THE RECASTING OF THE FEMALE GOTHIC IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the novels of Margaret Atwood through the use of the Gothic as a framework. Atwood’s novels re-write and re-vision aspects of the Female Gothic, the American Gothic, and the Canadian Gothic in their depiction of the problems of female identity and self-definition, human evil, and the demands and expectations placed on women and men by contemporary society.

In the Introduction I present a history of the Gothic as a genre, analyzing narrative themes and concepts originating in Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Matthew Lewis’s The Monk. I will show how the Gothic evolved, after the genre collapsed as a force in its original form by 1830, in both the United States and Canada. The Gothic as found in North America uses national history and the actuality of the landscape to provoke and depict terror. In both Canada and the United States the Gothic is used as a vehicle to depict issues of alienation and the influence of the past in both national and personal terms. In the Introduction I will also present a working definition of the Female Gothic that will show how the sub-genre is not, as many contemporary feminist theories have maintained, a genre that expresses female self-loathing, but one that permits an active engagement with the problems of constructing the female self as an active speaking subject.
Chapters One through Seven will analyze each of Atwood’s novels published to date in detail. In each, Atwood’s use of the Gothic tropes of imprisonment, confinement, haunting, and surveillance will be examined. Atwood’s use and rewriting of the Gothic canon will also be considered. In the conclusion, I will present a brief analysis of *Alias Grace*, Atwood’s most recent novel, and show how Atwood has rewritten the Gothic form to depict female anxieties and contemporary political abuses, and to examine questions of human evil and the relations between space and time.
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Introduction

In the past thirty years the Gothic as a genre has experienced a gradual, but growing, revival. The rediscovery or re-evaluation of classic Gothic texts from the genre's first appearance in the years between 1764 and 1830 has led to a gradual opening-out of interest in related Gothic forms by both writers and academic critics. The publishing success in the 1990s of writers such as Stephen King and Anne Rice, the popularity in the 1980s of graphic horror films such as the Halloween and Friday the 13th series, and the development in adolescent popular culture of a sub-culture called "Goth," featuring the wearing of black clothing and an interest in gloom-laden music also called "Goth," have in all made the idea of the "Gothic" more immediate, yet more confusing, to the average reader: the novels, films, and music mentioned all have frightening narratives or subtexts, but a range of intended audience and effects. The production of films such as Bram Stoker's Dracula and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which use the titles of the movies themselves as vehicles for reminding audiences of the source texts for both monsters, has provoked more of an interest in non-academic culture for going back to "first things" in understanding the Gothic. However, this interest co-exists with a belief that anything that could be termed "frightening" is "Gothic," leading to "Gothic" becoming an easy shorthand for "dark, depressing, or scary." So many things are labelled as Gothic that one can use, as a guide to the term's definition in the culture at large, United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's words on the legal definition of pornography: difficult to define but everyone knows what it is.¹

Since the early years of this century there has been a general critical consensus on
what the roots of the Gothic are; it is the branches of the Gothic that are difficult to define. Diffusion is one of the main points of the genre, which has grown from a set of novels published between 1764 and 1830, all sharing certain points of narrative technique and setting, to a series of sub-genres such as the nineteenth-century English sensation novel, mid-twentieth-century Southern American Gothic novel, horror fiction, detective fiction, and the Southern Ontario Gothic. This last sub-genre was explicated for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation by Margaret Atwood in a radio broadcast: her novels occupy a prominent place in this field, which has only in the past twenty years or so been recognized. 

Margaret Atwood has been both enthusiastic student of, and questioning contributor to, the Gothic in several of its forms. It is the aim of this work to analyze Atwood's novels in their Gothic contexts, and determine what Atwood has done in the genre in its current form. In the work that follows, I hope to be able to demonstrate how the variety of fictions based on the original Gothic novels of Walpole, Radcliffe, and others before 1830 led to the development of a living genre that has continued the narrative concerns of the first Gothics.

To explore the connections Atwood has to the Gothic, it is useful first to survey the landscape of the Gothic, starting with the first Gothics of Walpole and Radcliffe, and going on to the various "modified" Gothics (Female Gothic, American Gothic, Southern Gothic, "New" Gothic, and Southern Ontario Gothic) that evolved out of the original form. The novels of Margaret Atwood work within several of these latter-day Gothic traditions, the Female Gothic and the interstices of American and Canadian Gothic in particular, in order to represent the problems and dilemmas of present-day life and society in Canada. In her use of the Female Gothic, Atwood engages with some of the questions feminism has posed
in the past thirty years, while her engagement with both "nationalist" strands of the Gothic points to her involvement with questions of Canadian identity and American cultural hegemony.

As stated earlier, the canon of the original Gothic was established early in the century in works by J.M.S. Tompkins, Eino Railo, and Edith Birkhead as consisting of works written after 1764 and following the lead of Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto*. In this novel, Walpole laid out the various elements that would appear again and again in the field, announcing the work as "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (Walpole 7). *The Castle of Otranto* begins with a deliberate distancing effect: the preface to the first edition proclaims the novel to be a "work...found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England," printed "at Naples. in the black letter, in the year 1529" (3). Thus the novel itself is set into a frame, here one of distance and purported translation. Walpole's first preface outlines the tenor of the novel to follow as one informed by terror and the marvellous. His words on the former are instructive for the later novels in the genre:

Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the
story from ever languishing; and it is so often
contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a
constant vicissitude of interesting passions.

(Walpole 4)

The fiction of the translation exists both as a disguise for Walpole as author, and as a
convenient explanation for any flaws in the narrative or language. By the end of the preface, the reader is prepared to excuse any number of deviations from standard narratives of the period, and to accept the tone and setting of the present text as an archaic curiosity.

The Castle of Otranto, the "new species of romance," introduces many settings and situations that would become standard in Gothic novels. The castle of Otranto itself is a nearly animate edifice, furnished with secret underground passages and an ambulatory painting. Walpole's new romance plays out an old narrative, that of a reclamation of a house from usurpers by the rightful owners. The family of Prince Manfred, the holder of the castle of Otranto, is warned by a prophecy that the castle and their title will pass from them "whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it" (15-16). All of Manfred's actions are aimed at staving this off, but the harder he strives against fate the faster the catastrophe proceeds. His attempt to perpetuate his line by marrying his son to the daughter of a closer, more legitimate heir to the title is foiled by his son's sudden death under a giant helmet, which falls upon him at the announcement of his betrothal. Manfred resolves to marry the newly eligible girl himself, and starts a chain of events that will ensure the destruction of his family line. Manfred is not personally guilty of displacing the true owners of the castle of Otranto, but his efforts to hold on to his position damn him, as he presumes to defy fate and the weight of (angry) history. Walpole's evocation of Shakespeare as a model and influence in the preface to the second edition is apt, as the culmination of events and discoveries in The Castle of Otranto recalls the plot discoveries of Macbeth. Like Macbeth, Manfred presumes to circumvent fate and is foiled by the sudden revelation of the identity of a previously unknown threat. Walpole's enterprising marrying of "ancient
romance" and Shakespeare inspired several of his contemporaries and immediate successors, such as Clara Reeve and Sophia Lee, to blend vaguely supernatural elements and equally vague historical information into a romance form.

Walpole's two prefaces for *The Castle of Otranto* inspired not only the theory for the Gothic novel itself, but also the criticism the form would endure. *The Monthly Review*, which in February 1765 published a highly favourable review of *The Castle of Otranto*, reversed itself when it was revealed that the author of the novel was not a long dead Neapolitan named "Onuphrio Muralto" but the very much alive Horace Walpole.

While we considered [*The Castle of Otranto* a translation] we could readily excuse its preposterous phenomena, and consider them as sacrifices to a gross and unenlightened age.---But when, as in this edition, [it] is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we offered to the foibles of a supposed antiquity, we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false tale in a cultivated period of learning. It is, indeed, more than strange that an Author, of a refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism! (Clery 53)³

In *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction*, E.J. Clery analyzes the reaction to Walpole's hoax in context with other literary assumptions of an antique voice. Clery points out that Samuel Johnson's reaction to James Macpherson and the works of Ossian could be applied to the critical backlash against Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto*:

Johnson gives a number of reasons why the novel should adhere to
probability and reject marvels. For a start, the audience of today is more demanding, more worldly and knowledgeable. Any deviation from reality would be rejected. Conversely, and more importantly, books of this kind are most often read by the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as guides to conduct, and introductions into life. (58)\textsuperscript{4}

Johnson's criticisms will continue on, in many forms, in the development of the Gothic novel. Jane Austen's famous caveat about the form, found in the hybrid novel (part Gothic parody, part serious Gothic novel on its own) Northanger Abbey, is one of the best phrased:

Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. (160)

Johnson's and others' concern about the ease with which fiction can be taken for fact and exemplar by impressionable readers reflects the anxiety the Gothic narrative depicts about the permeability of boundaries. Critics felt that in real life, as in the text, the lines between fantasy and reality would blur for the reader, leading to danger.

Ann Radcliffe's novels solidified the Gothic narrative and descriptive forms first elaborated by Walpole. It is the work of Radcliffe that informs the majority of definitions of the Gothic and, owing in large part to Austen and Northanger Abbey, it is the work of Radcliffe that is fixed upon as the epitome of Gothic excess and exaggeration. Radcliffe's first two novels, The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne (1789) and A Sicilian Romance (1790),
were pleasant, if slight, exercises in romance: J.M.S. Tompkins calls The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne "pallid" (249). It was with her third novel, The Romance of the Forest (1791), that Radcliffe's style became the one known for, as the anonymous reviewer of the next novel The Mysteries of Udolpho put it,

the...powers of description...the...predilection...for the

wonderful and the gloomy. (Anonymous, qtd. in Williams 389)рем

In many respects, Ann Radcliffe is the Gothic novel. Tompkins wrote, in The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800, "one sees in her the focus of all the romantic tendencies of her time" (248). Radcliffe's basic plot concerned the travails of a young heroine, who is taken from a state of calm (a convent, her ancestral home, or care of a relative) into a series of adventures over a wide territory. She is beset by a tyrannical male who often acts in lieu of her rightful parental authority, and is left to her own devices to save herself. Often the tyrannical male acts in concert with an equally tyrannical female (usually a mother superior of a convent, but occasionally the mother of the heroine's beloved) to keep the heroine trapped in a series of convents or isolated houses. The heroine often writes poetry in an excess of emotion, and proves her moral superiority to those around her by her displays of sensibility. Ultimately, after many trials, she marries the hero and is set up in a state of idyllic domesticity that recaptures in some degree the life she had before the start of the novel.

Radcliffe's novels reiterate the basic romance/courtship plot, but with elaborations that defined the Gothic genre. The Mysteries of Udolpho, first published in 1794, is, for better or worse, the epitome of the Gothic in its first incarnation. The adventures of Emily
St. Aubert are the source of Catherine Moreland's would-be adventures in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, and contribute to the novel-madness burlesqued in Eaton Stannard Barrett's 1813 burlesque *The Heroine*. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* follows the education through adversity of Emily, who begins the novel living an idyllic rural life with her parents in sixteenth-century Gascony. Her mother dies, precipitating a series of events that take her from her secure home. Emily's father, M. St. Aubert, cautions her against letting her exquisite sensibility get the better of her, but is unable to offer anything more than advice as they are forced to leave the family home. Emily meets and falls in love with Valancourt before she and her family leave the safe haven of La Vallée.

Emily's travels in the novel can be taken as an enactment of the fall of mankind, as she is forced from retired bliss into hostile urban (Venice at carnival) or hostile near-savage (the estate of Udolpho) conditions. Emily's father dies and she is left in the care of her aunt Cheron, a frivolous woman who marries foolishly and catastrophically. The novel's durable villain, Montoni, is introduced as Emily's aunt's suitor and eventual husband. Montoni takes Mme Cheron and Emily to his family home, the estate of Udolpho, and there leaves his wife to die of neglect. Montoni after this is Emily's legal guardian, and he attempts to gain control of what is left of Emily's fortune by forcing her to marry one of his associates, Count Morano. There is a secret in Emily's past which her father failed to tell her of, and she finds clues to it in places all over Udolpho. Radcliffe relies a great deal on previously existing texts both in and out of the narrative of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: papers about Emily's father's family are important in tracing who Emily is, while the narrative refers to a tradition in writing heroism that the dialogue explicitly reveals. In response to Montoni's pressure
to sign over her patrimony, Emily asserts herself in words Montoni finds familiar:

"You may find, perhaps, Signor," said Emily, with mild dignity, "that the strength of my mind is equal to the justice of my cause; and that I can endure with fortitude, when it is in resistance of oppression."

"You speak like a heroine," said Montoni, contemptuously; "we shall see whether you can suffer like one." (Radcliffe, *Udolpho* 381)

Emily resists passively, and is locked into a corner of Udolpho for her pains, where she becomes convinced that the imprisoned young man near her is Valancourt. He is not, but in the world of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* it is an easy mistake to make. The villains blur into one another, their names Montoni and Morano being similar. Terry Castle traced the way in which the dead, or absent, have such a presence in Radcliffe that those who are physically present, and alive, in some parts of the text pale besides them. It is unsurprising that Emily would mistake one well spoken sensitive young man for another, although there is no reason for her to think that Montoni has captured Valancourt. DuPont, the man who is actually held prisoner near Emily, aids in her escape from Udolpho. After a few more trials, this time with a different family with previously unknown connections to her, Emily is reunited with Valancourt and is able to reconstruct a life resembling the one she was cast out of at the start of the novel in retirement at La Vallée.

Radcliffe managed to strike basic chords in her readers with her novels. Emily's persecution at the hands of Montoni critiqued domestic tyranny in a safe fashion, as Montoni was clearly a degenerate facsimile of a parental figure and not her real one. Emily has a
"good" father and a "bad" one, and Radcliffe can write about the power struggles in the family unit without overtly criticizing it. While Radcliffe adhered to the courtship plot in all her novels, in her hands "the strain that the gothic already places on the courtship plot—who can worry about marriage when there are corpses stashed behind the curtains?—is redoubled by the strain sentimentality puts on gender: valorous women and tearful men make odd couples" (Johnson, Equivocal Beings 76). There is a constant instability at the heart of Radcliffe's plots, as heroines are confronted with conflicting evidence about their parentage, and live in day to day insecurity over whether a locked door is to keep the world at bay, or them from the world. Objects can be taken quite easily for things they are not: the most notorious scene in The Mysteries of Udolpho concerns the identity of the thing behind the curtain that Emily discovers one night. She faints upon seeing it, and the reader is left to place all manner of objects in the void. Eventually it is revealed that it was a waxwork memento mori with no connection to Emily at all: Emily's reaction to it was ultimately of more importance than the thing itself:

The waxwork corpse is the best example of what Radcliffe is known for introducing into the Gothic, the explained supernatural. Although an atmosphere of near-ghostly sounds exists from the start of the novel, Radcliffe again and again pulls away from declaring anything to be outright occult in nature. This leads to some stylistic infelicities, as the anonymous Critical Review essay on The Mysteries of Udolpho indicated:

Curiosity is raised oftener than it is gratified; or rather,

it is raised so high that no adequate gratification can be given it; the interest is completely dissolved when once the
adventure is finished, and the reader, when he is got to the end
of the work, looks about in vain for the spell which had bound
him so strongly to it. (Anonymous, qtd. in Williams 390)

Not all contemporary reviewers regarded Radcliffe's use of the explained supernatural in this
way: William Enfield's praise of it in his review of the novel in the *Monthly Review* indicates
that he considered Radcliffe's innovation an improvement over Walpole's unfettered use of
the supernatural.

Without introducing into her narrative any thing really
supernatural. Mrs. Radcliffe has contrived to produce as
powerful an effect as if the invisible world had been obedient
to her magic spell: and the reader experiences in perfection
the strange luxury of artificial terror, without being obliged
for a moment to hoodwink his reason, or to yield to the
weakness of superstitious credulity. (Enfield, qtd. in Williams 393)

The explained supernatural would strain writers', and readers', ingenuity for decades, until
the rapid development of science and technology in the twentieth century made facts of the
physical world and universe appear more strange than anything a novelist could concoct.

Another strain of the Gothic appeared in 1796, when Matthew Gregory Lewis
published *The Monk*. Radcliffe gave *The Mysteries of Udolpho* a vague moral centre: in the
midst of Emily St. Aubert's over-sensitive perceptions one finds St. Aubert's deathbed
warning to his daughter:

Above all, my dear Emily...do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling, the
romantic error of amiable minds. Those, who really possess sensibility, ought early to be taught, that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. And since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them. (79-80)

Lewis affixed an even more nebulous moral to The Monk, and in some ways demonstrated that St. Aubert was correct, and that humanity's sense of evil was a great deal more acute than its sense of good. The whole of The Monk illustrates that repression is a bad thing, as the novel follows the downward ethical spiral of Ambrosio, the eponymous protagonist. At the start of the novel Ambrosio is Madrid's most admired monk; a commanding preacher and noteworthy celibate, Ambrosio is a pillar of virtue who has never been tested. Pride and sublimated lust prove his downfall, as he succumbs to the temptations embodied by Matilda, a young woman who has entered his monastery in disguise. Matilda aids Ambrosio first in breaking his vow of celibacy and later in planning the seduction of Antonia, a virtuous and sheltered young woman whom he sees during Mass in his church. Ambrosio is entrapped further and further in a web spun of sexual desire, murder, and ambition; he kills Antonia's mother in order to have Antonia, and utilizes Matilda's powers of black magic to attain his ends. After he drugs, rapes, and murders Antonia, his own parentage comes to light as he discovers that Antonia was his sister, and that he has committed matricide as an adjunct to
incest. Matilda reveals herself as an agent of Satan and Ambrosio is captured by the Inquisition. While in prison he sells his soul to the devil in return for protection from the Inquisition. Satan obliges and in a scene of cosmic irony takes him from certain release by the Inquisition to death by impaling and exposure in the Pyrenees. In a parallel storyline, Lewis shows the evils of the convent. Raymond and Agnes are two young lovers prevented from marrying by Agnes’s family. Agnes, sent to the convent adjoining Ambrosio’s monastery, is found to be pregnant and confined to an underground crypt. There she gives birth, and the baby wastes away. Raymond frees her just before she follows the baby, and the convent is destroyed by a Madrid mob as the cruelty of the mother superior is uncovered. In an allied subplot, Raymond attempts to elope with Agnes before she is sent to the convent only to find that he has eloped with her family’s ghost, the Bleeding Nun, instead, and only the help of the Wandering Jew can rid him of the phantom. Lewis used the supernatural with a free hand, and with less worry about inherent plausibility than troubled Walpole. If the descriptions in Radcliffe’s novels tend towards the picturesque and the gloomy, Lewis’s are funereal. Most of the action in The Monk takes place at night, or underground, and by the end of the novel there are persistent reminders of decay. Lewis injected a note of misogyny into the Gothic; while The Monk contains scenes where characters of both sexes suffer explicitly, later novelists took to depicting women’s torture, often by other women in by then obligatory convent and Inquisition scenes, with graphic intensity, as the following quotation from the novel The Abbess (by Shakespeare forger William Henry Ireland) shows:

Again he slumbers—the horrid scene continues—he strives in vain
to render her assistance—now, he is habited as a criminal, in the Act of Faith, he approaches the faggot—Maddalena Rosa is already chained to the stake—now, the ardent flames consume her garments—her beauteous hair now blazes—her flesh is scorched—her limbs wreathe in anguish—she cries for mercy—he hears her shrieks—again he wakes—the piercing cry still vibrates in his ear. (Abbess 3:6)

Lewis’s use of graphic descriptions of scenes of decay or violence lead to attempts to differentiate between his mode of terror writing and Radcliffe’s. Radcliffe herself tried to define the difference as being one between “terror” (her preferred mode) and “horror” (Lewis’s). In “On the Supernatural in Poetry,” published posthumously in the New Monthly Review in 1826, Radcliffe presented her own definition of the differences between “terror” and “horror”:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil? (149-150)

As far as narrative goes, Lewis and Radcliffe are remarkably similar. Both novelists break up the primary stories in their texts with incidental poetry and inset stories; Radcliffe’s
heroines are more likely than Lewis’s heroes to compose poetry as an outlet for their overflowing feelings, while Lewis is more prone than Radcliffe is to detour the main plot for inset ghost stories. The inset narratives in Lewis and Radcliffe serve as counterpoints to the main narratives, illustrating aspect of the plots in a form of dramatic irony, as the listeners or readers of the inset stories lack the information that the reader of the novels in question has. The reader is invited here to piece the narrative together from the various strands the writers have laid out. The main plotline, in Gothic novels after Radcliffe and Lewis, tended to digress and illustrate itself in a manner akin to Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy: inspiring twentieth-century critics like Eve Sedgwick to comment on the problems the Gothic narrative has in simply being transmitted in the course of the texts involved:

Of all the Gothic conventions dealing with the sudden, mysterious, seemingly arbitrary, but massive inaccessibility of those things that should normally be most accessible, the difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance. (Sedgwick 13)

The novels of Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis all illustrate, in varying ways, this inaccessibility. Authority is portrayed as arbitrary and prone to abuse. Family backgrounds are obscured, with characters finding important facts in fragmentary manuscripts or in hidden rooms. Things accepted as the truth change abruptly and without warning to protagonists: Ambrosio discovers his true parentage suddenly, while in Radcliffe’s 1797 novel The Italian Ellena, the heroine, is left confused by the rapid series of revelations regarding the identities of her father and mother. Time and perspective are shown to change the meanings and appearances of individual deeds and locations, something shown to full
effect in Radcliffe’s first description of the castle of Udolfo:

“There,” said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours.

“is Udolfo.”

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni’s: for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its wall, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend. (Radcliffe, Udolfo 226-227)

The prospect of Udolfo changes as Emily approaches it, since she is unable to perceive the castle in its entirety, but only as angles and views that change as her own perspective changes.

Mass imitation of scenes like the above ensured that by the time Radcliffe’s The
Italian was published in 1797, the Gothic was a well-established, even clichéd, genre familiar to reviewers. Arthur Aikin’s review of The Italian in the Monthly Review ranked contemporary novel types in a clearly defined hierarchy. “The most excellent, but at the same time most difficult, species of novel-writing consists in an accurate and interesting representation of such manners and characters as society presents,” he stated. He continued

Next comes the modern Romance; in which, high description, extravagant characters, and extraordinary and scarcely possible occurrences combine to rivet the attention, and to excite emotions more thrilling than even the best selected and best described natural scene. This species of fiction is perhaps more imposing than the former, on the first perusal: but the characteristic which distinguishes it essentially from, and shews its vast inferiority to, the genuine novel, is that, like a secret, it ceases to interest after it can no longer awaken our curiosity; while the other, like truth, may be reconsidered and studied with increased satisfaction. (Aikin, qtd. in Williams 435)

It is clear that Aikin places The Italian in the modern Romance camp, although “occupying a very distinguished rank among the modern works of fiction” (435). In ten or so years, the Gothic had become a dominant form of fiction, and copies of The Monk and The Mysteries of Udolpho could be found in any number of circulating libraries; T.J. Horsely-Curties even wrote a three-volume Gothic titled The Monk of Udolpho, combining the most distinctive features of both novelists. By the turn of the century Radcliffe had retired from the field, novelists in the new world were asserting that their Gothic-inspired novels were based on
more truth than the extravagant tales set in crumbling pasts that glutted shops in Britain, and the Gothic itself had collapsed into a set of clichés and narrative tricks that tired reviewers could list by rote. *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1798 asserted “the wonderful and miraculous is the *forte* of our modern novel writers” and went on to elaborate:

> Instead of pictures sketched from Nature, and portraits drawn from Life... we have narrations of haunted towers, old Blue Beards and Red Beards, spectres, sprites, apparitions, black banners waving on the battlements of castles, strange voices, tapers burning one moment and extinguished by some unknown hand the next, clandestine noises, flashing of lightning, and howling of winds. *(Gentleman's Magazine, qtd. in Williams 446)*

The novel that inspired this, *Santa Maria: or, The Mysterious Pregnancy*, appears to have been one of the all too numerous progeny of Radcliffe. Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* depicts the readership of the time, eager for products that approach the standard of Radcliffe but left instead devouring the likes of *Clermont, The Necromancer of the Black Forest, and The Mysterious Warning*. The full title of *Santa Maria* appears to have been more ludicrous than even the ones Austen lampooned in her list of “Horrid Novels” in *Northanger Abbey*.

Contemporary reviewers, as we see, were able to list what to them made a novel Gothic. Literary critics have had no trouble in deciding on a “canon” of Gothic novels; the meanings of the novels themselves have proved to be more difficult to find a consensus about. Reviewers of the eighteenth century distrusted the Gothic because of its inherent escapism. Critics of the twentieth century have divided over what this escapism represents. Montague Summers, an early bibliophile and essayist, asserted that the Gothic was a
conservative genre because

Romanticism weans our thought and care from the sordid practicalities of the repeated round: it offers us a wider and fuller vision; and it is therefore subjective: it is reactionary in its revolt against the present since it yearns for the loveliness of the past so picturesquely revealed to us in art and poem...(Summers 18)

Here Summers appears to be standing the typical eighteenth-century view of the romance (Aikin's, for example) on its head, celebrating its descriptions of a fantastical past and subjectivity. Later critics, however, have focused on the depictions of authority found in Radcliffe and Lewis, for example, and found sustained critiques of contemporary political and social structures in their works. The act of setting novels in a vague, but distant past, or a vague, but distant country, enabled writers to veil critiques of the family, or of the state, in depictions of evil stepfathers, false fathers, and illegitimate or Catholic despotic authority.

David Morse, in Romanticism, wrote:

The Gothic is a field of discourse saturated with political connotations and addressing itself to issues raised in the work of Godwin and Paine: the incompatibility of reason and humanity with a society based on domination and fear; the critique of secrecy and the insistence that a healthy society must be based on frankness, openness and sincerity; the suggestion that in a society governed by despotism and permeated by religious hypocrisy and bigotry natural human impulses will become warped and distorted: the conviction that relationships between
individuals on any basis other than that of freedom and equality must necessarily be alienating even for—perhaps especially for—those who coerce and manipulate. (3)

The growing recognition of a political component in the Gothic in the late eighteenth century has led, in some cases, to novels like William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* being classified as Gothic even though they are set in a recognizable version of contemporary Britain. Frederick S. Frank's list of the nine "most important formal characteristics and imperative motifs of the Gothic novel" is a key to the aspects of the Gothic that have permitted such varying interpretations of a relatively narrow set of novels. Frank's list, in abbreviated form, contains such requirements as "claustrophobic containment," "subterranean pursuit," "supernatural encroachment," "aliveness of architecture and art," "extraordinary positions and lethal predicaments," "abeyance of rationality," "possible victory of evil," "supernatural gadgetry, contraptions, machinery, and demonic appliances," and "a constant vicissitude of interesting passions" (Frank 436-437)

Frank's first motif has proved to be one of the most adaptable in the evolution of the Gothic. In Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis, "containment" is literal: characters spend time locked in crypts, towers, wings of houses, and prisons. In Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, the protagonist is "contained" by the words uttered and published against him by Falkland, his former employer. *Caleb* is trapped in an invisible prison, bounded only by how far Falkland's influence can go. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her unfinished novel *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman*, utilized the Gothic themes and imagery of imprisonment to show how her heroine's literal imprisonment in a madhouse was an analogy for the manner in which
women are imprisoned by society and its institutions. Later versions of the Gothic would have characters imprisoned and nearly immobilized by the past.

The presence of the supernatural in Frank's list would support views of the Gothic that regard it as escapist fiction, whether in a positive way as Summers does or negatively as feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar do. The supernatural aspect of the Gothic diversified as the genre split in the nineteenth century. The frisson of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is based in part on the probability of the events of the novel, and not the perceived supernatural aspects of the plot. Ghosts became fixtures in tales of their own, or became explained as near-tangible projections of a character's psyche. Science gradually took over the role the supernatural had in acting to resolve the Gothic plot; in later horror fiction, "supernatural" occurrences were caused not by occult influences, but by experiments gone awry, or, in the late twentieth century, nuclear accidents.¹⁰

In general, Frank's list fixes important aspects of the Gothic as they existed before 1830. Walpole's two prefaces for *The Castle of Otranto* provided the blueprint for the list, and the genre itself. After the publication of such late period novels as *Frankenstein* and Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the Gothic ceased to exist in the form consolidated in the 1790s.¹¹ Instead, various sub-genres, which can be described as "modified Gothic," some appearing even before 1800, were developed by writers who took narrative tropes from the original form, jettisoned the motifs tied too exclusively to the earlier period, and attempted to use the Gothic to describe the New World, or women's lives in contemporary Britain.
While many of the early novelists in both Canada and the United States owed a great deal to the Gothic as practised in Britain, they took pains to differentiate their attempts at writing their surroundings from what they regarded as the more fantastical historical settings of previous writers. Novelists such as Charles Brockden Brown in the United States and John Richardson in Canada domesticated the Gothic to some degree; using settings taken from the immediate landscape, and utilizing the topography of the New World and the recent history of settlement, they laid the groundwork for the development of the American and the Canadian Gothic forms. Polemical prefaces in the mode of Walpole found in early American novels make clear the aims of the writers. Charles Brockden Brown’s 1799 novel *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* contained a notice “To the Public” which asserted that “the field of investigation [of the novelist], opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe...” (Brown, *Edgar Huntly* 3). He continued:

One merit the writer [Brown] may at least claim; that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader, by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology. (3)

Brown’s novels in fact owe a great deal to the example of William Godwin, who had earlier demonstrated that the Gothic themes of secrecy, imprisonment, and the abuse of power
could be used to depict “Things as They are” (significantly, the original title of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*). The nightmare of Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemic formed the backdrop for several of Brown’s novels, most notably *Arthur Mervyn*. As Brown says in the public notice in *Edgar Huntly*, it was not necessary to conjure an imaginary past in order to construct an American Gothic novel: the materials were there in the landscape and the legacy of the American Revolution. The less-tangible effects of national history and politics contribute both to the uniqueness of North American Gothic and to the differences between American and Canadian Goths. James Fenimore Cooper’s humorous disclaimer, published as the preface to the first edition of his 1825 novel *Lionel Lincoln: or, The Leaguer of Boston*, could apply to writers on either side of the Canadian/United States border working in a Gothic mode:

...while he shrinks from directly yielding his authorities,  

the author has no hesitation in furnishing all the negative testimony in his power.

In the first place, then, he solemnly declares, that no unknown man, nor woman, has ever died in his vicinity, of whose effects he has become the possessor, by either fair means or foul. No dark-looking stranger, of a morbid temperament, and of inflexible silence, has ever transmitted to him a single page of illegible manuscript. Nor has any landlord furnished him with materials to be worked up into a book, in order that the profits might go to discharge the arrearages of a certain consumptive lodger, who made his exit so unceremoniously as to leave the last item in his account, his funeral
charges.

He is indebted to no garrulous tale-teller for beguiling the long winter evenings; in ghosts he has no faith; he never had a vision in his life; and he sleeps too soundly to dream. (3)

Fantastical story sources of many types were the targets of Cooper’s needling: as well as establishing the differences between his tale based on American history and the Gothic of the previous century, Cooper is also making an elaborate joke at the expense of Washington Irving, whose History of New York was advertised as being a manuscript left behind by an impecunious vanished lodger and published to relieve the landlord’s expenses. The mundane basis for the tales of terror published in the New World was a land without castles, too new for ruins (except for those left behind by natives), and free of spectres. “Ghosts” appear in more literal form, as figures representing the Europe Americans left behind. By the mid-nineteenth century it was obvious that the United States was not haunted by ghosts, but by the failed promises of the establishment of the Republic and the horrors of slavery. Louis Gross in Redefining the American Gothic placed this as one of the loci of terror in the emerging American Gothic:

The idea of America as a place of rebirth and renewal of personal identity, while embodying a radical political force often reflected in our literature (from the Declaration of Independence to Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches stories) finds its reverse image in the literature of terror. For Charles Brockden Brown at the beginning of our narrative history to Henry James and beyond, the possibilities of the New World call up dark visions of
accelerated change and unrestrained aggression that mark Gothic fiction
in America as a consideration of the land itself as the locus of terror. (21)

This profound anxiety regarding the land would modulate into an anxiety regarding the
fragility of boundaries, especially those separating slave and free or “savage” from
“civilized”. Brown’s Wieland and Edgar Huntly elide the differences between sleeping and
waking, or full possession of the senses from non-volition. Wieland, protagonist of his 1798
novel *Wieland: or The Transformation*, hears voices that tell him to kill his family: is he
innocent, since the sinister ventriloquist Carwin was the source of the voices, or guilty, for
Carwin’s suggestions may have fallen onto fertile soil? Edgar Huntly wanders the woods
while asleep, discovering things that elude him when he is awake. Cooper and Brown both
depict a landscape that is “home” to their characters, but at times unremittingly hostile.
American Gothic characters are in the position of having to continually re-colonize or re-
build home. This cycle of forced new beginnings, allied to the lure of personal renewal
mentioned above by Gross, can explain the tendency in American Gothic fiction towards
repetitive amnesia, as people are left helpless against threats they willfully forget over and
over. Events originating in the past play themselves out over and over again, a pattern seen
in such twentieth-century American Gothic novels as Peter Straub’s *Ghost Story* and Gloria
Naylor’s *Linden Hills*.

Canadian Gothic fiction can be defined almost as much by what is not in it as by
what is. Canada had no legacy of slavery to act as a fount of original sin in the national
narrative. Earle Birney’s poem “Can. Lit” lists the differences from what is perceived as
a more interesting literary heritage in comparison to the Canadian:
We French, we English, never lost our civil war,

endure it still, a bloodless civil bore;

no wounded lying about, no Whitman wanted.

It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted.

(Birney, Blasted Pine 116)

Canadian Gothic is not broken into as many sub-groups as American Gothic can be. Canadian Gothic does share with the early American Gothic a need to separate itself from the literary products of Britain and their clichés. Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*, while not an example of Gothic fiction, displays this tendency as Moodie depicts her re-education in Upper Canada from "Romantic" writer to "realistic" Canadian. She shows the process by which a woman with preconceptions about landscape derived from European enlightenment and Romantic models learns to read the New World in a more mundane manner. A visit to a lonely, heavily wooded forest prompts this discussion between Moodie and a neighbour:

"What a gloomy spot!" said I..."In the old country, superstition would people it with ghosts."

"Ghosts! There are no ghosts in Canada!" said Mr. D—. "The country is too new for ghosts. No Canadian is afeard of ghosts. It is only in old countries, like your'n, that are full of sin and wickedness, that people believe in such nonsense. No human habitation has ever been erected in this wood through which you are passing. Until a very few years ago, few white persons had ever passed through it; and the Red Man would not pitch his tent in such
a place as this... Now, it is more than probable that no person ever ended his days in this forest, so that it would be folly to think of seeing his ghost.”

(Moodie 286-287)

“Sin and wickedness,” found in older countries, are here as in the United States thought to produce ghosts and spectres. Moodie’s neighbour shows a very literal view of ghosts: they cannot exist, he claims, in places where no one has died.

Ghosts were quickly dismissed from the Canadian landscape, but the actualities of Canadian settlement furnished writers with other means of inciting terror. As earlier, American writers admitted, the engines of terror found in the original Gothic texts were simply not present in the landscape across the Atlantic. The landscape itself produced numerous threats to those inhabiting it: Northrop Frye’s theories on the “garrison mentality” of English Canadian writers provide one way of understanding the menace nature held for early settlers. As Frye put it,

Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological “frontier,” separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting--such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality. (Frye, Bush Garden 225)

The Canadian landscape also provided for an adaptation of the Godwinian idea of being
imprisoned by the manipulations of reputation. Mystery novelist Eric Wright wrote, on the subject of Canadian adaptations of the classic early twentieth-century mystery novel and story, about the difficulty in forcing regional sub-genres into a Canadian context. Canada, he said, was an inappropriate setting for American-style crime novels since “the whole country is just a village strung out along a frontier, and most of us are familiar with or have friends and relatives in every part of the village” (Wright 28). Surveillance is not only possible in the Canadian landscape, it is nearly impossible to avoid.

While Canadian and American Gothic novels differ in thematic points, both sub-genres share some similarities, in particular an interest in the ambivalent meanings and constructions of the idea of “home.” This can take different forms in different novels: as stated earlier, the difficulty of ever being “at home” in the landscape contributed to the ambivalence surrounding home. American writers from Poe to Faulkner depicted the home as being haunted:

Although writers use the old “Gothic” castle as setting, they view it in a new way: they believe that it is haunted not by “helmets” but by authoritarian tensions—spectres, if they exist, belong to the psyche of the inhabitants. Contrary to the simple, popular ideal of “Home Sweet Home,” they affirm that conventional patterns, firm constructions of the past, can often stifle us.

(Malin, “American Gothic Images” 146)

Poe’s house of Usher in the short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” is haunted by the weight of the degenerating family past of the Ushers, and is literally linked to the family’s fate: the house decays as the family does, and collapses into the ground after the deaths of
the last two Ushers. Irving Malin’s comments on the spectres haunting the American Gothic underplay the ghosts of the Southern Gothic; William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* depicts a house built, metaphorically and almost literally, on a charnel house and damned by the weight of the past and slavery. Thomas Sutpen’s desire to have a house and estate built out of the wilderness of Mississippi leads to the eventual downfall of his family line (and, as in Poe, the dereliction of the physical house is parallel to the decay of the family). Sutpen’s “fall” is precipitated by his divorcing his first wife when he finds she has Negro blood; this action results ultimately in near-incest, death, and the ironic return of the remains of Sutpen’s house to the descendants of his son by his rejected first wife. The ambivalent meanings of “home” are foregrounded in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where the plantation the characters escape from is the ironically named Sweet Home. Morrison’s novel depicts the haunting of American life by the after-effects of slavery, represented by the character Beloved, who may or may not be the ghost of the daughter of Sethe, a runaway slave living in Ohio, murdered when escaping the Sweet Home plantation (Sethe murdered her daughter to prevent her from living as a slave, and only the intervention of the men sent to track her stopped her from killing her other children and herself). Beloved, the child who escaped by death a life in slavery at Sweet Home, becomes the spectre reminding Sethe (and the reader) of what was past.

Depictions of home are almost equally double-edged in Canadian Gothic. The garrison in John Richardson’s *Wacousta* (1832) is first presented as a sanctuary from Indian attacks, but as the siege that starts the novel progresses, Richardson shows how sanctuary can turn into a prison, as the British soldiers realize how completely they are trapped in the
fort. Susanna Moodie writes in *Roughing it in the Bush* of the manner in which cabins become firestorms in a moment of inattentiveness. The wilderness is shown to undercut the security and integrity of the home, whether by natural disaster or violent attack: in contrast to the American Gothic, the foundations of the home itself are not called into question as to their legitimacy. The American Gothic collapses the boundaries between the home and its inhabitants, while the Canadian Gothic collapses the boundaries between the inhabitants of the home and the landscape: this can be seen to great effect in Martha Ostenso’s 1925 novel *Wild Geese*. Caleb Gare is shown to have trapped his family in his ongoing battle with the Manitoba prairie, keeping his grown children in a state of prolonged dependency and his wife with her spirit crushed. Gare’s relationship to the land is another version of the thralldom he keeps his family in, and it is fitting that he dies sinking into the muskeg on his property. Once Gare becomes part of the land, his family is freed.

We can see the ways in which American and Canadian novelists have developed the Gothic as a genre to make it reflect the landscape and history of each country. American Gothic novels are marked by the after-effects of the American Revolution and of slavery. The idea of the ever-expanding frontier in the United States contributed to an unease regarding the idea of “home” and possession. The Canadian Gothic novel in English was marked by the consciousness of how fragile the boundaries between the wilderness and humanity were. The exigencies of landscape and history were different than in the United States. A comparison of monsters found in the Gothic fiction of each country indicates subtle differences: often, “monstrosity” in American fiction is a function of human grotesqueness (as found in Flannery O’Connor’s stories, for example) or of colonization by
a threatening "other" (as found in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, for example).\textsuperscript{13} Canadian monsters are often functions of the living wilderness, like the Wendigo, a figure found in northern Native tales and used in English Canadian fiction as a way of expressing the permeable line between the self and the wilderness. The Wendigo is, in many cases, the wilderness, and subsumes its victims, making them into the landscape.\textsuperscript{14} In the American Gothic, threats come from without; in the Canadian Gothic, the threats come from within.

Another outgrowth of the Gothic, this one derived from the work of Ann Radcliffe and other female novelists, is the Female Gothic, which developed over the course of the nineteenth century to become one of the most vibrant of the sub-genres of the original Gothic. The term "Female Gothic" itself is fairly recent, originating in Ellen Moers's groundbreaking work on now-canonical female authors, \textit{Literary Women}. The term proved to be useful as a trans-historical signifier of a certain type of writing with links to Radcliffe, but often with contemporary settings. Moers, for instance, describes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short novel "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) as being typical of this sub-genre.\textsuperscript{15}

For Moers, the Female Gothic was

\begin{quote}
easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean—or anyone else means—by "the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the
\end{quote}
commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one
definite auctorial intent: to scare. (138)

What is not so easily defined is what authors fit into Moers's schema. Moers in fact
bases most of her argument on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Radcliffe is acknowledged as
"mistress of the pure Gothic form" (139), but Shelley is hailed as the originator of "the next
major turning of the Gothic tradition" (139). Shelley's importance comes for Moers out of
the perceived links between her life and the content of *Frankenstein*:

...no other Gothic work by a woman writer, perhaps no literary
work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in
the light of the sex of its author. For *Frankenstein* is a birth
myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination,
I am convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother.

(139-140)

The power of *Frankenstein*, in this analysis, is that it records the trauma and revulsion of
birth and maternity, given extra force since the author herself has felt those emotions. The
other works examined by Moers in conjunction with *Frankenstein* as Female Gothic,
*Wuthering Heights* and Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," extend the horror of
maternity found in Shelley into a more generalized concern with female monstrosity. Moers
associated the Female Gothic with female self-hatred and self-disgust instigated in part by
a perception of adult female sexuality as monstrous.

Despair is hardly the exclusive province of any one sex or class
in our age, but to give visual form to the fear of self, to hold
anxiety up to the Gothic mirror of the imagination, may well be
more common in the writings of women than of men. (Moers 163)

Moers's identification of a separate sub-genre of Gothic is important, although her comments on what sets the Gothic apart from other writing are contradicted by the evidence of some of the texts she considers as examples of the Female Gothic. If the Gothic, as she stated, privileges fantasy over reality, is that to state that women's fears of masculine threat are themselves unreal? Emily St. Aubert, to use an example from Radcliffe, fears Montoni as a murderer. This fear is indeed "fantasy," but the threat he poses to her is real, since he is her legal guardian and thus able to attempt to force her to sign over her property and to marry the man of his choice. While feelings of self-disgust and self-loathing may be fantasies, or exaggerations, fears of imprisonment, entrapment, and victimization are more realistically grounded.

A shift from grounding the terror in Female Gothic in female self-loathing and its attendant perception of the female body and its processes (epitomized by pregnancy and childbirth) as inherently monstrous to a deep fear of confinement and entrapment in domesticity may prove to support a more flexible and less narrow definition of the sub-genre. Moers's intense identification of the "Female Gothic" with Frankenstein has perhaps made female monstrosity as a theme appear inevitable in any later Female Gothic novel. Domestic relations can reproduce arbitrary tyranny in a microcosm, and the Female Gothic works with an awareness of the inequality in power relations between husband and wife, or father and child. Edith Birkhead, an early critic, placed domestic terror at the centre of the work of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, as the portrayal of "the terrors of actual life"
"The Yellow Wallpaper," cited above as an example of the sub-genre, illustrates these terrors. Gilman's novella concerns a woman who is recovering from childbirth and diagnosed with post-partum depression. Her treatment consists of solitary confinement in bed, the "rest cure" pioneered by S. Weir Mitchell in the mid-nineteenth century as the proper treatment of female hysteria and depression. The narrator is forbidden to read or write, as both will excite her. The "confinement" of pregnancy gives way effortlessly here to confinement in bed. The room in which the narrator is kept is furnished in a manner that repeats the double meaning in the word "confinement": it has once been a nursery, with barriers to keep children in, but the bed is bolted to the floor, implying an additional use as a cell for a madwoman. The enforced feminine inertia prescribed by the doctors and the narrator's husband eventually drive the narrator mad: enforced bed rest has indeed made her less depressed and desirous of working, but at the cost of her sanity. The rest cure was no fantasy, but rather the cutting edge of mental illness therapy for the period in question. Female victimization, often at the hands of those society perceives to be one's natural protectors, rather than female monstrosity, is at the core of the Female Gothic. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her unfinished novel The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria, a Fragment (1798), wrote of domestic tyranny in the story of the persecution of the titular heroine by her husband. Maria is placed in a madhouse, with the full connivance of the law, by her wastrel husband. Wollstonecraft asserts the "reality" of this type of victimization as contrasted to that of romantic novels:

Abodes of horror have frequently been described, and

castles, filled with spectres and chimeras, conjured up by the magic
spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wandering mind.

But, formed of such stuff as dreams are made of, what were they
to the mansion of despair, in one corner of which Maria sat,
endeavouring to recall her scattered thoughts! (Wollstonecraft 75)

In demonstrating the contemporary "abode of horror" Maria is placed in, Wollstonecraft
nevertheless is forced to use the language of the Gothic romances she is criticizing for
avoiding "things as they are." The Gothic, for Wollstonecraft, in fact becomes a vehicle for
her protest, as her presentation of imprisonment in a contemporary setting elides the
distinctions Radcliffe and others had set in their own fictions by situating them in the distant
past. Wollstonecraft uses the language of confinement, echoing the recent events of the
French Revolution as well as the work of Radcliffe, so her heroine's declaration "Marriage
had bastilled me for life" has double force (154-5). Maria's perception of the madhouse
recalls Radcliffe in its fragmentary nature, as Emily St. Aubert's shifting view of Udolfo
as she is carried nearer to it is ironically replayed in Maria's view from her cell:

She approached the small grated window of her chamber,
and for a considerable time only regarded the blue expanse;
though it commanded a view of a desolate garden, and of
part of a huge pile of buildings, that, after having been suffered,
suffered, for half a century, to fall to decay, had undergone some
clumsy repairs, merely to render it habitable. The ivy had been
torn off the turrets, and the stones not wanted to patch up the
breaches of time, and exclude the warring elements, left in
heaps in the disordered court. (Wollstonecraft 76-77)

Maria's cell is no picturesque ruin in fifteenth century Italy, and thus removed from the assumed experience of the reading public, but a location to be seen in any provincial town of appreciable size in contemporary Britain. Wollstonecraft's location of terror squarely in the family unit was striking, but would be repeated by novelists that followed her.

Domestic entrapment appears as a terroristic motif in a surprising place in early feminist literary criticism: Virginia Woolf, in the essay "Professions for Women." Woolf's caricature of the Victorian proper lady, the "Angel in the House," is described in terms that firmly fix the Angel as a monster. The Angel, for Woolf, is the conscience of the past that stands over every woman writer's shoulder and was "so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" (Woolf, "Professions" 60). Woolf "kills" her, claiming (artistic) self-defence--"Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing" (Woolf, "Professions" 60). The language of murder is here utilized to demonstrate the lengths traditional women's roles can go in obliterating creative life blood. The Angel is a blank, existing only for and through others, and will drain the mind in the name of propriety. Woolf presents here a type of devouring domesticity, the proper lady as proper vampire. Woolf's firm linkage of domesticity with a variety of monstrosity demonstrates how these metaphors affected even modernist, non-genre oriented writing. For writers like Woolf, Gilman, Wollstonecraft, Charlotte and Anne Brontë, Shelley, the home and family unit can be a terrible refuge, marriage a "Bastille," the innocuous surface giving way to terrifying depths.
As we have seen above, women writers after Radcliffe used the Gothic form as a vehicle to express criticism of women's roles and duties, domestic subjection, and the power politics of the family unit. Asserting the importance of genre in conveying these ideas is a relatively recent critical strategy in feminist theory. As Leslie Dick said in her essay "Feminism. Writing. Postmodernism."

it's something of a radical critical strategy to insist on the relevance of genre, to read Moby Dick as an adventure story, Crime and Punishment as a thriller, Jane Eyre as a 'penniless servant ends up marrying the master of the house' Mills & Boon-style moral romance. Suddenly all the high seriousness of modernist criticism starts to fall away, and it begins to seem much more like pleasure...(207)

Using the Gothic to convey anxiety about female victimization is not, as Gilbert and Gubar would put it, proof merely that women are victimized, but that such victimization is not normal. Why else use a terroristic and exaggerated mode of writing to express such an idea if one found it merely the norm? The masks of the Gothic allow a writer to indict perceived abuses while remaining under cover supporting authority: the existence in so many novels of the dead or missing "good" parent and the oppressive "bad" parent is just one example. Margaret Doody's words on the Gothic of Radcliffe and other female novelists of the Romantic period are applicable to writers of Female Gothic novels in the late twentieth century:

It is in the Gothic novel that women writers could first accuse
the "real world" of falsehood and deep disorder. Or perhaps they rather asked whether masculine control is not just another delusion in the nightmare of absurd historical reality in which we are all involved. The visions of horror are not private -- they have become public. (Doody 560)

The lines between the various strands of the Gothic blur easily, as writing in "nationalist" Gothic subgenres does not preclude writing in the Female Gothic mode. Nationalist Gothics and the Female Gothic share many thematic and narrative motifs. Critical responses to the modern outgrowths of the Gothic are just as varied and contentious as the critical reviews of the Gothic published in the eighteenth century were. Some contemporary criticism of the Gothic repeats concerns of earlier writers: in the late twentieth century the existence of the line between art and life is still as debatable as it was for Samuel Johnson and Arthur Aikin. Some feminist academics in particular critique the Gothic for its perceived escapism. Current critical views on the Gothic demonstrate the same lack of consensus on the ultimate meaning of the form as earlier writing did.

Much of contemporary work on the Gothic concentrates on aspects of the grotesque as found in various texts. The 1991 anthology *The New Gothic*, edited by Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath, focused almost exclusively on tales of the grotesque and of monstrosity: the introduction defined the "new gothic" as being fueled by "horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil, and weird sexuality" (xiv). In *Skin Shows*, a critical work that covers much the same sort of territory, Judith Halberstam wrote

Many histories of the Gothic novel begin with the Gothic
Romances of the later eighteenth century by Mrs. Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and Matthew Lewis... While, obviously, there are connections to be made between these stories of mad monks, haunted castles, and wicked foreigners and the nineteenth-century Gothic tales of monsters and vampires, we should not take the connections too far. (3)

In contrast, Elizabeth Napier in *The Failure of Gothic* says of the works of the later nineteenth century (the backbone of Halberstam's Gothic arguments) that the "propriety of employing the term 'Gothic' to describe such works is... open to question" (xiii). While there is agreement on the basics of the Gothic canon in contemporary academic works on the Gothic, there is by no means unanimity on the interpretations of the works.

Feminist literary theory appears to be one battleground over which the meaning and worth of the Gothic as a genre is fought. As stated earlier, Ellen Moers's grounding of the Female Gothic in images of female monstrosity and self-hatred fostered a view of Female Gothic as a limiting genre. Works on contemporary costume Gothic novels reinforced the idea of Female Gothic as a tool to wield romance as a weapon to limit women's choices and social roles.16 The culmination of this variety of criticism is Michelle A. Massé's *In the Name of Love*, which explores the idea of Gothic as an inherently masochistic literary genre and one that implicitly supports patriarchal domination of women. Massé's conclusion about the future of Gothic is interesting:

The Gothic too points forward to a time when there will be a cure for the symptoms it has so repeatedly suffered for the last three centuries, to a time when no woman will be lured by culture into the Gothic arena and
remain there by her own "choice." When no beaten woman embraces her pain as proof of existing through her dominator's "loving" gaze, when no woman creates her identity by oppressing other women, other classes, other races, when the spectator need not endlessly watch a woman being beaten---then the Gothic will come to an end. (274)

Massé, like Johnson two and a half centuries before, conflates narratives and the world outside them, making women who read Gothic novels out to be *tabulae rasae* in need of enlightening, non-threatening texts. The shift in many contemporary Female Gothic texts to relations of power games and abuses amongst women would indicate, however, that some forms of the traditional Gothic as listed by Massé have indeed "come to an end."

How one reads the Gothic text itself is open to debate. Napier, in *The Failure of Gothic*, cautions against over-reading the Gothic but also condemns the Gothic (its "failure") for its generic instability. Jacqueline Howard, in *Reading Gothic Fiction*, uses a more reader-based theory to approach this same instability:

> We need to remember that Gothic fiction, like any other genre, carries much that is culturally specific—ideological, aesthetic, and literary norms, which are received and interpreted or "rewritten" by readers on the basis of their own interests, their own cultural and institutional, as well as personal, history. (15)

This rewriting is found not only in differing interpretations of the novels (contrast Moers's view of Emily St. Aubert as an essentially passive character with Claudia Johnson's assertion of her active virtue in contrast with the passive men in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*),
but in the continued utilization of certain Gothic narrative and thematic tropes.

The survival of the Gothic in its various modified forms in the twentieth century is due to the durability of these tropes. Coral Ann Howells said, “Gothic fiction is a literature full of curiosity, doubt, and anxiety” (Love, Mystery and Misery 6). This anxiety is manifested in a “preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse” (Halberstam 23): we have learned how easily the lines between the body and the outside world, or the line between sanity and madness, can be transgressed. The structure of the Gothic reflects this anxiety about borders: genres cross in Radcliffe’s early novels as poetry composed by the heroines says what they cannot speak directly. Primary narratives are interrupted and cross-cut with embedded tales from other speakers that highlight spots of the main narrative. In some novels descriptions of paintings are used in the same way Radcliffe used poetry. Thematically boundary anxiety appears, particularly in Canadian Gothic novels, where the lines separating individuals from the wilderness, or Canada from the United States, are presented as permeable and under constant strain. Imprisonment, whether literal or figurative (by the past, by memories, by the constant surveillance of others) also looms large in the contemporary Gothic novel. The Gothic provides a framework to raise questions regarding power, science and the abuse of technology, and the residual weight of history. The popularity of such anthologies as The New Gothic indicates that while the novels of Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis, among others, are tied to their time, the narrative concerns they raised are not. “We live in Gothic times,” the English novelist Angela Carter once wrote, briefly explaining the continuing lure of a literary form constructed over two hundred years ago on the basis of a dream (Carter, Fireworks 122).
In her works, Margaret Atwood has consistently shown her interest and willingness to allude to examples of both high and popular culture in a considered, non-ironic manner. For example, her inter-textual musical allusions in Lady Oracle range from Elvis Presley to Béla Bartók's opera Duke Bluebeard's Castle. In the same novel, the protagonist Joan Foster finds similarities between her own life and films as varied as the Walt Disney animated feature The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met, post World War II Hollywood "women's films," and Federico Fellini's 8½. Atwood's own interest in the Gothic and related terror and horror writing is equally varied. Her approach to the Gothic is that of both academic and novelist: it is important to remember her early scholarly work on the nineteenth-century metaphysical romance, as well as her recent critical work on the literary representations of the Canadian north. As the novels demonstrate, she is both critic and fan of the Gothic as a whole.

Atwood's Gothic revisions can be seen in the novels in a variety of ways. In her first three published novels The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, she reworks Gothic plots, tropes and motifs in contemporary settings. The effect is to make us see what happens when generic standbys from a historically fixed genre are transposed to an emphatically different setting. When motifs found in late eighteenth-century British novels are reworked for a late twentieth-century Canadian setting the difference is considerable. The "explained supernatural" of Ann Radcliffe and other writers, for example, is reworked in The Edible Woman to comic effect. The motif of "blood that isn't really blood," in novels such as
William Child Green's *The Abbot of Montserrat; or, The Pool of Blood* (1826), used to frighten unwary characters and readers appears in *The Edible Woman* as the unforeseen effect of a blizzard that interrupts a house-to-house instant tomato juice taste test. The juice testers straggle back to Seymour Surveys, the consumer questionnaire company that sent them out, resembling ambulatory murder victims. In Green, the literary effect of the faux blood is frustration and deflation of expectation; in Atwood, humour. Where the motifs are transposed in a less parodic manner, as in the ghost story in *Surfacing* or the descent into the labyrinth in *Lady Oracle*, the juxtaposition of traditional Gothic motifs and contemporary Canada works against the popular assumption that Canada is a dull, unhauntable country. In these three novels, Atwood is consciously constructing a Canadian Gothic, reworking generic tropes and motifs to fit the Canadian context. By the time of *Lady Oracle*, Atwood appears to have taken this approach as far as it could go.

The three novels that follow *Lady Oracle, Life Before Man, Bodily Harm*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, are all more explicitly political novels than the previous three. All three share a generic base in the novels of William Godwin and Mary Shelley, using the Gothic form to critique contemporary political and social abuses in the public and private spheres. The Gothic here is a useful framework for constructing political criticism, as well as a starting place for debate. *Bodily Harm* in particular explores the space between the contained Gothic terror of novels and the "real" abuses found in the corrupt governments of the Caribbean islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe. Gothic imprisonment, Atwood points out, can be a useful starting point to understand literal prisons, but often fiction cannot come close to presenting the varieties of terror and horror that real life exhibits. The "fiction" of
The Handmaid’s Tale is found in the construction of the dystopia depicted in the novel: the components in and of themselves are taken from contemporary news clippings of real events and trends.  

Atwood’s most recent novels, Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace, explore relations between women, the long-ranging effect of the actions of the past upon the present, and the subjective nature of individual and collective memories. Cat’s Eye reworks autobiographical fictions like Jane Eyre in order to present the life and memories of a Canadian artist on the occasion of a major retrospective of her work. Modern scientific theories about the life of the universe and time are used as comparisons to the manner in which memories of the past alter as one’s perspectives alter. Elaine Risley, the protagonist, is trapped by her past until she is able to understand certain aspects of it. The Robber Bride rewrites the American Gothic tradition as found in the works of Hawthorne, Holmes, and Melville, and in American Gothic pastiches and rewritings by Straub. History and its construction are a major concern in the novel, as the three protagonists (one of whom is a professor of history at the University of Toronto) attempt to decipher the past of a woman who has haunted the lives of all three. Alias Grace, an actual historical novel examining an infamous nineteenth-century murder case in Ontario, is an entire Gothic “in costume,” using various screens and disguises from fiction and science to elaborate and distance the narrative.  

In all of her novels, Atwood modulates between the everyday and the terrifying, showing how one can erupt into the other without warning. Making terror appear commonplace is an occupational hazard of Gothic novelists: making the commonplace
terrifying is one of the bases of Atwood’s art.
1. Potter Stewart’s words were as follows:

I shall not today attempt farther to define the kinds of material...embraced within that shorthand description: and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that. (Eigen 462)

The case in question was Jacobellis v. Ohio, which was before the United States Supreme Court in 1964.

The definition of “Gothic” has become diffused to such a point that it is often used as an adjective to describe scenes that in the past would have been called “Dickensian” or merely grotesque. The existence on the Internet of newsgroups (in effect, electronic bulletin boards for the exchange of messages and information on specialized topics) such as “alt.gothic” will no doubt lead to more confusion regarding the possible definitions of the term.

2. The text of Atwood’s CBC radio lecture can be found in the Atwood Papers, Box 91, at the Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto.

3. The review cited by Clery appeared in the Monthly Review 32 (May 1765). Traces of this attitude can be found in contemporary reviews of Gothic writing: John Gardner’s original review of Joyce Carol Oates’s novel Bellefleur maintained

   In Bellefleur Miss Oates makes a heroic attempt to transmute the almost inherently goofy tradition of the gothic (ghosts, shape-shifters, vampires and all that) into serious art. (Gardner 99)

4. This is a condensed version of the arguments Johnson presents in the Rambler (No. 4, Saturday 31 March 1750). The power of narratives to delight and instruct was of concern to Johnson, as the full text of the essay demonstrates.

   For this reason these familiar histories may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions. But if the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should be mischievous or uncertain in its effects. (Johnson 151)

5. Some texts attribute this review to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ioan Williams, in the collection Novel and Romance 1700-1800: A Documentary Record, credits the reviewer as “anonymous.” On the other hand, in The Critical Response to Ann Radcliffe, the review is cautiously credited to Coleridge, though this review is not found in the Shorter Works and Fragments volumes of the Princeton collected Coleridge.
6. Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* and Rachel M. Brownstein in *Becoming a Heroine* construct definitions of "heroism," an attempt by female novelists to write of the female hero. "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story," wrote Jane Austen. "Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands." Now women seized the pen; and female self-consciousness brought heroism to literature. As literary women themselves have always been grateful to say, it all went back to the first heroine of letters, Richardson's Pamela, not because of her virtue but because, as she says herself, "I have got such a knack of writing, that when I am by myself, I cannot sit without a pen." (Moers 183)

7. Castle's essay, found in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, is entitled "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*" and delineates what Castle considers the change in perception of loss and death in the eighteenth century. The "lost" one is thought of as being present; Castle tracks this idea through *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In another essay in the collection, "Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie," she follows through on the same idea:

How comprehensible is it, after all, to say that thoughts have a power to "haunt" us? The post-Enlightenment language of mental experience is suffused with a displaced supernaturalism that we seldom stop to examine. Ironically, it is precisely the modern attempt to annul the supernatural—to humanize the daemonic element in human life—that has produced this strange rhetorical recoil. (Castle 143)

8. Lewis's unabashed use of the supernatural, as well as his tendency to describe gory scenes in detail, influenced horror writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lewis's immediate successors were the authors of what came to be classified as the "Blackwoods tale of terror," after the journal that printed many of them. The "Blackwoods" tale in itself lent itself to parody: Edgar Allan Poe wrote an uncharacteristically lighthearted one entitled "How to Write a Blackwoods Article."

9. Frank's list of Gothic motifs is found in his bibliographical guide to the Gothic, *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel*. Many varieties of the original Gothic are defined there as well, such as chapbook Gothic, bluebook Gothic (chapbook Gothic was found exclusively in 36-page form, while bluebook Gothic varied in length), burgverless Gothic, or "no exit" Gothic, and the rauberroman, or novel focusing on banditti and other outlaws (Frank, pp.433, 441).

10. Virginia Woolf, in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* of Edith Birkhead's *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance*, indicated her agreement with Birkhead's conclusion that the Gothic would turn to science for its thrills:

Science, as Miss Birkhead suggests, will modify the Gothic romance of the future with the aeroplane and the telephone. Already the bolder of our novelists have made use of psychoanalysis to startle and dismay. (Woolf, "Gothic
11. Strictly speaking, *Frankenstein*, like *Caleb Williams*, is a tale of terror rather than a Gothic novel. "Gothic" tended to be used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to describe novels like Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron*, historical romances with some degree of supernatural occurrences. "Gothic" and "romantic" have, in the twentieth century, been used in many cases interchangeably—Frank includes *Caleb Williams* and *Frankenstein* in *The First Gothics*, while Robert Kiely, in *The Romantic Novel in England*, analyzes both novels as terror fiction.

12. Bill Christophersen, in *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown’s American Gothic* (Athens: U of Georgia P. 1993), summarized the mood of the United States in the 1790s as one in which “events...shook America’s political and social equilibrium as the booms and busts of the 1830s were to shake her economy” (1). The French Revolution and the slave revolt in St. Domingue sparked, as he notes, national anxiety over the direction of the American government and the existence of slavery.

By midsummer of 1798, with the probability of war with France looming and John Adams’s Alien and Sedition Acts kindling the spark, if not the fire, of rebellion in Virginia and Kentucky, partisanship and apocalyptic evangelism must have reflected a range of unspoken doubts: What were the prospects for the republican City on a Hill we had presumed, against all political odds, to erect? Would our principles buoy or betray us? Was our revolutionary heritage a legacy to glory in or guard against? Would we, like France, self-combust—or, like Britain, consign the fire to the few for safekeeping? (1)

Christophersen’s book goes on to explore how Brown’s novels examined this national crisis of confidence. The questions posed by Christophersen are useful to remember in the context of Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

13. Lovecraft wrote of space as the locus of terror in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

Men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulf beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse (14)

The theme of possible colonization by an alien other has become one of the major plotlines of the popular Fox Television series *The X-Files*, which started broadcasting in September 1993. *The X-Files* is an intriguing example of the melding of a variety of Gothic sub-genres: the main plotline is conspiracy-derived (regarding United States Government cover-ups of alien landings and utilization of alien technology for defense purposes), and the two protagonists, FBI agents who investigate the “X-Files,” or unexplained cases the FBI buries in the basement, represent two strands of the Gothic tradition. Mulder, the male “believer,” is a character out of Lewis, or Lovecraft, while Scully, the female “skeptic,” has traits derived from the Female Gothic (particularly as written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Mulder believes literally in...
aliens and government cover-ups, while Scully is sure that whatever the source of the oddities they investigate, they reveal that something very human is doing evil things. The X-Files has grown from being a cult success on television to the Fox Network’s highest rated television series.

14. The wendigo is one of the monsters examined in Atwood’s essay “Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction.” As Atwood explains the wendigo as found in Brown Waters and Other Sketches (a 1915 book by the Canadian novelist William Blake):

Duchene, child of the wilderness [the character Blake’s narrator is speaking of the disappearance of], has become the wilderness as seen by the narrator—the incarnation of an unfriendly natural universe. The storm is one aspect of the landscape; the wendigo, soulless and destructive, is the same landscape in human form. (Second Words 233-234)

15. Gilman’s novella has proved popular with critics of the Gothic, and has inspired numerous responses: Lovecraft analyzed it in Supernatural Horror in Literature, while Elaine Showalter traced the thematic and medical themes in the text in Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in Women’s Writing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Showalter admitted that the psychological foundations of the narrator’s post-partum depression did not explain the entire story:

Such a ‘thematic’ feminist reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” cannot, as Mary Jacobus would argue, ‘account for the...uncanny elements present in the text.’...But the scenario of confinement and madness in Gilman’s Gothic corresponds to the scripts of repression and incarceration typical of late nineteenth-century American Female Gothic Plots. (135)

16. See Tania Modleski’s and Janice Radway’s works on the contemporary paperback romance.

17. Atwood’s clipping file, used in researching The Handmaid’s Tale, can be found in Box 96 in the Atwood Papers at the University of Toronto.
Early on in *The Edible Woman*, Marian, the heroine, is caught off guard at the laundromat by Duncan, the wilfully self-absorbed graduate English student who acts as an antithesis to her conventionally ambitious lawyer fiancé. In a situation that leads her, and the reader, to expect incipient romance (both characters are mobile young single types, doing laundry alone on a Sunday night in a nearly-empty city laundromat), Duncan startles her by stating:

"I can tell you're admiring my febrility. I know it's appealing, I practise at it: every woman loves an invalid. I bring out the Florence Nightingale in them. But be careful." He was looking at me now, cunningly, sideways. "You might do something destructive: hunger is more basic than love. Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know." (100)

Duncan's warning that "hunger is more basic than love" drives the entire novel, from the title onwards. Atwood's first published novel, written in the mid 1960s and printed in 1969, traces the tendril-like influence of consumption in a variety of forms. Marriage, work, school, family: each of these social arrangements is shown in *The Edible Woman* to be driven by a basic devouring impulse, similar to the cannibalistic needs driving the Angel in the House in Woolf's view.

"That's what you get for being food," Marian at the conclusion tells the cake-woman the novel takes its title from at the conclusion. The cake is a stand-in for herself, and is the
novel's most obvious symbol of the elision of the boundary between predator and prey. This collapse of boundaries is seen throughout the entire novel, as Atwood depicts, through the story of Marian McAlpine, the fragility of the lines separating the individual self from compulsion, abjection, and abnegation. Marian, a resolutely average young woman, finds herself trapped in a series of suffocating roles as a worker in a dead-end job and as fiancée to a manipulative lawyer. Marian's job, as a survey writer for a consumer research firm, presents her every day with analogues for consumption, as essentially her job consists of rewriting survey questions so that the prose of the psychologists who study the effects of consumer surveys is regurgitated in a more easily comprehensible form. Marian's sense of self is eroded as she accepts a marriage proposal from her boyfriend Peter, avoiding a lifetime of middle-level clerical work at Seymour Surveys and replacing it with an alternative script of domesticity. Atwood depicts career choices and personal relationships as having narratives with inexorable trajectories, developed by custom. Marian's responses to Peter after they decide to become engaged demonstrate this, as Marian finds herself changed when answering Peter's query about a time for the wedding.

My first impulse was to answer, with the evasive flippancy I'd always used before when he'd asked me serious questions about myself, "What about Groundhog Day?" But instead I heard a soft, flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it. (90)
Marian's loss of initiative in her relationship with Peter is mirrored as she loses conscious control of her digestive system in a form of selective anorexia. Duncan proves to be a way out in her escalating dilemma, as his situation as a graduate student in English trapped in "a welter of commas and shredded footnotes" (96) parallels hers.

The plot of The Edible Woman follows the narrative line of the traditional romance, as several commentators on the novel have noted. Marian begins the novel in a condition of stasis in her personal life and after a series of travails that plunge her down emotionally regains her sense of self and finds herself at the end of the novel in a condition nearly identical to the one she was in at the outset. Catherine Mc Lay in her essay "The Dark Voyage: The Edible Woman as Romance" examines the traditional romantic tropes utilized by Atwood in the novel, such as the descent into the underworld as part of the series of adventures involved in the evolution of its courtship plot (125). As a Gothic romance, The Edible Woman is more in the mode of Austen's Northanger Abbey: both novels simultaneously utilize and critique the genre. Atwood, like Austen, accentuates its more ridiculous aspects, taking some generic tropes to parodic lengths in modernizing them. For example, there are two scenes that depict the descent into the underworld identified by Mc Lay as an integral aspect of the romance plot. The first is a simple transposition of a nightmare descent into a contemporary setting. While out with Peter and Ainsley, her room mate, at her university friend Len's apartment, Marian escapes a constricting evening by gradually slipping under the bed only to find herself trapped in a mass of dust balls and unable to move. The effect of her incarceration is deflated as Len and Peter lift the bed up to remove her, rendering the trope a joke in effect. In contrast, Marian's later visit to the
Royal Ontario Museum with Duncan reworks the idea of the descent, as well as reworking the eighteenth-century Gothic obsession with the lessons of the past to highlight the negation of the immediate past found in the novel. The various characters in *The Edible Woman* exist in a perpetual present, in contrast to the perpetual past of the mummies Duncan loves to observe at the museum. Even later, Atwood's simple conversion of the trip to the underworld to a walk down a ravine in Duncan's otherworldly company demonstrates a non-parodic approach to converting the romantic landscape into a contemporary urban Canadian one. Marian's engagement to Peter is preceded by a chase down Bloor Street at night. Marian on foot pursued by Peter in a car.

The blunt tank-shape was threatening. It was threatening that Peter had not given chase on foot but had enclosed himself in the armour of the car; though of course that was the logical thing to do. In a minute the car would stop, the door would swing open...where was there to go? (73)

The sense of physical threat in this scene is diffused by Marian's sudden change of mood and announcement that she didn't know what had gotten into her. The chase is replayed later with the same effect, as Peter pursues Marian down a street in order to give her a ride home and destroys a few shrubs on someone's lawn in the process: "First you drag me into your car," [Marian] chittered, "and brow-beat me because of your own feelings of guilt, and then you try to *kill* me!" (81). Both chases have aspects of the ludicrous about them but occupy both literary stances (parodic and non-parodic) simultaneously. The presentation of the theme of consumption in the novel also exhibits this double voice.
The repetition in the course of the novel of the theme of consumption indicates a link with one of the prime examples in the Gothic tradition of consumption, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Stoker's novel, and the countless vampire thrillers in both print and film that have followed it, have been seen as extended metaphors for the anxieties of disease (both syphilis and AIDS, for example), and also for xenophobia and homophobia. Atwood in *The Edible Woman* focuses on the psychic aspects of vampirism, although Duncan's comments on hunger and love keep the traditional type of vampirism foregrounded.

Every relationship in *The Edible Woman* has some basis in consumption. Marriage, for example, is presented as an exchange of will, where one partner engulfs the other. This is depicted most obviously in the scene of Marian's acceptance of Peter's proposal, as her assertive self abdicates in favour of Peter's will. Peter's prolonged bachelorhood (in comparison to that of his university friends) is explained by his own belief in this exchange. Marian mocks his despair over his friends' marriages, but the words she chooses to depict his feelings are evocative of collapse and weakening: "It had been like an epidemic" (27) and "If the other two marriages had been any indication, he'd start seeing me after two or three drinks as a version of the designing siren who had carried off Trigger" (27). Variations of "having," "carrying off" and proprietorship reappear in descriptions of other personal relationships throughout the novel, such as Len's view of women:

> But you've got to watch these women when they start pursuing you. They're always after you to *marry* them. You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out. (66)

Len makes explicit the connection between sex and consumption which appears throughout
the novel. Atwood plays with Stoker's substitution of blood and vein-draining for semen and sex in the subplot of Ainsley's plans for pregnancy. Ainsley's actions here are a parody of Len's attitude towards women in that all she does is hit and run. Len is stricken, and disintegrates emotionally, when he discovers that all Ainsley wanted from him was a bodily fluid. Atwood juxtaposes the Red Cross's advertisements urging "Give the Gift of Life" with this "gift of life," making it clear that in a manner of speaking, the most traditional vampire in The Edible Woman is Ainsley herself. Ainsley's act of "vampirism," however, is in the service of fulfilling her femininity, or at least what media sources dictate that such fulfillment should be. The parodic conversion of Dracula's stalking of bodies with fresh blood into Ainsley's stalking of potential fathers leads into a more serious and unsettling equating of personal relationships with emotional draining. These pairings are not static, but reversible, as Len's conversion from consumer of young girls' innocence to victim of an adult woman shows.

Atwood's critique of consumption is grounded in instability, analogous to the instability depicted in identity. Sex, perceived as consumption, is also merely a consumerist fantasy, forever second-hand. Marian finds herself confused during some visits to Peter's apartment about the sources of his ideas on sexual games.

Peter's abstraction on these occasions gave me the feeling that he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere, but I could never locate the quotations. The field was, I guessed, a hunting story from one of the outdoorsy male magazines...The sheepskin I placed in one of the men's glossies, the kind with
lust in pent-houses. (60)

The role of the magazines and by extension the rest of the media in determining desire is explored here. Do the magazines reflect or direct reality? Ainsley's desire for a baby is a case of the latter, as Marian's questioning of her reveals.

"...But why do you want a baby, Ainsley? What are you going to do with it?"

She gave me a disgusted look. "Every woman should have at least one baby." She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. "It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity."(40-41)

While the urge to have the baby may be traced to her interest in "paper-back books by anthropologists about primitive cultures" (41), the campaign she orchestrates in order to snare Len and become pregnant is derived from popular women's magazines of the period. Many critics, among them McLay, have labeled Ainsley a feminist, but a more accurate label would be "Cosmo Girl," from the magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Ainsley's adoption of a little-girl persona in order to catch Len, and the fact that she would tailor her approach to fit any type of suitable man for her needs, is derived from the advice given by magazines in the early 1960s on the best modes to catch men.

Peter's appropriation of *Playboy* magazine-type imagery for his sexual fantasies may be conscious or not, but it is paralleled by Duncan's more aware commentary:

When I'm supposed to be writing term-papers I think about sex, but when I've finally got some willing lovely backed into a corner or we're thrashing about under hedges and so on and
everybody is supposed to be all set for the *coup de grace*. I start thinking about term-papers....Anyway they're all too literary, it's because they haven't read enough books. If they'd read more they'd realize that all those scenes have been done already. I mean *ad nauseam*...They sort of get limp and sinuous and passionate, they try so hard, and I start thinking oh god it's yet another bad imitation of whoever it happens to be a bad imitation of...(190)

Part of the instability is that there is no alternative posited to consuming images: there is no "real truth" (to use Duncan's ironic catchphrase) of authenticity. When Marian overcomes her inability to eat by baking the cake simulacrum of herself and presents it to Peter. Duncan congratulates her on her recovery by saying: "You're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer" (281). Marian's attempt to withdraw from the consumer/consumed dyad is unfeasible.

Marian's breakdown, marked by her increasing inability to eat foods after her engagement to Peter, is the physical manifestation of the breakdown of the boundaries between herself and the external world. Just as her own will collapses into Peter's, her own sense of self is collapsed onto foodstuffs, making the saying "you are what you eat" a mordant truism as well as an exhausted cliché. Her reaction to steak while in a restaurant with Peter starts the collapse, the steak appearing to her suddenly as "flesh and bone, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it" (152). Unaware of Marian's reaction, Peter declares without irony, "I sure was glad to get that steak inside. A good meal always
makes you feel a little more human” (152). Things "that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" are the obvious foods she first avoids (152). Marian views the process of progressive prohibition as something out of her own control, and with shifting lines. She identifies herself with the consumed to the extent of eliding the differences between herself and vegetables. Eating at this point for her is cannibalism no matter what is on the plate.

She became aware of the carrot. It's a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive...

She thought she felt it twist in her hands..."Oh no."

she said, almost crying. "Not this too!" (178)

Marian's equation of herself as one with the food world underlines the significance of the novel's title; as the boundaries between her sense of herself and the exterior world of consumed items erode. Marian becomes an “edible woman.” Baking the cake is a literalization of what she feels already. As a gesture it effectively exorcises Peter, who relinquishes his proprietary hold on her person and her self (we can safely assume that when he leaves in shock after Marian presents him with the cake, he leaves for good). As a symbol it has a limited meaning; after it serves its dual purpose in forcing Peter to make a decision and enabling Marian to reassert her separate identity, it is, in Marian's words, "only a cake" (273). Love is a kind of feeding, as Marian makes clear with the cake as she presents it to Peter.
"You've been trying to destroy me. haven't you," she said.

"You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along. isn't it? I'll get you a fork." she added somewhat prosaically. (271)

Peter's reaction is ambiguous: does he run because he's been found out as a psychic vampire or because he thinks Marian's odd behaviour has revealed her as mad?

Atwood takes it as a given in the novel that hunger is a component of love, and that personal relationships consist of a type of draining of one partner by another. Henry James explored the same area in The Sacred Fount, depicting a series of pairings observed by a preternaturally sensitive narrator at a house party: each pair is engaged in an unequal exchange of talents, the narrator finds, but is unable to convince his listeners that this emotional vampirism does indeed exist. In The Edible Woman, the characters already believe in this exchange: what is a matter of debate in the narrative is who is feeding off whom. The marriage of Marian's friends Clara and Joe is a case in point. Joe's own view of marriage is of the woman allowing

her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed. (236)

However, to other observers it does not appear that Joe has taken over Clara's core. Marian, after hearing Joe explain this, wants to tell him that Clara's core has not been destroyed
(236). Ainsley feels that the opposite is true: "She's flourishing, it's him that's not well. He's aged even since I've known him and that's less than four months. She's draining all his energy" (38). Multiplicity of perspective blurs the boundary between prey and predator, an idea propounded by Duncan in the novel's conclusion. Marian's own perception of her broken engagement, that Peter was attempting to destroy her, is complicated by Duncan as he throws out ambiguities in a parody of Jamesian uncertainty. He shifts from contradicting her ("Actually you were trying to destroy him") to

But the real truth is it wasn't Peter at all. It was me. I was trying to destroy you."

I gave a nervous laugh. "Don't say that."

"Okay," he said, "ever eager to please. Maybe Peter was trying to destroy me, or maybe I was trying to destroy him. or we were both trying to destroy each other, how's that?" (281)

The array of possibilities verges on the ridiculous, but indicates a pervasive undertone of consumption throughout the world of the novel. Avoiding consumption, as the novel shows, is impossible since the consuming ethic is buried so deeply in society.

In The Edible Woman, the everyday is made monstrous; as seen above, personal relationships are depicted as a species of emotional vampirism. In a similar manner, Atwood presents the world as a place of terror and entrapment, with Marian's workplace paired with Duncan's descriptions of his life at university.

The traditional Gothic motif of the "unguarded prison," as David Richter called it in The Progress of Romance, is reworked in Atwood's presentation of the world of work as
found in Marian's office job and Duncan's graduate studies. Marian's job at Seymour Surveys is at the same time one for her to consider herself mired in and one to leave effortlessly. Signing into the pension plan, she realizes,

bothered me more than it should have...It was a kind of

superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually

signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document

which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't

think about it. (21)

The future Marian is signing onto is simultaneously vague and sharply defined: vague in that she, after a few months on the job, has no clear definition of her duties, defined in that she knows what she will become if she stays on for a career at Seymour Surveys: "I might conceivably turn into Mrs. Bogue or her assistant, but as far as I could see that would take a long time, and I wasn't sure I would like it much anyway" (20). Marian's situation is by no means unique, as she is merely one of hundreds of thousands of young North American women who worked briefly before marriage in the mid-1960s at dead-end jobs that expected high turnovers. Atwood is delineating a working economy that is expecting to have any number of women like Marian to put through essentially the same work no matter what the company. The job isn't pleasant, but the alternatives are not either; Marian knows that it is easy to leave the company, but that fact in the abstract is not helpful: "I reminded myself I could walk out of there the next day and get a different job if I wanted to, but that didn't help" (21). This sense of futility marks her attitude towards her job.

Duncan's view of graduate English studies shares this futility. He describes the field
as a baited trap, with money luring students into the entrance. Marian can see something appear as a result of working for Seymour Surveys, even though she does not like what it is. Duncan, on the other hand, cannot see an end to the student process. His course work is unfinished, and his housemates Trevor and Fish seem to be equally bogged down in convoluted thesis topics. Exhaustion is the main theme in Duncan's explications of the academic world:

...everything's being done, it's been done already, fished out, and you yourself wallowing around in the dregs at the bottom of the barrel, one of those ninth-year graduate students...scrabbling through manuscripts for new material or slaving away on the definitive edition of Ruskin's dinner-invitations and theatre-stubs or trying to squeeze the last pimple of significance out of some fraudulent literary nonentity they dug up somewhere. (96-97) In this literary criticism version of the "anxiety of influence," literary production is near impossible because of the exhaustion of aspects of texts for discussion. Regurgitation appears as a thread in both Marian's and Duncan's work; she rewrites questionnaires, he rewrites the literary canon. His "trying to do something with Beardsley" comment is presented in the same way she talks about trying to do something with the over-subtle prose of the psychologists attached to Seymour Surveys. The academy itself is depicted in The Edible Woman as a "Belle Dame sans Merci": Duncan is as enervated as the knight victim in Keats, and has as little independent volition left. The world of scholarly consumption and the academic marketplace is shown in Atwood to be an adjunct to the world of economic
consumption where Marian toils. The repetition of digestion-related motifs is striking in Duncan's speeches. When he projects a future for himself as a failed labourer, his speech leads straight to the sewers.

"What else can I do? Once you've gone this far you aren't fit for anything else. Something happens to your mind. You're over-qualified, overspecialized, and everybody knows it. Nobody in any other game would be crazy enough to hire me. I wouldn't even make a good ditch-digger, I'd start tearing apart the sewer-system, trying to pick-axe and unearth all those chthonic symbols--pipes, valves, cloacal conduits..." (97)

His vagueness about graduate school ("you've got stuck in it and you can't get out, and you wonder how you got there in the first place" [96]) recalls Marian's belief about the nebulosity of her own position.

The limits of Marian's job may be "vaguely defined," as she complains, but there is a surprising amount of danger, whether actual or implied, in her work (19). She finds herself "calling up garage mechanics to ask them about their pistons and gaskets or handing out pretzels to suspicious old ladies on street corners" (19). Most of the work her department at Seymour Surveys performs is done in homes, either by people working out of theirs or questioners going to other peoples'. This focus on the domestic produces a paradoxical focus on danger. Extraordinary calamities befall the workers of Seymour Surveys, and its research techniques are used by criminals, as the example of the obscene phone caller known as the "Underwear Man" shows. The Underwear Man, as Mrs. Bogue explains to
Marian, is a man with a "convincing voice," who

says he's doing a survey on underwear, and I guess the first

questions he asks must sound genuine. Brands and types and

sizes and things. Then he gets more and more personal until

the ladies get annoyed and hang up. (116)

There is, in effect, very little separating the Underwear Man from the average questioner at Seymour Surveys: the line between legal harassment and illegal harassment is easily crossed. Marian's gut identification of the Underwear Man as Peter is another aspect of this, as she feels only his sublime ordinariness could fuel such hidden perversity.

Advertisements may have made the Underwear Man grasp at some unattainable ideal projected all over buses and subways through obscene telephone calls, but Seymour Surveys's techniques themselves can anger people. Marian notes early on the suspicious old ladies to whom she is forced to give pretzels, and Mrs. Bogue notes that someone in northern Ontario has taken a dislike of questions further.

"While you're up there," Mrs. Bogue said, "could you just take

off Mrs. Ellis in Blind River? I hope it's only temporary, she's

always done good work, but she writes that some lady chased her

out of the house with a meat cleaver and she fell on the steps and

broke her leg." (24–25)

Marian herself, when doing the preliminary work for the beer advertisements at the beginning of the novel, narrowly escapes from a lecherous man. In a parody of the escape of the eternal virgin on the run (as Atwood would put it in Lady Oracle) of numerous
supermarket costume Gothics, she saves herself from a difficult interview subject with temperance tracts a previous subject gave her. The ease of her escape from a stereotypical and parodic villain is contrasted with the increasing immobility she feels in her engagement to Peter as Atwood again juxtaposes aspects of the traditional Gothic which transfer poorly to a contemporary setting, producing farce, with core terrors from the same source which remain constant in both settings.

Atwood's later comments from *Survival* (1972) regarding Canadian animal stories illustrate in part the effect of terror she is working towards in *The Edible Woman*. As she recalled from her own reading,

in comic books and things like *Alice in Wonderland* or Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, you got rescued or you returned from the world of dangers to a cozy safe domestic one; in Seton and Roberts, because the world of dangers was *the same* as the real world, you didn't. (Atwood, *Survival* 30)

Just as the boundary between the self and the external world is shown to be fragile, the line between domestic safety and external danger is collapsed. Domesticity is depicted caustically in *The Edible Woman*; it is no surprise that one of the more stable family units in the novel is a parody of one--Duncan's own household. Marian's engagement to Peter is a gradually entrapping one which forces her to work out with her body what she cannot speak of consciously. As the boundaries between Marian and the external world collapse (shown in part by the novel's shift from first person to third person narration), her perception of the lines separating the familiar world and the terrors found at work and in the
newspapers also blurs. Marian already believes in the duality of Peter's personality: she has seen him turn from young professional to young thug the evening they become engaged after he destroys someone's front lawn. Peter's "selves" are neatly compartmentalized, symbolized by his suitable clothing for every occasion. Ainsley claims he is "nicely packaged," and this fits. His casualness is studied: "he was meticulously unshaven, and his socks matched the colour of the paint-stains on his sports-shirt" (88), to give one example. His suits are "aspects" and "phases" (229) of himself, the clothes becoming not the protective camouflage that Marian regards clothing as, but integral parts of himself.

Marian's full awareness of the emotional weight Peter's suits carry comes during the climactic engagement party at his apartment. Peter's suits, when she rifflles through them, frighten her:

She reached out a hand to touch them, and drew it back: she
was almost afraid they would be warm. (229)

The suits embody, in a literal sense, Peter's other selves, and appear as a set of objects she must work to figure the key to, while Peter can read her with ease. His reaction to her announcement that she invited a few friends (significantly, everyone seen interacting with her primarily) is a barely joking

Been keeping little secrets, eh? I'll have to make a special
point of getting to know them so I can find out all about your
private life. (226-227)

Before this point Marian has become intrigued with newspaper stories of a gunman who fired out of an upstairs window and killed nine passers-by. The instability in Marian's own
identity has led to her eliding the differences between advertisements, news and her personal life. Seeing the Moose Beer advertisements which feature a hunter leads to her contemplating the newspaper stories about the shooter, as the remoteness of the violence in both cases interests her.

He wasn't the kind who would hit anyone with his fist or even use a knife. When he chose violence it was a removed violence, a manipulation of specialized instruments...It was a violence of the mind, almost like magic: you thought it and it happened. (151)

Peter is also a hunter, as well as being an enthusiastic camera buff, and one of the more laboured motifs of *The Edible Woman* is the equation of the fixing properties of the camera with the gun. At the party Peter stalks guests, waiting to compose photographic trophies of the events. While searching for drinking glasses away from the sweep of Peter's photography, Marian puts together all she feels she's learned about him.

In an echo of Duncan's phrase "the real truth," Marian puts together the "real" Peter. Her search, as she puts it, for this essential self is related as a run through a series of doors and corridors. In a parody of the paradigmatic Gothic search (derived in part from variations of the Brothers Grimm's versions of the Bluebeard fairy tale), Marian opens three doors in this mental castle, looking for Peter's "secret." In contrast to the Bluebeard story, there is not anything overtly horrible revealed: behind the first door an older Peter barbecues, and behind the second the party disperses (243). The deflation of the Bluebeard myth is counterpointed with Marian's growing realization that Peter is dangerous, but not in so
obvious a way, as the third door shows:

Peter was there, dressed in his dark opulent winter suit.

He had a camera in his hand, but now she saw what it really was.

There were no more doors and when she felt behind her for the
doorknob, afraid to take her eyes off him, he raised the
camera and aimed it at her: his mouth opened in a snarl of
teeth. (243-244)

Peter and the newspaper gunman merge at this point in Marian's mind, and this sudden
revelation of Peter's underlying menace leads to the two actions which will put her back into
a semblance of normality: her night in the decaying downtown hotel with Duncan and her
decision to make a cake simulacrum of herself to resolve her relationship with Peter.
Marian regains control of herself and her judgement when she bakes and decorates the cake.

Another aspect of The Edible Woman tied to the Gothic tradition is the use of the
grotesque. Marian's equation of herself with a luridly-decorated cake fits into this, as does
her gradual slide after her engagement into a variety of insanity. Atwood here is working
in the American Gothic tradition in using the grotesque. The reworking of the quest
romance is a feature of the early novels of Truman Capote, for example: Atwood's first,
unpublished novel Up in the Air So Blue is a direct transposition of Capote-esque Southern
Gothic into an Ontario setting. Several characters in The Edible Woman function as
grotesques, their appearances exaggerated to accentuate the nightmarish world Marian finds
herself in. The landlady and her daughter are shown in monstrous terms, the daughter by
appearance:
She is a hulking creature of fifteen or so who is being sent to an exclusive private girls' school, and she has to wear a green tunic with knee-socks to match. I'm sure she's really quite normal, but there's something cretinous about the hair-ribbon perched up on top of her gigantic body. (13)

and the landlady by insinuation, Ainsley being convinced that she "can hear her burrowing through the woodwork" (16). Atwood uses the grotesque to make the familiar strange, as the monstrousness of the landlady and her daughter is connected to their femininity. The women at Seymour Surveys are perceived by Marian at the Christmas party in terms of basic bodily functions only, and as creatures peculiarly alien to herself in her own estrangement from her body (167).

Duncan's presentation as an alternative is equally extreme. He functions as a sort of double for Marian in the novel, as he announces himself when he has her wear his dressing gown while he irons her blouse "Hey...you look sort of like me in that" (144). If Marian's disgust regarding her femininity is seen in her reactions to those like her, her female co-workers, the alternative posited by her identification with Duncan is death. She wonders how he can be so thin and still be alive. she compares his skin to paper, and she is "even slightly repelled by the hollowness of [his] eye-sockets" (144). Duncan takes the idea of rebelling against the body and its needs to an extreme, as his comments to Marian about her inability to eat show:

"Oh...you're probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system: though it isn't considered orthodox to begin
with the digestive system. But why not?...I've always thought eating was a ridiculous activity anyway. I'd get out of it myself if I could, though you've got to do it to stay alive. they tell me...Personally...I'd prefer to be fed through the main artery. If I only knew the right people I'm sure it could be arranged... (192) 

Duncan's idea of food as alien is found in Marian's own ambivalent attitude toward it, ambivalent since while she identifies with all food and is unable to eat because that would be cannibalism, she also finds it utterly repellent. The rice pudding that turns into maggots as she looks at it is an obvious example of this. Marian's problems with food may be an attempt to assert control over the one aspect of her life Peter has not insinuated himself into, or may be a reaction against adulthood triggered by anxieties regarding her impending marriage (Cameron 60). In either case, it is only in merging both aspects of the grotesque in the novel, the feminine and the inert, in the acts of baking and eating the cake that she is able to break out of the entrapping behaviour that she has found herself engaged in.

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood first presents some of the issues and themes that will appear in her later works. The contrast between how easy it is to leave a physically restraining location and how hard mental and emotional imprisonment can be is outlined here in Marian's struggle to assert herself in the face of conventional marriage. Characters in *The Edible Woman* act in predetermined ways, as the culture has taught them, but the culture itself is one of monthly magazines and conspicuous consumption. Peter, Ainsley and the "office virgins" devour popular fictions of love and sex with as much seriousness as
Duncan applies to regurgitating the literary canon. Critics such as J. Brooks Bouson have commented on Atwood's exposure of "female fears encoded in the traditional romance plot" (Bouson, Brutal Choreographies 18), but this seems but a part of Atwood's exposure of the fears encoded in consumer culture, where there exists an infinite number of objects to fit into any place. Marian can find a new, nearly identical, job, easily, while Peter can fit Lucy effortlessly into his life to replace Marian.

Marian's rebellion is doomed to failure for more reasons than are found in the conclusion to the novel. The majority culture is so enveloping that one cannot break out of it, at least not with the intellectual tools that the characters in The Edible Woman are equipped with. Instead, Atwood postulates a kind of self-reflexivity in Marian's final actions: Marian at least knows the media- and consumer-constructed prison she is in. In an ironic reworking of the narrative flow of the traditional Gothic novels, in which a heroine went from the protection of one man to another, Marian goes from one form of stasis to another, one dead-end job to another. The novel demonstrates the possibilities for writing a contemporary Gothic novel without the use or overuse of the grotesque as found in Southern American writing of the period, and Atwood's use of humour is disarming in the manner in which it counterpoints the more commonplace but actually frightening aspects of Marian's life. From this "Gothic of the commonplace" Atwood moved in her next novel, Surfacing, to an active rewriting of the American Gothic tradition and exploration of the potential for a modern Canadian Gothic.
1. Recent critical work on Dracula has focused on the metaphors for vampirism: Kathleen Spencer, in “Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis” presents an analysis of the metaphors of contagious illness and decay reflected in the novel. Ken Gelder’s book Reading the Vampire relates the variety of meanings that have been projected onto the vampire in literature, while Judith Halberstam in Skin Shows places Dracula in a more general examination of the connotations of monstrosity in modern culture.

2. The phrase “unguarded prison” is from Richter’s essay “The Unguarded Prison: Reception Theory, Structural Marxism and the History of the Gothic Novel,” expanded in The Progress of Romance. Richter points out in both pieces that imprisonment in Gothic novels tends to last only as long as the plot needs it to. After that, the walls vanish: he uses The Mysteries of Udolpho to illustrate how a heroine can merely walk out of a seemingly secured castle when the plot requires her to.
Surfacing: The Haunted Wilderness

Surfacing, first published in 1972, is a compressed, tightly wrought novel which harkens back in its form and content to such highly symbolic American romances as The Scarlet Letter, as well as the works of earlier Canadian writers such as Richardson. Most readings of Surfacing stress its roots in the traditional romance form with the quest motif receiving the most attention. The plot of Surfacing fits so neatly into the quest genre that claims have been made for it being a parody of the genre itself. American critics focus on the quest romance, linking it with fairy tale motifs or shamanistic motifs, rather than on the Gothic romance: they do this in part because wilderness Gothic is primarily a male-oriented genre in American writing. Another problem for Americans to confront in viewing Surfacing as a Gothic novel is its very traditional use of the menacing enemy from the south. In Romantic novels, this was the threat posed by Catholicism, borne by Mediterranean figures: in Atwood's transposition, the threat from the south is that of Imperial America. Surfacing exists, for the American reader, as a reminder that Canada is a sovereign nation with a frequently tense relationship with the United States. A reluctance to deal with this issue could very well underlie American critics' preference for stressing what are perceived as "universal" female concerns in the novel, such as the self-healing nervous breakdown (see Barbara Hill Rigney in Madness and Sexual Politics) or the quest for the mother, and avoiding dealing with the anti-Americanism found in the text.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with focusing on the quest motif in the novel,
but this focus acts as a spotlight in the text, illuminating one aspect at the expense of others. Critics who stress the marvellous in *Surfacing*, such as Elizabeth Baer and Kathryn VanSpanckeren, gloss over segments of the novel that appear, on reflection, to be awkward or rushed: the third segment of the novel in particular is difficult to deal with. In all, the quest romance is a useful way to approach the general plot trajectory of *Surfacing*, but an incomplete way. On the other hand, Frank Davey has asserted that *Surfacing* is not really Gothic at all:

> There is so much Gothic imagery—of dismemberment, imprisonment, trick mirrors, dungeons, mazes, disembowelings—in these four novels that at times it is difficult to remember that it is the contemporary family rather than the Gothic romance which is their primary focus. In some ways—as the failure of Rigney's and McLay's criticism suggests—the Gothic element is a red herring, because for Atwood's protagonists it constitutes an escape from reality rather than a reality in its own right. (Davey, *Margaret Atwood* 65)

Davey avoids the trap of reading *Surfacing* too rigidly as a quest narrative, but does not see that the Gothic can, as a genre, interrogate family relationships as well as present assorted "Gothic imagery." Elsewhere he calls Atwood's first four novels "Freudian" without considering how Freud's own work on the uncanny connects the contemporary family with the Gothic (67).

*Surfacing* can be considered a novel-length exploration of a "family romance," the collection of heroic fictions members of a family construct about themselves and
their collective past. Like many Female Gothic novels, it focuses on family relations and power balances; and the various meanings of the term "romance" come into play. Particularly since the narrator herself is an inveterate self-romancer. *Surfacing* has many points in common with the generic description of the Female Gothic romance that Claire Kahane formulated in her essay "The Gothic Mirror."

Within an imprisoning structure, a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery. While vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues that pull her onward and inward--bloodstains, mysterious sounds--she penetrates the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthine space and discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? Or merely a disappearance? (Kahane 334)

In Atwood's novel, an unnamed female protagonist imprisoned by the past and societal prohibitions leaves Toronto to search for her missing father on the island in the Quebec bush where she spent her isolated childhood. The narrator is surrounded by mystery, due in part to the vague sense of intense but unvoiced despair she emanates on the trip north with her companions. Her companions themselves, her lover and a married couple, appear curiously rootless. The "powerful male figure" on the periphery of the narrator's consciousness is both her missing father and a married lover; on a more material level,
the narrator also has to deal with menacing Americans who want to buy the island.

Gradually as the novel goes on, the narrator approaches the psychic equivalent of the secret room, letting go her mental defenses. The discovery of the drowned body of her father in the lake, weighted down by the camera he used to photograph Native Canadian rock paintings, jars her into recalling one of the sources of her despair: the abortion she underwent nine years previously on the urging of her lover. The mental breakdown this realization occasions leads to her losing her companions and going even further into her past to come to terms with the mixed legacy of her parents, the reason of her father and the intuition of her mother. After a set of visions, or hauntings, the narrator is able to answer the questions posed and to reenter the world.

As a Female Gothic novel, Surfacing focuses on issues of power, security, and control, manifested often in father figure/daughter relations, and the unvoiced societal contract to keep most forms of personal danger and violence unspoken. The home is the centre of many of these conflicts, and Atwood explores three levels of "home" in Surfacing. The narrator is alienated from two of them, and symbolizes the alienation from a third. Most immediately, the narrator is estranged from her own body, having abdicated control of it in the act of having the abortion at someone else's demand. On a more conventional level, the narrator has been estranged from her family, having avoided contact with them for years. The most symbolic level of alienation from home comes in the nationalist subtext: the narrator and her companions cannot be fully "at home" in Canada until something authentic is found underneath the pastiche of "secondhand American" that the narrator perceives spreading over the landscape. The societal
prohibition on admitting the fact of abortion leads, in part, to the narrator's fractured psyche. The unspeakable in *Surfacing* is extended into the unthinkable, as the hidden room of traditional Gothic is translated in Atwood into the hidden parts of memory and the mind. Personal memory, and not an external agent, is the potential betrayer.

Eve Sedgwick has commented on the difficulty the Gothic story has in getting itself told, and this is true of *Surfacing*. Atwood uses fragmentation as both narrative and thematic device. Fragments in guises such as surfaces, spliced memories, split personalities, and incomplete characters haunt the text. The evasiveness of the narrator presents the most obvious difficulty in narrative transmission. She leaves the reader clues about why she is in unvoiced anguish in the course of the first few chapters, and is herself a propagator of the air of menace generally found in the Gothic. Actions which should appear normal, even clichéd, are related with an undercurrent of extreme emotion which belies the surface simplicities of what is actually said or done. The narrator's discomfiture at seeing the changes nine years have wrought on the road north is thus more than a comment on the impossibility of going home again:

Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more. I slide my tongue around the ice cream, trying to concentrate on it, they put seaweed in it now, but I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, 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. I bite down
into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the
knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's
one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all
right. (12-13)

What is remembered is left unthought: what the reader is left with is a reaction curiously
emphatic and overwrought, considering what on the surface has provoked it. The
narrator's memories of her husband and child have this same doubled quality, providing
an early indication that neither husband nor baby is what she declares on the surface. On
the "birth" of her child, she comments,

I have to behave as though it doesn't exist. because for
me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported.
A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese
twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to
forget. (48)

Here the relation of a custody dispute shades imperceptibly into mental commands which
have little, if anything, to do with the original thought. More strikingly, the narrator's
long description of what she claims is childbirth demonstrates the leakage in her
protective "screen" memories of an absent husband and child:

After the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was
too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital,
they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't
let you see. they don't want you to understand, they want you to
believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me ever again. (80)

This violent description of what is supposed to be, as far as the reader knows at this point, a live birth, is jarring, the sudden vehemence of the assertion "I won't let them do that to me ever again" at odds with the narrator's proclaimed lack of feeling. In both these instances one layer of memory covers another, "truer," layer, the authentic emotions leaching through the manufactured surface. The unreliability of the narrator, who may have, according to some critics, made up a brother as well as a husband and child as another convenient fiction used to avoid accepting facets of her life, makes the transmission of the narrative of *Surfacing* difficult.

The narrator has developed a series of screen memories to help her in constructing a past she can live with. It's not complete; there are nine years left a blur after the narrator's abortion which she cannot recall completely. Her portrait of Joe, for instance, is a circuitous confession. "I don't care much for his temperament, which alternates between surliness and gloom," she declares (57). The Gothic mirroring of heroine and hero here occurs in the blind mirroring of the narrator and Joe: her
statement that everything non-physical about Joe is "either unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous" could be applied to herself (57). Her description of Joe's pots is remarkably close to what we see of her memories. Joe, a frustrated artist, mangles pottery to create non-utilitarian household goods:

...the things don't sell at all in the few handicraft shops that will even stock them. So they accumulate in our already cluttered basement apartment like fragmentary memories or murder victims.

I can't even put flowers in them, the water would run out through the rips. (57)

Her own memories, fragmentary as they are, are analogous to the pots: they barely fulfil their function, as she realizes after her traumatic recovery of "real" memory in the lake: "a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it. I'd lived in it until now" (144). An example of one of the walls of the paper house is her allegorical memory-vision of her mother saving her brother from drowning.

This scene could be called kidnapped memory, for in fact it isn't the narrator's memory at all: "It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (32). The description of the drowning itself reads like a staged tableau:

It was a still day, no wind noise, and she heard something down by the water. She ran to the dock, he wasn't there, she went out to the end of it and looked down. My brother was under the water,
face upturned, eyes open and unconscious. sinking gently: air was coming out of his mouth. (32)

The narrator's insistence that she could see from the womb gains a more sinister resonance after she discovers her father's body in the lake and admits to herself "it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering. that had been a disguise" (143). Her art of kidnapped memory fails, on a basic level, to shield her from the consequences of her action. since the "false" memory is of a mother saving her child, and thus provides emotional leakage of the truth of her own failure to save her child. In a similar manner, the narrator's claims to be beyond pain are false. "Rats prefer any sensation to none" she says, and practises self-mutilation (111). The Gothic trope of the veil here is found in the layers of patched memories: lifting the veil in *Surfacing* results in the action of the title as the narrator works through the various surfaces of memory she hides behind. Until her climactic dive into the lake and subsequent discovery of her father's body, the narrator confesses obliquely, through memories stolen from others and descriptions of others, creating a surface which the unwary reader must learn to suspect.

Ghosts, and the nature of haunting itself, are important components of *Surfacing*. Here the haunted area found in most Gothics expands into the revenant past and the sentient landscape and even spills over into the issues of fragmentation just discussed. The presence of ghosts in *Surfacing* has been an issue in criticism: exactly what does the narrator see in the wilderness? Margot Northey in *The Haunted Wilderness* says she sees "illogical images of dead and murdered beings [that] keep returning like ghosts to haunt her" (68). In "*Surfacing: Apocalyptic Ghost Story,*" Keith Garebian writes:
This novel is clearly not in the style of Edgar Allan Poe or Ambrose Bierce, nor is it in the fashion of Emily Brontë, for its ghosts, unlike the conventional type, are not evil and terrifying except at certain moments to the protagonist who, like Henry James' governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, dramatizes her own psychic ebb and flow. The ghosts are more than a subject in this story: they are a vehicle to connect mixed literary modes and to integrate questions about innocence and guilt, alienation and harmony...(1) Later he refines this into "Surfacing reveals, ultimately, that its ghosts are essentially projections of the protagonist's troubled mind" (2). Garebian's list of qualifications and negations is interesting, not least in demonstrating his unfamiliarity with *Wuthering Heights*, a novel with some affinities with *Surfacing*. In a novel where everything is seen as a projection of the narrator's "troubled mind," picking out the ghosts as such seems redundant. What produces the ghosts and the array of menacing things the narrator half-sees?

*Wuthering Heights* provides a starting-off point for an examination of haunting in *Surfacing*. Both novels are situated in highly-charged, heavily symbolic, locales. Garebian notwithstanding, the "ghosts" in *Wuthering Heights* are not particularly evil, although one of Catherine Earnshaw's appearances is terrifying. Lockwood's early encounter with Catherine provides intriguing parallels with the narrator's experiences in *Surfacing*. A reading of old diary entries, along with his lodging in Catherine's old bed
(the one where she experienced the "fall" of her first separation from Heathcliff),
provokes in Lockwood a brief, nearly textbook-like, experience of the modes of fright.
The "intense horror of nightmare" overcomes him when his fingers close "on the fingers
of a little, ice-cold hand" (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 23). Terror sets in later; the horror
is produced by actual physical contact:

> As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking
> through the window--Terror made me cruel: and, finding
> it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its
> wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the
> blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed, "Let
> me in!" and maintained its tenacious grip, almost maddening
> me with fear. (23)

Lockwood is an obtuse narrator, but his description manages to convey some of the
power inherent in this particular place. If someone as dense and rootless as Lockwood
can see Catherine Earnshaw, even if it is as the result of a dream induced by the
surroundings, what must life be like for Heathcliff, who cannot see the ghost but is
forced to live in such memory-imbued surroundings? Brontë answers that much later,
when Heathcliff declares what he sees Catherine in, starting with her nephew Hareton:

> In the first place, his startling likeness to Catherine connected
> him fearfully with her--That, however, which you may suppose the
> most potent to arrest my imagination, is actually the least—for
> what is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall
her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree--filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day. I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men and women--my own features--mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her! (Wuthering Heights 324)

Location, deeply imbued with memories, can produce "hauntings" that exist only in one person's mind. Nelly Dean notes how Heathcliff in the days before his death focuses his sight on an object two feet in front of him, but unseen by her. Garebian's point regarding Surfacing's ghosts is well taken, if obvious, but negates and misreads Atwood's predecessors and influences.

The figure of Catherine Earnshaw, the "lost child," haunts both Wuthering Heights and Surfacing. Both Catherine and the narrator of Surfacing experience psychic "falls" which split their lives. Catherine dies in her attempt at reunification, surviving only as fragments, in the child ghost and her pale daughter Catherine Linton. The fragments of the narrator of Surfacing are more scattered, found in notebooks, photographs, artwork, and the aborted foetus. A poem published in The Animals in that Country (1968) presents Atwood starting to modulate between the implacable failure of Catherine Earnshaw's reintegration and the partial/perceived success of her narrator's.

"The Revenant" begins as a direct re-writing of Wuthering Heights:

The child's face at the window
the twisted child's face

its fingers scratching
against the glass, against
the clinical ice (52)

and gradually becomes the speaker's indictment of this "inner child":

Mirror addict, my sickness
how can I get rid of you

You don't exist (52)
The desire to rid oneself of the past, here personified as the ghostly child, will recur in
Surfacing, where perhaps the root "haunting" is that of the narrator's childhood,
perceived as "other." The child in "The Revenant" is

a frozen martyr
the white tyrant, crowned
and sullen in those green indelible
forests, that vague
province, vast as a hospital

the skull's no place. where in me
refusing to be buried, cured
the trite dead walk (52)
*Surfacing* expands this concept of haunting, exteriorizing the "vague green province" of the mind to a concrete location in Quebec. "The Revenant" is a reminder that the "lost child" isn't merely the narrator's aborted foetus.

The literalized "vague green province," the village and its environs in the north, is what instigates one set of hauntings in the narrator's mind. The logging village, as well as the family cabin, is a nearly perfectly preserved specimen of the past. The road north may be jarringly different, but in the village time appears to have congealed. As the narrator notes the landscape on the drive north, she remembers what her father said about it:

In the first few hours of driving we moved through flattened cow-sprinkled hills and leaf trees and dead elm skeletons, then into the needle trees and the cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite and the flimsy touristic cabins, and the signs saying GATEWAY TO THE NORTH, at least four towns claim to be that. The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once: when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either. (8-9)

The landscape is in ruins, over-logged or infected with the tree disease from the United States. The decay of the man-made landscape in traditional Gothic (ruined castles, decrepit cathedrals and tombs) is here transferred to the natural world. Atwood is not the only author to use nature in this manner, but this portrait of decaying nature is an intriguing counterpoint to American Gothic uses of the wilderness. Hawthorne, in *The
*Scarlet Letter*, depicted the wilderness as something separate from the decay and influence of civilization, a motif that has survived relatively unchanged in twentieth century novels like James Dickey's *Deliverance*.

The village itself is exceptionally well-preserved. The narrator notes that the men in the store are "still in Elvis Presley haircuts, duck's ass at the back and greased pompadours curving out over their foreheads (25)." Paul and his wife Madame still look like figures on a souvenir barometer. The village population is decreasing, leaving only the shell: as the narrator's father said, there isn't much there but the past and even that is decaying. In this landscape of the dead, haunting is exceptionally easy. The narrator is able to use the landscape as a mnemonic device. Conversely, the landscape tends to neutralize those fully alive: one gets only a fragmentary sense of the physical reality of Joe, David, Anna and the others the narrator comes in contact with. David, for example, is described in terms of his hair: "moustache and Three Musketeers hair" (29). Joe is shown in even more fragmentary detail:

I examine the part of his face that shows, an eyelid and the side of his nose, the skin pallid as though he's been living in a cellar, which we have been; his beard is dark brown, almost black, it continues around his neck and merges under the sheet with the hair on his back. (41)

Anna, as many have noted, is reduced to a makeup kit. Everything is seen through the neurasthenic eye of the narrator, which explains away some of this apparent lack of interest in recording visual details about the other people. But it is clear from the
extensive recollections of the narrator, as well as her detailed descriptions of the exterior world, that something more than self-absorption is present.

The combination of well-wrought, carefully observed setting descriptions and fragmentary characterization is a technique labelled by Terry Castle "The Spectralization of the Other" in the essay of the same name. Castle examines Ann Radcliffe's use of the technique in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

Enchantments, shades, haunts, sacred spots, the revivification (through memory) of a dead father, a perpetually mourning reader: the scene is tremulous with hidden presences...Home itself has become uncanny...To be "at home" is to be possessed by memory, to dwell with spirits of the dead. (123).

Castle points out how, in Radcliffe, objects and sites connected with the departed are so highly "charged" as to recall the departed. Persons actually present in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* become ghostly: "what mattered was the mental picture, the haunting image" (125).

The process Castle discusses as being in process in the works of Ann Radcliffe has become complete and is commonplace in contemporary writing and thought. Castle indicates this:

The twentieth century, I hope to show, has completely naturalized this historic shift towards the phantasmatic. We are used to the metaphor of the haunted consciousness—indeed hardly recognize it as metaphoric. Often enough, we speak colloquially of being
haunted by memories or pursued by images of people inside our heads. In moments of solitude or distress, we may even seek out such "phantoms" for companionship and solace. (125)

The contemporary acceptance of this idea of mental haunting may explain the distance many critics of *Surfacing* feel toward the ghosts. Garebian labels them figures in an "apocalyptic ghost story" and as stated earlier, "projections of the protagonist's troubled mind" (2). Those who have worked on the shamanistic and fairy tale motifs in *Surfacing*, such as Kathryn VanSpanckeren, Elizabeth Baer, and Catherine Sheldrick Ross, treat the ghosts as part of the theme without examining where they might have come from. However, if the ghosts the narrator sees are merely aspects of her troubled mind, why doesn't she see them in Toronto, where by her own account she is just as neurotic? The fact of her being in her childhood home in an area seemingly preserved in amber provides the environmental trigger for her to see the past as clearly as, if not more clearly than, the present. The power external objects have to call up memories and departed others can be seen in *Wuthering Heights* and its manipulation of symbolic landscapes. Like the Brontë novel, *Surfacing* invests locales and inanimate objects with mnemonic power, and demonstrates through objects the continuing presence of those not there.

The narrator's family cabin is the locus of memory. The narrator notes upon seeing it again after nine years that things remain nearly the same:

> In front of the house, the chicken wire fence is still here, though one end is almost over the brink. They never dismantled it: even the dwarf swing is there, ropes frayed, sagging and
blotched with weather. (34)

Nothing is out of place. (35)

There are two other rooms and I open the doors quickly. A bed in each, shelves, clothes hanging on nails: jackets, raincoats, they were always left here. A grey hat, he had several of those. In the right-hand room is a map of the district, tacked to the wall. In the other are some pictures, watercolours, I recall now having painted them when I was twelve or thirteen; the fact that I'd forgotten about them is the only thing that makes me uneasy. (35) Aside from the watercolours, which point to the void that is her own past, the house is familiar enough for the narrator to slip into old roles: she can find the kitchen utensils easily, for example. The past intrudes even more obviously into the present when the narrator sees her family narrative being re-enacted:

I can see Anna, partly hidden by trees. She's lying on her belly in bikini and sunglasses, reading a murder mystery, though she must be cold...

Except for the bikini and the colour of her hair she could be me at sixteen, sulking on the dock...Joe and David, when distance has disguised their faces and their awkwardness, might be my brother and my father. The only place left for me is that of my
mother...(51-52)

As in *Wuthering Heights*, the second generation working through the roles and actions of the past is a pale copy of the original. The repetition is interesting, however, in the manner in which it starts the process which enables the narrator to break out of her self-imposed amnesia.

The familiarity of the house is the source of the general sense of unease which affects the narrator and the text of *Surfacing*. The cabin is "home" but "not home" for her, while David, Joe, and Anna both re-enact and do not re-enact the narrator's family roles. The island is the key to unlocking the secrets of the narrator's past, and holds the answers to a variety of questions ranging from where is the narrator's father to why is the narrator in a state of prolonged emotional anaesthesia. Most readings of *Surfacing* focused as they are on the pattern of the quest myth or shamanism, rely on a Jungian analysis of the text, which explains a great deal in the development of the plot but does little in the way of explicating the setting. The juxtapositions Atwood presents in *Surfacing*, from preserved homes to modern roads to seeming contradictions, add to the pervasive sense of dread which infuses the text. The reader, in a parallel to Castle's analysis of the position of the reader of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, is not perpetually mourning (as with Radcliffe) but perpetually uneasy. This sense is derived from more than mere manipulation of atmosphere; in *Surfacing*, Atwood places the source of terror very plainly in the home.

"Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (11), the narrator announces as David's car pulls further north. The ambivalence regarding "home" is a keynote in
Atwood's presentation of the haunted area, and complicates the family narrative of *Surfacing*. Peter Klovan in "They Are Out of Reach Now: The Family Motif in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing" has acknowledged that the narrator's family is partially responsible for her condition:

...the narrator of *Surfacing* understands that her family was the cradle of her anguished personality, and that she is the carrier of her parents' limitations. During the course of the narrator's quest, it becomes evident that the abortion which so troubles the narrator is not the cause, but one of the many injurious effects of a neurotic personality whose roots can ultimately be found in the limited relationships she experienced while growing up in an uncommunicative family in a remote area. (Klovan 2-3)

Klovan's commentary on the family dynamics in *Surfacing* is perceptive, and is a necessary corrective to years of overly positive analyses of both the narrator's quest and her relationships with her parents. As stated before, the Female Gothic frequently locates sources of terror and unease in the family, something recognized also by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." An examination of the various etymologies of words related to the concept of the uncanny reveals the home as the ultimate source of "all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud 19). It is not actually the word "uncanny" which provides this definition, as "uncanny" is Alix Strachey's translation of Freud's "unheimlich," and it is in the series of German definitions that the double meanings of "heimlich" and "unheimlich" emerge. The "uncanny" is the helpful English equivalent
Strachey gives for "unheimlich," but it is unfortunate that the German sense of "unheimlich" and "heimlich" is lost in translation, since "canny" is not quite the antonym of "uncanny" and fails to overlap with it in connotation as the German words do with each other.

The simplest translation for the German "Heim" is "home" and the definitions in German Freud provides for an overview of the varieties of meaning "heimlich" and "unheimlich" contain, one finds, a modulation from "heimlich" as "friendly, intimate, homelike" (in German, "traut, traulich...") to something resembling "unfriendly," as a long passage shows:

...The Zecks...are all 'heimlich' "Heimlich'? What do you understand by 'heimlich'?" "Well, they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again."

"Oh, we call it 'unheimlich': you call it 'heimlich'. Well, what makes you think there is something secret and untrustworthy about this family?" (Freud 25)

This curious definition of "heimlich," which is close to its German antonym (and to "uncanny"), is, as Freud says, a reminder that the word ["heimlich"] is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different. (28)

The "two sets of ideas," in German, flow from the same source in the home, or in things
expected to be home-like. This meaning is intensified by Freud's tracing it to "infantile sources" (38). Some "themes of uncanniness" can be
doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. And, finally:
there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same
face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime,
or even a same name recurring through several generations.

(39–40)

To return to *Surfacing*, we are presented with a woman who invests the idea of "home" itself with a degree of ambiguity. Everything there is familiar, yet not familiar. Her memories are hers, yet not hers. In the course of *Surfacing*, Atwood modulates from one connotation of "heimlich" to the other, from the line where it blurs into "unheimlich" to its clearer connotations of "home" and the sense of location that entails. Here she repeats the concerns of Female Gothic, particularly with the ideas of power, control, and imprisonment as found in both the home and the family.

The narrator's ambivalence towards "home" shows itself most obviously in her flight from it after her abortion. Home is not a safe retreat, but seemingly something she can infect just as she was infected: if, as she said, the illegal abortionist in the city "planted death in [her] like a seed," then her family was in danger in their "perilous innocence"(144). Underneath this picture of isolated safety and preserved innocence, however, appears a more ambiguous picture of home. Atwood's narrator is no more reliable regarding her supposedly idyllic past than when she is in portraying a broken marriage. Her memories of her upbringing on the island are not papered over in false
memories, as her affair and her abortion are, but are overlaid in idyllic terms. Over-rosy
colorhood memories are not exceptional, but the narrator's external assertion of her
happy childhood has a counterpoint in her more detailed memories of specific incidents
in her past.

Security itself is an issue in the presentation of home in *Surfacing*. Early on the
narrator muses, "How have I been able to live so long in the city. it isn't safe. I always
felt safe here, even at night," then counters that abruptly with

*That's a lie*, my own voice says out loud. I think hard about it,

considering it, and it is a lie: sometimes I was terrified, I

would shine the flashlight ahead of me on the path, I would hear

a rustling in the forest and know it was hunting me, a bear, a wolf

or some indefinite thing with no name, that was worse. (73)

It is interesting how the idea and presence of home itself forces the narrator to break
through some of her tissue of obfuscation: the immediacy (and repetition) of her
childhood on her return to the cabin makes her habitual self-deception difficult.

Childhood games, she recalls earlier, were suffused with menace and the possibility of
abrupt transformation:

*It's like the times he used to play hide and seek with us in the*

semi-dark after supper, it was different from playing in a house,

the space to hide in was endless; even when we knew which tree

he had gone behind there was the fear that what would come out

when you called would be someone else. (50)
This loss of security, exemplified in the fear that one's father would change into something alien and turn on oneself, is in contrast to the narrator's memory of complete security and trust in the power of her parents. Significantly, she claims this memory is "one of the first things I remember" (17). As a small child she and her family were nearly killed going through rapids in a canoe; she cannot recall the danger, only "the hush of moving water and the rocking motion, total safety" (18). The narrator's obsession with power can be dated from this, as can her abdication of responsibility for actions. Her parents are the first in a line of adults who have what she terms "the power."

Madame with the one hand has one manifestation of it, an indefinite allure due to her deformity. Her childhood is, for her, linked with World War II but in opposition to it: peaceful, powerless childhood at home in contrast to power-crazed, violent war in Europe. The narrator's inability to return home after her abortion is linked to this complete separation of spheres: in her reasoning, death is other than home, and after her abortion she contains death, therefore she cannot go home, since her presence would contaminate home just as the abortion contaminated her. A stage in her recovery of emotional depth is her recognition of the ambiguous nature of home. Thus, her memories of her childhood grow gradually more and more violent and threatening, and her recollections of her parents less one-dimensional.

The ambiguous nature of home is due not only to the lack of security in the nuclear family but to the impossibility of having a home at all. Atwood makes it clear that the narrator is not quite at home in the bush due to home's previous claimants, the Québécois and the natives. Total habitation is impossible, as the narrator realizes when
she contemplates her family's uneasy co-existence with the Catholics who surrounded them. She recalls that her family fitted into the community belief system as near-monsters, existing for the rest of the village as "maudits anglais" and potential werewolves:

"They believe if you don't go to Mass you'll turn into a wolf."

"Will you?" I said.

"We don't go," he said, "and we haven't."

Maybe that's why they didn't waste any sweat searching for my father, they were afraid to, they thought he'd turned into a wolf; he'd be a prime candidate since he never went to Mass at all. Les mauvais anglais, the damned English, they mean it: they're sure we're all damned literally. (56)

The sense of being and not-being at home is intensified when she admits, "the truth is that I don't know what the villagers thought or talked about. I was so shut off from them" (54). Isolation is the main effect of her upbringing, an isolation in the name of reason. The fortress of the island reinforces the idea of the home under siege: the outside world is so threatening that complete severance from it is necessary. Co-existence is deemed impossible. The narrator internalizes this message at an early age even while trying to fight against it. Home, for the narrator, is either the beleaguered island-castle or complete submergence in urban life:

...we could have lived all year in the company town but he split us between two anonymities, the city and the bush. In the city we
lived in a succession of apartments and in the bush he picked the most remote lake he could find...(59)

The narrator's sense of home as location is early on fixed with a degree of ambivalence, since it is not a single place. This insistence on irreconcilable opposites, or opposing surfaces, will appear over and over in *Surfacing* as the narrator goes further and further into the labyrinth of the past.

This dependence on oppositions leads into one of the major themes of *Surfacing*, that of integration. The fragmentation of the narrator's psyche and memories, as well as her emotional divorce from any idea of "home," is intensified by her obsession with binary opposites, most notably mind/body and victim/victor. The narrator loads all sorts of meanings into these pairs, finding permutations of the dichotomies between men and women and Americans and Canadians there. The habit of classification itself is an "American" tendency, an example of how Americanization has infected even the narrator's supposedly safe home and family. Actual Americans find the island amazingly easy to invade: when Bill Malmstrom, the children's clothing salesman from Michigan, asks the narrator if she'd like to sell the property, he confesses that he has been reconnoitring the family cabin for years:

"Don't you want to see it?" I asked. "I mean, the house and all."

"I must admit that I've already seen it; we've had our eye on this piece for quite some time. I've been coming up here to fish for years, and I've taken the liberty, when no one seemed to be here,
of having a stroll around." (94)

If the reader missed the point earlier in Malmstrom's admitting that "the Wildlife Protection Association of America" had "quite a flourishing little branch" in Canada. this declaration of unabashed trespassing makes clear the ease with which Americans can take over the Canadian landscape. Paralleling this is the ease with which labelling and division have invaded the Canadian mindscape.

The dead heron the narrator and her companions see on their trek to find the rock paintings her father charted is a key to her realization of her own complicity in perpetuating conceptual absolutes. The heron, found in a cruciform position tied to a tree, was killed. she feels, because it was the perfect victim and existed only to be victimized: "Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it" (116). The fact that the men who evidently killed the heron were actually from Sarnia doesn't matter: "If you look like them and talk like them [Americans] and think like them then you are them..." (129). This is jarring enough for the narrator, who is becoming paranoid as sources of power close in. As a Canadian, she is like the men who killed the heron, and feels vicarious blood guilt. Even closer to home (in both senses) and harder to admit is her unforced and sudden flood of memory regarding her brother and his insect collection.

The paragraph relating this starts abruptly, and is unclear about who the "he" mentioned is.

The laboratory, he was older then. He never caught birds,
they were too quick for him, what he caught was the slower things.

He kept them in jars and tin cans on a board shelf back in the forest, near the swamp: to reach them he made a secret path, marked only by small notches on the trees, a code. (131)

Her brother's laboratory is unreason and cruelty masked and made barely palatable by reason. The codes and secrecy in the route to the cache, as well as its legitimizing label as a "laboratory," demonstrate its intrinsic moral bankruptcy. The narrator's question of "how did we get bad" (129) is partially answered here. Her first reflex on finding the neglected frogs and insects is to set the remaining live ones free: her fall can be construed as her capitulation to her brother's rage at this action.

He was so angry he was pale, his eyes twisted as though they couldn't see me. "They were mine," he said. Afterwards he trapped other things and changed the place: this time he wouldn't tell me.

I found it anyway but I was afraid to let them out again. Because of my fear they were killed. (131)

This family-tableau, leading into the concept of "good" and "bad" leeches (the brother roasts the bad ones, which only he can identify and label), outlines the structural problems in the narrator's family, and the results of her early tendency to place her security in the hands of others. The mother prohibits needless cruelty but does not back up her objections. The brother identifies with those with power. The narrator, because of her abdication of responsibility, identifies with the powerless, but cannot disengage herself from the power structure because of fear. Her habit of moral absolutism leads her
into an emotional corner, divorced from her past. Complicity in violence runs too deeply in the past, so her childhood must be amputated:

To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate. A thing closed in my head, hand, synapse, cutting off my escape... (132)

The childhood she separated herself from earlier because of her inability to associate her life in the city (including the abortion) with the perceived innocence of her upbringing is here seen as another trap. The narrator begins to think in fatalistic terms, with this view of humanity's predetermined evil a contrast to her earlier, more romantic, view of her childhood as an earthly paradise which was followed by a "fall" into urban life. This appears as one of the reasons why the narrator's breakdown takes the form it does, in a search for completely innocent "first things" that are part of the landscape she finds herself in.

The narrator's five nights in the bush after her discovery of her father's body function as the occasion of the final lifting of the veil of her past. The narrator starts her re-integration by an attempt to set things right. Her rejection of her former passivity, which she implicitly recognizes as one of the sources of her problems, leads her to gain control and destroy the film that Joe and David are making. David has demonstrated the coercive power of film by forcing Anna to strip for the camera in a culmination of his relentless voyeurism for the sake of "art." Anna at this point has become an object, a "Random Sample" (the name of the film is Random Samples) on the same level as the bottle villa, the stuffed moose family and the dead heron filmed earlier. The actual
destruction of the film occurs when David seeks to extend directorial despotism to the narrator. In a further display of potential victimization and objectification, he debates her place in the film as if he were worrying about furniture placement:

"There's part of a reel left," Anna says. "You should get her, you got me but you never got her." She looks at me, fumes ascending from her nose and mouth.

"Now that's an idea," David says. "The rest of us are in it, she's the only one who isn't." He assesses me. "Where would we fit her in though? We don't have anyone fucking yet; but I'd have to do it." he says to Joe, "we need you running the camera."

"I could run the camera." Anna says. "you could both do it."

and everyone laughs. (164-165)

The narrator, having mused over "how to act," now knows, and pulls the film out of the camera and throws the exposed reels into the lake. This conclusive break with her habits of passivity precipitates her flight into the bush and her inner journey through the labyrinth.

Section Three of the novel, which details this collapse, is difficult to deal with. Shamanistic interpretations such as VanSpanckeren's account for the framework the narrator's search through her psyche takes, but neglect the narrator's own conclusion to her ritualistic breakdown:

No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside
the skull, is it the same place. They'll never appear to me again.

I can't afford it; from now on I'll have to live in the usual way.

defining them by their absence: and love by its failures, power

by its loss, its renunciation. I regret them; but they give only

one kind of truth, one hand. (189)

The narrator's ritualistic destruction of items from her old, civilized life parallels the
journey a shaman takes to find truth and have visions, but the narrator turns from that
also. The combination of the ceremonial aspects of her withdrawal and the

circumstances which lead to it cannot be repeated. It is possible, as critics have done, to

overstate the importance of the ritual and its results, but the narrator explicitly grants

them only a limited power in her life.

Whatever happens, one is left in Section Three of Sur-facing with the end of the
narrator's long imprisonment in the past and in destructive forms of thinking. She has, as
Kahane would say, penetrated the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthean space.

transposed here to the recesses of her mind, and confronted the question of "who died"
(Kahane 334). There is more than one answer to that question: by recognizing the

cluster of associations around her father's drifting body in the lake, she accepts the reality

of her abortion as well as the reality of a parent's mortality:

It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the

rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest

level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It

was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I
knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (142)

Implicit in the text is the realization that for nine years she herself "died," her recovery of childhood signalled by her reconnection to the various selves found in the family photograph albums. Finally, the visions, or hauntings, of the narrator's parents are the key to her re-integration: "in this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused" (Kahane 334). As a result of this obliteration, the narrator becomes more fully alive and recovers a sense of "home," particularly because the forms her parents' shades take are derived from the northern landscape.

Identification with the landscape is the final stage in the narrator's recovery. As she tries a series of less-evolved identities in her mental and emotional collapse (bear, frog), she finds a sense of place in being a place:

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (181)

Her rushed collision with her past and with her spatial location is found in her word patterns, which are in marked contrast to her more fragmentary thoughts in the first two sections of the novel.
The final examples of the narrator's re-integration, as well as the integration of the fragments of the text, are the visions she has of her parents. The form her father takes in particular is a sign of his accommodation to the landscape:

He is standing near the fence with his back to me, looking in at the garden. The late afternoon sunlight falls obliquely between the treetrunks on the hill, down on him, clouding him in an orange haze, he wavers as if through water...

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone. (186-187)

It is significant that she is able to see her father, or what he became, at this point: the sight of his papers in the cabin earlier had only brought her brief, non-visual memories of him. The narrator's new sense of rootedness allows her to see her father in the landscape she now can call home. The fact that her father appears to be the landscape embodied is also important. In "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction," Atwood identifies this landscape-generated being as the wendigo, a native Canadian (and native to Canada) figure:

the incarnation of an unfriendly natural universe. The storm is one aspect of this landscape; the wendigo, soulless and destructive, is the same landscape in human form.

(Atwood, Second Words 234)
The evidence of *Surfacing* tends to contradict this overwhelmingly negative view of the landscape, but the sense of the wendigo being the landscape in human form is the same. The narrator's new acceptance of the landscape leads her to see the vision of her father as merely there:

> I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it: it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights. Reflectors. It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself. (187)

What the father has become is something beyond terror, since conventional fear cannot encompass the magnitude of the danger the vision embodies. The narrator's vision of her mother is more conventional, and potentially easier to assimilate. The mother appears as herself, feeding birds in her talismatic leather jacket that has such strong associations with her that the narrator feels uncomfortable having it around:

> it belonged to my mother a long time ago, she kept sunflower seeds in the pockets. I thought she'd thrown it out; it shouldn't still be here, he should have got rid of it after the funeral. Dead people's clothes ought to be buried with them. (43)

The jacket serves as a needed reminder of her mother, and is imbued with the "power" the narrator often invokes, since it was in this jacket that her mother waved off a bear with no outward sign of fear. The ghost of the mother, as befits the parent who had
earlier made accommodation with the bush. is in her own form and in familiar pose:

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born: she is turned half away from me. I can only see the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them [blue jays]: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder. (182)

This "real" sighting of the mother is connected to the narrator's "kidnapped" memory of her mother's saving the drowning child; both are visions of things before the narrator's birth. With the discovery of the parents in the landscape, the narrator has answered all the questions she needed to in the bush, and her long imprisonment fades suddenly, suddenly enough to make critics such as Peter Klovan and Keith Garebian find her recovery artificial and unconvincing. This conclusion is a result of reading Surfacing too much like a realist novel: the schematic form the narrator's near-insanity takes should be an indicator that Atwood is not writing a self-help book. Garebian's distancing from genre is a factor in his dismissal of the narrator's recovery. The narrator's sudden freedom from the prison-house of memory is a reworking of the trope of the unguarded prison described by Richter in The Progress of Romance. As in The Edible Woman, mental imprisonment ends in Surfacing when it is no longer necessary and characters can recognize the true face of their warders. The narrator's stirring enunciation, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim," is her last key to her cell. The Gothic form of Surfacing,
with its use of the interior search, makes this conclusion less a patched-in manifesto and provides the reader with a consistent, integrated text (paradoxically from a genre known for its emphasis on fragmentation). Whether or not the narrator reunites with Joe is unimportant, since her exit from her self-imposed and societally-constructed prison is the culmination of her experiences in the text. The narrator has progressed from being unable to go home (and unable to articulate why) to being at home, and in full possession of her past. Her recovery is signalled subtly by her new awareness of her physical self: her mind is able to recognize her body:

I turn the mirror around: in it there's a creature neither
animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders
huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from
the deep sockets: the lips move by themselves...They would
never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature, they
think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair
waving like scarves: not this, face dirt-caked and streaked,
skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck
with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold. (190)

It may be overly tidy and schematic, but the point of genre, and Gothic in particular here, is not to mimic reality, but to provide a series of conventions to discuss facets of exterior reality that are difficult to confront directly. Surfacing, with its interplay of Gothic and detective fiction, is a construct allowing discussion of power relations, security issues, and the relations between Canada and the United States more effectively than a direct,
realist narrative could.

*Surfacing* is Atwood's first attempt at a transposition of the Gothic form to a recognizably Canadian setting. In the tradition of North American Gothic writers who sought to present terror fictions that would owe little to "exploded superstition" imported incongruously from Europe. *Surfacing* goes further in outlining forms of terror that owe little to the United States, and thus resembles neither a Southern Gothic novel or a New England Gothic. The Canadian sense of homelessness at home unites with Freud's exploration of the source of uncanniness being a sense of ambivalence about home. Atwood develops this idea of domestic-centred terror in her interiorized Gothic, where the "skull's noplace" replaces the ruined castle as the locus of terror and the repository of hidden information.

Atwood's transformation of traditional Gothic into the haunted interior contains many familiar Gothic tropes. The island in the lake replicates the "Contested Castle" Kate F. Ellis describes as the ambiguous home:

A space where "terror, doubt, and division" cannot enter
is a place where innocence cannot be undermined by the
"rough world" outside it. But walls that cannot be
penetrated become a prison. (Ellis 45)

The "totalitarian innocence" of the narrator and her family on the island is a form of this home-cum-prison (Atwood, *Surfacing* 190). The fragmentation embodied in the text and the narrator reflects back to the fragmented Romantic text and the play of surfaces and veils examined by Sedgwick in the Gothic. And finally, the infection of
Americanization, which causes American critics of Atwood to make either a universal or a shamanistic interpretation of *Surfacing*, can be read as a transmutation of the old fear of the South, Catholicism, and revolution in this Gothic. Atwood's tale of embattled innocence takes on a mythic quality when placed in its historical setting of 1970-71 with a backdrop of the unending war in Vietnam and the vision of the United States as omnivorous giant, consuming Canada's resources and its own population indiscriminately.
1. Freud’s use of “heimlich,” most notable in this quotation, is from Austrian, rather than German, usage, as the Brockhaus Wahrig Deutsches Wörterbuch shows:

heimlich...2. (veralt.: noch österr.)=heimelig [<ahd. heimlich “zum Haus gehörig”, dann “vertraut”... ] (Brockhaus, Vol. III, 459)

The connection between “secret” and “home” in German is interesting.

2. Atwood’s rewriting of the traditional Gothic in Surfacebook has some affinities with novels such as the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, which depicts in more explicitly native terms the process of spiritual re-integration (Silko is a native of Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico). Scott P. Sanders, in “Southwestern Gothic: On the Frontier between Landscape and Locale,” identifies a strain in the novels of Silko, Richard Shelton, and Rudolfo Anaya that would be familiar to students of Canadian literature.

In the Southwest, three cultures—Anglo, Chicano, and Indian—are struggling to realize their desires for a sure sense of cultural identity, of rootedness, in a landscape which, with its gothic presence, resists making of it a locale, a homeland where people, events, and places are integrated.

(Sanders 55)

3. For example, the trees up north are dying, the narrator notices, due to “the disease...spreading up from the south” (7).
In *Lady Oracle* (1976), Atwood thoroughly domesticates the traditional Gothic form, contrasting it with the commercial Costume Gothic romances the protagonist Joan Foster writes as well as with nineteenth-century novels and mid-1950s films referred to intertextually. The Gothic is brought out front and centre in the novel, as the reader is instructed in not only how to read the Gothic, but how to write it. In interviews, Atwood has acknowledged her debts to Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in the construction of *Lady Oracle*, placing the novel firmly in the tradition Austen developed. The influence of *Jane Eyre* can be found in the plot of Atwood’s novel, as her answer to a question in a 1978 interview with Joyce Carol Oates indicates:

> Again, I’m not sure where it began, but the central character is a writer of Gothic romances partly because I’ve always wondered what it was about these books that appealed—do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers? And what about that “Mad Wife” left over from *Jane Eyre?* Are these our secret plots? (Ingersoll, *Conversations* 75)

Atwood, as Austen did in *Northanger Abbey*, in *Lady Oracle* splits the Gothic into several components and subgenres, presenting a serious Gothic plot countered with a parody of Gothic excess. *Lady Oracle* contains a Radcliffe-like plot set in the present contrasted with novels-in-progress in the historical Costume Gothic subgenre and a melodramatic poem sequence. The presence of many variations of the Gothic has
caused many critics to elide the distinctions Atwood has made between the two. As academic critics have tended to rely on Janice Radway’s and Tania Modleski’s work on the contemporary Costume Gothic romance to criticize both what Joan Foster writes and the novel in which she appears.\(^1\) It has been easy and reductive to read the Female Gothic’s emphasis on the woman being victimized (contrasted with Lewis’s emphasis on the victimization itself, and the male perpetrating it) as a tacit approval of the idea of the victimization of women. The plot device of the passive masochistic heroine is found in *Lady Oracle*, but as a part of the historical Costume Gothic novels that are shown as a degenerated version of the form.

Joan Foster starts *Lady Oracle* in traditional Gothic fashion imprisoned in southern Italy: by her own choice, but trapped none the less. \("I\) planned my death carefully,” she begins, as the novel starts to set up the transformed, modern Female Gothic in opposition to the contemporary commercial one. Joan’s thoughts of her “death” are inextricably meshed with ideas on fashion:

My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe, like a Quaker church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen. (7)

Why Joan is playing dead in Italy is the primary narrative of *Lady Oracle*: Joan outlines how she got from A, a suburban Toronto childhood, to D, a life in hiding at an Italian
vacation villa. The movement from her childhood was accelerated by her combative relationship with her mother Frances Delacourt, a woman frustrated by the constraints of 1950s life and by her daughter's obesity. As Joan puts it:

The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body. I didn't quite know this though I sensed it in a hazy way... (69)

Her past as a teenage fat girl is what she seeks to efface through every move and alteration of identity in the novel. Joan constructs the layers of identity and personality she uses to put emotional and physical space between her present self and this past as a parodic reworking of the Bluebeard fairy tale: the secret at the centre of Joan which must never be revealed is her former weight, with all the emotional injuries and baggage attached to it. When Joan's relationship with her mother passes from the emotionally combative to the physically combative, she leaves home, and later leaves Toronto for England, using a legacy from a favourite aunt who stipulated a weight loss of one hundred pounds before collection.

Joan remakes her past in England, where she becomes the mistress (her words) of a Polish count, starts her career writing Costume Gothic romances, and meets Arthur Foster, a "ban the bomb" activist and expatriate Canadian. After her precipitous return to Canada at the news of her mother's death, she marries Arthur and begins life as the wife of a professional academic revolutionary. Her writing career is added to her past as a fat girl as something to be kept from Arthur and their acquaintances, considered by her as inadequately serious. While researching aspects of the occult for a plot impasse in a
Costume Gothic, Joan experiments with automatic writing and as a result puts together a poetry manuscript from the words revealed by the mirror she used to put herself in a receptive trance. This poetry manuscript, edited and entitled *Lady Oracle* (referred to as “Lady Oracle”), propels Joan into national fame as a poet engaged with sexual politics and precipitates her eventual flight into Italy. As “Lady Oracle,” she manages to pick up a lover, a conceptual artist called the Royal Porcupine, and a blackmailer determined to reveal all that she has carefully hidden in her life. Threats in the form of phone calls, dead animals, and notes appear at her home, but it is unclear exactly who is responsible for them. The impending collapse of her carefully constructed separate identities drives Joan to feign her own death by drowning in Lake Ontario and escape to Italy to hide in the villa she and Arthur rented for vacation in Terremoto the year before. Even her “death” goes wrong, however, and she is considered simultaneously a murder victim and a living hoaxer by those in Toronto. As she sits in limbo in the villa, neither alive nor dead to those who matter in her life, the lines between what she writes and what she represses collapse and she begins to consider her life’s decisions as if they had occurred in the literary space her Costume Gothic novels and poetry occupy. The reporter sent to discover the truth about her disappearance is hit on the head with a Cinzano bottle as a result of Joan’s increasing panic. Recovering herself, she tells everything to the reporter:

I guess it will make a pretty weird story, once he’s written it; and the odd thing is that I didn’t tell any lies. Well, not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major. I suppose I could still have gotten out of it. I could have said I had amnesia or
She resolves to stop writing Costume Gothic novels and considers writing science fiction instead, and at the close of the novel is about to leave limbo and re-enter the land of the living.

Joan Foster and *Lady Oracle* are both haunted by the past: Joan by her own past, and *Lady Oracle* by previous Gothic novels. C. C. Barfoot wrote of the Gothic’s preoccupation with ghosts:

> Ghosts, guests, gestures, jests, gests, quests—all are gists of
> Gothic. all pointing to the Gothic as an invasion of the known
> present by the hidden past, an encroachment of the closed past
> onto the open present. a disturbance of the apparent daylight of
> today by the dark of yesterday. (Barfoot 161)

Barfoot’s word games bring into focus the ways in which the Gothic presents irruptions of the past into the present, whether with ghosts, manuscripts bearing tales, or stories told by characters who may or may not be aware of precisely what they are revealing. Joan Foster’s narration reveals that she is trapped in her childhood, a fact she acknowledges:

> When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn’t see what Arthur saw.
> The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like
> a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant
> superimposed on my own. I wanted to forget the past, but it refused
to forget me: it waited for sleep, then cornered me. (214)

Joan’s relationship with her mother is the source of her conflicts. Her layers of stories
ultimately lead back into her troubled relationship with her mother, which influences her waking and sleeping life. On a superficial level, Joan repeats her mother’s adolescence: both women left home in their late teens and set out on a life divorced from family. Joan’s mother is not as conscious a storyteller as she is, but both women reconstruct themselves, and rewrite their pasts, as needed. Close observation of her mother teaches Joan early about transformations both successful and failed. One of her recurring dreams from her childhood shows this. In it, Joan watches her mother apply makeup while sitting at a three-mirror vanity table.

In the dream, as I watched, I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her towelled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn’t frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I’d always known... (66-67)

The nightmarish aspect of this dream, the thing that frightens Joan, is the possibility of this secret being revealed: the monstrosity itself isn’t disturbing, but the discovery of it is.

...outside the door there was a man, a man who was about to open the door and come in. If he saw, if he found out the truth about my mother, something terrible would happen, not only to my mother but to me... (67)

As a child, Joan finds that her mother can change into a monster easily and suddenly, the sessions at the makeup table making her both figuratively monstrous (the three heads) and emotionally, as Joan recalls that after her sessions at the mirror “she was always a little cross” (66). The dream changes as Joan gets older:

Instead of wanting to stop the mysterious man, I would sit there wishing
for him to enter. I wanted him to find out her secret, the secret that I
alone knew: my mother was a monster. (67)

For Joan, the boundary between monstrosity and normality isn’t permeable and fluid, but
solid. Her mother is a monster, the sessions at the makeup mirror merely revealing what
was there all the time.

Joan’s mother is responsible in part for forcing her into the two groups that
contribute to Joan’s formative and entrapping memories of shame and confusion, ballet
class and Brownies. As an adult, Joan’s reactions to situations and other people are
determined by things that happened to her years before: she becomes a child again and is
unable to confront things as an adult with an adult’s experience. In the first “primal
scene” Miss Flegg, her dance teacher, pulls her from performing at a recital in the
“Butterfly Frolic” piece and makes her exchange her butterfly costume for a quickly
conceived mothball suit. “The problem,” as Joan says, “was fairly simple”:

in the short pink skirt, with my waist, arms and legs exposed. I was
grotesque. (46)

The costume’s effect falls short of Miss Flegg’s idea of what a butterfly should look like,
and Joan admits that even she was disappointed with it:

Even I was a little taken aback when she finally allowed me to inspect
myself in the three-sided mirror on her vanity table. Although I was too
young to be much bothered by my size, it wasn’t quite the effect I wanted.
I did not look like a butterfly. But I knew the addition of the wings would
make all the difference. I was hoping for magic transformations, even
Miss Flegg, with the complicity of Joan’s mother, changes Joan’s costume before the recital to one of the teddy bear outfits from another piece and tells Joan that she is to be a mothball rather than a butterfly. Joan performs this under duress, and is confused by the reaction of the audience.

...much to my surprise I was left in the center of the stage, facing an audience that was not only laughing but applauding vigorously. Even when the beauties, the tiny thin ones, trooped back for their curtsey, the laughter and clapping went on, and several people, who must have been fathers rather than mothers, shouted “Bravo mothball!” It puzzled me that some of them seemed to like my ugly, bulky suit better than the pretty ones of the others. (50-51)

Joan cannot understand how one can be ugly and bulky and still be a star: one is either a mothball or a butterfly, with nothing in between and no blurring of the lines between the types of response each gets. Her mother reinforces the idea of the absolute separation of the two poles, and the irrevocable nature of falling into the unattractive one, by asking her in various forms (as Joan says later), “who would think of marrying a mothball?” (51). Though the offices of Miss Flegg Joan learns that “if you’re going to be made to look ridiculous and there’s no way out of it, you may as well pretend you meant to” (48), a lesson that is of little help in later life but that she cannot help following.

Joan’s experiences in Brownies are another important set of components in her arrested emotional development. At first Brownies offered the possibility of sublimation
into an anonymous group in comparison with Miss Flegg’s dance school:

At Miss Flegg’s you were supposed to try to be better than everyone else, but at Brownies you were supposed to try to be the same, and I was beginning to find this idea quite attractive. (54)

Unfortunately she finds that she isn’t the same as everyone else. as her weight is not the only thing that sets her apart from the other Brownies. Joan’s secret, as she calls it, is that she is “a public sniveller still, at the age of eight,” and the other girls torment her once they discover how easy it is to make her cry (57). The winter landscape she associates with Brownies is imbued with the misery the meetings entailed. Atwood illustrates briefly here the dynamics of childhood power games. The three older girls who torment Joan are in a complex balance of power themselves, with the two younger girls Marlene and Lynne competing for the attention of the oldest one, Elizabeth. All four walk home together from Brownie meetings for safety’s sake, as arranged by their mothers who are either unaware or unconcerned about the abuse girls can give each other. Girls’ relationships can slide so easily into teasing and attacks, all the harder to guard against since girls’ wars are unseen.

At our school young girls weren’t supposed to hit each other or fight or rub snow in each other’s faces, and they didn’t. During recess they stayed in the Girls’ Yard, where everything was whispering and conspiracy. Words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could
say I give in. She who cried first was lost. (57)

The girls’ games are petty, but make a lifelong impression upon Joan: as an adult she will continue to think of herself as the unliked fat child who was the butt of practical jokes and left out of games. Joan’s adult attempt to feign her own death in order to escape from a rising tide of troubles has its roots here also: her own death would be a suitable revenge for her tormentors.

Sometimes, when they’d left me alone in the darkness and cold, I would stand there almost hoping that the bad man would really come up out of the ravine and do whatever he was fated to do. That way, after I’d been stolen or killed, they would be punished, and they would be forced to repent at last for what they’d done. I imagined him as a tall man, very tall, in a black suit, heaving up out of the snow like an avalanche in reverse, blue-faced and covered with ice, red-eyed, hairy-headed, with long sharp teeth like icicles. He would be frightening but at least he would be an end to this misery that went on and seemed as if it would go on forever. I would be taken away by him, no trace of me would ever be found. Even my mother would be sorry. (59-60)

Atwood’s rewriting of the traditional Gothic male is interesting here. The “bad man” is a compendium of features found in Radcliffe-derived villains in the original Gothic, and transformed over time into the heroes of Costume Gothic. Joan’s fantasies of being carried away by this figure are escapist, but desperate. The real encounters Joan has with men in the ravine are more confusing to her; it is significant that Joan has a better
understanding of herself and her experiences in her subconscious and fantasy worlds than in her waking moments. This pattern is seen to full effect in the way she ponders over the two men, or perhaps one man, whom she sees after Brownies. The first man was “a nice-looking man, neither old nor young, wearing a good tweed coat, not at all shabby or disreputable” (60), clutching a bouquet of daffodils over his open fly. The other man, who also is neither old nor young and has a tweed coat, releases Joan from the bridge post that the other girls have tied her to. This also frees Joan from the Brownies, and leads to her confusion over whether the second man was the “bad man” or not:

I still wasn’t sure, though: was it the daffodil man or not? Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once? (64)

This thought replays itself in all of Joan’s relationships with men, with mixed results. The feelings of guilt and shame that are buried within Joan’s memories are her secret, to be covered over at all costs. The fact that her past refuses to vanish but insinuates itself into her dreams and her writing is seen again and again in Lady Oracle. The tracks of Joan’s feelings lead back to her feelings about her mother, as her fears of discovery of her mother’s monstrosity blur into her fear of others’ finding out about her own obese past. The past, so carefully hidden by Joan, erupts into her consciousness when Fraser Buchanan the blackmailer threatens her with it.

Repetition, one of the narrative tropes of the Gothic (plots repeat themselves, actions of the past repeat in the present) is found throughout Lady Oracle. Joan repeats the past constantly, unconsciously more often than consciously. As a writer of Costume
Gothic novels, she is aware that her success in the field relies on recapitulating an idealized past itself derived from novels. Her novels regurgitate a version of *Jane Eyre* boiled down to essentials: this variety of romance has been called, not unjustly, “girl gets house.” The Costume Gothic, itself a commodity where authors’ names have become brand names, fosters a version of the past that is nearly all object-driven. Joan discovers that it is relatively easy to write such novels:

I thought if I could only get the clothes right, everything else would fall into line. And it did: the hero, a handsome, well-bred, slightly balding man, dressed in an immaculately tailored tweed cloak, like Sherlock Holmes’s, pursued the heroine, crushing his lips to hers in a hansom cab and rumpling her *pelisse*. (156)

The heroine also sports a *fichu*. while the rival female comes to a bad end tripping over her *paletot* going downstairs (156). In this detail-heavy evocation of the past, like a Sears clothing catalogue with a plotline, the clothes count for more than the characters, although Joan is told that she needs to explain more.

But I had aimed too high. My first effort came back with instructions to the effect that I could not use words like “fichu” and “paletot” and “pelisse” without explaining what they meant. I made the necessary revisions and received my first hundred pounds, with a request for more material. Material, they called it, as if it came by the yard.

(156)'

It does come by the yard, as her look at Paul’s collection of “Mavis Quilp” nurse novels
shows. Throughout *Lady Oracle* the Costume Gothic is referred to in terms of its commodity status. The novels are tranquillizers in print form, "...available...at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers" (34). Joan is aware of the contemporary prejudice against such novels, which echoes in many ways feminist literary critics against genre fiction in general:

> These books...would be considered trash of the lowest order. Worse than trash, for didn't they exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted?

> They did and I knew it, but I couldn't stop. (34)

The danger of the Costume Gothic lies not in its escapism, but in its glorification of the trappings of the past and denaturing of terror. Joan's view of her novel writing is appropriately cynical ("my eternal virgin on the run, my goddess of quick money" [131]), since this version of the past is as glossy and painless as her rewriting of her own past as a cheerleader and camp counsellor. Danger, in Joan's fiction, is displaced onto the heroine's wardrobe:

> Bad things always happened to the clothes of my heroines: bottles of ink got poured over them, holes were burned in them, they got thrown out of windows, shredded, ripped. In *The Turrets of Tantripp* someone stuffed them full of hay, like a scarecrow or a voodoo effigy, and floated them down a river. Once they were buried in a cellar. (132)

This produces a fiction at a double remove from reality, since it eliminates the thrill of triumphing over physical danger and threats to the self that the original Gothic novel
produced. Vicarious terror is replaced by vicarious possession of luxuries. Joan's admitted love for Victorian accoutrements fits in with her writing, while aspects of her buried past occasionally surface in the narratives. The man with the tweed coat who exposes himself to her and (perhaps) unties her from the bridge the next week becomes a hero. Miss Flegg a bordello madam, and the stairway from her first rooming house in Toronto the foundation of many dramatic stairways to come. As long as she keeps "Arthur in [the] apartment and the strangers in their castles and mansions...where they belong," she feels everything will be fine (216). However, just as the border between her submerged past and her fiction is continually transgressed, her fantasy and real lives blur. This collapsing of boundaries is marked by the creation and publication of her poetry sequence "Lady Oracle."

Until the experiments with automatic writing that produce the "Lady Oracle" poems, Joan leads a determinedly dull life with Arthur that is as rigorously constructed as one of her own Gothic romances. Taking the details from the lives of the girls in high school who made her obese former self their confidante, Joan writes her present as a disorganized housewife, with Arthur as befuddled but appreciative audience. The fantasies of her former friends are a major part of her fiction. Joan's habit of eliding the difference between herself and her heroines in order to solve Costume Gothic plot problems prompts her to try automatic writing to write her way out of an impasse. By doing this, she allows a gateway for her past to irrupt into her present, and for the original Gothic to collapse into the tamed Costume Gothic.

The automatic writing Joan experiments with is a remnant of her adolescence,
since it is part of the Spiritualist church her Aunt Lou brought her to. Spiritualism, as she encountered it, taught that the line between the present and the world of the dead could be crossed easily, by spirits seeking to warn and advise loved ones and living beings able to channel spirit messages through writing. Joan resorts to it with the same mixed motives with which she approaches any aspect of her professional writing: the occult has become fashionable and she needs to keep up with her competition, and she has a residual interest in spirit writing as a former practitioner. Her first thoughts on the experiment, the humorously materialist “Bell Telephone would go out of business if this method could be perfected” (219), give way to primal terror. Without realizing it, Joan has managed to bridge the chasm between the “safe” Costume Gothic and the original Gothic, and between her present and past selves.

I stared at the candle in the mirror, the mirror candle. There was more than one candle, there were three, and I knew that if I moved the two sides of the mirror toward me there would be an infinite number of candles, extending in a line as far as I could see... The room seemed very dark, darker than it had before; the candle was very bright, I was holding it in my hand and walking along a corridor, I was descending, I turned a corner. I was going to find someone. I needed to find someone.

There was movement at the edge of the mirror... Surely there had been a figure, standing behind me. But there was no one. (220)

Further attempts at automatic writing take her further into the dark labyrinth, which repeats her recurring dream of watching her mother’s monstrosity discovered. The
Gothic is here relegated to the subconscious, further interiorized than in any of Atwood’s previous novels. When Joan reads the poems she has put together from the scribbled words she finds on the paper after each automatic writing session, she ends up calling the result a “Gothic gone wrong,” since she has managed to identify completely with the novels she writes and the dichotomy she places them in. “Lady Oracle,” she feels, is “upside-down somehow” since the components of the novels are there but “there was no happy ending, no true love” (232). The central deeply unhappy female figure of the poems puzzles her: “she wasn’t like anyone I’d ever imagined, and certainly she had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t at all like that, I was happy. Happy and inept” (222). This lack of recognition is one reason why she puts her own name on this particular work, since it has little if any actual connection to her as a product of her unconscious mind, and is something she perceives as completely alien to herself. Arthur’s misreading of it as pertaining to him is funny, but a sign that Joan is closer to the material than she would think.

As an inset text, “Lady Oracle” is the key to the convergence of Joan’s past and present, and her collection of fantasy lives. The notoriety as a feminist icon that the book gives her leads to her affair with the Royal Porcupine⁶, while failed poet Fraser Buchanan researches her for blackmail purposes because of “Joan Foster”’s blank past. Arthur’s new enthusiasm, the nationalist journal Resurgence, drags Marlene the Brownie tormentor of her childhood back into her life, with the irony of Marlene having completely forgotten Joan and the nightmare she put her through. More importantly, aspects of the Gothic, which Joan considers as part of her fantasy life, start to appear in
Critics have claimed that Joan’s inability to separate fantasy from reality, with her tendency to read her life as if it were one of her novels, is the source of her problems in *Lady Oracle*, but this only tells part of the story. Joan has a very firm grasp of the difference between her fantasy life and reality, and is fully capable of recognizing what is fiction and what is not. She so firmly identifies the Gothic as a source of fantasy only that she ignores signs of it in reality. “Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?” she wonders, while ignoring the implications of the statement’s converse, “was every Linton a Heathcliff in disguise?” (269). Atwood, like Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, is demonstrating that the perils of Gothic thinking include failing to gauge danger effectively. Catherine Morland looks for proof of General Tilney’s homicidal tendencies in *Northanger Abbey* and fails to see the real danger, that the General is a materialistic boor who is willing to drive her from the house once he discovers she is not an heiress. Atwood’s protagonist falls into similar dualistic thinking, failing to see that aspects of the Gothic, fantasy world can exist in the real world and be a danger there: stalkers, blackmailers and murderers aren’t just part of *Love, My Ransom*, but possibilities in real life. Her response seems to be dictated by them, however, as she “dies” in a faked boating accident one step ahead of the mysterious stalker who is leaving dead animals and threats at her door, and Fraser Buchanan and his threats to reveal her entire life, Costume Gothics and fat childhood and all, if she fails to pay him a portion of her “Lady Oracle” royalties.

In her feigned death Joan replays her mother’s real but ambiguous death, and
shows that throughout her life she has been haunted by her mother and her mother’s example as much as by her overweight childhood self. Her fantasies of the Fat Lady are products of her waking life, relics of her childhood justification of being overweight: her dreams of her mother lie deeper, grounded in the monstrosity she identifies as being her defining feature, and what she fears she could fall into herself. The labyrinth that Joan goes into in an attempt to finish her last Costume Gothic leads through the layers of her fictions and pasts to her mother, as does the labyrinthine narrative of Lady Oracle. The “secret” of the Female Gothic plot here is the secret of the mother: Atwood has reworked the relatively simple family dénouement of Surfacing into the more ambiguous tangle of possibilities in Lady Oracle.

If the Female Gothic is driven to a large extent by women’s fears and anxieties, one of the more prominent fears is becoming one’s mother, or repeating the mother’s mistakes. Joan’s mother has been a source of anxiety and to a lesser extent fear throughout her life. From early on there is distance between the two: Joan comments that she can remember what her mother looked like but not what she felt like, since she seldom touched her (89).

I can never remember calling her anything but Mother, never one of those childish diminutives: I must have, but she must have discouraged it. Our relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product. (67)

“War” is the primary image she conveys of their relationship, with her body as the
battleground. Joan overeats in order to not be her mother, whom she describes as slender, but also to defy her mother. Her bulk is an attempt to build up presence, to make it impossible for her mother to ignore her, a need made vivid by the conversation she overhears between her parents while a teenager, in which it is strongly implied that Mrs. Delacourt tried to abort Joan (77).

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, if he really was my father, had I ruined my mother’s life? I didn’t dare to ask. (78)

The fissure this opens up in her idea of her family perhaps contributes to her abilities as a “receiver” of spirit messages. Not surprisingly, Joan’s mother is the first spirit to try to contact her, wearing her blue suit from 1949 (111); Joan’s connection with her mother is by her adolescence driven into the realm of dreams and the unconscious. The attempts by Joan’s mother’s astral body (as Leda Sprott the Spiritualist calls it) to contact Joan are in contrast to the methods she used in the conscious world. Joan can understand on an intellectual level her mother’s frustration with life as an upwardly mobile suburban housewife, but prefers to distance herself from her, particularly after she stabs her with a kitchen knife. Ultimately, from what Joan sees of her mother’s life while growing up, it is understandable that she takes steps to avoid repeating it.

Joan’s mother refuses to go away, however. Joan continues to dream of her, and
sees her ghost in London. Despite her desire to not be her mother, she ends up recapitulating her mother's life. Mrs. Delacourt, like Joan, left home as a teenager and essentially reconstructed her self afterwards. Both married diffident men fleeing wealthy backgrounds, Rosedale in Joan's father's case and Fredericton, New Brunswick in her husband's. Joan even repeats her mother's rituals in front of a three-sided mirror. Both women, to a certain extent, rewrite their own pasts, as Joan discovers in looking through her mother's photograph album after her death. Searching for clues about her parentage, she finds more than she expected, although not exactly what she hoped:

I got out the photograph album to refresh my memory. Perhaps in the expressions of the faces there would be some clue. But in all the pictures of the white-flannelled man, the face had been cut out, neatly as with a razor blade. The faces of my father also were missing. There was only my mother, young and pretty, laughing gaily at the camera, clutching the arms of her headless men. I sat for an hour with the album open on the table before me, stunned by this evidence of her terrible anger. I could almost see her doing it, her long fingers working with precise fury, excising the past, which had turned into the present and betrayed her, stranding her in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit. (179-180)

The mutilated photograph album reinforces Joan's fear of her mother, since it makes clear what she worried about as a child: she can make people disappear. Mrs. Delacourt lives out the romance plot, trapped by the messages given out by movies and fiction into
imprisonment in a perfect suburban house. Joan is able to leave the protective prison of her body by losing the one hundred pounds Aunt Lou required her to, but finds it is not as easy to shed the guilt, shame, and confusion that created the weight in the first place. Joan's memories of her mother as described in negative terms: "hanging from my neck like an iron locket" (67-68), "carried...around my neck like a rotting albatross" (213). By the time she attempts to finish *Stalked by Love* while in exile in Italy she comes to a degree of understanding of her mother.

The unfinished novel *Stalked by Love* literalizes the collapsing of boundaries Joan has feared throughout her life. As has been noted in the past, the villainess Felicia has Joan's own red hair and small teeth; Joan is also writing out her fears about her parents' marriage in the plotline, using the woman with her own features as a stand-in for her mother. Did her father kill her mother in order to marry a less intense and furious woman? In a parallel with her mother, Joan loses faith in the romance plot, mutilating it in an analogous manner; *Stalked by Love* remains unfinished, with sympathy diverted from the virginal heroine to the deposed first wife. Joan's attempt to work through her difficulties with the plot lead her back into the same place where she wrote the revealing "Lady Oracle" poems, a space between her conscious and unconscious, her past and present, as well as the original and Costume Gothic traditions. The virginal Charlotte, the intended heroine of the novel, is forgotten as Joan’s (and her mother’s) avatar Felicia goes into the maze featured in the landscape of the novel and confronts the men of Joan’s past in another “Gothic gone wrong”:

*Cunningly, he began his transformations, trying to lure her into his reach.*
His face grew a white gauze mask, then a pair of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard and moustache, which faded, giving place to burning eyes and icicle teeth. Then his cloak vanished and he stood looking at her sadly: he was wearing a turtle-neck sweater... (342)

The figure transforms yet again into a death's head, and the fiction and reality collapse into one another: Felicia is looking at the same pane of glass in the door that Joan is, and when a knock is heard at the door Joan assumes that whoever is on the other side is the figure at the centre of the maze, the transforming man. She hits the intruder with a bottle of Cinzano and finds that as fiction and reality recede back into their borders, she has hit a reporter looking for her.

Throughout *Lady Oracle* the boundaries between life and art are often elided in this fashion. Significantly, Joan's resolve to acknowledge her past comes as a result of the collapse between her fiction and her life: once she learns how to read and interpret her past, she is able to accept it. The novel is full of such ambiguous messages and dubious messengers. Leda Spratt the Spiritualist warns her at her wedding about the power her fictions have, and then reminds her that she is quite possibly a charlatan (206). Her mother's life shows her the limitations of the romance plot, which she uses to full financial advantage. Joan's mother's ghost is always wordless, and it is left to Joan to determine what meaning, if any, the apparition has. The meaning of the mutilated photograph album is equally ambiguous: it may stand as testimony to Joan's mother's "terrible rage," or as a monument to her drunken obsessions. Joan decides to stop writing Costume Gothics, but her alternative, science fiction, is equally escapist; how one
interprets this gesture depends as much on what one thinks of science fiction as what one thinks of Joan's new self-knowledge.  

There are many things in Lady Oracle that are left with as many possible interpretations. The injunction "contain yourself," delivered by Redmond, the hero of Stalked by Love, to Felicia, could be applied to the novel, as it displays an instability in its collection of narratives (319). Questions are left open: Joan's anxiety about her parentage is never resolved, nor is it made clear who is responsible for the campaign of harassment that leads her to consider death as the only escape. Atwood may be parodying the Radcliffean Gothic tendency to explain away everything in the narrative, but may also be indicating the limitations of the genre, and her use of it, as a whole. Lady Oracle is criss-crossed with plots, some overt, others imbedded and shown by implication only. The romance plot is repeated by nearly every major female character, and repeated again in Joan's conscious writing of Costume Gothic romances. The women's films enjoyed by Joan, her mother, and her Aunt Lou are another counterpoint, providing another angle on tales of self-sacrifice, with fewer happy endings than found in romances. The narrative of Lady Oracle contains many contradictions that strain at the conventions of both the "realist" novel and the Gothic, the primary one being that even while the narrative critiques the Costume Gothic romance for being unrealistic, it reinscribes the primary message of the Costume Gothic, that while self-sacrifice is good, it will not be required of the heroine, who is also not required to repeat her mother's life (Modleski 84). The repeated use of the metaphor of the Other Side, the place between life and death, is significant, reflecting as it does the tension in the novel between its
Gothic plot and its Gothic parody. In many ways, the Gothic novel that most informs _Lady Oracle_ is _Frankenstein:_ both novels are collections of narratives, haunted by images of monstrosity that are both identical with the narrators and beings created by them.

_Lady Oracle_, like Atwood’s two previous novels, reworks the traditional Gothic and places it in a Canadian setting, playing with the contradictions this causes. With _Lady Oracle_, the simple rewriting of the Gothic is taken to its extreme, the parody inherent in the technique giving way to the terror in the original genre: Joan’s Costume Gothic novels and her comic deflations of her own narrative share space with the stalker who harasses her and the spectre of her mother’s mysterious death. In _The Edible Woman, Surfacing_, and _Lady Oracle_, Atwood showed that the Gothic could exist in a contemporary Canadian setting: in her succeeding novels she would build on the things this rewriting would uncover.
1. See Gilbert and Gubar, particularly *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Massé in *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, Thomas in “Lady Oracle: The Narrative of a Fool-Heroine,” and McMillan in “The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and the Gothic Tradition.” In many cases, critics have confused Harlequin-style romances with the costume Gothic and been convinced that Joan Foster writes for a thinly disguised version of Harlequin, Canada’s largest book publisher. However, this tends to indicate a lack of familiarity with both subgenres of romance. Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance*, and Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* are clear on the difference: Harlequin novels are, by and large, set in the present and tend to be shorter than Costume Gothic romances; Harlequins also tend to have much less sex than the Costume Gothic novels, which are called bodice rippers for a reason, though Harlequin’s Silhouette line contains more sexually explicit novels than the main line. As an interesting aside, in the early 1990s, Harlequin did consider the idea of science fiction romance novels, which would have been an interesting way for Joan Foster to combine her idea at the close of *Lady Oracle* of giving up Costume Gothic romances for science fiction.

2. See Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Mississippi 1993). Wilson takes Atwood’s use of fairy tales in her work at face value as templates with which to read the novels and selected poetry and short stories, and does not investigate how Atwood inverts them, or parodies them (parody in Wilson is saved for Atwood’s use of genre conventions).

3. Joan’s figure also has some of the features of the wendigo, but this has very little connection to the narrative of the novel.

4. Readers of historical romances, however, do know what pelisses and fichus are. The excerpts from Costume Gothics found in Bill Pronzini’s *Gun in Cheek*, an informative account of “alternative classics” in the various sub-genres of the mystery novel (of which the Costume Gothic is one), show that pelisses are mentioned often, and without explanation. This could be explained, though, by the fact that Joan starts writing Costume Gothics relatively early, in the early 1960s, and the examples Pronzini mentions are from the full flowering of the genre in the 1970s. Georgette Heyer’s Regency romances predate both Joan’s fictitious novels and the real ones Pronzini outlines, and are fairly accurate as to setting.

5. Typical of this view is Susan Jaret McKinstry’s essay “Living Literally by the Pen: The Self-Conceived and Self-Deceiving Heroine-Author in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*”. McKinstry claims that the danger depicted in the novel “lies not in the imaginations of fiction but in the conventions of fiction: in the ways that fictional heroines are ‘squashed’ (to use the Royal Porcupine’s appropriate pun) into roles that kill them” (65). This is overstating the case.

6. In a following of the traditional Gothic, Joan is given a lover who is in many ways her double: the Royal Porcupine is, like her, a popular culture-obsessed redhead.

7. Critics are divided on Joan’s projected change of genre: Catherine Rainwater feels that “her decision to write science fiction instead of Costume Gothics suggests that she will invent a
vision of the future to some extent free of the oppressive (victimizing) feminine stereotypes which Gothic novels perpetuate in her life and the lives of other women” (Rainwater 25), while Susan MacLean thinks “the reader suspects that there are more Joans to come. Although no longer interested in writing Costume Gothics, Joan is toying with the idea of writing science-fiction, a literary genre which is even further removed from reality” (MacLean 195-196). Atwood lets the reader choose what to think of Joan’s contemplated career change while remembering that both genres are equally fantastical.

8. As Modleski said,
   For it ought to be clear by now that although modern Gothics may frequently contain statements endorsing notions of feminine self-sacrifice, the workings of the plot actually run counter to such professions. In other words, modern Gothics may inform us that “mutilation” is “truly the gift of gifts,” but they also assure us, to our immense relief, that it won’t be extracted from us. (84)

This double voice no doubt accounts for the continued popularity of the genre.
Life Before Man: The Haunted House

In many ways Life Before Man, Atwood’s fourth novel (published in 1979), marks a change in style from her earlier novels. In contrast to The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle, there are no sustained sequences of fantastical visions, or ghosts. Unlike the novels to follow, it is firmly grounded in a single square mile of Toronto in the recent past (its events occur between 1975 and 1978). As a result, Life Before Man is Atwood’s least-written about novel, as many critics consider it an anomaly in her oeuvre, or as merely a “mainline social novel” (Greene, Life Before Man 65). However, some elements in the text make that a misleading categorization. As Michael Hurley noted in his 1980 review of the novel, significantly titled “Dance of Death in Toronto the Good,” “visions of innocence fester into gothic nightmares” in the course of the narrative, and “as in any self-respecting Southern Ontario novel, the permutations of identity are infused with an eerie gothic flavour” (Hurley 123). The trappings of the Gothic are present in Life Before Man, but either transferred to the metaphoric level or made tangible and literal. The narration of the novel from a triple point of view illustrates the instability of the Gothic plot, as events have varying contexts and meanings depending on which of the three protagonists is perceiving them. While not entirely a Gothic novel (or more accurately, more of a minor-key Gothic), Life Before Man utilizes Gothic imagery and narrative structure to depict a claustrophobic world and the overbearing influence of the past, personal and global.

Life Before Man has been described as a “comedy of manners” (Goetsch 138),
and by Atwood herself (in a 1986 interview) as "very claustrophobic":

it takes place in the actual middle of a middling city, in the middle class,
in the middle of their lives, and everything about it is right in the middle...

(Greene, Life Before Man 65)

The novel follows three people, Nate and Elizabeth Schoenhof and Lesje Green, as Nate and Elizabeth’s marriage collapses and Nate begins a relationship with Lesje. Elizabeth and Nate have both had lovers before: Chris, Elizabeth’s most recent one, commits suicide before the start of the narrative, while Martha, Nate’s most recent lover, attempts suicide after their relationship ends. Lesje and Elizabeth both work at the Royal Ontario Museum, Lesje as a paleontologist, Elizabeth as an exhibits coordinator, while Nate is self-employed as a toymaker, and later returns to the law firm he left to make handcrafted toys. Elizabeth watches her hated Auntie Muriel, who raised her, die of cancer. The events of the novel are seemingly mundane, but are marked by the Gothic imagery the protagonists use to describe themselves and their pasts. This juxtaposition, between the realistic and Gothic illustrates the novel’s concern with the violence perpetrated in everyday life by people in the name of emotional survival.

The violent imagery of the novel belies its realist tone. Romantic and Gothic imagery is used to frame perceptions and displace emotion. Lesje, when thinking about Elizabeth as she begins seeing Nate, thinks of her as a conventionally romantic widow in order to consider her as something other than Nate’s wife:

....Elizabeth is therefore not the wife of Nate, she isn’t a wife at all.

Instead she’s a widow, Chris’s widow if anyone’s, moving unpaired and
grieving down an autumn avenue, leaves from the over-arching trees
falling on her faintly dishevelled hair. Lesje consigns her to this
mournfully romantic picture, frames her, and then forgets about her. (127)

Elizabeth’s attempts to exorcise Chris’s memory, and the idea of his death by shotgun
blast, make her see him in vampiric terms:

It was a closed coffin, naturally. They shipped him north in dry ice, rigid
among the cold crystals, fog coming off him like a Dracula movie.
Tonight, I thought, they forgot something. Part of him has been left
behind. (159)

She adds later, “they didn’t bury him at a crossroads with a stake, though”-- the
traditional mode of burial for suicides. used to prevent them from returning from the
dead (159). As a defence against what he sees as the demands of Elizabeth, his mother,
and Lesje, Nate imagines himself as a werewolf, giving himself in fantasy the
aggressiveness he lacks in life. Dinner at his mother’s home with his two daughters
inspires this vision of domestic alienation:

They are, all three of them, so unsuspecting, so innocent. It’s as if he’s
looking at them through a lighted window: inside, peace and tranquil
domesticity, this house, the tastes, the smells even, so familiar to him.
Good, unassuming. And outside, darkness, thunder, the storm, himself
a wolflike monster in tattered clothes, fingernails ragged, lurking red-eyed
and envious, snout pressed to the glass. He alone knows the darkness of
the human heart. the secrets of evil. (133-134)
Nate’s fantasy dissipates once he mutters to himself and is drawn back into the domestic circle by his mother commenting on how she talks to herself, too. Elizabeth’s Auntie Muriel is shown, in Elizabeth’s segments of the novel, as a vampire, sucking the life out of her husband. Elizabeth thinks of her aunt as a monster in order to explain the hold she has on her and the effect she has had on her life; Auntie Muriel’s monstrosity relieves Elizabeth of the need to understand her aunt.

Auntie Muriel is both the spider and the fly, the sucker-out of life juice and the empty husk. Once she was just the spider and Uncle Teddy was the fly, but ever since Uncle Teddy’s death Auntie Muriel has taken over both roles. Elizabeth isn’t even all that sure Uncle Teddy is really dead. Auntie Muriel probably has him in a trunk somewhere in the attic, webbed in old écru lace tablecloths, paralyzed but still alive.

She goes up there for a little nip now and then. (119)

Elizabeth is conscious of the realities of her aunt’s life—“Auntie Muriel had a strong personality and a good mind and she was not pretty, and patriarchal society punished her”—but finds it easier to believe her own construction of her as a vampire rather than the rattled-off phrases of contemporary women’s magazine psychology (120). Auntie Muriel’s force of will appears supernatural, and her idea of family burial verges on the literally vampiric, as Elizabeth realizes when her aunt starts to talk about the family plot in Mount Pleasant Cemetery:

In the story, she’d made no distinction between the living and the dead, referring to her own plot as though she herself were already in it and to
the others as if they were guests at a picnic she was throwing. (122)

Even in death Auntie Muriel is powerful, arranging her funeral and surprising the mourners with an eccentric selection of hymns and readings:

....Elizabeth had been unprepared when the organ burst forth with the opening hymn: “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” Was it the old beast letting everyone know she considered herself immortal, or was it just something Auntie Muriel had stuck in because she happened to like it? (297)

The final hymn selection, “Away in a Manger,” tends to indicate Elizabeth’s second theory, which disturbs her version of her aunt as an unmitigated monster. At the burial, she faints, the final interment of her aunt driving home to her the loss of the convenient bogey her aunt had always been. Monstrous images, Atwood indicates in the novel, are useful fictions for limiting understanding and sympathy for other people, but ultimately provide only partial understanding of others. Elizabeth realizes this, while Lesje continues on with her categorizing of Elizabeth as a sullen ancient animal, repeating the blind hatred of her own past as the only child of a mixed marriage between an Orthodox Ukrainian and a Jewish Lithuanian.

The Gothic repetition of the past is reworked by Atwood in Life Before Man, as some of the characters never break away from the habits and modes of thought ingrained in them by their pasts and history. Lesje’s childhood was split between her two grandmothers, one Ukrainian and one Jewish, who maintained mutual hostility but loved her dearly. The arrangements they worked out regarding visits with her indirectly influenced her choice of career, since the Jewish grandmother had Saturdays and took
her to the Royal Ontario Museum in the place of synagogue. As a result of the strained relations between her parents’ families, she was, in effect, brought up between ethnic groups. since family politics dictated that to follow one would alienate the other. Lesje’s upbringing, with its stress on her personal happiness, leads her to replace the gap of her own past with the planet’s geological past. However, the blank, unwittingly fostered by her parents, ensures that she will repeat the mutual hostility of her grandmothers in relation to Elizabeth. Seeing Elizabeth in the halls of the Museum makes her think about this:

Will they still be doing this in twenty years? Older women, old women, wearing black and not speaking; ill-wishing; never seeing each other, but each keeping the other locked in her head, a secret area of darkness like a tumor or the black vortex at the center of a target. Someday they may be grandmothers. It occurs to her, a new idea, that this tension between the two of them is a difficulty for the children. They ought to stop. (309)

She postpones any attempt at starting to heal the breach, however. In many ways, Life Before Man demonstrates that family history is a nightmare that those, like Lesje, who do not learn from it are condemned to repeat. Elizabeth is in just as great danger of being locked into a series of destructive patterns, but breaks free of them by the end of the novel. She manages to overcome her unstable early family life as the child of alcoholics who “sold” her to Auntie Muriel, her mother’s sister. Her sister Caroline collapsed under the strain of the family and ended her life institutionalized as a catatonic schizophrenic,
committing suicide passively:

....when Caroline was almost seventeen, an attendant was called away
while she was in the bathtub. An emergency, they said. They were
never supposed to leave patients like Caroline alone in a bathtub; those
were the rules. They weren’t supposed to put patients like Caroline into
bathtubs at all, but someone had decided it would help her to relax, uncurl
her; that was what they said at the inquest. So it happened and Caroline
slipped down. She drowned rather than making the one small gesture,
the turn of the head, that would have saved her life. (88)

Elizabeth, on the other hand, survives, despite having what she considers the more
unpleasant parts of Auntie Muriel’s personality encouraged in her. Her determination
not to repeat her mother’s failures makes her a barracuda of a maternal figure, and
oblivious to her husband. Her small triumph, over her family history and Auntie Muriel.
is that she has a home, and children, and is alive. Her survival is hard won, as indicated
early in the novel in one of her reflections:

    My mother, my father, my aunt and my sister did not go away. Chris
won’t go away either.

    I am an adult and I do not think I am merely the sum of my past.
    I can make choices and I suffer the consequences, though they aren’t
always the ones I foresaw. That doesn’t mean I have to like it. (99)

Nate, in contrast to the two women, has more of a problem with the future than
with the past. Raised by his widowed mother after his father’s death in World War II, he
struggles somewhat against his mother’s expectations for him, and leaves the law firm for which he did advocacy cases in favour of handcrafting toys. The need for money to finance his divorce from Elizabeth drives him back to the law firm, and he gradually falls back into his mother’s world of Amnesty International and political protests. Becoming “his mother’s son” is more complicated than he thought, since his mother tells him of her despair after his father died, and her thoughts of suicide:

It’s not only the revelation but the unexpected similarity to himself that appalls him. He has thought her incapable of such despair, and he now sees that he’s always depended on it, this incapability of hers. What now, what next? (287)

He tries to stave off this worry, and others associated with the future, by running, keeping himself in “that non-existent spot where he longs to be. Mid-air” (288). The prospect of changing his life by leaving Elizabeth for Lesje frightens him as much as he desires it.

Picking up his children’s toys and clothes when he decides to leave Elizabeth, he panics:

He should have held on, he should have held on more tightly. He picks up one of Nancy’s blue rabbit slippers, stroking the fur. It’s his own eventual death he cradles. His lost, his kidnapped children, gone from him, kept hostage. (166)

His thoughts of his children turn inexorably to their adulthood:

...Soon they will be women, and that recognition runs through him like a needle. They will demand brassieres and then reject them, blaming both needs on him. They will criticize his clothes, his job, his turn of phrase.
They'll leave home to live with surly, scrofulous young men: or they'll marry dentists and go in for white rugs and hanging sculptures made of wool. Either way they will judge him. Motherless, childless, he sits at the kitchen table, the solitary wanderer, under the cold red stars. (287)

At the close of the novel, as Lesje is contemplating, then postponing, *rapprochement* with Elizabeth, he does the same thing with the future while running around Queen’s Park, watching his shadow in front of him: “a premonition, always with him: his own eventual death. Which he will think about some other time” (312). Nate’s shrinking from thinking about, or planning, the future is portrayed as a mixed attribute: he is not paralyzed by it, as Elizabeth is from constant worry, but he makes life difficult for Lesje as he postpones making a final break with Elizabeth. Atwood shows Nate in motion in many of his segments of the narrative, forever trying to run to stay still.

The centre of the novel is the Royal Ontario Museum, a mausoleum of the past which fosters the gossip-ridden claustrophobic society the characters move in. All information is laid open in the museum, and rumour is displayed as openly as the dinosaurs. As Elizabeth notes of the transmission of the news of her affair with Chris among her co-workers,

> It wasn’t that she cared who knew, though she didn’t flaunt it, she didn’t need to; in the Museum, by a process of discreet seepage, everybody ultimately knew everything. (73)

In the small segment of Toronto society the characters inhabit, news travels quickly outside the confines of the Museum. Martha, Nate’s former lover, knows about Chris’s
suicide before Nate tells her, saying: "Everybody in this town always knows what happens to everybody else" (34). Work is connected, obliquely, to family: Elizabeth works with the nephew of a friend of Auntie Muriel’s, a situation she forgets "during her witty, lighthearted résumé of her domestic situation at the lunch table" (216). The chain of gossip leads to Auntie Muriel arriving at her doorstep ready to pay Nate, if necessary, to stay with Elizabeth. "An incestuous city," Elizabeth thinks of Toronto and its networks of spying and gossip (216). The Museum itself exists passively, merely surrounding this society. Lesje describes it 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 a bandits’ cave: the past has been vandalized and this is where the loot is stored. Whole chunks of time lie here, golden and frozen....(308)

As a repository of memory, the Museum acts as a macrocosm of each character: all are collections of what has gone before. Context and time lend meaning to both the Museum and its exhibits, and the memories and actions of the three protagonists of the novel.

In some ways, *Life Before Man* resembles a parody of the Gothic novel more than *Lady Oracle* does. Atwood reworks Romantic conventions, altering the outcomes of old stories, or undermining them. In *Life Before Man* someone dies of love: it’s Chris, who commits suicide because Elizabeth treated him "the way men treat women...He couldn’t take it" (161).² Elizabeth fears and anathematizes Auntie Muriel, but to her daughters the old woman is merely “funny.” The economy of adultery and abandonment leads
Elizabeth to seduce William, Lesje’s former lover: Elizabeth is bored by him, comparing him to Chris, who was

a dangerous country, swarming with ambushes and guerillas, the center of a whirlpool, a demon lover. Maybe for someone else William would be that: Elizabeth is old enough to know that one woman’s demon lover is another’s worn-out shoe. (213)

Lesje has realized that: two months before this speculation of Elizabeth’s, William tried to rape her. This undermining of Gothic narrative tropes works in concert with Atwood’s literalization of others, such as Auntie Muriel being seen as undead at her self-orchestrated funeral, to produce a novel in which Gothic elements are used to underscore the violence of emotional life. There are no messages, however ambiguous, from the spirit world in this novel as there were in Surfacing and Lady Oracle. Lesje, Elizabeth, and Nate lead extremely confined lives, considering the watchful society they live and work in. Each of the three is trapped emotionally, Nate and Lesje in fantasy worlds. Elizabeth in the nightmare of her childhood; their inner lives are nearly closed books to others. Elizabeth comes the closest to opening up, and even then has told only Nate and Chris most of her story. Repetition is used in Life Before Man, as in the Gothic, but while the Gothic generally depicts the ending of a cycle of repetition, Life Before Man leaves the possibility open that events will occur in the same manner again and again. The dead live on, and it is a question of whether they are listened to, as the epigraph from Abram Tertz’s short story “The Icicle” (the first two lines of the following quotation) indicates:
I'm smiling at you, I'm smiling in you, I'm smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe through every quiver of your hand?...Here I am!

You think I don't exist! You think I've disappeared forever? Wait! The dead are singing in your body; dead souls are droning in your nerves. Just listen! (Tertz 83)

The dead may be present in every fibre of the characters' being, but they do their best to ignore them. Elizabeth watches children dressed as ghosts on Halloween and thinks about the dead souls, hoping to bribe them into going away:

All Souls. Not just friendly souls but all souls. They are souls, come back, crying at the door, hungry, mourning their lost lives. You give them food, money, anything to substitute for your love and blood, hoping it will be enough, waiting for them to go away. (53)

The boundaries between living and dead are crossed in Life Before Man not because the dead return, but because the living are virtually indistinguishable from them (Hurley 123). John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" is used as an ironic refrain throughout the novel, its line "We are the Dead" degenerating into "We are the numb" (100). Elizabeth, the character most concerned with the dead, is the only character to learn from them, breaking the cycle of repetition in the novel and escaping from the stifling inner world she has built for herself.

Life Before Man plays itself out against a backdrop of atrocities past and present, human rights violations, government scandal, and other world scandals and abuses of power. Nate's mother's work for Amnesty International is treated by him as a Quixotic
gesture in the face of endlessly cycling abuses; the gap between the world stage and the actions of the characters in their small circle in Toronto appears difficult to bridge, and may be summed up in the Planetarium show of "Cosmic Disasters." Elizabeth watches passively while waiting for her family one Saturday. Atwood's reworking of the Gothic in the novels to follow is more assured in its bridging of the line between the personal and the global, and the manner in which the Gothic as a narrating tool can make the unbearable understandable.
1. One collection of essays on Atwood's writing, *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, does not contain a separate essay on *Life Before Man*; the novel is considered along with all of Atwood's novels published to 1987 in Sharon Rose Wilson's "Camera Images in Margaret Atwood's Novels." As a point of comparison, in the same collection *Surfacing* has two essays to itself and is a major component of three others. A more recent work by Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood's Power* (published in 1993), mentions the novel in passing but does not analyze it at all.

2. Although Lesje thinks otherwise:
   But at last she could see why Chris did it: it was this anger and the other thing, much worse, the fear of being nothing. People like Elizabeth could do that to you, blot you out; people like Nate, merely by going about their own concerns. Other people's habits could kill you. Chris hadn't died for love. He'd wanted to be an event, and he'd been one. (293)
Bodily Harm and The Handmaid’s Tale: In the Eye of History

Bodily Harm and the novel that follows it, The Handmaid’s Tale, exist in many ways as two halves of the same argument. Bodily Harm, published in 1981, concerns life in modern Toronto and the Caribbean, and contains events and characters recognizable to the average newspaper reader. The “tropical traumas” Stanley Atherton wrote of are familiar: life repeated eerily in events during the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly in Grenada (Atherton 8). The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), a dystopian novel set in the early twenty-first century in the remnants of the United States, is, despite its futuristic setting, constructed of tendencies present in the excesses of the religious right of the United States, fundamentalist Iran, and government practices from nations as diverse as the Philippines, Romania, and the People’s Republic of China. Bodily Harm deals with Canada’s relationship to newly post-colonial nations in the Commonwealth; The Handmaid’s Tale nearly dispenses with Canada altogether, the bulk of the novel concerning the former Cambridge, Massachusetts. Canada exists in the text by implication: it is the site of the conference in the future that ends the novel, and it reoccupies its space in the American historical imagination as a large, free, and generally unknown neighbour.

Both novels offer a more direct engagement with contemporary political trends and events than do Atwood’s previous works. The results of imperialism, both British and American, of untrammelled pollution, and of the increased levels of violence in North America are examined in both novels, with different conclusions. On the
overarching theme of surveillance, they are in accord, while on pornography they are in a dialogue, each novel interrogating the other's stance. Generically, both novels stand alone in the Atwood canon as being a great deal closer to the Godwinian than the Radcliffean Gothic. The novels of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley are the models here, demonstrating how one can take the Gothic form, with its intense interest in power relations in the family, imprisonment, and the role of history, often merely familial history, in determining the present, and widen its scope by critiquing society as a whole rather than its microcosm in the family, and the ways in which it exerts its own power by means of surveillance, varieties of imprisonment, and ideology. The female Gothic, by presupposing the existence of a fictional Gothic model with which it engages to simultaneously interrogate and conform to, is suited to the addition of the political sphere.

Police states are depicted in both novels, Bodily Harm describing the practice, The Handmaid's Tale the theory, of authoritarian government. Atwood's interest in the uses of surveillance develops political aspects in these novels. The world of workplace gossip and one-on-one stalking found in The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, and Life Before Man gives way to entire societies organized around the unseen but all-seeing eye. As demonstrated in Life Before Man, it is hard to avoid the gaze of the workplace; gossip observes small cues unblinkingly, rendering, for example, Elizabeth's affair with Chris open to their colleagues at the Royal Ontario Museum. It is only a difference in degree from Martha's statement "Everyone in this town always knows what happens to everybody else" (Atwood, Life Before Man 34) to the reiterated "everybody knows" in
Bodily Harm to the existence of a security force called "Eyes" in The Handmaid's Tale. In these novels, webs of politeness and social obligations give way to networks of observation and punishment. Incarceration in the past, or under the scrutiny of one's peers, becomes literal incarceration. Imprisonment and entrapment become the whole of the texts, as Coral Ann Howells noted that Bodily Harm.

for all its modern Toronto and Caribbean scenarios, is traditional Gothic minimally transformed with its insistence on pervasive threats to the heroine and her final incarceration, the dread of every Gothic heroine. ("Words Alongside" 122)

In Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale it is not only at "crucial points" that this merging occurs. Everyday life is depicted as a variety of dislocating nightmare, with escape and release relegated to fantasy, or extra-textual conjecture.

Surveillance in the two novels is depicted in markedly different ways. Bodily Harm is concerned with the mechanics of surveillance: the telescope, stalking, the fixing of images in pornography and fashion. Intelligence agencies and radio communication are also important in the novel, which on the whole concerns itself with things already conceivable. Atwood theorizes here on the results of surveillance, the "bodily harm" made possible by the accumulation of information and "fixing" of the gaze.

In contrast, The Handmaid's Tale elaborates the theory of surveillance. The Republic of Gilead functions as a prime example of Foucault's "punitive city," where the agents of law and government act in concert to produce public displays of discipline as both "entertainment" and warning for its inhabitants. These agents are everywhere and
nowhere at once, known by all but identifiable by none.

The plots of the two novels are linked by their similar nightmare quality. Rennie Wilford, the protagonist of _Bodily Harm_, and Offred, the narrator of _The Handmaid's Tale_, are, as the officious Professor Pieixoto of the "Historical Notes" of _The Handmaid's Tale_ would say, educated women "insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated" (318). Rennie is a lifestyles journalist in Toronto, a career as far away from her earnestly moral upbringing in stifling small-town Griswold, Ontario as she can get. Offred is an average liberal arts graduate and library worker, the daughter of a defiantly single old-guard feminist. Both women are distanced from contemporary feminism, Rennie because it seems so unfashionable, Offred because her life before the collapse of the United States makes it seem redundant.

Rennie's well-planned life caves in on itself as she has a professional crisis and is diagnosed with breast cancer. The cancer marks a turning point in her life, forcing a break-up with her manipulating lover Jake and a stunted affair with her oncologist Daniel. For a rest she goes to the Caribbean to write a travel piece on St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe, a paired island nation newly independent of Great Britain. Tourism proves not to be the restful world she hoped, as she becomes involved in the first free election after independence. Dr. Minnow, the unaligned candidate, urges her to write about the island as it truly is, while Lora, a fellow Canadian and long-term resident, drags her unwittingly into gun-running on behalf of Prince, another candidate. To Rennie, the events on the island resemble a spy thriller she'd rather not read, but prove to be more dangerous than fiction. Minnow wins the election but is killed by someone (the corrupt
head of the governing party, or maybe an agent of the CIA). Rennie, whose behaviour has been innocently suspicious due to her association with Lora and Paul, an American drug dealer and ex-Green Beret (or something like it), is jailed along with Lora. Lora is beaten, probably to death, while Rennie’s fate is ambiguous. She may or may not have been retrieved from the prison by the offices of the Canadian government, but she has definitely recovered from the malaise that rendered her a mere observer of surfaces.

_Bodily Harm_ is filled with "plot": _The Handmaid’s Tale_ in contrast has little of one. Offred exists as property of the state of the Republic of Gilead, a rump nation formed of parts of the United States after a fundamentalist coup. As a fertile woman, one of very few left, Offred is a Handmaid, her name displaying her patriarchal ownership. Her job, simply, is to multiply, to serve as a breeder for whatever man she is assigned to. All of Gilead exists as a prison, patrolled by secret police and internal informers. Offred’s only escape is in memory, generally at night. Daytime sections of the novel describe Offred’s daily routine in this present: shopping, meals, the occasional mass execution or prayer meeting. “Night” sections relate her memories of her past, occurring at times near sleep when her mental defences are lower. The two parts come together as she starts a surreptitious, and illegal, relationship with an employee of the family to whom she is assigned. This relationship may or may not result in her possible escape. "Historical Notes" at the close of the novel indicate that Offred escaped, in some fashion, from Gilead and managed to record a series of tapes that scholars in the future assembled to form _The Handmaid’s Tale_.

The nightmare quality of these novels comes from their juxtaposition of the
mundane and the horrific. Offred walks by Harvard University daily, its familiar brick walls draped in the bodies of political offenders. Rennie’s home is broken into by a man who leaves a rope on the bed and consumes a cup of Ovaltine. The only way Rennie can assimilate this violation is to regard it as a cosmic game:

All I could think of was a game we used to play, Detective or Clue, something like that. You had to guess three things: Mr. Green, in the conservatory, with a pipewrench; Miss Plum, in the kitchen, with a knife. Only I couldn’t remember whether the name in the envelope was supposed to be the murderer’s or the victim’s.

_Miss Wilford, in the bedroom, with a rope._ (Bodily Harm 13-14)

Rennie often relates serious issues and events in her life in an arch tone, recasting frightening events as worn-out cliché. She regards her affair with Daniel as a banal version of the old plot of a woman falling in love with her doctor, while her first reaction to the unfolding coup on St. Antoine is "Somebody change the channel" (259). Offred’s coping mechanisms are smaller, consisting of endless wordplay, linguistic solitaire games she works at to keep herself sane in a state where reading is forbidden to women. The banal, or merely familiar, is used in both novels as a touchstone to measure and highlight the deviations from the norm depicted.

As many critics have pointed out, _Bodily Harm_ concerns "things as they are," to use Godwin’s phrase. As Rennie Wilford goes from being a burnt-out lifestyles journalist in Toronto to committed, involved reporter of human rights abuses in the Caribbean, she traverses the late 1970s landscape of self-involved urban professionals, reckless
American political adventuring, and the various types of "bodily harm" contained in the title. As Rennie experiences several forms of harm, from cancer and a thwarted stalker in Toronto to incarceration and assault in a prison on St. Antoine, she discovers that no country is exempt, and tourism does not give a protective aura to travellers. Bodily Harm's dangers are believable and well within the bounds of human capability.

These products include St. Antoine's Fort Industry, which acts as a metonym for many of the processes going on in the novel. Dr. Minnow takes Rennie there as an educational side trip, patiently pointing out the sights. The fort itself, a relic of British colonialism, is on Rennie's first visit emergency housing for victims of a recent hurricane as well as a prison. Dr. Minnow takes her to a courtyard and points out what is there:

In the other corner there's an odd structure, made of boards nailed not too carefully together. It has steps up to a platform, four supports but no walls, a couple of cross-beams. It's recent but dilapidated. Rennie thinks it's a child's playhouse which has been left unfinished and wonders what it's doing here.

"This is what the curious always like to see," Dr. Minnow murmurs.

Now Rennie understands what she's being shown. It's a gallows. (Bodily Harm 131)

Rennie's reaction to seeing the gallows is to assimilate its existence by utilizing a consolatory fiction (in this case perceiving it as a playhouse and confining her interest in it to its curious placement). On another level in the text, the gallows itself is a grim
reminder of human ingenuity. Rennie's fictionalizing reaction is part of the impulse to revert to storytelling as an aid to assimilating or sublimating horror. At other points in the novel she refers back to detective novels in an attempt to order, and distance, the things happening to her. The genre conventions of the Gothic make the series of disturbing actions in the novel more easily apprehended by the reader, while Rennie and her acquaintances' reduction of most experience to fragmentary cliches leads to experience being less understandable, or even tangible. Irony and catch phrases let them relate without getting close. This ambivalence towards narrative construction is important in Bodily Harm. Tension is created between the urgent need for stories to get told (Lora's, Minnow's, the election's) and the need for clichéd plots to be avoided. Conventional spy thrillers and pulp mystery novels are used as counterpoint to the "real" terrors entrapping the characters: stalking, cancer, physical abuse and imprisonment.

*Bodily Harm*’s framing narrative is uncovered in fragmentary fashion, the tenses flickering between past and present. Scenes in one locale refract back onto scenes in another. The paperback detective novels Rennie reads in the islands allude to the police's reaction in Toronto to her own brush with death:

...two blondes with pale translucent skin, mouths like red gashes and swelling breasts bursting through their dresses, two tempestuous redheads with eyes of green smouldering fire and skin like clotted cream, each carefully arranged on floor or bed like a still life, not quite naked, clothing disheveled to suggest rape, though there was no rape in the forties, finger marks livid around the throat—they loved
"livid" --or a wound still oozing, preferably in the left breast. (246)

The codified death scenes, humorous when so two-dimensional, recall the arrangements of her sex life with Jake, while also pointing out the recurring nature of victimhood and blame in the text. If the stalker had succeeded in killing Rennie would the police read the crime scene (as she reads the Dell "Scene of the Crime" paperbacks) and evince the "hypocritical outrage" (246) of the fictional detectives in denouncing a crime they feel the victim provoked? The disapproving Englishwoman at the Sunset Inn also participates in this cycle, as Rennie finds when she is arrested:

The two policemen come forward. The Englishwoman looks at her.

a look Rennie remembers from somewhere, from a long time ago, from a bad dream. It's a look of pure enjoyment. *Malignant.* (262)

Here the internal and external threats to her are combined in the gaze of pure hate, St. Antoine recapitulating Toronto recapitulating Griswold, and the gaze itself labelled with the most private menace to Rennie.

Rennie's imprisonment on St. Antoine is a literal enacting of the thriller plots contained in the novels she reads, as well as the convoluted games of the various intelligence communities infesting the islands. Each intelligence agency active on the island spies on every other, making sudden geopolitical moves difficult, and trapping each agency in the fixed glare of surveillance. The public and private spheres merge and blur, as "plots and subplots intermingle" in the narrative and construction of the novel as noted by Lorna Irvine in "The Here and Now of Bodily Harm" (VanSpanckeren and Castro 85). The recurring question of "was she asking for it" is one case in point.
Atwood infuses the clichés and plot mechanics of the contemporary formulaic political thriller and the murder mystery with real terror so that storylines nearly inert with over-use work towards creating the nightmare atmosphere of *Bodily Harm*. “As in traditional Gothic, images of female dread are pervasive” in *Bodily Harm*, but they are connected to perpetual anxiety (Howells, *Private and Fictional Words* 59). The loss of faith in familiar organizing storylines and clichés gives way to their replacement by an empowering awareness of “the authentic first-order meanings of...words shining through and destroying the second-order generalizations her culture has assigned to them” (Davey, *Margaret Atwood* 78).

As a narrator and protagonist, Rennie is remarkably similar to Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley. Both characters are used by their creators as vehicles for educating their readers about different societies and cultures, although Atwood is to some extent reworking this tradition ironically. Rennie’s consistent misreading of the landscape and the people of St. Antoine demonstrate both her own ignorance and the blindness of Canadian society at large which in some degree supports such misreadings. As a lifestyles journalist, Rennie is in the position of being reduced to an observer of trends and culture wherever she writes; her Toronto-based writing has the same distanced quality that her observations of St. Antoine do. Rennie’s writing presents other paradoxes: she spots trends, swimming with the tide but ahead of it, but can also make trends. In this world of surfaces, trends are juggernauts bearing all before them, like “the new capitalism” or “the death of feminism,” but so ephemeral anyone can start one. The power of Rennie’s writing is foreshadowed in her ability to manipulate readers.
“Sometimes Rennie liked to write pieces about trends that didn't really exist, to see if she could make them exist by writing about them,” a tendency demonstrated by her writing the drain chain jewelry fad story (25). “The latest Queen Street thing,” she writes, using the trendy magazine shorthand for the hip and borderline dangerous, “a New Wave sleaze put-on of real jewelry” (24). In actuality the drain chain necklaces and bracelets are a one-off accessory put together by Rennie's friend Jocasta, a proprietor of a Queen Street vintage clothing store. Rennie's story on this is a trial balloon testing the gullibility level of the would-be sophisticates of Toronto: will fashion victims start slathering with materialistic desire upon hearing of a new accessory? This presumed easy acceptance of a “nouveau wavé,” as Rennie puts it, is part of the domestication of danger in urban Toronto. Violence and threat are smoothed over, rendered into knowing cliché or art trend. Rennie's power to channel these trends is laughably easy: as she finds, she can even dictate responses in absolute strangers' conversations. As an "expert in boredom," she writes in Pandora's "Relationships" column on the etiology of boredom, its construction of "borer and boree," and ways for women to entertain themselves when the inevitable strikes:

*Study his tie, she recommended. If you're stuck, make an imaginary earlobe collection and add his. Watch his Adam's apple move up and down. Keep smiling.* (19)

In Pandora's male counterparts she elucidates these activities for male readers in "How to Read Her Mind": "If she's looking too hard at your earlobes or watching your Adam's apple go up and down, change the subject" (19). Pandora's lessons for the leisure class,
exercises in anomie, are a contrast to the relentless activity-oriented women's magazines of fifteen years earlier satirized in *The Edible Woman*. Even Rennie's Caribbean destination is chosen by trendiness and the desire to be first: "Pick an island," her editor at *Visor* tells her, "Only it has to be someplace we haven't done" (17). The topic is thrown at her as "The Restless Caribbean," the capitals indicating the perceived irony and weariness in the phrase, and the aesthetic distance the reader is meant to feel.

Rennie's immediate journalistic crisis is precipitated by the two articles she fails to complete, a piece in *Pandora*'s "Women of Achievement" series and an article for *Visor* on "pornography as an art form" (207). Both assignments, while on the surface examples of the new morality, have more sinister undertones. The *Pandora* piece is by its series title feminism made simple. The subject, a judge, is on the surface a living example of the ideal of Having it All:

The judge had two wonderful children and an adoring husband who didn't at all mind the time she spent being a judge, because he found his own job so satisfying and rewarding. They had a charming house... filled with paintings by promising young artists...The judge had it all together and Rennie was beginning to see this as a personal affront. (66)

Tippy the editor, however, wants Rennie to find "a few cracks in the armour, a little pain. Didn't she have to suffer on her way up?" (66). Tippy's desire for "the real story" (67) goes beyond the supposed feminist interest in finding out the obstacles in society a woman has to overcome to be successful. Instead, it resembles attitudes from Griswold, demanding that the price of female success is pain, and success itself either undeserved
or liable to change into sudden disaster.

The other journalistic turning point, the article on pornography from the women's angle, presents another set of realizations clustered around the subtext of women asking for it. The presuppositions *Visor*'s editor Keith operates with eliminate women from consideration as anything but the object of the male gaze in pornography: Rennie's sources are a male artist and the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department's impounded hardcore pornography collection. The argument of the piece is grounded in the dialectic of pornography in the late 1970s, as presented by the mainstream media: feminists hate pornography, men don't. The assumption is, of course, that pornography is part of the masculine, and not feminine, world, and that strident radical feminist denunciation has been "done" already, thus motivating Keith's desire for Rennie's article to be tied in "with women's fantasy lives...keep it light" (207).

Her first interview subject, Frank the artist, constructs sculptures of found objects and mannequins that appear detached from any relation to women's fantasy lives:

The women were dressed in half-cup bras and G-string panties, set on their hands and knees for the tables, locked into a sitting position for the chairs. One of the chairs was a woman on her knees, her back arched, her wrists tied to her thighs. The ropes and arms were the arms of the chair, her bum was the seat. (208)

The avant-garde art scene is being satirized here, trapped in a circle of self-reflexivity. Rennie misses the commentary and the send-up of stereotypical views of women and men, since the gender criticism is disguised in a thick layer of protective irony and thus
easily misread. Rennie herself is merely bored by it. Her next stop for raw material, the Metropolitan Toronto Police headquarters, is full of items not so easily misread.

The shield of lightness and ironic distance intended by Keith disintegrates as Rennie and Jocasta view the pornography collection. Paradoxically, the collection of seized objects is open to the public in one more example of the blurring between linguistically separate categories, here legal and illegal. The objects themselves range from rubber appliances and whips, made inert in the contextual limbo of the viewing rooms of the police (209), to the film collection, which no amount of attempted normalization and detachment can render innocuous. Here is the absolute underground level of pornography, snuff films and in particular, the film of the rat in a woman's vagina which shocks Rennie into first vomiting and then giving up the essay.

Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she'd been used to thinking of as reality. What if this is normal, she thought, and we just haven't been told yet? (210)

The policeman-guide implies that this is normal: "I thought that one would get to you...A lot of women do that. Look at it this way, at least it's not for queers" (211). The implications of this particular type of pornographic film being normal are brought out fully on St. Antoine in the context of Rennie and Lora's imprisonment; this encounter with the sinister side of human nature and ingenuity that Rennie postponed confronting earlier is now acknowledged.

At the time, however, the encounter with this side of reality causes Rennie to retreat into more kitsch and more ephemera:
I can't do this piece, Rennie told Keith.

Why not? he said, disappointed in her.

It's not my thing, she said. I'll stick to lifestyles.

Maybe it is a lifestyle, he said.

Rennie decided that there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths. (211)

The retreat itself is into over-determinedly female subjects, angora sweaters and the "hand-knit-look industry," topics soft, swaddling and numbing in their near-parodic femininity. As the perceived antithesis of hard-core heterosexual pornography, they function as emotional havens for Rennie, shielding her from a level of contact with aspects of human nature she wishes to avoid thinking about.

Some of her discomfort is displaced onto reconsidering the nature of her sex life with Jake. Described by Rowland Smith as "one of the most self-centred louts in Atwood's fiction"(Smith 257), Jake imposes a fantasy of rough sex on Rennie that in itself is a fantasy based on a belief that there is no hurt or violence involved. It's not surprising that he collapses when Rennie is diagnosed with cancer, interrupting the fantasy with the reality of harm. Early in the text Jake's games are enumerated:

Sometimes he would climb up the fire escape and in through the window instead of coming through the door, he'd send her ungrammatical and obscene letters composed of words snipped from newspapers, purporting to be from crazy men, he'd hide in closets
and spring out at her, pretending to be a lurker. Apart from the
first shock, none of these things had ever alarmed her. (27)

Jake's sadism, based as he thinks it is in mutual trust, is of no help to Rennie. "She didn't
want to be afraid of men. she wanted Jake to tell her why she didn't have to be" (211),
but her confidence in Jake appears to be based less on mutual trust than on convenience
and inertia.

A secure woman is not threatened by her partner's
fantasies. Rennie told herself. As long as there is trust.
She'd even written that, or something like it, in a piece on
the comeback of satin lingerie and fancy garter belts. And she
was not threatened, not for some time. (106)

Jake is unable to reassure her that not all men are like the consumers of the types of films
and objects found in the evidence rooms. It is only a difference in degree, and not kind,
that separates Jake from the average consumer or producer of hardcore pornography, and
from the man who broke into Rennie's apartment. Rennie's sudden realization that "she's
afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are
frightening" (290), based on her experiences in the islands as well as in Toronto, makes
perfect sense because the reader, as well as Rennie, has seen no reason to believe
otherwise.

Objects, as well as people, are presented as frightening in Bodily Harm, owing in
part to Rennie's inability to read them correctly. The guidebook to "What to Do if the
Thief Visits You" she finds in her hotel room is a typical example: "like everything else
she's been reading, the instructions are both transparent and impenetrable” (139). As a tourist from one Commonwealth nation visiting another, Rennie is exposed to peculiar, to her, juxtapositions of the familiar and foreign. The sight of the row of Canadian banks on a main street in St. Antoine is just the first dissonant image she encounters. Sedgwick’s comment about the Gothic narrative’s “despair about any direct use of language” (14) is reversed here, direct language itself becoming impenetrable, as worn-out clichés and familiar landmarks get re-literalized. The Bagatelle shop on St. Antoine sells bags, and the pharmacy Rennie buys sunscreen in is similar:

"We have Quaaludes," the man says as she's paying for the lotion.

"Pardon?" says Rennie.

"Any amount," the man says...

Well, it's a drugstore, Rennie thinks. It sells drugs.

Why be surprised? (69)

Toronto has "the Lickin' Chicken on Bloor, which didn't sell chicken" (65), so why not a drug store that lives up to its name? Rennie's stint as a gun-runner occurs because of this confusion about signs, as she transports a box labelled medicine because she believes that inside and outside (particularly during her vacation in a place exempt from the subterfuges of Toronto) cannot be different. When she discovers the machine gun in the box she curses “her own stupidity. Dumb, gullible, naïve, to believe people; it came from drinking too much. Now she must try not to panic” (159).

One of the lessons she learns in the course of the novel is not to place confidence
blindly, or to refuse it for the same reason. Blind trust leads to her warped relationship with Jake, her misplaced faith in Daniel as her soul's healer, and her eventual jailing on St. Antoine on account of the gun running. Rennie's insistence, during the early part of her stay on St. Antoine, on not seeing leads her into conflict with the constant surveillance she is under throughout most of the novel.

Surveillance is a way of life for most characters in Bodily Harm. The epigraph, from John Berger's Ways of Seeing, indicates the power of the gaze in fixing behaviour and safety:

A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence...
defines what can and cannot be done to her. (7)

Rennie comes to St. Antoine thinking that she understands the power of public exposure and public sight in legislating behaviour, but finds that while Griswold, Ontario is different only in degree from St. Antoine, the degree of difference is important. Dr. Minnow is aware of the irony of his police surveillance (it keeps him alive, if only because the people who are most likely to kill him are engaged in watching his every move), while Rennie is not.

"Now we have the whole family," says Dr. Minnow. "This kind does not hand out papers."

"Who are they?" says Rennie. His tone of voice is making her jumpy.

"My friends," he says softly. "They follow me everywhere.
They want to make sure I am safe." (129)

Rennie's background in rural Ontario has taught her about the power of common report in a small town. As a journalist and as a tourist, she dresses and presents herself to attract the minimum of attention, the camouflage learned from an upbringing in a town where "everyone knew everything, sooner or later" (55). The line of least resistance to the common report was to do nothing unusual to avoid being the subject of talk (55). The jokes Rennie tells about Griswold focus on the obsession with supervising everyone and their personal business:

...How many people from Griswold does it take to change a lightbulb? The whole town. One to change it, ten to snoop, and the rest of them to discuss how sinful you are for wanting more light. Or: How many people from Griswold does it take to change a light bulb? None. If the light goes out it's the will of God, and who are you to complain?

(18)

Griswold blurs the lines between public and private by treating all as public; illness, disaster, and shame all become grist for the Calvinist rumour mill. Rennie's preference for things to have clearly demarcated insides and outsides is a reaction to this, and its vehemence leads to her choice of journalism and her inability to read the landscape and people of St. Antoine correctly.

Lifestyles journalism, at least as practised by Rennie, is a retreat into the world of surfaces and exteriors.
Instead of writing about the issues, she began interviewing the people who were involved in them. The *in* wardrobe for the picket line, the importance of the denim overall, what the feminists eat for breakfast. The editors told her she was better at that anyway.

(64)

She strives to see surfaces without depths, and this separation leads in part to her crisis over the pornography article.

The fishbowl of fashionable Toronto is not very different from that of Griswold. The annual New Year's list of those in and out parallels coffee gossip in a small town. The collections of "what's in" and "what's out" take small town ideas of what is acceptable and what is not to Byzantine degrees, with the items from each column constantly switching places, and parodying to an extent Rennie's own crisis over determining what is "in" her and what is not. The boundaries of taste are crossed so often that they collapse, as Rennie's memories of a "Class: Who Has It, Who Doesn't" list show:

Jogging didn't have class, contemporary dance did, but only if you did it in jogging pants, which did, for that but not for jogging, but not in stretchy plunge-back leotards, which didn't for that but did if you went swimming in them, instead of in bathing suits with built-in bra cups, which didn't. (65)

The lines between her life and work collapse in the same way: her first reaction to her cancer diagnosis is to write about it: "For instance, she could do a piece on it. "Cancer,
The Coming Thing.' *Homemakers* might take it, or *Chatelaine*. How about 'The Cutoff Point?'" (27). Her affair with Daniel is something she associates with *Toronto Life* magazine. "soft-core gossip masquerading as hard-nosed research and exposé" (33).

On St. Antoine, in contrast, she finds herself in a place where her careful distinctions between interior and exterior do not apply, and where she must learn that all boundaries are permeable, and that distinctions are doomed to be blurred.

"Everyone is in politics here, my friend," says Dr. Minnow. "All the time. Not like the sweet Canadians." (124)

In an echo of *Surfacing*, the Canadian attitude, personified by Rennie and the Canadian consul, is to distance themselves from the active harm of the United States and the Soviet Union, while passively participating in it through inaction or ignorance. Canada sends hams for hurricane relief that end up feeding the ruling party, and runs advisory sessions on diving during the diving season that are unsurprisingly unattended. Canadian money keeps the corrupt government of St. Antoine in power:

"There is no longer any place that is not of general interest," says Dr. Minnow. "The sweet Canadians have not learned this yet. The Cubans are building a large airport in Grenada. The CIA is here, they wish to nip history in the bud, and the Russian agents. It is of general interest to them."

Rennie almost laughs. The CIA has been done to death; surely by now it's a joke, he can't be serious. (135)
Sent by a jaded magazine editor looking for vacation stimulation on behalf of equally jaded readers, Rennie, as a representative Canadian, is meant to learn that power can be wielded by omission as well as by commission.

Surveillance is used as a weapon on St. Antoine, connecting it with Griswold and Toronto. "Everyone finds out about everyone else around here, they're curious. It's a small place, anything new or out of the ordinary gets noticed pretty fast. A lot of people are curious about you. for instance." Paul tells Rennie (148). "Everyone knows" how she got there, where she is staying, what is in her room, what is in the box she collected for Lora. The police on St. Antoine blur into the police in Toronto, as she senses the interconnectedness of those with the controlling gaze: "And now another man, possibly in a bathing suit. A faceless stranger. Mr. X, in the bedroom, with a knife" (159). Not very much separates the man who stalked her in Toronto and left the rope on her bed from the police who search her room in St. Antoine: the line between legal and illegal proves to be infinitely permeable, both halves of the law infinitely reversible, repeating the relationship between predator and prey in the original Gothic novels. The ongoing trope of spotting the CIA agent plays with this: the Abbotts, dull, obsessive birders from the United States are also, according to Lora, CIA operatives. "Rennie decides that Lora must be wrong. Surely two such innocuous, kindly, boring people cannot possibly be CIA agents" (187). It is never made clear who the CIA agent is on the island, or whether in fact there are any there. The instability inherent in this surveillance by rumour is disturbing, the CIA mirroring the cancer cell in its ability to assume the appearance of a "safe" object and to corrupt it fully.
Stories converge, on many levels, in the prison, as Rennie and Lora tell each other about their lives and trade rumours from the outside about the coup and foreign reactions to it. Lora takes up the slain Dr. Minnow's demand for Rennie to tell someone what has happened: "Tell someone I'm here...Tell someone what happened," Lora begs Rennie (282). Even at this stage Rennie is still thinking of stories in terms of "entertainment" alone, in this manner keeping up her distancing techniques. Lora disturbs her, her hands being a metaphor for what upsets Rennie about her:

She wouldn't want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn't like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that. (86)

Lora's hands become loaded with a great deal of symbolic weight, ultimately existing as the agents of Rennie's redemption as they recall and suggest her relationship with her stern overbearing grandmother, the idealism and community she turned her back on years before, and her vestigial belief in healing by touch.

In prison Rennie comes to terms with the possibilities for malevolence within herself as well as with the possibility of human connectedness and community. Her dreams, repositories of her own depths, lead her again and again to the man who broke into her home, and give her some sort of answer as to his nature:

Rennie is dreaming about the man with the rope, again, again. He is the only man who is with her now, he's followed her, he was here all along, he was waiting for her...it's not anyone she's ever seen before. The face
keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible,
she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't
really there, he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar,
with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own. (287)
She wakes up screaming from this discovery, but the acknowledgement of latent
possibilities for power and violence on her part appears to lead to her imaginative leap in
gripping Lora's hand after Lora is savagely beaten by the prison guards. After the beating
all of Lora reflects the "damage" Rennie feared earlier; it is likely that Lora is dead, or
close to it, here. Rennie's existential freedom comes from her taking Lora's battered hand
and forgetting the layers of protection she has erected between her self and experience,
pain, and others:

this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done.

She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all
her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough,
something will move and live again, something will get
born. (299)
Rennie's connection is made, finally, with others, and she re-enters the world just as she
re-entered her body only gradually after her mastectomy. Rescue comes from within, as
the final, ambiguous words of the novel demonstrate:

She will never be rescued. She has already been
rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky,
suddenly, finally, she's overflowing with luck, it's
this luck holding her up. (301)

“Luck” separates her living hands from Lora’s dead ones, as she becomes born again (her full name, appropriately enough, is Renata) through the agency of a dead mother.²

The schematic nature of Rennie’s trials, from cancer to attempted murder to physical assault, is a literal enacting of the varieties of “bodily harm” a woman or man can endure. Rennie, as an emotionally anaesthetized character, carries the full thematic weight of the novel; like Scott’s Waverley, she is positioned as slightly more ignorant than the presumed reader, and made to undergo an education in the course of the novel which will be paralleled by the lessons the reader learns from the same narrative. As in the traditional Gothic, the readers of Bodily Harm are asked “to seek answers to questions which are never precisely formulated” (Robertson 72). It is never made clear how Rennie leaves St. Antoine, or even if she does, or how long she was stalked by the unknown man with the rope in Toronto. The identity of the CIA agent on St. Antoine is never revealed, nor are the contents of the locked room in Paul’s house. Atwood’s critique of the types of thriller novels that Rennie reads throughout the novel is double edged: real-life is not as neat and clear cut as in a political thriller, but disregarding danger and abuses merely because they look more like fiction than reality is also a mistake.

The Handmaid’s Tale continues the analysis of power and surveillance started in Bodily Harm. The futuristic yet domestic setting of the novel highlights the issues by confining them to an imagined future in a partially transformed United States.⁶ Constant
surveillance is the base of civil society in the Republic of Gilead: the police are called “Eyes” and patrol the streets of the Republic at all times. The entire Republic is a prison, with informants everywhere, and punishments made into public spectacle, warranting the description of it as “punitive city.” The power of the state is kept before the eyes of its citizens constantly, regulating their behaviour and thoughts. Public and private spheres have merged entirely, as Atwood depicts a society where reproduction is the concern of the state, and censorship is practised to such a degree that an entire class of women, is prohibited from reading and writing. Mechanisms of control and imprisonment found in single households in the original Gothic are here used to regulate an entire society. “The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 33); Offred recalls those words when walking in “the heart of Gilead,” but she could just as well be on the edges.

The Republic of Gilead, as described in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is just close enough to contemporary society to be recognizable and disturbing. Things survive from the remote, more secular past, but without their former meanings. In this future, the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge is still standing but changed:

The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it’s called...Lilies used to be a movie theatre, before. Students went there a lot; every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. (35)

The memories of such films have gone underground, surfacing as second-hand romantic
banter that hints at what was lost, and the chasm between the world of the films and the present of Gilead (274). Buildings and monuments left in Gilead have undergone a similar transformation of meaning. Harvard University's buildings have been "detourned" and rededicated: the wall around the university is for the public display of state criminals' bodies, while a church is a museum. To Offred and the other handmaids who observe the bodies on the wall, "...these bodies hanging on the Wall are time travellers, anachronisms. They've come here from the past" (43). The past survives in Gilead in such fragments, pieces that are doomed to lose their meaning as their context recedes further.

Perhaps the most Gothic aspect of The Handmaid's Tale is its construction: the epilogue to the novel shows the narrative to have been one from the past, put together by scholars of the future studying a Gilead that has been defunct for a hundred years. Offred is consciously constructing her narrative throughout the novel:

I would like to believe this is a story I am telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. (49)

Narratives frame and distance experience, making it easier to understand and order even
while they shield the teller from the reality of the experience. This "sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story" (279) that Offred apologizes for to her unknown auditor near the close of the novel is in actuality mutilated; found years later on a series of audio-cassettes, it is arranged arbitrarily by Professor Pieixoto and presented to the "International Historical Association." The reception of "The Handmaid's Tale" (by Pieixoto) ironically parallels the reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* (by Atwood), as both are seen as voices from strange other worlds by academics in conferences.

It is debatable whether one can call *The Handmaid’s Tale* entirely "Gothic." In form it resembles Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, another novel set in a dystopian future sent back, however figuratively, to the past. Atwood utilizes Gothic tropes of imprisonment, narrative transmission, and irruption of the hidden or repressed past into the present more than Shelley does, but both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Last Man* have more affinity with the world of speculative fiction rather than with the Gothic. Like *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is marked to a great extent by a more topical set of narrative concerns and a more didactic tone than those of Atwood’s other novels. This topicality may foreground debates over ideas of power and its abuses, but it also renders both novels to some extent liable to premature aging: already at this writing, ten years since *The Handmaid’s Tale* was first published, some aspects of the plot appear dated at best. *Bodily Harm* has aged better, despite being more engaged with actual current events of the early 1980s. Like *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* explore, to some extent and with varying degrees of success, the collapse of the boundaries between the personal and the public worlds and the power
relations in the family and the external world.
1. The Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto possesses, in its collection of Atwood manuscripts, the clipping file Atwood collected for *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Items in the collection range from accounts of punishments in the Philippines and China to a report of a fringe sect of Roman Catholics based in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, who referred to women in their group as “handmaidens” (and were eventually found to be a cult and ordered to leave the church in which they held increasingly charismatic services).

2. Joan Didion wrote of this urge in her autobiographical essay “The White Album”:

   We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be “interesting” to know which...We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (*The White Album* 11)

“The White Album” presents a writer’s breakdown parallel to a society’s (in this case Los Angeles, California in the mid to late 1960s). There are many similarities between Didion’s narrative and Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, especially in the presentation of increasingly less random acts of violence, or threatened violence, that surround each female protagonist. Atwood and Didion have both been criticized for depicting female characters as “St. Zombie”: the Didion novel compared in this case to *Bodily Harm* is *A Book of Common Prayer*, which depicts, in the second person, the breakdown and reconstruction of a woman on an island in the Caribbean.


4. Although it can be argued that blind stupidity lands Rennie in jail. As Brydon points out, how can she possibly think that she can get away with a crime in a foreign country? Atwood’s lesson that “no one is exempt” in this case is quite literal: tourists have to obey the law.

5. This has disturbed some critics of *Bodily Harm*, most notably Elaine Tuttle Hansen, who find that ultimately Lora’s only role in the novel is to be sacrificed so Rennie can become a whole person again. Lora in many ways resembles Susie in *Cat’s Eye*, who is also brought onstage by Atwood to illustrate a point in the heroine’s development and disposed of in a gruesome manner.
6. The fact that the novel is set in the United States has led to *The Handmaid’s Tale* being, in many cases, the only Atwood novel the average American academic will ever read, and the only non-American novel placed on “20th Century Women Writers” reading lists in American universities (many of which have course names hurriedly changed to “North American” Women Writers). The literature on *The Handmaid’s Tale* is extensive, and is overwhelmingly American.

7. This was dealt with interestingly in the heavy-handed film adaptation of the novel: the symbol of the Republic of Gilead was the all-seeing eye in the pyramid familiar from the United States one-dollar bill. Unfortunately, this was inaccurate, as the type of right-wing terrorists likely to kill the entire United States Congress and suspend the Constitution are also likely to be convinced that everything is a Masonic plot.

8. “Detourning” is a technique used by the Situationists, in which an object or item is suborned for a use other than what was originally intended, but with enough slippage between meanings that both exist and influence the other. In the context of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the university is “detoured” only in the present described by Offred, since the older meaning would presumably be lost within a generation (considering the scorched-earth policies of Gilead as described by Atwood). Detourning, like irony, only works when all components are understood by both creator and observer.

9. Which is precisely how the novel is treated by many critics. Speculative fiction has a better reputation among feminist literary critics than the Gothic does on the whole. How one considers *The Handmaid’s Tale* depends in a large part how one feels about speculative fiction and fantasy fiction in general.
Cat's Eye: The Prison House of Memory

In contrast to the Caribbean setting of Bodily Harm, and the dystopian portrait of a twenty-first century United States of The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s 1988 novel Cat’s Eye appears comfortably domestic. Cat’s Eye returns, in many ways, to the concerns of Atwood’s earlier works: it is set in a clearly described Toronto, and is a first-person narrative of the life story of an artist. Appearing in the middle of this minutely detailed picture of a time gone by is a disturbing story of female victimization and brutality, as Atwood depicts the subterranean world of pre-adolescent girls and their clandestine wars upon each other. In many ways, it was hard to see who was more disturbed by the narrative of Cat’s Eye: the novel’s protagonist Elaine Risley, or the journalists who interviewed Atwood after the novel’s publication. Cat’s Eye provokes a dis-ease in the reader like no other Atwood novel owing in large part to its depiction of girls’ cruelty to one another.¹ Atwood told Maclean’s that she

wanted to deal with the idea that women somehow are more morally wonderful than men...There is no gene for moral wonderfulness. To buy into that is to be back in the 19th century. (Timson 58)

In Cat’s Eye she reworks the familiar Female Gothic themes of victimization and anxiety, depicting a series of relationships where females are the victimizers as well as the victimized, as well as the other recurring themes of buried secrets and the buried past, imprisonment in a claustrophobic environment, and the doubling of characters.

Cat’s Eye depicts the process in which Elaine Risley, a successful artist, comes to
terms with the destructive friendships she had as a child, as well as the destructive relationships with men she had as a young woman, and constructs her own vision as an artist. Having, at the beginning of the novel, returned to Toronto after a long absence for a retrospective of her paintings, Elaine becomes haunted by the memories the city brings up for her. In large part, she is haunted by the memory of Cordelia, her best friend and closest tormentor from childhood, but recollections and anxieties from other parts of her youth in Toronto surface also. In many ways, Cat’s Eye is a ghost story, with Elaine as the survivor of a life long gone by, trapped in a layer of time that goes forward as her memories remain fixed in the past. “This is the middle of my life,” Elaine states. “I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over” (13). In many ways Elaine herself is a bridge, becoming a medium for transmission of the words and actions of the dead to the living in both her story and her paintings. The worlds of the dead surround Elaine throughout the novel: in the Toronto of the present she is the only survivor of her childhood, with even the buildings of her childhood surviving only in her memories, while her childhood was bounded by the cemetery near her home and school, and the echoes of World War II. As in Surfacing, the idea of the uncanny operates in Cat’s Eye, lending an air of menace to what should be very familiar to Elaine, the city that was her childhood home.²

Elaine’s presence in Toronto for the retrospective, her first, provokes in her a great sense of unease. As she says early on of Toronto,

The fact is that I hate this city. I’ve hated it so long I can hardly remember feeling any other way about it. (13)
Her present-day narration alternates with her memories of Toronto, from the time her parents moved her family there from a nomadic life in northern Ontario to her leaving it and her marriage in her late twenties. Elaine’s life is the raw material for her retrospective look at her life, just as it is for her artwork hanging in Sub/Versions, a feminist art gallery: her memories and her paintings contain many layers of time. Her older brother’s study of theoretical physics gives her a framework for understanding the vagaries of memory: like him, she believes that time is not a line, but a dimension. Unlike her brother, Elaine then gives this dimension a shape, which will influence her narrative:

But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (3)

Elaine’s narration reveals the slippages of memory, how a recalled event differs with the distance the remembering is from the actual event, and how many times the memory has been overlaid or forgotten then remembered again. As well, her narration depicts memories and the past as a prison from which her adult life is an “escape,” a word she uses often. As a teenager, she and Cordelia watch the crazy older women on the streetcars with interest: “they have escaped, though what it is they’ve escaped from isn’t clear to us” (5). As an adult in Vancouver, she thinks she has “had a narrow escape” (15). Toronto is for her a prison, imbued with the displaced anxiety of her childhood: as
soon as she lands at the airport she begins to feel the city entrapping her: "I am dragged downwards, into the layers of this place as into liquefied mud" (13).

Elaine's present-time narration frames a narrative in which events repeat, objects are found again and again, and characters are doubled. The boundaries between past and present, and the self and others, blur, collapse and are reset throughout the novel. The story of Elaine's childhood is set up at first as a conventional story of a lost pastoral paradise, as she starts by saying: "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (21). However, her early memories are of playing war with her brother, listening to radio broadcasts about the war's progress, and watching her parents' unvoiced worry about the possibility of Allied defeat. Family security is early intermingled with uncertainty. As an adult Elaine wonders about the certitude of her memories of this time. Her brother Stephen cannot remember very much about this time, and is surprised that she can considering how young she was.

It disturbs me that he can remember some of these things about himself, but not others: that the things he's lost or misplaced exist now only for me. If he's forgotten so much, what have I forgotten? (334)

Her war games with her brother are both morbid and innocent, described with a precise detail that distances them slightly from her and the reader:

"You're dead," he says.

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are. They got you. Lie down."
There is no arguing with him, since he can see the enemy and I can’t. (24-25)

Stephen is the leader in their games, but also her twin. She wears his clothes, sleeps with him, and plays with his toys, and possibly as an adult recalls his memories. The family relocation to Toronto separates them, and sets them on their differing paths.

The entry to this different world is related at a double remove, represented by a photograph of Elaine in front of a door. The photograph, described in detail which fills in what is not seen as well as what is, acts as a metonym for the break in Elaine’s life. Throughout the novel Atwood will use repeated images of doors, holes and bridges as the breaks in the lines separating levels of time or space. The door in this case is the one in front of a motel on the road to Toronto, where the Risley family is staying awaiting completion of a house in the city. The house in the city, though, is left unfinished, prolonging the transitory nature of the family’s home life for a time as they all pitch in together to finish the interior. The differences start slowly, as Elaine gets a room of her own and no longer has to share a tent, or bed, with Stephen. The change confuses her:

At first I found the thought of my own room exciting—an empty space to be arranged as I wanted, without regard to Stephen and his strewn clothes and wooden guns—but now I’m lonely. I’ve never been in a room by myself at night before. (33)

The changes continue at school, where Elaine learns, in effect, how to be a girl. Difference between the sexes is concretized, marked by separate school doors, separate playgrounds, and separate clothes.
You can't wear pants to school, you have to wear skirts. I'm not used to this, or to sitting still at a desk. (45)

Gender differences are not only encoded in the body, but disciplined into the body: "if you go in the wrong door you get the strap, or so everyone says" (45). The school, named for Queen Mary and located near a cemetery, appears trapped in amber with its separate doors and name one queen out of date, a relic of a time that is rapidly passing with the war. Elaine starts her social life on this cusp, straddling the line herself between exotic and average.

Elaine’s life continues in this vein for an entire school year. She becomes friends with Carol Campbell, a girl in her grade who takes it upon herself to educate her. At Carol’s house Elaine learns about chintz, coat-trees, cold-waves and twin sets. The last item fascinates Elaine, since the name suggests much more than what it is, and the act of looking at it is slightly dangerous.

She [Carol] asks me if I want to see her mother’s new twin set. I don’t know what this is, but it sounds intriguing, so I say yes. She takes me stealthily into her mother’s bedroom, saying that she’ll really get it if we’re caught, and shows me the twin set, folded on a shelf. The twin set is just two sweaters, both the same colour, one with buttons down the front, the other without...I’m disappointed, because I was expecting something to do with twins. (50-51)

The aura of the forbidden that surrounds the twin set is mixed with the sight, in the same room, of Carol’s parents’ twin beds; seeing them makes Elaine realize suddenly that her
parents are different, since they have just one bed for the two of them. The duplication seen in the room (beds, lights, night-tables) intrigues her and disturbs her at the same time.

Through Carol, Elaine becomes friends with Grace Smeath, an older girl whose house and family throw into relief another set of ways in which Elaine and her family are different from the others. Grace is placid and unaccountably attractive to the two younger girls, who sit playing school quietly, or colouring in pictures to Grace’s specifications equally quietly. in the Smeath family cellar. Playing with the two girls is educational for Elaine:

Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I’m only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it. (52)

She finds herself observing herself and her actions, becoming a sort of twin imitating herself imitating a girl. Part of the games include the everyday duplicity of good girls: Carol and Grace compare their scrapbook collages of women and household goods, saying:

“Oh, yours is so good. Mine’s no good. Mine’s awful.”

They say this every time we play the scrapbook game. Their voices are wheedling and false; I can tell they don’t mean it, each one thinks her own lady on her own page is good. But it’s the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too. (53)

Elaine looks at these rituals with the same type of interest Carol feels in her, an attraction
and desire for their exoticism. The world of girls is less stressful than the world of boys, or at least the part of that world represented by Stephen.

Grace's passive domination of their games is a reflection of her mother's passive control of the household. Mrs. Smeath is a source of anxiety for Elaine, and a figure of terror. She has a bad heart, which Elaine finds equally frightening and exciting. She may die at any time, Grace reports to her friends dispassionately. The heart assumes an importance in Elaine's imagination, as well as a wealth of associations. Valentine's Day leads her to think about it:

...I think about Mrs. Smeath's bad heart. What exactly is wrong with it? I picture it hidden, underneath her woollen afghan and the billow of her apron bib, pumping in the thick fleshy darkness of the inside of her body: something taboo, intimate. It would be red, but with a reddish-black patch on it, like rot in an apple or a bruise. It hurts when I think about it. A little sharp wince of pain goes through me, as it did when I watched my brother cut his finger once on a piece of glass. But the bad heart is also compelling. It's a curiosity, a deformity. A horrible treasure. (58)

The uncertainty around Mrs. Smeath's bad heart is disturbing too, suggesting a connection to adulthood that is mysterious: is the bad heart a consequence of being female? It is hidden, yet open to the world; both of Grace's friends know about it. It controls Mrs. Smeath, and the household. This heart is emblematic of the world of femininity Elaine has entered into, where power games are expressed as games of
weakness, and passivity controls activity. Put into the context of play with other children, Grace loses her power. In the spring the schoolchildren, "boys and girls alike," play in the half-built houses sprouting in the field nearby,

clamber about inside them, in the fresh wood smell of shavings,
walking through walls that don’t yet exist, climbing ladders where there will soon be stairs. This is forbidden.

Carol won’t climb to the higher floors because she’s afraid.
Grace won’t climb either, but not because of fear: she doesn’t want anybody, any boy, to see her underpants. No girl can wear slacks to school, but Grace never wears them at any time. (61)

Elaine has neither constraint to worry about, and climbs through the beams happily. "I don’t think about falling. I am not yet afraid of heights" (62), she says in an echo of the Grimm fairy tale of the boy who “could not shiver”: fear of heights is something to come later, with intimations of maturity.

Power is more evenly distributed, and dependent on skill, in marbles. Significantly the only game played on school grounds by both boys and girls, the game enables Elaine to win exotic marbles, like her favourite blue cat’s eye.

The cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They’re the eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway; like the green eye of the radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet. (62-63)

She keeps the marble safe in the red plastic purse she received for Christmas, treating it as a talisman without knowing quite what it is. Her brother, who has won several jars
full of marbles, buries his under the bridge in the ravine near their school, an act Elaine cannot understand.

The entrance of Cordelia into the group of friends upsets the power dynamic. Elaine first meets Cordelia after a summer in the north with her family; Cordelia is a surprise waiting for her with Grace and Carol, who have blurred together for Elaine in their absence. When the Risley family arrives at their house, Elaine notes that Grace and Carol are standing where they were when they left, the same yet different.

They don’t come running over, but stop what they’re doing and stare, as if we’re new people, as if I’ve never lived here. A third girl is with them. (69)

She has been replaced seamlessly in the group; Cordelia now occupies her position. “I look at her, empty of premonition” (69), Elaine recalls, distancing the memory and framing it, since at the time she has no reason for premonitions. The addition of Cordelia adds a new dimension to the girls’ games, which now express a deep anxiety and fear about adult femininity and the mature female body. Cordelia, first seen occupying Elaine’s space as “new girl” in the friendship, competes with Elaine to keep this privileged position.

The educational labyrinth of the Gothic finds full expression in the power games the four girls play, which depict their fears of becoming adult, which find expression in regarding women as monstrous and alien. Elaine’s worry about adulthood, based on the ambiguity of Mrs. Smeath’s bad heart, which seems to be feminine passivity elevated to an art, is fed by Cordelia, who straddles a line between the world of pre-adolescent girls
and the world of adults. Cordelia is depicted as her double, who "creates a circle of two, takes [her] in" (71), yet is the ringleader and creator of the coercive surveillance games that the girls inflict upon Elaine. Cordelia tells the other girls about sex, and the hidden underwear of their female teachers; her fascination with and scorn for breasts sums up her ambivalent feelings about adulthood, which she shares with the other girls. The melodramatic plays she tries to get the other girls to join her in mark her as different, also. Grace fails to play along with a variation on the war games Elaine played with her brother. Cordelia has rewritten the plot, but keeps close to the same dialogue:

"Now you kill yourself." says Cordelia.

"Why?" says Grace.

"Because you've been deserted." says Cordelia.

"I don't want to." says Grace. Carol, who is playing the maid, starts to giggle. (74)

When not playing melodramas, Cordelia talks about death and ghosts in a conversational manner Elaine finds interesting, and nearly convincing. After Cordelia says that the stream in the ravine near their school is "made of dissolved dead people" since it flows out of the cemetery (75), Elaine is cautious but more trusting of her than the other two are, saying: "I believe in them and I don't believe in them, both at the same time" (75). Cordelia is like her, an imitation of something else, although she is not yet clear what.

Atwood depicts Elaine's fall into Cordelia's power as a consequence of their twinned nature and the "complicity" each sees in the other. In a dress-up game of Mary Queen of Scots played in a hole dug in Cordelia's back yard (which recalls the hole in
the Risley family’s neighbour’s yard that Stephen, Elaine’s earlier twin, wanted to play war in), Elaine is left in the hole as the game’s Mary. There, she experiences a blank spot, or what she sees from one vantage point as a blank, from another as a memory laden with objects associated with Cordelia such as the deadly nightshade Cordelia points out as good for poison. The game is around Halloween, a temporal hinge between autumn and winter and the living and the dead. Not only is the event on a threshold, and in one (the hole), but the girls themselves are on one, as pre-adolescents. The memory of being in the hole Elaine recalls as being an opening:

At first there’s nothing, just a receding darkness, like a tunnel. But after a while something begins to form: a thicket of dark green leaves with purple blossoms, dark purple, a sad rich colour, and clusters of red berries, translucent as water. The vines are intergrown, so tangled over the other plants they’re like a hedge. A smell of loam and another, pungent scent rises from among the leaves, a smell of old things, dense and heavy, forgotten...

I can tell it’s the wrong memory. But the flowers, the smell, the movement of the leaves persist, rich, mesmerizing, desolating, infused with grief. (108)

What is buried here is as tangled as the nightshade Elaine remembers; after this live burial she loses her confidence, and is prey to Cordelia’s organized attempts to “improve” her and offer her pain in return for companionship. Later she thinks of this memory, among others, as Cordelia’s and not hers, but this still reinforces the idea of a
transfer in this place between dimensions. Here Cordelia, the weaker of the two, dominates the stronger, and a group of girls supposedly holding reserves of power because of their pre-adolescent state use it turned in on themselves.3

Cordelia’s assumption of the role of interior monitor for Elaine is paralleled by Mrs. Smeath’s assumption of an adult version of the same role. Mrs. Smeath takes her to church since Grace told her that Elaine’s family did not go there at all. There, Elaine is exposed to an ever-watchful God, epitomized by the words “THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU” written on the stained glass windows. The first Bible verse she memorizes for Sunday School reiterates this idea of the omniscient God:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge....I look out the window, look up: there are the heavens, there are the stars, where they usually are. They no longer look cold and white and remote, like alcohol and enamel trays. Now they look watchful. (101)

Mrs. Smeath, with Grace’s assistance, watches Elaine’s spiritual progress: however well Elaine does in memorization and essay writing, she never makes her happy, since she is unable to bring her parents into the Smeaths’ church. Elaine’s progress in learning to be like the other girls is equally unsatisfying to Cordelia, who organizes the constant supervision and watching that envelop Elaine in anguish.

Elaine, when an adult, recognizes that what happened to her as a child was “the kind of thing girls of this age do to one another, or did then” that she had no practice in (118). The persecution is secret, but everywhere. Cordelia delegates Carol to watch
Elaine during school, and Grace to do the same during Sunday School. The girls report on everything she does; even on "normal" days she watches herself, since the line between normal and abnormal shifts, and only Cordelia can see it. To keep her place among her friends she complies, since the three girls are her friends, as Atwood reminds us. The girls succeed in making Elaine develop an internal watch on herself; all in the name of friendship. Elaine deteriorates under the stress, and Cordelia grows bolder with her demands and punishments. Elaine's depression writes itself (literally) in her handwriting, which is deteriorating and becoming "spidery, frantic, and disfigured with blots of black rusty ink" (127). Cordelia starts to refer to her in the third person as if she were not there: after a while Elaine grows to accept and desire this blankness while simultaneously relying on pain to remind herself of her existence. At night she peels the skin off her feet: "the pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold onto" (114). During the day she thinks about putting her fingers in the toaster (119) or her hand through the washing-machine wringer (122-123). Illness makes her feel safe and secure, although the magazines she reads and cuts up for scrapbooks while recuperating repeat the lessons of surveillance and observation she undergoes with her friends. Some pictures show women doing endless household chores.

Other pictures show women doing things they aren't supposed to do. Some of them gossip too much, some are sloppy, others bossy. Some of them knit too much. "Walking, riding, standing, sitting, Where she goes, there goes her knitting," says one...Some of the
women have a Watchbird beside them, a red and black bird like
a child's drawing, with big eyes and stick feet. "This is a Watchbird
watching a Busybody," it says. "This is a Watchbird watching
YOU." (138)

Women, the advertisements and warnings state, must always watch themselves, always
see themselves from without. Even practising quintessentially feminine hobbies like
knitting can lead a woman to cross an invisible line into ridicule. An equally nebulous
line separates the Watchbird from the Busybody.

I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the
wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub.
whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your
face or stupid act, somebody frowning. (138)

Femininity is a prison with no escape, she realizes as she grows more and more anxious
under the eyes of Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath, the figures she hopes to appease.

Absence and fragmentation become Elaine's protections from Cordelia's
incessant hounding of her. She begins to faint, saying:

There's a way out of places you want to leave, but can't. Fainting
is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into
another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without
you. (171)

When this escape is unfeasible, she shuts down all emotions in herself, claiming "I am
alive in my eyes only" (141). The blue cat's eye marble she saved becomes her talisman,
comforting her by its presence and enabling her to see as flatly as it "sees." Oblivion becomes a more attractive escape to her; the dead animals she sees during the summer are "safe" because no one can get at them, and she wants that safety (144). Her fragmentation continues to such an extent that she thinks about killing herself as a final escape from the girls:

I think about becoming invisible. I think about eating the deadly nightshade berries from the bushes beside the path. I think about drinking the Javex out of the skull-and-crossbones bottle in the laundry room, about jumping off the bridge, smashing down there like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin. I would come apart like that.

I would be dead, like the dead people. (155)

Her own mother confesses her powerlessness to stop the girls, making Elaine believe more and more that what is happening to her is her own fault: as an adult Elaine realizes that "there were fewer choices" (150) then, and her mother was just as confused by the mores of the time as she was.

Through all this Elaine is unable to speak her misery, since to tell it would be to break the unspoken contract of the girls' friendship and lose it. Her misery is written on her body, as well as in her schoolwork, but she never gives voice to it. In an art exercise for her Grade Five teacher she draws what she does after school as a nearly all-black picture of herself in bed, with a dark glimpse of her head as the only part of herself visible. "It isn't what I meant to draw," she admits to herself, and is surprised when her teacher Miss Stuart merely asks her questions about it.
For a moment she says nothing. Then she says, not harshly,

"Why is your picture so darruk, my dear?"

"Because it’s night,” I say. This is an idiotic answer, I know

that as soon as it’s out of my mouth. My voice is almost inaudible,

even to me.

"I see,” she says. She doesn’t say I’ve drawn the wrong thing, or

that surely there’s something else I do after school besides going to bed.

She touches me on the shoulder, briefly, before continuing down the aisle.

Her touch glows briefly, like a blown-out match. (162)

Elaine has succeeded in making herself nearly invisible to herself, as the drawing shows;

at this point she is almost obliterated as a subject, aware mostly that Cordelia is pushing

her tormenting of her as far as she can, merely to see where it will end. She becomes

furious when it becomes clear to her one Sunday at the Smeath house that the games she

considered private were known and approved by adults. Grace’s mother and aunt discuss

her as a heathen, with Mrs. Smeath saying “What can you expect, with that family?”

(179) and that the other children are right to torture her since “it serves her right” (180).

It becomes obvious that Grace is her mother’s instrument in disciplining Elaine, and a

violator of the unspoken rules of the games of the girls. Grace’s betrayal of someone who

had been given a place, however tenuous, in her home gives added significance to

Elaine’s adult ruminations on little girls “with...assessing eyes...slippery deceitful smiles,
tartaned up like Lady Macbeth” (113).

Elaine counters this betrayal with one of her own, as she vows to stop praying to
God and to pray to the Virgin Mary instead, whom she saw on a Catholic school religious paper on the street near school. The Catholic school in her neighbourhood is the significantly named Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and Elaine sees the Virgin Mary as an alternative to the vindictive God of the Smeaths (a real "lady of perpetual help"). Her interest in the icons of Catholicism is an example of her interest in "different" things and an intriguing rewriting of the traditional Gothic antagonism towards Catholicism. In Cat's Eye, Protestantism (in particular the denomination of the Smeaths) is seen as potentially hypocritical and mediocre, while Catholicism appears to offer a more personal religious vision. The Virgin Mary is one of the repeated mother figures in the novel: Mrs. Smeath is the anti-virgin, bad heart unseen in her chest contrasted with the pierced heart of the iconic Virgin, while Mrs. Risley is the too-fallible good mother. Mrs. Smeath's "bad heart" is visualized floating "in her body like an eye, an evil eye" (180), while Elaine's first sight of the iconic Virgin is of a figure with "her heart...on the outside of her chest, with seven swords stuck into it" (182). The Virgin is seen as her personal protector, with emblems that resemble familiar objects in Elaine's life, like her red plastic purse.

The ordinary and the horrific coexist in the climax of Elaine's childhood friendships. as she nearly dies as a result of one of Cordelia's punishments. Elaine laughs at an accident of Cordelia's: Cordelia's loss of control, and reduction to object, drive her to punish Elaine by dropping her hat off the bridge on the route home, sending Elaine down into the calm white blankness to retrieve it. Elaine is compelled to go after it, since the act of explaining its loss would breach the confidentiality of the game. In
retrieving her hat, Elaine goes down into the creek and is poised between worlds as the water surrounds her:

The water of the creek is cold and peaceful, it comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. It's water made from the dead people, dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it. If I don't move soon I will be frozen in the creek. I will be a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them. (188)

Cordelia has nearly succeeded in obliterating Elaine, who is poised in this void between pulling herself up the ravine and staying with the dead people.

Elaine’s vision of the dead people rising from below her to comfort her gives way to a vision from above, on the bridge. A figure appears on the bridge, which itself appears to be different: higher, with pools of greenish yellow light along it (189). While Elaine watches from the creek, near sleep, the figure bends over to her and says: “You can go home now...It will be all right. Go home” (189). Only after she pulls herself out of the creek, comforted by this vision, does she identify it as the Virgin Mary. All she can see of it is the white glimmer of her face, the dark scarf or hood around her head, or is it hair? She holds out her arms to me and I feel a surge of happiness. Inside her half-open cloak there’s a glimpse of red. It’s her heart, I think. It must be her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal. (189)

Her belief in it being the Virgin keeps her comforted until her own mother comes to take
her home.

"Why do we remember the past, and not the future?" is the epigraph from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* which opens the novel, and it is particularly applicable to this scene. In many senses, Elaine's rescue from the creek by the Virgin Mary is an example of the fluidity of time and memory that Atwood starts the novel with, the "easy flow between dimensions" Elaine regrets the loss of near the close of the novel. In the present-day narrative of *Cat's Eye*, Elaine seeks to lay the ghost of Cordelia at the bridge built on the site of the older bridge. Cordelia's absence, and simultaneous presence in every person Elaine meets on the streets of Toronto, repeats her old fears of Cordelia's constant surveillance. Cordelia was everywhere and nowhere, right behind her and spying from a distance. At the bridge as an adult, Elaine leans over the railing and says to the imagined shade of Cordelia, "It's all right... You can go home now" (419) The bridge she is standing on is higher than the old one, lined with lights the old one lacked; as Elaine speaks to the absent Cordelia she is repeating the words, and replicating the stance of the Virgin of her childhood vision: which presents the question, was Elaine's original vision an act of precognition, or is the second scene from her adulthood a repetition of the earlier scene? The fluidity of memory and time as described by Elaine leaves the question open, although in both senses it is clear that Elaine has saved herself from death, just as by walking away from the three girls after her recovery she saves herself, and recoups a portion of her confidence and volition. Her body finally bears witness to her friends' torment of her; her illness prompts her mother to tell the other mothers what has happened. Elaine's sickness conversely gives her the strength later to
walk away from the girls and to start a friendship with a girl who plays traditional children’s card games with her, in contrast to the more gendered games of Grace, Cordelia, and Carol.

This interval of roughly a year and a half from her pre-adolescent years proves to be the wellspring of her creative art, as the adult Elaine works through her art to recapture and reinterpret this “bad time” that she shuts off from herself immediately afterwards. Objects from this time, like her red plastic purse with the blue cat’s eye marble inside, are rendered devoid of meaning to her adolescent self. The events of this time, and the memories of the events, are like the marbles Stephen buried somewhere under the bridge with the treasure map buried elsewhere; Elaine has to find the key to unbury her memories and give the relics of that time back their context.

Without the self-knowledge the memory of the past could give her, she is doomed to repeat the dynamics of the relationship with Cordelia when they become friends again in high school. There, their roles are reversed: Elaine is armoured and appears sure of herself, while Cordelia is awkward and artificial. Elaine, by keeping to surfaces, is able to read the signs in the world of high school and dating correctly, and has become used to seeing herself from the outside:

Occasionally I do cry for no reason, as it says you’re supposed to. But I can’t believe in my own sadness, I can’t take it seriously. I watch myself crying in the mirror, intrigued by the sight of tears. (208)

Cordelia, on the other hand, is a patchwork of other voices, more pronounced than when she was a child; in her enthusiasms and manners she imitates her mother and her older
sisters. She slides into petty shoplifting, taking lipsticks and horror comics. The horror comics frighten Elaine: one, about a pair of sisters who change personality so the stronger, burned one can have the boyfriend of the weaker, pretty one, parallels her relationship with Cordelia. The comic highlights the Gothic pairing of the two in its grotesque narrative: Elaine fears having the books near her, feeling that although their stories are too lurid to be true, she just might wake up with someone else trapped inside her body:

I’ll look into the bathroom mirror and see the face of another girl, someone who looks like me but has half of her face darkened, the skin burned away. (212)

The stories of the horror comics fill her with unease, although she cannot fully explain why. Neither can she explain why she uses the language of the comics to frighten Cordelia in the cemetery on the way home from school. Idle stories about the Eaton family mausoleum in the Mount Pleasant Cemetery give way to Elaine’s assertion that she happens to be a vampire. Sensing Cordelia’s discomfort she pushes on:

“You walk around in the daytime,” Cordelia says.

“That’s not me.” I say. “That’s my twin. You’ve never known, but I’m one of a set of twins. Identical ones, you can’t tell us apart by looking. Anyway it’s just the sun I have to avoid. On days like this it’s perfectly safe. I have a coffin full of earth where I sleep; it’s down in, down in” --I search for a likely place—“the cellar.”

“You’re being silly,” Cordelia says.
I stand up too. "Silly?" I say. I lower my voice. "I'm just telling you the truth. You're my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I'm really dead. I've been dead for years." (233)

Although it starts as a game, it is truer than either wants to admit. Elaine has in effect been dead for years, after having been laid in the mock grave Cordelia dug in her backyard. The residue of Elaine's "twin," her earlier self, is buried in her family's house: her other twin sits in front of her, in her power. "Energy has passed between us, and I am stronger," Elaine says of the incident, belying her promise to Cordelia that she won't suck her blood because she's her friend (233).

After this, Cordelia visibly declines, unable to concentrate at school and teased by Elaine. Elaine, for her part, hates her for being so abject and unfocused; at the same time, she fears learning more about Cordelia and Cordelia's version of their childhood. Knowing about others, she decides, is a form of vampirism: "Knowing too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened" (217). She sees Cordelia at home, trying to make her demanding father happy, and simultaneously realizes that it will not work "because she is somehow the wrong person" and that she despises her for being so weak (249). Similarly, she both fears and resents Cordelia's reminiscences of earlier times, fearing what she will reveal. Her own submerged feelings of guilt, terror and shame are evoked by Cordelia's telling of her version of incidents of their past: the hole in Cordelia's yard which contains the buried memory that Elaine cannot go behind and recall fully is revealed to have been, conversely, Cordelia's refuge.
Cordelia gradually falls further and further into herself, becoming by high school graduation a parody of femininity, trapped at home without the need, or the will, to do anything. Elaine visits her at home, and leaves her there immured in her misery and increasing insanity, and on the verge of going into the void just as Elaine was left on the bridge years before. Elaine, for her part, is still trapped in seeing herself as a part of Cordelia, as Brooks Bouson has noted of the image of Elaine seeing herself reflected in Cordelia 's sunglasses. It is only later that Elaine can free herself of Cordelia, when she refuses to help her escape from the rest home her family has sent her to after a suicide attempt. Elaine is herself trapped in a crumbling marriage, but leaves Cordelia in the home, tranquilized and barely able to speak. Afterwards she feels "free, and weightless"(360), but because of this action she is haunted by Cordelia in her dreams, and in her return to Toronto for the retrospective will see her in every person on the streets.

The relationship between Elaine and Cordelia is paralleled later in the novel by the pairing of Elaine and Susie, a fellow art student. Susie has in general been neglected by critics in analyses of Cat 's Eye, since she is not a part of the primal girlhood drama of the narrative, but appears briefly as having a simultaneous affair with Josef Hrbik, their life drawing teacher, at art school. Susie's and Elaine's existence as twins in what is in many respects a rewriting of the Gothic romance plot (itself different from the victimization plot of the earlier part of the narrative) may explain some of this neglect. Elaine sees Susie as another, weaker version of herself, simultaneously distancing herself from and identifying herself with her actions. Both women are involved with Josef
(Elaine is by this time in university studying art and archeology, but has another life studying art at the art college). Josef is described in romantic terms, with "secrecy and...almost-empty rooms...baleful memories and bad dreams" (297). A kind of vampire himself, he drains volition from Elaine, who finds herself the summer of the affair unable to paint or do much besides work as a waitress and read mystery novels.

...he says, "You are very silent." He touches my cheek. "Mysterious."

I do not feel mysterious. but vacant. (305)

Susie is just like her, she knows, but she distances herself from her by placing her in romantic settings, or imagining her behaving like a paperback heroine.

I prefer to think of Susie as a woman shut inside a tower, up there in The Monte Carlo on Avenue Road, gazing out the window over the top of her painted sheet-metal balcony, weeping feebly, waiting for Josef to appear. I can't imagine her having any other life apart from that...She is limp, without will, made spineless by love; as I am. (306)

Josef's draining of Susie and Elaine is literalized when Susie aborts herself. Called for help by Susie, Elaine arrives at her apartment to find her bleeding heavily in the bathroom; Elaine has responded to Susie's call for help by traveling via public transport, in effect treating her like herself. Taxis were for Josef, she explains (319). Susie's desperate action shows Elaine what could very well happen to her: Susie's fate is something she looks at with both disgust and fear:

...I know that in her place...I would have done what she has done, moment by moment, step by step. Like her I would have panicked, like
her I would not have told Josef, like her I would not have known where to go. Everything that’s happened to her could well have happened to me.

But there is also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: It serves her right. (321)

She dreams about Susie, merging her with her memories of Cordelia, asking “Don’t you know what a twin set is?” (323).” Elaine realizes that she has done “something wrong” but is unable to articulate what it is. However, Susie serves as an example; when Elaine is in the same situation (single and pregnant) she finds strength from the pregnancy and makes a breakthrough as an artist.

Already finding herself marginalized because of the techniques she is interested in (egg tempera is most prominent), as well as her budding interest in iconic painting and drawing, Elaine pulls herself further from the mainstream by painting “things that aren’t there” (337). In contrast, her lover and later husband Jon, a fellow artist, works in the mainstream of most art trends of the early 1960s. Elaine finds her marginality useful: “There is freedom in this: because it doesn’t matter what I do, I can do what I like” (346).” Elaine’ s paintings are expressions of what she cannot bring herself to say, or think of consciously. The objects she paints are the toaster and percolator of her family’s kitchen, and the Smeath family couch.

I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories. They are not hazy around the edges, but sharp
and clear. They arrive detached from any context: they are simply there, in isolation, as an object glimpsed on the street is there. (337)

Elaine’s story is fully expressed in her paintings, which depict her hatred of Mrs. Smeath’s hypocrisy, her revisualizing of the Virgin Mary to account for her rescue from under the bridge, and her love for, and struggle to understand, her parents. The household items she paints first are mnemonic objects, bringing her closer to understanding the trauma of her childhood: “they are suffused with anxiety, but it’s not my own anxiety. The anxiety is in the things themselves” (337). As the pictures grow more detailed, revealing more of what she has buried, her old habits return and she starts hurting herself to punish herself and remind herself of her existence.

The art show she participates in with several other female artists demonstrates the power her paintings have, as well as the power her residual feelings of worthlessness have. In the F(OUR) FOR ALL show she displays the series of Mrs. Smeath paintings, as well as her Virgin Mary paintings and several of her still lifes, but it is the series of Mrs. Smeath that draws attention. Jody, one of the organizers, shows more interest in them than Elaine does.

I thought there were too many of her, but Jody wanted them. “It’s woman as anti-cheesecake.” she said. “Why should it always be young, beautiful women? It’s good to see the aging female body treated with compassion, for a change.” This, only in more high-flown language, is what she’s written in the catalogue. (348)

In contrast to Jody, who responds only to what the painting looks like (she has no reason
to do otherwise), a spectator at the show throws ink on another of the Mrs. Smeath paintings. "'You are disgusting,' she says. 'You are taking the Lord's name in vain. Why do you want to hurt people?'" (353): Elaine feels closer to her opinion than to Jody's, and is surprised at the support she receives from the other women at the show. She has been set apart, and made part of a community at once. The same contradictory feelings are shown as she looks at her work. She compares it to the work of the other women, repeating the self-belittling words she learned from Carol and Grace years before:

This is strong work, I think. Stronger than mine. Even Zillah's gauzy constructions appear to me to have a confidence and subtlety, an assurance, that my own paintings lack: in this context my pictures are too highly finished, too decorative, too merely pretty.

I have strayed off course, I have failed to make a statement.

I am peripheral. (350)

Upon meeting Jody's mother later during the show, she is struck with the similarity between her and her own mother. This, as well as the outpouring of sympathy and awe after the vandalization of her painting, leaves open the possibility of connection with women who may have shared the same damaging socialization she did. However, the increasing problems in her marriage lead her to close off this opening almost as soon as it appears.

Elaine's marriage collapses under the strain of Jon's and her careers, as well as the lingering feelings of guilt dredged up by her paintings. It is during this time that she
refuses Cordelia's request for help in getting out of the rest home. The freedom she finds in her “marginal” art techniques and imagery brings her into conflict with Jon, who finds her work on the margins of home life threatening:

Jon does not like me painting at night. “When else can I do it?” I say.

“You tell me.” There is only one answer, one that would not involve the loss of his own time: Don’t do it all. But he doesn’t say this. (345)

In the morass their marriage becomes she stops painting and falls into a depression like the one Cordelia was in when she saw her last. Repeating Cordelia’s feelings of worthlessness and immobility. she slits her wrist just as she feared Cordelia would if she brought her to her home.

I can feel the pull of the earth on me, the dragging of its dark curve of gravity. the spaces between the atoms you could fall so easily through.

This is when I hear the voice, not inside my head at all but in the room. clearly: Do it. Come on. Do it. This voice doesn’t offer a choice: it has the force of an order. It’s the difference between jumping and being pushed. (373)

The attempt leaves her “drained of blood, cared for, purified. Peaceful” (374). By this act she feeds the shades of her past, the nine-year-old voice that directed her to do it as well as the memories of Cordelia in the rest home and Susie bleeding in the bathroom, making them disappear. In effect, this is her final struggle with Cordelia, although the identity of the nine year old voice that urges her to cut her wrists is left ambiguous. The peace she feels afterwards gives her the presence of mind to leave Toronto and Jon. The
city, she feels, is literally killing her, and might complete the job if she stays. The memories and anxieties contained by the landscape will force her to

...turn sideways and dive off the curb, to be smashed by a speeding car.

I will topple in front of a subway train without warning, I’ll plunge from a bridge without intention. All I will hear will be that small voice, inviting and conspiratorial, gleeful, urging me over. (375)

Her parents have already left Toronto fearing, in their own way, the city’s poisoned atmosphere: her father tells her: “if we knew what was going into the drinking water we would all become alcoholics” (329-330). She leaves the prison of memory that Toronto has become for her, and escapes to Vancouver, where the exterior details of her life settle into something calmer than what she has left.

On a trip to Mexico with her reassuringly placid second husband Ben, she sees the festival of the Day of the Dead, and finds in it the connection to the past missing in her own life. Comparing it to Halloween in Canada, she says:

they do this festival the right way...Bright candy skulls, family picnics on the graves, a plate set for each individual guest, a candle for the soul. Everyone goes away happy, including the dead. We’ve rejected that easy flow between dimensions: we want the dead unmentionable, we refuse to name them, we refuse to feed them. feed them. Our dead as a result are thinner, greyer, harder to hear, and hungrier. (387)

Her paintings can be seen as giving candles to the souls of the departed. Her brother’s
murder by terrorists, and her parents’ slow decline afterwards, are reconfigured in her paintings as she tries to work through her feelings for them and her confusion (in the case of Stephen’s death) over their ends. A visit to her mother before her death gives her the final key in understanding and unlocking her past and memories. Buried within the family steamer trunk, in the basement of the second family home in Sault Ste. Marie, Elaine finds the fragments of her childhood and says of each “I remember now” as she pulls them from the trunk. Last of all her mother pulls her old red plastic purse from the trunk, surprised that she kept it. Taking the blue cat’s eye marble from inside, Elaine is connected at last to the feelings and memories of the time when she carried the marble for security: “I look into it, and see my life entire” (398). She has recovered one of the lost nine year old girls of the past, her former self, and can now rid herself of the residual presence of Cordelia. Atwood joins the two narrative lines of the novel at this point, leading to Elaine’s final vision of Cordelia.

Cordelia has been unseen, but present, throughout the present of the narrative, Elaine’s shadowy twin whom she recalls as being everywhere, but nowhere as a child tormenting her. The only clear sight of her the adult Elaine has is a glimpse at the bridge near their old school, and even then she is ghostly, as the long-demolished school itself is. Elaine tells her, and the shade of her child self, to go home, rescuing herself at last from the cycle of torment and vengeance they locked themselves into as children:

I know she’s looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness,
weakness: the same wish to be loved: the same loneliness: the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's, as they always were. (419)

Cordelia's spirit is finally loosed from Elaine, and she can see what their childhood traumas have done to her and what they have deprived her of.

Art, and the visual world in general, have given Elaine power she otherwise lacks. Her paintings "speak" for her, presenting multi-faceted versions of her past. Even in her rage at Mrs. Smeath, she recognizes later that she understood, at some level, the woman.

I put a lot of work into that imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork-fat...I laboured on it, with, I now see, considerable malice. But these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration.

I put light into them too. Each pallid leg, each steel-rimmed eye, is there as it was, as plain as bread. I have said, Look. I have said, I see. (404)

In her paintings, as has been noted, she is able "to redress her powerlessness, and...allow her [self] to demystify--often with great tenderness--the girls and women who terrorized her" (Crosbie 31). The paintings are set free from the feelings of anxiety she cut herself off from experiencing, and have a power of their own. "I'm what's left over," she realizes (409).

The difficulty of speaking for one's self, and organizing one's story, is depicted in the Gothic of Cat's Eye. The mutilated body parts in Jon's loft, which disturb her when she arrives for her retrospective, echo the mutilations in her story. Elaine's struggle to develop her own voice in her art has its price: she is alienated in person from
the subjects, and spectators, of her work. The novel has an elegiac tone as Elaine comes to mourn what has never been, and will never be, in her life: female friendship. Survival has come at a cost, as she thinks when she sees two old women together on the plane back to Vancouver: “This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that’s gone, but something that will never happen” (421).

Using the Female Gothic, Atwood in Cat’s Eye depicts the difficulties inherent in developing a voice, here shown as a “vision.” Elaine Risley uses her paintings, with their iconic imagery, to step outside the repetition of patterns of abuse and rage to construct a version of her past that is entire in a way that her speaking self is not. Her paintings allow her the access to dimensions she sees in Mexican religious celebrations, giving her the ability to enshrine and remember the past as a gift to the future. What she says about the stars at the close of the novel can be applied to her paintings, which themselves are fragments of stopped time. The stars are not eternal as was once thought...are not where we think they are.

If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago...Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing.

It’s old light, and there’s not much of it. But it’s enough to see by. (421)
1. Camille Peri's story on Atwood in the American liberal magazine *Mother Jones* is an extreme example of this: Peri insists on reading the novel as literal autobiography and directs her increasingly antagonistic questions to Atwood, who proceeds to intimidate Peri, who in turn becomes more hostile. (Camille Peri, "Witch Craft." *Mother Jones* April 1989: 29-31, 44-45)

2. The feeling of being lost in the familiar is part of Freud's definition of "the uncanny": "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (20).

3. The early 1990s gave rise in popular culture to the idea of the "riot grrl," which was an attempt by alternative feminist writers and musicians to explore this space between childhood and adolescence as the site of girls' power. This ties in with the idea found, among other places, in Angela Carter's short story "The Company of Wolves," where Little Red Riding Hood is shown as having untapped power within her because she is pre-menstrual. The riot grrls have a tendency to over-romanticize this time in women's lives, but are important because they want to recapture that lost power and give it back to women (witness the spelling of "girl" in their name), stopping the loss of self-confidence that marks girls as they enter adolescence.

4. Incorrectly identified in the novel as a "Sunday School paper." Catholic school students do not attend Sunday School, since they receive religious instruction in school during the week.

5. It is dangerous to regard the episode of Elaine's near-death as an act of "attempted murder," as Anita Brookner does, since that implies a greater degree of stupidity on Elaine's part than Atwood presumably intended (Brookner, qtd. in Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies* 170). Elaine's illness shocks and worries her friends, whose parents punish them, and is obviously not what they intended as the result of throwing her hat over the bridge. Making the three girls out to be completely malevolent skews the narrative.

6. J. Brooks Bouson, in *Brutal Choreographies*, and Lynn Crosbie, in the essay "Like a Hook into a Cat's Eye: Locating Margaret Atwood's Susie" (*Tessera* 15: 30-41) are among the few who consider Susie in any depth.

7. However, she also states, "I'm aware that my tastes are not fashionable, and so I pursue them in secret" (327). This is an interesting parallel with stories of Jane Austen's habit of hiding her writing when people entered the room she was working in. Elaine paints at night, just as Sylvia Plath, as a mother, wrote in the dawn before the children got up.

8. Cordelia's own suicide attempt is less directed. "I don't know. It just came over me. I was tired" is the only reason she gives to Elaine (358).
The Robber Bride: Revising the Ghost Story

As the characters in The Robber Bride (1993) realize at the end of the novel, discovering the origins of the name of the mysterious Zenia is at least as challenging as discovering its possessor’s past.

Even the name Zenia may not exist, as Tony knows from looking. She’s attempted to trace its meaning—Xenia, a Russian word for hospitable, a Greek one pertaining to the action of a foreign pollen upon a fruit...

Zillah, Hebrew, a shadow: Zenobia, the third-century warrior queen of Palmyra in Syria, defeated by the Emperor Aurelian; Xeno, Greek, a stranger, as in xenophobic... (535)

Tony’s research emerges with a series of possibilities, all of which illuminate facets of Zenia’s personality and actions. She is indeed a shadow, as the events in the novel make clear, as well as a stranger. This highlights the essential ambiguity at the heart of Zenia as a character, as she is the stranger who is nevertheless the three protagonists’ “best friend.” The array of names and sources Tony discovers also alludes in part to Zenia’s literary forebears: Zenobia is the name of one of the two heroines of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance. Like Atwood’s character, Hawthorne’s Zenobia is a shadow, a larger-than-life-sized woman with a murky past and an assumed name. Zenobia is the victim of male expectations and fantasies; in contrast, Atwood’s Zenia is the manipulator of these fantasies herself. Roz, another of the protagonists, realizes this.

The Zenias of this world...haven’t let themselves be moulded into male
fantasies, they've done it themselves. They've slipped sideways into
dreams: the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for
other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of another
kind. (456)

Zenia, as this indicates, has different effects on men and women. As a character, Zenia
can be said to be constructed with two different traditions in mind, the American Gothic
and the Female Gothic. The inclusion of Zenobia in the collection of sources for Zenia's
name evokes comparison with a series of sources for her character in the nineteenth and
twentieth century versions of the American Gothic, while the collection of stories Zenia
herself tells in the text to explain her life and origins reworks aspects of the Female
Gothic. Zenia is the great mystery of the novel; the three protagonists sort through her
stories, and add their own, as a way of fitting her into a narrative so as to make a
coherent story to interpret her. If the story is shown to make sense, then the actions in it
will make sense, as Roz realizes in talking to her therapist:

They are hopeful: if Roz can figure out what story she's in, then they will
be able to spot the erroneous turns she took, they can retrace her steps.
they can change the ending. (444)

Zenia is, in many senses, the "robber bride" of the novel's title. She sweeps
across the lives of Tony, a military historian at the University of Toronto, Charis, a New
Age believer with healing ability, and Roz, a feminist entrepreneur, making friends with
each in turn and taking their men and money away. Zenia's visitations come at intervals,
one a decade, with Tony victimized first in the early 1960s, Charis next in 1970, and Roz
last in the early 1980s. She takes a new persona for each decade, and preys on the strengths and weaknesses of all three women. Zenia is a collection of stories and backgrounds, claiming to be, at various times, a White Russian sold into white slavery by her mother, a gypsy persecuted by Romanians, and a Jew saved from the Gestapo in occupied Europe. Tony, Charis, and Roz fall prey to Zenia in turn, and think relief has come when her death in the Middle East is announced. However, Zenia returns from the dead and all three women determine to exorcise her and escape her influence on their lives. Each has a climactic altercation with her, and each refuses to fall prey to her lures again. Zenia dies, but whether of an accidental, or deliberate, overdose of heroin is unclear. The indeterminate quality of Zenia propels the novel’s plot. Zenia may ultimately be a void, after all her stories are stripped away, but the reactions of the other characters to her are more important in The Robber Bride, and illuminate Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s characters. As a character, Zenia is a reworking of the American Gothic image of the “transforming woman,” a creature born of two centuries worth of writers’ dreams. Leslie Fiedler, among other critics of American literature, has written about the compulsion many nineteenth century male American novelists felt to split the idea of femininity into two diametrically opposed figures, the “Fair Maiden and the Dark Lady---sinister embodiment of the sexuality denied the snow maiden” in order to portray their own ambivalence about women as other (296). Atwood recasts an American, male, Gothic plot in order to explore the nature of female evil and role expectations. Is Zenia merely an avatar of unmitigated evil, or do the three women become best friends with her because she acts out feelings and opinions nice girls aren’t supposed to have?
Zenia has roots in the figure of the confidence trickster found in mid-nineteenth American journalism and literature as well as in the figure of the "transforming woman" found in Hawthorne, Poe, and other writers. Herman Melville's novel *The Confidence-Man* has many parallels with Atwood's novel, particularly in the central figure of the confidence man. Melville's character plies his trade on a steamboat, in many forms but with the same motive of duping the passengers. Zenia rewrites herself into many personae, but keeps her central drive to lie, cheat, and steal her way through people's lives. Melville and Atwood are both interested in more than the mechanics of chicanery; both are intrigued by the reasons why such confidence tricksters do what they do. In *The Confidence-Man*, one of the passengers, a cynical one-legged man, on the steamboat Fidèle rebukes a man (possibly one of the guises of the confidence man) for asking "is it reasonable to suppose that a man with brains...would take all that trouble, and run all that hazard, for the mere sake of those few paltry coppers, which, I hear, was all that he got for his pains, if pains they were?" (Melville 42) with these words:

"Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and devilry, in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?" (42)

Charis wonders much the same thing, as she examines the wreckage of her yard with Tony after Zenia's departure. Her lover Billy, an American draft-dodger and revolutionary, has been taken away by official-looking men connected in some way with Zenia, but Charis cannot understand why there is collateral damage:

"But why did she murder my chickens?" says Charis. No matter
how she considers this, she just can’t get her head around it. The chickens
were lovely, they were innocent, they had nothing to do with stealing
Billy.

"Because she’s Zenia," says Tony. "Don’t fret about motives.
Attila the Hun didn’t have motives. He just had appetites. She killed
them. It speaks for itself." (325)

Tony’s answer is as close as any of the three can come to deciding why Zenia does what
she does, and what she hopes to gain; as Melville’s one-legged man stated, it certainly
was not for the possibility of financial gain. The art of the confidence trickster is
complex, derived from the ability to play, as the name of the figure indicates, with a
dupe’s confidence and trust. Zenia’s game is based on being an absence that her victims
never realized they had in their lives that needed to be filled. Roz suspects her of luring
her husband Mitch away by posing “as vacancy, as starvation, as an empty beggar’s
bowl” (431). Zenia offers all her victims a mirror, a possibility, the chance to feel unique
yet similar. Posing as a vacancy herself, she searches for others:

One may believe, in fact, that dupes of this sort were caught less by
hopes of gain than by that potent lure, a sense of being liked and valued
‘for oneself’. What the sharp most hoped to see in his prey’s face was
not stupidity but loneliness. (Chesney 279-280)

The reward is to live off the expectations of others, and Atwood makes the case in The
Robber Bride for Zenia’s being addicted in many ways to others’ trust as well as to the
thrill of devastating their hopes.
The repetition of the past, or of an important event in the past, as found in the Gothic is taken to near parodic extremes in *The Robber Bride*. Zenia wreaks havoc on each protagonist’s life, and each one fails to profit from the examples of the others. Zenia’s seduction of each depends on this, as is made clear by the process in which Roz falls for her. Initially wary, Roz questions Zenia about her previous stories and her behaviour. Zenia admits to everything—“I’m afraid I told some awful—I didn’t always tell the truth, when I was younger” (421)—and lures Roz with the plea

“‘It wasn’t a good thing---it was terrible, I suppose, to tell those stories. I owe both of them an apology. But I didn’t think I could’ve told them the real story, what really happened to me. They wouldn’t have understood it.’”

She gives Roz a long look, straight out of her deep indigo eyes, and Roz is touched. She, Roz---she alone---has been chosen, to understand. And she does, she does. (422)

Each story works in a circle, with this immediate recognition at the centre. Shannon Hegen has claimed that Zenia’s “foreignness” is what essentially leads to her victimizing the others, but this explanation fails to account for the “recognition” that each woman experiences in seeing and listening to Zenia’s stories. The question in the novel is, what makes “such a thing not only possible but necessary?” (133). Tony analyzes the power of Zenia and her fictions and realizes, like Coleridge’s Geraldine, that...

...people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never enter and entangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them. There
Zenia is not merely a wave of malevolence, but something each of the characters needs at a particular time.

Zenia's foreignness is not only the initial attraction for each woman, but the primary lure. Each woman finds her missing twin in her, a complement: the vagueness in Zenia's past allows her to be the double of each of the three. Aspects of each woman's childhood and past are repeated in Zenia, making the thrill of recognition more immediate and showing her mastery of storytelling and detection. Her story of being the daughter of a gypsy clairvoyant stoned to death in Romania strikes chords in Charis, reminding her of her own extrasensory abilities and her past as the battered granddaughter of a woman with a healing touch. Zenia's appeal to Roz is even more intimate; she claims to have the same religious background as Roz, and to have been saved by Roz's father during World War II. Roz is surprised and gratified to find someone like herself when Zenia tells her story:

"Hell, even my mother wasn't Jewish! Not by religion. She was Catholic, as a matter of fact. But two of her four grandparents were Jewish, so she was classified as a *mischling*, first degree. A mixture. Did you know they had degrees?"

"Yes," says Roz. So Zenia is a mixture, like herself! (418)

The identification grows as Zenia explains how Roz's father saved her from death in Europe and became for her a fatherly ideal. For Roz, Zenia is her long lost "other," a belief fostered by Zenia's admission of pretending "that your [Roz's] father was my
father, and that some day he would come to get me, and I’d move into his house” (420).

A core of loneliness shines out of Roz, as well as the other two, and Zenia fills the void in each. The tools to disbelieve her and break the spell are given to each, but each woman fails to utilize them. Charis, for one, is told by Zenia precisely what will happen to her and Billy: Zenia reads the cards to tell Charis her future, and in the reader’s hindsight is telling the truth. In a variety of magic trick, Zenia shows her entire hand and is still able to continue to work.

“Someone new is coming into your life,” [Zenia] says. Oh, thinks Charis. That must be the baby. “And someone else is going out of it. There’s water involved: a crossing of the water.” Zenia herself, thinks Charis. She’ll get better, she’ll leave soon. And anyone who leaves here has to cross water.

“Anything about Billy?” she says.

“There’s a jack,” says Zenia. “Jack of Spades. That could be him. Crossed by the Queen of Diamonds.”

“Is that money?” says Charis.

“Yes,” says Zenia, “but it’s a cross card. There’s something off about the money. Maybe he’ll take up dealing drugs or something.”

(311-312)

Like the recurring disasters in American Gothic fiction, Zenia comes back again and again, working the same deceptions and giving the same opening to each victim to stop the game. Charis and Roz fail to follow Tony’s advice and fall victim to Zenia, while
Tony forgets the lesson she learned in university from her encounter with Zenia and
hesitates a beat too long in slamming her front door shut on Zenia when she returns in
her life. The recurring amnesia on the parts of all three women is a manifestation of
their pride: intellectual pride on Tony’s part, pride in healing ability on Charis’s, and
pride in emotional acuity on Roz’s part.

This duplication of duplicity is but one way Atwood works with the tropes of
duality, doubling, and twinning in *The Robber Bride*. The recognition of sameness and
identification with Zenia is the origin of each of the characters’ deep entanglements with
her, but the offer of complete empathy and completion she offers each woman is
important. Zenia manages, through this, to be the force binding Tony, Roz, and Charis
together, making the three of them survivors of the same war. Zenia becomes the mirror
for each woman, listening one-sidedly to each and offering herself up to be whatever
each wants. Each sees her as her lost twin. Tony remembers her first encounter with
Zenia: “She opened the door wide, and in came Zenia, like a long-lost friend, like a
sister. like a wind. and Tony welcomed her” (133). Each of the three women is shown
to have some kind of missing double in her past. Tony, born left-handed, may be the
survivor of a pair of twins: “when Tony grew up and learned more about left-handedness
she was faced with the possibility that she might in fact have been a twin, the left-handed
half of a divided egg, the other half of which had died” (160). Her fantasy life is centred
upon this lost twin, which she names “Tnomerf Ynot,” her own name backwards.

Although she was a twin, Tnomerf Ynot was a good deal taller than
Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring. (160)
This invisible twin is part of Tony's hidden self, exemplified by the fact that the twin writes her name in Tony’s left hand, which Tony is forbidden to use. Charis is not a twin in any literal sense, but a protective second self taken on by Karen (the name Roz and Tony first know her by in university) as a shield against her uncle’s sexual abuse of her as a child. Karen is conscious of being the wrong child, beaten by her schizophrenic mother and later molested by her guardian uncle Vern, while Charis is “the cooler part, the clearer part of herself” (303). Roz has two names, the result of her mixed background: she spends her early childhood as Rosalind Greenwood, a student in Catholic school, but changes to Roz Grunwald, her “real” name, after her Jewish father returns from Europe after the war. Later, Roz uses yet another name, Rosie O’Grady, in order to distance herself from her father’s business. Zenia manages to be the lost other each woman has fantasies about. Her “trick” is basically the same for both sexes, although the three of them find it easier to analyse Zenia’s power over men rather than over themselves.

Where does it come from, her undeniable power over men? How does she latch hold of them, break their stride, trip them up, and then so easily turn them inside out? It must be something very simple and obvious. She tells them they’re unique, then reveals to them that they’re not. She opens her cloak with the secret pockets and shows them how the magic trick is worked, and that it is after all nothing more than a trick. Only by that time they refuse to see; they think the Water of Youth is real, even though she empties the bottle and fills it again from the tap,
right before their very eyes. They want to believe. (441-442)

For the women, Zenia convinces them that they are both unique and just like her.

Tony looks at her [Zenia], looks into her blue-black eyes.

and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. _Tnomerf_ Ynot. Herself turned inside out. (193)

For Charis, Zenia fills the void that was Karen, returning to her some of the emotions she shut off from herself when she split her self in two at age nine. Karen is Charis’s repository of the body, and represented in her mind earlier by the leather suitcase she threw into Lake Ontario in a scapegoat ritual. As Charis helps Zenia, who has come to her claiming to be suffering from cancer and needing a cure, Karen surfaces.

Karen is coming back, Charis can’t keep her away any more...But she is no longer a nine-year-old girl. She has grown up, she has grown tall and thin and straggly, like a plant in a cellar, starved for light. And her hair isn’t pale any more, but dark. The sockets of her eyes are dark too, dark bruises. She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia. (306)

The boundary between Charis and Karen is transgressed by Zenia to such a degree that Charis is convinced that Zenia was present at the conception of Charis’s daughter August as a kind of shadow mother (307). For Roz, Zenia is a spiritual sister, as her fantasy of living with Roz’s father shows. Zenia becomes the public face of _WiseWomanWorld_, the magazine Roz owns and controls. For all three, Zenia absorbs so much of them that she must needs take their men as part of the transformation, an act the three see as “man-eating,” avoiding the connotations in the phrase. Zenia eats their lives, consuming
everything and not just stopping with the men.

Zenia's conquests are presented by Atwood as three stories in the course of *The Robber Bride*, with the reader invited to sort through each to gauge the amount of truth Zenia's fictions contain. Tony, Roz, and Charis share much less with each other than Atwood does with the reader. The choice of Tony, the military historian, as the opening and closing voice of the novel is significant. Tony's words on history and its construction are guides to the reader, who is invited to view the histories of Zenia, Roz, Tony, and Charis and pull meaning out of the fragments.

History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at these events and we can say that after them things were never the same again. (4)

For Tony and by extension Roz and Charis, Zenia is a disaster, difficult to explain.

A disaster is a disaster: those hurt by it remain hurt, those killed remain killed, the rubble remains rubble. (3)

In presenting the stories of Zenia in the manner she does, Atwood rewrites the primary plot of the American Gothic and solves some of its structural problems in doing so. *The Robber Bride* recalls in many ways Peter Straub's novel *Ghost Story*, another narrative influenced by and informed by canonical works of the American Gothic. Straub’s novel, like Atwood's, concerns a group of friends, male in this case, who are tormented on a periodic basis by recurring visitations by a malevolent woman. Ultimately the remaining
friends must band together and fight the evil this woman represents. Stories are told with different organizing narratives to explain the woman; the group of friends in *Ghost Story* are by the end a group of storytellers, offering membership to anyone who can buy his way in with a story.

*Ghost Story* is a novel length gloss on “ghost stories”; Straub rewrites classic ones, most notably “The Turn of the Screw,” in an elaborate pastiche. While Straub’s plot is on the borderline between homage and parody, his use of the female outsider is not. Alma Mobley, the novel’s malevolent scourging force, is clearly and entirely evil, a successor to the Dark Lady of earlier romances. Straub builds on the tradition as exemplified in works such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia” and Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *Elsie Venner*, where the female is portrayed as threatening in her alien seductiveness.

“Tell me.” one character asks in *Elsie Venner* concerning the title character.

> are there not natures born so out of parallel with the lines of natural law that nothing short of a miracle can bring them right?  

(Holmes 73)

Straub’s character Alma is “so out of parallel” with nature that she is not human at all; with this the boundary between his heroes and his villain is clear and impermeable. However, Alma Mobley’s alien evil does not appear to rub off on those who fight her: the heroes of *Ghost Story* are able to touch pitch and remain undefiled as they seek to destroy her as completely as she would them. Straub’s novel is the logical culmination of a long tradition in the American Gothic as seeing the other as evil; in *Ghost Story* the “other” is female, yet so alien it is an alien.
The Robber Bride is a kind of ghost story on its own: Zenia is presumed dead at the start and returns to bedevil the other characters, and each of the three women is haunted by her own lost parents and partners. Each of the three women provides a master narrative to attempt to fit Zenia into. Tony tries the historical method. Charis thinks in terms of signs and portents derived from the Tarot and the Bible. Roz recalls fairy tales, detective novels, and Romantic-era fiction. Atwood does not present Zenia’s story at any point as a rewriting of any single text, as Straub does Alma’s: the narrative tropes the women find for Zenia illuminate their characters as much as they do hers. Zenia can be explained to some degree from the master narrative each woman finds structure in for her own life, indicating that the attraction of Zenia is finding a part of oneself that was thought lost. Zenia comes out of the buried pasts of all three: Tony tries to use the methodology of analyzing the past to understand Zenia, and more strikingly Charis is warned about her in her childhood, using her grandmother’s divination method of placing a pin on a Bible opened randomly.

Karen took the pin and closed her eyes. and her hand followed the strong current that pulled it downwards. “Ah,” said her grandmother, squinting. “Jezebel again. Revelations, Two, Twenty. ‘Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which callest herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.’ Now that’s a strange thing, for a little girl.” And she smiled at Karen, the smile of a withered apple. “You must be living ahead of yourself.”
Karen had no idea what she meant. (291)

Remembering the future is as easy for Charis to understand later as remembering the past: in her view, time is like a folded blanket, with edges brought together at times (296). Jezebel appears again in the verse she pinpricks in her grandmother’s Bible after Zenia returns:

_Kings Two, Nine. Thirty-five, she reads. And they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands._

It’s Jezebel thrown down from the tower, Jezebel eaten by dogs.

_Again, thinks Charis. Behind her eyes there is a dark shape falling._ (331)

Charis is given the signs and portents of Zenia again and again until she can read them properly: she is given the framework to place Zenia in, and has to learn how. Her employer at the New Age supply store (converted during the present of the novel into a “new basics” store) where she works, Shanita, reads her cards before her climactic altercation with Zenia.

“Big event, coming up soon,” she says. “What I see is—your card is the Queen of Cups, right? It’s the High Priestess crossing you. Does this mean a thing?”

“Yes,” says Charis. “Will I win?”

“What is this win?” says Shanita, smiling at her. “That’s the first time I ever heard that word from you! Maybe it’s time you started saying it.” She peers at the cards, lays down a few more. “Looks something like

"Not Augusta!" says Charis...

"No, no, nowhere near her," says Shanita. "This is an older person. Older than her, I mean. Related to you somehow, though. You are not going to see this death happen, but you're going to be the one finding it out." (486)

Charis has seen the death of Zenia at least three times earlier in the Bible verses, and sees it as it happens while at dinner: by that time she is fully prepared and can understand all the signs she is given.³

If Tony has a degree of authority because of her ability to place Zenia's story in a historical continuum, Roz has an equal amount of authority for her ability to place Zenia on a literary continuum. Roz, significantly, is the only one of the three women who is shown to be an avid fiction reader, and she finds the connections between the world of fiction and the fictions of Zenia. Roz's daughters give the novel its title image, taken from their early penchant for having all the figures in fairy tales played by women.

_The Robber Bride_, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia. (341-342)

For Roz, Zenia is also a version of Frankenstein's monster, a creation both of the doctor's art and Roz's. "My own monster, thinks Roz. I thought I could control her. Then she
broke loose" (111). Between the time Roz first knew her in university and her own encounter with her in the 1980s, Zenia has undergone plastic surgery, a process Roz associates with monstrosity:

That isn’t for Roz, she can’t stand the thought of someone, some strange man, bending over her with a knife while she’s lying in bed conked out cold. She’s read too many thrillers for that, too many sex-murder thrillers. He could be a depraved nut in a stolen doctor suit. It happens. Or what if they make a mistake and you wake up covered in bandages and then spend six weeks looking like a road-kill raccoon, only to emerge as some bit player from a botched-up horror movie? (92-93) Zenia’s monstrosity is centred upon her recreation by plastic surgery and breast augmentation and by the collection of fictions and passports she carries around: both her body and her personality are constructed of layers from other sources, lifted from other bodies. Zenia is a walking Gothic novel, a collection of fragmentary tales from the past that will not go away easily:

Like a renovated building, Zenia is no longer the original, she’s the end result.

Still, Roz can picture the stitch marks, the needle tracks, where the Frankenstein doctors have been at work. She knows the fault lines where Zenia might crack open. (118) Zenia has “no discernible heart, and by now she may not even have blood. Pure latex flows in her veins”: not surprising for one who has returned from the dead, although the
symmetry is upset by the fact that Zenia was cremated (120). "She doesn’t seem to have been born, at least not under that name" (432); not surprising, since she seems to have made herself up, in all senses. Roz compares her to a vampire, prospering on others’ blood (508), and wonders early on if Zenia needs a stake in the heart (14). In a lighter vein, Roz calls her final confrontation with her “Ms. Mature Fuller Figure meets the Queen of the Night” (500). But it is the Frankenstein imagery that is most revealing, because it leads into Atwood’s critique of the traditional view of the essential goodness of women. Zenia, like Frankenstein’s creation, is a rampaging collection of the traits and emotions the other characters have legislated out of themselves because of their own, or society’s, expectations. Zenia is self-indulgent, anti-domestic, anti-charity, anti-healthy living, and anti-sacrifice. She lives Tony’s rebellion for her, and teaches Roz’s husband Mitch the lesson Roz was afraid to teach him about the effects his affairs have on women. She appeals to the juvenile in all of them, the repressed child, because she appears to be able to act with complete license, saying what for them is unsayable.

“What was it she said,” Roz recalls of Zenia:

“Fuck the Third World! I’m tired of it!”

...It was a selfish, careless remark, a daring remark, a liberated remark—to hell with guilt!...The worst of it was that Roz—although shocked, although gabbling, Oh Zenia, you don’t mean that!—had felt an answering beat, in herself. A sort of echo, an urge to go that fast, be that loose, that greedy, herself, too. (113)

Zenia forces them to question their deepest beliefs, but ultimately leaves them to pick up
the pieces. Her advice, like her stories, is a collection of gold and rot, and she doesn’t care to make the difference clear. The split between the good woman and the bad woman found in the American Gothic, Atwood points out, creates monsters like Zenia, who are allowed to live without responsibility for what they do, and also creates potentially monstrous characters like Tony, Charis, and Roz, who also put off responsibility for their baser impulses. Banding together to stamp out the evil intruder and failing to learn anything from it is a mistake, and morally abhorrent. The structural flaw of the American Gothic, as epitomized in Straub’s *Ghost Story*, is that it reinscribes the amnesia that allows the invasion of monstrosity in the first place. Nothing of the “other” is found in any of the characters, nothing links the monster and its appeal to humans, nothing survives as a lesson, or guidepost, and the way is left open for the same thing to happen again and again. Atwood’s Zenia, on the other hand, is a mirror, a sister and twin to the women of *The Robber Bride*.

She gains power over them because they feel some basic identification with her, and each has some of Zenia’s ruthlessness rub off on her afterwards (Shanita’s comment on Charis’s new interest in winning is part of this). Zenia may be a kind of monster, but she is attractive, in the way George Steiner has said disaster and dark places were:

Bending too fixedly over hideousness, one feels queerly drawn...

I am not sure whether anyone, however scrupulous, who spends time and imaginative resources on these dark places can or, indeed, ought to leave them personally intact. Yet the dark places are at the center. Pass them by and there can be no serious discussion of the
human potential. (Steiner 30-31)

In their final confrontations with Zenia, she tempts them each with information they desire. Tony is told of Zenia’s complicity in the conspiracy to kill arms dealer Gerald Bull, and then taunted with exposure of the term paper she wrote for her in university. Charis is pushed near the edge of fury by Zenia’s throwing her lover Billy’s perfidy and disgust for her in her face, while Roz is driven to desperation by Zenia’s threats against her son Larry. All three nearly succumb and react the way Zenia wants, in a prolonging of their personal wars with her, but all three manage to walk out of Zenia’s hotel room without giving her a thing, or yielding an inch, or killing her as they each thought of doing. As Charis realizes, they have all won, since

“...she’s [Zenia’s] going away, and we’re all still all right. Aren’t we? None of us gave in.” She’s not sure exactly how to put it. What she means is, they were tempted, each one of them, but they didn’t succumb. Succumbing would have been killing Zenia, either physically or spiritually. And killing Zenia would have meant turning into Zenia. Another way of succumbing would be believing her, letting her in the door, letting her take them in, letting her tear them apart. They did get torn apart some, but that was because they didn’t do what Zenia wanted.

(Z14-515)

Zenia dies later because she has lost all means of support around the void that is her centre, leaving the other three to look upon her legacy with ambivalence, appreciation for her finally mixed in with the guilt and hatred.
Zenia forms the bond among the three women, who otherwise have just a shared university residence experience in common. She is the double for each of them, making them in turn doubles for each other, a process not very clear until near the end, when their dreams before meeting Zenia for the last time are shown as blurring memories from one another's pasts: Tony dreams of the flowered curtains of Charis's childhood, while Roz finds herself in an old dress of Tony's. Zenia reflects the past, whether theirs or history in general. It is interesting that Zenia talks about her European roots in outmoded, or historically defunct, terms. She is a "White Russian" for Tony, and a "mischling," a term rooted in Nazi Germany, for Roz. Zenia cannot help looking backwards, a product of history. Atwood provides a forward-looking double for Zenia as a more positive view of the other that must be recognized by each character: Shanita, Charis's boss at the store she works at. While Zenia is a compendium of twentieth century European disasters, Shanita, who has as many grandparents as Zenia has names, is the product of the New World and new immigration to Canada.

Shanita teases her...she throws out hints, changes her story. Sometimes she's part Chinese and part black, with a West Indian grandmother; she can do the accent, so maybe there's something to it. That might be the grandmother who used to eat dirt; but there are other grandmothers too, one from the States and one from Halifax, and one from Pakistan and one from New Mexico, and even one from Scotland...But sometimes she's part Ojibway, or else part Mayan, and one day she was even part Tibetan. (66)
Shanita acts more as a force for good than Zenia does: she uses her chameleon pasts and her inventive powers for good, as a variety of trickster figure in the novel, enabling Charis (and the customers of the store) to realize truths about themselves. Zenia and Shanita preside over the novel as paired fairy godmothers, or “disquieting muses,” to use Sylvia Plath’s phrase (Plath, Collected Poems 74), providing the characters in The Robber Bride with gifts of mixed value and meaning.

Like history itself, The Robber Bride escapes easy meanings. The reader is placed in much the same role as Zenia in interpreting the novel, having access to information about each character that is not shared among the three. Tony compares the story of Zenia with the stories of history and finds them much the same:

Still, there was once supposed to be a message. Let that be a lesson to you, adults used to say to children, and historians to their readers. But do the stories of history really teach anything at all? In a general sense, thinks Tony, possibly not. (536)

Rather than a message, Zenia ultimately acts as a medium; through her agency Tony, Roz, and Charis share strength and information, and are able to interpret the messages of the past that Zenia drags into their lives. The act of denying Zenia what she wants stops the repetition of the Gothic plot, and allows the three women to acknowledge and move on from the past by letting her go. Tony is left to muse “Was she in any way like us?...Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?” outside the door while Roz and Charis start for themselves the story of “The Robber Bride” (546). Zenia is left to live on in fiction, a suitable end for a woman constructed of narrative fragments,
a character who is simultaneously void and mirror, reflection and pastiche, and both
poles of the ancient female dichotomy at once.
1. Zenia also has links in this way with the “transforming man” as seen in *Lady Oracle*.

2. That name also resembles a stage Irish name, the type of thing Roz’s lace-curtain Irish mother would never use.

3. Charis’s clairvoyant abilities are a development of the “explained supernatural,” since it is made clear that she is just extraordinarily sensitive. The signs are available for all to see, but one has to know what to look for. Her ability to remember the future is tied into the way memory and time are seen to work in *Cat’s Eye* (the folded blanket theory of time is a paraphrase of the theories of time and space related by Elaine Risley and her brother Stephen in *Cat’s Eye*). Charis’s “third eye” is shown in *The Robber Bride* to be like perfect vision: a fully developed sense and not supernatural at all.

4. On the other hand, Tony associates blood with the power to keep Zenia down, rather than seeing it as something that nourishes her.

   ...for thousands of years, when people died—especially powerful people, especially people who were feared—the survivors had gone to a lot of trouble. They’d slit the throats of their best horses, they’d buried slaves and favourite wives alive, they’d poured blood into the earth. It hadn’t been mourning, it had been appeasement. They’d wanted to show their good will, however spurious, because they’d known the spirit of the dead one would be envious of them for still being alive....What was needed was a bowl of blood. A bowl of blood, some pain, some death. Then maybe she would stay buried. (14-15)

5. Zenia is also able to play with the Ice Maiden/Dark Lady dichotomy when it suits her own purposes. Atwood parodies the rigid distinction between the two in the way Zenia entraps West, Tony’s husband: Zenia claims to be frigid and unable to enjoy sex, while West tries dutifully to help her overcome this problem. Tony, when told this, is aware that Zenia wasn’t frigid and is amused at Zenia’s inventiveness at getting all the sexual attention she wanted from West on her own terms.

6. I am indebted to Lynn Crosbie for pointing this out.
Conclusion: Gothic Times

One of the epigraphs used as chapter heading in *Alias Grace*, Atwood's most recent novel, comes from Emily Dickinson and could be used as a commentary on Atwood's work as a whole.

One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—

One need not be a House—

The Brain has Corridors—surpassing

Material Place—(Dickinson 333)

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood continues her exploration into the natures of memory and evil, utilizing the Female Gothic to analyze a noted murder case which occurred in Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century. Grace Marks, a servant girl, was convicted of murdering Thomas Kinnear, her employer, and Nancy Montgomery, his mistress and a fellow servant, in 1843. Her alleged accomplice, James McDermott, another of the household, was executed for his part in the murders. At the start of the novel Grace has been in prison for fifteen years, and has become the interest of a group of reformers in Kingston who hope to find evidence of her innocence in order to obtain a pardon for her. Simon Jordan, an American alienist with advanced theories on the treatment of insanity and amnesia, is engaged to investigate Grace; Jordan’s expertise is needed since Grace claims to remember nothing of the murders. Jordan attempts to find Grace’s true story, buried under layers of amnesia on her part and newspaper reportage and doctors’ opinions elsewhere. Grace’s memories are presented as being buried; Jordan tries to
unearth them with object association, using the root vegetables to prompt her to make connections between the objects and the location of her lost memories. During their sessions Grace tells Jordan what she can remember of her story, from her childhood in Ireland to her family's emigration to Canada and the first positions she obtained as a servant. Jordan researches newspaper accounts of her crime, as a supplement to what he has learned from her. Grace's "history" comes together gradually from what she remembers and tells him, what he finds from the media of the day, and what he discovers in writing or speaking with men who knew her, such as her lawyer in the murder trial and the superintendent of the insane asylum in Toronto. Eventually, to discover the hidden truth of the murder which Grace cannot recall while conscious, Jordan consents to having her hypnotized by Dr. Dupont, an American researcher. In a scene that recalls Hawthorne's similar use of the veiled oracular woman in *The Blithedale Romance*, Grace is herself veiled as the doctor seeks to uncover her secret. This procedure, which is expected to reveal Grace's true voice, does the opposite: Grace, under hypnosis, speaks in the voice of Mary Whitney, her dearest friend from her earliest position as a household servant. Mary died of a botched abortion years before, but is always present in Grace's memory as a bolder, braver version of herself. "Mary" confesses to killing Nancy Montgomery, to the surprise of the on-lookers observing Grace's hypnosis. The plans to press the provincial governor for Grace's release collapse after this revelation. Jordan himself leaves hurriedly after this in order to extricate himself from a romantic entanglement with his landlady. Grace is eventually freed after thirty years in prison, while Jordan is left in a prison of his own, a victim of a head injury sustained in the Civil
War which strands him in the near past, with little memory of anything.

Atwood compares Grace’s literal imprisonment with her more intangible confinement in others’ narrative expectations and conventions. As a convicted murderess, she has a fore-ordained role in paradigmatic true crime narratives as completely evil. The reformers of Kingston, who dabble in Spiritualism and other advanced areas, regard her as wrongfully convicted and completely innocent. The daughters of the prison governor find her like the figures in novels:

Miss Lydia tells me I am a romantic figure; but then, the two of them are so young they hardly know what they are saying...if I laughed out loud I might not be able to stop; and also it would spoil their romantic notion of me. Romantic people are not supposed to laugh. I know that much from looking at the pictures. (25)

Her lawyer told the jury she was a near-imbecile, saving her from the gallows, while the superintendent of the insane asylum in Toronto thinks she is cunning and calculating, and was feigning madness. Grace has no real voice, or story, of her own: Jordan’s attempts to find one merely frustrate him, as her voice as revealed by hypnosis is someone else’s. Grace in many ways is a void; as a convicted murderess she is a canvas for others to display what they think of her, her crime, and her essential nature. Jeremiah, a travelling pedlar, surprises and disturbs her by telling her quietly “you are one of us” after a display of fortune-telling in one household (155). Jeremiah returns again and again in the novel in various guises: he is Dr. Jerome Dupont the hypnotist, as well as “Signor Geraldo Ponti, Master of Neuro-Hypnotism, Ventriloquist, and Mind Reader Extraordinaire”
Jeremiah has sensed Grace’s channelling abilities, and at one point urges her to leave the danger of Kinnear’s household and become part of a travelling fortune-telling act with him instead. The passivity of Grace’s nature, which has made it easy for people to project their own opinions and desires upon her, also makes her a superior medium. The fits of unconsciousness she suffers from are physical manifestations of this passivity. Before her first such fit she is convinced she hears the dead Mary Whitney tell her “let me in” (178), and during other losses of consciousness she is observed as acting in a manner contrary to her normal self. Grace is haunted by Mary, and may to some degree be possessed by her, or channelling her spirit; Atwood leaves the verdict ambiguous, showing instead that how one regards Grace depends on how one views the world and its phenomena. Susanna Moodie makes her into a romantic heroine, as Bannerling the asylum superintendent claims, because she is a female novelist and prone to fictionalizing and also prone to the influence of male writers. Bannerling, however, fails to see how he is just as influenced by rational and schematic thought in thinking Grace a conniving, guilty woman. The boundaries between fiction and reality blur into each other in the construction of Grace’s narrative: Oliver Twist informs Moodie’s depiction of Grace in the asylum while Grace’s own storytelling abilities are due, in large part, to Sir Walter Scott. Spiritualism and alienism are shown collapsing into each other as modes of belief, particularly during Grace’s hypnosis. Grace’s own story and voice are constantly supplanted by the stories of others; her last words after her release are borrowed from the ending of Charlotte Brontë’s novel Villette, just as her “confession” is
in Mary Whitney's voice. The reader is left to construct the version of Grace desired, from the fragments and narratives Atwood presents. True crime confession, romance, psychiatric case history: *Alias Grace* is all of these and none. Grace Marks, and the text itself, are the haunted objects in *Alias Grace*.

Louis Gross wrote in *Redefining the American Gothic* that the genre was largely the product of three groups of writers: women, gays, and colonials (in the English tradition this primarily means the Irish and the Americans). These "marginal" figures in the dominant culture are responsible for the majority of Gothic classics. In fact the overwhelming presence of these groups in the creation of Gothic fiction enables one to perceive the genre as an alternative expression of social, sexual, and political projections to the Great Tradition view of English fiction. (2)

Gross disregards the possibility of Canadians contributing to this "alternative expression," but his comment is interesting: one can see how Canadian Gothic fiction exists as the same kind of alternative to American fiction. The margins allow for security in speaking, as Atwood recognizes in her depiction of Elaine Risley, an artist granted freedom because of her work in a marginalized form with archaic techniques. In using the Gothic form, with its themes of imprisonment, confinement, and haunting, Atwood has created a space for the discussion of themes of women's entrapment in societal and familial expectations, the actions of the past, and interior and exterior violence. Ghosts are present in Atwood Gothic: her novels depict characters haunted by
their own pasts, or by the weight of history, while the texts themselves are haunted by the forms and themes of previous works of fiction. From The Edible Woman on to Alias Grace, Atwood's novels recapitulate and rewrite the Gothic genre while building on it: Marian McAlpine's increasing confinement by the commodity culture around her parallels Grace Marks's literal confinement in Kingston prison and her metaphorical entrapment in the various written and spoken versions of her crime and her history. As The Robber Bride and Alias Grace demonstrate, with their collections of histories and stories, it is nearly impossible to expect one single true story to emerge from the wealth of alternatives: changes in perspective and context alter interpretations of facts and narratives. The past, as Atwood shows in her novels, is always present: science, or spiritualism, may explain how the boundaries between times can be crossed easily.

Anxiety, in Atwood's fiction, derives from the realization that boundaries are not solid, but permeable. Science blurs into occultism, sanity into madness and the past into the present with ease in Atwood's fiction.

Margaret Atwood's rewriting of the Female Gothic has aided in constructing a mode that can depict the terrors present in contemporary life with the reassuring organizing logic of genre writing. As stated earlier, Angela Carter wrote that "we live in Gothic times": Margaret Atwood's novels have depicted reactions to, and resistances against, the stresses and terrors of our time. Atwood writes of the "dark places" Steiner claimed were necessary to visit in order to participate in the whole of human experience, showing in her fiction the examples of those who have passed by them that the rest of us need not be trapped there also.
1. She was convicted of murdering Kinnear, as neither she nor McDermott was tried for the murder of Montgomery. Both were sentenced to death for the Kinnear murder, and a trial for the Montgomery murder was thought superfluous.

2. Jordan at one point has a dream of dissecting a veiled woman who reveals nothing but the veil as he cuts deeper and deeper. George Eliot's novella "The Lifted Veil" is part of this cluster of writings on hypnotism and spiritualism. In it, the main character perceives the future as being uncovered by the "veil" of the present. Not surprisingly, he finds the knowledge revealed more a curse than a blessing.

3. Jeremiah's own channelling abilities are manifest in his choice of aliases: each describes how he bridges the space between this world and the next.

4. Writers also working in this genre include Canadian novelists Ann-Marie MacDonald, Barbara Gowdy, and Jane Urquhart, as well as Americans like Joyce Carol Oates and Joanna Scott.
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WORKS BY MARGARET ATWOOD

For current information on writings by and about Margaret Atwood, see “Current Atwood Checklist,” which is published in the Newsletter of the Margaret Atwood Society at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.


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