Surviving Childhood Victimization: *Cat’s Eye*

*Cat’s Eye* (1988) is the story of Elaine Risley, a middle-aged painter, who returns to Toronto after many years of absence for a Retrospective of her paintings. The Retrospective becomes the novel’s central metaphor, since what the novel depicts is Elaine’s retrospection of her own life. Her recollections of her girlhood in Toronto form the story. Elaine re-enacts what Atwood says about cultures in her introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*: “All the cultures are to some extent retrospective: we see where we are and where we’re going partly by where we’ve been”¹. A retrospective is a sign of accomplishment, a point of arrival, or a plateau that provides a view of the past – a reflective pause – before one moves into the future. Hence, in *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood turns from the life of the buried, smothered women to examine the other side of the coin, the woman who has fought her way to freedom as an artist.

*Cat’s Eye*, Atwood’s seventh novel, was received by a few critics as a ‘jeu d’esprit’ (Oxford Dictionary shorter: “a witty or humorous trifle”). But Margaret Atwood does not agree to it. In an interview with Earl G.Ingersoll she says:

> In fact, I don’t think my other “comic novels” are jeux d’esprit, either, I suspect that sort of definition is something people fall back on because they can’t take women’s concerns or life
patterns at all seriously; so they see the wit in those books, and that’s all they see. Writing is play in the same way that playing the piano is “play” or putting on a theatrical “play” is play. Just because something’s fun doesn’t mean it isn’t serious. For instance, some get a kick out of war. Others enjoy falling in love. Yet others get a bang out of a really good funeral. Does that mean war, love, and death are trifles?²

Cat’s Eye is unusual in that it builds upon the most detailed and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. There is fiction which explores the stage of young boyhood, but even writers who are women, haven’t dealt with this stage of a woman’s development before. Atwood says that the tendency is to think that the only relationships of importance to women are their dealings with men as parents, boy friends, husbands or babies. The writer has taken a bold step in writing about how the little girl who got run over by her girl friends was able to respond to the other women when she grew up. She says:

I sometimes get interested in stories because I notice a sort of blank – why hasn’t any one written about this? Can it be written about? Do I dare to write it? Cat’s Eye was risky business, in a way – wouldn’t I be trashed for writing about little girls, how trivial? Or wouldn’t I be trashed for saying they weren’t all sugar and spice […]. Childhood is very intense
because children can’t imagine a future. They can’t imagine pain being over, which is why children are nearer to the absolute state of Heaven and Hell than adults are.\(^3\)

Quiet, pensive, confused and ironic middle-aged painter Elaine Risley of Cat’s Eye seems to be a complex person. Elaine’s inner journey helps her see the negative effects of being overwhelmed by others. Unlike the “allegorical misery” of the women in most of Atwood’s earlier works, the present novel “gives way to recognizable landscapes and more plausible grief and is Atwood’s most emotionally engaging fiction thus far”.\(^4\)

Cat’s Eye is a Bildungsroman that in its exploration of what Atwood believes is the central concern of both women’s writing and Canadian Literature – survival – reiterates the importance of the universal quest for self-realization and self-expression. In early Bildungsromans written by women, the female protagonist discovered herself and her place only in marriage and submission to patriarchal norms, and thus grew “down” rather than “up” as Annis Pratt puts it: “it is only in the twentieth century that a feminine counterpart to the male version of the epic theme of the individual’s growth into life and love has begun to emerge”,\(^5\) as women project into their fiction their belief that “the experience of a young girl may stand as a paradigm for that of the whole human race every bit as much as the boy’s can”.\(^6\).
Some reviewers also regard it a “thinly fictionalized autobiography” and proceed to list the similarities between Elaine and her character. Atwood’s prefatory note explains: “This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one”. Though certainly not an autobiography, it is tempting to assume that this novel is a spiritual autobiography of Atwood. Lacking conclusive evidence regarding this aspect, it is best to assume that Atwood makes “cameo appearances” in it as she does in some of her other works. The autobiographical element is in no way important to this novel, which sensitively records Elaine’s alienation and survival from childhood to middle age.

Elaine Risley’s childhood begins in a literary home, filled with all those vanished things from Atwood’s own childhood – the marbles, the Eaton’s catalogues, the watchbird watching you, the smells, sounds, colours, the textures. For Atwood, fiction - writing is a celebration of a physical world she knew. It’s partly an attempt to stop or bring back time. The theme of mental journey across time is established right at the beginning of the novel in Elaine’s reference to time. She states: “You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away” (CE 3). The long sequences of her life from early childhood through art school, a disastrous love affair and her failed first marriage – the memories of her life down to the present moment culminate in the exhibition of her paintings.
Having lived in the wilderness while her father did field research on insects, Elaine is even more innocent than her young age warrants when her family moves to the city, and she is unprepared for the girls’ games, having so far played only with her brother. She feels much more comfortable with boys, whom she considers her secret allies. However, social convention requires her to speak and act like the other girls. The uncertainty with which she attempts this behaviour makes her the object of ridicule among her girl friends – Cordelia, Grace and Carol.

Cordelia’s criticism forces Elaine to be unsure of every move she makes: “‘What do you have to say for yourself?’ Cordelia used to ask. ‘Nothing’ I would say. It was a word that I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all” (CE 43). Cordelia’s voice invades Elaine’s consciousness, filling her with criticism and self-doubt. As Elaine’s childhood feelings of fragmentation increases, she turns to self-mutilation as a means of grounding herself in reality; the pain of pulling strips of flesh from her feet “was something to hold onto” (CE 114).

Being young and vulnerable, Elaine cannot talk to her brother because she thinks he, being male, either would not understand or would laugh at her for being sissy about a bunch of girls, for making a fuss about nothing. And communication with her mother is difficult, for between them there “is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It’s filled with wordlessness” (CE 98). Trapped in this silent isolation, Elaine naturally
begins to look for methods of escape such as being sick and staying home from school, imagining that she is invisible, or willing herself to faint:

“There’s a way out of places you want to leave, but can’t. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it’s later. Time has gone on without you” (CE 183). The split in her personality reaches its final stage when, after fainting, she actually flees her body. “I’m seeing all this from above, as if I’m in the air, somewhere near the ‘Girls’ sign over the door, looking down like a bird” (CE 152).

Only for a brief period during summer, camping out with her parents, is Elaine able to escape from being judged, from judging herself:

I’ve begun to feel not gladness, but relief. My throat is no longer tight. I’ve stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeing how I look from the back, talk without hearing the way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into the rhythm of transience as if into bed (CE 153).

But Elaine knows that this is only a temporary escape. That night, she dreams of her special marble, the one she calls ‘Cat’s Eye’, as a sun or planet falling from the sky into her sleeping body, and making her cold – a
dream which suggests that unconsciously she is maturing, acquiring new strength.

In the school years that follow her childhood, the torment increases; she holds on to the marble as though it were a magic third eye with an ‘impartial gaze’ that allows her to retreat back into her eyes. The marble enables her to hold on to the core of herself and to cast a cold eye on her tormentors. She attributes a protective power to the cat’s eye:

Cordelia doesn’t know what power this cat’s eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees me. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouth opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only (CE 151).

Possessing this other eye enables Elaine to see Cordelia, Grace and Carol the way she imagines it sees them, and also to block out their tainting voices, for the cat’s eye sees but does not hear. She reduces the girls to shapes and gestures that seem less threatening. Doing so, she begins to adopt the powerful, imaginative vision of an artist. Cordelia and the cat’s eye marble are inextricably involved in Elaine’s psychological, moral and artistic growth. Cordelia is Elaine’s inner demon, an embodiment of all her
self doubts. The marble is the inner energy source which protects her and urges her to more acute vision.

The transformation of the marble from child’s toy, to talisman, the symbol of radiant art, parallels Elaine’s own transformations as she grows up and learns how to evade victimization. A transparent crystal with a flower-like shape of opaque blue inside, the luminous cat’s eye marble hints at possibilities of vision, energy and beauty – an instrument to capture the light. Inside it, Elaine says at one point, “I can see my life entire” (CE 378).

When the situation reaches a crisis in the freezing river in the ravine, Elaine has already gathered the strength to pull herself out and go on living, although she imagines that she is saved by a vision of the black virgin floating above the bridge. She had been praying to the Virgin Mary instead of to God in Sunday school, but language, as always, had been an impediment: “I know who it is that I’ve seen. It’s the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt” (CE 204). From this point on, Cordelia and the other girls no longer affect Elaine: “It’s as if I can see right into them” (CE 206).

The first half of Cat’s Eye builds suspensefully to that moment when Elaine turns her back on Cordelia. The second half of the novel covers Elaine’s life up to the present, a life that she herself views as the aftermath of her ordeal with Cordelia. Her bitter experience prepares the adult Elaine to extricate herself from an absurdly constraining and pseudo-romantic affair with her art teacher, Josef. It also gives her strength to walk away
from her unsuitable and exhausting first marriage to the irresponsible artist, Jon, although not until after she has theatrically attempted suicide, with a knife, with the internal voice of Cordelia urging her on. The only relationship in her adult life which is not tainted by the victor-victim struggle is her peaceful second marriage to Ben.

Elaine’s adult life centres upon her art. She necessarily turns those events which were most wounding in her life into works of art. Elaine’s paintings are sites where she can freely express her imaginative vision and where she attains the boundless visual powers embodied by her cat’s eye to reduce people to shapes on her canvas. She asserts aesthetic control over the subjects she paints, the people in her life, such as Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia who have asserted control over her.

Malice and the desire to regain control may have been the original impetus behind these paintings, but at her retrospective exhibition Elaine suddenly sees more in them. “These pictures are not only mockery, not only discretion. I put light into them too” (CE 427). This light reveals different things to her now that she is older. As a child, Elaine fears Mrs. Smeath’s scrutinizing ‘evil eye’ (CE 194), but now when she looks at her eyes she sees that “they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholic, heavy with unloved duty”(CE 427). These are the same eyes that she initially painted out of a desire for vengeance but the light they give affects Elaine
differently now that she is older, or rather, now that she had gained solidarity.

Since childhood, Elaine has felt excluded from religion, and her experiences with feminists remind her of those feelings. She has also long mistrusted members of her own sex due to the torments inflicted upon her by Cordelia. Furthermore, she has always had difficulty communicating with other women due to women’s limited access to language. So, she realizes, did Cordelia. This suddenly becomes clear when she revisits the bridge, under which she almost died as a result of Cordelia’s games. Once again Elaine feels

[…] the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s, as they always were (CE 239).

She laments the friendship she will never share with Cordelia.

Elaine regrets not having tried to understand Mrs. Smeath’s frustration over being trapped in small town ‘threadbare decency’. She could have gone for ‘justice’ in her portrayal; “Instead I went for vengeance”, she admits. Elaine realizes that Mrs. Smeath was as much a victim of patriarchal ideology as she herself was.
Cat’s Eye depicts how the young Elaine was moulded into surviving calamities of childhood oppression by her other friends. It is a critique of the popular ‘Good Little Girl Image’. The media symbol of innocence and goodness is a pretty little girl. In Cat’s Eye, Atwood sets out to explore the darker side of this popular image. She believes that the ‘Best Friend’s Motif’ which is an offshoot of the ‘Good Little Girl Image’ is largely a myth, for “little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another, they are not cute. They are life-sized” (CE 125). By showing little girls as mean to one another, Atwood explodes the myth of childhood innocence, as emphatically as Golding does in his novel Lord of the Flies. All three girls ape the models they have in mind and constantly attempt to belittle each other.

Elaine is unprepared when games of jump rope, ball and marbles yield to a far crueler game of psychological sadism in which Cordelia and the two others systematically dominate and brutalize her for a period of almost two years. Elaine first saves the cat’s eye marble, so like and unlike an eye in its crystalline transparency, because it seems beautiful and mysteriously alien, perhaps the first object she has ever looked at aesthetically. The marble’s purity and its gelid look suggest to her the power of disembodiment of resisting torment by seeing without feeling, a way of freezing out those who have frozen her out.

Imaginative vision is the only means that Elaine has as a child of resisting Cordelia and the other girls because she cannot speak about their
cruelties to anyone. Her silence is indicative of the barriers that reside within women’s language, which are not conducive to communication. Dreaming is another form of escape from time, and one night she dreams that her cat’s eye actually enters her:

I dream that my blue cat’s eye is shining in the sky like the sun, or like the pictures of planets in our book on the solar system. But instead of being warm, it’s cold. It starts to move nearer, but is doesn’t get any bigger. It’s falling down out of the sky, straight toward my head, brilliant and glassy. It hits me, passes right into me, but without hurting, except that it’s cold (CE 155).

Instead of trying to become invisible or faint, both of which activities involve escaping the constraints of time and entering another space-time or a different dimension, Elaine dreams that her cat’s eye is now inside her. It is as if she literally incorporates into herself the cat’s eye’s visual powers in order to strengthen her own imaginative vision. In fact, Elaine’s dream affirms that her imaginative vision will be her means of controlling the people and objects that obstruct her.

Moreover, when Cordelia, Grace and Carol leave Elaine alone in the ravine, her imaginative vision actually saves her from freezing to death. Lying under the bridge, she envisions the Virgin Mary floating down through the air towards her from the bridge, helping her to get up and go
home. She had been praying to the Virgin Mary instead of to God in Sunday school, but language, as always, had been an impediment: “I don’t know what to say. I haven’t learned the words for her” (CE 197). But after this vision, Elaine’s belief in Virgin Mother is confirmed: “I know who it is that I’ve seen. It’s the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt” (CE 204). From this point on, Cordelia and the other girls no longer affect Elaine: “It’s as if I can see right into them”. And she deflects their cruel words: “I hardly hear them any more because I hardly listen” (CE 208). Now, that she has achieved individuality through her imaginative vision, she only needs to express it to be a dissident woman artist.

Cat’s Eye has been justly praised for its faithful re-creation of the sights, sounds, smells and tactile sensations of a childhood in Toronto in the 1940’s and 1950’s and for its dramatic portrayal of the schoolyard victimization of young Elaine Risley. But critics like Judith Thusrman, who thinks that Cat’s Eye should have ended “on page 206,” at the moment when Elaine turns her back on her chief tormentor, Cordelia, and walks away, disregard the fact that Elaine’s seemingly self-contained narrative of her early triumph over victimization bears a causal relationship to “a larger confessional narrative which ratifies her career as an artist”.8 There is a direct line of cause and effect between Elaine’s experience of cruelty at the hands of Cordelia and her career as an artist who is driven to arrest, transfix and freeze the people and scenes of her life that have given the most pain.
During a graduate seminar at which Atwood was invited to discuss her work, she commented that \textit{Cat’s Eye} held more pertinent parallels with \textit{Macbeth} than it did with \textit{King Lear}, the play containing Cordelia’s name-sake. This comment and “the reluctance Atwood displayed in discussing specific aspects of her work are not surprising”. Throughout her career, Atwood has expressed the belief that interpretation is the work of students and critics, not of authors. Despite Atwood’s denial of links between \textit{Cat’s Eye} and \textit{Lear}, an examination of the character of Cordelia reveals strong parallels between Cordelia’s role in \textit{Lear}, and the role Atwood’s Cordelia plays, both in her own family, and as a twin sister or mirror image for Elaine. Perhaps, the most interesting parallel to emerge from such an examination is that Cordelia embodies a “primary and dialectical theme” in both \textit{Cat’s Eye} and \textit{King Lear}: the theme of nothingness.

Atwood realizes the strength that the allusion holds for the reader when presenting Cordelia as a character. Through Elaine, Atwood reflects on the origins of Cordelia’s name and her positioning in the family: “Cordelia says they’re (her own name and those of her sisters) out of Shakespeare. She seems proud of this, as though it’s something we should all recognize” (CE 73). Indeed, in this initial description of Cordelia, Atwood clearly challenges the reader to recognize the name, because Cordelia will act not only as a character within the narrative but also as a
presence outside the story, “a symbol of the abjection” or sense of
nothingness each reader experiences.

At the beginning of *Cat's Eye*, having mentioned Cordelia’s name,
Elaine remarks: “But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up […] or
the one before or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone (CE 6).
Later in the novel, Elaine, meditating on the name ‘Cordelia’, wonders,
“Why did they name her that? Hang that weight around her neck? Heart of
the moon, jewel of the sea […]. The third sister, the only honest one”(CE
263). Discussing her anxiety about encountering Cordelia at an art
exhibition, Elaine remarks: “I’m not afraid of seeing Cordelia, I’m afraid of
being Cordelia, because in some way we changed places” (CE243).

The sense that Cordelia and Elaine are changing places emerges early
in *Cat’s Eye*. At the beginning of *Cat’s Eye*, it is Elaine who answers
“Nothing” to Cordelia’s question: “What do you have to say for yourself?”
(CE41). The parallels between King Lear’s daughter Cordelia and Elaine
Risley’s friend, Cordelia, again become disrupted when Elaine responds to
Cordelia’s “What do you think of me?” with “Nothing much” (CE 254).
Thus, it is only towards the end of her stay in the city that Elaine
understands that Cordelia is her doppelganger and that they are “like the
twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key” (CE 411).

To comprehend the growth and development of Elaine Risley’s vision
as a feminist painter, it is necessary to evaluate her background. Elaine is a
painter by instinct; as such she was interested in painting since her childhood. As a child, Elaine draws in her school workbook girls “in old-fashioned clothing, with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves, with big hair bows on their head” (CE 30-31). Thus, the workbook has an exotic appeal for Elaine. Further, she uses ‘silver paper’ of cigarette packages to draw figures of women as a childhood hobby. She likes the pictures in 

Eaton’s Catalogue. She cuts the small coloured figures of women, cookware, furniture, out of the book and pastes them in her scrap book. She plays the scrapbooks game with her brother, Stephen, and friends: Grace, Carol and Cordelia. Thus, she presents her “innocent vision of a child”.11

Elaine also cuts out pictures of women from the magazines, ‘Good House Keeping’, ‘The Ladies Home Journal’, ‘Chatelaine’, and pastes them into her scrapbook. These pictures show the unenviable occupations a woman is conventionally associated with such as gossiping, knitting etc. She sums up sarcastically the whole business of their knittings thus: “Walking, riding, standing, sitting, where she goes, there goes her knitting” (CE 147). Elaine cuts out all these ordinary women, “with their forehead wrinkles” (CE 148) who play traditional feminine roles. She fixes them into her scrapbook to show how worried they are in discharging the duties assigned to them by patriarchal society.

Elaine’s metamorphosis from a child in a fairytale world into an adult in a real world adulthood affects “not only her vision and the self but
conceptions of time and art”. This ‘backseat’ vision begins to change as she acquires a camera. Photography also becomes one of her hobbies. She takes snapshots of women with her camera and pastes them into her album. Playing marbles with her brother is also a favourite pastime of Elaine. Blue Cat’s eyes are her favourite marbles.

The cat’s eyes are my favourites. If I win a new one I wait until I’m myself, then take it out and examine it, turning it over and over in the light. The cat’s eyes, really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They’re the eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway; like the green eye of the radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet (CE 67).

Fortunately, Elaine is raised by parents who are unconventional. She is influenced by her father who is first an entomologist, and then a university Professor of Zoology. Occassionally, she has watched his students draw insects. She judges the drawings better or worse, depending on the colours used. She is fascinated by colours. Her interest in minute details later gives her a penetrating vision into things. She learns about insect infestations and acquires an interest in cross-section drawings, in which organisms are “cut open so you can see what’s inside them” (CE 37). Thus, she develops microscopic vision.

Elaine also bears the stamp of her brother’s artistic talent. Stephen aids Elaine in developing her mental perception and vision of painting by
means of his drawings of dimensional universes. He says: “We’re limited by our own sensory equipment. How do you think a fly sees the world?” (CE232). Stephen’s scientific enthusiasms, in significant ways, shape Elaine’s imagination, so that her paintings and his theories come to occupy the same area of speculation on the mysterious laws which govern the universe.

His discourse on theoretical physics provides the conceptual frame work for her paintings, for Elaine is “painting time”.¹³ He teaches her how time and space go hand in hand in the universe. He says: “Time is dimension. You can’t separate it from space. Space-time is what we live in” (CE 232). In her discussion of Cat’s Eye at the National Theatre, London, in April 1989, Atwood admitted: ‘The thing I sweated over in that novel was time, for Elaine’s story covers a period of nearly fifty years from the early 1940’s to the late 1980’s. This is a ‘space-time’ novel”.¹⁴ It is her brother’s concept of ‘space - time’ which Elaine later adapts to painting.

Elaine discovers through her brother a way to explore the freedom of imagination beyond the constraints of time. As Sharpe says:

Elaine unwittingly participates in this process when she embraces her brother’s ideas about space-time and combines them with the symbolization of her private experiences in her paintings. She asserts no feminist political strategy, however, and claims simply to paint what she sees. But combination of
science with private symbolization in her paintings challenges the language and conventions of linear time and challenges the limits placed upon women's communication. Elaine's paintings bridge the gaps between herself and other women; they communicate visually instead of verbally by depicting the objects and symbols of her own world or space-time.  

His letters, written when he was a summer camp instructor, empower her to paint women inspired by dream and memory. He also teaches her how to see in the dark and to move her feet slowly balancing on one foot. This learning further helps her have 'cat's eye' to look into the problems of women. She literally incorporates the cat's eye's visual powers along with what Stephen tells her about light and the solar system in order to strengthen her own imaginative vision. Elaine's association with her brother encourages her to develop her talent for painting. Thus, her family environment forms the background to her career of free-lance painting.  

The theme of transformation for survival is as dominant a motif in Cat's Eye as it is in Atwood's other novels, Lady Oracle and Surfacing. Atwood is greatly fascinated by transformations. During an interview with Linda Sandler Atwood says that her interest in changes from one state to another which began in early childhood has found its way into most of her verse and fiction. The transformations in Cat's Eye are basically of two kinds. Those of the first kind are willed by the characters and are seen as
necessary to help them fit in with the members of various groups while transformations of the second kind occur contrary to the character’s wishes and are beyond their conscious control.

Among transformations of the first kind are the changes in Elaine’s parents’ appearances on account of the change in her father’s job from being a forest insect researcher in the country, to being a University Professor in Toronto. Elaine and her brother, Stephen, have been used to seeing their father in windbreakers, battered grey felt hats, flannel shirts with the cuffs tightly buttoned to prevent the black flies from crawling up his arms, heavy pants tucked into the tops of woolen work socks and leather shoes water proofed with bacon grease. Except for the hats, their mother’s clothes are similar. However, once they move to Toronto, her father wears jackets, ties, white shirts, tweed coats and galoshes that buckle on over his shoes. Their mother too looks entirely different in dresses and skirts. Used to seeing her only in slacks, Elaine and Stephen are surprised to see her legs ‘appear’ sheathed in nylons. Unlike her country self, she wears lipstick on her mouth and wears a fur-collared coat and a hat. Elaine suggests that these city clothes are disguises or social masks which are totally unnatural to her parents for, the minute they are away from Toronto, they ‘shed’ their city clothes and turn back into themselves.
Elaine too transforms her life. While taking her final grade exams, Elaine gets a flash-like thought that she will be an artist rather than a biologist.

In the middle of the Botany examination it comes to me, like a sudden epileptic fit, that I’m not going to be a biologist, as I have thought. I am going to be a painter. I look at the page, where the life cycle of the mushroom from spore to fruiting body is taking shape, and I know this with absolute certainty. My life has been changed, soundlessly, instantaneously (CE 271).

From this moment on, Elaine nurtures her ambition to be a painter. Why is the protagonist very particular about being called ‘painter’ rather than ‘artist,’ a term which has social respectability? For Elaine, ‘artist’ is an “overblown, pretentious, theoretical” (CE 15) person who neglects the labour and the pain of creativity of painter. She juxtaposes these two activities: “The word artist embarrasses me; I prefer painter; because it is a tardy, lazy sort of thing to be” (CE 15).

According to Elaine, the artist leaves so much of a burden on the painter. To Elaine the painter is like a proletarian. Therefore, she chooses the profession of painting even though her parents are opposed to it because it is difficult to earn a living by it: “Art was not something that could be depended on though alright for a hobby like shellwork or wood carving.”
Instead of the precise diagrams of botanical illustration, Elaine transforms “the master discourse of science [...] through another medium or another mode of figuration”\(^\text{17}\) and creates surrealistic painting of women. The surrealistic quality of Elaine’s imagination makes her an ‘amateur painter’.

Apart from transforming her art, Elaine transforms her appearance too, to suit the situation or group that she finds herself in. At the Art and Archaeology Survey course, Elaine says that she tries to ‘blend in’ by wearing cashmere twin sets, camel’s hair coats, good tweed skirts and pearl button carriages like the others in her class. At the Life Drawing class she changes to black turtle-neck tops and jeans in order to show her allegiance to the group. Wishing to affect a further transformation in her appearance, her art teacher and lover, Josef Hrbik, ‘rearranges’ her to suit her fancy. He talks Elaine into leaving her hair loose and wearing a purple dress with a right bodice, a plunging neckline and a full skirt like a woman in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. When looking for a job, Elaine takes on yet another role and dresses to look distinguished in beige wool suit, medium – heels pumps to match, pearl button ear-rings, a tasteful silk scarf and hair done neatly in a French roll.

While these transformations appear innocent despite the alienation from the true self that they hint at, some others have a more sinister edge to them as they are well beyond the control of the individuals involved in them.
Among such transformations, the most disturbing are the changes in physical appearance with advancing age. Having reached “that borderline age, that buffer zone” (CE 6), Elaine lives in constant fear of looking like “an old biddy” (CE 19) and of falling prey to some kind of eccentricity or madness. Seeing the numerous young androgens along the side walks and the young waitress at the Four- D’s Diner, Elaine feels ‘outmoded’ and miserable.

The Barbara Ann Scott doll which Elaine gets as a Christmas present when she is nine years old, reveals her society’s worship of youthful appearance. Well in tune with her society’s obsession with youth, Elaine too wants to believe in rejuvenating creams and transparent inguents and says that she would do anything to “stop the drip drip of time” (CE 113) and “mummify” herself in her present condition.

Soon, Elaine realizes that the past is inescapable, for beneath the superficial changes, one remains essentially the same and the present is only an echo of the past. Though outwardly one may appear changed, one does not, in fact, change, develop or grow. The universe may become more elaborate, but one does not necessarily become essentially different.

Elaine’s preference in men changes from stumbling teenage boys to brooding Byronic types, and finally to her husband Ben, whose reassuring strength seems to epitomize the traditional male stereotype. Men always seem, however, peripheral to the real issues of Elaine’s life. Her art teacher,
Josef, is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity; he feels women should live for him only (CE 305), and has an objectifying, Pre-Raphaelite vision of women as “helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (CE 318). He is a demon - lover of the Heathcliff variety, and though Elaine is initially attracted by his mystery, she comes to see through “his secrecy and his almost - empty rooms, and his baleful memories and bad dreams” (CE 297).

In their relationship, Elaine and Jon constantly change from victim to bully positions. Elaine honestly admits that Jon and she are the survivors of each other. “We have been shark to each other, but also life boat”. Jon desires to foist upon Elaine his own image of femininity and refuses to see and value her as an individual. Pretending to depend on her completely, he tells her that she should remain untouched by others and that Canada should remain untouched by heroes. He sees her as his ‘country’, his property and tells her that in most countries except Canada “a woman belongs to a man” (CE 316).

As an artist, Jon reminds us of the concrete artist, the Royal Porcupine, in *Lady Oracle*. Jon begins by painting frenzied loops and swirls “in violent eye- burning acrylics, reds and pinks and purples” (CE 317). He regards his non- representational art as “pure painting” and says that they are “a moment of process, trapped on canvas”. A short while later when he moves on to doing pictures in which all the shapes are either straight lines or
perfect circles, he dismisses his earlier style as “too romantic, too emotional, too sloppy, too sentimental” (CE 325). His new paintings which hurt the eyes, are given names like “Enigma: Blue and Red,” “Variation: Black and white” and “Opus 36” (CE 345). A few years later, he paints pictures that look like commercial illustrations and supports them by talking about “the necessity of using common cultural sign systems to reflect the iconic banality of our times” (CE 335). Finally, he stops painting on canvas altogether and makes constructions dismissing flat surfaces with paint on them as “art-on-the-wall” (CE 342).

Feeling that only his art forms are trendy and relevant, Jon, in the manner of a full-blown male chauvinist, makes Elaine feel that her art is “irrelevant” (CE 345). His attitude makes her keep her own artistic attempts clandestine and see her work as inferior and insignificant as is evident from her words: “the present tense is moving forward, discarding concept after concept, and I am off to the side somewhere fiddling with egg tampers and flat surfaces as if the twentieth century has never happened” (CE 345).

However, time proves Elaine to be the more successful artist. This is because Elaine’s surrealist art reflects her private vision whereas Jon’s art is both superficial and inauthentic. Through the character of Jon, Atwood hits out at fake artists who try to pass off their worthless creations as avant-garde art.
During her present visit to Toronto, however, she regards him with fondness, feels amazed at “all those explosions, that recklessness, that technicolour wreckage” (CE 265) they caused, and leaves Toronto having forgiven him whole heartedly. Unlike Josef and Jon who regard women as “helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (CE 318), Ben refrains from such categorizing. Josef and Jon are to be largely blamed for having wrecked their relationship with Elaine. But Ben refrains from such categorizing of women. He does not cherish popular images of womanhood, accepts Elaine as she is, and respects her decisions.

Elaine’s adult life centres upon her art, about which she refuses to theorize, even privately; for all her retrospection, Elaine is not introspective. In contrast to the career of Jon, who slavishly follows every trend from abstract expressionism ‘to op art to pop art’, and ends up doing special effects for chain-saw-massacre films. Elaine follows the more difficult path of painstakingly crafting her own style. The first significant stage in her artistic development occurs in college when, after all the art history and life-drawing classes, she becomes fascinated with painting reflective surfaces, “pearls, crystals, mirrors” and such domestic items “as ginger-ale bottles, ice cubes, and frying pans” (CE 347).

Turning away from impasto or even the use of textured brush strokes in favour of pure colour and reflectivity, Elaine teaches herself the ancient art of mixing tempers, colours suspended in a water and egg emulsion. It is
evident that the vision of the cat’s eye marble, the ‘kernal of glasses, has been absorbed into a painter’s eye which leads her to depict “objects that breathe out light” (CE 346). This is the first stage in Elaine’s artistic growth, the rejection of ‘viscous’, textured, self-expressive art in favour of a highly skilled and optically precise art of painting the light as it strikes the world. The next and more difficult task is to bring the vision of a world of radiance to bear upon her own emotions and memories. Her rejection of impasto, indeed of any textured brush strokes that betray the artist’s hand, leads to a cold, dispassionate presentation of subject matter drenched in passions, her own most memorable moments of being.

And yet, Elaine becomes fascinated with Van Eyek’s well-known painting, ‘The Arnolfine Marriage’, not so much for its pellucid rendering of the wedding couple as for the framed convex mirror in the background, which reflects the figures of two people who exist in a different world outside the picture. “This round mirror,” she thinks, “is like an eye”. A surrogate eye fascinates her because it shows the outside of the painting’s inside, peeling back its reality and revealing the figure of the artist. “By trickery, the artist is both conceded and revealed. For Elaine, I believe, that mirror, which, art historians tell us, symbolizes the spotlessness of the virgin, externalizes the artist’s vision, the eye and the age, cleansed and made spotless by the will of the artist”.18
Painting from memory rather than from life means that all of Elaine’s art is extremely personal, even when it seems objective; moreover, the unconscious has already played a role in selecting and shaping the images that offer themselves to the artist. And the very events which make art a necessary means of expression for Elaine are also the subjects of her art. As the novel begins, Elaine sees herself in the middle of life’s journey, like Dante on his pilgrimage, a position she images as “the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge” (CE 14). The bridge is a literal one; it crosses a river in a ravine in Toronto, the scene of Elaine’s most extreme duress, when she nearly freezes to death, following a command of Cordelia. Cordelia and the cat’s eye marble which Elaine uses as a talisman against her are inextricably involved in Elaine’s psychological, moral and artistic growth. And both Cordelia and the marble symbol are internalized - Cordelia as Elaine’s inner demon, embodiment of all her self-doubts, and the marble as the inner energy source which protects her and urges her to more acute vision.

Elaine’s art bears witness to aspects of her life she cannot otherwise express. In ‘Picoseconds’ for example, Elaine paints a landscape depicting her parents picnicking above an iconic band of old gas pump logos, emblems of their traveling days. The parents are painted tiny. These are parents who have twice abandoned her, most obviously by dying – she cannot bring them back for a trillionth of a second – and less obviously by
her father's obliviousness and her mother's mute bafflement in the face of Elaine's torment at the hands of her supposed friends in childhood.

More conspicuously, an old searing hatred is made to bear fruit in Elaine's repeated transformations of the detested Mrs. Smeath, mother of her second tormentor, Grace, who, with her dowdy apron, sagging underwear, and rubber plant represents middle-class Canadian Protestant hypocrisy at its deadliest. It takes a long time for Elaine to exorcise Mrs. Smeath, because unlike Elaine's own sympathetic but ineffectual mother, Mrs. Smeath is a mother figure who openly countenances the other children's cruelty to "heathenish" Elaine. Elaine exorcises Mrs. Smeath by painting her half-undressed in various absurd postures of apotheosis appropriate to someone who has a monopoly on God.

At Elaine's retrospective, the last two paintings described in 'Cat's Eye' and 'Unified Field Theory' allude to their own making and contain the artist's presence through the images of the mirror and the cat's eye marble. Both paintings refer to the crisis at the ravine, and both represent objects suspended against the sky without visible support, suggesting a precariousness, an uneasy balance. 'Cat's Eye' depicts not the marble but the convex mirror, ornately framed and hung against a blue field. Facing forward in front of the mirror is the upper half of Elaine's middle-aged wrinkled face, while the convex mirror shows the back of her head at a younger age, and beyond it, the reflection of her three childhood tormentors
advancing through the snow. This painting is ambiguous. It may be read as witnessing a triumph; since Elaine’s back is turned to the image of the girls, she may be said to have put the childhood crisis behind her by capturing it in her art. On the other hand, the mirror reflection in the painting indicates that the tormentors are actually in front of her, a forever-approaching reminder of their false friendship and her lonely pain.

Elaine’s paintings defy linear time by interweaving the symbolic with the ordinary. For example, in her painting ‘Our Lady of Perpetual Help’, she depicts the Christian symbol of woman as mother, the Virgin Mary among the objects that pertain to her world as a wife and mother. And she paints her with the head of a lioness because

…it seems to me more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history. My Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild […]. I paint the Virgin Mary descending to the earth, which is covered with snow and slush. She is wearing a winter coat over her blue robe, and has a purse slung over her shoulder. She’s carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. Several things have fallen from the bags; an egg, an onion, an apple. She looks tired (CE 365).

Not only does Elaine debunk the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary as the eternal woman in this painting, but also summon her help.

Elaine’s symbolization of the Virgin Mary is actually relevant to her
experience, unlike the symbolization of Christian iconography, for she paints ‘Our Lady of Perpetual Help’ when she is feeling stifled within her first marriage and is looking for ways to escape, just as she did as a child—only this time she attempts the ultimate escape; suicide. Her vision of the Virgin Mary saved her then, and the painting seems to be the reconstruction of that initial vision, and another invocation for help.

Elaine asserts aesthetic control over the subjects she paints, the people in her life, such as Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia, who have asserted control over her. Elaine paints Mrs. Smeath repeatedly: “Mrs. Smeath sitting, standing, lying down with her holy rubber plant, flying, Mrs. Smeath unwrapped from white tissue paper, layer by layer, Mrs. Smeath bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God” (CE 426). Elaine gives shape to the hate she feels as a child for this woman. She paints her with an “imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork fat, hairy as the inside of an ear” (CE 426).

Thus, behind the painting there is the real story, lived by Elaine, that makes up the novel *Cat’s Eye*. Each chapter even bears the title of one of her paintings. Yet, there is a discrepancy between the story behind her works and the official feminist meaning ordained by Jody and Chama, the two feminists in the novel. Looking at Mrs. Smeath, Jody declares: “It’s woman as anticheesecake. It’s good to see the aging female body treated with compassion” (CE 368). Yet, Elaine’s rendition was hardly painted out of
compassion. Still, if their history is not taken into consideration, her paintings do seem to sustain Jody and Charna’s interpretations. Then, in spite of herself, Elaine finds that her paintings provide her with the recognition and acceptance of other women.

Collectively, on the night of the retrospective, the paintings form the shape of Elaine’s life, the “series of liquid transparencies” into which she looks and sees her past. The flashbacks to the past finally meet the present in the narrative entitled “Unified Field Theory”, in which we understand that ‘Cat’s Eye’ is like the Universe; it is expanding. Thus, Elaine who remains a dissident throughout her life, finally obtains the property she needs and understands the need for female friendship, solidarity.

In the chronicles of art, a woman painter is very rare to come by. The reason for this is not that women have no talent for creative work but that their egos are too badly smothered by the patriarchal order to germinate anything new. Germaine Greer observes thus:

There is then no female Leonardo, no female Titian, no female Poussin, but the reason does not lie in the fact that women have wombs, that they can have babies, that their brains are smaller, that they lack vigour, that they are not sexual. The reason is simply that you cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged, with will that are defective, with libidos that
have been driven out of reach and energy divided into neurotic channels.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, the history of women artists is the sad story of the damaged and distorted egos. A brief survey of the literature of art up to the twentieth century shows that either the women painters rarely exist or they are virtually ignored despite the widespread awareness about feminist issues in recent times.

Indeed, by making Elaine a painter rather than the usual writer-protagonist, Atwood takes an even harder look than in \textit{Lady Oracle} at the position of women in a so-called post-feminist society, for women take to writing rather than to the other arts primarily because, as Virginia Woolf suggests in \textit{The Death of the Moth}, writing materials are cheap, and writing itself is less disruptive of conventional social requirements for women.

\textit{Cat's Eye} is Atwood's attempt to expose male prejudice against women's creativity and talent and shows how art can be used as a weapon against tyranny in all its manifestations. Thus, the novel is like "an oasis in a desert for those whose creativity is prevented from blooming".\textsuperscript{20} What the novel depicts is Elaine's retrospection of her own life from her school days, adolescence and her involvement in the avant-garde art scene, to her present career as a painter.

These paintings depict a fusion of Elaine's conscious self with her personal and collective unconscious and show the way in which potent
archetypes function in our psyches. Elaine’s inner journey helps her overcome her alienated existence. By assimilating her shadow and gaining self awareness, she moves to a state of psychic wholeness. By clinging to talismanic objects and by believing in private rather than social myths and images, Elaine avoids victimization and survives spiritually.

The very fact that this is a middle-aged woman telling her story from childhood to the present, to the time the protagonist discovers where her selfhood lies, is itself a promise and an indication of feminine and human survival. As Saul Bellow sums it up in Herzog, “But for this higher education, survival is necessary. You must outlive the pain”. The title of the novel is an extended metaphor for survival. Just as cat’s eyes glow in the dark, Elaine’s art glows in her life. From childhood, the cat’s eye marble has been a source of security and selfhood for her. As Elaine flies back to Vancouver at the end of the Retrospective, victorious over the new Toronto, sure of her survival in a world that will always be hostile, she looks out of the plane window and sees the stars in the night sky glowing like the cat’s eye, “[...] shining out of the midst of nothing. It’s old light, and there’s not much of it. But it’s enough to see by” (CE 446) – a summing up of the meaning of Atwood’s portrait of the artist as a woman and a survivor.