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FROM OBJECTIFICATION TO SELF-AFFIRMATION:

MIRROR IMAGERY IN ATWOOD'S FIRST

THREE NOVELS

por

Maria do Socorro Baptista Barbosa

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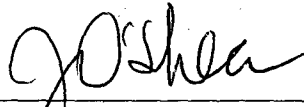
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José Roberto O'Shea
Coordenador

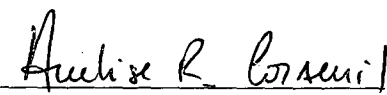


Susana Borneo Funck
Orientadora

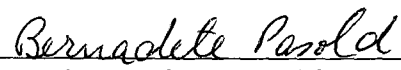
BANCA EXAMINADORA:



Susana Borneo Funck
Supervisor



Anelise Reich Corseuil
Examiner



Bernadete Pasold
Examiner

Florianópolis, 1 de Agosto de 1996

Para:

Maria Jesus

João Gabriel

Antônio Carlos

Virgínia Maria

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ABSTRACT

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Maria do Socorro Baptista Barbosa

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Supervising Professor: Susana Borneo Funck

I have formulated the hypothesis that Atwood's first three novels portray female characters searching for identity in relation to mirror imagery, establishing a behavioral pattern in which they would follow three stages in order to find their own selves. After having analyzed the three novels, I could see that Atwood's protagonists have, in fact, followed the stages I pointed out: they have gone from a narcissistic behavior in which they used to mirror men's desires to a more conscious behavior in which they stop mirroring the desire of others to mirror themselves. From the first step, in which they used to look in the mirror worried only with their physical appearance, to the third step in which they look in the looking glass feeling as newborn women, they have crossed different borders in their way from objectification to self-affirmation. These "border crossing" attitudes consist ultimately in going beyond the mirror frames in refusing to be "framed", formulated and contained.

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RESUMO

A partir da idéia de que as protagonistas dos três primeiros romances de Margaret Atwood (**The Edible Woman**, **Surfacing** e **Lady Oracle**) buscam suas identidades a partir de suas imagens no espelho, eu formulei a hipótese de que estas personagens femininas seguiriam um padrão de comportamento no qual elas partiriam de uma atitude diante do espelho em que refletiam desejos masculinos para uma atitude mais consciente em que passam a refletir os próprios desejos. Para chegarem a esse ponto de auto-conhecimento, elas passam por uma serie de diferentes momentos de crise e duvidas, terminando por assumir o controle de suas próprias vidas, usando o espelho a partir de então em proveito próprio.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter I: Being in the Mirror: Mirroring Men	10
Chapter II: Refusing to be in the Mirror: Crossing Borders	35
Chapter III: Going back to the Mirror: Mirroring Themselves	62
Conclusion	74
Bibliographical Reference	78

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: "Death as Bride".....	49
Figure 2: "Undersea".....	51
Figure 3: "Lady and Sinister Figure".....	53
Figure 4: "A Bird Diving into a Submerged Figure".....	58
Figure 5: "Drowned Figure II".....	59

Introduction

*The stranger who inhabits my
consciousness is not really a
stranger at all, but myself
(Barth)*

Identity, as a central concept for much literary criticism, has become a cliché without being clearly defined. Judith Gardiner, in her essay “On Female Identity and Writing by Women”, states that “the word ‘identity’ is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women” (347). These contradictions may be caused by the difficulty in defining the term, for even the dictionary meaning is contradictory.¹ Identity may be seen either as one’s own self or the way someone is seen by others. Each person may have more than one identity, according to the circumstances, being these identities defined by her/himself, by the environment or by the desires of others. With the rise of a feminist consciousness in the 60’s, the quest for an identity became one of the central concerns of literature by women in much of western culture. Women felt that they had to reinscribe themselves in a tradition which had rendered them for the most part invisible and silent—relegated to the place of the Other. It was then believed that if women could tell their stories, a balance could be achieved which would correct the facile association of maleness with humanity in general. For Gardiner, “female identity is a process” (“Female Identity” 349) which helps to illuminate the different features

¹ See, for example, the **Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language**, International edition, in which the word “identity” has six different definitions.

of writing by women. However, as Maggie Humm points out in **Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics**, “[s]exual identity is always unstable, it is susceptible to disruption by the unconscious and disruption manifests itself in the discontinuities and contradictions in everyday language. ... Additionally, the idea of femininity will always be open to redefinition” (59). In this way the phrase “female identity” rather than an easy solution became a challenge.

When talking about identity, it is impossible not to talk about gender. In her essay “Em busca de Outros e Outras: gênero, identidade e representação”, anthropologist Miriam Grossi declares that the cultural opposition between the feminine and the masculine starts from the biological difference and constructs itself differently in each time and place (339). Grossi also says that it is “no permanente jogo de contrastes que se constrói a alteridade e se consolida o sentimento de identidade” (336). Yet, she states that it is in the search for the “other” that it is possible to meet the “self”. This confirms Humm’s point of view when she questions:

How can one speak from the place of the Other? Where and what are the places and spaces of the Other? How can women in literature, and for that matter men, be thought about outside the existing Masculine / Feminine framework[?] ... [H]ow can women break away from the logic of oppositions? How can women break out of this (psychoanalytic) imposition of the place of suppression without having to enter the masculine space of the symbolic? (**Feminist Criticism 60**)

As Alicia Ostriker has pointed out in her essay “Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity”, “women have always been defined, and have permitted themselves to be defined, by the ‘world’ of masculine culture” (59) to such an extent that talking about an

autonomous self seems to be absurd. To be defined by a world, whether masculine or not, means that everybody has to behave in accordance to what is expected from each one. In the case of women, it means that they must be “feminine” and, sometimes, even submissive, for this is the constructed behavior which has always been imposed on them. It also means that everybody has to wear masks, to behave according to others’ expectations, not to her/his own.

It is important to point out that women have always been seen as the “other” in relation to men. And when a woman looks for her own identity it is because she needs to feel herself as a whole person. As Carol Christ says in her book **Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest**, in listening to her own voice and being conscious of her own value, trying to please herself instead of pleasing others, she may find an answer to all the questions above (9). Christ also points out that women’s quest for identity, in literature, “begins in an *experience of nothingness*. Women experience emptiness in their own lives—in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives” (13). To her, this experience of nothingness begins in a woman’s life from her birth and goes on throughout her life, for she internalizes the voices of her oppressors (mother’s, father’s, teacher’s) and learns to doubt the values of her thoughts, her feelings, her creativity, making the streams of her feelings of inferiority and self-hatred become strong and deep (15). Because women live in a male-defined world, their experience in patriarchy is similar to the experience of nothingness. This experience, says Christ, is followed by an *awakening*, which is a metaphor for enlightenment, a movement, in the case of women, from bondage to freedom, from self-negation to a new affirmation of selfhood, power and responsibility.

The quest for a female identity in western literature written by women is connected to the act of telling stories, according to Christ. To her, “[w]ithout stories there is a sense in which a woman is not alive” (6), for women’s stories have not been told for centuries and centuries of male domination. This act of telling stories has acquired much more meaning in the poststructuralist context, where discourse has come to be seen as origin rather than representation of experience. In **Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse**, Rosemary Hennessy states that it is crucial to feminism to disarticulate and rearticulate the process of telling stories and the stories themselves. To her, “[n]owhere is the question of who feminism speaks for more crucial than in the histories we tell” (100).

In spite of a variety of views and the different philosophical stances informing feminist thought, one could define the concept of female identity in literature as the way female characters can achieve their wholeness as humans beings in a patriarchal world. To Gardiner, for example,

the concept of female identity shows us how female experience is transformed into female consciousness, often in reaction to male paradigms for female experience. The concept of female identity provides us with a sophisticated and multivariant theoretical apparatus with which to explain differences between writing by women and by men in matters of both form and content. (“Female Identity” 360)

In this work, therefore, I will use the concept of identity as being that process by which female literary characters search for a new consciousness of being a woman, taking off the social and cultural masks imposed on her by patriarchy. In this sense, each one may find multiple and dynamic new selves which will constitute her whole identity.

In many literary works, women's quest for identity has been connected with mirror imagery. Although the best known myth related to the reflected image is not of a woman, but of a man, Narcissus, the futility and superficiality attributed to him have often been applied to women. What Ovid writes of Narcissus, that "[he] loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow" (153), appears in traditional narratives as related to a generalized view of women as frivolous, ornamental creatures. If we consider characters such as the wicked queens of fairy tales, especially in "Snow White", we tend to believe that a woman's physical appearance is all that matters to her. Narcissism, then, is a term used especially by psychoanalysis in order to present women as vain and childish (Bartky 36). Nevertheless, feminine narcissism need not be an excuse for feminine alienation. As Sandra Bartky states in "Narcissism, Femininity and Alienation", it may help "to reveal the nature of a mode of self-estrangement which lies close to the heart of the feminine condition itself" (37). Contrary to common belief, then, women do not always use mirrors for futile objectives, but also to make them think, through their reflected images, about their lives and their places in society. Besides, as Jenijoy La Belle states in **Herself Beheld: the Literature of the Looking Glass**, "[b]eyond vanity, and even beyond social definition, the mirror can reflect and project an otherworldly ideal" (16), as in Alice's stories, in which the mirror represents an enchanted world which goes far beyond the vain act of looking in it. Thus, the mirror may be seen in three different levels, different degrees of "reflection": personal, social and metaphysical. These three levels overlap, representing the different ways a woman looks in her looking-glass.

The relationship between a woman and her mirror reflection makes us think about the complex interchanges between the self as subject, the one who acts and is defined by

her/himself, and the self as its own object, the one who is defined by others' desires. As Bartky states,

[s]exual objectification ... displays the characteristic marks of alienation. Now, sexual objectification typically involves two persons, one who objectifies, and one who is objectified. But objectifier and objectified can be one and the same person: A woman can become a sex object for herself, taking toward her own person the attitude of the man. She will then take erotic satisfaction in her physical self, reveling in her body as a beautiful object to be gazed at and decorated. (36-37)

This attitude, still in Bartky's point of view, makes the self go doubling: "An Other, a 'stranger' who is at the same time myself, is subject for whom my bodily being is object" (39). The putting together of the *stranger* and the *self* would be a way of finding wholeness as a human being, the true self. Thus, two different attitudes may be discussed: if, on the one hand, women look at the mirror for vanity, because they need to feel secure of their beauty, their narcissistic behavior is then directed to the other, to whoever is going to see them, to the male. They allow themselves to become objects of male desires. On the other hand, if their attitude in looking at the mirror goes beyond vanity, then their attitude is directed to themselves. They then learn how to value themselves, not only through the image in the mirror, but through their inner selves. They also learn that, in order to have better relationships with the other, they must have better relationships with themselves.

In literary works, principally those written by women, it is possible to find female characters who associate the looking glass with the quest for self knowledge and identity. The first three novels written by Margaret Atwood are good examples of this quest for identity through the looking glass, for their protagonists have a very strong relationship with

the mirror and their reflected images. It must also be pointed out that Atwood, in these three novels at least, and in her non-fictional work, such as **Survival** and **Second Words**, is very concerned with connecting female identity to national identity. As Germaine Warkentin suggests, to have an identity, “you need to have an identification with something you can see or recognize. You need, if nothing else, an image in a mirror” (quoted by Atwood, **Survival** 9). Atwood situates Canada as a colony, and states that “[c]olonies breed something called ‘the colonial mentality’ and if you have the colonial mentality you believe that the great good place is always somewhere else” (**Second Words** 382). In discussing Canadian identity, she points out that

[e]verything has an identity. ... A man who’s forgotten who he is has an identity, he’s merely suffering from amnesia, which was the case with the Canadians. They’d forgotten. ... They’d become addicted to the one way mirror of the Canadian-American border—we can see you, you can’t see us—and had neglected that other mirror, their own culture. (**Second Words** 385)

Because Atwood, in Humm’s words, “explores a wide range of cultural myths about nationalism, political power and gender identity” (**Border Traffic** 124), it will be quite useful to see how the quest for identity through mirror reflections can be connected with her post-colonial attitude.

In the context of contemporary feminist and post-colonial criticism, Margaret Atwood’s novels **The Edible Woman** (1969), **Surfacing** (1972) and **Lady Oracle** (1976) offer rich material for the examination of how traditional stories and tropes are revised to produce more empowering subject positions for cultural minorities.

Many critics have already pointed out the use of mirror imagery in Atwood's novels. Some of them, such as Rigney, in "After the Failure of Logic": Descent and Return in **Surfacing**", see the mirror as an obstacle for the achievement of maturity (94-95). In her study of Margaret Atwood, Rigney also compares Atwood's heroines with Alice in Wonderland, for they "often move through mirrors and through their own self-deluding fictions into worlds of myth" (**Margaret Atwood** 2). To Harkness, in her essay "Alice in Toronto: The Carrollian Intertext in **The Edible Woman**", there is a clear connection between Atwood's **The Edible Woman** and Carroll's **Through the Looking Glass**. He points out that both writers use the mirror as a device: while in Carroll's text it allows Alice to enter into a world of fantasy, in Atwood's it alerts the reader to Marian's awareness (or lack of it), serving also to draw Peter into the intertext of Carroll's text (105-6). Givner, on the other hand, in her essay "Mirror Images in Margaret Atwood's **Lady Oracle**", sees Atwood's use of mirror imagery as a disruption of the traditional role of the mirror. It is possible to see, through these quotations, how mirror images are related to the heroines' quest for identity. In the same way, critic Frank Davey, writer of **Margaret Atwood: a Feminist Poetics**, investigates mirror imagery in Atwood but for him it is connected with the legend of Narcissus, though for Davey "it is Atwood's male characters who have this Narcissus relationship to the mirror, and the women characters who have their identity confused by it"(95). Jerome Roseberg, in his book **Margaret Atwood**, also relates Atwood's use of mirror images and the quest for identity to Narcissus, while Lecker, although also connecting mirror imagery with the quest for identity, states, in his essay "Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood's first three novels", that none of Atwood's heroines are able to find themselves or to achieve maturity. He affirms, for example, that the protagonists of **The Edible Woman**, **Surfacing** and **Lady Oracle** are, in fact, facets of the

same character, being “fragmented and duplicitous”, without being able to find her true self, without being able to live her own life without masks (203).

I have my own hypothesis about the relationship between Atwood’s female characters and their reflected images: there is a sense in which they follow a behavioral pattern through the three novels. This pattern may be seen through three stages: 1) each one sees the act of looking at the mirror as a natural thing, having, in a certain sense, narcissistic attitudes, mirroring men’s desires, being objectified and victimized; 2) feeling divided and selfless, they refuse to confront their reflected images, crossing the border between vanity and self-knowledge; 3) they then accept to look at the looking glass again, but with new perspectives and with a recovered self, refusing to be objectified, to become victims. To see if my hypothesis is valid, I have divided this work in three chapters, besides this Introduction, which is a sort of review of criticism, and the Conclusion, in which I will discuss the results of my research. In Chapter I, I will compare Atwood’s character’s behavior in the first part of each novel with the myth of Narcissus and the wicked queen of Grimm’s “Snow White”. I will also be dealing with Anne Sexton’s “Snow White”. In Chapter II, I will compare Atwood’s characters with the myth of Alice, using Carroll’s text as an important source. In Chapter III, I will discuss how the three female characters have gone from a narcissistic behavior to a more conscious one, in which they are aware of their limits and of their power over their own lives. In order to develop such an analysis I will be using the theories about female identity presented by Judith Gardiner and other feminist theorists, dealing also with La Belle’s theories on mirror symbology and its implications for the construction of female characters in literature. Besides the three novels, I will also be dealing with some of Atwood’s poems and paintings.

Chapter I

Being in the Mirror

Mirroring Men

*Mirror mirror on the wall
Who in this realm is the fairest of all?
(Snow White)*

*Mirrors
are the perfect lovers
(Atwood, "Tricks with Mirrors")*

*Meanwhile Snow White held court
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do. (Sexton, Transformations)*

In "Snow White", when the mirror answers the Queen, it has a male voice. She is, then, defined through a masculine world, which objectifies her. As La Belle points out, the patriarchal structures and powers which dominate Western culture and which impose to women their identities are extended to the mirror, which is over and over identified as male, telling the female how to behave. There is a sense in which both the man and the mirror can command the woman. La Belle also states that "[f]or many women, how they look is who they are. ... If the woman totally identifies her center, her self, with her appearance, ... then her appearance takes on psychological and existential importance" (31). Being defined by patriarchal social norms, the Queen envies her step-daughter because the young woman represents a threat to her as she is getting older: her image in the mirror is surely telling her she is not so beautiful as she used to be. And the loss of beauty for a woman who is defined only through her physical appearance means death. Nevertheless, she cannot deny what the mirror says, for it is supposed to tell only the truth.

The mirror reflects, or may reflect, as many writers have pointed out², truth, sincerity, and the contents of heart and consciousness, being considered a moon and female symbol. It is seen as a female symbol because women are supposed to look at the mirror much more than men do, since they need to keep their beauty in order to get a place in the world. However, there is a clear contradiction between the mirror which represents male values and the mirror as a female symbol. La Belle points out that the mirror has an oximoronic nature, for “mirroring is, quite literally, a mode of figuration or figuring-forth an image which, like metaphor, is inscribed with both identity and difference” (42). La Belle also discusses the two versions of the myth of Narcissus, in which the “oximoronic” nature of mirroring is better seen: in Ovid’s version, the young man falls in love with himself, while in Pausania’s version the image Narcissus sees is not of himself, but of his twin sister who has died very young. To La Belle, “[t]he two stories present the contradictory modes of response to the mirror; one version assumes the identity of self and image, while the other offers an extreme example of difference” (42). This oximoronic nature of the mirror is also seen by Bartky, who affirms that “[t]he gaze of the Other is internalized so that I myself become at once seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised” (38). The mirror imagery, then, is not only the self, but also the other.

In talking about women, the contradictory versions of the Narcissus myth may also be applied: when they look in the mirror not for vanity, but in order to go beyond that, trying to see who they really are, they see their whole images, and thus the mirror becomes a way they use to achieve maturity, to discover their more complex identities, functioning as a female symbol. On the other hand, when they look in the mirror worried with their physical appearance because they want someone to find them beautiful, they cannot see

²See, for example, Chevalier & Gheerbrant, in their *Dicionário de Símbolos*, or Walker, in *The Woman’s Dictionary of Symbols*.

their true images, but the image they want others to see. They are, like Narcissus in Pausania's version, looking at their images as if they were looking at the images of others, since they are worried in showing only their surface appearance, not their inner selves. The mirror then represents the other's value or, in relation to females, it represents the male values of a patriarchal social organization. As Virginia Woolf states, in **A Room of One's Own**, men have always seen women as their mirrors and, "[w]hatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all ... action" (36). It is important to emphasize that, while men have been traditionally seen as active beings, women have been considered passive and inert, beautiful beings with a complete lack of initiative. This traditional view of the dichotomy between action and passivity has allowed men to justify their use of women as mirrors of their desires.

The mirror is, therefore, seen in this chapter as a representation of male values, for I wish to show the way Atwood's female characters are objectified and victimized by the men in their lives, mirroring their desires. When Narcissus sees himself in the reflection and falls in love with his own image, although showing a complete lack of depth, he shows also that he is the most important person to himself. Of course this is an extreme case of self-love, which can lead to a psychological disease. But a controlled self-love is necessary in order to have self-respect. On the other hand, when he sees his sister, and falls in love with what he thinks is her image, he is in fact showing that it is the other who is important, not himself. He loses not only his identity, but his self-respect. This also happens with Atwood's characters in the beginning of each novel, for they consider the desires of others as being much more important than their own.

At first, Atwood's protagonists are not conscious of how objectified they are. Although not looking in the mirror exactly in the same way the Queen does, they are as

objectified and victimized as she is. In **The Edible Woman**, when Marian goes to Peter's apartment, he almost forces her to make love with him in the bathtub. She does not want to get in there, but she cannot say "no": "I had thought it was not a good idea, I much prefer the bed and I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortably hard and ridged, but I hadn't objected" (60). Besides allowing herself to be objectified, she has also a certain need for protection, which may be seen even in her choice for a certain kind of clothes: "Ainsley says I chose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can't see anything wrong with that" (13-14). She has, somehow, a paradoxical behavior, for although missing strong relationships, she feels panic when she has to sign the Pension Plan in her job, which may give her a sense of permanence: "It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it" (21). She feels, in a certain sense, locked in an awful job, and she would like to find a savior to rescue her.

In **Surfacing**, from the very beginning, the unnamed protagonist seems to look for protection. Even realizing that David is a good driver, she cannot avoid trying to protect herself: "He's a good driver, I realize that, I keep my outside hand on the door in spite of it. To brace myself and so I can get out quickly if I have to" (2). She also lacks strong relationships, for her best friends are almost unknown to her: "She's my best friend, my best woman friend; I've known her two months" (4). Like the Queen, who is objectified by the mirror, she has been objectified by her lover, who, even in the fictitious story she has invented to hide the true one, has used her as an instrument, as a mirror to his desires:

But I couldn't have brought the child here, I never identified it as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you're supposed to. It was

my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn't prove it though, he was clever: he kept saying he loved me. (28)

She feels locked not in a place, but in her past, which she pretends to have forgotten. She creates a whole story to hide her past, but her fictitious story is, just like the true one, a sad story of victimization, from which she also tries to escape, by refusing to feel; when looking for her father, she is somehow looking for a way to be saved from that prison without walls in which she has locked herself.

In **Lady Oracle**, the sense of women's objectification is quite strong, for, just after publishing her prose-poem book "Lady Oracle", Joan notices that all the newspapers make comments on her hair instead of on her style as a writer: "hair in the female was regarded as more important than either talent or the lack of it" (14). Joan Foster, writer of *Costume Gothics*, seems to be quite like her heroines, who long for heroes, as when she meets Paul:

My first reaction to this story was that I had met a liar as compulsive and romantic as myself. But my usual impulse was to believe everything I was told, as I myself wished to be believed, and in this case it was the right impulse, since his story was essentially true. I was very impressed. He seemed to belong to a vanished and preferable era, when courage was possible. (148)

She sees each new man she finds as a probable hero who will change her life. As soon as she realizes this will not happen, she turns him into a villain, for, as McMillan very well points out in her essay "The Transforming Eye: **Lady Oracle** and Gothic Tradition", it is the

heroine who creates the hero, through her “transforming eye”, which “works outside the heroine’s conscious awareness” (49). But while in the traditional Gothic Romance the heroine first sees the man as almost a villain, and then turns him into a hero, Joan inverts the plot, turning the men she finds into villains just because they cannot satisfy her expectations: none of them is the “prince charming” she would like to find.

The narcissistic relationship between the mirror and the Queen is an important theme in “Snow White”, in the sense that the Queen represents female objectification, the stereotype of the woman to whom physical appearance is all that matters, not because she sees her self in the mirror, but because she is defined by its male voice. What worries her is, actually, the fear of becoming old and ugly, so the men would not desire her anymore. Gilbert and Gubar, in **The Madwoman in the Attic**, suggest that the Wicked Queen and Snow White are two sides of the same person, and that the Queen, in trying to kill the princess, is in fact trying to kill in herself those feminine attributes which characterize the young woman: passivity and submission (41). Nevertheless, in letting herself be defined by the male voice of the mirror, the Queen herself is submissive.

In **The Edible Woman** Marian is so concerned with her appearance that she even talks to Peter in the mirror, when they are going to meet Len. Her concern, however, is not to see how she looks, but how her appearance seems connected to Peter’s appearance. She is, in fact, seeing herself as his complement: “‘I wonder if Len’s up there yet,’ I said to him, keeping an eye on myself and talking to him in the mirror. I was thinking I was just about the right height for him” (65). Marian also describes accurately the way her friends (the three office virgins) look at the mirror in a way men expect them to do. They are, in fact, mirroring men’s desires: “‘Emmy, Lucy and Millie were all there, combing their yellow hair and retouching their makeup. Their six eyes glittered in the mirrors” (29). These three

women may be seen as Marian's foils, the way she will perhaps become if she fails to become conscious.

In **Surfacing**, the unnamed protagonist, while lying even to herself, sees the mirror almost as a friend, for she can recognize herself in it. However, it is as a teenager that she remembers being in the mirror for the first time: "My mother's phrase, used to me once when I was fourteen: she was watching, dismayed, as I covered my mouth with Tango Tangerine. I told her I was just practicing" (38). It is in her past, not in her present, that she acts narcissistically in front of the mirror. At the present time she looks at it only when it seems to be necessary: "I brush my hair in front of the mirror, delaying; then I turn back to my work" (46). The mirror, to her, functions as a way of recovering her lost self, being part of a long process of becoming in which she has to go back to her past in order to be able to move forward.

In **Lady Oracle**, the theme of surface appearance is stronger than in the other two novels. Joan has been concerned with physical appearance since she was a little child, for it was what her mother, representing the social norm, imposed to her. However, she could not satisfy her mother, becoming a fat woman instead of a pretty and thin one. There is a sense in which, for a certain moment, when refusing to lose weight she is in fact refusing to be mirrored, to be framed by a male world which does not value a fat or ugly woman: "I ate to defy her [her mother]" (78).

Among the several aspects of human relationships, the relationship between mothers and daughters is perhaps the most controversial one. It is common belief, among specialists, that this relationship works as a kind of foundation from which all forms of interaction between a woman and the world will be constructed. Paola Patassini, a psychologist quoted by Cilene Pereira in her article "Mães X Filhas", says that "[a] relação entre mãe e filha é o

núcleo do universo feminino. É esse modelo que irá influenciar a relação com as outras pessoas” (67). Besides indicating models of relationship with other people, the relationship between mothers and daughters tends to last throughout the daughter’s adult life: the mother is always an important figure, because she is, basically, the one who will advise the daughter, the person to whom the girl or the young woman will ask for help anytime she feels necessary, especially at important moments of transformation, such as the first menstruation, pregnancies and breastfeeding.

However, at the same time the mother is this important person to the daughter, she can also appear as an old witch, a step-mother figure, just like in fairy tales such as “Snow White”. This situation can happen when the mother seems not to worry only with her children, but also with herself. It is easy to remember that some step-mothers are presented with seductive images, completely different from the traditional image of the mother. As Patassini explains, “[à]s vezes, a mãe que se arruma, que se cuida, pode incorporar a imagem da madrasta e assustar a própria filha, que ainda não sabe lidar com esta situação” (67). Then, it is possible to see Snow White’s step-mother as her rival, assuming the role of a witch instead of that of a mother.

Except for **Lady Oracle**, the protagonists’ mothers are absent or dead. In the **Edible Woman** there is just one clear reference to Marian’s mother, right in the beginning of Marian’s anorexia, when she comes back to her town to tell them of her engagement (173). It is not possible to see how their relationship works, but Marian seems not to worry about this in any way. She does not even like to go to her hometown, where her parents live, for it is not part of her life anymore: her parents, relatives and hometown belong to her past. In **Surfacing**, the mother has already died, and her relationship with her daughter while alive is also uncertain. Her influence upon her daughter’s life, which comes after her death, will be

discussed later on, in Chapter II. In **Lady Oracle**, however, the mother is alive, and her relationship with her daughter is quite similar to that of the Queen with Snow White. As a matter of fact the novel presents two contrastive mother figures: Mrs. Delacourt, Joan's mother who seems not to care about her daughter very much, and Joan's aunt, who the girl considers her actual mother, having even dreamed about it, for it is in her aunt that Joan trusts, it is her aunt who she looks for when feeling alone, or when having some doubts about female sexuality. Mrs. Delacourt functions as a "Queen" figure, being both defined through mirrors, and both have problems in dealing with the daughter, although in different ways: the Queen wants to kill Snow White, because she fears the girl would become much prettier and would finally take her place; Joan's mother wishes to fulfill her dreams through Joan, who refuses to play the script her mother wants for her. Peck, in her essay "More than Ideal: Size and Weight Obsession in Literary Works by Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood and Andre Dubus", states that "getting fat and staying fat is one way of saying 'no' to gender expectations and sexist restrictions." She also points out that "fat may be viewed as an expression of the anxiety inherent in the mother daughter relationship" (71), since patriarchy demands that the mother must prepare the daughter to be well accepted by society, to face the marriage market. For me, Mrs. Delacourt's behavior is quite paradoxical: at the same time she wishes Joan to lose weight, she provides her kitchen with all of Joan's favorite foods. And when the girl finally decides to get thinner, her mother does not accept her decision. It seems to me that, in this case, the mother fears that the daughter, in becoming a pretty woman, is turning out to be also a threat. Joan becomes quite confused with her mother's reaction:

About the only explanation I could think of for this behavior of hers was that making me thin was her last available project. She'd finished all the houses, there was nothing left for her to do, and she had counted on me to last her

forever. I should have been delighted by her distress, but instead I was confused. I'd really believed that if I became thinner she would be pleased; a smug, masterful pleasure, but pleasure nonetheless; her will being done. Instead she was frantic. (123)

As the Queen tries to kill Snow White, Mrs. Delacourt tries to kill her daughter as well, hurting her with a knife. Like Snow White, Joan runs away. However, she could never forget her mother, and, although never meeting her again, except in a vision, Joan is very much influenced by her.

Being a mirror to someone means to act exactly in the way the other wishes. In Woolf's words, "[w]omen have served [for] centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man as twice its natural size" (35). When a man, then, sees a woman as a mirror, and tries to control her, perhaps he is not concerned with her inferiority, but with his own superiority. Woolf also states that the reason why men have insisted so "emphatically upon the inferiority of women", is that "if they [women] were not inferior, they [men] would cease to enlarge"(36). This is what Atwood describes in her poem "Tricks with Mirrors", in which she tells how a woman feels when transformed into a mirror: she is invisible; what the man in the poem sees is not her, but himself. "I enter with you / and become a mirror. / Mirrors / are the perfect lovers" (Selected Poems 183).

Atwood's protagonists also serve as mirrors to men, by turning themselves into objects of desire. When Marian meets Peter he calls her a sensible girl (64), not because she indeed is one, but because she understands him: she is just like a mirror, reflecting his wishes. And he acts like a gentleman, protecting her as if she were a child: "'Oh come along Marian, don't be childish,' he said brusquely, and took my arm" (79). In fact, in the three

novels men are always patronizing women: when Joan marries Arthur, she thinks she has finally found her hero, for he would take care of her. He acts exactly the way she foresees, trying to protect her, treating her sometimes as a pet which needs to be cleaned up:

Once I was there, installed in his own house under his very nose, Arthur began to pay more attention to me. He even became affectionate, in his own way; he would brush my hair for me, clumsily but with concentration, and he would sometimes come up behind me and hug me, apropos of nothing, as if I were a teddy bear. (171)

Joan tries to be just like Arthur wishes, in order to satisfy him, in order to become a mirror for him: "For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be" (210).

In **Surfacing**, after the protagonist has aborted her child against her will, her lover treats her as a child who needs to be protected, not as a human being who has suffered a violation:

"It's over," he said, "feel better?"

He coiled his arms around me, protecting me from some thing, the future, and kissed me on the forehead. "You're cold," he said. My legs were shaking so much I could hardly stand up and there was an ache, slow like a groan. "Come on," he said, "we'd better get you home." He lifted my face, scrutinizing it in the light. "Maybe I should carry you to the car."

He was talking to me as though I was an invalid ... (82)

As Bartky states, in accepting their objectification, women can be alienated from their own sexuality, becoming sexual objects in male hands. Being then alienated from our

bodies, “we suffer a different form of estrangement by being too closely identified with it in others” (35). Cronan Rose, in her essay “Through the Looking Glass: when Women Tell Fairy Tales” states that, when looking at the mirror, these female characters see, in fact, “the tales men tell about women” (211). She also states that “the cause of female narcissism is a male-dominated culture that perceives women as objects and conditions them to become objects” (215).

Grace, in her essay “Margaret Atwood and the Poetics of Duplicity”, also talks about the objectification of women in relation to mirrors. She discusses some of Atwood’s poems, pointing out that the speaker of “The Circle Game” and the woman in “Tricks with Mirrors” are terrified by the mirror because it reflects and limits the self, reducing women to objects seen and, as objects, they become mirrors in which the viewer sees only himself (59). In the second section of “The Circle Game”, the scene happens in a room occupied by the speaker and her lover, to whom she is talking. However, it seems that she is talking more to herself, for he seems not to hear her, looking closely and intensely in the mirror, narcissistically centered in himself. Rosenberg states that the poem “Tricks with Mirrors” is a “witty, pun-filled poem that evokes the myth of Narcissus and warns of the dangers of love turned inward upon the self. Here the speaker ... becomes the inanimate mirror of the self, evading the torments of exposure to another person.” The frame, Rosenberg goes on, which does not reflect the man, “contains the emotions that she has suppressed in transforming herself into a mirror” (74-75).

Another Atwood’s work which may be also seen as example of women’s objectification is the “Circe/Mud Poems”, in which Circe, the speaker, allows herself to become a mirror to Ulysses, to be objectified by him: “Look at me,” she addresses him, “and see your reflection” (*Selected Poems* 210). Their love, then, “has become a grotesque,

because one-dimensional, affair” (Rosenberg 79). Circe’s speech is followed by the prose poem which elaborates on the passive mud woman Ulysses seems to wish Circe to become. Circe herself tells the story of a mud woman constructed by a traveler who shares her with a boy, in a kind of love the man considers perfect:

When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman
out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees
and elbows: they stuck to the essentials. Every sunny day
they would row across to the island where she lived, in the
afternoon when the sun had warmed her, and make love to
her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown
wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted. They
would take turns, they were not jealous, she preferred them
both. Afterwards they would repair her, making her hips
more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone
nipples.

His love for her was perfect, he could say anything to her, into
her he spilled his entire life. She was swept away in a sudden
flood. He said no woman since then has equaled her.

(Selected Poems 214)

In using the mud metaphor, Atwood is comparing it with the way women, in patriarchal societies, are seen as being adaptable to men’s wishes just like the mud is

adaptable to the wishes of the sculptor. It is interesting to see that the mud woman has not got the parts which are usually considered essential: she has no feet, no hands, no head. In this way, she is not able to move by herself and depends completely on the wishes of her creators. More importantly: she is not able to think. Unable to feel or to talk, she cannot express opinions which would be different from men's opinions. She is just an object, created to satisfy men's desires, being this the reason why her hips and breasts are seen as essentials, for these parts of the women's body are supposed to give much pleasure to men. Being this woman fully in her sculptor's hand, she represents the objectification of the female as a sexual partner. He can do everything he wishes, she can never say "no".

After telling the mud woman's story, Circe asks Ulysses: "Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? Is this what I would like to be? It would be so simple" (**Selected Poems** 214). To Rosenberg, "[i]t would also be an evasion of human complexity; and it is not enough" (80). As we can see, Atwood plays with issues of passivity versus action as it has been historically pointed out, questioning, through Circe, the validity of these issues.

The protagonists of the novels let themselves be objectified due to their love for the men who objectify them. Ostriker says that "[t]o love a man is to be dependent on him. To be dependent is to be silenced. ... Women ... feel that to gain male approval they must remain silent" (67). In **The Edible Woman**, as soon as Peter proposes, Marian feels different. Used to making her own decisions, suddenly she is not able to do that anymore. When he asks her about the day she would like to get married, she hears a "soft flannelly voice [she] barely recognized," leaving all the big decisions to him (90). In **Surfacing**, the first man the protagonist loves, the father of her aborted child, is worshipped by her: "For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that's where I learned. I

worshipped him, non-child-bride, idolater” (142). In **Lady Oracle**, after marrying Arthur, Joan feels quite happy, for she seems to have found her prince: “I myself was bliss-filled and limpid eyed: the right man had come along, complete with a cause I could devote myself to. My life had significance” (171). Self-effacing and compliant they could go on following the traditional roles of female characters, as if they could not think by themselves, just like the mud woman of the poem.

Davey sees Atwood’s protagonists as rewritings of Shakespeare’s Miranda, for they are left “in a deeply flawed male world about which they still hold some illusions” (59), just like Prospero’s daughter. These protagonists display extreme passivity, allowing their lives to be controlled by factors outside their own wishes. They believe they have their lives determined by the male world in which they live. They must be at the mercy of unconscious forces that are pushing them to carry out the fate they believe are theirs. In valorizing men’s wishes and letting them command their lives, Atwood’s protagonists act like colonized countries which are commanded by the colonizer. It is important to point out that women from colonized countries are doubly colonized, being completely powerless and voiceless.

It is possible to relate the victim position of Atwood’s protagonists—victim position 2, according to Atwood’s **Survival** (they acknowledge that they are victims, but they think it’s their fate, they cannot do anything to avoid it)—with Canada’s position as culturally colonized. In **The Edible Woman** the characters compare Canada to the United States, wishing they were in the States, where things would be better (96). This is what Atwood calls the “colonial mentality”, discussed in my introduction, and which means giving much more value to everything from outside instead of one’s own country. In **Surfacing**, when the unnamed protagonist arrives at her hometown, she sees some men in Elvis Presley

haircuts (19), and the place seems to be an imitation of British places (21). These facts also show the same colonial mentality seen in the first novel: in imitating American and British people, Canadians show they do not value themselves. Ironically, however, they discover later that “the Americans” they imitate are in fact Canadians, like themselves. In **Lady Oracle**, when Joan finds out that Arthur is Canadian like herself she feels disappointed: “I would’ve preferred it if he’d had a British accent; unfortunately he was only a Canadian, like me, but I overlooked this defect” (165). This colonial mentality happens because Canadians are always comparing themselves with the wrong place (Atwood, **Second Words** 380).

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, authors of **The Empire Writes Back**, consider very important to post-colonialism what feminist writers have done. To them, some writers, including Atwood, “have all drawn an analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of the imperial power and the colony” (32). They also point out that

[t]he Canadian ‘victim position’ is occasioned not just by the obvious political circumstances of domination by the USA or, earlier, by Britain and France, but by the radical problem of the ‘word’. Canadians ... do not have their own language, but are forced to use the language of others, in a position closer to that of Africans brought to the Caribbean once their ancestral languages were no longer recuperable, or, as feminists theorists have frequently pointed out, to that of the position of women. (142)

Some of Atwood’s poems also deal with the close relationship between women’s body and Canada. In section iv, at the central part of “The Circle Game”, there is the couple’s climatic map game, in which imperial and horror scenarios underlie gender domination:

So now you trace me
 like a country's boundary
 or a strange new wrinkle in
 your own well known skin
 and I am fixed, stuck
 down on the outspread map
 of this room, of your mind's continent
 (here and yet not here, like
 the wardrobe and the mirrors
 the voices through the wall
 your body ignored on the bed),

transfixed
 by your eyes'
 cold blue thumbtacks
 (**Selected Poems** 19)

Objectified by a man, who sees her as a land to be possessed, the speaker is female as well as colonized, being, in this way, doubly exposed and doubly silenced. The sections which deal with mirrors and windows are also good examples: in section ii, for instance, the female persona tells that being with that man, in that room, "is like groping through a mirror / whose glass has melted / to the consistency / of gelatin" (**Selected Poems** 15). She also comments on his refusing to be "an exact reflection, yet / will not walk from the glass, be separate" (**Selected Poems** 15). In this section, the *I*, in being with the *You*, feels as if she were groping through a gelatinous melted mirror. McCombs, in her essay "Politics, Structure, and Poetic Development in Atwood's Canadian-American Sequences: from an Apprentice Pair to 'The Circle Game' to 'Two-Headed Poems'", states that "[h]er refusal to be separate from him enacts gender entrapment—and also enacts the French-Canadian entrapment of a colony within a colony, a country within a country" (147).

In section vi, the female persona portrays the way the man behaves, standing at every window, “shivering, pinched, nose pressed / against the glass, the snow / collecting on his neck, / watching the happy families / (a game of envy)” (**Selected Poems** 21). While looking at the windows, the speaker portrays the colonial mentality bred by colonized people, who envy what is in a place that is not theirs. It is important to point out that windows exerts a function which is quite the opposite of that of the mirror: while the mirror reflects who looks in it, the window allows one to see through it, like glass, which is also transparent.

If we compare this poem with the novels, it is possible to see the same treatment in relation to women. In **Surfacing**, for instance, at the same time the unnamed protagonist is avoiding to confront the center of her pain, being unable to cope with the violation of herself and her body, she is focusing her attention on the violation of the Canadian wilderness, whose victimized image serves as a mirror of her own victimization.

More so than the protagonists themselves, some secondary characters behave quite narcissistically: like the Queen, they wish to be defined by what they see in the “mirror”. Such is the case of Ainsley, in **The Edible Woman**, a pseudo-feminist who is always worried about her physical appearance. Marian even compares her to a Siren, a mythological being also related to the mirror imagery:

She was leaning forward, concentrating on something that was spread out in front of her, her legs drawn up and tucked under her on the chair, her hair cascading over her shoulders. From the back she looked like a mermaid perched on a rock: a mermaid in a grubby green terry-cloth robe. (83)

The half-woman, half-fish being is considered as one of the most vain creatures, since she is said to spend all her time looking in the mirror, combing her hair, and singing to attract

men. Both the Siren and Narcissus are seen as superficial creatures, with a complete lack of deeper thoughts. As La belle points out, “[t]he importance of the mirror in mermaid mythology is its connection with a destructive illusion. And mermaids are themselves illusions—they are reflections of masculine desires” (143).

In **Surfacing**, Anna appears to represent the stereotype of the liberated women, the one who seems to act by herself, who seems to be independent. However, she is not liberated at all. She lives to satisfy David, instead of herself. She wears makeup all the time, as if it were her real face:

Anna is there, still in her sleeveless nylon nightgown and bare feet, standing in front of the wavery yellowish mirror. There’s a zippered case on the counter in front of her, she putting on make up. I realized I’ve never seen her without it before; shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn doll’s, her artificial face is the natural one. (37)

Pretending to have an “open marriage” with David, Anna accepts everything he does to her, including his extra-conjugal relationships. They are constantly fighting for power, which seems to keep their marriage alive. Nevertheless, she is not aware of how objectified she is.

In **Lady Oracle** it is Joan’s mother who is always worried about physical appearance. She has a triple mirror in which she finds herself:

“Sit there quietly, Joan, and watch Mother put on her face,” she’d say on the good days. Then she would tuck a towel around her neck and go to work. Some of the things she did seemed to be painful; for instance, she would cover the space between her eyebrows with what looked like brown glue, which she heated in a little pot, then tear it off, leaving a red patch; and sometimes she’d smear herself with pink mud which would harden and crack.

She often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied; and occasionally she'd talk to herself as if she'd forgotten I was there. (66)

Through her acts, Mrs. Delacourt is in fact trying to initiate her daughter into the “feminine rituals”, such as the concern with physical appearance, which implies that staying hours in front of the mirror may be a primary concern in a woman's life if she wants to be accepted by society.

In psychoanalytic terms, narcissism is indeed a “necessary feature of the normal feminine personality” (Bartky 37). However, in the English literary tradition, as Bromberg, in her essay “The two faces of the Mirror in **The Edible Woman** and **Lady Oracle**”, intelligently points out, “women are often criticized and punished for the sin of narcissism, for loving their own images and selves above all (especially masculine) others. Yet, it is precisely women's images, that is, their beauty, that society most prizes and rewards in the marriage market” (12). Female beauty, then, must be validated in the eyes of others, not by the woman herself. That is the reason why women look so often in the mirror: their market value in the marriage exchange depends on their images. In a sense, women *are* their images in such a male-dominated culture.

The marriage market also influences Atwood's protagonists. When Marian tells Clara she is engaged, Clara seems to be relieved. She was afraid her friend would not marry anymore:

Clara sounded pleased, but her response was ambiguous, “oh, good,” she said, “Joe will be delighted. He's been saying lately that it's about time you settled down.” I was slightly irritated: after all, I wasn't thirty-five and desperate. She was talking as though I was simply taking a prudent step.

(87)

Marian's family reaction is quite similar: "their approving eyes said, she was turning out all right after all. They had not met Peter, but for them he seemed to be merely the necessary X-factor" (174). Differently from men, unmarried women in western patriarchal society are seen as failures: no one wants them.

The unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing**, although not having actually married, lies in order to be accepted by some people who would not understand her situation: "My status is a problem, they obviously think I'm married. But I'm safe, I'm wearing my ring, I never threw it out, it's useful for landladies" (17). Being married confers status to women, validates their social existence.

In **Lady Oracle**, before marrying Arthur, when she was still a fat girl, Joan was taken to a psychiatrist to whom she said she did not want to get thinner. The man, instead of worrying about her health as a whole, just remembered to ask: "Don't you want to get married?" (83). Since marriage seems to be the fate of all these women, this reminds me of Snow White's fate: although it is not clearly portrayed in the Grimm's version of the fairy tale, it seems that, after the Queen's death, she is now the Queen. Anne Sexton very well rewrites the end of this story, in which Snow White starts looking at the mirror just in the same way her step-mother used to do, which makes of the sweet and delicate princess another wicked queen. During the development of her story, Snow White shows twice how concerned she is with her physical appearance: when the queen, disguised as an old woman, offers her first some lace and then a comb, she accepts both, showing that she is as vain as the queen, being then a perfect substitute for her:

And thus Snow White became the prince's bride.

...

Meanwhile Snow White held court,

rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do. (Sexton 255)

In the discussion of narcissism, what is usually being discussed is females' attitude in front of their mirrors. Men are not supposed to be narcissistic, and, as La Belle suggests, traditionally a man does not define himself through the image in the glass, he can not even look at it for vanity (20). Mirrors, then, work differently for men, for they seem to be never worried about becoming beautiful in order to satisfy women, but only to satisfy themselves. Usually, when they look at the mirror, all they see is their own images and they do not feel confused by what they see, for they seem to have a strong sense of identity. In Atwood's novels, therefore, men behave much more narcissistically than women, in the sense that they feel much more important than anybody else. They are all extremely selfish and self-centered, without any concern for female feelings. They are not even conscious of how the female characters are concerned with them. In **The Edible Woman**, Peter and Duncan, although being completely different characters, are much worried about themselves. Peter behaves just as Marian's owner to such an extent that she cannot feel herself as a single person again. Once he invited her for dinner and then, just before she left work, he called her to tell her they could not meet that night, for a problem had come up in his work suddenly. What disturbed her was the tone of his voice: "He sounded as though he was accusing her of trying to interfere with his work, and she resented this" (113). It seems that, in his mind, she has to understand him and to guess what is happening even before it happens.

When they are discussing about the way they would bring up their children, he does not even accept to hear her opinion: "'Darling, you don't understand these things,' Peter

said; 'you've led a sheltered life.' He squeezed her hand. 'But I've seen the results, the courts are full of them, juvenile delinquents, and a lot of them from good homes too. It's a complex problem.' He compressed his lips" (147). Although self-centered, Peter needs Marian to mirror his wishes. That's the reason why he wants to control her. Her friend Duncan, on the other hand, is so self-centered and selfish that Marian is nothing to him. Sometimes, when they are talking, Marian feels he is talking to himself. Since he does not need her to mirror him, she feels secure with him, she can always be herself.

In **Surfacing**, it is David who has this narcissistic behavior. He likes to look at the mirror just like his wife: "He jumped up and went to the mirror and rearranged the hair down over his forehead; I hadn't noticed before that he combed it that way to cover the patches where it had once grown" (87). He uses his wife as a mere object, forcing her to be filmed naked, disrespecting her totally. He sees Anna, and perhaps all other women, as a beautiful being whose feelings are not important, in the same way the protagonist's lover has done to her. In a sense, these men seem to consider women as ornamental creatures without feelings or opinions at all.

In **Lady Oracle** each man has a different kind of narcissism: Paul is selfish, but pretends to be a very good man, almost a hero. However, when Joan loses her virginity, although blaming himself, he can not understand her lack of guilt:

[H]e viewed the loss of my virginity as both totally his fault—thus making him responsible for me—and a fall from grace which disqualified me from ever being a wife, or his wife at any rate. He thought my lack of guilt was a sign of barbarism. ... So he ended by being angry with me for my failure to cry, though I told him over and over that this wasn't the sort of thing I cried about". (158)

Arthur is also selfish, although on another level. When everything is all right with him, he never asks her opinion. When some of his political movements fail, he becomes depressed and asks for her help. She cannot even work when such things happen, for he becomes so dependent on her that she cannot do anything else but take care of him.

Another important issue in discussing male behavior in these novels is the way men associate cameras and weapons with mirrors. Peter has all his guns in the same bookcase where he has his cameras. And he enjoys taking pictures, even of himself. When he sees Marian all dressed in red, the first thought he has is how she would become well portrayed in a photo. He wishes to frame her, to lock her into the frame of a photograph in the same way that she is already framed in the mirror of their relationship. David is all the time framing Canadian wilderness in his camera, using it almost as a gun when filming Anna's naked body. Rigney compares the camera with the act of hunting. She states that "the movie camera in *Surfacing* functions as a device for torture, an instrument for symbolic rape" (Margaret Atwood 25). Joan's mother is always framed into the mirror or into old photographs, being certainly framed by patriarchy. Weir, in her essay "Meridians of Perception: A Reading of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*", points out that the mirror's trap "is the extension of a false belonging, link between woman's body ... and topography, the colonized earth" (77-78). She also states that cameras operate in an analogous way, "synthesizing the light and mirror/reflection codes in the service of the unseeing eye. Imitating only its operator's glass ambitions, ... the camera performs its mirror tricks of perspective, transmuting object into subject of perception—the lover's narcissistic paradigm once again" (78).

What differentiates the Queen, and, by extension, Snow White herself, from Atwood's protagonists, is that, although feeling locked in a similar fate, Atwood's heroines are able

to fight to escape from it. The Princess of the fairy tales cannot avoid becoming a wicked queen, while Marian, Joan and the unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing**, when feeling trapped by the mirror, can at least try to find a way out. They take a journey in order to discover their selves. The way these female characters undergo such journey in order to find their identities, and how this quest is related to mirror imagery, is what I am going to discuss in Chapter II.

Chapter II

Refusing to be in the Mirror

Crossing Borders

*I can't believe I'm on this road again.
(Atwood, **Surfacing**)*

*I went into the mirror one evening
and I couldn't get out again.
(Atwood, **Lady Oracle**)*

*I walked ... through a trick golden haze
of heat and dust. It was almost like
moving underwater.
(Atwood, **The Edible Woman**)*

Mirroring others' desires almost all their lives, Atwood's heroines suddenly face a dilemma: they start to question their attitudes towards men, towards the world and, principally, towards themselves. After having allowed themselves to be victimized and objectified, they put into question their innocence in their victimization, entering a world of doubts and uncertainties. Like Alice, in Carroll's texts **Alice in Wonderland** and **Through the Looking Glass**, they enter a fantastic world in which they project their own feelings and take a journey to find who they are. Like Marlow, in Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**, who faces the dark side of every human being in the darkness of his own self, they face the dark side of their inner thoughts in order to assert different possible versions of themselves. Davey points out that "each character descends literally or symbolically into her unconscious to locate previously repressed or 'amputated' materials which may allow the building of a new growth-oriented personality" (72-73). It would be oversimplifying to see Atwood's novels as "sexual-identity-crisis" books, as Alice's story is defined by Fish in **The Edible Woman** (193). However, there are interesting points of convergence between

Carroll's texts and the way each of Atwood's protagonists takes the journey into herself trying to cross the border between objectification and self-affirmation. Their journeys follow a pattern which is marked by important facts, from eating disorders to fear of losing their shape, till their complete loss of "identity" and their refusal to see themselves in the mirror, due to their fear of facing the truths inside themselves.

Each novel has a turning-point, a certain situation which leads the protagonist to doubt her own sense of selfhood, to doubt who she indeed is. In **The Edible Woman**, the turning point happens when, after having been hunted by Peter through the streets of Toronto, Marian accepts his proposal. Up to this moment, although having always let him command their relationship, she has had a private life in which he would not interfere. From now on, everything is in his hands, and she begins to feel as if she were nothing. There is a shift of tone in the novel that clearly demonstrates Marian's loss of identity: while Part I is narrated in the first person, as Marian herself tells her story, Part II, which begins shortly after her engagement, is narrated in the third person. As Rosenberg states, it is still Marian speaking, but she is now "seeing herself as an object of study rather than a subjective human being" (101). She is not herself anymore. She feels confused and lost, without knowing what to do with her life, just allowing things to happen to her. After being mirrored in Peter's eyes, she feels herself frozen in a "period of waiting, drifting with the current, an endurance of time, marked by no real event; waiting for an event in the future that had been determined by an event in the past" (184). To McLay, in her essay "The Dark Voyage: **The Edible Woman** as Romance", the change of view point in the novel "suggests not only a loss of identity but also an entry into enchantment. Her body is now seen as external and can be observed from the outside by her mind; the two are no longer parts of a unified self"

(127). Step by step, Marian loses her identity as an active, independent self, metamorphosing herself into Peter's wife, being now defined as other and object.

In **Surfacing**, since the very beginning it is possible to see that the protagonist is already confused: "now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (5). However, the event which would finally lead her to face her inner self is the discovery of her father's dead body. Forced to accept his death, she has also to accept her responsibility in the actions she has done in her past. Nevertheless, this is not an easy task, and she takes a long journey into her self before achieving any kind of self-affirmation. Having come back to her town, after years of absence, in search of her father, who has mysteriously disappeared, she realizes she must also find her mother, whose death she has never accepted. In searching for the logical figure of her father, she finds as his gift the acknowledgment of her own situation. In searching for her mother, she enters a pre-symbolic period, a period of madness, in which she finds another identity, the other selves she has hidden behind her fictitious story. As her mother's gift, she finds out she also has to be a mother, to assume her mother's place. For a short period of actual time, like Marian in **The Edible Woman**, she feels lost in a different world from which she does not know how to escape.

In **Lady Oracle**, Joan Foster is led to her journey into herself when, with her aunt's death, she is obliged to reduce in order to get her inheritance. She reduces and, from this time on, she enters a world of lies, full of different identities which she creates in order to hide her past as a fat woman. At nineteen, she describes herself as having "the right shape" but "the wrong past". She feels "naked, pruned, as though some essential covering was missing" (141). She considers all her relationships with men a fraud, and sees herself as a "liar and impostor" (199), because she feels that since she has kept the secret of her fatness from them, they love her without knowing who she is, under false assumptions. She seems

to have a certain control over all her selves till the moment she becomes a public figure for having published a best seller. She, then, feels in danger of having her past discovered by everybody who surrounds her. Having always lived different identities at the same time with different people, she does not know which of these identities is going to survive. Having tried to forget her past, she is now forced to face it due to reporter Fraser Buchanan's blackmail, for he has discovered everything about her. In order to escape from him, she pretends to have drowned in a lake and then goes to Italy. However, she is not able to escape from her worst enemy: herself. She is lost and confused, just like the protagonists of the other two novels.

It is important to point out that, at a certain period of their lives, Marian, the unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing** and Joan feel completely lost, without destiny, without knowing where they are, just like Snow White has once felt: "meanwhile, the poor child was all alone in the huge forest" (Zipes 214). Alice also feels lost while in Wonderland: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?", she asks the Cheshire Cat when, in the middle of a forest, she does not know where to go (Carroll 88). The same thing happens to Atwood's protagonists: in **The Edible Woman**, for instance, after visiting her friend Clara at the hospital, where she has just had another child (she has two already), Marian is so "involved in the threads of her own plans and reflections", that suddenly she notices she does not know where she is, she has "got off the elevator on the wrong floor" (134).

In **Surfacing**, the unnamed protagonist seems to feel lost right from the beginning for, in trying to forget her past by creating another one, she has lost her self and her identity, losing her ability to feel and thinking of herself as a non-human being. When still on the road with her friends, although being conscious about the changes which might have occurred during her long absence (she has not been there for several years), she feels lost for not

accepting these changes: “Nothing is the same, I don’t know the way anymore” (6). These changes hurt her more than she expects and, avoiding to face the center of her pain, she bites violently into an ice-cream cone, inventing a different pain in order to avoid the worst one: “Anaesthesia, that’s one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain”(7). In this way, pretending not to feel anything, she keeps herself lost.

In **Lady Oracle**, Joan feels lost at several periods of her life, for many things happen to her without her doing anything to avoid them, beginning with her loss of virginity, which happens because of her misinterpretation of Paul’s intentions, not because of her will. Later on, when she meets Arthur, she marries him not only because she loves him, but because she could not find any good reason to refuse his proposal. In her own words: “My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and feston like the frame of a baroque mirror” (7). It is in a mirror, when doing her experiments on Automatic Writing, that she feels more lost than ever: “I was stuck there, in the midst of darkness, unable to move. I’d lost all sense of direction I felt as though I was suffocating” (223).

Similarly to other critics, Davey compares Atwood’s protagonists with Alice, stating that they “stand before their mirrors, or wander in the confusing ‘gothic’ world beyond the mirror, unsure of who they are or what powers and size they possess” (104). In their journey into themselves, there is a sense in which they go underground, or underwater, just like Alice. In **The Edible Woman**, before receiving and thus accepting Peter’s proposal, when they are in Len’s apartment, Marian hides herself under Len’s bed, in a totally illogical attitude: “I was thinking of the room as ‘up there’. I myself was underground, I had dug myself a private burrow. I felt smug” (76). In Atwood’s writing, going underwater usually means entering into a “potentially transforming experience” (Davey 111), which may lead her characters to search for their personal unconscious, for their inner selves. Marian has, in

Duncan, the guide she needs to take her to the Underworld. If in the beginning of the novel she feels as if she were underwater (29), as the time passes by her sense of living in a different world becomes much stronger. She feels she is not normal: "what was essentially bothering her was the thought that she might not be normal" (203). She is so concerned about what is happening to her and about the consequences her "strange" behavior should have that she "found herself being envious of Clara for the first time in three years. Whatever was going to happen to Clara had already happened: she had turned into what she was going to be. It wasn't that she wanted to change places with Clara; she only wanted to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared" (206).

While trying to get away from Peter's apartment, on the night of their engagement party, she feels as if she were in another place: "she retraced through time the corridors and rooms, long corridors, large rooms. Everything seemed to be slowing down" (243). She cannot stay there any longer, for she is not ready to face reality yet. Instead, "she ran as fast as she could down the hall way towards the stairs" (245). She goes then to the laundromat, a place in which she feels safe.

The unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* faces the "transforming experience" when, finding the body of her dead father, she also confronts the story she has hidden from everybody, even from herself: the story of her abortion. She is terribly shocked by what she sees: "It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. I turned, fear gushing out of my mouth in silver, panic closing my throat, the scream kept in and choking me" (136). She still has a long road in front of her, but from that moment on she is at least conscious of her past and has, finally, acknowledged her

participation in the death of her unborn child: "I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (137).

In *Lady Oracle*, when in front of the mirror, Joan Foster also faces her lost past, the past "I wanted to forget..., but it refused to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me" (214). She has different nightmares, and in all of them she is locked in a room and hears people talking about her: it is her fear of surfacing, of coming to reality, of telling the truth. Like the Lady of Shalott, she has locked herself, weaving her stories, in front of a mirror, and fears the idea of escaping. She feels that her lives are not real:

It was true I had two lives, but 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)

Feeling lost in space and time, each of Atwood's characters is in doubt about her own self, her own identity. Each one seems to be more than one person at the same time. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian, in becoming Peter's fiancée, feels as if she belongs to him. However, she keeps an odd relationship with Duncan, who, acting quite like the White Rabbit in Alice's story, guides her to the underground of her existence, serving as an escape for her, as a way she has found to avoid a complete loss of selfhood. Rigney sees him as Marian's other side, and comparing Marian to Alice and Duncan to the White Rabbit, she says that "Alice and the Rabbit, the girl and the animal ... are but aspects of one self, looking glass versions of each other" (Margaret Atwood 28). Marian seems to trust Duncan much more than she trusts Peter, for she is not able to tell her fiancé about her

eating disorders, but to her strange friend she tells everything. She is somehow unable to communicate with Peter, for sometimes he seems not to hear her or, if he hears, he does not take her seriously, as when they are discussing about their probable future children, and he cannot accept her opinion (148).

The unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing**, in losing her identity, also seems to be double: the one of the present tense, who pretends to be a divorced woman whose child is under the custody of her former husband; and the one of the past, who has had an abortion against her will, not being able to decide her own life and who has let her lover decide everything for her. Her two identities are presented in the very beginning, when Anna, reading her hand, asks her if she has a twin, “because some of your lines are double” (2). Like Marian, she also has problems of communicating with language. She would rather use gestures, because “[l]anguage divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole” (140). Her dissociation from language is also connected to her loss of identity and with her refusal to be seen as human, for being human means to be guilty, and she has refused to feel any guilt throughout her life till the moment she has to confront the truth of her participation in all her past actions. Language is a human feature and, in avoiding it, she is trying to avoid being human.

Joan Foster, in **Lady Oracle**, is more than double. She is, at the same time, the Fat Lady of her youth, Louisa K. Delacourt, writer of Costume Gothics, and Joan Foster, celebrated author of “Lady Oracle”. As she herself says, after having begun her affair with the “con-create artist” self named the Royal Porcupine: “I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many” (246). Lack of communication is perhaps one of the main problems Joan has to face for, although being a writer and talking a lot, she lies to everybody, which makes it impossible for anyone to

believe her. Because she is ashamed of having been, in the past, a fat woman, she hides her past from everybody. Even after having faked her death, when she seems to have decided to live differently, at the moment her Italian landlord offers her a picture she does not know what to do: perhaps remembering her first sexual experience with Paul, in which she misunderstood him, when Mr. Vitroni asks her to choose one of the pictures he has brought, she asks herself: "How could I choose without knowing what the choice would mean? The language was only one problem; there was also that other language, what is done and what isn't done" (17).

The protagonists' difficulty in communication may be seen as resembling a post-colonial attitude, for as Ashcroft et al say, "[w]omen ... have been relegated to the position of 'Other', marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, 'colonized' They share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors" (174-75). Atwood's characters, in avoiding the use of language, while taking their long journey into themselves, are also willing to get free of their colonized status. Atwood's heroines always show an ambivalence about where they have been and about their identities as Canadians, and this identity, in Rigney's words, "can be metaphoric as well as actual To be Canadian, for Atwood, is a state of mind, and it often has to do with psychological failure, with victimization Canada is essentially 'feminine' in a powerfully 'masculine' world" (**Margaret Atwood** 2-3).

The three protagonists have twin sisters in themselves, the identities they try to hide, the truth they avoid facing. Rigney affirms that

[t]he division of the self is, at least partly, 'a trick done with mirrors'. In Atwood's novel and in much of her poetry, the mirror becomes a symbol of

the split self, and one's own reflection functions like a kind of negative doppelgänger. Presumably, the mirror provides a distorted image of the self, thus stealing one's sense of a real or complete self, robbing one of an identity. ("Failure of Logic" 94)

This can be applied also to Peter, in **The Edible Woman**, who is seen as Trigger's twin by Marian, one being the other's image in the mirror: "He and Trigger had clutched each other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed"(27). Atwood's protagonists also have twins, represented by their double identities, by their inner selves. Each one of these doubled identities is seen as their reflection in the mirror, just like the twin brothers Tweedledum and Tweedledee, in Carroll's **Through the Looking Glass**, who are "what geometers call 'enantiomorphs', mirror-image forms of each other" (231).

In **The Edible Woman**, Marian's lack of identity and, consequently, the feeling she has that she is more than one person at the same time, may be seen when she, getting dressed up for her engagement party, looks in the mirror with her two dolls on her side and is not able to recognize herself:

She saw herself in the mirror between them for an instant as though she was inside them, inside both of them at once, looking out: herself, a vague damp form in a rumpled dressing-gown, not quite focussed, the blonde eyes noting the arrangement of her hair, her bitten fingernails, the dark one looking deeper, at something she could not quite see, the two overlapping images drawing further and further away from each other; the center, whatever it was in the glass, the thing that held them together, would soon be quite

empty. By the strength of their separate visions they were trying to pull her apart. (219)

To Rigney, the two dolls symbolize “Marian’s two-sided and split self, the result of her insistence on dividing the world into polarities of light and dark, eaten and eater, good and evil” (Margaret Atwood 35). Dolls may be also seen as unborn children, and in **Surfacing** there is a mutilated doll which is drowned in the lake just as a prefiguration of the protagonist’s abortion and her own victimization.

Like Joan in **Lady Oracle**, who sees herself multiple in her triple mirror, Marian has already seen herself as triple in the three silver globes of the bathroom taps: “She moved, and all three of the images moved also. They were not quite identical: the two on the outside were slanted inwards towards the third. How peculiar it was to see three reflections of yourself at the same time, she thought” (218).

When feeling lost in her self, without having any true sense of identity, the unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing** does not recognize her image in the lake. She feels her image as her other shape, as another self: “My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head” (135). She finds her twin brother not only in the mirror, but in her self, in each time she, willingly or not, remembers the abortion she has undergone: “A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled” (42). But her mirror image has the same connotation: “I’d allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors” (102).

In **Lady Oracle** the multiple selves of Joan Foster are presented throughout the novel, especially her “twin sister”, the Fat Lady. However, after publishing her book “Lady Oracle”, another pair of twins appears: “it was as if someone with my name were out there

in the real world,” she says, referring to the shows in which she takes part, “my dark twin, my fun-house-mirror reflection. She was taller than I, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her” (250-251). All the words Joan uses to describe this new self show the fear she has of not being able to control it, because, unlike the other ones, who were construct by herself, this new one is a consequence of the publication of her prose poem, being constructed by the media, not by herself.

It is important to point out that many of Joan’s inspired identities are derived from mirrors, “even the fat lady is one she sees reflected in a fun-house mirror as a child” (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 65). Joan sees herself as doomed to a tragic fate, just like Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott” with whom many writers compare her. In locking herself into a metaphorical tower, she uses the frame of the baroque mirror as a metaphor for her fantasies, the romantic visions she reveals in her gothic romances. Joan’s triple mirror, as the one her mother had, represents, besides her multiple identities, a maze from where there is no exit. She is just like her fictional characters, especially Felicia, in *Stalked by Love*. They both discover, in the “central plot” of the maze, that it represents their multiple manifestations. The mirror shows again its paradoxical meaning: “it is simultaneously a trap and an instrument of truth. ... [L]ike Alice in Wonderland or Persephone in the underworld ... Joan must enter the mirror maze to find her many selves” (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 71). Entering the maze, for Joan, means entering a world of enchantment just like Carroll’s Wonderland. In order to get out of it, Joan must find a center, the positive identity she hides behind her many selves.

The question of duplicity or multiplicity, which is seen positively by Atwood (Grace 56), for nobody is the same person all the time, is clearly presented in the poem “This is a Photograph of Me”, in which the speaker is at the same time showing us the picture and drowned in the lake which is in the center of the picture itself. She has two selves, like many of other Atwood’s characters. The poem shows two contrasting worlds: one with romantic descriptive images obscures reality—“in the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills”—and the other carries out the important facts—it seems that this “photograph of me” does not contain me, because it “was taken the day after I drowned” (**Selected Poems** 8). It is a poem about invisibility, presenting two halves, the first with the landscape described romantically, the second, enclosed in a parenthesis, a device used to denote “modesty and self-suppression” (Ostriker 64), presenting the other self of the speaker, the one who is drowned and thus invisible: “I am in the lake, in the center / of the picture, just under the surface” (**Selected Poems** 8).

Experimenting “nothingness”, as described by Carol Christ, the female characters follow different ways to escape from this feeling of being nobody. Being inside the mirror of their inner selves, these characters have certain attitudes towards life which are seen by the other characters, and even by themselves, as abnormal attitudes: Marian runs away from Peter and he asks her not to be “childish” (79); the woman in **Surfacing** does not show any kind of emotion and her friends call her “inhuman” (148); and Joan Foster, for not being able to maintain a serious conversation with her husband’s friends, is seen as “absentminded” (217). Atwood’s protagonists, however, seem not to be worried about being understood. What really worries them is the feeling they have of not being alive, of not having a true self, of not knowing who they are, of being double or multiple without any kind of certainty. Each one of them crosses a different border in order to find her self.

Marian, in **The Edible Woman**, faces a series of problems after becoming engaged, beginning with her anorexia, which is clearly related to her fear of commitments, and continuing with cannibalism, which represents her fear of being consumed, of being eaten by a marriage she seems not to be able to avoid. She feels trapped by her relationship with Peter, which seems to mirror Clara's marriage. In a sense, not knowing who she is anymore, and feeling consumed by her engagement, she is not able to consume. Like the protagonist of **Surfacing**, she also uses the "anaesthesia" technique: avoiding her real problem, which is her loss of a true identity, she invents another one: her body's rejection of food.

During their journey into themselves, Atwood's protagonists seem to avoid any kind of commitment or, if they are already committed to some kind of relationship, they wish to escape from it. Such is the case of Marian, who, while waiting for her wedding day, feels bad every time she meets Clara, for her friend, after getting married, has had her life totally changed, and Marian fears to have the same destiny. The day she visits Clara at the hospital, she feels suffocated by its atmosphere. When she leaves, she feels as if she had "escaped from a culvert or cave" (132), feeling happy because she is not Clara. The fear Marian has of marriage is also seen in one of Atwood's visual arts, labeled "Death as Bride" (figure 1), in which the bride is seen as a dead person, mirroring Marian's idea of marriage, which would mean the death of her identity, of her sense of selfhood, for she would become only Peter's wife, not herself anymore. It seems to me that the bride being a dead person means Marian's death even before marriage, because she feels she is being consumed and framed by Peter's desires. Miner, in her article "Atwood in *Metamorphosis*: an Authentic Canadian Fairy Tale", says that **The Edible Woman** expresses Atwood's own early fear of marriage.

The unnamed narrator of **Surfacing** and Joan Foster, during their journey into themselves, also have some eating disorders: the protagonist of **Surfacing** refuses to eat



Figure 1
Untitled Watercolor, Archive-Labeled "Death as Bride"
1970, Signed

anything which would be produced by civilization, deciding to eat only the food nature would give to her, except animals. When David asks her to kill a fish, she cannot: “‘You do it,’ I said, handing him the knife. ... ‘I couldn’t any more, I had no right to’” (114). In **Lady Oracle**, Joan, who had been fat since her childhood, is obliged to reduce in order to get her aunt’s inheritance. She, who was used to eating a great amount of food, stops eating everything which would make her fatter.

Restaurants and kitchens are important settings in the novels, and “much of the action and imagery involve mouths and the process of eating, as is also the case in the *Alice* books” (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 22). Marian associates brides and grooms with cannibalism, in the sense that they, in essence, “eat” each other, showing a struggle for power which is also present in her visual art, such as the watercolor labeled “Undersea” (figure 2), in which a big fish is trying to eat the little one, depicting the idea of the larger and stronger devouring and conquering the smaller and weaker, an idea also present in Atwood’s novels, in which sexual politics also implies power politics. Maternity is also seen in the same way. This is the reason why Marian’s first attack of anorexia comes just after she and Peter had talked about future parenthood, which clearly indicates her rejection of her expected identity and the maternity it would imply. Being locked in her relationship with Peter, the only thing still allowed to her is eating, or refusing to do so. Consciously worried about what is happening to her, she cannot do anything but wait and “hope it’s not permanent” or she would “starve to death” (152). In Humm’s point of view, “Marian is an independent professional graduate but the body discourse of opportunity which a pre-feminist Toronto offers her is that of marriage and maternity” (**Border Traffic** 127). When she criticizes Clara’s marriage and Ainsley’s behavior towards maternity, she is, in fact,

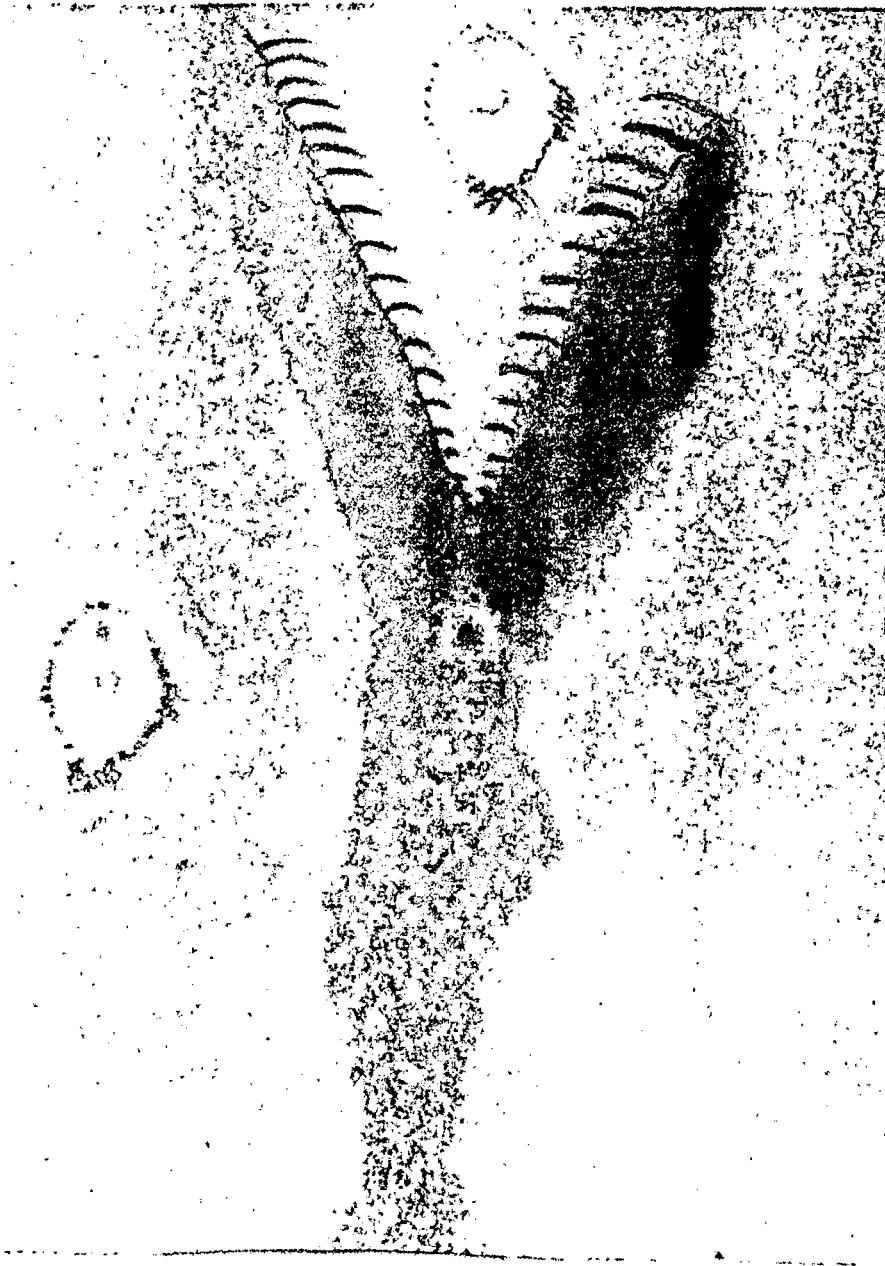


Figure 2
Untitled Watercolor, Archive-Labeled "Undersea"
Undated

rejecting such roles for herself. She wants to belong to herself, not to anybody else. She wants to be herself without wearing any masks.

Marian feels as if everything she used to eat is now alive. Even the mould, which has grown in the kitchen sink, she thought that it perhaps would have “as much right to life as she had” (217). Her empathy for all forms of life, which is shared by the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*, may be seen as hyperbolic portrayals of one of Alice’s experiences, in *Through the Looking Glass*: when the Queen introduces the girl to the Mutton and the Pudding, she prevents her from eating them by explaining that “it isn’t etiquette to cut any one you’ve been introduced to” (Carroll 331).

Contrary to Marian, Joan finds her way to avoid commitments by eating too much, for, in doing so, she is out of the marriage market. But when she gets thinner, she is trapped by the same fate Marian wishes to avoid: marriage. Nevertheless, in avoiding to be a mother, she is, in a certain sense, still controlling her life. What both seem to fear is the loss of a life of their own, which has happened to Clara: “Clara’s life seemed cut off from her, set apart, something she could only gaze at through a window” (129). To the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*, avoiding to eat canned food means avoiding to be “American”, avoiding to be human, avoiding to face her responsibilities. Joe asks her to marry him, but she feels it is not necessary: ““But it wouldn’t make any difference,’ I said. Everything would be the same.”” (80). Marrying him would not make her feel, would not bring her self back. Rigney points out that “with the living proof provided by Anna and David constantly before her, marriage is more a surrender than a commitment; it is, for the woman, total immersion in the male world and thus a further division of the female self” (“Failure of Logic” 103). This struggle for power, presented in the novels, may be also seen in Atwood’s watercolor labeled “Lady and Sinister Figure” (figure 3), in which the woman



Figure 3
Untitled Watercolor, Archive-Labeled "Lady and Sinister Figure"
1969, Signed

seems to be afraid of the man on her side, just like Anna is afraid of David in **Surfacing**, and Marian is afraid of Peter in **The Edible Woman**. These women see men as hunters, either because they use their camera as weapons to frame women in their relationships or because they do not allow women to behave freely, but always in accordance with their desires. In refusing to be photographed, Marian is refusing to be framed by patriarchy, while Anna is not able to avoid it, becoming more and more a mere object in David's hands. The unnamed narrator of **Surfacing**, in destroying the camera, is also refusing patriarchal values. Both the camera and the mirror may be said to represent the same thing Atwood's protagonists want to run away from: a framed life, in which women may always mirror the desires of others instead of their own.

Atwood's protagonists and Alice share an eating pattern: they start their story with quite a strong appetite, which they lose as the time passes by and they merge, Alice in her dream, Atwood's female characters in their journey into themselves. By avoiding to eat and feeling empathy for the animals used as food, these female characters see themselves also as edible objects, as consumable items. Colonies are also seen as consumable elements, being eaten by the colonizers. In this sense, Atwood's characters represent their country, a country "sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals" (Atwood, **Surfacing** 126), colonized and consumed by its powerful neighbor from the south. To Rigney, the protagonists are like Canada itself, being divided and exploited as the country is ("Failure of Logic" 100).

These eating disorders are closely related to the characters' "experience of nothingness": they feel so confused and divided that even the simple act of eating acquires a different meaning, for they seem not to be in the actual world, but in an underworld, a world beyond the frames of a mirror, beyond the frames of patriarchy. They even feel their bodies

changing as if they were not human anymore, which again makes it possible to connect them with Alice. In **The Edible Woman** Marian feels as if she were melting into the bathtub while she was bathing to get ready for her engagement party. As time passes and the wedding day gets closer, Marian feels more and more that she is no longer herself. Clara has told her “it’s only bridal nerves” (206), but she is not convinced. She is afraid of “dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (218). She is almost losing control, she is afraid of “losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself anymore” (219). She is entering into a frightening sense of irreality, in which everything is possible.

In **Surfacing**, the narrator, perhaps because of the mushrooms she has eaten, like Alice, feels her body changing its shape at least twice. Feeling quite confused, she runs away from her friends and remains alone on the island. She seems to be mad, what does not mean anything to her. She has gone beyond logic: “there are no longer any rational points of view”(163). She feels her body changing: “the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply” (162). For a moment, she seems not to be human anymore: “I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place”(175).

In **Lady Oracle**, when Joan’s aunt dies, leaving her two thousand dollars on the condition that she must lose a hundred pounds, Joan begins to diet. Although her mother seems not to believe in her, she is able to reduce, changing her body completely: “At home I spent hours in front of the mirror, watching as my eyebrows, then my mouth began to spread across my face. I was dwindling” (122). It is interesting to point out that, although reducing, she always considers herself as fat. She cannot forget how she was, for the Fat Lady never stops disturbing her. When in Italy, Joan does not wish anyone to recognize her.

She decides, then, to change her appearance: "I'd cropped my head like a concentration camp inmate's. My face looked quite different, though: I could pass for a secretary on vacation" (14).

It is important to comment on the close relation existing between the mirror and the water: it is in a lake that Narcissus sees his image and finds his destiny. It is in a lake that the unnamed protagonist of **Surfacing** dives in search of her father and is forced to face the truth. It is also in a lake that Joan Foster pretends her suicide in **Lady Oracle**. And Marian feels underwater when walking down the streets, as if diving in a lake. Davey also compares mirror to water, seeing it as a "false pond, something to be treated as water rather than glass" (94), giving a distorted image of the self. The mirror may be seen as something static, superficial, which presents to Atwood's female characters only their physical appearance, their present time which, feeling their selves split by the looking glass, they wish to avoid. The water, on the other hand, is seen as something deeper, dynamic, representing the protagonists' unconscious, their way to confront their past and their reality. In the poem "Tricks with Mirrors" the speaker, tired of being a mirror to her lover, goes beyond that and ends up by stating that "[p]erhaps I am not a mirror./ Perhaps I am a pool./ Think about pools" (**Selected Poems** 186). Atwood's visual art labeled "A Bird diving into a Submerged Figure" (figure 4), is also associated with mirror imagery in the sense that the bird is diving into a lake looking at its distorted reflected self in the water, just like the narrator of **Surfacing** has once done (135).

It is not possible to forget that drowned images are quite important in Atwood's fiction and poetry, especially in **Surfacing**, in which the narrator's brother almost drowned when he was a child and she was still in her mother's womb. She says that her aborted child has also "drowned in air" (137). Even some of her visual arts represent drowned figures,

such as the watercolor labeled “Drowned Figure II” (figure 5), in which a figure is journeying under water holding what seems to be a wedding bouquet. Wilson, in her essay “Margaret Atwood’s Visual Art” states that the watercolor, although having a tragic tone, may portray a symbolic death and, consequently, a rebirth, which may be seen, in the novels, as the protagonists’ last step towards maturity, as we will see.

The mother and daughter relationship, already discussed in Chapter I, is quite important to the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* in her search for her “true” self. While apparently looking for her father, she is in fact looking for her mother and for what she represents: the regaining of her ability to feel. It is through her mother that she discovers her way to recover her self: getting pregnant. While Marian fears the idea of being a mother, seeing children as pigs, as Alice does, and while Joan, although willing to have children, fears to be like her own mother, the young woman in *Surfacing* wishes to be a mother in order to recover her lost selfhood: “I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long”(155-6). As Ostriker points out, “[a] woman seeking her identity is like a woman attempting to give birth to herself” (59); the narrator of *Surfacing* must find her wholeness by “giving birth to herself as well as to a new life” (Rigney, “Failure of Logic” 110).

Quite interestingly, there is a clear opposition between the way male and female critics analyze Atwood’s protagonists’ desire, or lack of it, of having children, of becoming mothers. To the male critics, such as Rosenberg, Davey and Lecker, avoiding getting married and having children means avoiding to achieve maturity, refusing to grow up, rejecting their role as women, willing to be always like children themselves. Even the narrator of *Surfacing*, who ends up pregnant, is seen as still immature for refusing to marry Joe. On the other hand, female critics, such as Rigney, Christ and Humm, quite rightly, see



Figure 4.
Untitled watercolor, Archive-Labeled "A Bird Diving into a Submerged
Figure" - 1969, Signed



Figure 5
Untitled Watercolor, Archive-Labeled "Drowned Figure II"
Updated

these protagonists' rejection of marriage and maternity as a refusal of being submissive, of becoming objects, of being framed by patriarchy, meaning that they have not only grown up, but also become completely aware of their need to be independent people, not only wives and mothers.

After a long journey into themselves, the three heroines are so confused that they finally refuse to see themselves in the mirror. At first, they see distorted images, then they avoid looking at it, for they feel it as a trap and a tool for the imposition of social limitations (La Belle 151). In a way, they wish to avoid seeing their images in order to see themselves beyond the looking glass. Marian avoids the mirror when running away from Peter dressed in her red dress because she does not want to be framed by it, she does not want to have that image frozen, for she is afraid of not being able to escape from becoming Peter's wife. The narrator of **Surfacing** avoids the mirror, turning it against the wall, because she feels it as a trap, closing one's soul into it. She prefers "not to see myself but to see" (169). Joan avoids the mirror because each time she looks at it she sees the Fat Lady, the past she wants to avoid, to forget: "When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn't see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon" (214).

Each one of the characters has crossed different borders through the novels: Marian, to come back to her house after having stayed the whole night with Duncan, has to cross a bridge; the narrator of **Surfacing** has to cross the borders of two different regions of Canada; and Joan, when a child, has to cross a ravine to get to the Brownies, besides traveling abroad when adult. However, the most important movement they make is from their initial position of victimized women to a situation that, if not clearly one of self-affirmation, is at least a situation in which they have taken different attitudes towards themselves, and, if in the others' eyes they seem to be mad, at least they are not mirroring

men's desires anymore. If they have achieved some positive thing in their journey, if it was good or not for them, I will discuss in Chapter III.

Chapter III

Going back to the mirror

Mirroring Themselves

*I was thinking of myself in the first
person singular again.
(Atwood, **The Edible Woman**)*

*This above all, to refuse to be a victim.
(Atwood, **Surfacing**)*

*I was beautiful and intelligent, why
didn't I make something of myself?
(Atwood, **Lady Oracle**)*

After having mirrored others' desires for a long time and entered themselves in order to find their "true" identities, refusing to be trapped by the mirror, Atwood's protagonists must now look in the mirror again in order to establish their selves and to face the truth of their lives, to achieve maturity and learn to live without masks. At first, when they are still feeling divided and confused, they discover that they share with their oppressors the responsibility for their oppression: they finally understand that if they were objectified, it was because they permitted others to objectify them; if they have mirrored men it was because they have accepted to become mirrors; if they were victimized it was because they have put themselves in the role of victims.

The delusion of female innocence is often present in Atwood's works: in **The Edible Woman**, Marian maintains her own innocence throughout her destructive relationship with Peter until the very end when, after making sex with Duncan, she realizes she is not innocent at all: it is she who asks Duncan to have sexual intercourse with her, taking, for the first time, her sexual life in her own hands, concerned about satisfying her desires, not the desires of others. In **Surfacing**, acknowledging her guilty in the death of her unborn child,

the narrator finally understands that she is also responsible for her own lack of feelings, for her victimization: she understands that, in being human, she shares with men the responsibility of whatever they have done to her. In **Lady Oracle**, Joan finally understands that, if she is oppressed, she is also an oppressor, for she has used men almost in the same way her mother tried to use her. If men are her enemies, it is because she has turned them into enemies. The three heroines can finally see that they have misinterpreted men's feelings towards them due to their own feelings towards men. In **The Edible Woman**, when Marian sees Peter after their engagement party, after she has run away from him and from the mirror of their relationship, she is not afraid of him anymore. She realizes that "Peter was not the enemy after all, he was just a normal being like most other people" (271). In **Surfacing**, after having dived into herself and faced the truth of her parents' death, recovering her ability to feel, "I am crying finally, it's the first time" (166), the narrator is finally able to see the father of her aborted child as he indeed is: "He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions" (183). In **Lady Oracle**, after having hit the reporter with a bottle, having almost killed him, Joan finally realizes that she has mistaken her life for that of her heroines, following, by doing that, the traditional script of femininity, making a mess with herself. She finally understands that Arthur may not be guilty of what has happened to her, and that, since he has loved her under false pretenses, she cannot feel rejected if he stops loving her. Acknowledging they are not innocent, these characters "must come to terms with [themselves] as perpetrator[s] as well as victim[s], or at least as correspondent[s] in [their] own victimization" (Rigney, "Failure of Logic" 97), in order to build a stronger sense of self.

Accepting to face their images in the mirror means understanding their responsibility in their victimization, means escaping from their initial position, discussed in Chapter I, when they see themselves as locked in their destiny, as not being able to escape. Since they are also guilty of their own situation, they can run away from it, refusing to be victims anymore. In **The Edible Woman**, when Marian realizes Peter is trying to destroy her by framing her in their relationship, she realizes that she is also trying to destroy him, framing him in the role of hunter and exploiter: both are victims of a patriarchal system that establishes male and female behavior. Becoming aware of this fact, she is able to run from it, avoiding to become Peter's wife and thus framed by patriarchy. In **Surfacing**, the narrator realizes that, if she is exploited and victimized as Canada is, she is responsible for both exploitation and victimization, for she has allowed, with her passivity, the killing of her unborn child and of the heron, both representing her own victimization and Canada's exploitation, not by Americans, as she usually states, but by the Canadians themselves. Returning from madness, she re-enters her own self by acknowledging her guilt, and by getting pregnant, the way she has found of being forgiven by herself. In **Lady Oracle**, Joan recovers her self when she discovers she is not like her heroines, for she is not at all so passive and submissive. She seems to have acknowledged she is strong enough to take care of herself without being dependent on any of her fake heroes. When the protagonists finally realize they are not innocent, when they realize they are also responsible for what has happened to them, they understand that anaesthesia is not an escape, for blocked feelings never go away, they stay inside. This is a very important point for them to achieve power and to be able to refuse to be victims, achieving victim position 3, according to Atwood's **Survival**, which means acknowledging the fact that they are victims but refusing to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable, fighting against it, perhaps even achieving victim position 4, which means never accepting to become a victim again (36-37).

In the same way that Atwood's protagonists must face the mirror in order to find their true identities, Canada, as their country, being as victimized and exploited as they have been, must also "recognize and confront its own political identity" (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 3). Sharing a symbolic identity with Canada in their victimization and initial powerlessness, these protagonists "affirm selfhood and power within the context of Canadian literary tradition" (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 4). In **Lady Oracle**, if in the beginning Joan feels bad for being Canadian, near the end, when planning her "death", she seems to be at least conscious of how colonized her country is: "They [the Americans] hate national organizations, they want to keep this country down" (296), just like men do to women, colonizer to colonized. However, Canada itself must acknowledge it is not an innocent country, as Atwood's protagonists are not innocent at all. As Atwood points out in

Second Words:

We sometimes forget, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances towards other, both inside the country and outside it; and our concern about sexism, men's mistreatment of women, can blind us to the fact that men can be just as disgusting, and statistically more so, towards other men. (282)

In accepting her country as a victim like herself, the narrator of **Surfacing** refuses to accept victimization as inevitable: "They [the Americans] exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (183). As these protagonists surface from their journey into themselves, so their country must surface from its past as a colony and find its own place in the world.

Accepting to see themselves in the mirror means surfacing from the illogical world in which they have entered onto the "logical" world of reality. In **The Edible Woman**, when

Marian, after having rejected Peter, recovers her voice and starts eating again, Duncan tells her: "You're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer" (281). McLay states that "[o]nly a rejection of her marriage to Peter will lead to liberation from the prison of society and a return to freedom and new life" (126). Feeling she is no longer in danger of losing her shape, of disintegrating, Marian is ready to come back to life and to consuming. In **Surfacing**, after having recovered the ability to feel, the narrator is also able to re-enter her own time: "When I go to the fence the footprints are there, side by side in the mud. ... I place my feet in them and find that they are my own" (181). Placing her feet in the same place they have been before means being able to face her past, to put her selves together, becoming whole. Coming back to the real world, after having gone beyond logic, she understands she must be alone now, that the "gods" she has seen during her journey have gone, "[n]o gods to help me now", (183), for they would not survive in a logical world. To Rigney, "the protagonist ... loses a tenuous identity only to gain a firmer one. She 'surfaces' from the illogical to return to a world of logic, but not as before divided, incapable of coping. ... [S]he recognizes her own power and the fact that she can refuse victimization" ("Failure of Logic" 114-15). In **Lady Oracle**, Joan Foster also comes back to reality from her world of fantasies in which she and her heroines of Costume Gothics are different aspects of the same person. She re-enters her own time by hitting the reporter and accepting to face the consequences.

Accepting to see themselves in the mirror means being able to cope with their past and their action without fearing them. In **The Edible Woman**, the first time Marian sees her image in the mirror after having run away from Peter she finds herself awful, but she can still recognize that image as herself. She knows she has to face Peter soon, and as the time passes by and she gets home, she seems to know exactly what to do: she has recovered her

free will, she is not in his hands anymore. In **Surfacing**, when returning to her own time, after a period of madness, the unnamed protagonist finds out she is a newborn woman, without fears, whose physical appearance is not at all important to her. What is really important is that she is aware of her powers and of her limits as human being. "The ultimate affirmation of sanity and humanity ... is provided by the symbolic mirror, that agent of truth and objective reality in which the protagonist asserts her identity and rejects her madness" (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 57). In **Lady Oracle**, after re-entering reality, Joan finds in her a new self, which seems to be the union of all the other selves she has finally allowed to surface, to come from the looking-glass of her existence.

Looking again in the mirror can also mean also accepting to put themselves in the place of their mothers. As La Belle points out:

The daughter is in part a genetic replication of the mother, a biological mirroring that can be signified by the image in the glass as the girl becomes what her mother has become--old. The basic self/other paradox (both me and not me) of the mirror image is analogous to the self/other inter-relationship of mother and daughter. In one's mother's mirror, there is a double image, the echo and re-echo, the reflection of the self and the ghostly unseen presence of the parent. The woman undergoes a twofold testing of identity, proved both by that cold objective glass and by the overlay of the image of the mother. And that real reflection can make adjustments both in the woman's self conception and in the conception of her mother. (80)

When, in **Surfacing**, the unnamed protagonist is in search of herself, she sees her mother, dressed as when she was younger, feeding the jays. She goes "where she was" (176), assuming her position as a woman, accepting her femaleness, finally letting her

mother go, accepting her death. In **Lady Oracle**, it is through the mirror that Joan re-encounters her mother, who has already died: "It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from the window, life was her curse" (329-330). In putting her mother in the Lady of Shalott's place, Joan finds herself free from the metaphorical tower in which she has locked herself. She finally understands that she has always loved her mother, and that it is time to let her go, to set her free: "She'd never really let go of me because I had never let her go. ... She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long" (329-330). Atwood here makes an inversion: it is the mother who reflects the daughter, and this inversion makes it impossible for Mrs. Delacourt to frame Joan into patriarchy.

Marian, in **The Edible Woman**, is the only one of the three protagonists that does not assume her mother's place, does not see herself as her mother's reflection, either because her mother is still alive or because she refuses to be a mother. However, when she bakes the woman-shaped, doll-like cake, she is metaphorically giving birth to herself, her true identity: the cake, the edible woman of the title, is consumable, edible. A woman is not edible. By eating the cake, the mirror image of herself, Marian is recovering her appetite and rejecting the feminine attributes society imposes on her. When Ainsley states that Marian is rejecting her femininity (272), she is somehow right: Marian is refusing to be passive and submissive, taking her life in her hands, not allowing herself to be objectified anymore. As Rigney points out, "Marian does indeed reject the childish and doll-like femininity of her former self, but in order to affirm the adult woman, the human being the reader can at least hope she has become" (**Margaret Atwood** 36). Marian becomes active again, a subject

rather than an object, “healing the mirror’s split” (Bromberg 18), becoming again a consumer rather than a consumable object.

Accepting to see themselves in the mirror means to come back from the psychological death their journey into themselves has taken them. In Atwood’s novels, there is a pattern of descending and returning which is associated with images of rebirth. In **The Edible Woman**, the day after Marian’s engagement party, Duncan takes her to a great open pit, an abyss, which “looks like nothingness, like absence, like death”, where he exerts her to responsibility and from where she comes out alive, having a kind of rebirth when moving towards reality and coming out of her Alice existence (Rigney, **Margaret Atwood** 32). In **Surfacing**, since the very beginning the narrator feels as if she were dead, and the killing of the heron, representing the wilderness, symbolizes the protagonist’s own psychological death. As Rigney points out, “[i]f the protagonist is ‘dead’ at the beginning of the novel, she must somehow be reborn, not in a religious sense, but psychologically” (**Margaret Atwood** 53). In **Lady Oracle**, in Joan’s words: “I pretended to die so I could live, so I could have another life” (315). Her new life begins after she has finally accepted to put all her selves together, becoming whole, and forgetting about her false death.

Accepting to see themselves in the mirror also means to become whole, to join all their selves into one, complete, without fragmentations. In **The Edible Woman**, soon after breaking up with Peter, Marian recovers her voice. There is again a shift of tone, this time from the third person narrative, in which Marian is seen as object, to a first person narrative, in which she is finally in control of the story of her life. In **Lady Oracle**, Joan, when still feeling divided, thinks about achieving wholeness, but she does not know which one of her selves would survive: “*It is often best to be oneself*, whispered the small, crumby voice, like a conscience. But which one, which one?” (231). After re-entering reality, she seems to

have put all her selves together, assuming her whole self without the necessity of hiding any of them, for the separate identities cannot be ignored or discarded, they have to be reintegrated into the total self. Telling her story to the reporter she has almost killed, she forces herself to assume who she is, for her story will become public and everybody will know about her. However, this fact does not frighten her anymore, for it is she who decides to tell her story, not anybody else. Her life is now under control, without getting flabby anymore. She has learnt, from all her experiences, that she is not at all powerless, that she can decide her own life: "I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this" (345). She has found her way out of the mirror, metaphorically shattering it. Joan is no longer seeking escape, no longer avoiding responsibility: she assumes her action toward the reporter and decides to come back to Toronto in order to help Marlene and Sam, the friends that have helped her in her "suicide". She has also decided to explain what has occurred, revealing to all who may care, especially to herself, the secrets of the several lives she has always kept apart.

The unnamed narrator of *Surfacing*, having felt divided for a long time, is now recovering her lost self: "the half of me ... had begun to return" (142). As Rigney very well points out, "[w]hereas images of cutting, splitting, division, fragmentation have dominated the novel to this point, now images of unity, joining, completeness begin to supersede. The protagonist has united the two halves of herself, found her parentage, reconciled the male and female principles within the self" (110), becoming whole. To the young woman in *Surfacing*, as well as to the other two protagonists, "belongs the ultimate sanity: the knowledge that woman can descend, and return—sane, whole, victorious" (Rigney "Failure of Logic" 115).

Atwood's novels, at first, seem to have a closed and positive ending, with the three heroines completely in control of their own lives. However, the novels' endings are not closed at all: on the contrary, they are quite ambiguous and open, allowing the reader several interpretations. The three protagonists are not even sure about their future: in **The Edible Woman**, Marian has left her job while engaged with Peter, and now she has to find another job and probably another place to live, for her relationship with "the lady down below" has been terribly disturbed. Marian's final performance, feeding Duncan, makes us doubt if she has really gone out of her Alice phase or if she is still immature. However, since she is now speaking again with her own voice, having refused to be framed by patriarchy in rejecting the role of Peter's wife, she seems to be much more conscious of what she is and wants. She is at least free to choose her future, thus being able to break the traditional paradigm of feminine behavior imposed by social norms. I think she has finally acknowledged she cannot marry Peter or any other man not because she refuses to grow up, but because she rejects the constructed female roles, the feminine attributes society demands from her. In his selfishness, Duncan does not represent a real danger: he is so concerned about himself that Marian can feel safe with him. Their differences make it possible to have separateness, each one with her/his own life, without interfering in the other's.

In **Surfacing**, the narrator has also given up her job, for "this is no longer my future" (170). If she returns to society, she has to find another job, to re-organize her life. The end of **Surfacing** is even more ambiguous: the narrator is behind the trees, listening to her lover's voice, without making any movement towards him: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (186). She is perhaps the more mature of the three protagonists, for she seems to have no doubts about who she is anymore. Her indecisions about going to the city are due to her self affirmation as a woman

which may not be well understood by society as a whole: she is getting, from her inner self, the strength she will need to face the new life that is before her. She also breaks the paradigms of social behavior imposed to women in the sense that, in refusing to be a victim, she takes her life in her own hands, being free to choose her own future.

In **Lady Oracle**, after coming back from the maze of her thoughts and accepting she that is not like her heroines, Joan decides not to write Costume Gothics anymore. Although she decides to work with another kind of “escape literature”, science fiction, it is important to point out that, while writing Costume Gothics, she is concerned with past and closed stories, with traditional plots in which the hero marries the heroine, and in deciding to write science fiction she becomes now concerned with the future, with its infinite and open possibilities, which is a clear indication of her still multiple, but now unhidden, selves. Having broken the rules of patriarchy, she has become whole without necessarily becoming one, feeling her selves united without leaving any of them, for they all are important parts of her whole identity. She ends up taking care of the reporter in the hospital: “there is something about a man in a bandage” (345), her last romantic hero. She has decided to solve all the problems her fake death has caused and seems to be sure about herself. Her last sentence, “[i]t did make a mess; but then I don’t think I’ll ever be a tidy person”, shows she has come back to reality perhaps as multiple as she has always been: she may even use the same names she has always used, such as Louisa K. Delacourt, when working on any kind of writing. What differentiates her from the beginning is that now she does not need to hide any of her selves to anybody.

Although uncertain about their future lives, the three protagonists are much more conscious than they were in the beginning of their stories and, in refusing to be objects of male desires, in refusing to be framed by patriarchal norms, they become not divided or split

anymore by their mirror images, but whole and even multiple while fabricating their own stories, being able to “renarrate their cultures, particularly the social construction of woman as a multiply-differentiated and historically-specific subject position” (Hennessy 137). Their uncertainties about their future are extended to their sense of selfhood, for their identities are as provisional as their present situation. However, they are now ready to live with their fears and doubts. These heroines seem wholly transformed and wholly determined to “surface” in their full powers back into the world.

Conclusion

*I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess
(Haraway)*

In my introduction I formulated the hypothesis that Atwood's first three novels portray female characters searching for identity in relation to mirror imagery, establishing a behavioral pattern in which they would follow three stages in order to find their own selves. After having analyzed the three novels, I could see that Atwood's protagonists have, in fact, followed the stages I pointed out: they have gone from a narcissistic behavior in which they used to mirror men's desires to a more conscious behavior in which they stop mirroring the desire of others to mirror themselves. From the first step, in which they used to look in the mirror worried only with their physical appearance, to the third step in which they look in the looking glass feeling as newborn women, they have crossed different borders in their way from objectification to self-affirmation. These "border crossing" attitudes consist ultimately in going beyond the mirror frames, in refusing to be "framed", formulated and contained.

The three protagonists have escaped from the mirror's trap by taking their mirrors and their lives in their hands. Although the process of self-knowledge is quite always a painful process, as the protagonists' stories seem to prove, it is a necessary step in productive socialization. Knowing who they are, Atwood's heroines seem to be now ready to have better relationship with others. They have escaped from the mirror's trap also by taking the

mirror in their hands and using it to their own profit. But feeling whole does not mean that they have to throw the mirror away. Instead, as La Belle points out:

By taking the mirror into their own hands, women are eliminating the mirror as tyrant, as dominant male. ... The mirror and its representations are so related to feminine self-conception, in its distinctions from male identity, that the glass has to be saved and controlled. For women to liberate themselves as women is not to dismiss their bodies but to free them from male/mirror tyranny. ... In this process, the mirror serves as a useful but finally subordinate instrument for the assimilation of physicality into thought. (180)

The historical mind/body split which plagued literature by women until recently can now be healed. In the same way other dichotomies can be said to have been eliminated, not necessarily by means of unity, but by the very stress on multiplicity.

An important conclusion I have reached is that, even finding their own selves and feeling “whole” or integrated, Atwood’s protagonists’ identities are not completely defined, perhaps due to the novels’ ambiguous endings, their greatest strength, for they leave infinite possibilities to the critical reader. With her open endings and her characters’ identities still undefined, Atwood is reaffirming her position when she says, in **Second Words**, that “women, both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections” (227), for real women are not angels or harpies, witches or earth mothers. They are human beings who want to be respected as such.

Atwood’s open endings lead us to another possibility: it seems that her novels are already taking a step toward postmodernism, in the sense that the concept of identity is seen as provisional, never fixed. As Linda Hutcheon points out in **The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English Canadian Fiction**:

Unlike men, who in our Western culture are said to have a firm sense of a single, coherent, rational identity (or to think that such a sense of self is possible and desirable), Atwood's women seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are more fragmented and even multiple. (145)

This multiplicity does not mean Atwood's characters have not achieved maturity. On the contrary, they are now conscious of who they are; they are even conscious they have no such thing as a single and coherent identity, and they seem also to be aware that this unified self is not possible or even desirable. They have recovered their self-respect and their self-esteem, which are essential to a positive, although fluid, sense of identity. As Donna Haraway says in "A Manifesto for Cyborg: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", we can no longer think in terms of a fixed essence:

Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. ... There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism. (197)

It is important to point out that, since gendered identity is always in process, its fluidity may represent the very nature of the construction of female subjectivity in a patriarchal society. Having been always represented as objects of male desires, women want now to become subjects, to be concerned with their own desires instead of the desires of others.

As I have discussed early in this work, women have always been seen as the “other” in relation to men, just as the colonized are seen as the “other” in relation to the colonizer. What seems to be a negative point is seen positively by Haraway, to whom “to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundaries, frayed, insubstantial” (219), a clear indication of postmodern contradictions, in which there is “a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization, and it deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to essentialist accounts of gender identity” (Butler 338).

If identity is fluid and insubstantial, in Postmodernism it is also multiple, contradictory and processual, as Atwood’s characters clearly demonstrate: they have started their story, which is told by themselves, being constructed and forged in their own way, without any certainty about their reliability, having multiple identities without knowing how to cope with them, letting themselves to be objectified and victimized. As they realize that being multiple does not mean accepting their victimization, they fight against their victim position and thus become complete, joining their selves in a whole identity, becoming their own owners. Atwood’s first three novels also demonstrate that if “full humanity” has been denied to women, especially as literary characters in most of western canonical literature, it has now been achieved by her heroines, whose very process of crossing the borders between objectification and self-affirmation, in which these female characters assume their responsibility for their own acts, shows that they have become more complete human beings, accepting their limitations and understanding they are neither goddesses nor witches, but simply women whose greatest strength lies on their ability to accept themselves as they are.

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