Chapter III

Surviving Duplicity: *Lady Oracle*

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which I meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it (LO 3).

The central character's death is her contrived disappearance, the consequences of which serve as a frame for the narration of her life story in *Lady Oracle*. Her life story is many stories just as Joan is many women. Her story questions the duplicity of women's lives and outline new scripts for women to survive.

In *Lady Oracle* (1976), published seven years after *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood again explores the issue of appearance and reality, the self as seen by others and the self as known from within. In this, her third novel, however, Atwood extends the concepts of doubling, of inner and outer selves, of surfaces and depths, of appearances and realities.

While her first two novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* had come quickly and fluently, Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle* had to be written and re-written. When *Lady Oracle* appeared in 1976, it was warmly received by admirers for its readability and for its satire, though Atwood herself sees it more as a distortion of reality than as a scathing attack. It was awarded the 1977 City of Toronto Book Award and the 1977 Canada Booksellers' Association Award.
In an interview with Margaret Atwood, Sandler expressed the view that the plot of *Lady Oracle* is her most intricate, with various time zones and the interlocking of real action with a gothic plot. Atwood explained that *Lady Oracle* is the most rewritten of her books and it took about two years to write. *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman* each took six months, approximately, although she had been thinking about them for a long time before she started writing. With *Lady Oracle*, the conception and the writing were much closer.

The heroine of *Lady Oracle* says that writing gothics is like moving through a maze, and *Lady Oracle*'s plot is something like that. Atwood says:

Mazes are interesting. Apparently they were originally built for two reasons, religious initiation or defence [...] In gothic tales the maze is just a scare device. You have an old mansion with winding passages and monster at the centre. But the maze I use is a descent into the under world. There's a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* which I found very useful, where Aeneas goes to the underworld to learn about his future. He's guided by the sibyl and he learns what he has to, from his dead father, and then he returns home.¹
The plot of *Lady Oracle* is much the same. The central character is a writer of gothic romances partly because Atwood has always wondered what it was about these books that appealed.

The hypothesis of the book, in so far as there is one, is: “What happens to someone who lives in the 'real' world but does it as though this 'other' world is a real one? This may be the plight of many more of us than we care to admit”\(^2\). *Lady Oracle* is not autobiographical. Atwood does not want her readers to assume that the novel is just another version of her life. “With *Lady Oracle* I was determined to make the character physically unidentifiable with myself, so I made her very fat and I gave her red hair”\(^3\).

The novel follows the familiar pattern of unhappy childhood, escape from home, apprenticeship in exile, love and marriage, and the slow and difficult process of self-discovery through art. Joan's story is a poignant anatomy of childhood terror and alienation. It is also a parody on the stock image of a heroine in romantic fiction - beautiful, slim and tender.

As the novel opens, Joan has planned and faked her own death to avoid a blackmailer who would reveal to her husband her lover, her career as writer of romance novels, and her childhood obesity. As a child and as an adolescent, Joan is painfully obese, a disgrace to her middle-class, social climbing mother. At school, Joan is asked to do a moth dance, not the butterfly dance. Her mother advises her to buy clothes that would make her less conspicuous. She always quarrels with Joan, and the quarrel
is on the territory of her body. Joan escapes her wretched childhood when her aunt dies, leaving her a bequest of two thousand dollars, on condition that she loses a weight of one hundred pounds.

Joan arrives in London, a different thin self. In London, she falls off a double decker bus near Trafalgar Square and an old Polish Count lifts her up. She lives with him for a brief period, and awakens to the fact that he categorizes women into either wives or mistresses and nothing else. His ever increasing possessiveness makes her run away from him.

She is next caught in a maze of incomprehensible, unresponsive apathetic marriage. Arthur, whom she meets by chance, marries her because that would be both convenient and cheap. He'd been giving it quite a lot of thought, he says. "Marriage itself would settle us down […] most importantly, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately" (LO 197). There is no talk of love here and yet she agrees to marry him in her desire to belong to him. Joan, although trying desperately to please him through her love, senses his over righteous airs. She resents his attitude, yet does not question it. The only way she reacts to his overtly pedagogical manner is by continuing to write escapist romances, without his knowledge.

Joan's literary reputation snowballs when she publishes 'Lady Oracle' and tells the media how she wrote it by automatic writing. She receives phone calls from all sorts of people. Some of them even want her
to prophesy their future. The newspapers publish things which she has never said and for which ironically she has to face the consequences. Like all celebrities, she visualizes a threat to her life. Therefore, Joan dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses, dons a printed dress, flees to Rome in disguise with the help of her friends and relates her story to a reporter. Ultimately, Joan emerges as a serious writer in Rome and leaves an optimistic note for the female writers whose voices are marginalized: "[…] dark place is only a cocoon; we will rest there for a time, and after that we will emerge with beautiful wings; we will be butterflies, and fly up toward the sun" (LO 117).

Lady Oracle is divided into five parts - Part I deals with Joan's exile in Italy, Part II with her childhood in Toronto, Part III with her young adulthood in England, Part IV with her marriage to Arthur and escape through pretended suicide and Part V with her resolution in exile. This division reflects Atwood's gradual development of a psychoanalytic perspective throughout the novel.

Joan's early childhood is one of a victim in Position Two as delineated in Survival. Atwood gives us a detailed view of Joan's early life and makes it clear that most of her difficulties with adult relationships are caused by transferences and projections from childhood experiences. Joan's mother represents the difficult but inevitable legacy of the younger protagonist. Joan reflects on her mother's ambition to shape her into her
own mould in terms which reveal that Joan's lack of self-worth is the only
gift her mother has been able to transmit:

Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but
large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right
thing. But she didn't push all the time; it wasn't that she was
aggressive and ambitious, although she was both these things.
Perhaps she wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd
ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out
and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her,
the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge
edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped
into anything for which she could get a prize (LO 67).

Joan's father is an insensitive and irresponsible man who is an
anaesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. As a doctor, he has two sets
of costumes, namely 'healer' and 'killer'. He goes to war leaving his wife
pregnant and does not return home until Joan is five years old. He is a
heartless wreck who abandons his wife and little daughter and lets them
fend for themselves. He suspects his wife of infidelity. Consequently,
Joan's mother remains a silent victim at the hands of her father. Her
mother says: "You don't know what it was like, all alone with her (Joan) to
bring up while you were over there enjoying yourself [...]. It's not as
though I wanted to have her. It's not as though I wanted to marry you [...]

had to make the best of a bad job” (LO 82). Thus, she is trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and was “stranded in domesticity - a plastic - shrouded tomb from which there was no exit” (LO 201) for her.

Joan realizes that she is an “accident,” the unwanted daughter of an insecure, unhappy woman and carries her sad story around her neck like “a rotting albatross” (LO 238). Fran, her mother, cares primarily about “what kind of impression she makes” and never grows to accept her life. Joan describes her as “an anxious, prudish adult” (LO 46) “too intense to be likeable” (LO 180), with “a hawk's eye for anything out of place” (LO 66), “menacing and cold” (LO 214). Fran “had been told to do with a sulky fat slot of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her” (LO 178). Joan adds: “I and my father had totally failed to justify her life the way she felt it should have been justified” (LO 178). What Joan’s mother fails to see is that she is, at least partly, responsible for her misery, for, instead of living in accordance with her own inner self, she has let her society tell her how to live her life.

Joan's addiction to plots is a legacy from her mother. Suggestions that Joan as not a wanted child, but illegitimately conceived in a relationship between her mother and a wealthy young man, lead us to believe that the marriage to Joan's father was motivated by his name, ‘de la court’. With his magical powers over life and death, he was indeed a knight
to the rescue and a model for Joan's relationships with the Polish Count or the royal Arthur.

Names are significant as Joan soon realizes; they establish expectations, though they are frequently confusing too. Metamorphoses are suggested through her first name as well, changes which underline their own inadequacy since they result in alienation rather than identity.

"What's in a name?" muses Joan:

Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, and destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had will power, and she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn't have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille Le Sueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat (LO 42).

As a fat girl, Joan can never be thin like the screen idol. This fantasy of the transformation of ordinary girls into starlets on the magic screen seems to provide a model for Joan's alienation from herself. Even though in her new thinness Joan indeed undergoes such a metamorphosis, the fact that she remains encumbered in her mental image of herself with
her Fat Girl's body makes this an incomplete change. Then, there is the other incarnation that the name suggests, an inverse one from saint to witch:

May be my mother didn't name me after Joan Crawford after all, I thought; she just told me that to cover up. She named me after Joan of Arc; didn't she know what happened to women like that? They were accused of witchcraft; they were roped to the stake (LO 336).

Aunt Lou, ‘Joan’s early mother–image’ educates her niece in matters of the heart and harbours characteristics opposite to those of Joan’s mother, Fran, a woman caught in conventionality. Fran herself explains the difference between the two women, saying of Aunt Lou, “she's good-hearted but she just doesn't care what kind of an impression she makes” (LO 86). Aunt Lou declares to Joan by way of self-analysis, “that’s just the way I am [...]. If other people can’t handle it, that’s their problem. Remember that, dear. You can’t always choose your life, but you can learn to accept it” (LO 88). Having married at nineteen a man who was seven years older and a compulsive gambler, because “she was madly in love with him [...]. He was tall, dark and handsome” (LO 80), Aunt Lou is abandoned by her husband and provides a model of fatalistic emotional vulnerability which is, for her niece, both appealing and dangerous. She reports thus about their relationship:
Then he’d come back and if he’d lost he’d tell me how much he loved me, if he’d won he’d complain about being tied down. It was very sad, really. One day he just never came back. May be they shot him for not paying. I wonder if he's still alive; if he is, I suppose I’m still married to him (LO 90).

The utter casualness with which she describes their relationship points to its coldness and unnaturality. After her frustrating experiences with her husband, Aunt Lou settles down as the Head, Department of Public Relations, of a Canadian firm. The sad tale of victimization of Aunt Lou further influences Joan's thinking on man - woman relationships and she begins to assess social relations from a fresh perspective. Joan benefits a lot from her association with Aunt Lou. She learns a great deal about the oppressive nature of the patriarchal world and the helplessness of women in playing out the roles prescribed by men in the contemporary society from the life of Aunt Lou. These lessons go a long way in shaping her views on unequal man - woman relations.

Once, Joan visits the Canadian National Exhibition along with Aunt Lou. She looks upon this visit as a "melancholy pilgrimage" (LO 155) and is deeply moved by the sight of a freak show of a Fat Lady on a tiny platform. After the "death defying" (LO 112) feat on the high wire, the Fat Lady has to return to "the freak show to sit in her oversized chair with her knitting and be gaped at by the ticket buyers. That was her real life" (LO
112). While the performance is painful and mortifying to the Fat Lady, the show is entertaining to the spectators.

Through this incident, Atwood seems to comment on the general plight of women who sacrifice themselves to please others. Joan analyses this fantasy in the light of her "mothball" (LO 50) dance at school. Seven years old Joan was pretty fat and so she was stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance. She shed tears when she had to put on the white teddy-bear costume and hang around her neck a large sign that said "Mothball". She felt naked and exposed in the dance. She found the whole thing "grossly unfair" (LO 53) on the part of society. Therefore, she withdrew from the dancing school thinking that overweight should not be a criterion for judging women.

Joan feels that good-looking women are as horribly exploited and oppressed as ugly fat women by men. Atwood deliberately portrays Joan as a fat girl in the novel to question male attitudes to women's body, thereby presenting Joan "as a victim of sexist social pressures". According to Molly Hite, "Fat is a feminist issue", and "excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions appropriate". Joan is enraged by the attitude of the society towards woman's body: "What a shame [...] how destructive to me were the attitudes of society, forcing me into a mould of femininity that I could never fit, stuffing me into those ridiculous pink tights, those
spangles, those outmoded, cramping ballet slippers” (LO 112). The sensitive Joan feels very much humiliated at the sight of the costumed Fat Lady in the Exhibition. From this pathetic sight she learns to be “very true, very right, very pious” (LO 112) in her intentions to write about forced female roles in society.

With the death of Aunt Lou, Joan makes her first escape. She frees herself from the clutches of her mother, just as soon as she has the financial motivation to lose the ungainly weight that had made her a social outsider during all her growing years. Having “dicted away her magic cloak of blubber” (LO 141), she heads for a new life in England.

Joan meets Paul when she falls off a double-decker bus in London. He is a Polish Count, who poses as “Mavis Quilp”, the writer of Nurse Novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. He offers her his Nurse Novels, which are trashy books dealing with illicit relations between doctors and nurses, and compliments her for having “the body of a goddess”. Thus, she appears to him as a goddess in moments of contemplative passion. Paul is as wildly romantic as is Joan herself. While Joan fantasizes about being a romance heroine, Paul fantasizes about being a romance hero. He feels that he has missed his chance of becoming a hero by escaping from Poland in a cowardly manner during the Russian invasion. He hopes there will be another war “so that he himself might fight in it and distinguish himself by acts of bravery […]. He didn’t picture
war as tanks, missiles and bombs; he pictured it as himself on a horse back with a sabre, charging against impossible odds” (LO 158).

To kill time, Joan begins to write. She takes the name Louisa K. Delacourt as the pseudonym under which she writes the Costume Gothics. Joan uses the pattern of Aunt Lou's eccentric life to shape her Gothic heroines, career women of a kind who lure away other women's husbands and find a shaky happiness. Perhaps she reflects upon her mother, too, for Joan divulges that “in my books all wives (like Fran Delacourt) were eventually either mad or dead, or both” (LO 319). And so, Joan's private life as a writer is always devoted to remembering her female ancestors, and that process merely becomes her primary occupation in Terremoto.

Joan's striking physical metamorphosis from fat girl to thin provides the more dramatic shedding of her younger self, but her physical change is outward only:

Her camouflages and fibs are thoroughly conscious, although her improvisations come less from the desire to deceive than an oddly innocent longing for happy endings. She is not trying to escape reality so much as to help it along; to this end she has never found the truth “convincing”. While she suppresses nothing in her own mind, her problem is to understand and rationalize the several selves she has lived, both in her real life and in her active fantasy world. Hers is
not the simple dichotomy of an embattled natural self versus synthetic personality as in the first two novels, but rather, she faces the knowledge of multiplicity of selfhood, co-existent and sometimes at war within one’s being. Joan’s supposedly discarded life has a way of catching up with her, actually and psychologically.⁶

She has been an imaginary thin girl when she was actually fat and she is an imaginary fat woman while she is actually thin. She is still haunted by her other self from which she is unable to free her mind: “The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant super - imposed on my own” (LO 216). All this emerges quite neatly in her writing problems with “Stalked by Love”, the costume gothic she tries to write during her Terremoto exile.

Initially, Joan embarks on her secret career as a pulp writer out of financial necessity, taking the idea from Paul, who makes extra money with Nurse Novels. But soon Joan explores the personality of Paul as a manipulator. She realizes that he is a threat to her identity as a writer. She gives reasons for not being able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. First, she detests him because he considers a woman as an “empty vessel” and prescribes her the roles such as child-bearing and sewing;
second, she resents his categorization of women as 'wives' and 'mistresses' - a derogatory word. She says:

It's an odd term, 'mistress', was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged; wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover (LO167).

Third, she learns that he believes in 'cataclysmic' relationships; fourth, she discovers that he claims man to be superior to woman. In fact, he declares: "[...] the mystery of the man is of the mind, where as that of the woman is of the body" (LO 188). In short, he considers a woman far inferior to a man in respect of intellectual pursuits. So, for all these above-mentioned reasons, she leaves Paul for Arthur.

Paul represents conventional males: in contrast, Arthur is a radical who poses as a revolutionary and champions the cause of the oppressed. Atwood attacks not only conventional thinking which casts woman as inferior to man but also revolutionary thinking which exposes the shallowness and hypocrisy of the pseudo-radicals among men.

Joan meets Arthur by chance while she is walking through the Hyde Park, composing "Escape from Love," a piece which she writes to escape from Paul. She gets involved in a romance with Arthur, who is associated with the 'ban-the-bomb movement' (LO 189) as a 'leaflet man' and later in a civil rights movement. He changes his theories constantly. He
transforms himself from Lord Russell to Mao. Thus, he is seen as a multi-layered personality with various colourful revolutionary costumes. He proposes to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. He says: “Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would be better acquainted. If it didn’t work out, well, it would be a learning experience. Most importantly, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately” (LO 220). Joan yields and is trapped in the maze of incomprehensive, 'unresponsive' and 'apathetic' marriage. The so-called radical husband, Arthur, turns out to be always ‘coldly dialectical’ (LO 220).

Joan is dismayed when she discovers that Arthur, the so-called 'leftist' husband, expects her to be a cook. For the sake of her love for Arthur, she changes her right attitude and obeys him. She tries her hand at cooking. She soon realizes Arthur's sadism when he enjoys her failures as a cook. She says:

Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red-hot platter on the floor, having forgotten to put on my oven mitt; he liked to hear me swearing in the kitchen; and when I would emerge sweaty-faced and disheveled after one of my battles, he would greet me with a smile and a little joke, or perhaps even a kiss, which was as much for the display, the energy I’d wasted, as
for the food. My frustration and anger were real, my failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience (LO 234-35).

Joan is aware that Arthur wants to turn her into a domestic servant to serve him for years. Further, Arthur also imposes restrictions that Joan should not wear long fashionable dresses in public because he feels that she may attract exploiters. He becomes sadistic in the bedroom. In spite of his oddities, she plays her role as a dutiful wife. She hopes to win his love some day as it is time for them "to settle down somewhere, a little more permanently, and have children" (LO 238). But Arthur deplores her suggestion. He festoons their bedroom with every known form of birth-control device and urges her to take the pill.

Joan gets bored and frustrated in her marital life with Arthur as he does not understand her ideals and aspirations. She defines him as a "cloaked, sinuous and faintly menacing stranger" (LO 241). She finds the gothics an emotional necessity. At this time, she publishes her piece, "Love Defied". Her pseudonymous activity gives her a secret independent identity, the freedom of a private bank account, but more importantly, the fantasy life of the costume gothic scenario. But she hides her identity as a writer from her husband. Arthur has kept Joan so fearful that she suppresses her several identities. To Arthur, Joan, as readers come to know her, hardly exists. Writing serves a therapeutic purpose for Joan as it soothes and consoles her mind. She realizes the genuine need to be a
committed writer to serve the community. Hence, she gets her book, "Lady Oracle" on 'male - female relationships' published.

Lady Oracle is a metafiction using the device of a novel within a novel to allow the heroine finally to recognize and accept the legitimacy of all her identities. Joan, the narrator of the story, defines herself as different from Joan, the writer. Joan is constantly confronted with an endless reflection of infinite images of herself which multiply in the distance. Every woman is many women, just as every story is many stories. Joan is also Louisa Delacourt, writer of Costume Gothics, and Joan Foster, Arthur's wife and celebrated author of 'Lady Oracle'.

Joan Foster is most herself as Louisa K.Delacourt, and all the other Joan Fosters are afraid the world will find out. What would her husband Arthur, the radical standard - bearer in anyone's hopeless cause, think of his wife exploiting the people?

What would her lover, Chuck, the way-out 'Master of the Con-Create Poem', think of his cult figure piece revealed as just another hustler? What would the reputable publishing firm of Morton and Sturgess, the establishment organization that had catapulted the unknown Ms.Foster to instant fame as the poetess of the season, think of their discovery being exposed as a notorious literary hack?
Arthur is appalled by the news of the publication of “Lady Oracle”. He is bewildered by the sudden emergence of Joan as a writer. He feels embarrassed by the theme of her book. Her interview on TV is a terrible humiliation to him. He behaves as though she has committed "some unpardonable and unmentionable sin" (LO 262) by giving an interview on TV. “He feels as though the book just does not exist, but at the same time is hurt by it because it assails his misogynist mentality” (LO 263). He begins to look at her as a betrayer. He involves himself completely in the activities of Resurgence, a ‘left-oriented’ magazine. Marlene, a married woman, who is the managing editor of Resurgence and who has an illicit affair with Sam, the assistant editor, is a ‘paragon’ of virtue for Arthur. In fact, Joan's home is converted into “a camp - ground littered with other people's garbage, physical, emotional” (LO 280) of Arthur's colleagues.

Life becomes difficult for Joan. Tears trickle down her face. She sells her piece, “Love, My Ransom” and takes Arthur for a “honey-moon”. She hopes to have reconciliation with him. But there is no change in his attitude towards her. Her relationship with him is like that of a father with his "smart kids who got bad report cards” (LO 34). His goddamned theories and ideologies make her puke. It is this attitude of Arthur that "prompts Joan to escape rather than confront - escape from the overpowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference”. She is anguished by the sad state of affairs at home.
We see Arthur, in turn, pass through his own series of identities - pamphleteer in a British Ban the Bomb movement, U.S civil rights activist, writer for a Canadian nationalist tabloid - all of which fail to supply him with an acceptable sense of self. Joan realizes that he "was very good at respecting people's minds, initially. But he would always manage to find some flaw, some little corner of dry rot" (LO 228). Arthur then experiences a growing contempt, disillusionment, and apathy. Cut off, too, from ties to home and parents, Arthur is unable to form an intimate bond with Joan and remains isolated. She explains that "no matter what I did, Arthur was bound to despise me. I could never be what he wanted" (LO 247); Arthur "didn't trust me" (LO 230).

Arthur's pathology results from an inability to interact with the dominant order effectively, "perhaps reflecting his sense that Canada's historical ties with the parent country, England, have been served, yet a working alliance with the United States has not been acceptably formed". Separated from his past and with no distinct and purposeful future, Arthur's desperate search for an adequate sense of self cannot, unfortunately send him to his wife for guidance; as rigidly conventionally male, Arthur is unwilling to look to Joan for help, and she, entangled as she is in self-deception, is incapable of offering it.

Arthur is indifferent to his wife because of his own "complicated and possibly sadistic reason" (LO 303) of victimizing her. It is this
indifference of Arthur that drives the naïve and gullible Joan to get involved with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, a "homicidal maniac" (LO 303) with costumes. He wants to be Joan's husband. He meets Joan after her TV interview. He poses as a "con-create" poet and invites her to the show called SQUAWSHT at an art gallery. He appears before her with "red hair [...] an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled upward at the ends, the beard pointed [...] wearing a long black cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills" (LO 266) and drags her into sexual immorality. Later on, he behaves "more and more like Chuck Brewer and less and less like the Royal Porcupine"\(^{10}\) and blasts a dynamite for sensational news.

He wants Joan to leave Arthur and move in with him. He accuses her of not being motivated to leave her husband and comments: "You're like an out of control school bus" (LO 300). When Joan meets him next at his apartment he is no longer the Royal Porcupine. He appears as Chuck Brewer who looks plundered with his hair cut short and the beard shaved off. "[...] no cap, no cane, no gloves, just a pair of jeans and a T-Shirt that said Honda on it" (LO301). He rips down his dynamite poster and throws it into the pile of his costumes. Joan is troubled by his unexpected behaviour and screams with anger. She realizes that Chuck has planned to
occupy Arthur's place and to manipulate her by transforming himself into someone like Arthur.

Having known Joan's frustrated marital life, Paul reappears with a new layer of personality as a successful businessman and wants to kidnap her from Arthur. He tries to brainwash her. “You can trust me. You were a child; you did not know your own mind. Now you are a woman. You will leave this man, you will divorce, we will be happy [...]. If you tell him it is I you love, he will [...]. But I have friends. If necessary I shall steal you” (LO 312) She does not want to be rescued by him. She realizes that Paul does not love her but he wants “the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous Communists” (LO 315).

Fraser Buchanan (who meets Joan after her TV interview) appears to Joan in the bedroom. He is dressed in “a tweed jacket with the leather patches and a trendy turtle - neck sweater, plus a pair of black gloves” (LO 318). He poses as “The Montreal Poet” (LO 288). He too has two sets of costumes - a lover of arts and a fake - researcher. He threatens to blackmail her. He says: “The fact is, I know a good deal more about you than you think. I know things. I'm sure you would rather keep [...] private. Just between us two”(LO288). He cites a few incidents from the private life of Joan to black-mail her for sex and money but she rebuffs him saying that “I'm married, remember?” (LO 322)
Fraser Buchanan lets Joan know the existence of his 'black notebook' (LO 322) which is a collection of the data about the lives of women - his 'clients'. He is a sort of an 'agent' (LO 322) who knows about the private lives and secret identities of several authors including Joan. The note book is organized like a diary and it documents the personal and public lives of women writers from head to toe. It is clear from his use of the book that blackmail is the very breath of Fraser's life. Money, sex and power are the tools of his business of literary criticism. The language used by Fraser in his 'black notebook' is primarily to oppress female writers and therefore it is, what Jacques Derrida calls, "the unity of violence and writing". Joan realizes that language in Fraser's book is "inherently phallocentric since it merely establishes relationships of power between a victim and victimizer - a fact that manifests itself most obviously in the attempts made by the sexist Fraser Buchanan to blackmail Joan (and) to assert power over her by threatening to speak".

Therefore, Joan seizes his black notebook and runs away when he is in a drunken state. She tears out a choice page from the notebook, seals it in an envelope and sends it to Fraser 'like the ear of kidnap victim'. Thus, she lets him know that she is in possession of his notebook. She also encloses a note: "If anything happens to me the book is in good hands. One word from you and it goes to the police" (LO 324). Thus, Joan pays Buchanan back in his own coin.
Joan receives anonymous phone calls, threatening notes and dead animals on the doorstep - signs of malevolence against her. She suspects that Arthur in collusion with Paul, Chuck, and Fraser, has plotted against her to get rid of her, because most of these sinister things occur when Arthur is not at home. She believes that they have all planned together to do her harm in some undetectable way. Ultimately, Joan concludes that every man with whom she has come across has had two costumes. She says:

My father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer, even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? The fact that I'd taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening (LO 325-26).

In spite of her knowledge of the true nature of these men, Joan does not stop loving them, but her love is unrequited. So, she muses thus:

“'I felt I'd never really loved anyone - not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection enhanced and sparkling”'(LO314-15).
Despite all temptations, Joan zealously guards her individuality and refuses to walk into the traps laid by the men she encounters. She knows that Arthur – ‘a hero’, wears the mask of a villain whereas the other men, who are villains, wear the masks of heroes. Ultimately, she becomes the hero herself - the ‘Lady Oracle’. In Lady Oracle, Joan shares Marian’s division of self, but she possesses conscious knowledge of past, present, and multiple selves. Marian shows different sides of herself to Peter and Duncan, but Joan invents new identities, even new pasts, for a variety of different men. The unnamed narrator of Surfacing becomes the multi-named narrator of Lady Oracle. She is the fat, prosaic Joan Delacourt, who by age nineteen weighed 245 pounds. She is the thin Joan Foster, who after a fling with a Polish Count, marries a dull Canadian political activist and then has an affair with the Royal Porcupine. She is Joan Foster, author (via automatic writing) of a book of poems entitled “Lady Oracle”. Finally she is Louisa K. Delacourt, successful writer of costume gothics.

The Edible Woman’s rejection of food here becomes overindulgence, a use of eating as a means of defiance and escape. Joan becomes a cultural idol, a darling of the media, largely because her poetry makes men, including her own husband, feel threatened. But Joan’s life comes to seem as sinister and complicated as the world of her creation, and her paranoia and desire for escape send her to pseudo-suicide – “a trashy, melodramatic fiction, both stagily convenient and perhaps morally
reprehensible”.13 Joan’s pain is caused by the clash between her multi-coloured fantasies and dull grey reality. Her overwhelming desire to see herself as a ‘heroine’, perfect in every way and utterly desirable, is thwarted time and again.

With her final escape, Joan thinks that she would step into a new life—a less murky and a clearer one, but it does not materialize. She asks herself, “where is the new life I’d intended to step into as easily as crossing a river?” (LO 310). This thought awakens her to sort out her life. She begins to think of ways and means of improving and reforming herself. Her recovery begins with a speculation about her mistakes of escapism, of being obsessed with her ‘fat self’, of indulging in fantasies and of being steeped in her romances. Her misadventures have done great harm. And she decides to be pragmatic, to return and face life head on: “I should have stayed where I was and faced reality” (LO 372).

She is now ready to accept the reality that Arthur loves her in spite of her false pretences and consequently stops feeling rejected. She would stay put and face the consequences rather than be scared of Arthur and his reactions. The obsessive, wildly romantic fantasies of Joan Foster prevent her from coming to grips with reality.

Unable to distinguish between fantasy and fact, Joan fails disastrously in her numerous attempts to live out one trashy, melodramatic script after another. Joan’s
Quixotic mind-set, the chaos of her psyche and her multiple selves are brilliantly conveyed to us through the form of the novel.¹⁴

Unlike Atwood’s second novel, *Surfacing*, which is essentially tidy in form, *Lady Oracle* has a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and meander.

Gothic fantasy has for centuries romanticized the victimization of women. Gothics are essentially mystery novels written largely by women for women. According to Juliann E Fleenor, women seek out gothic romances “to receive confirmation, and eventually, affirmation that love really is what motivates and justifies a woman’s life”.¹⁵ Moreover, through identification with the Gothic heroine, the reader escapes into a world in which excitement, mystery, danger, and action occur side by side with domestic activities and social roles that women have traditionally performed.

Writers of popular Gothics con readers into believing that they are reading about ‘real’ life through elaborate descriptions of clothes, appearances and furnishings. As a writer of Costume Gothics, Joan devotes a lot of attention to the clothes of her heroines, heroes, villains and rival females for she thinks that if only she can get the clothes right, everything else will fall into line. Her obsession with costumes in her novels spills over into her private life. Each time Joan sheds an identity, she discards the
clothes associated with it and tries to transform herself into a different person. For instance, after her fake suicide she thinks it necessary not only to bury her “funeral costume” (LO 19) belonging to her “former self” but also to cut and dye her hair an innocuous brown and dress like a tourist.

The victimization of the heroine serves a necessary function in the formulaic plot of gothic fantasy. Although the heroine typically shows independence and courage, the pattern allows her to do very little for herself. The actions of the heroine in her own behalf only create the need for a saviour.

Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle relies explicitly on Gothic traditions. Joan is a writer of Gothic romances who follows their promises of romantic escape in her own life. Lady Oracle's heroine, Joan, learns life's lesson only after her Gothic obsession has led her into serious mistakes. For Joan, the mistakes are much more serious. Like the heroines of Gothic naturalism, she fabricates prisons of romantic self-deception. Atwood herself describes, her heroines as ones who "have become their own prisons".16

With each man in her life, Joan hopes for a happy ending. She can never reach it; she can never complete the recognition-transformation process, because her world is not the world of Gothic fantasy. Each of the men important to Joan seems first a hero, then a villain. She envisions
them sometimes as double-natured (LO 325), sometimes as many natured (LO 236), sometimes as masked—good by evil, evil by good (LO 300).

She flees from a lonely and banal existence into the arms of Paul, her first lover. Her life with him turns out to be hardly less lonely and even more banal. Her growing uneasiness with him necessitates her casting of Arthur in the role of a hero. From Arthur, she escapes to the Royal Porcupine, whose eccentric appearance promises material for heroic transformation. To her horror, though, she transforms him backwards into the antiheroic Chuck Brewer. Clean-shaven and T-shirted, Chuck is too much reality for Joan, who flees back to Arthur. When mysterious incidents make her fear that her life is in danger, she plans the ultimate escape by faking her own death.

Joan needs a change of perception in order to move beyond passivity and self-imposed victimization. Unlike the fantasy heroine who faces physical danger, Joan's fears stem not so much from external threats as from internal ones. On her escapes into love, Joan carries with her a heavy load of guilt, shame, and deception regarding her past and her 'real self'. Her need to see men as heroes, to escape into them, results from her desire to escape the unglamorous facts about herself. It forces Joan to deny aspects of herself not acceptable in a heroine. These denials create 'ghosts', terrors resembling those of gothic fantasy, but these ghosts are suppressed selves that return to haunt her: "I wanted to forget the past, but
it refused to forget me, it waited for sleep, and then cornered me” (LO 239).

Paradoxically, by modeling herself on the innocent, passive heroines of gothic fantasy, Joan is more and more haunted by guilt. Her habit of deception can be seen as a form of self destruction, making her ‘confusion and fear’ increase until they become intolerable. Finally, Joan must either destroy her selves completely (as she has tried and failed to do) or enter the maze and face the ghosts she herself has created.

The scene in which Felicia, the ‘female foil’ of Joan's gothic novel, enters the maze dramatizes Joan's ‘confusion and fear’. Half fearful, half fascinated, Joan imagines her simplified projection, Felicia, being drawn into the maze. The path closes behind her and she is trapped with Joan's other alter egos. When she asks the way back, one Joan - self replies : “We have all tried to go back. That was our mistake” (LO 342). The way in which Joan's simplified, partial selves have entered the maze prevents them from getting out without further destruction. These selves are caught because her way of escape, time after time, is to tell another lie, ‘kill’ another self, and enter another maze - another man. The mysterious door they point to as the ‘only way out’ of the maze opens to reveal Redmond, the gothic hero - villain, then a series of other hero – villains ; Joan's father, Paul the Royal Porcupine, the man with icicle teeth, Arthur, and then Redmond again.
“Both the necessity for and the process of a change in the foundations of perception are dramatized in Lady Oracle in a drive to connect.” Joan Delacourt must reject this polarity and accept the multiplicity of her being in order to find herself. “Joan plays with triple mirrors, which disrupt any temptation to dualism, opening up an infinity of perspectives that eventually encompass all the characters of the novel within the expanding persona of the mirror, Joan.” The narrative itself is a narrative within a narrative. Atwood plays with the notion of distorting mirrors, convex and concave, foregrounding here the central issue of the novel, that all reflections are distortions, all mimetic representations lies:

I (Joan) felt very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I’d never said but which appeared in the news papers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my fun-house mirror reflection.

(LO250-51).

Joan’s life is increasingly taken over by the lives of her fictional creations when she, as Felicia, moves into the labyrinth. Ultimately, there are no boundaries, only perpetual metamorphoses, for the writers are intrigued by the point at which one thing becomes another.

Joan fragments her personality through multiplication, rather than by division. And within Lady Oracle, we move between past and present,
between Toronto and London, between Italy and ancient Greece as rapidly as Joan changes costumes or sentences. Lady Oracle is the lady within the mirror, alias the Great Goddess, alias mother, alias Joan. Joan gives her own attributes, red hair and white body, to Penelope in “Love, My Ransom” and to Felicia in her current novel, placing her, too, “at a vanity in front of a mirror” (LO 318). Joan confuses her pronouns, taking herself as Charlotte into the maze (LO 332) in an ever increasing number of the blurrings of the boundaries between art and life.

In a final gesture, wearing the mask of Felicia, Joan strikes Redmond, who looks like Arthur and turns out to be Fraser Buchanan. It is fitting that Joan’s story leads her at this point through the maze to one man who has managed to put together the fragments of her story. Everything converges from the moment she gives herself up to multiplicity. When she sees herself playing the role of the many wives of Redmond, she gains her power to kill him.

Paradoxically, in the process of discovering her own guilt, Joan gains a new strength. That strength comes from having glimpsed the responsibility of inter-relatedness. Seeing her own victimization fuel a system of exploitation frees her from her paralyzing need to remain innocent. After all, there can be no villains without victims.

Although Joan does not give up fantasizing even at the end, continuing to play the role of a nurse to the reporter she has attacked and
wounded, there is no denying the fact that the process of 'becoming' for Joan begins in her decision to accept responsibility for her action and thus symbolically assert her will. In all the novels of Atwood, the ending marks the beginning of the process of 'becoming' which may eventually lead to 'being'. As Atwood says, “I never make Prince Charming endings because I don't believe in them. But I do believe that people can change. Maybe not completely but some”.¹⁹ Atwood does not believe in one - (WO) man revolutions. She believes in progressive evolutions that may eventually lead to the humanization of the woman in the socializing and idealizing male world. As Atwood says, Joan at the end of the novel has “gotten as far as saying I am who I am, take it or leave it”.²⁰

Atwood’s Lady Oracle makes us re-vision our notion of reality and see every human being as a fascinating mixture of reality and fantasy. Popular art, radio, television, movies and advertising fill our minds with standardized images which force us to live narrow, limited lives. Unlike serious art, popular art (fairy tales, romances, gothics and science fiction) reduces life and language to cliché. Joan, who writes Costume Gothics, is both a creator and a victim of popular art. Writers of popular art feed their readers with regressive escape fantasies.

In her 1981 address to the Amnesty International, Atwood bemoans the popularity of such art when she says:
In Canada, the artist’s duty is to entertain and divert nothing more [...]. On the whole the audience prefers art not to be a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland and all other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth.  

By and large, women feel the need for escape to a greater extent than men. This is so because “the weight of patriarchal tradition educates women into nothingness and denies them transcendence of being”.  

Elizabeth Janeway is of the opinion that popular literature functions as a psychological safety valve for women. She writes:

[...] very few women can be really good at everything they are expected to do. Some are good mothers and bad wives, while some devoted wives and loving mothers are perfectly terrible home-makers. Some women who can do all these things adequately find it hard to shift back and forth from one to the other as quickly as may be needed. As a result, there is almost always a little failure packaged in with any woman’s success in playing her various roles [...]. Men are more free to walk away from failure than women. Women’s traditional role demands that she go on doing things even if she knows she’s not very good at them. So women more or less have to live with a knowledge that they are failures in certain areas of
their lives and see themselves as disappointing creatures who have to act out their disappointments over and over.  

Joan likewise defends her readers’ pure need for escape when she says:

Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back [...]. Escape wasn’t a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them [...] neatly packaged [...]. I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it (LO 34-35).

Joan feels that by offering “a vision of a better world” (LO 35), she is providing succor to the thousands of depressed women, who read her books. Her self-delusion prevents her from realizing that by giving false hopes she is encouraging them to accept their victim positions passively, instead of actively striving to change them.

Fairy tales generally emphasize physical beauty and fine clothes and imply that girls who deserve happiness are invariably gentle, affectionate, forgiving, obedient, hardworking and home loving. The men in these tales are either heroes who rescue the virtuous sweet-hearts in distress, or they are villains. “None of the tales say what the future holds for plain-looking or overweight girls like young Joan or for men like Paul, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine who, far from being rescuers, themselves need to be rescued from their life-denying ego-cages”.  

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan, her
mother, Aunt Lou, the Polish Count and Paul are shown to be victims of gender stereotypes.

It is important to note that though Joan desires the simple, romance-filled life of her heroines and relishes the escape that her work provides her with, she feels that her own novels fail to satisfy her inner needs. She admits this: “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” (LO 216). Her disillusionment with Gothics is because they misrepresent life and only serve to alienate her and her readers from their own inner selves as well as from those around them.

During one of her rare moments of self-awareness, Joan realizes that all her fantasies have turned into traps and that all through her life she has been moving from one form of bondage to another. Joan thinks to herself:

I might as well face it, [...] I was an artist, an escape artist. I’d sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and the locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else have I ever done? (LO334)

*Lady Oracle* thus parodies Gothic fiction, romance literature and the numerous fictions we live by.
Through *Lady Oracle*, the autobiography of Joan Foster, Atwood proclaims that both men and women are equal as they have the same human capabilities and therefore gender-based injustices should be fought against in society. *Lady Oracle* exhorts women not to barter reality for a pseudo security promised by male. It also reveals that women no longer wish to be scapegoats in the mazes, thickets, and brambles of life. It encourages women to be bold enough to face life head on. It makes clear that they must no longer hold on to the wife-mother role as it has been interpreted in the past. It exhorts them to exercise their autonomy and be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

The protagonist in *The Edible Woman* only learns to live meaningfully but she does not endeavour to change her society, where as Joan Foster, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, wishes to transform society through her writing and thus deconstructs male discourse in which the victimization and trapping of women are romanticized for centuries.

Atwood believes that “fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects”. As a self-conscious political and didactic writer, therefore, Atwood in her fiction not only reflects society but also aims to re-form it by exposing, as in *Lady Oracle* - the damaging effects of duplicity in women who succumb to patriarchal forces.