Chapter III

Margaret Atwood’s Novels of the 70s
Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* (1972), published at the time when Canadian life styles seemed threatened by American cultural imperialism, displays an urge to locate an ‘authentic’ national identity even as it undermines the naivety of the simplistic assumptions underlying this desire. In *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator revisits the island which was her childhood home ostensible to solve the mystery of her father’s mysterious disappearance, but actually to piece together a sense of her own identity from the fragments of a traumatic past. She is accompanied by three friends, her lover Joe, and David and Anna, a married couple who wish to collect footage for a documentary film.

The narrator’s voice reveals a personality scarred by painful personal experiences that have left her numb and withdrawn; her detached, undemanding relationship with the inarticulate and uncommunicative job is a symptom of this state of mind. Gradually, we realize that she is un-unreliable story teller with a penchant for distortion and invention that jeopardizes the credibility of her account. The narrative carries suggestions that her private trauma is related to a larger social
malaise, of David and Anna, as well as in the desecration of the natural habitat by Americans and Canadians alike. The idea of subjectivity encompasses both private and public spheres. A series of images, the documentary entitled 'Random Samples', the stuffed moose family at the gas station, the dead heron strung up on the island, captures the fragmentation, hypocrisy, materialism and destructiveness that the narrator sees as the effect of the cultural colonization of Canada by America. She is forced, however, to confront Canada's own complicity in this process in the encounter with the fishing party where national identities are mutually mistaken; Shuli Barzilai points out the discovery that the 'Americans' blamed for destroying the environment are actually Canadians highlights the 'instability and vulnerability' of a national identity based on an oppositional polemic.

In the course of the novel, the narrator goes through a 'breakdown' that seems to offer the possibility of liberation from the shackles of the past and the social pressures of the present. Alienated from her friends, whom she now perceives as enemies of nature, she stages an escape so that she is left behind on the island when they depart. By stages, she regressed beyond childhood to a quasi-animal condition where boundaries between self and world, perceiver and perceived, began to
dissolve. In a near-drowning experience, she encounters what she takes to be her father's dead body, in an underwater landscape full of 'sacred' native Canadian paintings. She resurfaces, literally and metaphorically, with a new awareness of the legacy of her parents, recognizing that the rational principle of order, control and authority, associated with her father, has limitations that need to be balanced by her mother's more subtle, initiations that need to be balanced by her mother's more subtle, intuitive, non-verbal response to experience. The childhood memory of the barometer, with its figures of the man and woman signifying rain and fair weather respectively, now acquires a special resonance, as a symbol of the balanced perspective which the narrator seeks to learn from her parents.

*Surfacing* is Atwood's earliest work of fiction which probed into the matter of artistic death of women and abortion. It was published in 1972 when the legal sanction of abortion was still debated in Canada. Before the publication of *Surfacing*, the trauma of abortion and artistic disintegrate had never been dealt so extensively as in this novel. It addresses itself to the traumatic effects the suppression of artistic sensibility and abortion by force have on a woman's psyche. Foremost among those creating this excitement is Margaret Atwood; in a lively interview with the writer, Ellen Coughlin notes Atwood's celebrity status.
The cover of the December 31 issue of *Maclean's* the Canadian counterpart of *Times* or *Newsweek* displays a photograph of Ms. Atwood (unidentified) with those of about a dozen other instantly recognizable celebrities of the year just past, including Pierre and Margaret, Trudeau, Jimmy Carter, Ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeni, and Jane Fonda.¹

The public adulation of Margaret Atwood is remarkable; academic opinion, while hardly as zealous, seems generally to agree with her adoring public. Critics find in her prose, as in her many volumes of poetry, technical ability and an original style. As an editor of the eminent journal, Canadian Literature, George Woodcock has reviewed the finest among Canada's younger generation of writers. In his opinion:

No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use.²

And in the concluding chapter of the three volume, collectively edited *Literary History of Canada*, Northrop Frye declares:

Atwood's *Surfacing* an 'extraordinary novel' which perfectly represents her own critical review of Canadian themes.³
Northrop Frye's praise is valuable precisely because he includes in his estimation Atwood's controversial critical work, *Survival*: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1971). The work is controversial not because it lacks either perception or utility but because *Survival* addresses itself to the common reader rather than to the scholarly one. Despite its dismissal by some members of the intellectual establishment, Frye and others in this same circle agree that *Survival* is "a most perceptive essay on an aspect of the Canadian sensibility."

Atwood's creative and critical writings indicate to positive advantage his influence upon the younger generation of Canadians. And while one cannot present a complete analysis of the parallels between Frye's theories and Atwood's methods, one will endeavour to suggest several key examples of his influence. What Margaret Atwood means by 'survival' is manifested clearly, according to Frye, in *Surfacing*:

Where the heroine is isolated from her small group and finds something very archaic, both inside and outside her, taking over her identity.⁴

While the issue in *Surfacing* is the reintegrating rather than the 'taking over' of identity, Frye's definition may prove serviceable. This novel is, as almost every critic and reviewer
who has ever written on the subject attests, a novel about identity on a national level and on the female, personal level.

"Perhaps, identity only is identity when it becomes, not militant, but a way of defining oneself against something else."5

The protagonist examines several aspects of identity. She juxtaposes her own historical generation with that of her parents. She contrasts how the members of the microcosm define themselves with how she does. She confronts true memory regarding her childhood beliefs and adult behaviour. She determines to unify her body or mind dichotomy, and this is her single most important achievement in establishing an identity. Nothing the correlation between isolation and identity is strategic to an understanding of *Surfacing*. Isolation on a physical level is assured by the journey into the wilderness; isolation from her peers is a complicated matter, however, because this generation is, itself, disconnected from both personal and historical identity.

Therefore, Atwood emphasizes the surfacer's isolation as being primarily a reflection of her generation's disconnection. Their microcosm of two men and two women moves into a physical isolation which increasingly defines them. They travel a few hours by car, yet they enter "foreign territory". The language and customs which separate Quebec from Ontario, these English
from those French Canadians, isolate these travellers. The novel's focus on isolation and identity sharpens with their journey.

That is, these four proceed deeper into geographical and symbolic separation, they move toward their final destination: an island. They must traverse a lake "blue and cool as redemption", and this water, in turn, becomes both a symbol of their isolation and of the surfacer's purification. The water is the medium for the surfacer's unification and survival.

This abandoned island seems a sustaining Eden for the four characters; who survive on produce from its neglected garden, on fish from its pillaged water. The island invites peaceful contemplation and self-renewal. But only the surfacer re-examines her connections, her personal values. Atwood's use of this highly symbolic island suggests another connection between Frye and this younger writer. Frye's Anatomy of Criticism notes that certain physical setting usually symbolizes what he calls:

"The point of epiphany where the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment."6

Such is the island of the surfacer's childhood identity against which she must now redefine herself. This island is an oracular place for the surfacer; here she confronts memory and her lost
parents and self-knowledge. And this return, not necessarily to a previous locale but to the natural world is a central motif in the Canadian novel noted in Edmund Wilson’s *O Canada* and Northrop Frye’s *The Busbe Garden*. Frye cites this “nostalgia for a world of peace and protection” as a “particularly strong” theme of Canadian identity. Atwood suggests the complexity of Frye’s “peaceable kingdom” by making the surfacer fear nature’s power to reveal the human identity. Thus, the surfacer must bridge the chasm between the natural and urban worlds in order to achieve passage into identity. Critic Margot Northey suggests that the surfacer is faced surfacer with not pastoral peace but “the double meanace of nature and civilization,” the isolation and quiet of the island force the character and self-scrutiny; she remembers her childhood identity.

The external conflict may in turn be connected to the internal conflict between primitive emotions and rationality displayed by the narrator.⁷

She fears this insular place where past and present collide; the surfacer fears learning of her father’s death, learning about herself, learning about her peers:

I want to go back where there is electricity and distraction. I’m used to it now, filling the time without it is an effort.⁸
In the unnatural natural quiet, the surfacer hears herself think; the thoughts are insistent and profoundly disturbing. Her identity faces a test not only of survival but renewal. Despite her protestation, however, the surfacer cannot escape knowledge. After a futile weekend's search for missing father, surfacer hopes the crisis is behind her. But, the protagonist must reconcile herself with the preceding generation. So driving is her need to unify with them and to understand their influences that the protagonist eventually summons the gusts of both parents. Knowledge shared between the quick and the dead, so prominent in Lagerlof's *The Treasure*, also provokes the character in *Surfacing* yet Atwood cannot depend, as can Lagerlof, on the Saga's traditional fusion of natural and supernatural elements to make such connection credible. For this first person narrative, Atwood must have another tradition; which she specifies quite succinctly in an informative discussion of *Surfacing* and literary ghosts:

You can have the James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's ownself which has split off and that to me is the interesting kind and that is, obviously, the tradition I'm working in.  

The surfacer reconciles within herself the human balances which her parents represent. She accepts emotional balance with each parent finding within herself her father's rationality
and her mother's understanding. The surfer's preoccupation 
with family history and emotional history estranges her from her 
peers, who abrogate all connection with history. Her reason for returning to this isolated retreat confounds and disturbs them.

But my reason for being here embarrasses them, they do not understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people David call his the pigs.¹⁰

This generation, apparently, prefers not only to judge but all to abandon parents. This denial seems aberrant; these adults seem unnatural, sprung without familial ties from their own imaginations. These four adults might also represent the first barrage of the fabled 'Baby Boom' yet seem disconnected even from this historical phenomenon. Each seems unwilling or unable to share personal history.

"My friend's pasts are vague to me and to each other also, any one of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice."¹¹

The surfer thus dispassionately assesses her contemporaries:

A little beer, a little pot, some political chitchat, the golden mean; we're the new bourgeoisie, this might as well be RecRoom.¹²
Each individual is isolated, preferring cliché to the risks of personal expression. Among these peers, too, form lacks content, and appearance symbolizes nothing deeper than its superficial reality. The protagonist notes David’s long hair and Joe’s beard as “just the style now, like crew cuts”. Divorced from both personal and cultural history, these adults seem disconnected from one another and themselves. The surfacer apprehends her separation from this company. These friends are of the instant coffee variety so common to our mobile times. The protagonist says of Anna:

“She’s my best friend, my best woman friend. I’ve known her two months.”\textsuperscript{13}

The protagonist cannot share her complex fears regarding her quest for the father and the resurgence of memory within herself; she fears that she will cry.

I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him. I’ll start crying that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I.\textsuperscript{14}

Her isolation from her own emotions seems peculiar, but her isolation seems even stranger since Joe, one of the company, is her present lover, Joe prefers stoicism, if not apathy, to shared emotion. For all the representatives of this generation, excepting
the surfacer, emotional links seem vestigial and suspect. Therefore, her sense of historical time, of familial responsibility, and of personal history isolates her from her peers. On this island, she sees herself, Joe, Anna and David as divided people, each isolated and imperilled by such separation. The surfacer begins part two of her quest, having reluctantly entered the lake for the first time, when this key internal monologue:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies,
I'm not against the body or the head either; only the neck which creates the illusion that they are separate.\textsuperscript{15}

Body and mind seem often to function separately or even at cross purposes, this split promotes a body-as-object attitude. This encounter with the dominant influence of her father and forces her to confront the facts of her past which she has so far repressed; her romantic tale of love, betrayal and tragic loss turns out to be a fabrication, as much a survival mechanism for herself as a strategy for winning the reader's sympathy. Her invented story of marriage, divorce and loss of custody of her child masks the more sordid reality of an affair with an art professor, leading up to an abortion which has left her riddled with guilt and secret anguish. The vision of her father's body merges, in her subconscious, with the image of the aborted
foetus, which floats up from her repressed memory to haunt her. Spirits, her ghosts of her parents as well as the native gods of a bygone age, surround her during her lonely vigil on the island; a seeming visitation from her father reveals the animal face of the thing you meet when you’ve stayed here too long alone, and it seems to her quite natural, now, to feel the presence of her mother feeding birds in a familiar posture suggestive of her closeness to nature and ‘nurture’. As she discard the trappings of ‘culture’ represented by cabin, clothes and cooked food, the narrator undergoes what may be described as an ‘ecofeminist’ experience, in which she senses a oneness with nature in terms of a common position of exploitation, by the forces of ‘civilization’.

"I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning."

She experiences a dissolution of the boundaries that compartmentalize conscious knowledge; possible a hallucination caused by the mushroom she has eaten, she herself interprets this mental condition as the acquisition of the wisdom which the spirits on the island wish to offer once the epiphanic moment is over, the narrator is deserted by the spirits of her parents and the gods are silent, because, as inhabitants of the past, they belong to a dimension she cannot enter; their wisdom must be reinterpreted according to the demands of the present. Having undergone a healing and restorative experience on the
'visionary' terrain of the island, she must now prepare herself for renewed participation in 'real' life on the mainland, where she must live by her own rules. For the value of the past lies in its ability to provide a key to the present; in her struggle with a painful heritage, the narrator, we are led to hope, has discovered the strength to meet the challenge of a future that continues to appear bleak:

"If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses are absolute, we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it's necessary, the intercession of words."17

Another fact of feminine existence is apparent in Atwood's *Surfacing* which has been hailed as a significant nationalist and feminist work of art. One's first impression of surfacing is that it is an extremely contemporary work in setting, social concerns, and diction, the elements which make the novel a signature as opposed to archetype. *Surfacing* deals with many basic concerns of feminine life, namely, marriage, divorce and abortion. The nameless narrator, representing the feminine conscience, is a distraught young woman who is in search of her father in the wilderness of Northern Quebec, the site of her childhood. At the outset the narrator would have us believe that her distraught
condition, caused by her sense of guilt and condition, is due to the possibility of her father's death coupled with her estrangement from her parents. But as she analyses the facts for her estrangement, we learn about more personal reason for her disturbed state. She first tells that it was her rushing into a marriage, and then, quite as suddenly, obtaining a divorce, leaving the child she had born in the custody of her husband:

They never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce, I don't think they even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising, since I didn't understand it myself. What upset them was the way I did it, so suddenly and then running off and leaving my husband and child, my attractive, full-colour magazine illustrations suitable for framing. Leaving my child that was the unpardonable Sin; it was no use trying to explain that it wasn't really mine.¹⁸

Now it becomes clear that the narrator has never been married. All her memories of the wedding are transposed memories of the abortion; and all her memories of the pain of childbirth are sublimated expressions of the horror that she experienced in aborting the foetus. The whole issue of marriage, divorce and custody is fabrication. Initially she would have us, including herself, believe that the concern over the
disappearance of her father is different pain invented to divert her attention from the real grief she is suffering as a result of the admits. Her own situation is unacceptable to her, that she is a young unmarried woman whose love affair with a married man ended, when he persuaded her to abort the child conceived in the act of love.

The trauma of abortion has never been dealt with such an extraordinary understanding before in fiction. Atwood’s novel was published when the legal sanction to abortion was still debatable. Once Atwood’s narrator admits reality of the abortion and that she had invented the divorce and custody issue as a less painful way to account for the loss of her child and lover, she determines to redeem herself and to reverse the process by conceiving another child. Thus the theme of death becomes the means of rebirth. To average herself, she chooses as the father of her replacement child the opposite of her former lover. In contrast to her former lover whom she saw as a noble profiled, latter perfect formalist, the second lover is inarticulate ‘half formed’ companion. In contrast to the first encounter, the second encounter takes place in the wilderness, on the ground and under the light of the moon. The narrator then comes up with the idea of divorce. Since her lover spoke of the operation as something legal, simple and he wanted to remain detached in the whole affair:
He didn't want our relationship to influence anything, it was to be kept separate from life.19

This was a psychological need with her that the idea of divorce offers a word which conventionally denotes a legal permanent separation. Etymologically and figuratively speaking, divorce does not have the conventional and legalistic meaning. Divorce connotes the idea of severance. It is this meaning that the narrator's psyche registers. Thus, in her case, divorce and abortion become combined revealing the cause of her grief and distraught condition.

Furthermore, the term abortion etymologically connotes the idea of spontaneous miscarriage, a natural and conscious rejection of the foetus by the mother, and only recently it has come to mean, if not narrator's problem in Surfacing is that she has willingly prevented the birth of a potentially normal and health of child. She is not grieving and tormented sixty because of the death of her foetus, but because she has gone against nature by attempting to thwart the natural cycle. Her abortion does not even have the saving grace of an attempt to co-operate with nature. Thus, etymologically speaking, the narrator in Surfacing did not have an abortion, and Atwood never uses the word to describe her narrator's situation. The root meaning of the word is evoked in the passage to describe the narrator's attempts
to expiate her crime. The protagonist in her peers and in herself the dangers of this divided self; she feels half alive, half-formed.

The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live, I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or, no, something minor like a severed thumb, numb.\textsuperscript{20}

The surfacer's references to body as 'robot' is central to Atwood's diagnosis of this age old dilemma of the divided sensibility. The contemporary metaphor for this is, in \textit{Surfacing}, mechanical. Of these four adults, Atwood selects David and Anna, the married couple, to represent this dangerous, common division. All the images surrounding them are mechanical; by novel's end, both of them become, in fact, sexual robots. These are the casualties of the urban, technological society. Joe certainly needs healing, he is not yet mechanical.

From the side he's like the buffalo on the U.S. Nickel, shaggy and blunt shouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species, once dominant, now threatened with extinction.\textsuperscript{21}

He can still feel; the human animal in Joe is not yet iron. But for David and for Anna, spiritual and emotional renewal on this island proves impossible; they cannot even conceive of such connection. To examine these two as a married unit and as
single individuals may clarify how Atwood dissects the contemporary dilemma for each of the sexes, or to preserve the metaphor, dismantles the nuts and bolts of our awesome, robot identities. In her quest for identity on its emotional level, the surfacer looks to Anna and David for knowledge. She considers them, initially, to be 'the perfect couple', an awesome burden to place upon any two people, to be sure. But the surfacer assumes that because David and Anna have been married for nine years.

Yet Anna fears losing David almost as much as she fears him. Her identity is fused with his, fulfilling not the promise but the peril of the romantic notion that two shall become one. Anna, in the continuing battle of the sexes which she wages with David, teaches the surfacer about emotional desperation. Anna defers to whatever David commands. An early scene, during the car journey into 'foreign territory', foreshadows the regime between Anna and David. Her self-abnegation is made apparent, but the reader quite like the narrator is prepared to dismiss the incident. Anna begins singing in earnest. Characteristically, the narrator simply records this, she deduces nothing from the incident.

Nevertheless, this is not simply a case of two people's abrogating their Rogers or Astaire privileges when in company. David may suppress her simply to save her self-embarrassment, but the action, even if well-intended, blocks Anna's life sounds.
These two act out the war between the sexes, seventies style. Fear dominates them. Anna and David fail to attain the fairy tale, social promise of ‘living happily’ even for nine years much less for the mythical ‘ever after’.

In *surfacing*, Anna represents the female who embraces whole-heartedly the fairytale promise of the kiss, prince, timeless joy. Yet she lives in time and must confront herself not as the princess but as the aging queen. In a life-long, self-haunting game of ‘mirror, mirror’, Anna is victimized by her own socially inculcated narcissism. By accepting, stereotyped models of female identity, Anna must accept the fears and self-revulsion which they inspire, in her account of Anna, Gloria only finds her:

“Locked into her playboy center fold stereotype, her soul trapped in a gold compact, her capacity for love-locked into a sado-masochistic pattern.”

Anna is indeed caught between princess and pin-up; by novel’s end, she has learned nothing from her return to the natural world. Note that her transformation does not involve entering into the natural world; her appearance is artificial. Nor does David, as the prince, fare well with his identity. He too, feels locked into the romantic illusion and disappointed with his role. While attempting what he considers the mandatory seduction of the surfacer, David reveals himself, but not quite as he had
hoped. As fairytale king, David is deaf to the living creatures and can neither receive guidance nor give protection. David does not preserve and defend life, as the fairy tale hunter must. David hunts not with a gun but with a Camera; to clarify the correlations between a hunter and a photographer in *Surfacing* is to clarify not only characterization but also a major symbol, the camera.

David, of course, represents the devastating male triad which oppresses and defines that sex; dominance, sadism, and Megalomania. In their failure to connect mind and heart, personal and cultural history, David and Anna refuse adulthood. Any personal, ethical, complete identity seems beyond their imaginations. They are commercial identifies, products of fairy tale images and pre-packaged sex concepts. In fine, they represent a generation threatened with emotional extinction. This she learns from perceiving Anna and David, from discarding the metallic barriers which she herself has accumulated.

Thus, David and Anna do more than represent some reductive example of the wearisome 'perfect couple'. Their fear of time partially explains their mutual or individual desire to escape from absolutes but time, like emotional history, proves inescapable. Fear is not transcendence. Nevertheless, Anna lives in her ruling object, her compact, and worries each wrinkle into place. David combs his thinning hair in bangs, signalling his
premature baldness. Both fear again the process, considering it unnatural. In the youth culture is created by contemporary, western technological society, this fear is inculcated. The surfer's final assessment of David and Anna reflects no hope for their reunification of mind and body. The mechanical male and the mechanical female are more performers in their own pornographic productions. Even in the act of love, or, as they would surely call it, the sex act, David and Anna are not alive.

That David and Anna are not aberrant but are, rather, microcosmic representatives of our technological generation must not be overlooked. Through them, a re-examination of modern division within the self and between the sexes proves illuminating. They are victims and victimizers; becoming more and more static in their perceptions of existence, they cannot discern the natural from the artificial, the life-giving from the death-dealing. Body as an object does, indeed, produce emotionally irresponsible men and women, David and Anna are sexual mechanics. Atwood's protagonist must examine her identity against these sexual and generational patterns which she perceives in the microcosm. Her hope for connection with the natural world and with emotional wholeness helps her to understand why Joe, her taciturn and passive companion, is a much less dangerous male than price David. While David and
Anna finds mechanical images with which to identify Joe and the surfacer do not. Atwood carefully maintains Joe's symbol in the natural world.

The term 'American' in the context of the novel is a metaphor for all powerful maniacs from Hitler onwards. The protagonist says that Hitler is no more and yet the legacy left behind by him survives according to her:

Hitler was gone and the thing remained; whatever it was, even then, moving away from them. - - - It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew.23

Although Hitler is dead, he relives in all powerful maniacs who are enemies of life. These maniacs senselessly leave the forest a graveyard of trees. They humiliate their wives in their arrogance just for a 'Random Sample' in a nude or semi-nude movie. Thus, the protagonist discovers different kinds of victims as well as victimizers. She also discovers that woman is not indicative of a particular sex but women include all those beings who are powerless. Vulnerable such as all the weak men, trees, and animals. She realizes that woman is a metaphor for all those who are week, exploited and abused. The protagonist deconstructs the meaning of the legacy left behind by her father. The legacy which is in the form of Indian paintings by her father.
guides and inspires her to the knowledge that one has to fight in order to survive face the reality than escape from it.

Directed by both her discovery of different victims and victimizers and her father's message, the protagonist marches forward to fulfil her objective as a new champion of the mute and inanimate objects as well as the wildlife in nature. She realizes that mere invisibility, in activism, and withdrawal can never do any good to society. She thinks that she herself will have to be courageous and face life squarely. The protagonist attains the affirmative and humanistic ideal by the end of her journey in the Northern Quebec Island. Her association with the people and nature in the Quebec Island raised her consciousness of victimization of women in particular and all the animate and inanimate objects. When her consciousness of victimization reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation and oppression of all beings. As Carol P. Christ says, the protagonist in *Surfacing* awakes:

"From a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and Joy, of world defined by the heroines own feeling and judgement."\(^{24}\)

The protagonist decides to go back to the city to face life. She is determined not to withdraw from the battlefield. She has
ultimately found her true identity in her rebel role. As the protagonist refuses to be a victim, she will create her own reality. She becomes subversive and feels that her future is uncertain with Joe. The protagonist wishes to give birth to a truly human child rather than a divine son whom she would like to bring up as an artist a supporter of ideal society. So, she echoes the throttled wishes of many women who have grown weary in life due to oppression and victimization.

The protagonist not only struggles to survive with dignity in society and to face the reality but she also desires to organize all the weak, victim to protest against the oppression of the strong, victimizers. Thus, the protagonist becomes a spokesperson of all the vulnerable and exploited creatures by turning a feminist theme into a universal one in which the battle is not only between the two sexes but also between the strong and the weak, she ends up as an activist.

This success attests Atwood's considerable skill with the stream of consciousness narrative. As with most stream of consciousness novels associative logic constructs the islands in that stream. These island are perceptual units within the character or external events which reveal her and other characters. Atwood uses scenes like the discovery of the mutilated heroine or Anna's disrobing. Her sometimes eerie, dispassionate
objectivity, juxtaposed with her awakening emotional understanding which is quite subjective, helps characterize her. This establishes, too, the division extant between her internal values and her external action; she must, as interior monologue reveals, heal herself.

The narrator’s constant internal monologue gives the reader intimate information; the reader understands many conflicts before the character does. What she thinks and how she thinks provide a basic of credibility between reader and character. Many of her recollections seem accurate, perceptive; history class we remember and communion within the natural world, the child space. With self-scrutiny, she exposes the human need for such strenuous responsibility. She knows that, to avoid the same static identities that mechanize Anna and David, she must not confuse a description of reality with reality itself. To do so violates body and mind, feeling and consideration.

*Surfacing* reinstates the images of women as mother and an artist who has undergone the trauma of abortion and denial of professional aspirations. It encourages women to be rebellious to face life and struggle for survival with dignity. It is optimistic about the professional aspirations of women. Moreover, it proclaims that men cannot order a woman to give birth to a child and to abort a foetus at their will. In *Surfacing*, Atwood endorses the
struggle for freedom without anarchy, order without oppression. *Surfacing* is a blueprint of Atwood to eradicate victimization of women in particular and other weak human beings in general. It is a blueprint of revolt. It offers a ray of hope to destitute women and men who remain unnamed in the world. The message of *Surfacing* is that all men and women should work together to free the world from exploitation, oppression and bullying.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) is a story about storytelling, both the stories themselves and the writing process, for Joan offers us multiple narratives figuring and refiguring herself through different narrative conventions. The novel is structured through a series of interlocking frame. First, there is the story of Joan's real life in the present, set in Italy where she has escaped after her fake suicide in Toronto, Canada. Enclosed within this is her private memory narrative of a traumatic childhood, filled with shame, pain and defiance centring on her relationship with her neurotic mother, of an adolescence when she escapes to London and becomes a writer of popular Gothics, her marriage to Canadian, her celebrity as a poet to be followed by the threat of blackmail and her second escape from Canada to Italy. Embedded within this narrative are snippets from Joan's Gothic romances, which provide more glamorous and dangerous plots than everyday life in Toronto, or
even in Italy, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Then there is the fourth narrative thread, the curiously mythic 'Lady Oracle' poems, produced as Joan believes by Automatic writing when she looks into a dark mirror in her bedroom in Toronto. These shifting frames generate a series of comic collisions, confrontation and escape attempts, but there are no clear boundaries between them as borders blur between present and past, art and life. Joan's fantasies of escape and transformation are always duplicitous and riddled with holes, so that one story infiltrates another and fantasy is under continual barrage from the claims of real life. Joan may adopt multiple disguises in the form of fancy costumes, wigs, different names and different personas. Through this shimmer of different figures, the reader wonders if there is any chance of getting beyond the veils to the centre of the plot or to the enigma of Joan Foster herself. Do we ever get beyond the distorting funhouse mirrors? Joan is nothing if not a self caricaturist as well as a parodist of Gothic romance conventions, as she switches between real life and fantasy roles in a continual process of double coding.

It is arguable that the novelist constructs the Gothic plots in her own life. From her point of view even her life story could be seen as a tale told by a ghost, speaking from beyond her watery grave in Lake Ontario.
I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it.25

Of course, this 'death' is another of her contrived plots for Joan is not dead at all. One of the things that frightens her most in Italy is that people at home in Canada will think that she is really dead, and not even miss her. Having escaped from her husband Arthur in Toronto, Joan realises that the other side of her escape fantasy is isolation.

The other side was no paradise, it was only a limbo.

Now, I knew why the dead came back to watch over the living, the other side was boring. There was no one to talk to and nothing to do.26

Such reflection is a result of Joan's rueful recognition of the gap between real life and fantasy, for she is haunted by memories of her visit to this same Italian village the previous year with her husband and is now filled with the longing that he will come to rescue her from her own perfect plot.

In fact it was less like a Fellini movie than that Walt Disney film I saw when I was eight, about a whole who wanted to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. He approached a ship and sang arias, but the sailor harpooned him, and each of his voices left his body
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 portrays Joan as a female writer in *Lady Oracle* in order to allude vicariously to the obstacles that a woman writer faces in a Phallocentric culture. *Lady Oracle* is the portrait of the writer as a woman and a 'survivor' in a patriarchal culture. According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, patriarchy has perpetuated a phallocentric myth of creativity in which literary production is a male prerogative throughout history. Hence, they argue:

"Woman - - - must escape just those male texts which deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them."\(^\text{28}\)

Atwood's *Lady Oracle* shows how the identity and individuality of a woman writer is destroyed by the invisible authority of male writers and her writing is gendered and classed on the basis of sex. By projecting woman writer and asserting her greater measure of freedom, Atwood seems to agree with Helene Cixous who argues:
"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."²⁹

Joan in *Lady Oracle* rewrites her history as woman to revise her own male constructed identity and to dismantle the feminine roles historically forced upon women. As a female writer, Joan plays "the part of a metaphorical Sibyl, an oracle, for whom writing is a visionary experience." The oracle is 'beyond herself'. Commenting on the significance of 'oracle' Howells says:

> The most significant thing about an oracle is that it is a voice which comes out of a woman's body and is associated with hidden dangerous knowledge, but that it is not her own voice. The voice of the Delphic Oracle was the voice of the god Apollo, or earlier the voice of the Earth Goddess."³⁰

In addition to illustrating the range of Atwood's references to popular cultural forms in *Lady Oracle* and the ways in which they shape identity, I hope to show how the reworking of the first of these modes and to some extent the second while initially seeming to demonstrate how popular discourses stereotype and restrict, ultimately does the opposite. Stereotypical conceptions of both culture and gender are transformed by her parodic use of
form; popular genres are employed in a manner that has the effect of carnivalesque subversion.

Names confer identities and Joan Foster finds her identity determined by a popular culture discourse from the outset, she is named after the Hollywood film star Joan Crawford. The only problem with this is that Joan Crawford proves, like virtually every other signifier in *Lady Oracle* to be ambivalent.

I did tell him one thing though, which should’ve made more of an impression on him than it did: my mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of the things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had will-power, she built herself up from nothing according to my mother. Joan also considers the possibility that her mother may have given her this name to prevent her having a name of her own, but comes to realize that:

Joan Crawford didn’t have a name of her own either.

Her real name was Lucille Lesueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat.
So, very early in life Joan becomes aware that roles particularly women's roles, are conferred not innate and that identity can be ambivalent and multiple. This realization prefigures much of the subsequent action of the text, in which she lives out a schizophrenic existence occupying a variety of available female roles. Hollywood is a major formative influence on the young Joan. Her Aunt Lou takes her to see a variety of movies from the late 'forties' and early 'fifties' in which the dominant theme seems to be a woman's stoical or heroic struggle against adverse odds.

Eleanor Parker playing a crippled Opera Singer in *Interrupted Melody*. Her favourite among films on this theme is, however, a British production, *The Red Shoes*. Watching this, she projects herself into Moira Shearer's rendition of the part of suffering ballet dancer. Ballet and Opera both come to function as popular rather than 'high art' discourses in the text, since they are frequently filtered through the medium of cinema and since Joan sees them as offering an opportunity for grand passion and a romantic transformation of humdrum existence.

The popularity of the Hollywood music leads her mother to send Joan to dancing classes and here she learns some home truths about conventional responses to the female figure when, while all her peers are cast as butterflies, she is forced, because of her fatness, to play the part of a mothball in a dance entitled
the Butterfly Frolic at the dancing school's annual spring recital. Images of flight, suggestive of some kind of transcendence of everyday reality, permeate the novel and here the effect is a kind of reversal of the 'magic transformation' which Joan craves from an early age. She comes to understand that popular conventions of representing women reflect social attitudes.

If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? The effect would be quite different, if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of immoral or sexually titillating. However, plump unattractive women are just as likely to be tortured as thin ones. More so, infact.33

This latter observation is borne out when she is tied up and blindfolded in a Toronto ravine by the girls with whom she walks to Brownies, only to be reserved by a mysterious man carrying a bunch of daffodils, who may or may not be the same man who exposed himself to the girls the week before. Her mother has instilled a Manichean view of men into Joan, she tells her there are only 'good' men and 'bad' men and so she is left puzzled by this apparent cross over figure who appears to be morally double. Joan's rescuer from the ravine is insubstantial to a point where even his identity is unclear, is he the daffodil man or not?
And his dual identity proves to be a pattern which is replicated in her adult life. Eventually, Joan comes to the realization that all men in her life have split identities; her father has killed people in war, but has subsequently been regarded as a life-saver in his job as an anaesthetist, Paul has also been ‘Mavis Quilp’ the writer of escapist Nurse Novels, another popular form; The Royal Porcupine surrenders his exotic Byronic identity and reveals himself as ordinary Chuck Brewer who wants to be Joan’s pairingly:

Was every Heath cliff a Linton in disguise? What did I want, adventure or security, and which of them offered what? 34

So, the daffodil man is a paradigm for all the men that follow, and Rapunzel will remain firmly ‘stuck in the tower’ as long as she awaits a knight on a white charger to rescue her. Joan remains in this situation for most of the novel, because she has internalized the values of the Rapunzel syndrome from the various popular discourses that shape her upbringing. Several of them have to do with escapism. Her outings to the movies with Aunt Lou give way to Sunday evening visits to the Jordan Chapel, a spiritualist meeting place which very obviously offers an escapist discourse equivalent to that of the dream factory. There she encounters a typically Canadian response to the
romantic side of Victorian culture when the 'visiting' medium Mr. Stewart quotes:

He quoted a few lines from "Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth," by Arthur Hugh Clough.\textsuperscript{35}

Escapism is also central to a number of other popular discourses that appear in the text. The \textit{fotoromanzi} that she and Arthur read while in Italy, Paul's Norse novels, women's magazines, some of the sideshows she works among when employed at the Canadian National Exhibition, the decor of the Royal York in Toronto, described as a 'bogus fairy land of nineteenth century delights' and the satirical vignette with which it is linked, the lid of the Laura second chocolate box. Most important of all in this context, however, is Joan's own writing, the costume Gothics that she comes to write under the influence of Paul and the inner 'Lady Oracle' poetry that she comes to write an experiment with Automatic Writing techniques first suggest to her at the Jordan Chapel.

Her costume Gothics are typical of most of the escapist discourses with which she becomes involved. They offer wish fulfillment fantasies and hence occupy a similar role in ordinary women's lives to that played by the Rescuer figure in the Rapunzel syndrome and, as Paul tells her when he first introduces her to them, they represent 'an escape for the writer as well as
the reader'. So, initially at least, Joan's writing them seems to involve a form of self evasion produced for 'Columbine Books'; a playful fictionalization of the name of Harlequin Books, they are formula fiction writers in the romantic novelette genre that derives from the novel of sentimental courtship that had its origins in Richardson *Pamela*. Examination of the intertextual elements in a passage like Joan's breathless account of the plot of the latter stages of her 'Gothic' *Escape from Love* helps to illustrate the formulaic elements that go into the making of her writing in this genre:

Samantha Deane was kidnapped precipitously from her bedroom in the house of the kindly guppy man; threatened with rape at the hands of the notorious Earl of Darey the hero's disreputable uncle; rescued by the hero; snatched again by the agents of the lush bodies, evil-minded countess of Piedmont, the jealous semi-Italian beauty who had once been the hero's mistress. Poor Sanantha flew back and forth across London like a beanbag, ending up finally in the hero's arms' while his wife, the feeble-minded Lady Letitia, died of yellow fever, the countess, now quite demented, plunged to her death off a battlement during a thunderstorm and the Earl was financially ruined by Pacific Bubble.36
And Gothic function, along with the various other escapist forms already outlined, in just this way in *Lady Oracle*. Writing Gothics affords Joan the opportunity of a secret life away from her husband Aurther, who is presented as a product of the repressive, Calvinist aspect of Maritime culture, writing an ironic reworking of the Gothic mode ultimately provides Atwoods, as in *Surfacing*, with a means of subverting received gender stereotypes. So, the Gothic can offer a form of imaginative release even when actual escape is not possible, though Joan, who likens herself to Houdini in the closing pages of the novel, comes to be an untypical Rapunzel in that she repeatedly effects actual physical escapes. But obviously escapist fantasy has a negative side too, since it encourages unattainable fantasies.

Joan Foster presents herself as uncomfortably close to this model, not only in the automatic writing of her Lady Oracle poems but also in her costume Gothics. They too are a form of automatic writing, for Joan is writing through Gothic romance formulas and she types with her eyes closed. When she becomes a celebrity, Joan even begins to feel certain paranoia about her persona:

> It was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me - - - doing things for which I had to take the consequences: My dark twin
— she wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference, because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her.\textsuperscript{37}

Joan starts to feel like one of the victims in her Gothic romance written under her other \textit{nom de plume} 'Louisa K. Delacourt' borrowed from the name of her deceased Aunt Lou. In her fiction, her poetry and her interviews, Joan refuses to take responsibility for what she says; though from another point of view her double identities also provide her with a kind of escape, for she cannot be defined by any statement made in her name and the name is always changing. There is Lady Oracle for whom Joan is merely the medium and Louisa K. Delacourt is the name of her dead aunt. Joan uses the names as alibis.

The really important thing was not the books themselves, which continued to be much the same. It has the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster - - - But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt.

As long as I could a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right.\textsuperscript{38}
Indeed, Joan never does take the consequences for the minor explosion she participates in when she and her lover the 'Royal Porcupine' stage an absurdly sixties happening in a snowy park using the sticks of dynamite which Joan is supposed to be carrying around Toronto for a crazy Canadian nationalist plot to blow up the peace bridge at Niagara falls. She even uses those explosives as the basis for another of her fantastical plots, her fake suicide which is transformed in her absence into a real life murder mystery.

Joan assumes no responsibility for what she writes and yet through this pose she tells us a great deal about her self, her fears and ambitions, and her forbidden feelings. It is through her memory narrative of a middle class Toronto childhood. That 'can of worms' as she calls it, that Joan reveals the sequence of humiliation and betrayals against which she has constructed her multiple self defences. Joan's life story is a tale of grotesques and monsters for Joan is the only child, the unwanted product of an unhappy wartime marriage, who cannot please her neurotic mother and who in a rage of adolescent defiance overeats till she looks like 'a beluga whale'.

While shifting shape from fat thin, Joan Delacourt becomes an international traveller and mistress of Paul, the "Polish Count". She adopts in secret the pseudonym of Louisa K. Delacourt and
becomes the author of fifteen costume gothics, published by the Hermes Press, a company named for the God of thieves, tricksters, travellers, and artists, all of which she has become. Joan becomes both Charlotte and Felicia, the heroine and the villainess, the beloved and the wife, in each of the novels of her gothic canon. Subsequently, she marries Arthur and becomes Joan Foster. She fabricates a past that bears little relation to her own and labels the picture of her fat self 'Aunt Dierdre'. Because she cannot endure any of the Jobs which she has had or claims to have had, she continues to pose as a failure. Meanwhile, she adheres to her secret role as the successful author of the costume gothics. Eventually she becomes famous as the author of *Lady Oracle*, a book of poetry written under the self hypnosis of automatic writing. Recognizing that Arthur will never meet her expectations any more than she will meet his, she takes a lover, the Royal porcupine. When Fraser Buchanan discovers her secret life, she turns a blackmailer in self-defence. Finally, to maintain her sanity, she feigns drowning. Like the true picaro, although she lies each of these lives with zest, often with excruciating pain, none of her lives seems real.

Atwood's research file on *Lady Oracle* emphasizes the role of the Goddess as 'sibyl' and Joan's position as the 'oracle'. The power of sibyl is like the power of the mother, the power of
creation and thus she gives information and prophesies at length. According to Marilyn Patton:

This is a figurative way of saying that the novel is attempting to imagine a way in which women can take back their rightful place as poets and writers. We can think of the various modes of writing in *Lady Oracle* as musings upon the place of gender in the politics of literary production.\(^\text{39}\)

The novel also articulates the difficulties encountered by female writer in assuming an equal place with man in the realm of literary production. Her work is discriminated against on the basis of sex which Atwood calls "sexual bias".

Joan Foster unfolds her oracle to a reporter about the politics of gender such as condemning female writers to kitchen, devaluation of their creative work, prescription of feminine roles, narrow categorization of women as wives and mistress, defication and glorification of the image of woman as a goddess or what Virginia Woolf calls the 'Angel of the House' or damnation of woman as a temptress and seductress. *Lady Oracle* raises its voice against stereotypical gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society as these role models inferiorize women and thereby distort and problematize their self-perception. Atwood
shows, in *Lady Oracle*, how the socialization process of patriarchy shapes and institutionalizes sex roles.

The characteristics of maleness and femaleness are not biologically determined; rather they are based on cultural definitions.\(^{40}\)

Having reached an impasse, Joan seeks the answer through automatic writing. Although the process does not furnish an immediate solution for the novel, it does produce the poetry which becomes *Lady Oracle*. The poems deal with male-female relations in terms and images which touch her life so closely that Arthur is totally alienated. He is angered that she published the poems without consulting him, and he is chagrined at the fame which they have brought her conscious of his frustrations, Joan sees herself as a monster like her mother. Typically Joan finds temporary escape fame brings the Royal porcupine into her life.

As the writing helps Joan work out her romantic longing and marital problems, so does her subsequent affair with the Royal porcupine enable her to sublimate her sexual desires. He is everything that Arthur is not. He dances with her eagerly wrapped in a lace tablecloth and he clad in only a tap hat. He is an underwear freak, easily aroused by the sight of Joan in her bilingual weekend bikini briefs. He is so like Joan in his romantic notions and appearance that he seems to be one of her
fantasies. When he shaves off his beard, scraps his opera cloak, and wants Joan to live with him, she drops him. Faced with her failure as a wife, the end of her affair, the pressures of success, the reappearance of Paul, who wants to kidnap her, and the appearance of Fraser Buchanan, who threatens to blackmail her, Joan seems cornered at last. She steals Buchanan's notebook to silence him, plans her death by drowning, and escape to Italy, where in her seaside her mintage, she struggles with the problem anew. But in that retreat, Joan, like her German counterpart splissimus, realizes that her peace may be short-lived.

I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn't really there. I was an accident; I'd heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me? What had I done? Had I trapped my father - - - had I ruined my mother's life? I didn't dare to ask.41

All her life she has gazed into mirrors of physical and social composition and has been influenced by the image they reflected her mother, the beauty and the monster; herself, like Alice in Wonderland, fact and thin, in the costume gothics and mirrored in the eyes of Paul, Arthur, and the Royal porcupine. She realizes that as long as she lived by these illusions, she was
uncomfortable, but, in a sense, protected, like the Lady of Shalott weaving in her tower. But once she stepped to the window, looked on reality, allowed *Lady Oracle* to be published, risked being a public figure, she was no longer safe. Like the Lady of Shalott, she had to pay for her freedom with death.

Joan's next illuminations comes some days later, when Mr. Vitroni returns the escape clothes which she had buried beneath the house. She had always recognized the significance of clothes as reflective of the people who were them; she treasured Aunt Lou's old fox scarf, shied from her mother's blue serge suit, and resented the disposal of the clothes of the dead. When she began writing the costume gothics, she studied books on clothes, believing that if she got the clothes right, everything else would fit, for clothes were the symbols which kept people in their places. When her heroine's clothes were slashed, burned, and buried, they would always be replaced with more fitting attire, indicative of the better life to come. The return of her old clothes indicates to Joan that she cannot really bury her old self. The picaro does not change character. Joan says that she cannot really bury her old self. She understands that Italian people see through her disguise, even though she has dyed her hair, put on dark glasses, and donned a print dress. There is no escape from reality. In her isolation, the mirror begins to crack, the truth underlying the myth begins to emerge.
Therefore, Joan dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses, and dons a printed dress and flees to Rome in disguise with the help of her friends and relates her story to a reporter. Her search for a new identity is met with a stiff resistance from the patriarchal order. Commenting on this aspect Roberta Scieff Zamaro observes:

In Lady Oracle Joan's (Concealment) clearly symbolizes the feminist writer's imprisonment in canons dictated by a society in which art has been the domain of men, and her quest for a new self represents the woman writer's quest for a new identity as an artist, an identity freed from the traditional stereotypes imposed by patriarchal culture.

After a fearful day, Joan has a nightmare in which her mother's astral body appears at the window. Seeing her mother's tears, Joan tries to reach her, to tell her that she loves her. Her mother's spirit has appeared at important points in Joan's life. All this time, Joan thought that her mother was following and watching her disapprovingly. Now, she senses that she, not her mother, produces these visions she recognizes her mother's image as "a vortex, a vacuum" which she could never please. She realizes that she must not live to please her mother or anyone else, that she must "dance for herself alone" Joan had begun to sense this
when she saw the fountain of Diana of Ephesus in Tivoli, which seemed to symbolize woman's being poured out for others. Now, that earlier inclination is confirmed.

This experience is central to the novel. Once Joan recognizes that the spirit is of her own conjuring, she sees her mother also as a victim, the Lady of Shalott, always looking at life through the mirror. When her mother finally looked on reality, she, too, died, or was killed by her husband, by Joan, by the roles which society expected her to play, but chiefly by the romantic conditioning which made beauty, wealth, and romance supreme. When beauty and romance disappeared, wealth did not satisfy. All her managerial gifts were unused, and, therefore, wasted.

Having shed the illusion of her mother's vigilance, Joan understands that she must stop hiding behind closed door, that she must pursue her own life and develop her talents. She cannot expect Arthur to provide support. As Joan begins to dance, her butterfly wings returns, the optimistic caterpillar of the "Road of Life" story comes out of the cocoon. But as she dances Joan crosses the broken glass and cuts her feet. She now has the real red shoes of the movie. Like the mermaid, she knows that if she wants to dance, or even to walk, she will have to give up something, the comfort of the traditional role. Joan props her
feet to stop the bleeding and determines to walk despite the pain. She recognizes the mermaid as a female monster and sees herself in a comparable role. She reasons that perhaps her mother named her for Joan of Arc, not Joan Crowford. Joan of Arc heard voices. She was burned at the stake and only her heart survived. Joan goes to pick up her mail. She learns that Sam and Marlene have been accused of her murder and realizes that she must somehow save them. She also discovers that her gas tank has been drained, preventing her departure, and that a young reporter is on her trail. She decides to panic but to complete Stalked by Love and to await the next whim of Fortune.

"No," she said. "I know who you are."

The flesh fell away from his face, revealing the skull behind it; he stepped towards her, reaching for her throat. - - - 43

Romance, fantasy, violence and death are telescoped in the final scenario but nothing is resolved, for Joan is interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the path. Does she think it is Arthur or does she think it is the figure of death? And are they the same? In this crisis, Joan acts with the energy of one of her Gothic protagonists, bashing the male stranger on the head with an empty Cinzano bottle, when he appears at her door and
knocking him out. This is the explosion which she had feared for real life and the shadow of fiction had come into collision.

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 that women should no longer barter reality for a pseudo-security promised by male. It also reveals that they no longer wish to be scapegoats in the mazes, thickets, and brambles of life. It encourages women to be bold enough to face lie head on. It makes clear that they must no longer hold 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 message of *Lady Oracle* is that:

"the experience of all women everywhere becomes,
in a sense, our communal property, a heritage we bestow
upon each other, the knowledge of what it has meant to be female, a woman in this man's world."44

In actually doing harm, Joan moves from the passive guilt of lying and concealment to the active responsibility of facing what she has done. Her genuinely harmful act of anger and rebellion is potentially healthier than heroines manipulative adherence to the code. Perhaps, she realizes that if she can be both innocent
and destructive, so can the men she has reduced to one or the other category. Moreover, what her transforming eye has been revealing to her indirectly turns out to be true. It has been right in presenting the different faces of each man, leaving no one man a hero. No human being is entirely a hero or a villain. No man is, neither is she? For her, honesty and maturity will be possible only when she is free to respond to a person or situation in all its complexity and without suppressing one or more selves. Joan has, in the last line of the novel, gained at least some knowledge and self-acceptance.

Also I've begun to feel he's the only person who knows anything about me. May be because I've never hit anyone else with a bottle, so they never got to see that part of me. Neither did I come to think of it.

It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person.45

At the end of the novel, Joan seems to stand clear of the maze at last. She may, however, create another maze for herself, if she lets her transforming eye cast yet another man as her savior. Her remark about the reporter she hit with the bottle, “there is something about man in a bandage,” leaves this danger open. Her self revelation may contain a good deal of deception and even self-deception. But if Joan has fabricated the story, at least
she has made up for herself neither an unrealistic happy ending nor a dramatic tragic one, but an ending which is ambiguous yet hopeful. We cannot rule out any possibility and this openness is one of the novel's greatest strength. Any attempt at a resolution, good or bad, would put us back in the realm of the Gothic novel in its fantastic or naturalistic mode.

At the end, however, we can see better possibilities for Joan than the pattern of escape attempts. Even her thought of going on to write since fiction instead of Gothics can appear hopeful.

The future doesn’t appeal to me as much as the past, but I’m sure it’s better for you. I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this, as my mother would have said.46

In writing Gothic fantasy, Joan has shared the guilt of those writers who assure women that conventional female virtue will receive tangible rewards. She has helped to keep the house haunted with romantic fears, distracting those trapped in it from seeing any way out save through a hero. Although writing about the future may represent another form of escape, it would at least allow her to create alternative to the ideal of victimization.

Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*, most realistic novel, continues her concern with how humans can break through
predetermined, negative patterns. The issue is not the Gothic quest for love so much as it is the search for identity as a process of healing. Many forms of pain, deaths, divorce, abandonment, discrimination, madness, threaten the novel's female characters, particularly Elizabeth. Life Before Man, has been described as her first novel of "social and domestic realism" it is a realistic novel only on its surface. Its characterization and some of its themes are the familiar ones of the themes "emotional cannibalism" and the interpenetration of the past and present. So the title, Life Before Man, not only refers to the fantasies of the palaeontologist Lesje Green, the novel's second main character, about the dinosaurs who lived before man, but also alludes to the preconscious men who lived before us. Just as Elizabeth's hallucinations link her with this preconscious past, so do Lesje's symbolic fantasies. Thus Life Before Man is not about the discovery of identity but about its loss. The new question in this novel is "What is identity?"  

Shaping this question, the narrative point of view is also new. Life Before Man uses a triple point of view to tell the story of a triangle. Instead of her usual female first person narrator, Atwood uses the third person, limited point of view and makes one of her central characters a not very convincing man, Nate Schoenhof, who is split between two women: his wife Elizabeth,
and Lesje. By cutting back and forth between these three points of view, Atwood reveals the distorted perceptions of her characters and lets the reader in on subtle sexual ironies that they fail to recognize. But Elizabeth is much more important than Nate or Lesje. Elizabeth is the only character with first person interior monologues. These have two paradoxical functions. Although fragmentary, they bring readers inside her mind as she debates with herself, sometimes addressing Jaynesian voices or holding imaginary conversations voices or holding imaginary conversations with her dead lover, with a psychiatrist, with her husband and with the aunt who raised her. Thus, readers know Elizabeth better than they know the two characters presented only from the outside. But this split point of view also divides her identity and prepares for its blurring.

The split voice is reminiscent of the split point of view in *The Edible Woman*. So is Elizabeth's stasis. Like Marin at the end of part first, Elizabeth in the first chapter is lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. So the novel opens with Elizabeth's interior monologue:

I don't know how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I lie like a peeled smail. And that's no way to make money. 47
Because Chris Beecham, her lover, has committed suicide, she sees on the ceiling a crack symbolizing not only the split in her self but also the instability of her world. With this desperate outcry of a subject at odds with the real world, overwhelmingly aware of the gap between living and knowing or between describing and prescribing, the human dimension is given priority over the vastness of prehistory signalled in the title. For Elizabeth, as we quickly discover, real time has ceased to exist; everything is construed as being merely post-Chris suicide. This is the focal point of her attention as she continues in dialogue with his ghost, upbraiding and blaming him.

I'm so angry I could kill you. If you hadn't already done that for yourself.

The shift from first person monologue to objective description of this woman lying alone fully clothed on her bed and looking up at the cracks in the ceiling only serve to insist on the splitting of spatial and temporal dimensions within consciousness. Still within the third person, the narrative returns to indirect interior monologue as Elizabeth feels herself to be not anchored to the bed but drifting in space:

She is not in. She's somewhere between her body, which is laying sedately on the bed, - - - and the ceiling with its hairline cracks. She can see herself
there, a thickening of the air, albumining. - - - Into the black vacuum in air is being sucked with a soft, barely audible whistle. She could be pulled up and into it like smoke. 49

The space she 'knows' to be there is the fantasy space of non-meaning and absence as figured in the 'black holes' which later appear on the screen at the planetarium on The Royal Ontario Museum. This is the Elizabeth's inner space scenario, imaged as the abyss into which she steadfastly resists falling herself, though sucked towards it by the shock of Chris's suicide. Its menace continues to coexist in Elizabeth's mind with the rituals of domestic life as she listens through her half open door to her daughters innocently preparing for Halloween and sees her husband bringing her a cup of tea;

"How are you, love?" - - - I've brought you some tea." 50

Though the pain of the very ordinary characters she creates in the novel is distinctly understated, we are left with the impression that like Lucifer in Dante's Hell, they are souls freezing in agony. Misled by Atwood's 'passive prose' and the 'muted irony' of narrative voice. This is precisely the spiritual condition of the three main characters, Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje and of all the other characters in the novel. Having cut themselves off from traditions and religion, they all lead utterly rootless, grinding
and banal lives. Modern society encourages them to pursue of life and banal lives. Modern society encourages them to pursue a life of material prosperity and live at the bare physical level. The spiritual needs or the human psyche are barely acknowledged and the truth inherent in statements like "man does not live by bread alone" is foolishly ignored. The psychic imbalance caused by this lopsided world view makes almost all the characters in the novel repeatedly vacillate between the twin desires of survival and potential suicide. Though Elizabeth lovers, Chris is the only one who actually commits suicide, Elizabeth, Nate, Lesje and even Nate's energetic and idealistic mother are tempted to end their lives in different ways. James Wolcutt goes a step further and says that:

"Atwood writes about her characters' stunted lives with a brittle contempt."51

Not only is *Life Before Man* a multi-voiced text told from the different perspectives of the three main characters but within this structure the novel records a wide range of coexistent and often antagonistic private discourses which have the effect of fracturing the social discourse into multiple individual gestures of resistance and survival. We may well ask what kind of story Atwood is telling us in a novel whose title faces both ways, where *Life Before Man* looks backward to prehistory and forward to the
future. This promise of doubleness is kept throughout in the unsettling shifts between realism and fantasy which characterise the double voiced discourse of the narrating characters, just as the evolutionary theme suggested by the title balances threats of extinction of the species against evidence of individual survival. From this perspective, claims about the realism of *Life Before Man* may seem strange indeed, and we may wonder how the reviewer Marilyn French in the *New York Times Book Review* could say:

"The life of the novel really lies in its texture, in the densely interwoven feelings, memories and insights of the characters."\(^{52}\)

Atwood herself regards this as her most domestic novel with its triangular plot where a wife takes a lover and later the lover commits suicide, the marriage breaks up, and the husband goes to live with another woman. Atwood is credited with saying that she wrote *Life Before Man* as a homage to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which is generally acknowledged to be the classic Victorian realist symbol of the past, itself a presence in the novel, a weight on the present. The central question of the novel, then, is how can people change for the better when we are so burdened by the past? How can we make time an ally rather than an enemy? Elizabeth has the strongest sense of the
nightmare repetition, of the sin of the elders being inflicted on the younger:

"My mother, my father, my aunt and my sister did not go away. Chris won't go away either."\textsuperscript{53}

Elizabeth has a bleak sense of herself becoming 'Mummy' source of pain and guilt to her children. Nate, who believes that "things have to be viewed in a historical context, believes in historical determinism. Atwood provides some support for this perspective by showing family histories in historical contexts. Nate lost his father in the war and Lesje's grandmothers hated one another because of Balkan politics and antisemitism. But Atwood also evokes a longer view of time, an anthropological rather than a historical view, from which contemporary Canadian society is like a 'primitive' society engaged in attempts to control nature through rites and magic. Frequent references to ritual and ceremony, along with the descriptions of holidays that are the setting of sections, make the point that this is a society with its own rites and rituals. It is also a society that defines itself by excluding outsiders, as 'primitive' societies do and its politics are the collective expression of territoriality.

Before trying to sort out the puzzles about realism and the relation between Atwood's novel and George Eliot's, one should remember that Atwood also refers to \textit{Middlemarch} when
speaking about the novel form and the role of convention and
innovation, which she calls 'moving the brackets' or 'changing
the rules'. It is in the double context of conventions of realism and
'ways of moving beyond the conventions to include things not
considered includable' that connections between *Life Before
Man* and *Middlemarch* might be profitably explored.

Conventions of realism in fiction centre round the notions
of mimesis that the text is a representation of everyday life giving
the illusion of referentiality through what Roland Barthes called
"solidity of specification". The action of *Life Before Man* is set in a
particular historical moment in a socially and geographically
specific location and the characters in ways with which most
readers can readily relate. Atwood has taken for her subject
matter the near terminal impoverishment of the human, and
therefore moral, imagination as applied to contemporary urban
life, and she has attempted to situate this impoverishment in its
proper devastating context. Realism tends to be associated with
the dearliness and the mundaneness of everyday life as it is
here, for it is based on the myth of objectivity which implies that
a novelist can see and describe accurately things as they are, a
kind of universal validity of observation.

Furthermore, even though *Life Before Man* how certain
qualities of social realism, its social setting is tangibly rendered,
its characters are precisely delineated in relation to their environments, and "nobody reappears from the dead," as Atwood says. In other respects, it has more affinities with modernist with realist fiction; the structure problematizes time and reality; events are filtered through three sorts of consciousness in a way that draws attention to problem of interpretation; and Atwood's lyrically and imagistically textured style draws attention to itself rather than offering a transparent medium on a knowable reality.

Atwood's structure draws attention both to time as the medium of life and to the way we experience time. One to the moment when Nate realizes that Elizabeth and Chris are having an affair, the other to the moment when Elizabeth tells Nate that the affair is over, disrupts the chronological sequence in a surprising way and makes the point that change has occurred.

The title of the novel, which specifies a time "before man," raises the question of evolution; if humankind is not yet 'man', can it perhaps become human at some future time? Time itself, furthermore, presides over the novel, oppressive, menacing. Elizabeth has an image of her body as an hourglass with sand running through it:

"When it's all gone she'll be dead."54
The museum is more than a microcosmic community that brings the characters together on account of their work; it is a storehouse and by the novel produces a complex effect. On the one hand, it reduces human life, showing the characters to be determined by forces so huge that they can barely bring to comprehend them. On the other hand, this view of time widens the scope of the novel and gives a sense of the range and power of the human imagination. As Elizabeth sits and Nate runs and Lesje goes about her daily activities, their minds move through time, through various pasts and possible futures evoking a universe of potential.

Whereas Elizabeth, the protagonist in Life Before Man is considered to be a frustrated, rebellious, and an indifferent woman in regard to the institution of marriage. Thus, the novel is very different from Atwood's other novels. Atwood describes Life Before Man as a "mainline social novel". Sherrill Grace calls it:

"Atwood's first attempt at social and domestic realism."55

Atwood herself regards the novel as her most domestic novel with its triangular plot. The novel covers two years in the lives of three ordinary middle class people. Elizabeth and her husband, Nate, and Nate's new lover, Lesje, for whom he leaves his wife. We follow their imagination as they explore their own pasts and futures and construct possible pasts and futures for the species. Lesje provides a longer view, with her understanding of
prehistory, a perspective from which humanity is a small part of the large process of evolution, and whether we survive is not all that important. Her proximity to Chris's suicide puts her closest to the ultimate question of existence and brings the possibility of extinction.

Nate's narrative on the same day is bound to his wife's by the echo of his own word 'love', though he no longer knows what word means. It is nothing more than an empty ritual left over from what he nostalgically calls 'the olden days' before Chris when their marriage appeared to have some stability. Nate is floundering around in domestic wreckage shut out from Elizabeth's bedroom as he is shut out from her life, fixated like her on Chris's death which looms in his memory in grisly detail:

No head left at all, to speak of. The headless horseman. But recognizable. Chris's expression had never really been in that heavy flat face of his; not like most people's. It had been in his body.56

For Nate too Chris continues to exist, occupying the subjective space inside his own head asserting authority over the inter subjective space between him and Elizabeth, where Nate feels himself and Chris to be doubles:

Nate's other body, joined to him by that tenuous connection, that lose in space controlled by Elizabeth.57
As another of realistic fiction, Atwood does not claim for Elizabeth, the protagonist in *Life Before Man*, greater autonomy than actual women can reasonably claim in their life. Atwood says:

> After 10 years of the women's movement we like to think that some of the old stereotypes are fading, but 10 years is not a very long time in the history of the world, - - - the old familiar images, the old icons, have merely gone underground and not far at that. We still think of a power as an anomaly, a potentially dangerous anomaly; there is something subversive about such women even when they take care to be good role models. They cannot have come by their power naturally, it is felt. They must have got it from somewhere.\

Unlike Elizabeth Nate is not given to flights of fantasy, though on rare occasions he imagines what it might be like to be elsewhere. However, his subjective position in this narrative is worth considering in some detail for it is ambiguous and increasingly erratic. As if on a leash for Elizabeth knows all about it, he also cycles over to visit Martha, his former mistress, a place where he no longer belongs to or wishes to be. Nate is becoming a displaced person, speaking in outworn cliches to Elizabeth, Martha, his mother and his children. Worse still he finds he is
deprived of speech altogether in his attempts to break out of the trap by making a series of silent phone calls to Lesje, a young woman whom he has met at the museum and whose image floats like a promise of new romance in his mind. He is always in restless motion, running in circles as he jogs around Queen's Park, cycling furiously between houses owned by the four women in his life while not belonging to any of these houses himself, switching between jobs as he moves from his work in Legal Aid at a Toronto lawyer's office to become a toymaker in the basement of his house, then back to the law firm again. Nate does not completely fit into any of these social identities, and while there is a dimension of unsatisfactoriness about his position it must be said that he remains a resisting subject who remains open to new possibilities. Whether we agree with this authorial assessment or not, the language of his narrative suggests some measure of progress and cautious optimism for the final words of his last entry suggest an end to his wandering. As he thinks about meeting Lesje after work on the steps of the Museum, something he did for years with Elizabeth, Nate considers:

'They will either go for a drink or not. In any case, they will go home.'

To return to the opening trilogy, the third voice is Leslie Green's asocial and isolated, for her imagination inhabits the wide spaces of the upper Jurassic period where dinosaurs roam free:
Lesje is wandering in prehistory. Under a sun more orange than her own has ever been, in the middle of a swampy plain lush with thick stalked plants and oversized ferns, a group of bony-plated stegosaurs is grazing.60

Lesje's position up in the top of one of these trees and watching through binoculars is one of 'blissful un-involvement' for here her human form is her disguise. Her otherness is so incomprehensible to the dinosaurs that they will not even notice her, which 'is, the next best thing to being invisible.' Like the delicate camptosaurs' Lesje too is cautious, nervous, and sensitive to danger, for she is a casualty of her multicultural upbringing across three cultures, those of her Ukrainian and Jewish grandmothers and the Canadian culture of her birth, and among which she has no certainty of self location. Marked by her ethnicity and her scientific interests as irremediably 'other' in Toronto, Lesje in early childhood discovered her 'true nationality' in the Royal Ontario Museum to which she was regularly taken by one or other of her grandmothers. Not surprisingly, she chose to become a palaeontologist and to work in that Museum. Like Elizabeth's black holes, this imagined territory is the place where she negotiates the gaps between real life and desire, though like any supplementary state it remains in constant subterranean
dialogue with the voice of reason. Lesje knows for instance that her dinosaur scenario is a regressive which she means her relationship with William, a young environmental engineer. Whereas Lesje exists with confidence in her imagined world, it is the everyday world whose social code she cannot fathom. She jumps every time the telephone rings and at work she commits the *faux Pas* of mentioning a series of silent phone calls she has been receiving, only to discover when Elizabeth walks out that her lover had been doing the same thing to her for a month before he committed suicide something Lesje would have known if she had ever listened to office gossip. In this oblique and silent fashion the first significant connection in the plot is made, for Lesje's mysterious caller as we discover later was Elizabeth's husband Nate whose behaviour pattern is a repetition of Chris's as Nate acts through his 'other body' with its speaking silence.

Certainly Lesje's self division is no more strange than Nate's or indeed Elizabeth's but her fantasies are more exotic, for though she may be a scientist, she is also, like Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, an 'escape artist'. How the prehistoric jungle offers her a place of refuge from the embarrassments of social life is amply demonstrated at the dinner party to which Elizabeth invites her and William, for Elizabeth already suspects that her husband is falling in love with Lesje. Awkward and ill at ease,
Lesje knocks over her coffee cup and flees to the bathroom, where locking herself in she escapes to the lost wilderness:

Is she really this graceless, this worthless? From her treetop she watches an Ornithominus, large-eyed, birdlike, run through the scrub, chasing a small protomammal. - - - Surely these things are important. 61

Back 'in her field' once again, Lesje realises that though she can see nothing clearly up close:

It's like being farsighted, the distant lake and its beaches and smooth backed basking sauropods clear eged in the moonlight, her own hand a blur.

She does not know, for instance, why she is crying. 62

As a subject Lesje is under continual threat of erasure, preferring to be invisible and certainly sexless as she runs through the upper Jurassic out of her living room. If fantasy suggests the trajectory of a character's consciousness, then we can trace the subterrean shifts in Lesje's internal dialogue through the changing scenarios of her lost worlds. Just as her antagonism to William projected the image of the ravenous Gorgosaurus in the colonnade, so at the lowest ebb in her relationship with Nate all her fantasies become vision of extinction.

Such visions are still possible, but they don't last long.

Inevitably she sees a later phase: the stench of dying
seas, dead fish on the mud covered shores, the huge flocks dwindling, stranded, their time done, all of a sudden, Utah.63

This fantasy is incidentally, an echo of Nate's similar anxieties about their relationship, suggesting the strongly poetic metalanguage of image clusters which binds this novel together. In her state of desperation, Lesje finally perceives an affinity between herself and Elizabeth's dead lover in their comparable roles and their possibly comparable fates. As a 'pregnant paleontologist' in the final section of her narrative, Lesje discovers that section of her narrative, Lesje discovers that not only has her perspective on life changed but also her perspective on prehistory, though she is still capable of wryly looking at her own act of vengeful conception from an objective scientific point of view. Instead of an absence, Lesje's plot now has a centre; at last she has become significant to herself and suddenly visible to her dinosaurs. With that knowledge comes the destruction of her fantasy as she realises not only that they are long since dead but if they were alive, 'they'd run away or tear her apart.' Even her favourite fantasy of the dinosaur dance fades:

They'd dance stumpily down the stairs of the Museum and out of the front door. Eight-foot horsetails would sprout in Queen's park, the sun would turn orange.
She’d throw in some giant dragon tiles, some white and yellow flowers, a lake. She’d move among the foliage, at home, an expedition of one.64

To add a further twist, it is possible to see revisionary elements in Lesje’s fantasy which might be interpreted as a resistance to Conan Doyle’s imperialist values, where the challenge of the unknown for his white British all-male exploring party was as much cultural as scientific, and where the confrontation was not only with dinosaurs but also with ape men and cave dwellers in an emblematic representation of the whole Darwinian evolutionary scale. Needless to say, ‘civilised’ values prevail after a bloody combat where the white men have all the rifles, and the territory is marked down as ripe for colonial exploitation. Lesje’s relation to the Lost World is quite different. Not only is she an observer rather than an invader in an unpeopled land, but the distinction between civilised and ‘savage’ blurs, when her prehistoric fantasy brushes up against real life. Given the behaviour of William and Elizabeth, not to mention the documentation of atrocities in Nate’s mother’s Amnesty International bulletins, primitive violence is not alien to the late twentieth century human beings. Lesje’s opinion of the human race is low.
Does she care whether the human race survives or not? She doesn't know. The dinosaurs didn't survive and it wasn't the end of the world. In her bleaker moments, of which, she realizes, this is one, she feels the human race has it coming.

As the love triangles shift, though, Nate and Lesje move out of relationships that prevent them from changing and into relationships that liberate them to larger possibilities; and though Elizabeth is left alone, she, too, arrives at a place where she can realize her better potential. Each makes a connection of some sort; each learns to go with time, to accept its forward movement, to make time an ally; and each of the women develops a capacity for compassion that counters the processes by which the sins of one generation are inflicted on the next. Elizabeth becomes a strong and dominating woman who refuses to be victimized by any man or woman. She is an image of threatening force, the daring and dashing "Lady with the axe."

Elizabeth says:

I don't want to discuss my mother, my father, my Auntie Muriel or my sister. I know quite a lot about them as well. — — I am adult and I do not think I am merely the sum of my past. I can make choices and suffer the consequences.
She finds herself incapable of preventing herself from doing to others what has been done to her. In *Life Before Man*, through Auntie Muriel’s character Atwood gives the picture of a victim of patriarchal society who, unable to realize the harm done to her, chooses to shape other women in her mould. In such instances, woman loses her sensibility and individuality as a woman and becomes an enemy of another. In other novels, Atwood depicts men as victimizers but in this novel cautiously she sows a victim becoming a victimizer, inadvertently though. This is more pathetic than ironical.

What is particular about the marriage of Elizabeth and Nate is that despite the lack of warmth and trust, they still live together under the same roof because of the children. Elizabeth charts out her conjugal life systematically, Thursday for her Chris, Saturday for Nate and Martha. As time goes by they come to an understanding that they accept each other’s affairs and to keep the marriage going for the sake of children. Among the rules which have been developed from these premises are “agreements on the division of housework, regulations for going out and staying at home, and the promise of frankness and honesty about their sexual arrangements.” The fossilized relationship between Elizabeth and Nate is a painful reminder of the truth of Adrienne Rich’s words:
Conscious of their own spiritual deaths both of them strongly desire to be re-born, Elizabeth feels that all her emotions have frozen after the suicide of her lover, Chris silently cries out:

"I want to be moved. Move me. We are the numb.

Long years ago / we did this or that. And now we sit."

As the love triangles shift, though, Nate and Lesje move out of relationships that prevent them from changing into relationships that liberate them to larger possibilities; and though Elizabeth is left alone. She too arrives at a place where she can realize her better potential. Each makes a connection of some sort; each learns to go with time, to accept its forward movement, to make time an ally; and each of the women develops a capacity for compassion that counters the processes by which the sins of the generation are inflicted on the next. Elizabeth has so strong a sense of determinism because she sees herself becoming the Auntie Muriel she has always feared and hated. In her better moments, Elizabeth can be quite clear about this. She knows that Auntie Muriel was destructive because of what was done to her.

Unlike Lesje, Nate is not a child of two cultures but his estrangement from his mother is as great as that between Lesje and her parents. Nate secretly sneers at his energetic mother, who, according to him, naively believes that by zealously
crusading against atrocities, inhuman deeds can be wiped clean from the surface of the earth. Nate is embarrassed by his name which means Gift of God and feels the weight of her ideal son pressing on his chest and choking him. Nate knows that his mother sees him as a failure and that she strongly disapproves of the fact that he makes over priced handmade toys while people all over the world are being tortured, imprisoned and short. Her strictness during his childhood caused him to start being a hypocrite at the age of six. To add to his misery, she told him that his father died a hero during the war. Aware of his own lack of flair and scrawny body. Nate felt overshadowed by his heroic father till she told him on his sixteenth birthday that he died in England of hepatitis without ever reacting the real war. Nate's deep rooted desire to be an adventurous, romantic hero like his childhood image of his father, finds expression in fantasies and day dreams which sharply contrast with his powerless position amidst dull reality. Nate inwardly rages against his morally smug mother not comprehending his suffering till he learns with a sense of shock that underneath her social mask of optimism and serenity, his mother is a despairing lonely woman doing the things she does only to avoid committing suicide. Commenting on the progress of Elizabeth's life Paul Goetsch comments:
Elizabeth succeeds in overcoming her melancholy. She accepts Chris's death and the dissolution of her marriage, takes over the responsibility for her children, and, losing her husband to a younger woman, faces the problem of age. Her development is reminiscent of the central characters of Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before Dark.*

However, hers is only one voice in this multi-voiced novel, and as we have seen, this bleakness does not characterise Lesje's mood at the end, nor Nate's, as he faces their shared future with a shadowed optimism. Neither is it an adequate description of Elizabeth's mood in the final section of the novel as she stands in the empty Museum after closing time looking at the Chinese Peasant Art exhibition which she has been responsible for arranging. In the struggle for social and psychological survival which has been narrated she too has succeeded, though not in the ways she had hoped. Hers is not the dominating discourse of the novel but only one among three in a structure of mutually responsive and frequently antagonistic discourses. Within her roles of wife, lover, mother and niece, she has survived Chris's suicide, separation and divorce from Nate, and the death of her Auntie Muriel. She has come very close to being sucked into the back vacuum by her ghosts and witches, where her collapse at
her aunt's funeral is represented through spatial imagery of falling into the abyss of outer space, though at the same time it is ironically interpreted as appropriate social behaviour for the occasion, as far as Aunt Muriel's friends are concerned this is exactly what she should have done. Elizabeth returns from that dark fantasy world while remaining aware that those forces continue to rage just beyond the borders of sanity:

She has no difficulty seeing the visible world as a transparent veil and whirlwind. The miracle is to make it solid. Elizabeth's vocabulary may be different from Lesje's but she shares with her a similar apprehension about borderlines, though each remains unknown to the other and known only to the reader.

Elizabeth stands looking at a picture. The picture is framed and glassed. Behind the glass, bright green leaves spread with the harmonious symmetry of a Chinese floral rug; purple fruits glow among them. Three women, two with baskets, are picking. Their teeth shine within their smiles, their cheeks are plump and rosy as a doll's. *A Fine Crop of Eggplants,* the caption says, in Chinese English and French.
Though there is no doubt that Elizabeth, remains located in real life, aware that she is meshed into social codes of family and professional responsibility, this picture represents an imagined space outside the limits of the everyday, offering her an image of otherness which is quite separate from the 'black holes' and strikes a correspondence with the spaces of contemplation contained by Kayo's bowls in her living room. These paintings occupy the same dimensions of Oriental space as the bowls tough with difference that the space is no longer empty but filled with images, which Elizabeth apprehends not as representations of real life but as the figures of desire or political idealism.

China is not Paradise; Paraside does not exist. Even the Chinese know it, they must know it, they live there. Like Cavemen, they pain not what they see but what they want.71

The perception of Elizabeth's is not unlike Atwood's comment on the task of the novelist:

What kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you can see around you, or the better one you can imagine? It is only by the better world we imagine that we judge the world we have.72

Though she returns to the parameters of everyday, remembering that she has to go to the supermarket on the way home, yet
Elizabeth has her vision of a better place 'elsewhere' within the impossible space opened up by the picture on the wall:

China does not exit. Nevertheless, she longs to be there.\textsuperscript{73}

The novel ends with Elizabeth poised on the borderline between realism and fantasy in the double knowledge that the paintings represent optimistic illusions and that such illusions are necessary for survival. Elizabeth's story, like Nate's and Lesje's is remarkably resistant to threats of closure just as it resists the grand narratives of science with their patterns of determinism based on natural law. Certainly the arguments from prehistory are no more reassuring than the arguments from contemporary history as guarantees for the survival of the human race, but we should not forget that the Chinese Art exhibit as well as the dinosaur skeletons are housed in the Royal Ontario Museum. Both Lesje's and Elizabeth's narratives end their as well, opening out into space of the imaginary which exceed the actual dimensions of the museum, just as the novel exceeds the limits of the classic realist text. This multi-voiced narrative contains many more voices than three, if we include the discourses of social realism and science as well as of science fiction, fantasy, and moral idealism. Similarly, the Royal Ontario Museum itself shimmers with multiple meanings. Of course, it offers a specific point of reference on a map of Toronto and a definite location, but what else does it
represent in this fiction. Rather like the Mesozoic when viewed from Lesje's deconstructive angle, its definite outlines tend to disperse when viewed subjectively from the inside.

Sometimes, she thinks of the museum as a repository of knowledge, the resort of scholars, a palace built in the pursuit of truth, with inadequate air-conditioning but still a palace. At other times it's bandits' cave: The past has been vandalized and this is where the loot is stored.74

Like everything else in the novel, the Royal Ontario Museum has a double existence within the contiguous discourse of realism and of fantasy, a solid edifice which may at any moment disappear into scenarios of Jurassic swamps or idealised Chinese landscapes. Such slippages open the way out of the museum and beyond the deterministic narratives of prehistory contained there so that we may hear the heterogeneous voices of human survivors in the present in 'mid-history' as Atwood described it, as the 'before' of the title reverses its direction to point not backwards to the distant past but forwards to the future.
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