottigheimer believes that this tendency to incriminate and punish women while protecting

male figures may be explained by "the notion that all womem share Eve's sin" (171). Hence the idea that they must be punished. On the other hand, the identification of every man with Adam explains the more tolerant attitude towards men's transgressions. These views, according to Bottigheimer, are "central to the view of women in Grimms' tales" as they help us understand why it is "easy to see some women as witches . . . who are believed to derive their powers from their associations with the devil" (171).

At this point it should be said that although most of what is being presented here refers to Grimms' fairy tales, it is possible to extend part of the considerations to the appreciation of other traditional fairy tales which have remained alive through the years, such as Andersen's. As Jack Zipes remarks in *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1986), "Andersen was petrified of women and wanted to keep them under control, and he rewarded the submissive, pliant women in his tales with God's love" (18). So, his tales are also full of traditional expectations for women which have remained quite strong through time.

Another aspect that cannot be left out of these introductory observations on fairy tales is the popularity achieved by the Disney versions of famous traditional narratives. It is not difficult, nowadays, to find children who are more familiar with these cinematic versions than with the tales themselves. The movies based on the stories have received even international recognition, as well as several significant awards, such as the well-known *Oscar* . According to Zipes, Disney " Americanized the Grimms' tales by celebrating the virile innocence of male power, the domestication of sweet, docile pubescent girls, and the

virtues of clean-cut, all-American figures and the prudent, if not prudish life" (1988: 24). Zipes also calls our attention to the fact that in Disney's versions we find strong emphasis placed on the role of male heroes who usually perform great deeds, such as the prince in "Sleeping Beauty". Female protagonists, on the other hand, are most of the time portrayed as beautiful women who believe that their hard work associated with their purity of heart and obedience will make them deserve a *happy end* in the arms of strong, powerful male figures who will definitely rescue them to paradise on earth (24-25).

The considerations presented here up to now are based on some contemporary studies on fairy tales, and they can be seen as strong evidence of the appeal these children's stories have exerted on different scholars. Dating from the early 70's, for example, there has been a growing interest on the part of European and American feminist critics in discussing the social and cultural effect of fairy tales. As Jack Zipes says in the introduction of *Don't Bet on the Prince*, "[i]t is no longer possible to ignore the connection between the aesthetic components of the fairy tales, whether they be old or new, and their historical function within a socialisation process which forms tastes, mores, values, and habits" (2). In fact, there has been a general tendency to see these stories as ideological constructs which play a very special role in the process of socialisation that begins early in childhood. As Ronald Granofsky remarks, "[c]entral to the process of cultural conditioning in childhood is the indoctrination of values embodied in fairy tales" (52). It is exactly in this period that a good number of

children are exposed to the values, morals, and social roles
established, or at least suggested by fairy tales. Indeed, fairy
tales have been told and retold for a very long time and the ones
in contact with them have been exposed to certain patterns of
behavior which carry deep social and cultural significance. These
stories have been seen, thus, as repository of tradition. Among
the things observed in contemporary critical analyses of fairy
tales is the fact that together with other patterns of behavior,
they help consolidate sex role stereotypes.

Bottigheimer's conclusions on the social and moral vision of
Grimms' tales are particularly interesting in what concerns the
view of men and women in the tales. For her, "[t]he collection as
a whole presents a consistent vision of gender differences which
does not support many of the psychological interpretations that
have been made up to now" (168). With her detailed study of the
motivations that may be hiding below the surface of the motifs
and images of the tales, she observes how moral expectations
radically vary for men and for women. Equally important is
Bottigheimer's perception of the "consistent vision of gender-
specific and gender appropriate behavior that includes kindred
values revived and incorporated from preceding centuries" (168).

In addition to all these considerations regarding fairy
tales, there is also the fact that classical narratives such as
"Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty", "The Little Mermaid", "The Red
Shoes", etc., are frequently referred to as contemporary myths.
For a good number of us fairy-tale meanings do indeed appear as
"wholly natural and unpremeditated" (Bottigheimer 39), denying
their historical origin. This transformation of "culture into
nature or, at least, the cultural, the ideological, the

historical into the 'natural'" (Barthes 1977: 165) is one of the main traits of myth. In fact, the classical tales make us feel that

> we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms, that we are all striving for the same happiness, that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable, that a particular type of behavior will produce guaranteed results, like living happily ever after with lots of gold in a marvelous castle, "our" castle and fortress that will forever protect us from inimical and unpredictable forces of the outside world. (Zipes 1988: 148)

Myth, as Roland Barthes sees it, is nothing but " a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature of things'" (Barthes 1972: 110). As to classical fairy tales, critics such as Zipes and Bottigheimer have pointed out that although what is presented in the stories appears to us as if it were just following the nature of things, in fact, what we have below the surface of the events presented is manipulation of images and motifs, so that patterns of behavior do emerge from the tales, reinforcing social and moral patriarchal views. And as Gilbert and Gubar remark, "myth and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts" (36).

Critics have also pointed out the "mythic connotations of fairy-tale illustrations" (Zipes 1988: 156) as the pictures and images created to illustrate the stories are full of significance, reinforcing patriarchal views of men and women. As Zipes says, these illustrations "were established and designed in accordance with male fantasies. Imaginative fairy-tale projections served the underlying desires and ideas of a patriachal culture" (1988: 158). Bottigheimer's analysis of illustrations of Grimms' tales calls our attention to the fact

that "[g]irls, but not boys, are routinely shown with downcast eyes and demure demeanor, which effectively inhibits them from seeing their own surroundings and thus represents a form of personal isolation" (111).

After the several considerations on the ideological connotations of fairy tales it is not a surprise to see critics such as Marcia Lieberman, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Karen Rowe, pointing out the need to deconstruct these inherited *stories* which, among other things, spread false notions of sex roles, so that conservative views of gender and power may be questioned and reevaluated. What we notice, then, is a tendency to transform (deconstruct and reconstruct) the fairy tale genre following an emergent need for change in social practice. Zipes emphasizes the fact that "numerous women writers up to the present have felt compelled to confront the stereotypical fairy tale roles in some form or another to establish a sense of their own identities and voices" (Zipes 1986: 10).

To expose the mythic connotations of fairy tales it is necessary to "disasemble the used components of knowing and knowledge and reassemble them into anti-mythic stories" (Zipes 1988: 153). Thus the task of deconstructing inherited *stories* such as fairy tales implies a kind of reformulation of the traditional narrative which has been the repository of a strong system of interpretation disguised as representation. The term *deconstruction* as it is loosely used by some feminist critics means the act of dismantling the literary conventions so that the traditional tales may be revaluated from a new critical direction. In her *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985) Rachel Du

Plessis examines the ways followed by twentieth-century women poets in the remaking of mythic stories. One of the strategies is "narrative displacement", through which attention is directed to the other side of the story. This strategy implies a change of point of view that gives "voice to the muted" (108), offering a new reading of the old story from a noncanonical perspective: "the choice of the teller or the perspective will alter its core assumptions and one's sense of the tale" (109). Another strategy is the "delegitimation of the known tale" (108), that is, the negation of certain parts of the traditional tale, thus achieving a rupture with "conventional morality, politics, and narrative" (108). Using Alicia S. Ostriker's words in her *Stealing the Language* (1987) we may say that in revisionist mythmaking the rule is usually to "keep the name but change the game"(215), that is, to use a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, but challenging the traditional meanings attributed to the mythic figure or story, so that *imprisoned* meanings that were latent may be released. Thus, "the core of revisionist mythmaking", according to Ostriker, is "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (216). In the process of myth revisionism there's an attempt to move from an internalized colonial world view, aiming at an anticolonial mentality to an effective change in social practice.

Indeed, the revision of traditional fairy tales has been the task of several writers in the last two decades. These revisions, or "innovative adaptations" as Jack Zipes calls them, represent an opportunity to appreciate the well-known tales from a new perspective, so that we may acknowledge the conditions underlying the traditional views transmitted through the tales. Anne

Sexton's *Transformations*, for instance, is by now widely known for its innovative readings of sixteen tales from the Brothers Grimm, in which she "demolishes many of the social conventions, especially those connected with femininity, that fairy tales ostensively endorse" (Ostriker 232). Sexton has been praised for her "striking ability to decode stories we thought we knew, revealing meanings we should have guessed" (Ostriker 232-233). The classical "Cinderella" has been the subject of a good number of "innovative adaptations", in which the female heroine is usually "re-represented as a young woman who learns to take destiny into her own hands or as a fool for not taking a more active role in determining the course of her life" (Zipes 1988: 144).

Atwood herself has taken part in this revisionist process. Throughout her work we can notice the presence of traditional fairy tales taken from diverse perspectives. And as Barbara H. Rigney has suggested in her study of 1987, we may use Atwood's own words on Adrienne Rich to synthesize one of Atwood's major concerns that is "the quest for something beyond myths, for the truths about men and women, about the I and the you, the He and the She, and more generally. . . about the powerless and the powerful" (1982: 161).

CHAPTER II

Identity Through Romance: The Passive Heroine Revisited

The reading of Atwood's novels reveals the writer's deep concern about the implications of being human, male or female, in such a confusing, not to say almost completely illogical world. But it is also true that Atwood dedicates special attention to the problems of being a female human being, as well as to the problems of being a woman artist in a world which despite being able to "turn certain individual writers into revered cult objects, has little respect for writing as profession and not much respect for women either" (Atwood 1982: 204). It should be noted, however, that Atwood herself has declared in the interview to Miner that this special interest in feminine issues does not mean her work is a direct product of the feminist movement, nor that she represents what would be called an authentic *feminist* writer:

> Some feminists insist that my work, things like *The Edible Woman* and *Power Politics*, stem from the women's movement. But they didn't. This isn't to disparage anyone's politics. It is merely to indicate that parallel lines do not usually start from the same point and that being adopted is not, finally, the same thing as being born. (189)

For the purpose of this specific study, the question of whether Atwood is actually a *feminist* writer is quite irrelevant. What really matters is that she is writing from a female perspective, since before being a writer she is also a woman. And undoubtedly this makes it easier to translate in her work the anxieties, the doubts, the questionings, the desires of a female being.

Taking into consideration what Atwood has declared in interviews, as well as what we find in her novels, we could say that the writer has demonstrated an aversion to pre-determined roles in society. She cannot accept the idea that one should behave in this or that way just because society expects him/her to do so: "I don't mind playing roles - as long as I can determine the roles" (Miner 187). Just to illustrate, we could refer to a passage from Atwood's *Bodily Harm*, in which we have a detailed description of a woman's punishment by her husband for being found with another man. It should be noticed the interesting way society's expectation is portrayed in the passage:

> Of course Marsdon beat her up. If he hadn't beat her up, the other men would have laughed at him and so would the women. They expect it for being *bad*. (214)1

With this passage, the writer leads the readers to at least acknowledge the power of social rules as well as how these rules may be internalized, playing an important role in determining the *appropriate*, the *expected* behavior in a given circumstance.

In Atwood's novels it is quite common to find female heroines in a difficult attempt to find their own place in the world, in society. Page by page we can see them trying to move towards maturity, towards balance, towards self-definition.The *search-for-identity* theme has been pointed out by several critics as one of Atwood's main concerns. Carrington even remarks that "[e]very novel is tightly organized through an obsessive metaphorical network to dramatize [Atwood's] protagonists' developing consciousness" (39). In this process of becoming conscious of limitations and possibilities, one of the things Atwood's female protagonists usually have to confront are social

expectations. They are very frequently put face to face with multiple roles presented by society, with what has been traditionally accepted as *appropriate* male and female behavior. To achieve the desired maturity, balance, and self-definition we notice, among other things, that the protagonists seriously consider the implications of being women in the world where they live, as well as what they represent in this context.

It should be observed, however, that the question of identity does not appear isolated in the novels; other interrelated questions also emerge, such as the question of victimization and the question of power. It is very difficult to discuss the protagonists' development of consciousness without mentioning these other aspects. When facing society's *options*, it becomes quite evident the protagonists' deep concern with their own *victimization*, as well as with the psychological factor of sexual politics.

Considering Atwood's concern with the questions above on the level of sexual politics, it is not a surprise to find, in the novels, characters who are identified, in one form or another, with fairy-tale masculine and feminine figures. As was observed in the previous chapter, these children stories have been frequently pointed out as at least somewhat responsible for the establishment, or better yet, for the consolidation of sex role stereotypes in society. And it is possible to demonstrate how Atwood may be using fairy-tale elements to expose these stereotypes to examination with a close inspection of male/female relationship, especially in her earlier fiction, since it is in these novels that a greater number of examples are found.

The male/female relationship is one of the remarkable aspects of Atwood's novels. In all the stories, there are women who are emotionally involved with at least one male figure. It is also a fact that most of the times these involvements are problematic, full of questionings, usually centered on the dispute to see "who can do what to whom and get away with it"(*Handmaid's* 127). A fairy-tale element which Atwood proves to be using in her novels is the idealized view of romantic love, of a male / female relationship that is frequently emphasized in these children stories; a view that may be contributing to the consolidation of the idea of male hegemony, as the stories usually emphasize the role of male heroes and their adventurous spirit contrasted with female passivity, victimization, and complete lack of power.

Taking up some of the ideas already discussed in the previous chapter, we can observe that in fairy tales such as "Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty", and "Snow White", femininity is equated with natural beauty, kindness, passivity, domesticity, and victimization. Unable to do anything practical to solve their own problems, these heroines have informed the *romantic* view of women waiting for the day their *prince* will come to rescue them into *everlasting happiness*, guaranteeing their state as *princesses*. In "Little Red Red Cap", the young heroine is equally portrayed as innocent, kind, passive, and victimized. She is completely defenceless against the wolf. Although the emphasis is not placed on the idea of *romantic* love, the girl's complete destruction is prevented by the courageous *deed* of a male figure: the hunter, who frees both the girl and her grandmother from the *evil* wolf, emphasizing the idea that it is a hero who has the ability to destroy the villain. Identity through the heterossexual contract

-- usually *marriage* -- is therefore the major option for women, who traditionally succeed under the protection of male strength.

Marriage, as the prototypical expression of women's subservience to men, appears indeed as one of Atwood's recurring concerns. Marian in *The Edible Woman*, for instance, is clearly in search for her identity as a woman. She moves among several *role models*, unable to decide what to do. She works for a market research firm, at a job she does not see any chance to give her a better position in life, as the office *above* her own can be populated only by men. Her roommate, Ainsley, spends most of her time trying to go against social conventions, especially in the field of male/female relationship. Marian gets involved with two men: Peter,her boyfriend, a lawyer with a possibly brilliant future ahead; and Duncan, a young man who clearly breaks away from conventional life styles, serving as a perfect foil for Peter. After noticing all his friends have already gotten married, Peter also decides to do so, and urges Marian to marry him. *Marriage* is one of the several options Marian is put in contact with throughout the novel, and deciding whether to get married or not is, in fact, Marian's more serious doubt. A real example of what being married means comes to her through a typical middle-class couple: Clara and Joe. The way they are portrayed in the novel leads Marian to see them as the personification of the traditional princess and prince figures of classical fairy tales in which everlasting happiness is achieved through marriage:

> Their worship of each other before the wedding was sometimes
> ridiculously idealistic; one kept expecting Joe to spread his
> overcoat on mud puddles or drop to his knees to kiss Clara's
> rubber boots. (36)

The description of Clara makes her a perfect princess: blonde, fragile, "everyone's ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity" (36). She has given up professional life to dedicate herself exclusively to her *wifely* life. She is never seen involved in any productive activity. Her complete passivity and dependence on her husband catch anyone's eyes. Even "[h]er messiness wasn't *actively* creative. . . it was *passive* . She simply stood helpless while the tide of dirt rose around her, unable to stop it or evade it. The babies were like that too; *her own body seemed somehow beyond her* , going its own way without reference to any directions of her" (37; emphasis added).

The portrayal of Joe completes the scenery. He "tends . . . to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection" (35), and his constant "protective attitude towards Clara" (36) is quite evident. Joe's identification with fairy tales' traditional *prince* figures is not on the level of *heroism*; he cannot be considered *heroic* at all, as his great *deeds* are limited to doing housework, a task not usually associated with men. But Joe does believe himself to be the one responsible for Clara, the one who can protect her from any danger, in the same way that princes take care of victimized, unreacting heroines.

The importance of the identification of Clara and Joe with fairy-tale figures lies especially in the fact that Marian cannot find in their marriage the promised *happy end* one encounters in fairy tales. The usual fairy-tale idea of achieving *everlasting happiness* through marriage is destroyed, or better yet, exposed to examination. With the development of the novel it becomes evident that Clara has not found *paradise* in her married life.

Although she does not show any clear intention to do anything effective to change her situation, it is not difficult to notice how dissatisfied she is with the life she leads. One has the impression she does not even become aware of the real reason of her feeling of emptiness. Her abandonment of her professional life as well as her lack of effective participation in the determination of the course of her own life suggest her complete abdication of power. Similarly to fairy-tale heroines, she gives up her own life to "rise in societal status through marriage", reaching this way, social acceptance. But, instead of the expected eternal happiness beside her husband, the only thing she seems to have found in marriage is boredom and disillusionment. There is, thus, the possibility that Atwood may be using the couple's relationship to expose how disappointing and ridiculous the fairy-tale idealized view of marriage as the way to complete happiness usually proves to be in real life situations, especially concerning women. Clara and Joe's relationship seems to serve as a warning to Marian, as she indeed demontrates from the beginning a rejection of Clara's role : "she was glad she wasn't Clara" (31). Doing so, Marian is rejecting Clara's model of femininity, her passivity, her complete dependence on her husband to solve all her problems, her absence of life.

Although Clara's way of living does not attract Marian at all, Marian's relationship with Peter may not be considered much better. She clearly shows a tendency to let all decisions be made by him. Also, in several instances she surprises Peter with completely childish behavior. This is partly responsible for several critics' tendency to identify Marian with the protagonist of "Alice in Wonderland". The possibility of seeing Marian as the

figure of Alice is relevant for the present study in that it may
be suggesting the character's difficulty in assuming an effective
role in society. Marian's childish behavior may be a way she
finds to evade reality, avoiding thus the responsibility for the
course of her life. This behavior demonstrates Marian's
unconscious refusal to grow up, so that she is spared the
confrontation with reality, which would demand an effective
attitude from her towards the solution of her own problems. In
the contact with the world around her, Marian tends to see
herself as a *victim*, especially in relation to Peter. For
instance, when she is unable to see the rabbit in the picture
Peter is showing (69), it is possible that Mac Lulich is not
wrong to say that this happens probably because "she
unconsciously feels she is the rabbit" (188). Seeing that the
rabbit had been violently destroyed by Peter, it is not difficult
to perceive how Marian emphasizes her view of herself as *victim*.

Peter is mainly portrayed as "a perfectly packaged playboy
prince" (Piercy 55), and there are, indeed, several references to
his prince-like characteristics: "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" (61); "attractive, bound to be
successful" (102), he "never shed and never shone in wrong
places" (146). This is the way most people see Peter: the ideal
match for any *lucky* woman. And Marian does spend a good part of
her time trying to convince herself of the advantages of having
such a prince-like figure as her future husband. But what becomes
evident as the novel develops is Marian's extreme difficulty in

feeling pleased by such characteristics. She always finds
something in Peter's attitudes that bothers her immensely, as for
instance, his demonstrations of his adventurous spirit and
physical power:

> His satisfaction with what he considered a forceful display
> of muscle was obvious. It irritated me that he should
> appropriate as his own the credit due to the back wheels of
> his car. (81)

It is significant that at Peter's side Marian does not seem
to have found the expected delight, tranquility, and safety. On
the contrary, the more she forces herself to accept Peter's
prince image as something positive and inoffensive, the more she
perceives in this image an underlying power to harm her. This can
be noticed, for instance, in this passage, in which Marian
observes Peter cutting meat:

> How skillfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And
> yet it was a violent action, cutting; and violence in
> connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. (150)

Several passages of the novel indicate that by Peter's side
Marian feels a permanent fear of being destroyed, consumed,
reinforcing her view of herself as *victim*. At first sight, this
fear may seem ridiculous and unjustified, but it should be
observed that what Marian fears is not physical violence, but the
possibility of another type of violence, much more dangerous,
given its usual subtlety. Marian's serious concern, then is with
"removed violence, a manipulation of specialized instruments, the
finger guiding but never touching" (151). Marian is afraid of
"violence of the mind"; something "almost like magic: you thought
it and it happened" (151). This somehow explains why, almost at
the end of the novel, Peter's prince image gives place to the
image of villain in Marian's perpective.

At the party in which Peter and Marian are supposed to get engaged officially, a Cinderella-like ending is expected: the woman completely conquering her beloved's affection and endless happiness finally being achieved. But what happens does not coincide with the famous *happy end* for Cinderella and her beloved prince. Marian, all dressed in red, becomes at once a mixture of Cinderella an the famous helpless girl of "The Little Red Cap" due to her perception of Peter as both prince and villain. The fact of wearing red disturbs Marian greatly: "She should never have worn red. It made her a perfect target" (244). Like the little girl from the fairy tale, Marian fears destruction. This feeling dominates her so completely that she finds herself unable to go ahead with her relationship with Peter. With some difficulty she finally accepts her rejection of Peter's prince image, an image she had been forcing herself to believe. What shocks her is the image of villain she suddenly perceives in Peter: "She recognized all the costumes she had ever seen Peter wearing, except of course the dark winter suit he had on at the moment" (229). As Mac Lulich observes, it is possible that "Marian runs from Peter when she realizes he is a modern technological version of the wolf" (187). Differently from the tale, however, Marian is not *devoured* by the wolf, as she rejects the alternative offered by him. Seen from the "Cinderella" perspective, Marian's flight differs from Cinderella's. In the fairy tale, Cinderella runs away from the party not to break the magic of the moment, which could risk her possibility of success with her prince. In the novel, Marian runs away from the party not to get engaged to Peter, rejecting, thus, the possibility of conquering the prince's affection. Also, the usual wedding cake

gives place to a cake in the shape of a woman which Marian bakes and offers to Peter.

Marian's final decision not to marry Peter has some possible implications in the novel. What matters is not the fact in itself, but what it may represent. Her decision signals that she has possibly overcome her childish attitude towards her life, as together with it she also seems to be refusing the fantasy of the self as little -girl-lost, as victim. And this is suggestive of an effective movement towards maturity (cf Rigney 1987: 2). As Carrington interestingly observes, "if Marian married Peter . . . [s]he would be a passive and childish doll-woman, desirable to Peter and acceptable to society, but no longer acceptable to herself" (50). What Marian rejects is Clara's model of femininity.

Still moving along the lines of the idealized fairy-tale view of marriage, we have another good example in *The Edible Woman*. Marian's co-workers, Emmy, Lucy, and Millie -- the "three office virgins" -- are very humorously portrayed in the novel. All "artificial blondes" (22), their main objective in life is one day "to get married and settle down" (22). It is not difficult, thus, to see them as the classical *princess* figure who wastes most of her precious time daydreaming about the day in which her nice, handsome prince will come to marry her and make her the happiest woman of all. But it is also possible that the source of the sardonic presentation of the "office virgins" is in Cinderella's stepsisters who desperately try to conquer the prince's love in vain. It is during the party in which Marian is supposed to get engaged to Peter that this identification becomes

clearer: "They were each expecting a version of Peter to walk
miraculously through the door, drop to one knee and propose"
(233). And Lucy does try to woo Peter: "you're even handsomer
than you sound on the phone" (238). The amazing thing is that the
novel suggests Lucy has some chance with the *prince*: " it's nice
to know there are *some* considerate women left around" (266). This
would mean a stepsister doing fine!. . . Here, with the "office
virgins", Atwood may be satirizing the belief in the fairy-tale
idea that "some day my prince will come", in which a good number
of women may still believe.

In *Bodily Harm*, the heroine, Rennie Wilford, a writer of
magazine articles on trivialities, travels to an island to write
a travel article on the Caribbean, after having experienced both
a mastectomy of her left breast due to cancer, and also her
abandonment by her lover, Jake, who loses interest in her after
the surgery, not because of the amputation itself, but possibly
due to Rennie's extreme passive attitude towards his exploitive
behavior. On the island, she gets involved with Paul, a man she
never gets to know what he does in fact, and she ends up
imprisoned with a revolutionary woman called Lora who can easily
be interpreted as Rennie's double -- her active, politicized
self. In this novel we also find examples of how idealized
views of male/female relationship may be taking part in the
creation of unreal expectations for a woman's life. A good number
of these children stories very often present women who are able
to make any sacrifice just to have the affection of their beloved
ones. Happiness for these women can only be achieved through
love. Like famous fairy-tale heroines such as Andersen's Little
Mermaid, Lora loves to extremes and she also dies in name of her

love for "Prince". However, the romantic idea of "even dying for love" proves to be useless since through it Lora does not achieve what she had possibly idealized for herself. Concentrating all her expectations on "Prince", Lora is unable to face life without him. What happens to Lora serves as a warning of the danger of making romantic love the center of one's life as if it were the only way to true happiness. This belief may lead a person nowhere, and sometimes even to death, which does not necessarily mean being literally dead, as there is something equally terrible in finding oneself a living dead being who has lost all excitement, all self-satisfaction, all reasons to live.

Rennie, the protagonist of *Bodily Harm* also seems to be very much influenced by the romantic idea of love. As pointed out in Chapter I, in traditional fairy tales it is common to find special emphasis placed on the passivity of female heroines whenever they have to face antagonic circumstances or characters, reinforcing their *victim* position. Consequently, the way out of complicated situations usually lies out of their sphere of action. It is here, then, that we frequently encounter the powerful, handsome male figure of the prince who easily puts an end to all problems. Similarly to what usually happens in fairy tales, Rennie also has difficulties trying any effective attitude towards the solution of her immediate problems. Love, for her, lies exactly in the possibility of being rescued. What attracts her in a man is the fact that this male figure may have the necessary *power* to free her from what disturbs her. As Rigney observes, "[Rennie] has inevitably chosen men who maintain power over her" (111). To deal with the cancer which is gradually

destroying her body, she throws all her life expectations in Daniel's hands, which paradoxically are the ones that amputate her left breast. Interesting, for instance, is the explanation she finds for her sudden passion for this man: "She fell in love with him because he was the first thing she saw after her life had been saved. This was the only explanation she could think of" (32). If we compare Rennie's explanation to what happens in fairy tales such as "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" concerning the heroines' attitude towards their handsome princes after being "saved" by them, it is not completely improbable, then, that Rennie's explanation may have its origin in the idea of love passed by these tales. Like a good number of fairy-tale heroines, Rennie also links the idea of being rescued to the idea of love. It even becomes the only way she believes she can conquer her beloved: "the only way she could entice Daniel over would be give him a chance to rescue her" (237). What becomes evident in the novel is Rennie's almost complete dependence on male figures in difficult circumstances. When she is in prison, unable to think of anything she could do that might help her get out of it, she can't accept the idea that Paul may be dead: "That would rule out the possibility of rescue" (283). This waiting for rescue just serves to reinforce that the solution for her problem always lies in male hands, delaying, this way, her development as a complete being who is able to run her own destiny.

Differently from fairy tales, however, rescue doesn't come to Rennie through male figures. What seems to make her feel more powerful, more human is what she learns from another woman: Lora. When she finds herself alone with Lora's dead body the experience achieves its climax. After overcoming her feeling of repulse

towards the destroyed body, Rennie touches Lora; she holds her left hand "between both of her own" (299), regaining her ability to feel:

> She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now. (300)

After this, Rennie notices that "[w]hat she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it"(300). She clearly does not end where she had begun.

In *Surfacing* we have a nameless heroine who moves from the city to the wilderness, an island in northern Quebec, in order to find out what has happened to her father who has disappeared mysteriously. She is accompanied by some friends: a couple, David and Anna; and her lover, Joe. In her past she had her baby aborted, what was in a way forced by the child's father who was already married to another woman. And this is a part of her life she avoids facing. The couple that accompanies her in this trip is portrayed with special emphasis on the depiction of the game of sexual politics existing between them. As Annis Pratt comments in her "*Surfacing* and the Rebirth Journey," the protagonist of *Surfacing* "brings her own patriarchal space and subconscious gender world with her in the form of David and Anna, a couple hideously involved in normative 'male and female' behavior" (151). Critics such as Granofsky and Rigney have already pointed out that it is possible to see Anna as "an incarnation of the evil queen in 'Snow White' who sits before her mirror but never asks the fatal question" (Rigney 1987: 42). Indeed, Anna does exhibit an extreme preoccupation with mirrors and with keeping herself beautiful through the use of make-up,

"the only magic left to her" (p. 194), just to try to please
David. In Grimm's tale, the evil queen dances herself to death in
red hot iron shoes. In the novel, Anna is forced to dance,
completely naked, to her husband's camera; "the camera. . . like
a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture" (160). But it is
also possible to identify Anna with both the figure of Snow
White, the passive heroine, and her other self - the evil queen,
always worried about remaining young and beautiful, for as
Gilbert and Gubar have already pointed out, the evil queen is
simply the reversal and therefore the same as the princess(41).
Completely dominated by her husband David, Anna is petrified into
the *image* of what women should be like - the image reflected on
the surface of the mirror. It is the nameless heroine who acts
against David, destroying the film he has made of Anna's body.

It is possible that Atwood may be using Anna's resemblance to
the evil queen and Snow White to direct attention to the
underlying violence of male power, or patriarchal tradition
(cf. Granofsky 60-61), as well as to how difficult it is for a
woman to acknowledge such domination and move out of it. The fear
of being left alone seems to help women get used to the *war*,
sometimes even becoming dependent on it to survive:

> he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him
> because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be
> broken and he would go elsewhere to continue the war. (180)

The protagonist of *Surfacing* does seem to end up
acknowledging the danger of being imprisoned inside the
"glassed-in control cubicle" (195) as well as of the necessity to
"come to terms with the image on the surface of the glass"
(Gilbert and Gubar 16-17)

I must stop being in the mirror. . . I reverse the

> mirror . . . it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken.(205)

In the final moments of the novel the protagonist realizes that the solution lies not in destroying the mirror, nor in avoiding facing it: "I turn the mirror around: in it there's a creature neither animal nor human", just "a natural woman" (p. 222). The protagonist's refusal to follow society's patterns in the way she now sees herself suggests she is at least attempting to transcend patriarchal views of what a *normal* woman should be like.

Another aspect that should be mentioned here is the fact that "[t]o be 'reborn' just as to be born, the protagonist must have a 'gift' from both father and mother . . .. She must understand her parentage and her origins before she can understand herself" (Rigney 1980: 107). From her father, the heroine receives *knowledge*; from her mother, analysing one of her drawings in which there is a pregnant woman, she gets a message: "in order to be alive and whole she must replace, resurrect, that part of herself which she has killed -- the aborted fetus and the fertility aspect of the female principle which it represents" (Rigney 1980: 110). It is quite interesting that, after the protagonist establishes a quick contact with the *ghosts* of both her parents, she is sure she is pregnant. Her pregnancy can be seen as symbolic of her own self rebirth as a human being, as a woman; something she is able to accomplish combining both male and female principles. The fusion produces life; not fragmented life, but life as a whole -- a unified totality.

It is interesting that the well known fairy-tale figure of the evil queen is, in fact, one of the recurrent fairy-tale

images Atwood uses in her novels. In *The Edible Woman*, for
instance, Marian's roommate Ainsley resembles the evil queen,
especially in her ability to transform herself in order to
achieve her objectives. With the magic of make-up she makes it
very difficult, even for Marian, to recognize her in her first
attempt to approach Leonard: "A young girl I'd never seen before
was standing there" (p. 66). Like the evil queen, Ainsley does
not wait for things to happen. She does act, react; and what is
more important, she does it creatively:

> She'd been closeted in her bedroom most of the day, engaging
> in heaven-knows-what black magic practices: brewing up an
> aphrodisiac, no doubt, or making wax dolls of Leonard and
> transfixing them with hatpins at the appropriate points. (91)

Contrarily to what happens to the evil queen in "Snow White",
however, Ainsley does not find destruction at the end; she does
succeed. We see, then, the victory of a witch's creative power,
of her craftiness. But it is amazing that her refusal to follow
traditionally accepted patterns of behavior proves to be purely
theoretical as she ends up desperate to find a father for her
son, a husband, her own *prince*.

What happens in Ainsley's case is similar to what was
discussed about Anna's identification with both the evil queen
and Snow White. Ainsley is also Snow White in her longing for
rescue, for a man who can solve the problem of fathering her son.
And she does end up getting married at the end of the novel.
Marian is quite surprised at her roommate's radical change: "How
did she manage it, that stricken attitude, that high seriousness?
She was almost as morally earnest as the lady down below" (273).
This may be indicative of how powerful society's rules are and
how difficult it is not to try to fit the *appropriate*, the

expected roles; how difficult it is to move from theory to practice.

The evil queen is also present in the portrayal of Joan's mother in *Lady Oracle* (cf. Rigney 64) who is often facing a mirror, and whose cruelty towards Joan makes her look more like a stepmother figure than a mother figure. It should not be forgotten, however, that the woman is being presented to the readers through the eyes of Joan, and that it is possible that "Joan perhaps creates this image of her mother as the evil queen in order to preserve her corresponding image of herself as Snow White" (Rigney, 64).

What happens to the heroine in *Surfacing* also deserves special attention. In the past, the novel's nameless heroine, who is an illustrator of children's books, has an affair with a married artist. She gets pregnant and the man convinces her to have the baby aborted, traumatizing her, and making her feel extremely guilty about it afterwards. But insted of facing it, she creates an alibi for herself: a "fairy tale for her own history, the facts of which are obscured even in her own mind. . . She fears truth, but also fears losing it, as she takes inventory of her memories" (Rigney 1980: 96). However, this fantasy does not go much on. In her *diving*, in her process of self-definition, the protagonist succeeds at *surfacing* and one of the immediate consequences is her total refusal of the fairy-tale plot she had created for her relationship with the married man and also for her abortion. After *surfacing*, the nameless heroine is able to face the reality of the facts, ackowledging her complicity in her own situation.

The examples presented here illustrate how Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements may be exposing the indoctrination of fairy-tale role models to examination. In the analysis of the fairy-tale material used by Atwood in the depiction of male/female relationship in the novels, it is amazing that most examples are encountered in the minor plots. One possible explanation for it is that what happens in these plots may be contributing, in a way, to the heroines' development as female beings; to their movement towards self-definition. For instance, this may be giving the protagonists a chance to pay attention to aspects of male/female relationship that would be undoubtedly more difficult to be acknowledged in their own situation, given the implications of being personally involved in a relationship. Observing what goes on around them, Atwood's protagonists confront the options presented to women by society, re-evaluating their own attitude towards life, especially concerning what they have been doing with their lives.

One thing that calls attention is the fact that in the portrayal of the minor characters there is a tendency to have them accept the pattern suggested by fairy tales, without questioning, without even acknowledging how influenced they may be by the idealized view of romantic love and relationships based on inequality. On the other hand, Atwood's protagonists end up rejecting the pattern, refusing to fit into the molds of femininity imposed on them. They attempt self-definition by other means, and their final search is for a voice, a language, with which they can establish their own place in the world.

The question of victimization and the question of power acquire special significance in the instances in which fairy-tale

elements are being used. According to the analysis conducted
here, it becomes clear that Atwood's heroines end up rejecting
the view of themselves as victims. This refusal to be a victim
suggests, for instance, that the protagonists have assumed
responsibility for their own destiny, and that if things are done
to them, they are at least partly responsible for that. Although
the novels do not give us a chance to see what really follows the
heroines' decision, there is something in the air that points to
a more mature involvement with reality, with the course of their
lives. The level of awareness they seem to have achieved will not
permit that they remain in the same position, repeating the same
mistakes of the past. The rejection of the view of the self-as-
victim will also possibly affect their attitude towards the male
figure: they will not be fascinated by the idealized view of man,
nor frightened by the possibility of finding a villain under the
prince's disguise. But one thing is certain: after such important
decisions in their relation with the world around them, Atwood's
protagonists will be always alert, feeling confident and what is
more important, being the writer of their own stories and not
simply the impersonators of fairy-tale figures.

CHAPTER III

The Woman Artist: From Escape to Confrontation

> "Alongside my real life I have a career, which may not qualify as exactly real. I am a painter . . . The word *artist* embarrasses me; I prefer *painter*, because it's more like a valid job. " (*Cat's Eye* 15)

Atwood's heroines are very frequently *failed* artists in search of self-assertion. The unnamed heroine in *Surfacing* is "an artist with no art form" (Rigney 1987: 40), immersed as she is in commercial art, working as an illustrator of children's books. Joan Foster, the heroine in *Lady Oracle*, also opts for what *sells* and gets involved with the writing of Costume Gothics, stories which deal with the traditional stereotype of defenseless, passive heroines waiting for the strong and powerful hero who will rescue them, freeing them from any possible danger. Rennie Wilford in *Bodily Harm* also misuses her talent "writing trivia for pupil magazines" (Rigney 1987: 104), avoiding in this way direct confrontation with truth, with reality. The epigraph to this chapter, taken from one of Atwood's most recent novels, echoes the usual uneasiness of these heroines who have to deal with the serious implications of being *women* and artists.

Atwood is neither the first nor the last woman writer who has felt compelled to depict in fiction the struggle of women who

have artistic aspirations in a world where femininity is equated with beauty, passivity, domesticity, kindness, and self-sacrifice. As Linda Huf points out in her *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (1985), in the last decades "there has been a dramatic increase in artist novels written by women. These novels . . . differ in significant ways from those which went before them" (151). Through a very interesting analysis of some American women's artist novels, Huf emphasizes exactly the aspects that make these novels different, especially when in contrast with men's.

Before going on with the analysis of Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements, it seems relevant to mention some of Huf's several considerations which may contribute to a better appreciation of Atwood's artist novels.

A very important aspect analyzed by Huf, for example, is the protagonist's ruling conflict. She observes that, differently from the artist hero in men's artist novels, the artist heroine depicted by women is "torn not only between life and art but, more especifically, between her role as a woman. . . and her aspirations as an artist" (5).

Another equally interesting observation made by Huf is related to the woman artist's want of a Muse. She points out that "[t]o the woman artist in fiction, men are not muses or models who guide or lift her upward and onward. Rather, they are despots or dunces who drag her down" (9).

At the end of the Introduction Huf mentions something quite relevant concerning the heroine's usual final discovery that, in her fight for self-assertion, in her fight to be a creative

artist, "she has inner foes as formidable as the outer ones. Because she has internalized society's devaluation of herself and her abilities, she must slay enemies whitin her own ranks: *fear, self-doubt, guilt*" (11; emphasis added).

Finally, among Huf's considerations about the woman's artist novels it is also of interest here what she has to say about the images in which the artist's character and conflict may be revealed, such as "images of monsters" and "images of entrapment". Huf observes that "images of monsters" may be reflecting the way the woman artist perceives herself for having gone against traditional expectations for women, while "images of entrapment" make it quite evident that "the female artist sees herself as caught in a trap, not simply in the trap of feminine role but also in a more complicated kind of double-bind" (11).

The analysis conducted in the previous chapter reinforces the general idea that for Atwood's heroines the question of identity represents a very serious concern, and that this issue is usually presented in the novels in connection with other equally relevant questions as victimization and power. Atwood's protagonists cannot be considered simplistic at all; they usually have a complex personality, and the multiplicity of their selves is just one of the things they have to deal with. Each novel brings about a new context in which the quest for identity is experienced in a peculiar way, on a specific level. Although the levels on which the question is treated may vary, the heroines' search for identity frequently implies a search for self-definition as a female being, as a woman. As Gilbert and Gubar point out in their *Madwoman in the Attic*, "[f]or all literary artists . . . self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I

AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is" (17). One of the things that do complicate Atwood's heroines' struggle for self-assertion are stereotypes, the role models which are presented to them as the "appropriate" choices for women. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the stereotypes of fairy tales, for example, constitute powerful elements in the indoctrination of women into the expected *female* roles, which often clash with the artistic ideal.

Thus questions such as the ones of identity, of victimization, of power gain an increased urgency when treated at the level of the artist. As Rigney remarks, "Atwood's subject . . . is an exploration of both the creation and function of art and the assertion of its relevance in social and political contexts" (1). And, indeed, the question of the woman as artist permeates good part of Atwood's work, though the emphasis given to it may vary.

In *Surfacing*, for example, we have a story which can be read on a series of levels. Superficially, it can be read as a detective story. With some friends, the nameless heroine moves from the city to the island in which she spent most of her childhood, with the serious purpose of finding out what has really happened to her father who is missing. Her hypotheses that he might have gone crazy, or committed suicide, or even that he might have been killed by foreigners who were interested in his piece of land, are all destroyed when she dives and discovers his drowned body in the lake, weighted down and prevented from *surfacing* by the camera he used to photograph underwater cave paintings of ancient Indians. After getting in touch with her

parents'*ghosts* through a long and painful process of introspection, the heroine reaches a balance between her conflicting selves and is able to return to the normal society in the city.

What was presented here constitutes just what the superficial layer of the novel offers the readers. However, the way the novel is developed suggests that, underlying the quest for the father there is also the heroine's search for something more comprehensive. It is not difficult to perceive that the protagonist's ruling conflict is centered on the process of finding out "what it means to be human". As Carrington observes, this is what "shapes the novel's plot, organizes its structure, determines its point of view and narrative technique"(52-53). The nameless heroine's attempt to decipher the riddle posed by her father's disappearance reflects, on another level, her search for her identity as a human being, as a woman, and also her great concern with the question of what, in fact, it means to be a Canadian.

But this picture would remain incomplete without recognizing that in this process there is also a preoccupation with the heroine's artistic aspirations. As already mentioned here, the novel presents the readers a failed artist who "[betrays] her talent through compromise, choosing to be an illustrator rather than an artist"(Rigney 1987: 41). She illustrates children's books and, in the novel, she is involved with the illustrations for *Quebec Folk Tales*. The excuse she finds for having accepted the task is quite amazing: "It isn't my territory but I need the money"(61). Here it becomes very clear that she is committed to *commercial* art, partly for necessity, for survival.

Another relevant aspect that should be mentioned is the fact that the more she tries to produce illustrations which would conform to the patterns imposed by the editor, the more her drawings move away from the expected:

> I wanted my third princess to be running lightly through a meadow but the paper's too wet, she gets out of control, sprouting an enormous rear; I try to salvage it by turning it into a bustle, but it's not convincing. I give up and doodle, adding fangs and a moustache, surrounding her with moons and fish and a wolf with bristling hackles and a snarl; but that doesn't work either, it's more like an overweight collie. (66)

This is quite relevant in the general context of the novel, as it reveals the heroine's probably unconscious refusal to follow patterns: "My fingers are stiff, maybe I'm getting arthritis" (62). This rejection of the stereotyped images, reflected in the drawings, may also be suggestive of a growing awareness of the role these illustrations may be playing in the indoctrination of children into the role models established and consolidated by society, and the wish not to function as a collaborator in this process. The more the novel develops, the more difficult it becomes for the heroine to go on with her task:

> It was hard to concentrate; I reread two of the folk tales, about the king who learned to speak with animals and the fountain of life, but I got no further than a rough sketch of a thing that looked like a football player. It was supposed to be a giant.(100)

The heroine's final decision about her *art* is very interesting. She ends up throwing everything in the fire, giving up her job as an illustrator: "this is no longer my future" (206). Although it is not clear what she intends to do afterwards, the fact that she is able to fully reject what is, in a way, going against her principles, cannot be disregarded.

Although not directly concerned with the issue of art, *The*

Handmaid's Tale deserves a place in this analysis for dealing with language and the need for self-expression. In this novel the main question is less a search for an identity as an artist than a process of recognizing power in its several manifestations, acknowledging that confrontation with it is the only way to prevent the total loss of the self. As Coral Ann Howells comments, the novel "deals in patterns of oppression and victimisation based on sexual difference" (62). The Gilead presented in the novel is dominated by the horrors of theocracy and puritanism. In this society women lose their names and are recognized by names composed of the possessive preposition and a man's first name, as is the case of the novel's protagonist, Offred (=of Fred). Their function in this society is easily recognized by their uniform. The Handmaids, for example, wear red gowns and are *used* for procreation purposes, something highly valued by the members of Gilead, especially for fear of the extinction of the species, due to the previous generation's excessive birth control.

Amputation is a recurrent image in Atwood's fiction. Rennie Wilford in *Bodily Harm*, for instance, is literally amputated of her left breast due to a cancer which is spreading. It is also true that this image is usually used symbolically, standing for a kind of deprivation. In Rennie's case there's a straight relation between her physical amputation and her extreme inability to feel. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, amputation is not physical, but it takes place to show the suppression of language, especially for female members of the Gilead. In this society, the extreme control over communication plays an important role in the

maintenance of the order, functioning as an efficient mechanism to prevent possible rebellion against the system. Offred finds herself deprived from any kind of communication that goes beyond what is allowed: "It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. *Amputated speech* (189; emphasis added). She does not go much ahead with her attempts to break the rules for fear of death; a strong possibility awaiting the ones who try to go against the norms. But it is exactly in this context that the question of art seems to gain special significance. Offred cannot bear having just what is allowed to her. In order not to go insane she feels compelled to tell the story:

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling . . .
> If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it . . .
> It isn't a story I'm telling.
> It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. (37)

The uncontrollable desire to tell, to report, accompanies Offred throughout the novel. It is stronger than she is. It is important to observe that *telling* is the only possibility Offred has to let her artistic impulse find a way to flow:

> Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden . . .. A story is like a letter . . ..
> *You* can mean more than one. (37)

For Offred, the importance of story-telling, of the creation of *you*, lies especially in the fact that it means the possibility of communication:

> By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (251)

It also gives the heroine a sense of power, a way she has to manipulate events. But the fear of finding death in the end

speaks quite loud to her: "I don't want to be telling this story" (211) is something she repeats to herself many times. She is afraid of suffering. She knows what happens to women who dare go against the rules: they are hanged in public. Offred compares the exhibition of the dead bodies to "a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera: mid-air" (260). And this is exactly what she does not want for herself:

> I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head as faceless oblong of white cloth . . . . I don't want to be a wingless angel . . . . I am abject. I feel for the first time, their true power. (268)

As the historical notes to the *tale* show, Offred does tell the story that was going on in her head. Whether it is just a story will never be discovered. But it is there, recorded and transformed later on into a "manuscript". What happens to Offred after she leaves the Gilead is also "obscure". What remains is the fact that although telling, reporting would mean possible death for Offred, she ends up opting for going on with the story, no matter the price she would pay for it.

In *Cat's Eye*, the question of the woman as artist is greatly emphasized, being also possible to detect in the protagonist the usual uneasiness of Atwood's heroines towards their option for art. Elaine is a painter who is preparing to take part in an exhibition which is a retrospective of her work. And the novel is, in fact, the retrospective of the protagonist's own life. The movement back and forth in time is present throughout the novel. Elaine's personal life, her relationships with her family, friends, lovers, as well as her artistic life are quite detailed.

That the heroine's option for art does not come to her easily can be perceived in the epigraph to this chapter. She shares

similar doubts and anxieties with other Atwood's artist heroines, such as the dilemma between art and womanhood; the sensation that what is produced is never of any quality and worth; etc. An interesting aspect of the novel is that, although it is not deeply dealt with, it is the first time we see in Atwood's artist novels a protagonist dealing with her own children. Elaine has two daughters: Sarah, almost a doctor; and Anne, an accountant. Another curious *innovation*, if it could be called so, is the fact that Atwood is presenting the readers a heroine who is involved with a type of art which is not regarded as *inferior*. And as the novel demonstrates, Elaine is an artist who finds recognition, deserving even an exhibition.

It is almost impossible to deny that the question of the woman as artist is one of the central elements in the novel, but it is also true that it is treated on the level of the relation between time and space . The idea of deterioration usually associated with the passing of time is greatly emphasized. The novel begins with this statement: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space" (3); and it ends reflecting a similar concern:

> Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars, which are not eternal as was once thought, which are not where we think they are. If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago: a word made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing. It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by.(421)

It is in this context that the question of the artist is developed in *Cat's Eye*. Almost at the end, when Elaine is walking the room in which her paintings are being shown it should be taken into consideration how she feels towards them: "I walk the

room, surrounded by the time I've made; which is not a place, which is only a blur, the morning edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself like a wave" (409). Among her questionings, Elaine demonstrates a serious preoccupation with the question of to what extent paintings could preserve things from the deterioration caused by the passing of time. But she seems to end up realizing the impossibility of exerting any control over a work of art, as well as over the effect(s) it will produce in the ones in contact with it: "Whatever energy they have came out of me. I'm what's left over" (409).

In *Lady Oracle* , all attention is centered on the question of "what it means to be a female artist" (Carrington 66). The novel brings the implications of the option for art into consideration with special emphasis. The question, then, is not just an important element of the total; it is the total, the central place where everything else happens. It is equally interesting to observe that it is in *Lady Oracle* that fairy-tale elements seem to have been used with greater significance to expose problems faced by women as artists in a world which does not stimulate female independence. We shall thus focus on *Lady Oracle*, paying special attention to the way fairy-tale elements are used on the level of the question of the woman as artist. As Carrington observes, through this question "Atwood's third novel explores the fusion of fantasy and fact by a wildly unreliable first-person narrator" (66). Several critics have already observed that Joan's basic confusions are centered on the distinction between life and art; between truth and fiction. This is something she really can't deal with well.

Lady Oracle is not a novel which is presented in chronological sequence. The beginning, for example, does not mean it is the point in which Joan Foster's story really starts. As we read the novel we perceive that the opening of the story has direct connection, in time, with the final sections. The novel begins and ends with the heroine in Italy. Between these two sections and also within them, there are flashbacks of Joan's life which guide the readers to understand how and why the heroine gets to Terremoto and what she is doing there, as well as how the beginning of the novel is closely connected with the end.

One of the things we learn about Joan is that in her childhood she is extremely fat and that as a consequence she experiences what seems to be her first serious frustration, when her mother and her dancing teacher do not allow her to play the role of a butterfly in a ballet recital. She is given the role of a mothball instead, improvising a dance which expresses all her rage. We also find out that her relationship with her mother is quite difficult and aggressive. Her Aunt Lou is the person whom she trusts and who is also directly responsible for her loss of weight, demanding this from Joan in her will. After her aunt's death Joan does get rid of her *fatness*, although she cannot free herself from a vision: a fat lady, stuffed in pink tights and a short skirt, and wearing red slippers. This is an image which accompanies Joan throughout her adult life, and which is very probably the reflection of her fat-lady self, something she cannot ignore.

After a fight in which her mother hurts her with a knife, Joan escapes from home and uses the money she inherited from her

aunt to begin living by herself in England. There she gets
involved with two lovers: the Polish Count and Arthur. It is in
England that Joan's literary career begins, when she starts
writing under her aunt's name,following the footsteps of her
first lover. After her mother's death, Joan ends up marrying
Arthur in a ceremony which both doubt could be legal at all.
Following spiritualist Leda Sprott's advice on the day of her
wedding ceremony, Joan experiments with "automatic writing", a
process that involves sitting in front of a mirror with a lit
candle, and produces a book of poetry, *Lady Oracle*, which she
publishes under her married name, Joan Foster. The book becomes a
great success, especially after she fakes her death and flees to
Italy in an attempt to escape from Arthur and from everything she
feels to be against her, such as her mother's ghost and Fraser
Buchanan, a blackmailer who is threatening to reveal all the
truth about her double identity. Speculations about her possible
suicide give the book special significance: "Sales of *Lady Oracle*
were booming, every necrophiliac in the country was rushing to
buy a copy" (313). At the end of the novel Joan seems to get
involved with a reporter whom she hits on the head, suspecting he
had come for her, and plans to go back to Toronto again,
abandoning the writing of Costume Gothics forever, opting this
time for science fiction.

The opening statement of the novel is quite amazing: "I
PLANNED MY DEATH CAREFULLY; unlike my life, which meandered
along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to
control it"(7). From the beginning it is easy to perceive that
Joan Foster, the writer heroine of *Lady Oracle*, finds it

extremely difficult to handle the multiplicity of her selves.
Staging her own death is just one of the several strategies used
by the heroine to escape confrontation with reality. The
necessity to face reality is, in fact, one of the things Joan
has to learn before giving up her attempts to be *outside* to avoid
involvement. As Rigney observes, Joan is an "escape artist" who
misuses her talent creating fiction as a means to avoid direct
confrontation with reality: "She moves through mirrors and
through her own self-deluding fiction into a realm of fairy tales
and myth where instead of escaping, she becomes trapped in the
very surfaces she strives to create" (Rigney 1987: 62).

Critics such as Carrington and Rigney see Joan's private
fiction, that is, her Costume Gothics, as "literary escapes". The
interesting fact about Joan's fiction is how it is intimately
connected with the heroine's own life. Carrington sees it as "the
layer closest to [Joan's] naked self, the self she wants to
escape from by costuming herself in her fiction" (68), and it
also reflects Joan's confusion between truth and fiction. In the
novel there are several excerpts from Joan's Costume Gothics, and
it is amazing that in the stories Joan writes, "all heroines are
always versions of herself" (Rigney 1987: 62). Special emphasis
is given to the story Joan is writing at the time of her faked
suicide: *Stalked by Love*, a story dealing with danger, fear, and
love. Charlotte, a defenseless, victimized heroine falls in love
with the powerful Redmond who is married to Felicia, the supposed
villain in the story who ends up "[taking] over the novel in
spite of Joan and Charlotte, the appropriate 'good' heroine
(Rigney 1987: 70). The first excerpt of the story introduces an
important element: "the maze", a place to be avoided due to the

dangers awaiting the ones who dare enter it. The maze functions as a *bridge* connecting Joan's real world with her artistic world, and it also represents the figurative place in which confrontation with reality can take place.

Equally interesting is Joan's movement through the realm of fairy tales, a journey which starts at a very early age when her Aunt Lou exposes her to the magic world of fantasy, of stories, of romantic movies. The development of the novel demonstrates that the images from this world are images that will not abandon Joan very easily; in fact, they invade her life becoming even part of it, as the writer heroine explicitly assumes the identity of different fairy-tale figures in her adult life.

By reading the novel carefully, it is possible to observe that elements from different fairy tales are being used, but the ones which are more directly related to the idea of the *artist* are Andersen's "The Red Shoes", and "The Little Mermaid", and Disney's movie *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met*. As critics on Atwood have observed, the use the writer makes of these specific tales produces a great impact in the treatment of the question of the woman as artist in *Lady Oracle*. The analysis of how and to what extent Joan's identification with figures from these tales takes place enhances the process of understanding the heroine's dilemma, which is very much much in accordance with Huf's considerations about the artist heroine's usual ruling conflict in contemporary woman's novels. Joan Foster is evidently torn between keeping her husband, ironically called *Arthur*, or fullfilling her artistic aspirations. The more she tries not to give up any of them, the more she is led to

acknowledge the impossibility of doing so, as the option for one of the alternatives would automatically rule out the other one.

Before proceeding with the analysis proposed here, it seems necessary to appreciate these tales in which the question of the artist is brought into consideration with greater emphasis, so that their connection with *Lady Oracle* becomes more evident, making it easier to perceive the use the writer is making of them to convey problems faced by female artists.

In Andersen's "The Red Shoes", Karen, the heroine, is given a pair of red shoes which change her life completely. The shoes make her even more beautiful, and after receiving them she becomes unable to think of anything else. This leads her to neglect her religious an social duties, as she can neither concentrate during church service, nor take care of the sick old lady who has brought her up after her mother's death, and who in fact dies later in the story, after Karen opts for going to a ball with her red shoes instead of taking care of the woman. It seems the red shoes dominate her completely: "It was as though the shoes had obtained power over her" (182-3). This strange power obliges the girl to go on dancing endlessly as once she begins she cannot stop it. After trying desperately to remove the shoes without success, and perceiving the impossibility of controlling herself she is led to ask an executioner to solve her problem:

> "You probably don't know who I am? I cut off the *bad* people's heads with my axe, and mark how my axe rings!"
> "Do not strike off my head", said Karen, "for if you do I cannot repent of my *sin*. But strike off my feet with the red shoes". (184; emphasis added)

After having the feet amputated she suffers terribly and thinks it is enough to redeem her from her *monstrous* sin:

> "Now I have suffered and striven enough! I think that I am
> just as good as many of those who sit in the church and carry
> their heads high". (185)

In the story it is easy to perceive that the option for beauty,
for dancing, for self-concern is presented as something
extremely negative in the female figure. It is also important to
mention the fact that it is not only physical suffering that
redeems Karen. What really makes her accepted again is the
change we notice in her behavior. She becomes completely
passive, thoughtful, and industrious, and "when they spoke
of dress and splendour and beauty she would shake her head"
(185). At the end of the story she is finally rewarded with
God's love:

> Her soul flew on the sunbeams to heaven, and there was
> nobody who asked after the RED SHOES. (186)

It is the movie version, however, which seems to have
influenced Atwood the most. As Carrington observes, the movie is
"an early feminist parable of conflict: a woman can have love or
be an artist; if she tries to have both, she will be driven to
bloody-legged suicide"(71). Moira Shearer, the movie heroine,
is a ballet dancer who ends up throwing herself in front of a
train, after having opted for art over love.

"The Little Mermaid", another Andersen's tale is not much
different in essence from the previous one. The heroine risks
her own life to save a young Prince who is drowning due to a
shipwreck. Afterwards she cannot forget him and she begins to
find his world much more interesting then her own. She
discovers that, differently from human beings, mermaids do not
have an immortal soul and that the only possibility she has to
win one is through the love of a man: "then his soul would be

imparted to [her] body, and [she] would receive a share of the happiness of mankind" (551). But again, another problem: to conquer the love of a man she ought to have "legs to be called beautiful" (551). Despite being afraid of the sea witch, the little mermaid decides to go to her for help. The witch warns her about the high price she would have to pay for growing legs:

> it will hurt you -- it will seem as if you were cut with a sharp sword. All who see you will declare you to be the prettiest human being they ever beheld. You will keep your graceful walk; no dancer will be able to move so lightly as you; but every step you take will be as if you trod upon sharp knives, and as if your blood must flow. (553)

Besides the pain there's something worse: the witch wants her to pay for it with her tongue, her voice, which is her greatest gift. Mermaids are thought to enchant men and destroy them by means of their splendid voices, by means of their ability to sing. And the little mermaid does exchange her voice which "is the finest voice of all . . . . at the bottom of the water" for legs, but everything is in vain (553). The exchange does not make her have the Prince's love exactly due to her inability to speak . The prince does not know she is the one who has saved his life and whom he wants to marry; and she does not have a way to let him know about it. The announcement of his marriage to another woman dooms her to death: she would be turned into foam immediately after it. She is given a chance to survive and turn into her old frame again if she kills the Prince and lets his blood fall upon her feet. But she rejects this possibility, throwing herself into the sea. As it usually happens in Andersen's tales, she is given an oportunity to make herself a soul through three hundred years of good-deeds. Then she can receive "an immortal soul and take part in the eternal happiness

of men" (559). Again, the heroine is rewarded with a place in heaven.

In the opening pages of *Lady Oracle*, the heroine makes an explicit reference to a Walt Disney movie she had seen when she was a child. It was about a whale who wanted to sing at the Metropolitan Opera.

> He approached a ship and sang arias, but the sailors
> harpooned him, and each of his voices left his body in a
> different-colored soul and floated up towards the sun, still
> singing. *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met*. . . . (9)

As this passage demonstrates, the story Joan remembers also deals with the question of the artist, of life versus art.

As extensively discussed in the foregoing chapters, fairy tales usually spread an idealized and stereotyped view of women, of love, and of relationships. In these stories the heroines are most of the times portrayed as naturally beautiful, fragile, passive, victimized, giving priority to the needs of others in the name of compassion or love. Everlasting happiness beside their beloved ones is the usual reward these women receive for being *good*, *patient*, *industrious*, and able to bear any kind of suffering to attain such bliss. Throughout the novel, Joan, the heroine in *Lady Oracle*, gives signs that the messages which came to her through the images of the world of fantasy and romance she was put in contact with in her childhood have spoken to her unconscious mind, shaping her personal view of love and also of art.

Joan's first contact with the world of art seems to have taken place in her childhood when her mother sent her to a dancing school. It should be observed, however, that this attitude does not reflect any serious concern about developing

Joan's possible artistic potential. As the story demonstrates, this was just one of the several strategies available to indoctrinate girls into the molds of femininity. Joan's mother did so "because it was fashionable to enroll seven-year-old girls in dancing schools . . . and partly because she hoped it would make [Joan] less chubby"(43). Although her mother and her dancing teacher gave her enough reasons to hate this school, Joan loved it, and it seems she was beginning to acknowledge how limited the options for women were: "Like most girls of that time I idealized ballet dancers, it was something girls could do"(43). It was in this period that Joan created what seems to be her inseparable fantasy: a very romantic view of a ballet dancer, herself "leaping through the air, lifted by a thin man in black tights, light as a kite and wearing a modified doily . . . hair full of rhinestones and glittering like hope"(43). The amazing thing about it is not the fantasy itself, but the fact that it persists through the years.

Frustrated as a dancer when she is forced to dance as a mothball in the school recital, Joan gives up dancing which represents her first experience with art. Her next attempt will take place in a completely different field. This time it is writing. Joan's first experience with it begins with her Costume Gothics, stories which as she herself recognizes, "exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted" (34). Although she knows this, she can't stop writing, probably because, like her readers, she also wants this possibility of escaping from reality moving into the world of fantasy and romance. It is clear

in the novel that Joan misuses her talent writing such stories
which serve to reinforce traditional views of women and love, but
it should be remembered that Joan's own indoctrination begins
very early. As Carrington observes, "[f]rom her conventionally
female role models, her mother and her dancing teacher, [Joan]
learns that she must *conceal* herself" (71; emphasis added).
This is a lesson that Joan also seems to have learned from the
stories that were mentioned here, in which the act of going
public leads the artist protagonists to suffering on different
levels.

Similarly to other Atwood artist heroines, Joan Foster in
Lady Oracle openly demonstrates extreme difficulty to deal with
her artistic aspirations. In the beginning of this chapter
there's a passage from Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, in which Elaine, the
protagonist, expresses her feeling that her life as an artist
seems to be a parallel one, disconnected from her *real* life;
that is, from her life as a female being. It is very interesting
what Atwood hersef has to say about the woman writer's conflict.
She compares this interior battle to "siamese twins pulling
uneasily against each other, the writer feeling suffocated by the
woman, the woman rendered sterile by the writer(1982: 172). The
heroine in *Lady Oracle* is not much different: "I was more than
double, I was triple, multiple" (246). Besides seeing her life
as basically divided into two distinctive parts, Joan uses, in
fact, two different names that perfectly serve to set these
lives apart: Joan Foster, her actual name which she uses for
going public; and Louisa K. Delacourt, her aunt's name, an
identity she assumes for her literary life: "I'd always tried to
keep my two names and identities as separate as possible" (33) .

Although Joan tries to find a plausible explanation for such
attitude, she cannot convince even herself: "I used Aunt Lou's
name, as I didn't want my mother to trace me. That was stupid,
she would have recognized Aunt Lou's name at once, but I didn't
think of that" (315). In the novel it is clear that Joan's real
preoccupation is not with her mother. In fact, she is a woman
artist, a writer of Costume Gothics who finds herself unable to
assume her option openly especially due to an extreme fear of
suffering, of being unhappy, of not being able to please her
lover and in this way have him go away.

From the beginning of the novel it is easy to perceive the
great importance Joan places on having the love of a *good* man. A
common hidden message in fairy tales is exactly that women need a
man to make their life worthwhile, and Joan is constantly
expressing an inner desire to please the men who populate her
life. As Susan MacLean observes in her "*Lady Oracle*: The Art of
Reality and the Reality of Art", "[i]n each relationship,
[Joan] acts a role determined by her partner, striving to
fulfill his expectations" (183). Although she gets involved with
several men, her special interest lies on Arthur, whom she
marries and whose last name is added to hers: Foster. Joan's
necessity to please dominates her so completely that, for
example, she can't stand Arthur's depressions. They give her a
feeling of inadequacy:

> The love of a *good* woman was supposed to preserve a man from
> this kind of thing; *I knew that.* But at these times I wasn't
> able to make him happy . . . . Therefore I was not a good
> woman. (212; emphasis added)

This passage shows how the ability to please the male partner

by means of love is directly associated with female *goodness* in Joan's mind. Her logic, then, has much to do with the logic of fairy tales, with these tales' view of love. Joan seems to believe in the healing properties of love which could banish sadness to the other side, guaranteeing the usual *everlasting happiness*. For fear of losing Arthur she conceals her real profession from him:

> Arthur never found out that I wrote Costume Gothics . . . .
> Why did I never tell him? It was *fear* mostly. When I first
> met him he talked a lot about wanting a woman whose mind he
> would respect . . . . I wanted very much to have a
> respectable mind. . . . revealing my profession would
> certainly have made it worse. (33-34; emphasis added)

It does not seem to be a very difficult task to discover where exactly this fear may come from. Many details in the novel lead to the hypothesis that good part of Joan's uneasiness towards her artistic aspirations is, in fact, a direct consequence of her internalization of the messages she received from the magic world of fairy tales and romantic movies. A very strong evidence is found in Joan's explicit identification with protagonists of "The Red Shoes", "The Little Mermaid", and *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met*. As Rigney has observed, "victimised heroines of fairy tales are . . . frequently a source of identification for Atwood's protagonists, and they inevitably prove to be destructive models" (9).

As several critics on Atwood have already observed, "Moira Shearer in 'The Red Shoes'. . . becomes an identity for Joan, who shares the luxurious red hair of her idol and who repeatedly attempts to also dance herself to death and to suffer 'more than anyone'" (Rigney 1987: 66). Joan identifies her inner desires with the movie heroine's: "I wanted those things too, I wanted to

dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor, *both at once*"(82; emphasis added). And when she perceives everything goes wrong in the movie, which ends with the heroine's suicide, she cannot control her great emotion: "I let out a bellowing snort that made people three rows ahead turn around indignantly" (82). Considering that Joan was taken to see this movie not just one time but four, one is not surprised at the conditioning effect it must have had on her.

Joan has a similar reaction to the tragic end of the whale in the Walt Disney's movie: "At the time I cried ferociously"(9). In *Lady Oracle* this story gains special relevance as it seems that elements from it are found in Joan's fantasy about the Fat Lady. Rigney sees this fantasy as being basically a reflection of Joan's "fat lady self" which must have been "inspired by her childhood experience in which her mother and her dancing teacher in collusion decide that Joan is too plump to make a convincing butterfly in the ballet recital"(65). At one moment of the story Joan reveals that once she had a desire to be an opera singer. She enjoyed the idea that despite being usually fat, opera singers "could wear extravagant costumes" without being ridiculed (78). Joan's desire coincides with a point of the story in which her conflict with her mother is greatly emphasized: "I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic"(78). Although Joan is aware she does not have the talent for singing opera, she confesses the great appeal such possibility exerted on her:

> to be able to stand up there in front of everyone and shriek as loud as you could, about hatred and love and rage and despair, scream at the top of your lungs and have it come out music. That would be something.(78)

It is not difficult to see that what Joan really wants is the

possibility of power art offers, a means to express the innermost
feelings without fear. Although Joan was just a child and could
not perceive the real importance of what happened to her at the
moment, her performance as a mothball can be seen as her first
demonstration of the power conferred by art. Her "dance of rage
and destruction" comes as a wonderful exhibition: Joan, "left in
the center of the stage, facing an audience that was not laughing
but applauding vigorously"(50). But this is her life before
Arthur -- the fat, ugly self that keeps popping up throughout her
life as an adult.

Arthur never gets to know about this peculiarity of Joan's
life. She hides it from him as she hides her writing of Costume
Gothics. At one moment of the novel, when she decides to tell
Arthur everything, she has a vision. Arthur is watching the
Olympic doubles figure-skating championships on TV, and Joan sees
the Fat Lady there, among the skaters:

> I couldn't help myself. It was one of the most important
> moments in my life, I should have been able to keep her away,
> but out she came in a pink skating costume . . . she was
> whirling around the rink with exceptional grace, spinning
> like a top on her tiny feet . . . . (273)

Joan sees this public exhibition as an "outrage" (274), and what
happens to the Fat Lady in this vision resembles aspects from the
movie about the whale. One relevant detail is the fact that Joan
hears the commentator mention a harpoon gun: "They were going to
shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that
she had now burst into song . . . "(274). This vision of the Fat
Lady that Joan cannot control at all reveals Joan's fear of going
public, of revealing her inner secrets to Arthur. She fears
destruction; she doesn't want the risk of being destroyed as the
whale from the movie.

Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" also teaches Joan a lesson she seems to learn pretty well. On the day of her secret marriage to Arthur at the Reverend E. P. Revele's house, just before the wedding ceremony, the fake Reverend who is, in fact, Leda Sprott, the spiritualist Joan had met during her visits to Jordan Chapel, talks to Joan seriously, giving her some important advice: "You do not choose a gift, it chooses you, and if you deny it it will make use of you in any case, though perhaps in a less desirable way" (206). She also tells her the negative influence of her fear on the development of her "great powers", that is, of her ability to write. Critic Barbara Rigney sees Leda Sprott's advice to Joan as "little short of oracular". She also considers "the truth she has to tell" as "one aspect of Atwood's own philosophy of literature and summarises what Atwood has stated in both poetry and fiction as the proper function of art" (74-75).

Joan recognizes that after getting married "[her] writing became for [her] anything more than an easy way of earning a living"(213). Her double life as Joan Foster and as Louisa Delacourt starts to annoy her, as her fear of being discovered increases considerably. Her artist self urges her to go on writing although it is not always an easy task to find space to do it in secret. Although evidences abound as to how negative Arthur's influence on her is, Joan tries not to face it, traveling through the world of fantasy and romance: "When it came to fantasy lives I was a professional"(216). However, it is interesting to observe that Joan cannot avoid feeling she is not happy at all living like that. Her fantasy lives do not protect her from confrontation with the evidences:

> as time went by, I began to feel something was missing.
> Perhaps, I thought, I had no soul; I just drifted around,
> singing vaguely, like the Little Mermaid in the Andersen
> fairy tale. In order to get a soul you had to suffer, you
> had to give something up; or was that to get legs and
> feet? . . . . She'd become a dancer, though, with no tongue.
> (216)

In the fairy tale, the Little Mermaid gives up her greatest gift just to have a chance to conquer the prince's love, and, in this way, be given a soul which would immortalize her. Joan interprets the message of the tale as that no matter what she wants -- a "soul" or "legs and feet", anything to fill in the blank space inside herself -- she has to suffer, she has to give up her artistic aspirations, her writing. Joan does not give it up, but she does conceal her real profession as she does not want to be considered inadequate, foolish, especially by Arthur.

Together with Joan's considerations about the Little Mermaid there's also reference to Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*. Joan mentions the fact that "[n]either of them had been able to please the handsome prince", and also that "both of them had died". She realizes that the fairy tales do not work well at the end, and she believes to have found why everything had gone wrong for them at the end: "Their mistake had been to go public, whereas I did my dancing behind closed doors. It was safer, but . . ."(216). Although Joan keeps her writing of Costume Gothics in secret, it is very difficult for her to deal with her "two lives":

> on off days I felt that neither of them was completely real.
> With Arthur I was merely playing house, I wasn't really
> working at it. And my Costume Gothics were only paper; paper
> castles, paper costumes, paper dolls, as inert and lifeless
> finally as those unsatisfactory blank-eyed dolls I'd dressed
> and undressed in my mother's house.(216-17)

What becomes clear is that the avoidance of going public does not guarantee the dreamed happiness and tranquility. On the contrary,

it seems to stress Joan's sensation of dissatisfaction and ineptitude. There is still something missing .

From what has already been said here, it becomes quite clear that the *female dancer* is a recurrent image in Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. According to Carrington, it represents one of the novel's key metaphors: "The novel develops a pattern of contrasting images: the female dancer dancing alone, and led by a male partner. The first is the independent artist; the second, the woman who conforms to the female stereotype intensified in the Gothic heroine dancing to the hero's tune"(71).

In her childhood, Joan experiences *dancing* in its literal sense. Afterwards, she decides to do her dancing "behind closed doors". She even fantasizes about dancing to an invisible partner. In her affair with the Royal Porcupine Joan almost concretizes this fantasy: "Finally I had someone who would waltz with me"(254). But soon she notices that "something was changing"(266-67). Joan wants the fantasy, while the Royal Porcupine begins to demand a more *serious* relationship with her. This attitude leads Joan to have the fantasy completely destroyed, breaking the magic so that everything turns back into its real form in Joan's perception. As a direct consequence, she cannot go on with her dance with the Royal Porcupine.

Joan's identification with the victimized dancing heroines of "The Little Mermaid" and "The Red Shoes" has much to do with the problems Joan has to face due to her involvement with art. This fact serves to reinforce Carrington's view of the *female dancer* as a metaphor for the woman as artist.

The more we read the novel and observe the way elements from fairy tales are being used by Atwood, the more we are led to

agree with the ones who say that through this use Atwood is invoking dilemmas directly related to the question of the artist, and especially of the female artist.

The dilemma invoked by the use of Andersen's tale is clarified by Atwood herself in *Second Words*: "If you want to be good at anything, said the message, you will have to sacrifice your femininity. If you want to be female, you'll have to have your tongue removed, like the Little Mermaid"(225). Joan, in *Lady Oracle* is really in conflict between accepting the molds of femininity which are being imposed on her, or going on with her writing. One thing is clear: *amputating* this part of herself is something Joan cannot permit at all.

Another similar dilemma is invoked by the movie *The Red Shoes*. In *Second Words* Atwood mentions the fact that "[a] whole generation of girls were taken to see it as a special treat for their birthday parties . . . The message was clear. You could not have both your artistic career and the love of a good man as well, and if you tried, you would end up committing suicide"(224). As Susan MacLean points out, Joan "fantasizes about re-enacting the dilemma of Moira Shearer in the movie "The Red Shoes"; that is, of having one day to make an arduous choice between her career and her husband"(180). After Joan publishes her book of poetry, *Lady Oracle*, under her "real" name, she regrets having done so. Again, it is her fear of having Arthur discover the secrets she has hidden from him, as well as her lack of confidence in her talent as a writer: "Perhaps I shouldn't have used my own name, Arthur's name rather;then I wouldn't have to show him the book . . . Arthur wouldn't like the book, I was

certain of it, and neither would anyone else"(232-33).

The passage in which the identification of Joan with Moira
seems to reach its climax appears almost at the end of the novel,
when Joan begins to realize that instead of offering her a way to
escape, a way to free herself from danger, her fantasies end up
entrapping her. After such realization, Joan decides to dance to
herself. But while she is doing so, she dances "right through the
broken glass":

> The *real red shoes*, the feet punished for dancing. You could
> dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were
> afraid to dance, because you had this *unnatural* fear that if
> you danced they'd cut your feet off so you wouldn't be able
> to dance. Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they
> cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you
> wanted to dance. (335; emphasis added)

In this passage it is possible to see the reflection of Joan's
basic dilemma between art and love. It is not easy for her to
decide. Atwood herself has declared that "there is some truth to
the *Red Shoes* syndrome. It is more difficult for a woman writer
in this society than for a male writer". As to the reason of such
difficulty, she says, "it is more difficult because it has been
made more difficult, and the stereotypes still lurk in the wings,
ready to spring fully formed from the heads of critics, both male
and female, and attach themselves to any unwary character or
author that wanders by" (1982: 226).

In Joan's experiment with automatic writing she produces a
book of poetry and she perceives that its heroine "was enormously
powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power".
Joan also notices a great difference betweeen the heroine and
herself: "I wasn't at all like that, I was happy. **Happy** and
inept(222; emphasis added). Joan is beginning to realize that the
option for love could mean being happy, but that it would also

mean being inept. On the other hand, opting for dancing, for art, would mean having power, but also being unhappy. The use of "The Red Shoes", thus, invokes the paradox that blood is the price of art (Rigney 1987: 13). This can also be related to the message that comes from the movie about the whale, as the option for art, for singing arias in public, leads the defenseless animal to death.

The two dilemmas analysed above are very much connected with Joan's fear of going public. After she has her *Lady Oracle* published, she lets Arthur know about it, and she is quite disappointed at his reaction: "I'd been expecting him to tell me the book was bourgeois or tasteless or obscure or a piece of mystification, but instead he was acting as though I'd committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin"(235). The use of the word "sin" echoes Andersen's "The Red Shoes", where the heroine's option for dancing, for art, is also presented as a horrible *sin* of which the little girl should repent. Arthur's attitude makes Joan feel she has moved out from what was expected of her, and this gives her an extremely uncomfortable sensation. Later, in her attempt to escape from Arthur, as well as from everything she thinks might put herself in danger, she fakes her own death and, disguised, moves to Italy where she seems to be trying to put her life in order.

Almost at the end of the novel Joan receives some newspaper clippings which speculate about her possible suicide. Reading them, she notices that "[s]everal of the articles drew morals: *you could sing and dance or you could be happy, but not both*"(313; emphasis added). This statement can be seen as a

synthesis of the messages contained in the stories we are analysing in relation to *Lady Oracle*. In the first part of the statement there are the words *sing* and *dance*, which stand for the artistic activities performed by the stories' protagonists: The Little Mermaid, the Whale, and Moira Shearer. The second part reflects the idea that being happy and fulfilling one's artistic aspirations are incompatible for a woman artist.

The final events of the novel produce a great impact in the treatment of the question of the artist. First we have Joan's decision to dance to no one but herself. As Rigney has observed, in her dance "[b]oth Moira Shearer and the fat lady . . . merge identities with that other innocent and victimised heroine, yet another 'dancing girl' identity for Joan, the Little Mermaid"(66). The option for art is clearly perceived in this passage and it at least suggests a change in Joan's view. She perceives that it is possible to dance by herself, as once she had done as a child. Although in this dancing she ends up hurting her feet, she "could still walk" after it; she notices that art offers a possibility of power: "The Little Mermaid rides again . . . the *big* mermaid rides again(336; emphasis added). The change in the adjective which precedes the word "mermaid" may be suggestive of a different feeling on Joan's part. With her identification with these dancing heroines Atwood seems to be also "[invoking] her familiar paradox of the woman as artist: to sacrifice art for love is to sacrifice art, love and the self as well"(67), and, thus, the refusal to follow one's artistic aspirations is a price beyond reason.

Another event which gains special importance in the novel is Felicia's entrance in the maze in Joan's *Stalked by Love*. In this

part of the novel Joan's fiction and her own life seem to merge, being extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate one from the other. In the excerpt, it becomes clear that Felicia is also Joan herself confronting a reality she was trying to avoid all the time.

The first thing she has to confront is the multiplicity of her self. Even the Fat Lady is there in the maze. Felicia encounters four women there who declare they are all "Lady Redmond", to what Felicia protests: "I myself am Lady Redmond". One of the women says that "every man has more than one wife. Sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about"(341). This statement may be seen as the synthesis of Joan's multiple facets, the aspects of her divided self that Arthur never gets to know about.

In the maze, Felicia discovers that the only way out is through a door which is the actual door Joan sees in the place where she is, and through which she could also "see a small piece of the outside world: blue sky, some grayish-pink clouds"(342). The opening of the door seems to be symbolic of confrontation with reality. The only real escape, then, is to face reality. When Felicia opens the door she is face to face with Redmond. Her first impulse to throw herself in his arms is soon destroyed when she notices "an odd expression in his eyes", realizing that "[he] was the killer . . . he wanted to murder her as he had murdered his other wives"(342). Felicia's reaction to this acknowledgement is quite significant: "She refused to be doomed". And there,in the maze, Redmond is transformed into all the male figures who have populated Joan's life. The last one to appear is her

husband, Arthur. His name does appear in the excerpt from *Stalked by Love*. Then there is the temptation through Redmond's invitation: "Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always"(343). But Felicia says "No". At the moment Redmond moves towards her and tries to kill her, the story stops and Joan hears footsteps, this time *real* fotsteps.

Similarly to Felicia, Joan also opts for opening the door, for she "would have to face the man who stood waiting for [her], for [her] life"(343). She hits the stranger on the head, and though she did not have anything against this specific man, Joan's attack means action, means power. She is surprised when she notices she has hurt him: "it's a case of not knowing your strength"(344).

Thus Joan ends up refusing the scripts provided by romance and by fairy tales. Her *Lady Oracle* is seen by her as "a Gothic gone wrong . . . there was no happy ending, no true love"(232). And even her *Stalked by Love* moves out of the expected, as Joan can no longer follow the conventions of romance:

> I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways . . . she made me itchy, I wanted her to fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart. Even her terrors were too pure, her faceless murderers, her corridors, her mazes and forbidden doors.(319-20)

Felicia, the supposed villain, ends up as the story's real heroine, a significant change in the romance structure. But what is equally relevant is Joan's final decision to abandon her writing of Costume Gothics. She is planning to try *science fiction* as an alternative: "The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you"(345). Joan's new attempt may be suggestive that she sees a possibility of change, a possibility that "somewhere in the future, the dancer

will dance alone without bleeding"(Carrington 74).

Reviewing *Lady Oracle* in the light of Linda Huf's considerations about the woman artist, we can see that it follows the pattern in terms of the ruling conflict. As to the woman artist's want of a Muse, it could be said that in *Lady Oracle* the men who populate Joan's fictional and personal world do indeed exert a negative influence on the female figure. Joan realizes, for example, that "Arthur enjoyed [her] defeats. They cheered him up . . . [Her] failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. His applause kept [her] going"(210)

Huf also observes that the artist heroines usually have to confront and fight internal enemies which are as strong as the external ones: fear, self-doubt, and guilt. And Joan, for sure, becomes familiar with such enemies. The fear she has of going public, of assuming her option for art openly, has much to do with the lack of confidence she has in her talent, and it also has something to do with the sensation that by being an artist she is neglecting her responsibility as a *woman* who should make her lover *happy*. It is also clear that the lessons she has learned from the magic world of fantasy and romance also have a share in this complex problem.

Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* is mentioned by Huf in her discussion of the image of entrapment usually found in artist novels written by women. For her, Joan "succeeds in extricating herself from the love trap"(152), as she "stages her own drowning to escape a husband who, if he knew of her secret life as a romance writer, would have contempt for it and for her"(156). Although Joan is aware that it hurts to say goodbye, she also

seems to recognize the danger of letting herself be taken into the idealized illusion offered by the world of romance and fairy tales.

Huf's "image of monster" as a recurrent image in women artist's novels is explicitly present in *Lady Oracle*. After Joan opts for dancing to herself, she alters the perception of herself. She begins to wonder how people would see her:

> A female monster, larger than life, larger than most life around here anyway, striding down the hill, her hair standing on end with electrical force, volts of malevolent energy shooting from her fingers, her green eyes behind her dark tourist's glasses, her dark mafia glasses, lit up and glowing like a cat's. Look out, old black-stockinged sausage women, or I'll zap you, in spite of your evil-eye signs and muttered prayers to the saints . . . .If I got a black dress and long black stockings, then would they like me?(336)

The description stands perfectly enough for the traditional fairy-tale figure of the villain, of the powerful and evil *witch*. It seems that that is the way Joan feels for having made the option for art over love. But one thing is clear: Joan's dance is neither like the Queen's dance to death in "Snow White" tale, nor like the dance of the victimized heroines of "The Red Shoes" and "The Little Mermaid". Quoting from Gilbert and Gubar, although it might sound too much optimistic to say so about *Lady Oracle*, in Joan's final dance "the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority"(44).

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis conducted in this study of Atwood's novels it was possible to identify some concerns which receive special emphasis and acquire significance within the general context of Atwood's writing.

One of the remarkable aspects frequently mentioned by critics and that is also observed here is the fact that Atwood's novels usually depict heroines in a movement from innocence and victimization to maturity and confrontation. The more we read the novels, the harder it becomes to deny that Atwood's protagonists tend not to remain in the same state they were in the beginning. The way they are depicted reveals the writer's general tendency to immerse them in a search for a more comprehensive understanding of their *function* in the world where they live, as well as of what they are doing with their own lives. The pattern suggested by Atwood's second novel, of *diving deep enough* and *surfacing* with a new view of life seems to be recurrent in the process of self-definition of Atwoood's heroines, who must at least move towards the acknowledgement of their own share in the establishment of their current state, and towards assuming responsibility for the course of their lives, thus refusing the initial passive attitude exhibited when they are first confronted with problems. Atwood's heroines such as Marian, Joan, Rennie, and others are led to realize the inefficacy of waiting for *rescue*. Their attempts to avoid facing the reality of facts end up in a direct and unavoidable confrontation.

One of the things Atwood's heroines have to confront is *power*. In their relationship with the world around them they are led to perceive the existence of oppression, of antagonic forces. But the important thing about this is that the consequence of such recognition is not conformity to the established patterns in order to avoid *suffering*, to avoid frontal combat. On the contrary, Atwood's protagonists, such as Marian, Joan, and the nameless heroine in *Surfacing* explicitly express their final decision "not to be a victim". Although the novels often have an ambiguous end, the heroines' desire to act, to react, to fight for the things they believe in is usually suggested even when it may imply having to suffer.

The questions and problems mentioned above appear in the novels very much in connection with the protagonist's search for self-definition, taking two slightly different though complementary lines. Sometimes the protagonist's quest is for personal identity, for the affirmation as an individual in charge of her life. This aspect is extensively examined in Chapter II, in which the discussion is centered on the appreciation of how Atwood's protagonists define their own place in the world, with special emphasis on how they deal with the stereotyped role models they are exposed to and which suggest to them the *appropriate* female behavior. At other times, the theme of identity in Atwood's novels is treated on the level of the artist, through the artist protagonist's struggle for her artistic identity, for her affirmation as an artist, as an individual endowed with creative powers and capable of communicating her *identity* and view of the world through art. The

discussion of Atwood's artist novels, especially *Lady Oracle*, was carried out in Chapter III.

Allusions to fairy tales represent one of several strategies employed by Atwood to present, or better yet, to highlight the themes of identity, power, and victimization on both the personal and the artistic levels. The examination of Atwood's use of fairy-tale elements to convey her major concerns in the novels shows that the predominant, more recurring references are to the figures of traditional tales who *represent* female sexuality and social roles. For instance, in her use of the figure of Cinderella, Atwood deals especially with those traits which have been largely associated with *femininity*, such as beauty, passivity, and victimization. The heroine's wish to conquer the prince's love and thus find eternal happiness is also an element of the tale which Atwood does not disregard. The figure of Cinderella can be recognized, for example, in the depiction of Marian at what was supposed to be her engagement party, as discussed in Chapter II. Differently from the traditional heroine, Marian rejects the possibility of marrying Peter as she does not seem to believe in a happy end after it. The portrayal of Clara, especially before getting married, also suggests the figure of the passive Cinderella, who believes the love of a handsome, good man could make her the happiest woman of all, a belief which the development of Clara's story proves to be false. It is interesting that "[Atwood] does say that *The Edible Woman* expresses her own fear of marriage"(Miner 189-90).

The figures of Cinderella's ugly sisters are also identified in Atwood's novels. As discussed in Chapter II, the portrayal of the "three office virgins" reminds us of the sisters, especially

for their desperate wish to find *princes* for themselves and also for the fact they do not possess *natural beauty*, and thus try anything to become *beautiful* to conquer their *princes*. Differently from *The Edible Woman*, in which the identification is just a possible reading of the presentation of Marian co-workers, in *Lady Oracle* the identification is explicit and produces a different effect. This time it does not take place in a minor character: Joan, the novel's heroine, in her fantasy with the Royal Porcupine, cannot feel like Cinderella, but like her ugly sister. This feeling reveals Joan's difficulty in fitting into the molds of femininity imposed on her. The fact that she feels like the ridiculous Cinderella's stepsister may reflect her own feeling of inadequacy.

Another well-known fairy-tale figure we can recognize in one of Atwood's characters is the passive Sleeping Beauty, who falls in love with the prince who breaks the spell and wakes her from her hundred-year sleep. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie is also Sleeping Beauty when the only explanation she can find for her love for her doctor, Daniel,is clearly very much based in the tale's logic: rescue ends up in love. In the analysis conducted here it has also been possible to see in Rennie another figure, Snow White, who is equally brought back to life by a *prince*. Playing with these images, Atwood is possibly satirizing the idealized view of romantic love.

Another recurrent fairy-tale image used by Atwood in her novels is that of the Evil Queen, the villain in the Snow White tale. In *The Edible Woman* we have the personification of the Evil Queen in Marian's roommate, who uses her creative power to

conquer her lover. In *Surfacing* there is Anna, completely subjected to her husband's oppression, "the voice in the mirror" offering no way out. In *Lady Oracle* the way Joan presents her mother sounds more like a stepmother, the Evil Queen in the Snow White. Some critics see this identification as the heroine's attempt to keep her image of herself as a victim. However, the identification of characters with the villain in the Snow White tale reveals that the same characters also exhibit aspects of Snow White herself, reinforcing Gilbert and Gubar's view that one is in fact the reverse of the other, both subjected to the patriarchal voice in the mirror which throws one against the other(38,41).

The young protagonist in "Little Red Cap" also deserves a place in Atwood's work. In *The Edible Woman*, for instance, we see Marian incorporating aspects of the tale heroine at the party already mentioned here. All dressed in red, she runs from Peter, afraid of the "wolf" she perceives in him, and succeeds at not being devoured.

In *Lady Oracle* the question of being a woman artist is greatly emphasized and figures from fairy tales which deal with the subject are brought into scene. The Little Mermaid becomes an identity for Joan, who is in great conflict between her femininity and her art. Moira Shearer, the heroine in the movie version of Andersen's "The Red Shoes" is also an identity for Joan, who is afraid of opting for *dancing*, for art, openly, and have her husband, Arthur, go away. As was already extensively examined in Chapter III, the whale from the Walt Disney movie also represents an identity for Joan, having direct relation to her "fat self". The three figures constitute relevant material

for Atwood's exposition of some of the problems women may have to face if they opt for art, such as the usual great difficulty encountered by women artists to coordinate their artistic activities with their social obligations, with what society expects from them.

As to the use of fairy-tale elements in the construction of her fictional characters Atwood comments that "[her] hypothetical character would have a choice of many literary ancesstresses"(1982: 219), including the ones mentioned here. She also remarks that "[a]ll, of course, are stereotypes of woman drawn from the Western European literary tradition and its Canadian and American mutations"(221). As presented in Chapter I, contemporary analyses of fairy tales demonstrate that, in the last decades, innovations and *revisions* of these traditional tales abound. "Keeping the name" but usually "changing the game", these *new* stories give readers a chance to see the same subject from a different perspective, allowing other latent meanings to emerge, challenging the *old*, traditional ones, "giving voice to the muted".

The use Atwood makes of fairy-tale elements sounds as a form of *mutation*, that is, another way to approach the same old stories. The way the writer deals with these elements leads us to perceive, for example, that the major characters, always women, manage to *rewrite* the scripts of femininity endorsed by the tales, *revising* the plots encountered in them. Marian, in *The Edible Woman*, instead of being *devoured* by the big, bad wolf in disguise, runs to the freer side of herself, represented by Duncan. Afterwards, her first *positive* action is to bake a cake

in the form of a woman and offer it to Peter, the disguised *wolf*. The cake, something edible, could be devoured, but not herself, for she no longer sees herself as a victim. In running from Peter, Marian rejects what Cinderella longs for as, differently from the tale heroine, she is not very confident in achieving *everlasting happiness* through marriage.

The nameless heroine in *Surfacing* ends up rejecting her own *invented* story, facing the reality of facts, assuming responsibility for the course of her own life. Furthermore, in deciding to give up the *stereotyped* illustrations for a children's book, she refuses to collaborate in reinforcing patriarchal views of men and women.

In *Lady Oracle*, the use of elements from especially the movie version of Andersen's "The Red Shoes" gains special significance in the context of the woman as artist. Joan opts for *dancing*, for art over love, even though her feet hurt. Differently from the heroine in both the tale and the movie, Joan survives and expresses her firm desire to assume her life openly. The idea of getting into trouble, of suffering, is directly linked to the act of dancing. But *dancing* is also linked to the idea of power, of overcoming fear and acting. The refusal to dance would possibly prevent trouble, but it would also mean being inept, being abject, being passive. Joan's final decision to go on with her art reflects Atwood's own position towards it:

> It would be impossible for me to live with anyone who didn't allow me to be a writer. Repressing that part of me would lead to more misery than it would be worth . . . . But it cost me a lot of blood . . . . . I missed out on a lot of things other women had -- children, a husband for a long time. Now I know that I may not have missed anything at all. But the point is I 'thought' I did. It always hurts to say good-bye.(Miner 184)

Atwood's use of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" also shows "revisionist" aspects, such as the significant change of the adjective *little* for *big*. When she opts to dance to no one but herself, Joan does not feel weak, powerless. On the contrary, this time she is not dancing to a *prince*; she assumes her art openly, she assumes her own voice. Perhaps now she can find what was missing .

Also important is Joan's decision to give up writing *romance*. Instead, she wants to try some science fiction. This attitude suggests a positive movement from the *past* to the *future*, reflecting Joan's ability to *rewrite* old plots, creating new ones for women. She explains her choice for science fiction saying "[t]he future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for **you** (345; emphasis added). Her use of the word **you** clearly implies the reader(s). It also reveals her concern about her responsibility as a writer, a writer who feels the need to pay attention to what she is offering her readers.

After all that has been said up to now, there are also some considerations which cannot be left out of the final conclusions. In Atwood's use of fairy tales we notice that while protagonists usually *rewrite* the traditional plots, minor characters provide foils by conforming to the scripts. Anna, Ainsley, the office virgins, all remain *closed* in the patterns suggested by fairy tales, without acknowledging how involved they are in their attempts to fit the *appropriate*, stereotyped role models offered by society. We do not notice any degree of awareness on their part, nor do they show any sign pointing to a more mature attitude towards their own lives.

In the same way, male characters do not break out of

stereotypes. Figures such as Peter in the *The Edible Woman*, David in *Surfacing*, Jake and Paul in *Bodily Harm*, Arthur in *Lady Oracle*, Offred's Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jon in *Cat's Eye*, all are presented as strong, firm, and most importantly, active. They are not the ones waiting for rescue. On the contrary, all the time they seem to be self-confident, aware of what they expect from life. Thus we can agree with Atwood herself when she says that "[h]eroes and villains have much in common, after all. Both are strong, both are in control of themselves, both perform actions and face the consequences"(1982: 221).

By capitalizing on our internalized *versions* of womanhood and manhood, through the roles crystalized in fairy tales which have played a major role in the socialization of children, Margaret Atwood can better express her views of full womanhood, of female identity, and also of female artisthood, showing the need to destroy pre-conceived ideas of what a woman should be. At this point it is important to mention the fact that Atwood's *revisionist* use of traditional narratives such as fairy tales does not mean the writer rejects these fictions. What she does, in fact, is explore "the ways that human beings have allowed themselves to be implicated in structures of victimization and oppression"(Howells 56).

When constructing the fictional protagonists, Atwood is possibly trying to fulfill her desire to create a female character "[showing] her having the emotions all human beings have -- hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy -- without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example". This female character should

also "be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women"(1982: 227).

The more we read and analyze Atwood's writing, the more we perceive that, above all, she demonstrates a very serious concern with the human condition. Although she presents the world through an evidently feminine perspective, her themes are not restricted to female questions. With her characters she is able to bring about universal themes, functioning as a kind of camera which can capture even minimal details of life, of human experience, of the relationship with the world around. Atwood really knows how to expose human anxieties, doubts, fears, imperfections, weaknessess. At first sight Atwood's writing may sound pessimistic, but the careful reading of her work reveals, for instance, that her non-heroic heroines are, in fact, very much human. What happens to them and to the people around them reflects Atwood's belief that writers should bear witness to life, to human experience. Presenting possibilities, Atwood's negative examples do not lead to hopelessness, but they point to a light at the end of the tunnel. Her protagonists' usual final refusal to be victims, together with their desire to be the writers of their own story, makes it clear that although imperfections are unavoidable, power, feeling, and reason cannot be set apart. These elements must be integrated, as they are indispensable to the composition of the total being.

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