Making the Journey: The Female *Bildungsroman* and Quest Motifs in Selected Margaret Atwood Texts

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Tracy Elizabeth Webb, declare that

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Abstract

The research presented in this dissertation examines, from a gender studies approach, the genre of the female *Bildungsroman* and the representation of quest motifs in three primary texts selected from the oeuvre of Margaret Atwood. These three texts include: *The Penelopiad* (2005), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye* (1988). Given that the *Bildungsroman* is traditionally championed by a male protagonist as well as the varied nature of this quest, which is also led by a male hero, this project investigates texts which highlight the nature of the female protagonist's experience and the variation in her *Bildung* and quest as a result.

In order to provide a thorough analysis of these texts an extensive theoretical approach of gender theory, *Bildungsroman* theory, and quest theory has been used. This promotes a focus on the construction of gender in the texts, the traditional structure of the *Bildungsroman* and how the selected texts conform to but also deviate from this model, as well as illustrating how variations of Joseph Campbell's mythic structure have been included in the texts.

The Penelopiad offers a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* epic from the point of view of a female narrator, Penelope. In this text several narrative techniques are used to 'rewrite' the original myth and privilege the female perspective. *Surfacing* provides an account of a spiritual quest; this text couples the protagonist's *Bildung* and search for identity with spirituality. *Cat's Eye* represents an example of a psychological quest as the protagonist's journey is closely connected to her memories of the past and the experiences to which they are linked. The variations within these texts contribute to a comprehensive analysis of the complex nature of this study and this genre as a whole.

These texts provide different examples of *Bildungsromane* and representations of the quest. This examination explores the extent to which Atwood makes use of the traditional *Bildungsroman* structure, and also the ways in which she is able to skilfully manipulate the genre and provide texts that more accurately constitute a female *Bildungsroman*.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The ideas of searching for a lost object, endeavouring to resolve a sense that something is missing in one's life, and the possibility of restoration are themes that are present in almost all forms of literature, albeit in different contexts and manifested in different ways. However, these ideas are particularly pertinent when looking at the quest narrative or the *Bildungsroman*. Both genres, with the idea of the journey and resulting growth at its centre, represent archetypal human concerns. Yet both these literary genres are born out of and are dominated by a male tradition. Over the changing landscape of literature, influenced by the Women's Movement and feminism, a journey narrative has emerged with women at its centre that can be considered a female *Bildungsroman*. This project aims to investigate the nature of these texts, how they represent distinctively female examples of *Bildungsromane*, and the shades of quest motifs that are evident in the texts. The texts that have been selected, from the oeuvre of renowned Canadian author Margaret Atwood, are *The Penelopiad* (2005), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye* (1988).

Of these three Margaret Atwood's texts which I have chosen to examine in this dissertation, each will be explored in its own chapter. Before I outline the structure of each investigation and chapter I should explain the reasons that I have chosen to order my analysis in such a way, as it does not follow a chronological ordering of Atwood's work. I have chosen to order the texts in a manner designed to display the clearest link to the theoretical framework and conceptual outline. I begin with *The Penelopiad* as this text offers a retelling of Homer's classical poem *The Odyssey*, but from the viewpoint of a female protagonist, Odysseus's wife, Penelope. This text illustrates the closest link to a male quest myth, and thus represents the ultimate female appropriation of the mythic structure and the idea of a female journey. *Surfacing* is the second text because this also includes a physical journey to a new space, in that the protagonist journeys away from the city to a secluded island in Northern Canada to memories of her childhood. However, this journey is augmented with a spiritual aspect which enhances the idea of the quest and female *Bildungsroman. Cat's Eye* is the final text, as this represents less of a physical journey to an unfamiliar space

(although some movement is required on the part of the protagonist). Yet this text details more of a journey into the past, memory and the subconscious, and thus represents a kind of psychological quest. Thus, the organisation of the primary texts in such a way is less to do with tracking the chronological progression of Atwood's work but rather the thematic development and progression of the journey, *Bildungsroman*, and quest narrative in these texts.

Each of these texts provides a rich landscape for investigation, and thus in addition to my analysis of the female *Bildungsroman* and quest motifs in each of the texts there are other issues which will be explored. For example, the chapter on *The Penelopiad* will examine the feminist re-appropriation of well established narratives such as Homer's *Odyssey* and will also explore *The Penelopiad*'s relationship to the original *Odyssey* poem. A study of the female characters will be conducted, as will the idea of Penelope's retrospective viewpoint and the chorus of the maids. This text represents that female appropriation of myth, and thus an investigation of the quest structure, its deviations and their significance is necessary.

Surfacing and *Cat's Eye*, much like the female *Bildungsroman*, are far more subtle feminist texts, unlike Penelope's overt appropriation of the male narrative. *Surfacing* follows the journey of an unnamed female protagonist away from her life in the city to her remote home in northern Canada to search for her father, who is missing and presumed dead. This text offers an opportunity for investigation of a spiritual rather than purely social quest. It also explores issues of post-coloniality, ecological perspectives and victimhood which enhance the investigation of the female *Bildungsroman* in this text. The final novel to be discussed, *Cat's Eye*, focuses on the life of artist Elaine Risley. This text offers a retrospective journey into Elaine's memories, exploring the influence of her three childhood friends, the representation of women, social issues, and the role of art, which offers opportunity to explore a derivative of the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman*. By exploring these different aspects of each of the texts, as well as the main focus of the female *Bildungsroman* and quest motifs, I will offer a comprehensive perspective on the genre.

I will conduct this research using a textual analysis methodology, utilising Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as a Research Method" (2005) as a guide. Belsey's

approach to interpreting and exploring texts is a subtle one. In her opinion it is crucial to outline the details of a text and the significance of these details. This involves closely engaging with the individual works and interrogating the multiplicity of meanings that they offer in the most empirical and objective way possible. Any form of research is "expected to make a contribution to knowledge" (Belsey, 2005: 163), and this requires context from other sources without overwhelming the text with too many different viewpoints and opinions.

In conducting a textual analysis of the chosen texts I will explore them within the various contexts in which they occur as well as providing a theoretical base and other secondary material to arrive at a comprehensive reading of the texts. Belsey also notes the importance of the reader/text relationship and the 'dialogue' into which they enter. Here she stresses that rather there is a not a single, absolute meaning, but rather in investigating the text one must study the process of signification and interrogate its implications. Using this approach as a guideline for textual analysis, I will study each text individually, situate these texts within cultural knowledge and carefully selected secondary material, and finally explore the different meanings that are exposed, as well as their significance in terms of this project.

Before I begin exploring the theoretical foundation of this project it is necessary to consider the body of literature that already exists in order to contextualise this project. The history of the *Bildungsroman* from its inception in the German tradition will be outlined later in the investigation of *Bildungsroman* theory. Furthermore, as this project is located specifically in relations to the female viewpoint it is important to consider the history of literature that constitutes female quest narratives, journeys of discovery and self-development, and female *Bildungsromane*. The *Bildungsroman* genre emerges in the English tradition in the 1800s with male authors such as Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens. Female protagonists become the focus of this genre around the same time, but the success of this adaptation of the *Bildungsroman* is debated, as these texts were often characterised by "ambivalent endings" (McWilliams, 2009:17). Nevertheless, some of the significant texts that present the "self-improving heroine" (17) in nineteenth-century literature include Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). It is important to note that this development in the

genre, the inception of the female *Bildungsroman*, was not pioneered solely by female authors. However, one particularly significant text for this tradition, written by a female author, is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). This novel holds its place of importance as it is "invested with a realistic understanding of female need for agency and assertiveness" (McWilliams, 2009:17-18). The significance of the text is emphasised by the way in which later female authors have engaged with it. Atwood herself provides a gothic rereading of the text in her novel, *Lady Oracle* (1976). The *Künstlerroman* also sees some development during this time with the contribution of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Virginia Woolf's work also represents an important contribution to the *Bildungsroman* genre, as well as the *Künstlerroman*, with novels such as *The Voyage Out* (1915) and To *the Lighthouse* (1927).

Ellen McWilliams (2009), who outlines this helpful overview of the female *Bildungsroman* (while stressing unequivocally that it does not represent an exhaustive canon), notes that in the twentieth century "contemporary female Bildungsromane challenge and renegotiate the traditional paradigm" (20). For example, Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973) is an example of the development journey occurring in middle age, rather than the more popular adolescence and early adulthood. Additionally, one major criticism of the genre and its body of critical work is that it is Eurocentric. However, by extending the frame to more multicultural examples we find even more development of the genre in Chinese American, African American and even South African contexts. Some examples of such works include Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), which merges issues of cultural identity with developing selfhood. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) offers a more African American perspective on the genre and draws attention to the way in which race sometimes complicates development; while Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) explores issues of exile. Further examples include Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* (1952), which highlights the effects of a tense colonial community on the developing self, and Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979), which offers a perspective on the influence of coming of age under the oppressive apartheid regime. Margaret Atwood can be said to fit within this tradition because as a Canadian writer her texts are also imbued with issues of identity, belonging and post-coloniality. This brief exposition of the significant texts within the *Bildungsroman* and female *Bildungsroman* tradition reveals that narratives of development are diverse. It is important to consider, for the

purposes of this project, that the "Quest and Odyssey are at the heart of these forms, as individual narratives attempt to articulate collective experience" (McWilliams, 2009:26).

In this section of this chapter I will foreground the three main theoretical concerns of this dissertation, namely: gender studies and feminist scholarship, *Bildungsroman* theory, and quest theory and representations of the quest. I will be exploring the ideas related to gender studies and feminist scholarship to create a clear gender studies lens through which to examine the primary texts. Secondly, I will explore the development of the *Bildungsroman* and chart its progress from its inception in the German tradition to its development through the English canon. I will also look at the ways in which the *Bildungsroman* is extended to focus on female characters. Thirdly, I will explore quest theory and examine Joseph Campbell's mythic structure. Following this I will explore feminist representations and appropriations of quest structures, before concluding this introductory chapter and continuing my analysis of the primary texts in the subsequent chapters.

Gender is a particularly contested theoretical perspective, but one which it is necessary to explore in order to create a sound gender-conscious foundation on which to base this project. I will explore several different aspects of this debate before moving on to expositions of the other theoretical approaches I will be using. In her introduction to *Speaking of Gender* (1989), editor Elaine Showalter discusses the ways in which gender is a crucial factor in the operation of literary discourse. She focuses on how gender and language intersect by making three central observations. Firstly, language and gender are interwoven, as "all speech is necessarily talk about gender, since in every language gender is a grammatical category" (Showalter 1989:1). The gendered form of some nouns in certain languages illustrates this point. In the English language this only pertains to nouns referring to human beings or animals, but this distinction extends much further in other European languages such as German, French and Spanish (1). In these languages the masculine form rather than the feminine is what Showalter notes as the "linguistic norm", thus making language and language usage "the site of a covert struggle for gender meanings" (1). The second central observation refers to our basic understanding of gender, in that "the term 'gender' has been used for the past several years to stand for the social, cultural,

and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity" (1-2). Gender is culturally constructed and assigned, taking into account a number of factors, of which only one is sex, the biological, anatomical sexual definition of an individual. In differentiating sex and gender, Showalter also points out that just as the term 'sex' can be substituted for 'gender', and vice versa, neither can be substituted for the term 'sexuality', which is "the totality of an individual's sexual orientation, preference, and behaviour" (2). Traditional and normative views perceive a simple linear function between sex, gender and sexuality; however, gender and sexuality prove to be complex categories that are shaped and influenced by the individual's social and personal experiences. The third of these central observations is that although 'gender' dominates feminist discourse it does not focus strictly on women. Showalter points out that "talking about gender means talking about both men and women" (2). She notes that this more inclusive view developed during the early 1980s and marked a shift from investigations centred on women to "the study of gender relations involving both women and men" (2). Therefore, keeping this shift in mind, it is important to note the affect that gender has on literary production and consumption. Additionally, such discussions of gender serve to illuminate and remind scholars of other categories of difference such as class and race.

As stated previously, gender is a subject of much debate and contention. Although the sex and gender divide is largely accepted, Showalter notes that masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, heterosexuality, the construction of gender and the way that it is used in academic study are vigorously debated. For example, in some instances terms such as 'gender' and 'sexual difference' are used interchangeably, but Showalter points out that sexual difference is born out of the theoretical perspective of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, and "originates with the question of difference in language, subjectivity and sexual identity" (3). Scholars in this field use Freudian, post-Freudian and Lacanian accounts, and maintain that gender is not socially prescribed but rather born out of acquisition of language when the speaking subject enters into the symbolic order. This symbolic order is "ruled by the Law of the Father, and marked by the signifier of the phallus and the castration complex" (3). The subject takes a linguistic standpoint as 'he' or 'she' in relation to this symbolic order, and is thus gendered. Thus, gender is constructed by way of the construction and use of language.

However, for materialist critics who favour the term 'gender', using the term 'sexual difference' can be universalising with regard to social relations between the sexes. Showalter (1989) notes that, as Marxist-feminist critics point out, "gender does not exist independently or in a social and political vacuum, but is always shaped within ideological frameworks" (3). As a result, gender cannot be treated as an isolated category, and it also cannot be considered in a purely psychoanalytical framework, but should rather be seen as a "part of a process of social construction" (4). Yet, when discussing gender we must consider not only difference but power as well. The question of difference with regard to gender "assumes that the sexes are separate but equal" (4); however, power has significant bearing on this notion, as "in looking at the history of gender relations, we find sexual asymmetry, inequality, and male dominance in every known society" (4). Showalter summarises that:

> Feminist scholars with a materialist or Marxist orientation analyze the ways that gender ideology is inscribed, represented, and reproduced in a variety of cultural practices, including literature, the mass media, film and popular culture. (4)

The investigation of gender and implementation of a gender studies approach in this project will pay attention to material factors but it will not follow a strict Marxist line.

Judith Butler's article, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" (1993), supports Showalter's emphasis on the importance of gender in literary studies; however, Butler's study focuses more on the gendered subject from the dimension of political representation. She begins her discussion by interrogating the concept of 'woman'. She observes that there is an assumed existing identity of woman and it is on this foundation that feminist critique and discourse is based and is, in Butler's (1993) words, "the subject for whom political representation is pursued" (341). However, within the framework of political representation this category of 'woman' is problematic, as it cannot be considered nor is it understood as a fixed classification. There are no fixed criteria for what constitutes the category 'women', the subject of feminist discourse. As a result, representation becomes problematic as it can only extend and advance that which has already been determined. Before sufficient and appropriate representation of the subject can take place, the specific qualities and attributes of that subject must be

outlined and satisfied. Yet this is further complicated in that "systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (342). It is systems of power such as language, which determine women as the subject of feminism, which is itself formed by a system of "representational politics" (342). Ultimately, it is crucial to understand that "the category of 'women', the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (342).

Butler continues to explore the problematisation of the subject, specifically within a feminist discourse, where this subject is 'women'. Butler notes that this term "denotes a common identity" but it is not in fact a "stable signifier" to which all women conform and fit, and as a result it is a site of contention (343). Thus, Butler notes:

> If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pre-gendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (343)

Butler continues her discussion by noting that the distinction between sex and gender is vitally important with regard to the formation of universal identity for the subject. She states that "whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (345). However, Butler considers the fact that this binary-like breakdown is somewhat flawed. She notes that the social construction of 'man' or 'masculine' will not necessarily conform to a biological male body, and neither is the social construction of 'woman' necessarily limited to a female body. Thus, just as gender originates in culture, so too is sex a gendered category: "as a result gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (346). Whether or not sex is given or originates in culture as a category which then acts upon gender, it is nevertheless affected by normative procedures. Butler notes that this pairing (which she has

somewhat complicated) is "always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (347). Thus, when we consider gender as Butler engages with it, we must consider the cultural context in which not only gender is constructed but sex as well, and the way that these categories interact, while being careful not to treat them as a fixed binary. It is also important, when taking a feminist point of view, that one consider the way that women are constructed in any given text, as this too is not a fixed category.

After discussing gender as a category and its effect on the subject from Showalter and Butler's work respectively, we must also consider gender and its relation to literature. Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn (1985) discuss this idea in their chapter "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman". Gender is the "fundamental organizing category" (Greene & Kahn 1985:1) of feminist literary criticism out of which two foundational observations are noted; firstly, "that the inequality between the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construction" (1), and secondly, that the male perspective is assumed to be the dominant and universal view around which many fields of study and knowledge are structured. Having outlined this paradigm, Greene and Kahn note the focus of feminist scholarship:

> Feminist scholarship, then, has two concerns: it revises concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular purposes; and it restores a female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience and contributions to culture. (2)

They note that such scholarship focuses on the social construction of masculinity and femininity, 'maleness' and 'femaleness' in an effort to understand and interpret "the *universal* phenomenon of male dominance" (2). This social construction of gender is enabled through ideology, "the system of practices that informs every aspect of daily life" and "authorizes its beliefs and practices as 'universal' and 'natural'" (3). The ideology of gender is "inscribed in discourse" (4), perpetuated through our modes of talking and writing, because whether in speech or written work we make use of the "signifying codes that pervade [all] social interactions" (4).

The ways in which literature and ideology co-function are of particular interest to feminist literary critics, as they focus on "the ways ideology is inscribed within literary forms, styles, conventions, genres and institutions of literary production" (5). Greene and Kahn note that in Western culture writers or storytellers conform to the dominant culture or ideology to the same extent as they challenge it. They justify this by pointing out that even if literature is considered subversive it nevertheless falls within a literary tradition that is enabled by and perpetuates the dominant ideology which likely "marginalizes women" (22). The English literary canon is marked by 'Great Works' so designated because they deal with universal human truths; however, these truths are congruent with the dominant ideology, and thus feminist criticism seeks to interrogate the "values implicit in the Great Works, investigating the tradition that canonized them and the interests it serves" (22). In so doing a "*revisionary rereading*" (22) is proposed, one that by "the reading of women writers alters standards of literary excellence, redefines literary periods and reshapes the canon" (23).

Reinforcing the idea of the woman writer and her significance in the literary canon, Mary Eagleton suggests that "any discussion of gender and the literary form is dominated by the need to explain women's special relationship with the novel" (Eagleton, 1996: 137). Eagleton explains that through the exploration of the rise of the novel there is little investigation into the establishment of the professional female author. Although no specific origin can be explained, the significance of the woman writer, in both the public and private sphere, is no less notable. Eagleton references the power of the female writer when she quotes Juliet Mitchell's assertion that the woman writer "must at once 'be feminine … and refuse femininity'" (139); Eagleton elaborates on this by noting that:

> She [the woman writer] creates a woman's world within her novels while, at the same time, rejecting that world through the authoritative act of writing [.…] She has to work within the dominant order, what is termed the 'symbolic', for to be outside the dominant order is to be mad or dead. But equally, she must disrupt that symbolic order. (139)

This approach highlights a field of interest in the gender/genre debate regarding the way in which "the woman writer can *subvert* the male-dominated forms" (139). This

subversion can come about in several different ways, for example, "psychic and ideological conflicts" (139) that appear in the texts, the linear narrative or the disruption thereof, as well as the female voice and the way that this is used in the texts. Eagleton notes the significance of different genres and the way that they are critically analysed. For example, she emphasises the way that utopian and science fiction writing offer "an interrogation of the existing social order and the possibility of transformation" (141). Margaret Atwood is particularly well known for her science fiction writing and her texts that offer alternative visions of society, for example *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). However, her science fiction and dystopian writing are not the focus of this project; instead, I will focus on her narratives depicting the journey of a female protagonist. Through this study of the *Bildungsroman* it will become clear that Atwood is able to utilise the genre effectively, but simultaneously manipulate it in order to subvert the dominant form and ideology in her own unique way.

The *Bildungsroman* is defined as "a novel that recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his or her place in the world" (Murfin and Ray, 2003:39). The word derives from the German "*bildung*" meaning education and "*roman*" meaning novel. Thus, the *Bildungsroman* can be broadly defined as a novel of education. However, despite this panoptic definition, the *Bildungsroman* is a rich genre with a complex and contested history which must be expanded in order to develop a thorough reading of the selected texts. Ellen McWilliams (2009) notes that:

> [to] use the term without reference to its complex history, to bypass this controversy, and launch into a reading of Margaret Atwood's novels as female Bildungsromane, would be to isolate the term from its heritage. It would also be to miss precisely the complexity of the genre on which Margaret Atwood builds. (5)

In her book, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*, McWilliams discusses the development of the *Bildungsroman* genre and traces its evolution from the German tradition into contemporary literature. In so doing, McWilliams is mindful of the complexity of the genre's history, and by using points summarised by Todd Kontje from his study, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*

(1993), she outlines the problems associated with defining the *Bildungsroman*. In order to maintain a full picture of the genre Kontje points out that:

> "At least three factors combine to produce the history of the Bildungsroman over time: the changing reception of the old literature, the production of the new, and the effort to situate the new literature in the context of the growing literary tradition." (In: McWilliams, 2009:5)

McWilliams keeps these factors in mind when exploring the German tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. It is also important to note the influence of the political and social climate of eighteenth-century Germany:

> The literary historians transferred the concept of the *Bildung* from the individual human being to the national literature [….] [T]he organic development of the hero toward maturation and social integration reproduces in miniature the movement of German literature towards its maturity, and this literature in turn, is to inspire the unification of the German nation. (2009:6)

It is widely agreed upon, even among scholars who contest the genre, that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796) is the first example of the *Bildungsroman* in the German tradition. McWilliams (2009) suggests that its privileged position is born out of the fact that "it is an epic record of human experience at a pivotal time in Germany's history" (6). The narrative chronicles a young man's journey away from his bourgeois home to pursue his dream of working in the theatre, his love of which is inspired by a puppet theatre that he played with when he was a child. His love of the arts is contrasted with the crude commercial interests of his merchant father. However, he is unable to escape his surroundings through his involvement with the theatre, and his disillusionment is followed by his withdrawal from that environment. Nevertheless, his journey is incomplete until he meets a stranger who reassures him "that everything that happens to us leaves its traces, everything contributes imperceptibly to our development (257)" (McWilliams, 2009:7). Hereafter, with much ceremony he receives his 'Certificate of Apprenticeship', his relationship with his illegitimate son is restored and he becomes engaged to Natalie, an appropriate partner, giving the novel a harmonious and hopeful conclusion (7).

Although Goethe's novel is considered the 'blueprint' for the *Bildungsroman* in the German tradition, McWilliams notes several other examples that adapt his model and therefore contribute to the development of the genre. The first example is E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (1820-1822), which deliberately references and parodies Goethe's text through its chapter names. The *Bildungsroman* underwent a significant shift in the social context of Nazi Germany, during which time the "genre's close association with nation-building was given a new sinister dimension" (McWilliams 2009:7). *The Tin Drum* (1959) by Günter Grass explores this in the narration of the events unfolding between Poland and Germany between 1920 and 1950 from the context of an insane asylum. The grotesque and fantastical preoccupation of the narrator situates this text as a critical subversion of the genre; however, this text forms a complex part of the *Bildungsroman* canon as it has "been viewed by some as marking a decisive end to the genre and by others as self-consciously sustaining it" (2009:8). In this regard, Martin Swales (1978) asserts that "even the non-fulfillment of consistently intimated expectation can, paradoxically, represent a validation of the genre by means of its controlled critique (12)" (in: McWilliams 2009:8). McWilliams also cites another example, Ulrich Plenzdorf's *The New Sorrows of Young W* (1973), as a "Socialist [renegotiation] of the classic model" which "engages explicitly" (8) with Goethe's The *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Thus, within this German literary context it is clear that the genre experiences unexpected reinvigorations and revivals, which leads McWilliams to state that "ultimately, for the purpose of literary critics, the most useful, inclusive, definition of *Bildung* can be taken as a physical, intellectual, or indeed spiritual process of cultivation and transformation" (2009:8).

However, there are many critics who take issue with the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and object to it because of its "often unapologetic investment in masculine, bourgeois ideologies" (McWilliams 2009:9), or who question whether or not the term should be applied only in a strictly German context. McWilliams outlines several of these critiques which note that the *Bildungsroman* is a problematic term as it is too broad: everything is a *Bildungsroman* or nothing is. To respond to such criticisms other terms such as *Individualroman* (novel of the individual), *Identitätsroman* (novel of identity), or *Antibildungsroman*, which is considered dubious because of its "conscious confrontation" (10) with the genre, have been offered. These alternatives

have been largely dismissed, but McWilliams points out that "another difficulty with these arguments is that they risk losing the distinction of a highly fecund literary and critical term" (10). Other scholars find the broad nature of the category particularly conducive to migration from the strictly German context into other transnational literatures. To support this idea, McWilliams quotes the advice of Martin Swales (1978) regarding genre:

> "[Genre] works *within* individual fictions in that it is a component of the expectation to which the specific novels refer and which they vivify by their creative engagement with it. The degree to which the expectation is or is not fulfilled is not the criterion for participation in the genre construct. As long as the model of the genre is intimated as a sustained and sustaining presence in the work in question, then the genre retains its validity as a structuring principle within the palpable stuff of an individual literary creation (12)." (In: McWilliams 2009:10)

Thus, the German context of the *Bildungsroman* is a helpful starting point for investigating the genre, and regardless of the contention regarding its definition or usefulness it is "recognized throughout the world as a synonym for exploring aspects of human progress and development" (12). As McWilliams aptly notes, the "*Bildungsroman* is not simply defined by resemblance to the classic template, but is rather sustained in the mapping of an odyssey of selfhood in which the internal machinations of the self are foregrounded" (12).

The *Bildungsroman* was notably appropriated by English writers in the nineteenth century. In his book *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), Ian Watt notes that "the privileging of individual experience emerged as a distinctive feature of the novel (13)" (McWilliams, 2009:12). An especially important scholar when considering the *Bildungsroman* in the English tradition is Jerome H. Buckley (1974), whose study of the *Bildungsroman* "takes the early Victorians as its point of departure" (2009:12). He notes that "novels dating to this period are most compatible with the *Bildungsroman*'s preoccupation with middle-class progress, aspirations and frustrations (20)" (in: McWilliams, 2009:12). McWilliams also offers Buckley's breakdown of the principal elements of the *Bildungsroman*: "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation,

ordeal by love and the search for vocation and a working philosophy (18)" (in: McWilliams, 2009:13).

However, McWilliams also provides insight into how the English tradition may transcend Buckley's nineteenth-century timeline with "narratives of development of eighteenth century fiction" (2009:14). Two examples of this fiction include: Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), which McWilliams notes are examples of English coming-of-age narratives in the eighteenth century and which provide an interesting contrast to the "generic expectations of the German tradition" which was "most concerned with the organic development of the individual (which also served to complement the manifest destiny of the German nation)" (2009:14)

Continuing this line of discussion, the role of Charles Dickens is also brought to the fore, as "Dickens's novels show signs of an enduring preoccupation with the idea of the self as narrative" (14). For example, McWilliams notes that *Great Expectations* (1861) shows particular fascination with "language and identity" (2009:15) in the relationship and tension between Pip, the mature narrator, and Pip, the narrated subject of the novel. Additionally, *David Copperfield* (1849-50), which opens with the protagonist's uncertainty regarding whether he will become the hero of his own life, gives power to the narrative and the process of writing it. This meta-narrative aspect concurs with the self-conscious nature of the eighteenth-century texts which seem to have been incorporated into the *Bildungsroman* genre in the English tradition.

Before investigating women writers in the English tradition and exploring the idea of the female *Bildungsroman* I will investigate the role of the *Bildungsroman* in modern society. Franco Moretti explores this significance in "From the Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture" (2000). Central to Moretti's analysis of the *Bildungsroman* and its significance for culture is youth, as "youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition of [heroes]" (Moretti 2000:554). For centuries, in pre-modernity, youth was in some senses predetermined as one merely took up the lifestyle and vocation of one's forebear. However, with the onset of modernity and the resulting shifts in society, such as the abandonment of the countryside for the city and the changes in work and production, youth is problematised, and two new concepts

are introduced. These concepts are: mobility, "the dismantling [of] the continuity between generations [and] destabilizing forces of capitalism"; as well as interiority, yearning for exploration, and "unexpected hopes", which are often unfortunately characterised by perpetual dissatisfaction and restlessness (555). Moretti explains that modern youth is characterised by other factors such as "the growing influence of education, the strengthening of bonds within generations, a new relationship with nature" (555); however, mobility and interiority constitute the symbolic component, and thus the *Bildungsroman* becomes a "symbolic form of modernity" (555). The central aspects of youth represent and "*accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability" (556). However, if "inner dissatisfaction and mobility make novelistic youth 'symbolic' of modernity, they also force it to share in the 'formlessness' of the new epoch" (556). In order to assign form to youth we must consider that youth is brief, and thus "only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism […] can modernity be represented" (556). However, this contrast makes the *Bildungsroman* "intrinsically contradictory" (556).

The notion that youth is terminal makes it clear that the symbolic form is not constituted by a spatial determination but rather a "*temporal* one" (Moretti 2000:556). The focus on temporality is highlighted by the ability of history and narrative to bring about order and meaning to any series of events. Moretti notes that as a result there are many variations of the *Bildungsroman*, but that these can be organised through plot differences: "differences in the ways in which plot generates meaning" (557). He identifies two principles of textual organisation, which are both present in narratives but not weighted equally. The first is the classification principle which implies that "narrative transformations have meaning insofar as they lead to a particularly marked ending" (557). This teleological progression lends itself to a kind of finality at the conclusion of the narrative. The second principle, the transformation principle, suggests that "what makes a story meaningful is its narrativity, its being an open-ended process" (557). Meaning comes not as the result of a fulfilled teleological totality, but rather the "total rejection of such a solution" (557).

Furthermore, Moretti notes that the oppositions and tensions between the two models can continue indefinitely, but he also notes that "it is clear that the two models express opposite attitudes toward modernity: caged and exorcised by the principle of

classification, it is exasperated and made hypnotic by that of transformation" (558). This correlates to the concept of youth which Moretti discussed earlier. In the classification model, youth is terminal and is succeeded by maturity, whilst in the transformation novel "youthful dynamism is emphasized […;] youth cannot or does not want to give way to maturity" (558). He concludes that "maturity and youth are therefore inversely proportional: the culture that emphasizes the first devalues the second, and vice versa" (558). Thus, another contradictory aspect is added to the symbolic form of the *Bildungsroman*, one which is nevertheless interesting, "for the contradiction between conflicting evaluations of modernity and youth, or between opposing values and symbolic relationships […] is above all the paradoxical *functional principle* of a large part of modern culture" (558). For example, values such as

> [Freedom] and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphoses: although antagonistic, […] are *all equally important* for modern Western mentality. Our world calls for their *coexistence*, however difficult; and it therefore also calls for a cultural mechanism capable of representing, exploring and testing that coexistence. (558)

The *Bildungsroman* is the necessary form and cultural mechanism used to illustrate societal and individual progression, and the coexistence of which Moretti speaks results in a kind of compromise which is often a central theme in the *Bildungsroman*. Ultimately, as Moretti observes,

> The success of the *Bildungsroman* suggests in fact that the truly central ideologies of our world are not in the least […] intolerant, normative, monologic, to be wholly submitted to or rejected. Quite the opposite: they are pliant and precarious, "weak" and "impure". When we remember that the *Bildungsroman* – the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization – is also the *most contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to "solve" the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival. (559)

Moretti asserts that the *Bildungsroman* stands as a "reference [point] in that irregular expanse we call the novel" (561), even though it has undergone development and change through different literary traditions. These developments and constant reinterpretations of the genre are evidence that "we seek to indicate with it one of the

most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*" (561-562). This is congruent with the opposition of individuality versus normality. Thus, this solution is not for the free citizen, the individual, to oppose social norms, but rather to internalise them and create a kind of unity between the two. Moretti comments that the *Bildungsroman* is such a successful genre, a significant point of reference, as well as what he terms "the comfort of civilization", because it has "succeeded in representing this fusion with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equalled again" (562). Moretti concludes that "[more] than depicting the two opposing tensions of modern existence as coextensive and isomorphous, the synthetic vocation of the *Bildungsroman* presents them as complementary" (563).

Like the German and English male-dominated tradition, the female *Bildungsroman* sustains the complexity of the genre. To introduce their study of a female *Bildungsroman*, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland offer three questions to consider when discussing narratives of female development: "What psychological and social forces obstruct maturity for women? What are the prevailing patterns of women's development in fiction? How does gender qualify literary representations of development?" (Abel, Hirsch & Langland, 1983:4). It is necessary to include gender as a concept which colours development along with factors such as class and history, as "the sex of the protagonist modifies every aspect of a particular *Bildungsroman*: its narrative structure, its implied psychology, its representation of social pressures" (5).

Abel, Hirsch and Langland chart the development of the German novel and concur with the complexity of the category. They note the way that the genre has developed and has adapted, and, bearing this complex history in mind, they note that "the relationship between the individual and society, as it is represented in the novel, is marked by clashes of unique human possibility within the restraints of social convention" (6). However, they complicate this notion by pointing out that

> Critics have assumed that society constrains men and women equally. In fact, while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to

realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever. (6-7)

They note that the social options available to men and which the protagonist of the male *Bildungsroman* explores are not necessarily as accessible to women. For example, while the male protagonist embarks on his journey in adolescence or early adulthood, the female counterpart embarks on her journey later in life, often "after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient" (1983:7). Male protagonists often encounter the rigours of their society during their schooling or formal training, while women of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel rarely had access to formal education. Additionally, women have less freedom than men in such novels. Women are not free to leave their homes for an independent exploration in the city; more frequently "they merely exchange one domestic sphere for another" (8). Abel, Hirsch and Langland note that "[her] object is not to learn how to take care of herself, but to find a place where she can be protected, often in return for taking care of others" (8). We also find that women are not able to sever familial ties as easily as men are, which contributes to their confinement in domestic spheres. Moreover, on his journey the male protagonist comes across women with whom he initiates affairs or sexual encounters, "one debasing, one exalting" (8). However, regardless of the context or the nature of the relationship, if such a relationship were undertaken by a female protagonist it "would assure [her] expulsion from society" (8).

Some of the main differences regarding narratives of development stem from "inherently different psychological features of women's maturation" (Abel, Hirsch & Langland, 1983:9). Feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller and Carol Gilligan have provided a revision of the "traditional, hierarchical account of psychosexual differences" (9). While a Freudian approach "links psychological to anatomical differences" (9), this approach traces the "influence of gender on identity to the dynamics of the mother-infant bond" (9). In Freudian theory the "presence or absence of the phallus determines gender" (9), thus the female is defined by what she does not possess and manhood is only achieved by overcoming the fear of this lack, the fear of castration, by passage through the Oedipal complex. In addition, it is also important to note that

In Freudian theory, women remain culturally marginal, passive, dependent, and infantile. By shifting the focus from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal experience and by highlighting interpersonal relationships rather than anatomy, feminist theorists construct a picture of femininity as alternative, not inferior, to masculinity. (10)

In this revisionist approach the mother-child relationship is significant. Daughters identify more closely with their mothers and thus see themselves as "partially continuous" (10); however, for sons the separation and difference are learned early in life. The relationship and identification between mother and daughter fluctuate throughout adolescence and into adult life. The opposite is true for male children: "[whereas] boys define their identity by contrast, not relation, to the earliest caretaker, girls persist in defining themselves relationally and thus do not develop the precise and rigid ego boundaries common to males" (10). Thus, the way in which gender impacts identity formation is critical when discussing a female *Bildungsroman*:

Female fictions of development reflect the tensions between the assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists. The heroine's developmental course is more conflicted, less direct: separation tugs against the longing for fusion and the heroine encounters the conviction that the identity resides in intimate relationships, especially those of early childhood. (11)

Having firmly established the effect of gender on the developmental process of the self and the resulting social opportunities allows space for discussion of some characteristics of women's developmental fiction. Abel, Hirsch and Langland note that "[we] can describe this female version of the genre most dynamically in terms of recurrent narrative structures and thematic tensions" (11). Within the genre, there are two clear narrative patterns that emerge. The first model is that of apprenticeship which, in keeping with realist writing, is often chronological. Importantly, in "showing a continuous development from childhood to maturity, this paradigm adapts the linear structure of the male *Bildungsroman*" (11); however, such a progression does not necessarily manifest in the same way. Examples of female fictions of this model include Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The second narrative model is awakening which is characterised by "deferred maturation" (11). This development does not proceed chronologically from stage to stage but rather

after the "fairy-tale expectation" (12) of marriage and the resulting bliss. However, as this narrative "frequently portrays a break not from parental but marital authority, the novel of awakening is often a novel of adultery" (12). Additionally, development does not occur consistently but rather in "epiphanic" (12) flashes.

It is also important to consider the formal revisions of a plot charting female development. Abel, Hirsch and Langland note that the plot is often disguised: "the tensions that shape female development may lead to a disjunction between a surface plot, which affirms social conventions, and a submerged plot which encodes rebellion" (12). Narration through dreams and memories can also complicate this idea. Moreover, the concept of the protagonist is slightly adapted, and these novels often feature relatives or friends, who are most likely also female, whose own narrative is given equal attention.

Noting that the female narrative of development is coloured by gender and that certain formal revisions occur, it is also important to consider the thematic consequences. There are tensions that arise in such narratives which include anxiety regarding "autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men" (Abel, Hirsch & Langland, 1983:12). These tensions arise as a result of the female protagonist attempting to develop in a "culture pervaded by male norms" (12). There are other conflicts which are often realised in female fiction:

> Repeatedly, the female protagonist or *Bildungsheld* must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive "normality". (12-13)

However, by outlining these formal and thematic concerns we still do not arrive at a static definition of a female *Bildungsroman*. Yet there are certain aspects of the female model that remain congruent with the traditional genre; these include:

> [Belief] in a coherent self (although not necessarily an autonomous one); faith in the possibility of development (although change may be frustrated, may occur at different stages and rates, and may be concealed in the narrative); insistence on a time span in which development occurs (although the time

span may exist only in memory); and emphasis on social context (even as an adversary). (14)

A certain continuity with the traditional genre as well as compelling differences work together to provide a framework for fictions of female development. The genre has been reinvigorated by the "increased sense of freedom" (13) in the twentieth century. While the genre certainly has its critics and is complex, whether a male or female protagonist is presented, the idea of the *Bildungsroman* as "the evolution of a coherent self is key" (13). As Abel, Hirsch and Langland point out, the novel of development has become "the most salient form of literature, for contemporary women writing about women" (13).

In her book, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), Rita Felski considers the idea of emancipation narratives, narratives of self-development and a feminist *Bildungsroman* in contemporary literature. Felski notes that

> The contemporary narrative of female self-discovery thus cannot be understood as the liberation of a "true" women's writing from the straitjacket of a patriarchal system of representation, but is itself an ideological site, an active process of meaning production. (Felski, 1989:126)

Keeping this in mind, Felski provides a rough division of contemporary narratives of female self-discovery which correlate with two movements within feminism. The first, and the focus of this dissertation, is the feminist *Bildungsroman*. This is "characterized by a historical and linear structure; female self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity, however problematic and fraught with difficulties this proves to be" (Felski, 1989:127). She also notes that "[this] form of narrative is particularly strongly represented in realist feminist fiction" (127). The feminist *Bildungsroman* correlates with the tendency within feminism "represented by liberal and socialist feminism, [that] embraces a narrative model of history and progress, emphasizing the activist and participatory dimension of politics and the necessity of engagement in the public sphere" (127). The second form of female self-discovery is that of awakening, less central to this project, and which is represented by more radical forms of feminism. In order to justify and further explain the dichotomy

between the feminist *Bildungsroman* and the narrative of awakening, Felski emphasises that

> [The] broad division of feminist narratives into two groups derives from the degrees of emphasis given to either the inward transformation of consciousness or to active self-realization within the individual text, but it should be stressed that this division does not constitute an opposition or signify that these two models of female self-discovery are to be viewed as mutually exclusive. (1989:128)

Before beginning a more nuanced investigation of the feminist *Bildungsroman* Felski explores the idea of self-discovery narratives in more depth. Despite differences in feminist narratives they often "share a common starting point, typically beginning at the stage when the traditional plot of women's lives breaks off, with the attainment of a male sexual partner" (128). In this context it is important to consider that

> The defining feature of the feminist text is a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis for the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence, and subordination, and an attempt to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located. (129)

Thus, the starting point to which Felski refers "introduces a negative model, an image of female alienation which the text will strive to overcome" (129). This is exemplified by the figure of the housewife who prioritises the physical and emotional needs and desires of the male above her own. Felski expands:

> The internalization of this view of female identity as supplementary to and supportive of a male figure by women themselves is registered as the most disturbing indication of the deep-seated influence of patriarchal ideology; the protagonist is unable to see herself except in relation to the needs and desires of others. (129)

This creates a kind of lack in the female protagonist, a "problematic absence, [which] offers no basis from which to challenge existing ideologies of gender as they are manifested at the level of commonsense assumptions and everyday practices" (129). In Margaret Atwood's case, it is by providing development for her characters at the conclusion of the text that she is able to illustrate the female *Bildungsroman* and create successful feminist texts.

Felski goes on to explore the way in which female protagonists often experience a sense of isolation and alienation. This sense of alienation stems from

> A preformed destiny which the protagonist feels helpless to alter [.... This can be described] as a splitting of inner and outer self, the heroine experiencing a powerful estrangement from the external appearance by which her social status as a woman in a patriarchal culture is largely determined. (130)

It is also important to consider the way that language acts as a metaphor for alienation and estrangement; the idea that the female experience cannot be translated into the patriarchal cultural hegemony of language formation and development. Thus, the "key transformation of the text takes the protagonist from this stage of alienation, of sense of lack, to a conscious affirmation of gendered identity" (130). Felski notes that this model differs from previous narratives which result in the destruction of the female protagonist in that the contemporary model "describes a form of opposition through the resistance and survival of the heroine" (130).

The "psychological transformation" (131) that the heroine experiences can occur in two ways: firstly, it occurs abruptly, a sudden illumination "similar to religious conversion" (131), as described by Carol Christ. Or secondly, this change occurs gradually, "through a steady accumulation of insights into the structures of power governing relationships between men and women" (131). Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* (1979) is an example of the former, while *Cat's Eye* (1988) more closely resembles the latter model. However, both texts emphasise a shift in space. The first focuses on a "shift in physical space [... where] the heroine moves outward, from the oppressive environment of the city to the empty spaces of the wilderness" (Felski, 1989:131). Alternatively, a break from "traditional heterosexual relations deeply ingrained with patterns of subordination and domination" (131) is necessary.

This idea places significance on the role of relationships in the woman's process of self-discovery; however, "love relationships do not, as in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, contribute significantly to the protagonist's education" (131), as the intensity of erotic passion is considered to be, more often than not, a destructive force. In relationships between women, "knowledge, rather than desire, is emphasized", and

the other woman acts as a kind of double or mirror in which the "protagonist discovers herself" (131). The rejection of heterosexual relationships as a locus of meaning results in two alternative configurations: nature and community (132). Felski notes that

> Nature is often viewed as an extension of some kind of "feminine" principle; the violation of the natural world is perceived to reflect the oppression of women, the refusal of the values of industrialized and urbanized modernity simultaneously functions as a search for a lost female self, a return to origins. (132)

Atwood's *Surfacing* (1979) illustrates this notion of the natural that Felski describes. Additionally, "the model of the female community [that] offers an alternative form of intimacy grounded in gender identification" (Felski, 1989:132) is both illustrated and problematised in *Cat's Eye* (Atwood, 1989). The impact of nature and community is significant, as both "are perceived to complement and extend the protagonist's sense of self rather than to threaten it by absolute otherness, and thus provide a framework within which a gendered identity can be meaningfully located" (Felski, 1989:132). The focus of the feminist self-discovery narrative on the "process of psychological transformation rather than upon a detailed exploration of its social implications" (133) is significant. Felski suggests that "the resolution of the feminist narrative also functions as a beginning; the heroine's new self-knowledge creates a basis for future negotiation between the subject and society, the outcome of which is projected beyond the bounds of the text" (133). This is a notion to which Atwood pays heed in her texts, but also one that suggests a less rigid ideological structure and societal context than that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel.

Having explored ideas of narratives of female self-discovery, Rita Felski focuses more closely on one strain of these narratives, the feminist *Bildungsroman*. She begins her discussion by noting that the male *Bildungsroman*, now less common in contemporary literature, is concerned with inward development and little resulting activity. The opposite is true for the feminist *Bildungsroman*; its trajectory is "from the world within to the world without, from introspection to activity" (Felski, 1989:134). As has been well established, the *Bildungsroman* has a complex history, and thus Felski outlines four defining features of the genre. Firstly, it is biographical

as the novel centres around a "coherent individual identity" (135). It is also dialectical in that said identity is "the result of a complex interplay between psychological and social forces" (135). Moreover, the *Bildungsroman* is historical, as the formation of the protagonist's identity is presented as a "temporal process" and is indicated by means of a "linear and chronological narrative" (135). Lastly, it is also teleological, in that textual signification is organised "in relation to the projected goal of the protagonist's access to self-knowledge" (135). The idea of moving outward into society after a time of personal growth is necessary because it is only by so doing that "the protagonist [can] become critically aware of the limitations of her previously secluded existence and her unquestioning acceptance of the circumscribed nature of women's social roles" (135).

Felski also initiates some discussion of important ways in which the feminist *Bildungsroman* differs from the male *Bildungsroman*. While Felski agrees that it retains "distinctive structural features of the genre" (1989:137), there are certain aspects which do not correlate. For example, the male hero often experiences a journey which erodes his naïve ideals, leading him to adopt a more sober and realistic view of the world, which allows him to successfully integrate into society with a "resigned acceptance of the existing social order" (137). Conversely, where the male hero is worn down, the heroine is built up; for her "the journey into society does not signify a surrender of ideals and a recognition of limitations, but rather constitutes the precondition for oppositional activity and engagement" (137). The main reason for this difference can be explained by examining the starting point of the narratives. While the male is free to pursue his quest for enlightenment, the starting point for the female viewpoint is more "unambiguously identified as negative" (137), and is marked by "acquiescence, dependency, and powerlessness" (137). What the male hero possesses from the start the female heroine must struggle through the course of the text to claim. Additionally, the male *Bildungsroman* is often characterised by apprenticeship and thus focuses on childhood, adolescence and early adulthood; however, "the feminist *Bildungsroman* embraces a much wider range of ages" (137). While the male *Bildungsroman* often ends with a socially sanctioned and accepted marriage to a suitable woman, the feminist journey begins "only after the experience of marriage [has allowed the protagonist] to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female self-identity" (137-138). Thus, the characteristic

journey of self discovery often manifests in later stages of life for the protagonist of the feminist *Bildungsroman*. Having outlined the characteristics of a distinctly female *Bildungsroman* it is necessary to consider the structure at its core, the journey; and thus quest mythology and structures are significant.

The final theoretical approach that I will discuss is with regard to the quest and quest patterns and motifs. The quest is rooted in mythology, and so in order to explore this notion properly we must examine noted scholar Joseph Campbell's mythic structure, which is outlined in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1956). It is important to note, however, that Campbell's work is embedded in Western society, and thus does apply to this study of Margaret Atwood but not to every text at every time. Additionally, although I will make use of Campbell's mythic structure I will subsequently use a more gender-conscious approach. In his book, Campbell explores the idea of the hero and the adventure of the hero, otherwise known as a quest. Campbell also argues the idea of a 'monomyth', a term first coined by Irish novelist and poet James Joyce, which refers to the patterns and archetypes that unfold in all cultural writings, myths and religions. He adopts the idea of the archetype from the work of psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung. Jung conceptualises this idea of archetypes as the foundation, the building blocks of our unconscious mind and of the collective unconscious of a group of people. In his book, Campbell (1956) notes that "the archetypes to be discovered and assimilated are precisely those that have inspired, throughout the annals of human culture, the basic images of ritual, mythology and religion" (18). These archetypes are how a group of people is able to speak the same language and interpret stories that are told.

Campbell takes this idea of archetypes and uses it to chart the underlying structure of myth and religion. Since each narrative must have a protagonist, in this case a hero (very rarely a heroine), the resulting journey or quest is considered the adventure of the hero. Before Campbell addresses this journey he notes that the task of the hero is twofold. The primary aspect is noted in this statement:

> The first work of the hero is to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them in his own case […] and

break through to the undistorted, direct experience and assimilation of what C. G. Jung called 'the archetypal images'. (17-18)

This encapsulates the basic progression of the quest journey. The second task of the hero relates to his actions after his return to the community: upon his "transfigured" return, he is to teach the community "the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (19). Thus, this second aspect suggests a restorative or transformative effect on the community, which is significant.

The mythic structure which Campbell develops comprises three parts: separation, initiation and return. This formula can be termed "the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (30). Campbell summarises this pattern in the following way:

> The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

Although the mythic structure consists of three major parts, each can be broken down further to reveal a more nuanced progression of the journey. The first stage is that of departure or separation, and this is the beginning of the hero's journey. It is comprised of five subsections; firstly, the call to adventure, or "the first signs of the vocation of the hero" (36). This is the first notice that the life of the hero is about to change. The second stage is the refusal of the call; the hero denies his calling or duty out of a sense of fear, inadequacy or obligation to his present situation. Once the hero has chosen to pursue his quest, whether consciously or unconsciously, he is provided with supernatural aid or guidance from a magical helper; this is the third stage. The fourth stage is crossing the first threshold. This is the point where the physical adventure begins and the hero enters the realm of the unknown (77). Finally, the belly of the whale is the point which represents the final separation from the hero's known world. This is the stage at which the separation between the old and new self begins, as the experiences to be faced are often symbolised by something dark and terrifying, which represents a kind of dying to one's old self and a resulting metamorphosis (90).

The second major stage in the progression of the quest is the initiation, the stage in which the hero faces a series of physical or spiritual challenges in order to prove he is

worthy (97). The first part of this is the road of trials, which consists of a series of tests that the hero must undergo before the transformation can begin. The second part is meeting with the goddess, which represents a time during which the hero experiences a significant, all-encompassing love. This is the time the quester finds the person he/she loves most in the world. Despite the title of this stage the person is not necessarily a woman. The next stage is the woman as temptress, again not necessarily represented by a woman, but rather any force that would cause the hero to stray from his path. This often entails revulsion that the hero feels about his own fleshly nature projected onto women, as it is most often lust that causes the hero to stray from his spiritual journey (122). The fourth stage is atonement with the father, which is a confrontation with whomever or whatever holds the ultimate power in the hero's life. This is the central point of the journey and results in a death, whether literal or figurative, which initiates the metamorphosis of the hero. The penultimate stage of this state is apotheosis, or for the hero to become god-like. Here the hero experiences a state of divine knowledge, love, compassion and bliss. The final stage is the ultimate boon; this is the achievement of the goal of the quest, the attainment of the grail or elixir of life. All the previous steps represent the purification process for the fulfilment of this step (173).

The final stage of the mythic structure is the return, which is the hero's journey back to from whence he came, a journey not without its own challenges (193). The first part of this stage is the refusal of the return; the hero is reluctant to return to his ordinary life as he would rather remain in a world of bliss and ambrosia. The second stage is the magic flight, which is the escape with the boon if it is something closely guarded by the gods. The next stage is the rescue from without, which represents guidance and assistance offered by a helper on the return; just as on the journey, this person often encourages the hero and reminds him of his duty to the community. Crossing the return threshold refers to the task of attempting to integrate the wisdom gained on the quest into everyday life. The fifth stage is the mastery of two worlds, which is an extension of struggle to achieve a balance between the material and spiritual (229). The final stage of the quest is the freedom to live. This is the result of mastery of two worlds, and refers to a freedom from the fear of death and thus a freedom to live. This suggests a kind of *carpe diem* attitude.

As is evident, "the monomyth contains many elements; [however, this] is not to say that every hero acts out each element" (Leeming, 1990:216). This point is crucial to this project. Although Campbell's mythic structure is extensive, in order to identify quest patterns and motifs in Atwood's texts I will adhere to the broad structure of separation-initiation-return, and point out other salient sections when necessary. Campbell's structure is crucial in any discussion of myth and quest structures, and thus makes an apt foundation for this project; however, his work is quite dated and came about before the Women's Movements of the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Thus, I will augment this study of quest patterns and motifs with Annis Pratt's work regarding feminist archetypes, which she explores in her book, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981).

Pratt (1981) begins by laying out the etymology of the word archetype, deriving from the Greek, 'archi' and 'typos', meaning "beginning" and "stamp" respectively, thus collectively denoting "the primordial form, the original, of a series of variations" (5). She references Jung's idea that these primordial forms derive from the unconscious mind and thus "literary forms […] derive from [that] unconscious original" (5). Pratt identifies that in Jung as well as Campbell's framework women are peripheral, "either exterior containers for male projections or subordinate elements of the male personality" (8). Similarly, Campbell "depicts women as auxiliaries to men, elements to be absorbed in masculine maturation" (1981:8); however, Pratt does credit Campbell with the revision of his work in later years. Pratt notes the necessity of the feminist archetypal critic when she states that in women's novels:

> We are outcasts in the land, […] we have neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society. Our quests are being thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do: when we seek an identity based on human personhood rather than on gender, we stumble about in a landscape whose signposts indicate retreats from, rather than ways to selfhood. (6)

Yet Pratt is aware of the challenges of such a task. She notes that literature is dominated by male archetypes, even with regard to female characters. Additionally, this task is complicated by the fact that "the novel is a social construct and that women authors internalize gender norms from birth" (Pratt, 1981:11). However, Pratt seeks to make use of the important elements of male archetypal writing and discard

those that are superfluous, while being careful not to simply privilege the female in a male archetype. In seeking out these recurring patterns, Pratt organises her framework by providing archetypes that recur in different forms of the novel. The frameworks she provides for the novel of development and for novels of rebirth and transformation are a useful adaptation of Campbell's theories for analysing the selected texts by Atwood.

Pratt (1981) notes that the quest for selfhood is at the centre of the *Bildungsroman*. However, in the case of the protagonist in the classical *Bildungsroman*, "the supreme goal [in such novels] is to groom the young hero for marriage" (14). Additionally, with regard to female protagonists we find that often as a result of societal pressures and expectations, the "genre pursues the opposite of its generic intent – it provides models for 'growing down' rather than for growing up" (14). In the *Bildungsroman*, part of the journey of self-discovery is learning and conforming to the assigned gender norms. In the case of the woman, Pratt suggests this means learning to be "dependent, submissive or "nonadult", which results in "imagery of entrapment and fear of psychological invasion" (16). Pratt notes that this is not always apparent but is revealed in the larger narrative trajectory, counteracted only by "images of desire for authentic selfhood" (16).

The first archetype that Pratt notes in which this desire is expressed is the Green-World Archetype. In this archetype nature is central, as there is a kind of nature worship for the female adolescent, or alternatively, "nature remains a refuge throughout life" (1981:17). Nature is a solace as she "confronts her present placelessness and her future submission within a male culture" (17). However, this is not a permanent place, but rather a space that is inhabited in adolescence and early adulthood, and memories and experiences which are returned to, which act as "touchstones" (17) later in her "midlife rebirth journey" (17). The protagonist's bond with nature can, in keeping with the transformation of the mythic structure, initiate a "process of metamorphosis" (19) through which the protagonist takes on and becomes an element of nature. Often the "solace, companionship and independence" (21) that the woman finds in nature is disrupted by the arrival of the male antagonist, and so nature in this case becomes a kind of "ally", a "talisman that enables her to make her

way through the alienations of male society" (21). Another aspect of this archetype is the Green-World Lover. Pratt describes this phenomenon as occurring when

> The young woman turns away from appropriate males toward fantasies of a figure, projected from within her own personality, more suitable to her needs [….] [T]his figure is closely associated with the naturistic epiphany, a vision of the green world that calls up from the feminine unconscious the image of an ideal lover and almost always includes a rejection of social expectation concerning engagement and marriage. (22-23)

However, the Green-World and the Green-World Lover are not sustained but rather something that is recalled in retrospect, a "state of innocence that becomes most poignant as one is initiated into experience" (22). The manifestation of this archetype appears in both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*.

The second archetype that Pratt explores is the Rape Trauma. Pratt notes that for the woman erotic freedom, "the right to make love when and with whom they wish" (1981:24), is not only opposed by the patriarchal order, but rape is offered as a substitute. This violation is seen within the confines of a legitimised marriage. Thus, men are "pictured as agents of harsh disruption" (25). The trauma of such an event characterises the gothic novel: "the horrific element of gothic fiction conveys in the woman's novel the idea of women as unjustly treated by society and pictures men as agents to be feared and 'the chase' as a hardship to be endured" (28). In some cases, nature and the Green-World offer some solace, but both are also affected as a result of the trauma. The hero is not always able to recover from such an experience and thus is often unable to enact restoration of the Green-World.

The final archetype that Pratt identifies in novels of development is the Growing-Up-Grotesque archetype. This references the consistent resistance that the hero encounters on her journey of self discovery, as "the vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero's attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with the expectations and dictates of the surrounding society" (29). This is often indicated in contemporary fiction by images of entrapment that were so prevalent in gothic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pratt notes that the result of this resistance is often that the female hero "finds herself confused and isolated at best and at worst succumbs to madness or an early death" (33). As with the Green-World

archetype, shades of this structure are evident in both *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*. As Pratt concludes her discussion of archetypes in novels of development she notes that "the hero does not *choose* a life to one side of society after conscious deliberation on the subject; rather, she is radically alienated by genre-role norms *from the very outset*" (36). This leads Pratt to conclude that in "most novels of development it seems clear that the authors conceive of growing up female as a choice between auxiliary or secondary personhood, sacrificial victimization, madness and death" (36); however, I would maintain that although Atwood does explore these stages she does not settle firmly on a single one, but rather concludes with the optimistic possibility of a complete self going forward.

Pratt notes that the rebirth journey, "the quest into the unconscious" (135), is in fact an archetype in women's fiction. She notes that this journey of transformation is a spiritual quest embarked on by an older generation of women and thus differentiated from the social quest of the *Bildungsroman*, embarked on by adolescents and women entering early adulthood. The journey of transformation and rebirth being its own archetype is separated into stages, which Pratt suggests gives it congruency with Campbell's adventure of the hero and Jung's structure of the quest for individuation. The first stage is the splitting off from family, husbands or lovers, which is characterised by "turning away from societal norms" (1981:139). The second stage is the Green-World guide or token. This phase offers some measure of aid to the protagonist, as the "hero is helped to cross the threshold of her adventure by some ordinary phenomenon that suddenly takes on extraordinary portent" (139). The third stage of this progression is the Green-World lover, which is a kind of ideal figure who does not strictly conform to patriarchal norms. This figure does not constitute a significant turning point, but does initiate some social development, as this figure "leads the hero away from society and towards her own unconscious depths" (140). The penultimate stage is confrontation with parental figures, which often takes place in the memory or in visions, rather than an actual battle. The final stage is the plunge into the unconscious, which the hero is now free to enter having confronted the "figures of the subconscious" (141). This is often a time of difficulty and one that involves a certain amount of risk and "psychological danger", because it is as likely "to lead to madness as to renewal" (142). However, if this journey is successful it can create "transformed, androgynous [as in not confined and stifled by gender norms],

and powerful human personalities" (142). This framework which Pratt provides for the novel of rebirth and transformation is especially useful for an analysis of Atwood's *Surfacing*, which I will engage with later on.

As I proceed with the analysis of my primary texts, I will use the theoretical framework, consisting of a gender-conscious approach, the female *Bildungsroman*, and quest patterns, as an underlying structure on which to base my analysis of the texts. I will explore additional issues that each of the texts raises in order to enhance readings of female *Bildungsromane* and to explore a broad range of issues within the genre. I will close this dissertation with an analysis of the extent to which these texts illustrate the female *Bildungsroman* and quest patterns as well as an analysis of the ways in which they constitute extensions and manipulations of the genre which result in a kind of hybrid text.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Weaving and Unweaving’: Narrative Tools and Feminist Myth in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*

> Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings. (Atwood, in: Howells, 2008:5)

> Dripping water wears away stone. (Atwood, 2006:43)

Margaret Atwood’s 2005 novel, *The Penelopiad*, forms part of a series also containing Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth* and Jeanette Winterson’s *Weight*. The Canongate Myths Series is one which “brings together some of the world’s finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way” (*The Penelopiad*, 2006). The significance of this project and the use of ancient myths and legends is central, as myths constitute “universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human” (*The Penelopiad*, 2006).

This is especially pertinent given the focus of this dissertation, and thus in this chapter I will explore the way in which Atwood’s novel represents the female appropriation of a quest narrative. I will examine this feminist quest narrative by firstly, providing an exposition of Homer’s original myth and Atwood’s *Penelopiad* comparatively; and secondly, I will explore the narrative techniques that Atwood uses, such as the Underworlds, Penelope as a narrator, narrative transformations and the role of the maids. Thirdly, I will interrogate the class and gender issues that are raised in the text. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘re-visioning’ and how it applies to this text as well as an overall evaluation of representation of quest and development in the text.

Two of Homer’s most famous poems are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The first tells of Helen, daughter of Zeus and Aphrodite, being abducted by Paris to the city of Troy. This incited a war between peoples when Helen’s husband, Menelaus and his brother

Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, sought to retrieve her. There were many Greek heroes that fought for the Greeks, of whom Odysseus was one. The conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans lasted nearly a decade. After this time the Greeks tricked the Trojans into believing that they had abandoned the war. They withdrew their armies from around the walls of Troy and offered the Trojans a huge wooden horse as a kind of peace offering. The Trojans opened their gates and took the horse into their city, not knowing that it was filled with Greek soldiers, and they celebrated with feasts, parties and drinking. The Greeks emerged from the horse when the celebrations had dwindled and sacked the city while the Trojans were unaware, thereby winning the Trojan War. However, during this sack of the city some of the Greek heroes, for example Ajax 'the lesser', committed crimes against the gods, specifically Athena (goddess of knowledge and reason), their own patron goddess. The gods responded in anger, sending great winds to scatter their ships on their return to Mycenae.

This is where Homer's second major work begins, as after ten years of attempting to correct his course Odysseus is still lost at sea. Penelope, Odysseus's wife, remains at their home in Ithaca with their son Telemachus. They are surrounded by suitors attempting to win Penelope's widowed hand, and they put enormous strain on the household. This is the context of *The Odyssey*, but the focus is on Odysseus himself. Jasper Griffin (2004) provides a useful synopsis of the text. The poem opens with discussion by Zeus and Athena that Odysseus may return home and Odysseus's son, Telemachus, journeys to learn news of his father and tries to make plans to ward off the suitors who have invaded his home. When we first encounter Odysseus himself he is leaving the island of the enchantress Calypso where he has been imprisoned. Calypso has been instructed by the gods to release Odysseus, which she is reluctant to do, but when he declines her offer of immortality to be shared with her, she gives him tools and supplies to build a ship and sees him on his way. His new vessel is promptly wrecked, and he throws himself at the mercy of the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa and her maids as they play naked on the beach. He comes before the princess's father, King Alcinous, and his wife Arete, but does not reveal his true identity; he evades their suggestion of marriage to their daughter, and regales them with the tales of his travels before he came to be a prisoner on Calypso's island.

We learn that Odysseus first raided the Cicones in Thrace, then was blown off course to the land of the lotus-eaters where he escaped trance-like apathy, and was blown further off course to the island of the Cyclops, where he encountered a Cyclops named Polyphemus from whom he tried to steal. When the Cyclops attacked him Odysseus blinded him and escaped by tricking him, which incited the rage of the sea-god Poseidon, father of Polyphemus. On the island of the god Aeolus, Odysseus was given a bag containing the winds, including the favourable west wind which would guide him back home. But while Odysseus slept his men opened the bag and were blown back to the isle where Aeolus refused to help them a second time. On their journey Odysseus and his crew arrived at the isle of the Laestrygonians, but when they learnt that the inhabitants were ogres, the crew came under attack and only one of Odysseus's twelve ships was able to escape. This lone ship arrived on the island of Circe, a witch and seductress, who turned the crew to pigs, sparing only Odysseus, to whom she was drawn. After a "year of love" (36) he asked to leave, but Circe insisted that he was only able to do so after seeking instruction from the dead. He summoned the dead seer Tiresias, who told Odysseus of his future journeys, and Odysseus saw the punishment of damned souls. After Odysseus and his crew, freshly returned to their human forms, left Circe they passed the monster Scylla and also passed by the deadly whirlpool Charybdis. They greedily slaughtered forbidden sheep on the island of the sun god and were punished by a lightning bolt to their ships. Odysseus is the only survivor and is shipwrecked on Calypso's island. His tale concluded, and with the aid of the Phaeacians, he returns to his home in Ithaca.

In Ithaca, Odysseus seeks the assistance of the swineherd Eumaeus. When Telemachus, having returned from Sparta, visits the swineherd, Odysseus reveals himself to his son, and the two of them plot to depose the suitors. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, returns to his household where he sees Penelope, who does not recognise him, and is met with antagonism by many of his servants and the suitors. The time Odysseus and Telemachus spend in the household is used to remove some of the suitors' weaponry in anticipation of the coming conflict, and Odysseus and Penelope also converse. He maintains that he is not her husband but rather that she had entertained him many years ago and he claims that he knows Odysseus is on his way back home and is not far away. Penelope remains unconvinced and Odysseus is dismissed to be tended to by Eurycleia, his old nurse. While she washes his feet, she

identifies Odysseus by a scar on his leg from a boar attack, but he encourages her to keep his identity a secret. Penelope confides in Odysseus that she is going to set a test for the suitors, involving stringing his bow. During this task no one is able to string the bow save Odysseus, who then reveals himself and begins to attack the suitors with the aid of Telemachus and Eumaeus. All the suitors are killed, and Telemachus and Odysseus hang the "disloyal" (38) maid-servants. When Eurycleia informs Penelope of the situation and that Odysseus has returned she is sceptical and tests him about the marriage bed that he had carved from a tree. When she is convinced he recounts his tale and the two are "united at last in love" (38). At the conclusion of the poem Odysseus visits his frail father and reveals himself while the souls of the dead suitors are escorted to the Underworld and the surviving suitors plan revenge; there is a skirmish but only a few were killed. Athena and Zeus engineer lasting peace which is enacted in Ithaca.

The Penelopiad provides Penelope's view of the events of *The Odyssey* from her position at her marital home in Ithaca. The novel offers insight into Penelope's history and relationships, and the "story is grounded in the domestic details of her life as daughter, wife and mother, and then queen who manages her husband's estates on the island of Ithaca for twenty years single-handed" (Šlapkauskaitė, 2007:10). However, the novel also focuses on Penelope's relationship with her twelve handmaids, who appear as a haunting chorus in the text, and on the reason for their execution. Penelope attempts to provide an explanation that does not implicate her in their deaths, but the way in which her story is constructed is often in contrast to this aim. Her position as a possibly unreliable narrator denies the reader any closure regarding this issue, and leaves one speculating as to the true nature of Penelope's character. The novel also offers powerful comments on class and gender issues.

In Atwood's text Penelope is long dead, as is the chorus of maids, and she is speaking, figuratively, as she makes a point of noting that the shades have no physical mouths or bodies, from her place in the Underworld. She begins by emphasising that this is her chance to tell the truth and to set the record straight, to some extent. Penelope's tale is often interrupted by brief songs by the chorus of maids which add a layer of commentary to Penelope's narrative. The maids maintain that despite whatever excuses Penelope may try to offer, their death was unfair and unjust, and

they were victims of patriarchal power. Penelope, daughter of King Icarius of Sparta and his wife, a naiad, begins by explaining her childhood, how she was thrown into the sea by her father after he heard a prophecy from an oracle, and how she was subsequently rescued by a "flock of purple-striped ducks" (Atwood, 2006:9). She has a strained relationship with her father and inattentive mother thereafter, and lives in the shadow of her beautiful and cruel cousin, Helen, to whom she compares herself throughout the course of the novel. She becomes engaged to Odysseus and they depart Sparta for his home in Ithaca, a change which Penelope welcomes as an opportunity to begin a new life.

Although their marriage was not a love match, Penelope is fond of Odysseus and relishes their mutual cleverness and ability to spin yarns. While in Ithaca Penelope feels lonely as her mother-in-law Anticleia dislikes her, and Eurycleia, Odysseus's childhood nursemaid, dotes on him endlessly, leaving Penelope very little to do. She finds that even after her son Telemachus is born, she has very little parental control as even that is usurped by Eurycleia. When the Trojan War erupts and Odysseus's plan to remain in Ithaca is foiled, in part by Penelope's folly, he departs to the battle, and Penelope hears of him only in songs. She hears of his cleverness in battle strategy and his part in the planning of the wooden horse and finally the Greeks' victory in Troy and his inevitable return, and then she no longer receives news of her husband. She hears rumours of her husband's adventures, some fantastical and some rather ordinary, but as time passes the palace at Ithaca is invaded by suitors who seek to take the 'widowed' Penelope as their wife and inherit the estate and the fortune of the Princess of Sparta. Unable to dissuade them, Penelope devises a plan to weave a shroud for her ailing father-in-law, and only when it is complete will she choose a husband. However, she enlists the help of twelve maids to help her unweave the shroud nightly so that it is never completed. She also encourages these maids to spy for her, understanding that in order for them to do their work they must become sexually involved with the suitors and are often raped. During the course of Penelope's plan Odysseus returns home in disguise. Penelope claims that she is not fooled but goes along with his ruse and enacts a challenge that she knows only he can win. While this challenge is going on Penelope sleeps in the women's quarters and does not wake for the ensuing battle when Odysseus, Telemachus and two herders defeat and slaughter the other suitors; neither does she wake during the hanging of her

twelve maids, whom she loved. She fears Odysseus's reaction if she objects to this execution and so stays silent, forever haunted by the death of her maids.

In studying Atwood's *Penelopiad* as a feminist appropriation and revision of classical myth, one must examine the ways in which Atwood executes this strategy. The first significant aspect is the choice of Penelope as the narrator and her location in the Underworld. Penelope as the narrator is clearly significant in a female re-visioning of the Odyssey myth, as is her "[expression of] remorse for the death of her maids" (Suzuki, 2007:269) as depicted in the original myth; however, it is the vision of the Underworld that she provides for the reader that suggests that this narrative is much more than the original myth. The Underworld is mentioned in Greek mythology, and many heroes make a journey to the Underworld as a part of their quest. In Homer's *Odyssey*, although Odysseus does not physically travel to the Underworld he is required to summon the seer Tiresias in a kind of séance. Odysseus also sees the ghosts of Achilles, Agamemnon and other fallen heroes, and Agamemnon specifically mentions Odysseus's fortune at having Penelope for a wife. Agamemnon also notes that Penelope would not betray Odysseus in the same way that his own wife, Clytemnestra, did, as Penelope is "too sound in heart and brain for that. The wise Penelope!" (Homer, 1945:188). Hilde Staels offers her opinion of the role of the Underworld in the text, noting that the novel

> metafictionally deals with the artist's symbolic journey into the dark Underworld, the realm of the dead who possess the stories from the past. The Underworld is a source of knowledge and inspiration, from which the artist ideally returns with a tale. (2009:110)

The Underworld which Penelope inhabits bears resemblance to that of Greek mythology, but there are several specific characteristics by which it is defined. For example, the souls that reside in the Underworld no longer have bodies; death is a "state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness" (Atwood, 2006:1). Penelope notes the difficulty of telling her side of the story because she has no mouth, no voice: "when I try to scream, I sound like an owl" (2). The fact that Penelope draws the reader's attention to her lack of voice but specifically notes that this is her opportunity to share her version of events highlights the constructed nature of the narrative, in the same way that the shroud was meticulously woven. This awareness of the writer or

storyteller is characteristic of Atwood's writing, and contributes to our discussion of Penelope as a female proprietor of myth in the novel. This lack of a body is complicated further in that several times when Penelope encounters revenants from her life they seem to have some kind of form. Whenever she sees Antinous, the first of the suitors to be slain in the massacre, he disregards his usual haughty aura and "assumes the guise of his own corpse, with blood spurting all down his front and an arrow through his neck" (99). Penelope has another encounter in the Underworld, with Helen, who is on her way to bathe. Penelope reminds her that as spirits they have neither the bodies nor the need to bathe. However, this encounter leads us to believe that the spirits do have some kind of form that can be perceived by those with whom they share the Underworld, as Penelope refers to the way that merely a glimpse of Helen's "bare-naked tits-and-ass bath treat for the dead" can "perk up" (155) the throng of male spirits that shadows her.

Although the inhabitants of the Underworld no longer have physical forms, they retain many of their characteristics from their life on earth. For example, the animosity that exists between Penelope and her cousin Helen during their living years transcends the boundaries of death, and even their encounters in the Underworld are terse and cruel. Additionally, ghosts seem to use their time to haunt other ghosts, such as the way in which Odysseus is haunted by the spirits of the hanged maids. Penelope uses their dogged haunting of Odysseus to justify why he does not spend time with her in the Underworld. She claims that whenever they get close to one another he sees the maids in the distance, and "[they] make him nervous. They make him restless. They cause him pain. They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else" (189). When Penelope says Odysseus wants to be 'anyone else' she refers to the River Lethe in the Underworld, the river of forgetfulness. Drinking from this river allows drinkers to forget their past lives and to be reborn. Odysseus has been reborn several times: "He's been a French general, he's been a Mongolian invader, he's been a tycoon in America, he's been a headhunter in Borneo. He's been a film star, an inventor, an advertising man" (189-190). However, unlike the seamless reincarnation that the river initiates in Greek mythology, Penelope notes that the "Waters of Forgetfulness don't always work the way they're supposed to" (186-187).

Other aspects of the Underworld which Atwood offers variations of include the separation of souls. In Greek mythology the heaven-hell dichotomy of Western Christian culture was not prescribed, and so although all passed-on souls proceeded to the Underworld, some were sent to the Elysium fields and others to Tartarus. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope mentions the fields of Asphodel, with "pretty enough white flowers" (2006:15), which serves as a kind of heaven, whereas the "truly villainous" were sent to another area where their punishment was of the mental variety; however, it is no less severe as it is "hard to put up with the screams" (16). Penelope in fact makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to the hell of modern Christian culture, describing it as a "more spectacular establishment down the road – fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks – and a great many special effects" (18-19), which upstages their own vision of the Underworld. Another element of the Underworld which Atwood references is the blood sacrifice ritual, which Odysseus himself performs in *The Odyssey*, where the blood of a sacrificed animal is poured into a trench dug in the ground. Penelope explains this ritual from the side of the Underworld as "a lot of pushing and shoving, a lot of slurping and spilling; there were a lot of crimson chins. However, it was glorious to feel the blood coursing in our non-existent veins again, if only for an instant" (18). The drinking of the blood creates a sinister, vampiristic element that contributes to Atwood's creation of the Gothic in her Underworld. The way in which Atwood adopts elements of the Underworld from Greek mythology, emphasising the idea of bodies and how they retain some part of themselves from a previous life, and the way in which one cannot truly be reborn, all provide a vision of an Underworld that is at once familiar and very strange. This disturbing quality classifies Atwood's Underworld as the "Gothic territory of the Uncanny" (Howells, 2008:8).

It is important to consider Penelope herself and the narration of her version of events as she tells her life story "in the form of a confession, […] in self-defence and self-justification" (Howells, 2008:5). I have already highlighted her disembodied nature, to which all ghosts are confined, and the way in which this draws attention to her literal 'telling' of the narrative. However, there are other significant aspects, such as the reason Penelope feels the need to provide us with her version of events, as well as the tone that she uses. Both these aspects contribute to Atwood's skilful use of narrative technique and contribute to the way in which *The Penelopiad* can be

considered a re-visioning of the original myth. In the Introduction to the novel Atwood notes that in the original myth Penelope is "portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy" (2006:xix). This is a description of which she is both proud and constantly striving, even in death, to change. Penelope is quite pleased with her level of intelligence and the fact that, as husband and wife, she and Odysseus both possessed similar levels of wiliness; she later remarks that "the two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing" (173). She uses her intelligence to compensate for the fact that she pales in comparison to her cousin Helen, in terms of appearance. Throughout the novel, she constantly compares herself to her cousin, and often mentions Helen in unrelated conversations. For example, when she dreams of Odysseus trapped on an island, deliriously making love with a seductress, "the goddess turned into Helen; she was looking at me over the bare shoulder of my husband with a malicious little smirk" (123). This jealousy manifests itself in bitterness, which is evident when Penelope remarks that "I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice" (33). The tense relationship is an example of sororophobia which Mihoko Suzuki (2007) notes is a "[recapitulation of] Atwood's earlier exploration of 'sororophobia' in the problematic relationship between Elaine and Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*" (270). Penelope also shares strained relationships with her own mother, her mother-in-law Anticleia, and Odysseus's nurse maid, Eurycleia.

In combination with the inferiority that Penelope feels when compared to Helen, speaking from the Underworld, Penelope is drawing on the body of criticism and rumours that have been directed at her and told about her over the centuries. There are three main generalisations that have been made about Penelope that she wishes to set right in the novel: firstly, that she was duped by Odysseus and that she was nothing more than a victim of his trickery: "what a fool he made of me, some say", notes Penelope (Atwood, 2006:2). Secondly, she is described as a kind of ideal, a patient submissive woman, easily manipulated by the skill and cleverness of her admirable and heroic husband. She objects to this description because it denies her the credit she deserves; she urges other women not to follow suit: "*Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours!"(2). This version of events has turned her into "an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as

considerate, as trustworthy, as all suffering as I had been?" (2); she is portrayed in such a way in Homer's original myth and in other Greek mythology. The final generalisation is that Penelope was not a loyal wife at all, but rather having an affair with several of the suitors who invade the estate in Ithaca; that is what she was doing when she was supposedly weaving the shroud for her father-in-law or wailing and crying in her quarters. This rumour is one that she addresses in a chapter entitled "Slanderous Gossip", and which she maintains is completely unfounded. Yet her vehement denial of such rumours is undermined by her earlier musings that "[she] occasionally daydreamed about which one [she] would rather go to bed with" (105). In this version her twelve handmaids were hanged because they had knowledge of these events, and would betray Penelope to Odysseus out of obedience to their master. In one of their choral chapters the maids suggest that Penelope's constant weeping, for which she is well renowned, was simply a method of "[masking] her lust with gales of moans and weeping" (147). Penelope notes that she has not been able to counter such rumours until this time, because when a woman tries to defend herself against scandalous gossip it is often seen as some warped admission of guilt; as Penelope says, "If she defends herself she sounds guilty" (3). Thus, Penelope takes this opportunity, at a time were there are few people that still consider her behaviour and fewer still left to contradict her, so she will "spin a thread of [her] own" (4). *The Penelopiad* is "her story of resistance to all those other stories" (Howells, 2008:10). In this account she takes back the traditional Homeric myth and illustrates her own intelligence and her own part in the making of this history. She denies that she is the passive, submissive woman tricked by her husband, but rather claims that she is the smart and cunning woman who outwitted Odysseus himself. This strategy of appropriation is strengthened by the tone which Penelope chooses. We find that she has a kind of sarcastic and caustic tone, especially when discussing the behaviour and rumours of her husband. This mocking tone that highlights Odysseus's adventures leads readers into their own form of disbelief which works in Penelope's favour.

It is through Penelope that the re-visioning of *The Odyssey* myth is focalised. I have discussed Atwood's use of her as a narrator and how this contributes to a female appropriation of the Homeric text; however, it is important to consider the reliability of Penelope as a narrator. We are clearly told that this is her opportunity to contribute to the discussion, yet are we simply to accept her contributions? Penelope prides

herself on her cleverness, wittiness and her ability to 'spin a yarn' that rivals even her husband's. These traits that differentiate her from the weeping, wailing woman of *The Odyssey* are the very attributes that should inspire some distrust in her tale. For example, she details the everyday activities of her life in Ithaca, emphasising how lonely she is and how her duties as Odysseus's wife and Telemachus's mother are usurped by Eurycleia, which seems like an effort to garner sympathy from the reader, which suggests that the reader is being manipulated on some level. Coral-Ann Howells (2008) also points out that Penelope's enjoyment of Odysseus's storytelling is marked by her ability to do the same, often illustrated when she "[devises] alternative explanations for events which make her feel uncomfortable or unloved" (12). An example of this is when she explains how her father tossed her into the sea as a child, never offering a true explanation, and how she was saved by a flock of purple ducks. She muses that "[she likes] to think that she [her mother] may been responsible for calling up the flock of ducks" (Atwood, 2006:11), a statement shortly followed by the flippant dismissal of how absent-minded and inattentive her mother was, denying her the attention and affection that she craved.

This analysis of Penelope reveals subtle flaws in her character that she is unable to mask sufficiently. The portrayal that she attempts to 'sell' to the reader contains "small ruptures of the unity of her character", which suggests that her "self-representation is a consciously laundered one" (Kapuscinski, 2015:10), and one which suggests that she is "carefully moderating the degree of guilt she is opening herself up to" (11). A particularly pertinent incident to interrogate at this stage is the hanging of Penelope's maids after the slaughter of the Suitors. In the official version, Penelope and the maids are separated, as Penelope is in the women's quarters, locked out of the conflict, where she falls asleep, and the maids are summoned to clean up the blood and gore after the massacre, shortly after which they are hanged. In trying to explain how she was unable to avoid these murders Penelope compromises the integrity of her account. Howells (2008) summarises and interprets the official record, noting that

> Penelope does not rescue her maids, pleading from Homer's script that she did not know; like all the other women she was locked out from the slaughter of the suitors in the hall and had fallen asleep. However, she advances so many excuses for her own behaviour toward her favourites and so many alternative

explanations for why they were hanged that we begin to suspect that she protests too much. (13)

After Penelope recounts their death and begins explaining her own inability to prevent it she shifts the blame to Eurycleia, firstly alleging that the reason that she "slept through the mayhem" (Atwood, 2006:157) was because Eurycleia "put something in the comforting drink she gave [her], to keep [her] out of the action and stop [her] from interfering" (157). The first mention, this theory seems plausible as Penelope is careful to point out Eurycleia's disapproval of her special treatment of the twelve maids. However, later in the chapter she mentions the possibility of Eurycleia's involvement, again suggesting that "[there] could be a more sinister explanation" (161), that Eurycleia "singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus" (161). Penelope's repetition of her theory somehow undermines its validity. This is compounded by a seemingly unrelated statement that she makes earlier in the text regarding her acceptance of Odysseus's stories and lies in the interest of keeping a happy marriage. She notes that "happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages" (3). Penelope seems unaware that this statement implies that although she was aware of Odysseus's plans to murder the maids she was not able to oppose her husband and could not fathom a way to exert the power necessary to prevent their death, and thus accepted it, telling everyone that she had gone to sleep. These clues provided by Atwood lead the read to conclude that Penelope cannot necessarily be considered a reliable narrator.

Another significant narrative strategy that is employed in the text is that of the chorus of the twelve handmaids. Like Penelope they speak from the Underworld; however, they tend to speak in a chorus, and their contributions have a much greater performative and burlesque element than Penelope's does. These contributions offer commentary regarding Penelope's narrative, providing yet another perspective. In her article on *The Penelopiad* and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, also a part of the Canongate Myth Series, Hilde Staels (2009) discusses the way in which these texts illustrate transformations of classical myths through parody and burlesque travesty. The chorus of the maids contributes significantly to this transformation; however, they are not solely responsible for it. Staels divides her discussion of the narrative

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tools used in *The Penelopiad* into several different sections, two of which I wish to expand upon: metafictional parody and burlesque travesty. It is important to understand these terms as Staels uses them by drawing on several different theorists in order to outline these concepts. Staels focuses on Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern metafictional parody as "repetition with critical difference (1985, 32)" (in: 2009:101). She notes that this occurs when a "text or genre convention is imitated and transformed by means of ironic inversion" (2009:101). Burlesque travesty works with parody, however, whereas burlesque travesty is more comical and involves some level of ridicule; parody has a "serious critical intent" and "does not automatically imply a degradation" (101).

The transformative narrative technique of metafictional parody is enacted in the text through the "technique of self-conscious mythologizing and demythologizing" (Staels, 2009:103). This is enacted in the text in four main ways. The first way is through the focus on the oral nature of the narrative (taking into account the complexity of orality while Penelope is a disembodied ghost). The fact that this tale is a first-person narrative as told by Penelope and the maids is significant. The point is augmented by the original nature of Penelope's tale, that is to say, that she begins not only at the very beginning of the tale, but at the beginning of her life as well, with information that seems irrelevant in Homer's version of *The Odyssey*. Staels notes that the "overt thematizing of the logos [traditional interpretation of mythology] is one of the novella's demythologizing devices" (104). By narrating from her childhood and then bleeding into an adapted version of *The Odyssey* as it is traditionally known Penelope creates a new kind of myth. Secondly, metafictional parody is enacted through the distortion of the boundary between truth and lies, fact and fiction. The way in which Penelope accepts some of Odysseus's tale yet questions, or even straightforwardly rejects, others contributes to this aspect. For example, Penelope despairs over the news she hears of Odysseus during his absence, and her synopsis and reading of the tales illustrate the blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction. She details the events offered in the traditional myth and follows them with a counter explanation:

> Rumours came, [….] Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of
> call and the men had mutinied, said some; no, said others, they'd eaten a

magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships. Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over the non-payment of a bill. Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others, with ear-bitings and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations. Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she'd turned his men into pigs – not a hard job in my view – but had turned them back into men because she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam. (Atwood, 2006:83-84)

Additionally, the way the other aspects of the story and details of Penelope's character are assimilated from other sources such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1934) and Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* (1960) create a melding of truth and fictions that affects the narrative.

Moreover, the idea of "the inscription and semantic transformation of classic story material" (Staels, 2009:104) also contributes to parody in *The Penelopiad*. Here the maids are particularly notable. In the original myth the maids are peripheral characters of little consequence, few if any of them ever speaking. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks is mentioned briefly in *The Odyssey* as it is she who insults the disguised figure of Odysseus with slander of her master. The hanging of the maids is also very brief in *The Odyssey* and is an event that is glossed over. Thus, in *The Penelopiad* the role of the maids is significant: they are credited with not only a voice and a story (told through their chorus chapters), but also the power to haunt Odysseus, the cleverest man that lived, hundreds of years after his death. Furthermore, the maids are also able to sway the reader and to make one question not only the original myth but also Penelope's version and the validity of Penelope as a reliable narrator. Staels (2009) notes that the maids, "as first-person narrators, boldly challenge and liberate themselves from the 'official version' (Atwood 2005, 2)" (105). Finally, parody is achieved through the disruption of both historical time periods and the generic hierarchy (Staels, 2009:106). With regard to the latter, Atwood incorporates elements of the high Homeric style as well an everyday conversational tones and concerns. This, coupled with the songs by the chorus of maids, as well as the jump from the Underworld to Homeric Greece and to the present day in the trial scenes, illustrates

three distinct styles in the text: lyrical, epic narrative and dramatic styles (106). Staels aptly points out that "[in] crossing the boundaries between serious and popular genres, Atwood creates a postmodern transgression and contamination of the physical setting and semiotic medium with a particular genre" (106).

Keeping in mind the narrative transformations that result from parody it is also important to note the stylistic changes that result from burlesque travesty. The changes that occur as a result of this narrative technique are slightly more subtle. An example of the aforementioned stylistic changes is anachronisms, or chronological inconsistencies that demonstrate a juxtaposition of different time periods, as well as other contemporary phrases and idioms that were not used in the Homeric style. Additionally, the conversational style also contributes to this burlesque travesty as it "undermines the high Homeric style by using trivialising transgressive speech" (107). The contribution of the maids' chorus is noteworthy here as the simplistic rhyme of their choruses also serves to undermine the elevated style of the original myth. Furthermore, the debunking of original myth is also a significant aspect of burlesque travesty. The novel is littered with such examples, as Penelope's aim in the text is to undermine the credibility of the established *Odyssey* narrative. A few examples include the way in which Odysseus is characterised as "both a wise epic hero and an buffoon" (108), or the way that Penelope questions Helen's birth myth stating that she had been born of an egg because her mother was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan. Penelope says:

> I wonder how many of us actually believe that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn't seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other. (Atwood, 2006:20)

Thus, these aspects serve to illustrate the ways in which narrative techniques such as metafictional parody and burlesque travesty are used as both mythologising and demythologising devices in the *The Penelopiad.*

Having established that the narrative tools that Atwood employs in *The Penelopiad* function to offer a subversive account of the original Homeric *Odyssey* myth so as to represent a more feminist approach, it is important for us to explore specific examples of how this text challenges the confining normative structure of that society. The

challenging of class and gender norms of the society of the time is a significant aspect of Penelope's re-visioning of the narrative, but these concerns are amplified by the chorus of the maids. Suzuki (2007) notes that Atwood "re-envisions the maids not merely as silent victims sacrificed to the interests of patriarchy and the ruling class, but as energetic satirists of the dominant order" (275). In the Introduction of the novel Atwood notes the role of the maids, which is outlined here by Howells:

> [The] maids are like the Chorus of the satyr plays of Greek drama, though the sheer variety of their narratives draws our attention to the different generic conventions through which stories may be told, so that the interaction between Penelope's confession and the maids' shifting narrative forms cast doubt on the absolute truthfulness of any single account, including Penelope's. (2008:14)

Kiley Kapuscinski supports this idea noting that the "interpretive presence of the maids' choral voices provides intervals of counter-narrative to Penelope's master-narrative, and counter-truths to Penelope's truth claims" (2015:12). Thus, their contribution interrupts a straightforward reading of the texts, and "subverts the expectations of mimetic reading" (Šlapkauskaitė, 2007:144). The maids' narrative opposes Penelope as they subscribe to the first of the three generalisations regarding her character that were outlined previously. In their view, "their mistress is a cunning liar, who committed adultery, caused them to be seduced and raped by the suitors, and who ordered their execution" (Staels, 2009:106), and they maintain throughout their narrative that she "connived in the hanging because they knew too much" (Howells 2008:12). While their narrative not only challenges the credibility of Penelope's, "their tale-telling highlights gender and class issues which go unchallenged in *The Odyssey*: the physical and sexual exploitation of servant girls […,] male violence against women […] and also, more shamefully, women's betrayals of other women" (2008:13).

The issue of class becomes particularly apparent through Penelope's dealings with the maids. Much of their chorus material deals with their role in the household and how they were used; in "The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune" they lament their lot in life:

> I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey,

It's Yes sir and No ma'am the whole bleeding day.
(Atwood, 2006:52)

Later, they compound their objections to their treatment by their master and mistress with particular reference to the way that their sexuality is exploited:

we toil and slave,
And hoist our skirts at their command
For every prick and knave. (126)

Moreover, they refer to the way that they are not thought of as people in the household; even from infancy they are considered more as animals to exploit. They compare this existence to that of Telemachus, Penelope's son. They note that

His mother presented a princeling. Our
various mothers
Spawned merely, lambed, farrowed, littered,
Foaled, whelped and kittened, brooded,
hatched out their clutch.
We were animal young, to be disposed of at
will,
Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used,
discarded when bloomless. (67)

Their relation to Telemachus is significant in terms of our discussion of class. Penelope draws attention to the special place that her twelve maidservants hold in her heart as a result of their long history together: "these [twelve maids] had been with me all their lives. I had bought them or acquired them when they were small children, brought them up as playmates for Telemachus, and trained them carefully in everything they would need to know around the palace" (113). This illustrates the way that the maids were treated as objects, goods to be 'bought' or 'acquired'. Moreover, Penelope brings them up as companions for her royal son, almost as pets for his entertainment. She also notes how she graciously imparts knowledge to them; however, we see that this knowledge extends only to "everything they would need to know around the palace"; they are only taught what enables them to effectively serve their house and little else. Furthermore, these maids are raised as friends for Telemachus, but it is by his hand that they are murdered. The maids express their shock at this turn of events when they say:

We did not know as we played with him
        there in the sand […]
That he was foredoomed to swell to our
        cold-eyed teenaged killer. (68)

This betrayal, although he is the heir and they were merely servants, of a childhood bond highlights their status as objects to the masters of the household.

The maids form an integral part of Penelope's plan, and she, herself, points out the extent to which she relies on them for information. She encourages them to get close to the suitors who have invaded the palace lands and to feed her information: "I told my twelve young maids – the loveliest, the most beguiling – to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent" (115). When a few of the maids are raped Penelope's reaction is significant. She notes that

> They [the maids] felt quite guilty, and the ones that had been raped needed to be tended and cared for. I put this task in the hands of old Eurycleia, who cursed the bad Suitors, and bathed the girls, and rubbed them with my very own perfumed olive oil for a special treat. (116)

After the maids are violated while gathering information for Penelope, she barely treats them or interacts with them herself; rather, she hands them over to Eurycleia whom even she is not all that fond of and who she points out actively dislikes the maidservants. She notes their consequent interaction as such:

> "Never mind," I said to them. "You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. It's one way of serving your master, and he'll be very pleased with you when he comes home." That made them feel better. (117)

It is striking that Penelope continues to put the maids in harm's way even after their interactions with the suitors have proven detrimental. She offers them a rub with some special oil and the promise of praise from their elusive master when he returns as a consolation for the mental and physical pain that they have endured and will continue to endure at her command. This behaviour and her acceptance of such violence against her house and especially the females of her house is very disturbing, and is

evidence that "women frequently circumnavigate physical violence and 'become aggressors of a different kind'" (Kapuscinski, 2015:4).

In addition, in the final scenes of the novel, Penelope and Odysseus and the maids appear in a postmodern episode of a present-day court scene in which Odysseus stands trial. When Odysseus is probed as to why the maids were put to death he argues that their crime was that "[they'd] had sex without permission" (Atwood, 2006:178), which suggests that the master of the house, a male, has the power not only to command the actions of his staff but also to police their sexuality. Penelope counters that they were raped, and the scene continues:

> *Penelope*: […] It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission.
> *Judge (chuckles)*: Excuse me, Madam, but isn't that what rape is? Without permission.
> *Attorney for the Defence*: Without permission of their master, Your Honour. (181-182)

This control over the maids and their sexual exploits, whether willing or otherwise, highlights the extent to which they are viewed merely as objects. Penelope's disregard for their wellbeing and her concern only for their ability to serve her purposes, coupled with Odysseus's argument regarding the reason for their execution, provide a powerful indictment of class issues of Grecian society, about which Atwood's retelling makes a striking statement.

The novel also draws attention to issues of gender, not only with regard to the maids but Penelope as well. Part of the reason that Penelope feels the need to tell her side of the story results from assumptions born out of gender stereotypes; for example, that she is either the placating, subservient wife or the lustful adulteress. Another, more subtle example is how Penelope takes over the running of the estate in Ithaca after Odysseus's mysterious disappearance. She is a capable manager and excels at her task. She lists the tasks for which she is responsible:

> Through my steward I traded for supplies, and soon had a reputation as a smart bargainer. Through my foreman I oversaw the farms and flocks, and made a point of learning about such things as lambing and calving, and how to keep a sow from eating her farrow. (2006:88)

It is clear that although she is very involved in the everyday workings of the estate and plays a large role in keeping it running, she is unable to take full credit because of her status as a woman. Her advice and ideas are channelled through the male overseer of each palace ground industry: the steward, the foreman and the swineherd. The maids also serve to expose gender issues in the text, as has been made evident in some of the discussion regarding class issues.

The maids' haunting of Odysseus in the afterlife is central to our discussion of gender in *The Penelopiad*, as their terrorising of him in the underworld draws attention to the double standard by which he justifies their execution. As has been mentioned, Odysseus condones their murder at the hands of Telemachus on the grounds of their illicit sexual activity and disloyalty to their house and master. However, Odysseus himself is unfaithful to Penelope multiple times during his journey home. This is the double standard to which the maids object. In their very first choral chapter of the novel, "A Rope-Jumping Rhyme", they expose these contrasting principles:

> we danced in air
> our bare feet twitched
> it was not fair
>
> with every goddess, queen, and bitch
> from there to here
> you scratched your itch
>
> we did much less
> than what you did
> you judged us bad
>
> you had the spear
> you had the word. (5-6)

Here they reference Odysseus's willing liaisons with Circe and Calypso, as well as his attraction to and almost-engagement to Nausicaa, Princess of the Phaecians. These liaisons are compared to their instruction by their mistress to spy on and seduce the suitors for information. Suzuki notes that this illustrates the way in which the maids

> debunk the gender privilege that Odysseus holds over them, complaining about the sexual double standard that condones his adultery while finding their liaisons deserving of deadly punishment, and his possession of "the spear" and

"the word" as the means by which he enforces patriarchal prerogative. (2007:272)

I would extend this assessment to suggest that the 'spear' to which they refer not only invokes an image of the weaponry used in the massacre of the suitors and the maids' subsequent execution, but also conjures the idea of a phallic symbol, suggesting that the power by which Odysseus condemns them is patriarchal, masculine power. Additionally, their reference to his 'word' suggests phallogocentric power over language, an ability to shape and manipulate discourse. This is especially significant as part of the maids' role as a haunting chorus, as well as Atwood's project in this text, is to take back that power. In this way the maids contribute to the exposure and possibility of correction of the gender double standard of the traditional narrative.

The final contribution of the maids to the idea of exposing gender double standards in the text is the Chorus line entitled "An Anthropology Letter", in which they observe an alternative explanation for their murder. They argue that the number twelve is significant in terms of the months of the year and their connection to the lunar cycle. Therefore, they suggest, they are the "twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly goddess of the moon" (Atwood, 2006:164), and that their death constituted a ritual sacrifice. However, the correct number of lunar months is thirteen and thus the thirteenth member of the cult is represented by their mistress, Queen Penelope. In this schema the bow that is used to prove Odysseus's identity in the test of the suitors is significant, as Artemis, goddess of the hunt, is known for her choice of the bow as a weapon. Moreover, in this test the suitors were required to shoot an arrow from this bow through *twelve* axe heads. Thus, this chorus suggests that their "rape and subsequent hanging [represents] the overthrow of the matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. The chief of them, notably Odysseus, would then claim kingship by marrying the High Priestess of our cult, namely Penelope" (165-166), and the maids are subsequently sacrificed in an exercise of his power. Atwood goes on to provide other examples from the original myth that support this theory, offering a powerful feminist appropriation of these events. The maids conclude the chapter with an address to scholars who dismiss this idea as "unfounded feminist claptrap" (166), noting that such scholars "don't have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain,

real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us a pure symbol. We're no more real than money" (168). This final statement leaves readers continuing to think of this theory long after they have laid down the novel, as money is an extremely potent symbol. The coloured paper and metal coins have little value in and of themselves; however, their symbolic power can represent abject poverty or exorbitant wealth. Thus, such a comparison with a compelling symbol is noteworthy.

From this discussion it is evident that Atwood's use of a female narrator and the narrative implications of the fact that Penelope speaks from beyond the grave are significant. The class and gender issues as well as the double standards that Atwood exposes in the text are also noteworthy. In drawing the discussion of the aforementioned issues to a close it is helpful to refer to the useful summary, offered by Šlapkauskaitė, which highlights the significance of several of these aspects. In her opinion,

> Penelope's narrative contests the official account of the Grecian myth and does so by exposing the power relations that structure the social hierarchies of Grecian society: the enslavement of female servants, the silencing of aristocratic women, and the glorification of male heroes. Symptomatically, it is only after death that Penelope is at liberty to criticise her father, husband and son and to contradict the grand narrative of history turned myth. (2007:143)

Yet it is also important to note the extent to which Penelope is embroiled in societal hierarchies of the Grecian society represented in the text, and how she is on more than one occasion portrayed as guilty or complicit in injustice. Šlapkauskaitė comments that this is almost inevitable, "such is the ambivalent character of the postmodern Penelope: she both questions the societal structures of the dominant order and remains dangerously complicit with them" (143). This highlights and corroborates the established complexity of the text and differentiates is as a "battlefield of power relations" (144).

Following the discussion of Atwood's interpretation and subsequent adaptation of the original *Odyssey* myth in her adaptation, it is important to consider to what extent *The Penelopiad* represents a 're-visioning' of myth. In her article "When We Dead

Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", Adrienne Rich (1972) addresses the idea of re-visioning. In her article, she uses the term specifically with regard to poetry, her own and others', but the term can be applied more broadly and has acquired more validity in the literary field since the time of the article. Rich notes that "Re-vision [is] the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). This is an idea that she applied especially to women, as it is "more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of the male-dominated society" (18). Using this text as a lens illuminates the power that Margaret Atwood wields as a female writer. *The Penelopiad* constitutes an effective re-visioning of a well established, male-centred myth, *The Odyssey*. By looking back on the traditional narrative and augmenting it with other historical material and initiating narrative transformations Atwood is able to offer a shade of the myth that accurately explores female issues and poses striking questions about the place and role of women in that society, while at the same time offering a powerful comment and an alternative viewpoint for those who wish to accept it. The text is an apt example of "feminist revisionist mythmaking" (Howells, 2008:10).

Given the overall focus of this project and its emphasis on the female journey it is important to provide some discussion of the narrative of development and the quest in the text. Penelope's central role as the protagonist and first-person narrator, interspersed with the point-of-view of the maids, would suggest that this is a strong example of a female journey narrative, and represents an attempt to take back some of the deterministic power of the male-dominated discourse of the traditional myth. Penelope does embark on a physical quest in the text, from her childhood home in Sparta to her married home in Ithaca, and to obtain a position of significance, not merely in her title of queen, there. While she is in Ithaca, her task is to outsmart the suitors and restore order in her household, which in her account she is able to do despite the collateral damage of her twelve 'beloved' handmaids. On a more subtle level, Penelope journeys to find a place for her voice and her narrative, her version of events, in the critical discussion of this myth. Thus, although this novel does not offer a straightforward representation of the *Bildungsroman* or quest motifs as do the other Margaret Atwood texts that will be explored in subsequent chapters, it does nevertheless, offer a feminist reading, or rereading, of *The Odyssey*, and makes several powerful critical comments that suggest a more feminist approach.

In conclusion, in *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood presents a complex and highly experimental text. Penelope, as a narrator, provides the reader with an intricate and selectively woven narrative that acts as a kind of labyrinth for the reader to navigate, but which refuses to offer a singular, absolute meaning or final truth. Staels (2009) points out that through this narrative "the author not only liberates the epic story from its generic constraints, but also Penelope and her twelve maids from the limitations imposed on them by the traditional narratives" (111). Atwood's appropriation of the traditional myth and her use of the cunning and resourceful narrator of Penelope, who is somewhat unreliable, leave the reader with a veritable tapestry of meanings and possibility. This text offers an account that is like "dripping water [that] wears away stone" (Atwood, 2006:43), as it offers an account that is able to subtly wear away at the established traditional narrative to provide an alternative lens through which to view *The Odyssey*.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Boundaries and Baptisms’: Gender, Belonging and Representations of the Spiritual Quest in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*

> This is border country. (Atwood, 2009:28)

> [M]y home ground, foreign territory. (Atwood, 2009:9)

> [M]adness is only an amplification of what you already are. (Atwood, 2009:128)

The *Bildungsroman*, as well as any quest on which one embarks, is layered. There are various forms of the journey: physical, literal, spiritual, psychological, or figurative. These different elements may coalesce in a single journey; alternatively, several individual aspects are combined which demonstrate different versions of a journey or quest narrative. The previous chapter touched on a few of these aspects while highlighting the focus of the quest, the object to be obtained, that which will bring balance to a fraught situation; in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope searches for truth that will vindicate her against the vicious maligning she has endured since Homer’s *Odyssey*. This chapter illustrates the subtler aspects of the journey narrative, typical of the female *Bildungsroman* or quest which is less overt than that of a male hero and which focuses on a more subconscious search.

Although Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, first published in 1979, does offer aspects of a physical quest, the focus of this chapter is on the story of a spiritual quest for power and agency. This chapter will examine the way in which this novel illustrates such aspects of the quest by: firstly, providing an exposition of the text and conducting a brief analysis of the protagonist compared with her companions on her journey, and thus investigating gender identity issues in the text. Secondly, it will explore the physical nature of the protagonist’s quest, noting the ecological perspective that is offered and highlighting the post-colonial concerns of the text. Thirdly, it will explore notions of spirituality and the quest for agency, here noting the importance of language in this journey and focussing on the protagonist’s enlightenment experience.

I will conclude with a brief discussion of the representation of the *Bildungsroman* and quest motifs in the text.

The novel's protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the text, travels back to her family's cabin in the wilds of Northern Quebec where she spent much of her time as a child. She is not alone but travels with her lover, Joe, as well as her 'friend' Anna, whom she remarks she has only known for two months (Atwood, 2009:6), and Anna's husband, David. The purpose of their journey is to locate the protagonist's father who is missing, and presumed dead. The protagonist is very uncomfortable returning to this place, and we soon learn that she has been estranged from her family. Throughout the text the protagonist hints that the reason for this estrangement, as well as many of her other issues, is a bad marriage and relationship with her 'husband' and 'child'. However, we discover that this is not the case; she was never married, but was rather in an exploitative relationship and affair with an older, married man who forced her to have an abortion when she conceived his illegitimate child. When we finally receive the full version of events we can conclude that the isolation from her family unit is a result of the shame and guilt of that relationship, as well as the contradiction between her behaviour and the traditional, nuclear family values to which her parents presumably subscribed. Their tense and complex relationship is illustrated when the protagonist notes, through the façade of her 'cover story', "if [he, her father, is] safe I don't want to see him" (32). She continues:

> There's no point, they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising since I didn't understand it myself. What upset them was the way I did it, so suddenly, and then running off and leaving my husband and child. (32)

This relationship and the traumatic experience of the abortion have had a negative impact on her selfhood; she no longer sees herself as a complete being and describes herself as being lost and numb. Being back in her 'home' begins to trigger a transformation of sorts that enacts the surfacing of her complete self, bringing healing, and it is only once this transition back to a complete consciousness begins that we as readers receive and are able to make sense of the full version of events as I have detailed them here.

The first-person narrative of the novel links us with the protagonist from the very beginning of the narrative; it is her journey, her quest, her *Bildungsroman*. She is the focalising character and everything is filtered through her, sometimes resulting in an "unreliable [narrator]" (Wilson, 2006:178). However, although her role is significant, the characters of Joe, Anna and David not only offer insight into the character of the protagonist but through their independent interactions raise several issues of gender identity in the novel. As I noted earlier, the protagonist remains nameless throughout the course of the novel; this is strikingly noted when she refers to her companions specifically by name, but we are never offered her own. We know that she obviously has one, as later in the text when she separates herself from the others they call her name incessantly while they look for her. However, she seems to have no link to it. This indicates the extent to which her identity and sense of self have been damaged by her past experiences. She feels she has lost her identity, and her effort to regain, recreate or re-engineer her identity is a significant aspect of her quest journey. Furthermore, although she often refers to her family, her father, mother and brother, during the time that she relives her childhood, or sorts through childhood mementoes, she never mentions any of their names. This emphasises the rift that she feels is between them and illustrates her alienation from her family unit.

Importantly, as suggested previously, the protagonist experiences a deep sense of isolation, as "like her three friends, she is completely cut off from her past" (Christ, 1976:319). This results in a kind of alienation from them, as well as other people in general, in the present and the very shallow friendship that they all share. The protagonist notes that "[m]y friends' pasts are vague to me and to each other also, any one of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice" (Atwood, 2009:34). Moreover, her lack of name, indicating loss of or diminished identity, is paralleled by the protagonist's lack of emotion. At the outset of the novel it is clear that she is anxious and uncomfortable: she experiences uncertainty about her father's whereabouts and yet there is something very shallow in these emotions. She is not insincere, but she merely seems to experience very little depth of emotion. Rather than fully experiencing such emotions she tends to avoid and dismiss them. When she is disturbed over the changes that have occurred in the village, making what was once very familiar rather confronting and strange, she tries to numb that emotion: "I bite down into the [ice cream] 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" (10). This deflection suggests that her lack of deep emotion is a defence mechanism; she is trying to protect herself from getting hurt, from further emotional damage. Carol P. Christ notes that "she has lost the ability to experience normal feelings [….] The protagonist's alienation from her feelings is reflected in her dispassionate voice: everything is seen; nothing is felt" (1976:319). This is something that she comes to realise after a few days at the cabin; she notes: "I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time" (Atwood, 2009:134). This inability to experience normal emotion is a part of her quest; it is what prompts her to begin looking through scrapbooks, and going through her father's books and drawings, in an effort to find out when she lost this ability and how she could get it back. She tries to relearn how to feel, pointing out that "I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it" (142); however, although we see that she is making an effort it is clear that she will be unable to truly experience any form of deep emotion until she confronts her trauma. Her comparison of emotions to clothes, to be copied off others, and changed and discarded, seems to trivialise genuine feelings and illustrates her continued state of emotional stagnation.

The protagonist's relationship with her lover, Joe, is also significant in the discussion of her character, but also illustrates an interesting reversal of gender roles. The protagonist's emotional distance figures quite prominently in her relationship with Joe. She mentions that at the start of their relationship her distance was something that Joe admired, clearly not understanding the extent to which she is affected by it. She notes his reaction during their first sexual encounter: "What impressed him that time, he even mentioned it later, cool he called it, was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't" (31). However, at this point in their relationship, and indeed throughout the course of the novel, it becomes clear that her apparent lack of emotional investment is increasingly becoming a point of contention between the two of them. Again noting her stunted emotional ability and use of defence mechanism, Christ (1976) notes that "[a]lways conscious of how she might be hurt, she remains oblivious to her power to hurt others" (319), which is undoubtedly a reference to her relationship with Joe. She is very aware of him, and mentions several times the non-verbal way in which they

seem to communicate. For example, when she observes him during the car ride, "[h]e feels me watching him and lets go of my hand. Then he takes his gum out, bundling it in the silver wrapper, and sticks it in the ashtray and crosses his arms. That means I'm not supposed to observe him; I face front" (Atwood, 2009:5).

Her slightly indifferent approach to their relationship is an issue that becomes increasingly central to their joint narrative. Erinç Özdemir notes that the protagonist's previous relationship was a controlling and oppressive one, but that the "balance of power in [her] relationship with her present lover, Joe, is quite the reverse" (2003:64). With Joe's unease becoming more and more apparent to her she endeavours to examine her emotions and solve how she feels about him. However, like many of her other observations, the nature of their relationship is objectively catalogued rather than compassionately considered:

> I'm trying to decide whether or not I love him. It shouldn't matter, but there's always a moment when curiosity becomes more important to them than peace and they need to ask; though he hasn't yet. It's best to have the answer worked out in advance: whether you evade or do it the hard way and tell the truth, at least you aren't caught off guard. I sum him up, dividing him into categories: he's good in bed, better than the one before; he's moody but he's not much bother, we split the rent and he doesn't talk much, that's an advantage. When he suggested we should live together I didn't hesitate. It wasn't even a real decision, it was more like buying a goldfish or a potted plant. (Atwood, 2009:49)

When Joe finally does confront her about whether or not she loves him, he is displeased with her uncertain reaction, and although he is hurt he reacts rather like a petulant child, throwing her reaction in her face, sulking about and sitting alone on the dock. As she tries to explain her emotional confusion and the fact that she is 'trying' to love, it is important to note here that "[l]ove has become for her a mere word devoid of any real significance" (Özdemir, 2003:64). He then lashes out bitterly saying, "The truth is [...] you think my work is crap, you think I'm a loser and I'm not worth it" (Atwood, 2009:136). Özdemir points out that this "reaction reveals him [Joe] to be a victim of the stereotype of masculine worth measured in terms of social power – wealth, status, professional success" (2003:73). Additionally, as the above passage indicates, "[there] is in fact a reversal of stereotypical gender roles in the protagonist's attitude to Joe revealed by words reducing him to a sexual object and

domestic partner" (73). Although their relationship is quite complicated it is indicative of her emotional unavailability as well as an interesting reversal of stereotypical gender roles, and although the future of their relationship remains unresolved at the conclusion of the text there is a certain glimmer of hope.

The protagonist's relationship with Joe is contrasted with David and Anna's relationship. Özdemir points out that Anna, in comparison to the protagonist, "embodies the antithetical position […] in terms of gender attitude […,] she is completely submerged in heterosexual power politics" (73). David and Anna's relationship, unlike a healthy marriage built on trust and affection, is characterised by manipulation, exploitation and insincerity. Their interactions through the course of their journey to the cabin suggest petty irritation and intolerance for one another, and upon arriving at the cabin David "has dropped his packsack on the floor and unfolded himself along the sofa. 'Christ, am I wiped,' he says. 'Somebody break me out a beer.' Anna brings him one and he pats her on the rear and says 'That's what I like, service'" (Atwood, 2009:40-41).   This illustrates a stereotypical heterosexual marriage dynamic in which the wife submissively caters to the desires and whims of her husband. This relationship is very different from that of Joe and the protagonist. Moreover, Anna is always expected to be 'made-up'. When the protagonist points out that she need not wear make-up because there "no one to look at you" (51),

> Anna says in a low voice, "He doesn't like to see me without it," and then contradicting herself, "He doesn't know I wear it." I [the protagonist] glimpse the subterfuge this must involve, or is it devotion: does she have to sneak out of the bed before he's awake every morning and into it at night with the lights out? Maybe David is telling generous lies; but she blends and mutes herself so well he may not notice. (52)

This is an example of the dishonest nature of their relationship; Anna is unable to be a natural version of herself but rather must modify her appearance to cater to her husband's preferences. Moreover, the 'blending and muting' could refer to more than just the application of make-up, but also suggest that Anna modifies and adjusts her behaviour in David's presence in order to seem more attractive to him.

Later in the text Anna makes an overt reference to the power-play in their relationship. She fatalistically laments their relationship: "He's got this little set of

rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him [....] He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself" (156). Anna's reference to making her cry because he cannot do it himself is a reference to the stereotypical gender profile of the strong, emotionally suppressed male, rather than one in touch with his emotions. Moreover, this structure of rules is, as Özdemir point out, what sustains their relationship: "the asymmetric balance of power for the maintenance of which Anna must constantly strive lest she lose David" (2003:64). One of the ways that this power is enacted is through sexual intercourse; Anna notes that "He watches me all the time, he waits for excuses. Then either he won't screw at all or he slams it in so hard it hurts" (Atwood, 2009:156). This sexual manipulation is further compounded when it is suggested that both Anna and David are often unfaithful to each other as a form of revenge. The protagonist succinctly perceives the power struggle in their relationship and astutely notes the pathos in Anna's stereotypically gendered role as David's wife: "her body was her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war" (196). Therefore, the relationships that we are presented with in the text offer an interesting study of both the reversal and internalisation of gender roles. They also offer insight into insincere and emotionally stunted relationships of all kinds, which emphasises Sharon Hengen's point that the "inability of characters in this novel to connect emotionally with one another makes obvious the absence of such saving graces as compassion and love" (2006:78).

The physical nature of the quest is manifested in the actual journey that the protagonist and her companions make away from the urban area of an unspecified city in Canada to the wilder north of Quebec. They pass through a small village, parts of which the protagonist is familiar with; however, those parts of the village that have changed no longer have any sense of familiarity and thus alienate her further. This contributes to the feeling that she does not belong and greatly distresses her. Hereafter, the group is forced to charter a boat and embark on a twenty minute to half hour journey across bodies of water until they reach the cabin on the shore of the lake in a small cove. The lake is very significant in the text. It is described by the protagonist as "blue and cool as redemption" (Atwood, 2009:14), as well as an

"entrance" (Pratt, 1981:258); it "[becomes] a healing balm for her worldly unhappiness" (McWilliams, 2009:71). This journey further and further away from the city towards the threatening wilderness is like that of the hero's journey away from his home to a place where he must face trials in an effort to complete his quest. The lake is also significant in terms of the quest motif in that the protagonist's descent under the water can be likened to the Underworld descent of classical mythology.

This journey, and the fact that it takes place in Canada, is significant in that it provides an opportunity to examine issues of post-coloniality that the text offers. Post-colonial theory refers to the exploration and interrogation of the "situation of colonized peoples both during and after colonization" (Murfin & Ray, 2003:356). It typically "connotes political and moral attitudes opposed to colonization" (356), but broadly "explores historical, cultural, political, and moral issues surrounding the establishment and disintegration of colonies and the empires they fuelled" (357). In her discussion of the experience of colonisation in Canada, and specifically Quebec, Linda Hutcheon notes that regardless, "the pre-colonial history of the French in Quebec was an imperialist one" (2005:132); as such, there is "the very real sense of cultural dispossession and social alienation in Quebec" (132). Kiley Kapuscinski offers an overt example of issues of post-coloniality in the text. On their journey into the village the four drive down the main street in the village and the protagonist observes "a movie theatre, the itz, the oyal, red R burnt out" (2009:3). Kapuscinski suggests that this "gestures toward rapidly fading imperial presence in Canada and the simultaneous disappearance of a sense of protection under a larger and more established governing body" (2007:107).

Another aspect that contributes to the protagonist's sense of displacement and lack of belonging is the kind of language power struggle that seems to exist. The fact that the protagonist is not able to communicate efficiently in a language that is dominated and determined by hegemonic patriarchal culture is something that is central to her journey of development towards a complete self, and will subsequently be discussed. However, the language trouble to which I refer here is the juxtaposition of English and French, both recognised languages in Canada. This problem is not limited to the protagonist's return to the village after a long time away, as she recalls her English-speaking mother attempting to converse with the French-speaking Madame, wife of

Paul, who was a friend of her father's. She notes that "[n]either knew more than five words of the other's language and after the opening Bonjours both would unconsciously raise their voices as if talking to a deaf person" (Atwood, 2009:21). The current manifestation of this language trouble is evidenced in the actions of the protagonist when she visits the supermarket. She makes sure to go to a store with which she is 'familiar', "the one where they're supposed to speak English" (27). Yet, when she enters the store and sees how things have changed, she doubts herself: "I hesitate: maybe the tradition has changed, maybe they no longer speak English" (28), and decides to speak in French, embarrassed by her accent, and becomes the brunt of the joke of the three people minding the store. She notes the response of the proprietor:

> She grins and the two men grin also, not at me but at each other. I see I've made a mistake, I should have pretended to be an American. "'Amburger, oh yes we have lots. *How* much?" she asks, adding the final H carelessly to show she can if she feels like it. This is border country. "A pound, no two pounds," I say, blushing even more because I've been so easily discovered, they're making fun of me and I have no way of letting them know I share the joke. Also I agree with them, if you live in a place you should speak the language. (28)

The conflict she feels over which language to use illustrates her lack of belonging. Moreover, the reference to "border country" (28) is significant. This connotes more than bilingualism as a result of living in a place where there are multiple official languages, but also references the destruction of binaries, barriers and borders. The fact that she is not comfortable in this 'border country' suggests that she has not yet come to a place where she is able to effectively negotiate different spaces and inhabit hybrid spaces. The development of the ability to do this is an important part of her quest, and one at which she becomes increasingly adept throughout the course of the text.

Another aspect of this physical journey into Canada is the role of the wilderness itself. Özdemir summarises the role of the wilderness in the text, which creates a useful basis from which to continue my own analysis. He notes:

> The wilderness as the setting of the novel has a multidimensional symbolic significance. It is, first of all, the setting of the protagonist's childhood, and as

such a symbol for lost innocence and happiness. Secondly, it stands for a realm of existence outside the alienating, materialistic, ecologically and spiritually polluted urban way of life, which the protagonist and her companions are part of. Thirdly, the wilderness stands for nature, which is appropriated and victimized by human society. As such it is something the protagonist identifies with in so far as she, too, is victimized by what is essentially the same masculine power in a different form and also because she, too, stands in opposition to culture in virtue of being a woman. (2003:60)

This theme of victimisation is important to note, because, as David Staines points out, "[although] a feminist novel, *Surfacing* is simultaneously a study of victimization" (2006:18). The idea of victimisation relates not only to the protagonist but to the natural environment as well. The "environment of *Surfacing* is not one in which the companionship and stewardship advocated by biologists figures significantly" (Hengen, 2006:78), but is rather shown to be under immense strain. On their arrival the group learn that the fishing and angling industry has deteriorated as "the lake's fished out" (Atwood, 2009:30). We also see that the environment is being appropriated for commercial use. While staying at the rural cabin, the protagonist is approached by a businessman looking to buy her father's land, upgrade certain amenities and use it as a facility for corporate retreats. Another example is when the group come across surveyors marking out a new shoreline for the lake:

Surveyors, the paper company or the government, the power company. If it was the power company I knew what it meant: they were going to raise the lake level as they had sixty years ago, they were plotting the new shoreline. Twenty feet up again and this time they wouldn't cut off the trees as they had before, it would cost too much, they would be left to rot. […] The lake didn't matter to them, only the system: it would be a reservoir. (144-145)

Atwood uses evocative language to emphasise the effect that this kind of behaviour has. She describes how the group move through the portage:

The water was covered with lily pads [….] It swarmed with leeches, I could see them undulating sluggishly under the brown surface. When the paddles hit the bottom on the way across, gas bubbles from decomposing vegetation rose and burst with a stench of rotten eggs or farts. The air fogged with mosquitoes. (146-147)

This study of the violation of the environment is augmented by the illustration of the destructive power, and specific cruelty, that humans exhibit. The protagonist, as yet

unaware of her own complicity in any sort of harmful action, "focuses her attention on the violation of the Canadian wilderness by the men she calls 'Americans'" (Christ, 1976:320). She talks about how these men, the 'Americans', are "the kind who catch more [fish] than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it" (Atwood, 2009:81). These men are also the one whom she blames for the desecration of the dead heron, which becomes a kind of talisman for her: "[t]he smell was like decaying fish. I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied around its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye" (147). Özdemir describes how the 'Americans' function as the main symbol of destructive power: they are "representative of a national spirit characterized by egotism and exploitation, and a country contaminated by urban pollution and decay, soul-killing machinery, and artificiality" (2003:60). The protagonist exposes this mindset in her observation of the tortured creature:

> Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. 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. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. (Atwood, 2009:149)

This kind of disrespect for the environment, and the senselessness of it all, are what bothers the protagonist, who is still unable to see her own complicity in such actions. The protagonist's own view on such issues is very much in line with the author's, as well as a sound ecological vision: "Atwood's novel's ethical vision does not prohibit killing, but it restores a sense of worship, which recognizes that one sacrifices other beings to one's needs, but that one ought to make only those sacrifices that are truly necessary" (Christ, 1976:328).

It is this incident in part that prompts the beginning of the protagonist's spiritual transformation. As I mentioned earlier, she has not yet realised her own capacity and so places all the blame on the 'Americans' and aligns herself with nature, as a victim: "she experiences herself as the wilderness innocent and virgin, violated by nameless men" (320). Christ goes on to note the effect of such a standpoint, as her "association

of power with evil and her dissociation of herself from both reflect a typical female delusion of innocence, which hides her complicity in evil and feeds her false belief that she can do nothing but witness her victimization" (320). However, conflating evil with the 'Americans' becomes problematic when they discover that the 'Americans' are not American at all but Canadian, as the protagonist mistook a sports team emblem on their canoe for an American flag. This surprising discovery is compounded when the ones they thought were American mistake the band of four Canadians for Americans as well. This comparison initiates a revelation of sorts for the protagonist: "I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd" (Atwood, 2009:167). This is the beginning of her spiritual journey. She has already sought out her lost power by looking through her childhood mementoes and scrapbooks, by trying to understand her father's scribbling to no avail; but the hanged heron and the guilt she feels over its death lead her to believe that her father's work, his investigation of traditional Indian hieroglyphs, is the key. Thus, "[t]hough the wilderness initially deflects her vision, in the end it will provide the key, the revelation, which releases her power" (Christ, 1976:320).

Before beginning to explore the protagonist's spiritual transformation it is important to discuss her relationship to language. I mentioned previously how the protagonist struggles with her cultural language, one that reflects the hegemonic interests of patriarchy, and one in which she is left submissive, an object on which meanings are imposed and where she feels she has no agency. There is no indication that she was dysfunctional, at least to the extent that she is now, before her affair and abortion. Özdemir supports this statement when he notes that "we are led to believe that it was an oppressive marriage that caused the shattering of her self-image and integrity as an autonomous individual" (2003:64). The protagonist's isolation from her family also contributes to this, although she does not yet realise the extent of her grief at never reconciling with her parents before their death. During her spiritual transformation experience she confronts this pain, kneeling in the garden they worked on together, and weeping, "they didn't consider how I would feel, who would take care of me. I'm furious because they let it happen" (Atwood, 2009:223).

Moreover, her language troubles have less to do with communication errors than to do with the fact that she no longer equates the same meanings and significance to words, and emotions, that normal, fairly well-rounded people do. A striking example of this is when we consider the word, 'love'. It is reasonable that after a traumatic relationship experience she is wary of trusting others, but as she recalls her lover's words we see the extent of her bitterness: "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (56). Later on in the text when she is trying to resolve her problems with Joe she makes it very clear that she is aware of her issues with this 'language', and again uses the example of love: "It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimoes have fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love" (135).

Through the novel the protagonist's problematic relationship with language is evident. She comments on the way in which meanings are culturally assigned and embedded when she notices the way in which vulgar language and curse words operate, how they have become more socially acceptable over time. During an exchange with Anna and David, she notes:

> There are no dirty words anymore, they've been neutered, now they're only parts of speech; but I recall feeling, puzzled, baffled, when I found out some words were dirty and the rest were clean. The bad ones in French are the religious ones, the worst ones in any language were what they were most afraid of and in English it was the body, that was even scarier than God. (53)

She repeatedly points out the ways in which language fails her: "I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own" (96). An example of how she feels language falls short is when she objects to the way the brain and the body, the flesh, are considered separate entities as though they could be independent from one another. She criticises this notion, saying, "I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them" (95). This growing awareness through the text of the language 'barrier' plays a significant role in her transformation. She says, "[language] divides us into fragments, I wanted to be

whole" (187), and as a result part of her journey is "enacting a painful but determined search for another language, one that would allow non-destructive relationships with others and nature" (Özdemir, 2003:58).

The protagonist's spiritual journey is the climax of the text. Throughout the course of the novel we as readers become increasingly aware of the renewal that she craves. The lake becomes not only a medium for this renewal but the lake is the portal through which she must enter in order to begin the transformation process. This process begins as a kind of vindication for her father; she wants to prove that his drawings, and possibly his own spiritual experience, are neither the cause nor the result of his possible madness and disappearance. She knows that she must dive down into the lake in order to see the glyphs on the cliff face. She comes to the place where she will dive using what she believes is a sign, a plane overhead, "its trail of smoke; an x in the sky, unsacred crucifix" (Atwood, 2009:179). This reminds her of the heron that flies over the group's heads casting a similar shadow as they made their excursion a few days earlier; as well as the shape of the hanged heron. Each of these 'signs' has offered her a revelation, and so she dives beneath the surface of the lake, beginning her 'Underworld-like' descent. Under the water she becomes more and more conscious of the way her body moves under water, and this brings to her mind the nature of an unborn child, like the one she aborted. She is still searching for the glyph when she encounters something else: "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" (182). Atwood herself notes that this image is slightly unclear in the text (Christ, 1976:321). Some feel that it is a vision of her aborted child, but Atwood notes that what she is actually seeing is the corpse of her dead father, submerged under the surface of the water since his death some weeks prior. This discovery, whether she immediately identifies it as her father or not (it is plausible that on a subconscious level she feels it is him but does not internalise that knowledge as we are told the body was fairly unrecognisable), leads her to realise her own complicity in her abortion, and that she was not just a victim of her lover's will. She realises that "[i]t wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it [….] He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it

sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer" (Atwood, 2009: 183,185).

The protagonist sees this revelation, this knowledge, as a gift from the great spiritual powers. However, as Carol P. Christ points out, this protagonist is like many other "heroines of this genre [who] rarely discover the God of Jewish and Christian traditions at the end of their journeys" (1976:318). This experience of spirituality is thus not Judeo-Christian, but rather an encounter with the more natural and traditional spirituality of the Canadian First Nations people. The protagonist notes:

> I regretted the nickels I'd taken dutifully for the collection plate, I got so little in return: no power remained in their bland oleotinted Jesus prints or in the statues of the other ones, rigid and stylized, holy triple name shrunken to swear words. These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely [….] The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and the signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth. (Atwood, 2009:185-186)

This spiritual epiphany prompts a response in the protagonist: "in the presence of the great powers, she feels the need to worship, to give a thank offering" (Christ, 1976:322), and so, emerging from the lake, she throws her sweatshirt up onto a ledge on the cliff as a sacrificial gift. Although she has had this enlightening experience, she returns to the cabin where she ponders the meaning of her experience. Later in the afternoon David tries to seduce her, and when she rebuffs him is aggressive and cruel. At dinner when the incident comes up she finds that instead of finding support in Anna and Joe they offer only judgement. The alienation from them is not something that bothers her at this point, as she realises that their worldviews are flawed. Shortly thereafter, a boat arrives to inform them that her father's body has surfaced, a fact which she calmly accepts. Her friends avoid her, believing that she is grieving, and ready themselves for their departure the next day; however, the protagonist embarks on the next stage of her renewal journey.

The next step in her journey entails resolving the guilt she feels as a result of her abortion, and so she feels prompted by the great powers to conceive another child, not to replace her lost one but as a part of her slowly returning identity as a woman. She

draws Joe out of the house, embracing the natural setting, to conceive under the moonlight. The protagonist describes her conception experience and the kind of restoration that she feels as a result:

> He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself [….] The baby will slip out as easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full. (Atwood, 2009:209)

This experience is very natural, and the focus on the child and herself, rather than on Joe, emphasises the reclaiming of the protagonist's power and agency. Christ notes that as "she conceives, the protagonist resembles the virgin Mother goddesses of old: at one with her sexual power, she is complete in herself; the male is incidental" (1976:323). Joe believes that this incident restores their relationship and they prepare to return to their life in the city, but as they wait on the dock she realises how very isolated she is from her friends and that "if she wishes to pursue the revelations and experience the powers more deeply, she must choose the isolation of the visionary quest" (323). She dumps out the rolls of film that Joe and David have been recording during their trip, thereby freeing the people trapped in the images, and she makes her escape in a canoe, paddling around the point and out of sight, waiting for Joe, Anna and David to leave so she can return and continue her enlightenment.

Returning to the cabin alone she waits for further guidance, confronting her grief over her parents' death, and rests, restoring parts of herself. The following day she begins going about a normal routine but is overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and fear when using certain objects, which she interprets as messages from the great powers. She understands that she needs to undergo a purification ritual, eliminating those things that hinder her and trap her in her old life. She makes a fire and begins burning things; she burns the pages of the book she is supposed to be illustrating, severing herself from the concept of commercial work and labour. She also throws her ring, a souvenir from her 'pseudo marriage', into the fire, discarding the guilt and pain of that relationship. She then continues to purify the cabin, burning old scrapbooks, guidebooks and maps, slashing blankets, sheets, beds and clothes, breaking plates,

cutlery and crockery, and littering the floor with kitchen utensils that cannot be burned. She then proceeds to the lake for the final stage of her purification: baptism. She enters the water fully clothed, wearing everything but her shoes, and only when she is fully soaked does she begin to ritually remove her clothes, her "false body" (Atwood, 2009:231). Baptism, in the Christian faith, is a symbol of forsaking an old sinful life of death and embarking on a new journey to live in faithful service of the creator. The water symbolises a grave, from which one rises in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Given that the protagonist has already encountered death in the lake, and that she is completing her own ritual purification, including purifying herself, the lake is an apt medium, and reinforces the ideas of baptism and spirituality in her actions. She describes her baptism as such:

> My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes. (230-231)

In addition, although this is a baptism ritual which in itself in rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview, the experience also focuses on the traditional spirituality which is guiding her. The references to the sand, rock and water, the plankton and the sun and the moon, amplify the natural focus of such traditional religions, which are especially significant given the link with nature that the protagonist has experienced through the course of the novel.

The final phase of her spiritual enlightenment transformation experience is "mystical identification with all forms of life" (Christ, 1976:324). Instead of returning to the cabin, the protagonist retreats into the forest and proceeds to live like an animal, completely indentifying with that form. She uses a blanket for protection, "until the fur grows" (Atwood, 2009:230), but embraces all other aspects of animalistic life:

> I head for the garden and prowl through it, then squat [….] The outhouse is forbidden so I leave my dung, droppings, on the ground and kick earth over them. All animals with dens do that. I hollow a lair near the woodpile, dry leaves underneath and dead branches leaned over, with fresh needle branches

woven to cover. Inside it I curl with the blanket over my head. I sleep in relays like a cat. (231-232)

While in this altered state she realises that her experience with the powers is encouraging an acceptance of hybrid space and an opposition to confinement and entanglement; "they are against borders" (234). As her translation experience comes to a close she experiences the kind of transcendental hybridity that the powers advocate: "I am not an animal or a tree, I am a thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (236). This feeling is amplified following a visionary encounter with her mother and father: "I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock" (243). After a final evening in her transfigured state, upon awakening she knows that she is no longer in communion with the great powers as, having imparted their knowledge to her, they have retreated: "The rules are over. I can go anywhere now [….] They were here though, I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language" (245). She returns to the cabin and opens a can of beans, a symbol of her return to the human world.

The protagonist's experience has had a significant effect on her. She has found redemption in "facing the truth and accepting the pain, guilt, and responsibility it entails" (Christ, 1976:322). She is now able to accept herself as an individual and autonomous entity. She confronts the mirror in the cabin, which she turned over before her transformation, disturbed by the trapped person she saw therein, and finds that she likes the natural, primal woman she sees in the reflection; she is a "new kind of centrefold" (Atwood, 2009:248). She also makes a vow: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (249). Not only does she recognise and embrace her power, agency and freedom, but also accepts her capacity to inflict damage. This self-awareness is proof that she has regained her lost identity.

Although we are not offered definitive closure at the end of the novel there is a sense of hopefulness in the conclusion. The protagonist has dressed in human clothes again when she hears a boat pull up to the dock. Joe has returned alone. She hides in the tree line and watches as he calls for her. It is important to note that although she has

received healing from her past she is still affected by it. Her transformation has allowed her to live with it rather than completely erasing it and rendering it obsolete; and thus, she retains her scepticism of love, "my love for him useless as a third eye" (250). She is committed to raising her child and she is aware of the changes their relationship will have to undergo if she goes with him, and the possibility of failure and resulting pain. She realises that he is a good man, noting that as "he isn't an American, I can see that now" (251), he does not possess the destructive power. Yet she still remains unsure of her decision: "To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move *yet* [my italics]" (251). The 'yet' implies the possibility of their reunion. In addition, Joe remains in a hybrid space, as where he stands on the dock is "neither land nor water", and the anticipation we get from the protagonist's use of the world 'yet' suggests that she intends to inhabit that space as well, thus creating a sense of hope for the future.

The representation of the quest in this text is layered, especially given the spiritual nature of the journey; however, there are certain motifs that emerge. For example, as I have mentioned, the journey into the unknown, into the wilderness away from the city is a common trait of the quest narrative and is a crucial step for the hero. Additionally, the presence of a mentor figure is common, and although the protagonist is unable to interpret the guidance that she receives from the clue, both her father and mother can be seen to be mentor figures to the protagonist. Her father, and his drawings and clues, also act as a guide for the protagonist through her quest. She realises their significance in this regard when she refers to them as such: "I had a talisman, my father had left me the guides, the man-animals and the maze of numbers" (191). She also experiences a descent into the Underworld and an encounter with the dead during her diving expedition when she sees her father's corpse, and finally she experiences a rebirth and renewal through her baptism and transformation experience. The sense of hope that we receive that suggests she may leave with Joe and embark on a new journey offers the final element of the quest motif: the possibility of restoration. Furthermore, Christ offers a comment on the representation of the female quest, and by extension the female *Bildungsroman*, in the text:

> [The novel] exemplifies two structural elements of female quest [....] Awakening from a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also

the great potential healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine's own feeling and judgement, is one of the stages or moments of the female quest which may have important spiritual implications [….] The second stage of the female quest which often has profound spiritual implications is moving from victimhood to power. (1976:325)

In conclusion, the protagonist embarks on a spiritual journey of discovery prompted by many trials. She is required to face the tragedy of her past as well as her complicity therein. The acceptance of her responsibility, her ability to do harm and to avoid it, is a crucial part of her quest journey. The spiritual nature of her quest is exemplified in her interaction with the traditional spirituality of the Canadian First Nations people, as well as in her baptism and translation and transformation experiences. These incidents form a kind of crucible for the protagonist from which she emerges, purified by the flames, or rather water in this case, and with a new sense of individuality and agency that not only represent the successful completion of her quest and *Bildung* but also the possibility of hope for the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

<u>'Sisters, Sacraments and Self-Portraits': Social Issues, Art, Memory and the
Psychological Quest in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*</u>

> 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. (Atwood, 2009:3)

> The past isn't quaint while you're in it. Only at a safe distance, later, when you
> can see it as décor, not as the shape your life has been squeezed into. (Atwood,
> 2009:428)

As the previous research and chapters of this dissertation have illustrated thus far, the
Bildungsroman, especially the female *Bildungsroman*, one preoccupied with a female
protagonist and her physical, emotional and psychological development and
wellbeing, is not only complex but also, and perhaps more importantly, very subtly
conveyed in a text. This is certainly the case in the novel that is the subject of this
penultimate chapter: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, first published in 1988. However,
this text is further complicated by a non-linear structure, the idea of the retrospective
as well as the role of memory in the text.

In *Cat's Eye*, the protagonist Elaine Risley returns to the city of Toronto, where she
grew up, for a gallery installation of her painted work: a retrospective. This return to
the city of Toronto as well as to places that hold significance for her prompts a
journey through her memories. Through the narrative it becomes clear that Elaine has
no true sense of herself, and thus this novel can be considered to be a psychological
quest to regain or fully develop the protagonist's selfhood. This text can not only be
studied as a *Bildungsroman*, but as Elaine is an artist and her work contributes
significantly to her identity formation, *Cat's Eye* can also be considered a
Künstlerroman, a novel of the artist. This chapter will examine Elaine's journey and
quest by firstly, contextualising the novel and the social context in which Atwood
operates; and secondly, discussing some of the most noteworthy incidents of Elaine's
childhood and the significance of these in terms of her quest. Thirdly, it will offer an
explanation of some of the prominent motifs in the text, such as eyes and blindness, as
well as a discussion of the role that Elaine's art plays in the novel. It will also explore

the narrative structure, the role of memory in the text and the way in which it represents a retrospective. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the *Bildungsroman* in the text.

The novel is set in Canada in the mid-1940s to 1950s. As I have already noted, Elaine returns to Toronto for a showing of her work, entitled *Elaine Risley: A Retrospective*, at an art gallery. This journey is the physical aspect of Elaine's quest as she fled from Toronto to Vancouver when she was a young mother and has not returned since. She makes her feelings about the city very clear when she says, "I hate this city. I've hated it so long I can hardly remember feeling any other way about it" (Atwood, 2009:13). Eleonaro Rao (2006) notes that "Toronto represents an abhorrent world, as opposed to Vancouver, a place of refuge where she imagined she would find happiness by starting afresh" (101). Her family settled in Toronto when she was approximately eight years old and this marks the beginning of her decline, as she notes that "[u]ntil we moved to Toronto I was happy" (2009:23). Before this her family had lived a very nomadic life style, travelling all around Canada camping, staying in motels and spending extended periods of time in the car to accommodate her father's work as a researcher and entomologist. She remembers this time fondly, and up until this time her closest friend and mentor has been her older brother, Stephen, which accounts for the way that she feels more comfortable interacting with boys, a trait that extends past childhood into her adult life, as well as her inability to fit in with and find a place among other girls her age. She describes her uncertainty as such: "I am not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (54-55). Carol Osborne (1994) compounds this point by stating that "the customs and rituals of little girls seem strange to her because she has grown up playing with and freely emulating her closest companion, her brother, without worrying about society's gender restrictions" (101).

Once she begins attending school she forms a friendship with Carol Campbell, who is surprised at the lower middle-class nature of Elaine's family still settling into their permanent home. She treats Elaine as an oddity and talks about Elaine's family as if "reporting on the antics of some primitive tribe" (Atwood, 2009:57). Elaine also makes another friend, a girl from a grade ahead of Carol and herself, Grace Smeath.

She begins to feel somewhat comfortable in this small group until her family leaves for a summer trip. Upon their return she finds that her two friends are joined by a third girl, Cordelia, also older like Grace.

Cordelia's advent into the group is the true origin of Elaine's decline. Cordelia, Grace and Carol begin to manipulate and abuse Elaine, forcing her to retreat further and further into herself. These behaviours culminate in a near-death experience which will be explored in greater detail later on in this chapter. Hereafter, she distances herself from the girls but is reunited with Cordelia in high school. Here, the roles are reversed and it seems as if Elaine has more power than Cordelia; however, their relationship remains somewhat unhealthy. After leaving school and going to college she loses touch with Carol and Grace permanently and sees Cordelia in person only three more times. She becomes absorbed in her art, which she is studying at university, as well as in her secret affair with her teacher Josef, and her simultaneous relationship with her classmate, Jon. She and Jon marry when she falls pregnant, but their relationship after the birth of their daughter, Sarah, is strained and difficult, and prompts a suicide attempt on Elaine's part. Soon after this, she leaves Toronto for Vancouver where she begins to paint in earnest. Rao further notes that this relocation holds not only the possibility of a fresh start but also constitutes "an escape, a flight of the familiar, [as well as] an act of amputation, an erasure which is also a denial of her previous life" (2006:101). She meets and marries a kind, placid man named Ben and they have a child together, Anne. We learn very little about her life onwards from this point until she returns to Toronto.

After Elaine transitions out of the period of Cordelia's influence over her she is still consumed by thoughts of Cordelia, where she is and what she would think of Elaine's current behaviour. This seems strange given that the girls were close but did not have what can be described as a healthy and valuable friendship, and instead their relationship was in fact quite abusive. However, Elaine thinks of her as one thinks of a sister. Again, this is an unusual notion because it becomes clear throughout the text that as a result of her relationship with Cordelia she is not able to form relationships with women easily: "Elaine's childhood traumas are reconstructed in all her subsequent relationships with women, such as her relationship with her rival for Josef's affections, fellow painter Susie" (McWilliams, 2009:115). The complex nature

of her relationship with Cordelia is noted several times in the novel. Elaine points out that her motivation for continuing contact throughout the abuse is that "[t]hey are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please" (Atwood, 2009:142). She later notes the effect that these friendships have had on her subsequent relationships when she says: "Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me" (404).

This warped sisterhood notion that Elaine has can be explained in Helena Michie's concept of sororophobia. She explains that as a result of the feminist movement there has been some kind of expectation that all women have a fundamental basis in common, a kind of assumption of inclusivity, which is plausible; however, this is accompanied by the assumption that this results in some kind of automatic friendship or 'club'. The sheer differences in race, class, sexual orientation, anatomy and educational background make this a fairly idealistic notion and one that does not manifest in reality. Michie (1992) describes the concept as such:

> [S]ororophobia is about negotiation; it attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and differences, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women. Sororophobia is not so much a single entity as it is a matrix against and through which women work out – or fail to work out – their differences. (9-10)

Part of the power that Cordelia wields over Elaine is predicated on inclusivity: Cordelia's "power lies in a […] promise of inclusion and affirmation […] based on a cult of femininity complete with exacting rules and expectations" (McWilliams, 2009:114-115). Elaine desperately wants to be accepted by Cordelia, and even after she moves past this craving, the alienation that characterised that period in her life lingers. Michie (1992), therefore, aptly illustrates the complex relationships between women, and summarises her argument in her statement that "[w]hile sisterhood may indeed be powerful, it is by no means simple or completely benign" (18).

Molly Hite (1995) notes that *Cat's Eye* is "set in an environment of extremity, where the central concern is not merely well-being but survival" (136). Here she is referring to Elaine's abuse at the hands of her friends and the subsequent psychological damage; however, I would argue that this notion of tension extends beyond the

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relationships of the protagonist to the social conditions that Atwood brings to light in the setting of the novel. Elaine, like many abused young children, does not speak up about her treatment but rather retreats into herself, becoming numb in a sense and eventually turning to self-mutilation. This silence that Elaine maintains is something that I would suggest correlates to the issues that Atwood is raising in the text. The injustice and discrimination to which I am referring are not overtly stated but rather quietly suggested and painstakingly exposed for the reader's interpretation through Elaine's own experiences and her perceptions of the treatment of other people.

As Osborne observes, "the forces that have shaped Elaine reflect much about social and cultural conditions in Canada, particularly the coercive nature of the white middle class, so dominant in the 1940s and 1950s" (1994:101). Keeping this is mind, there are four main social concerns that can be discussed with regard to the text: racism, classism, a discussion of Elaine's first experiences with mainstream, Protestant religion, as well as gender issues that are a major concern of the text. The time in which the novel is set coincides with the Second World War and its aftermath. This time-setting, as well as the fact that Canada was a nation colonised by the British, is significant in terms of our discussion of racism. There are three characters that become central to this discussion: Miss Stuart, one of Elaine's teachers from school, Mrs Finestein, who moved to the neighbourhood when Elaine was a teenager and whose son Elaine briefly babysat, and Mr Banerji, a student and later a colleague of Elaine's father at the university. These three people later become the subjects of one of Elaine's most meaningful paintings, but they also represent three different groups of people. One of Elaine's first teachers is Miss Lumley, who subscribes strongly to the colonising manifesto of Britain. She tells the children that "The sun never sets on the British Empire" (Atwood, 2009:93), teaches them about the 'civilising' work that the Empire is doing, brings newspaper clippings about the royal family to display in the classroom and has the children sing 'God Save the King' every morning while her "jaw quivers in a frightening way" (94). Elaine contrasts Miss Lumley to her Grade Five teacher, Miss Stuart. Miss Stuart is Scottish and is not devoted to the British as was Elaine's previous teacher. Miss Stuart's lessons, especially in art, about foreign countries and other groups of people inspire and excite Elaine. She describes these lessons, saying:

> We draw pictures about foreign countries: Mexico with cactuses and men in enormous hats, China with cones on the heads and seeing-eye boats, India with what we intend to be graceful, silk-draped women balancing copper urns, and jewels in their foreheads. (191)

Learning about these places is not only interesting to Elaine but also provides an escape from her present circumstances. She explains the importance of these lessons: "I like these foreign pictures because I can believe in them. I desperately need to believe that somewhere else these other, foreign people exist" (191). Miss Stuart is also kind to Elaine. During one of their art lessons she asks the children to draw what they will do after school. Elaine sets out to draw her bedroom but instead colours the whole picture black with violent crayon marks. This behaviour correlates with the way that abused children often interpret and express situations of abuse in therapy. Elaine is dismayed and terrified that Miss Stuart will be angry, but instead she kindly queries the picture. Elaine answers lamely that it is dark "[b]ecause it's night" (192), fearing her teacher's reaction, but is comforted by the way that "[s]he touches me on the shoulder, briefly, before continuing down the aisle. Her touch glows briefly, like a blown-out match" (193). Although Miss Stuart is not able to actively intercede and stop the abuse that Elaine is experiencing, her kindness is something that provides solace to the troubled child. The significance of Miss Stuart's character, especially in terms of our discussion of racism, is clear when contrasted to that of Miss Lumley. Although Miss Stuart is not actively discriminated against, her more open worldview, which displays fascination for different peoples, emphasises by contrast the essentialist notions of Miss Lumley, and presumably many other people in Canada, which become much more apparent when considering the characters of Mrs Finestein and Mr Banerji.

Mrs Finestein lives in Elaine's neighbourhood and she pays Elaine to babysit her son, Brian, in the afternoons, and take him for walks. She enjoys this time with Brian because he is such a good baby: "He never makes any noises at all, nor does he go to sleep. He just lies there in his carriage, gazing solemnly at me [….] But I like him: he's silent but also uncritical" (157). She is also fascinated by Mrs Finestein, who is glamorous even in her housecoat, and is "not like any mother [Elaine has] ever seen" (157). It is during the time with Brian that we see the inherent racism of this predominantly white middle-class community. When Elaine sees Carol, Grace and

Cordelia while walking with Brian and she tells them his name, Grace immediately replies, "Finestein is a Jewish name" (158), and Carol notes with scorn, that "Jews are kikes" (158). Elaine's mother explains to her that Jewish is just a different kind of religion, but in light of this interaction with the girls Elaine notes that "Brian has a new dimension: he is a Jew" (158). When she sees her friends again Grace quickly points out that "The Jews killed Christ [….] It's in the Bible" (159). After these short interactions Elaine senses the animosity that the girls bear towards the child, and tells Mrs Finestein that she cannot watch Brian anymore: "I tell [her] that I can't do the job anymore because I have too much schoolwork. I can't tell her the real reason: that in some obscure way Brian is not safe with me" (158). The vulgar way that Carol talks about Jewish people and the antagonism that Grace shows towards the child indicates an inherent racism in the community that these young girls have learned.

Mr Banerji is an Indian man and a student of Elaine's father's. He is invited to their Christmas dinner, and Elaine immediately identifies with him. His feelings of displacement parallel Elaine's own feelings among her group of friends. She notes that: "I can hardly believe he's a man, he seems so unlike one. He's a creature more like myself: alien and apprehensive. He's afraid of us. He has no idea what we will do next, what impossibilities we will expect of him, what we will make him eat" (153). Not only does Elaine empathise with Mr Banerji but she is drawn to his difference, a trait which she admires throughout her teenage years. Later on in the text, when Elaine is grown up, we learn that Mr Banerji, and his wife and child, have returned to India because although he is well qualified and an asset to the university he was not promoted and was not going to be granted a tenured position. Given his qualifications and the way in which Elaine's father speaks about this situation the reader is led to believe that this discrimination is based on Mr Banerji's race and ethnicity. Although they are marginal characters, in the text and somewhat in society as well, Miss Stuart, Mrs Finestein and Mr Banerji are all important because they offered alternatives for Elaine and contributed to the widening of her worldview, but were also kind to a troubled little girl and "share her outsider status in Toronto [….] [S]he identifies with all of them in their alienation from the dominant culture" (Osborne, 1994:103). Osborne clarifies Elaine's alignment with them, noting that "Elaine identifies with members of minority groups in Canada as she faces the pressures of conforming to white, protestant, middle-class standards" (1994:96). Elaine also notes their

significance in her life as well as exposes the discrimination that is implied earlier in the text when she reviews her painting of them, entitled *Three Muses*:

> God knows what they really saw in their own lives, or thought about. Who knows what death-camp ashes blew daily through the head of Mrs Finestein, in those years right after the war? Mr Banerji probably could not walk down the street here without dread, of a shove or some word whispered or shouted. Miss Stuart was in exile, from plundered Scotland still declining, three thousand miles away. To them I was incidental, their kindness to me casual and minor; I'm sure they didn't give it a second thought, or have any idea of what it meant. (Atwood, 2009:480)

Classism in the text is mediated through the eyes of Elaine but is evident in the way that the Risley family is received into the Toronto neighbourhood, as well as in the way that Elaine and Cordelia mock the Smeaths when they are older and no longer friends with Grace. When Elaine's family first arrives in Toronto their house is not fully finished and, as they have lived a fairly nomadic life, they have a period of waiting before orders of beds and furnishings are delivered. After befriending Carol, Elaine notices the differences in their lifestyles. For example, Elaine observes the furnishings in Carol's house:

> She lets me look at her living room from the doorway, although we aren't allowed to go into it [….] The living room has a sofa and two chairs and matching drapes, all of a flowered rose and beige material Carol says is chintz. She pronounces this word with awe, as if it's the name of something sacred. (56)

Elaine is bombarded with the practices of white middle class women, quickly learning that twin sets and cold waves are revered by young girls, but not really as interesting as she had hoped. Additionally, Carol finds the practices of Elaine's family strange, and openly talks about them at school as if revealing "exotic specialities" (56):

> Carol tells everyone at school that our family sleeps on the floor. She gives the impression that we do this on purpose, because we're from outside the city; that it's a belief of ours. She's disappointed when our real beds arrive from storage [….] She puts it around that I don't know what church I go to, and that we eat off a card-table. (57)

Although the four girls are friends when they are younger, Elaine loses touch with them after her near-death experience. However, when she is a teenager, Cordelia is

transferred to the school that Elaine attends and they become friends. One day when they walk home from school they begin discussing Grace's family, and in so doing reveal very clear classist sentiments. Grace's family was not as well off financially as Carol and Cordelia's families were, and this is something to which Cordelia has paid great attention and in which she takes great delight. They make fun of the Smeaths, calling them the "Lump-lump Family" (271), and Cordelia lists and ridicules the economies they make:

> "They rationed their toilet paper," Cordelia says. "Four squares at a time, even for Number Two" [….] Cordelia remembers all kinds of things: the greying underwear dripping on the clothesline in the cellar, the kitchen paring knife that was worn right down to a sliver, the winter coats from Eaton's catalogues. Simpsons is the right place to shop, according to Cordelia. (270)

The way that the girls mock the Smeath family reveals clear negative classist views and emphasises the social environment to which Atwood subtly draws attention.

The Smeaths are not only a frugal family, but another of their characteristic features in the text is their piety. Initially when Elaine is invited to church by Mrs Smeath she is excited because she will "have Grace to [herself] on Sunday mornings" (112). Liza Potvin notes that this attempt to draw Elaine out is because "Elaine is considered a heathen and a social outcast by the pious Mrs. Smeath, who first tries to convert her by taking her to church" (2003:637). Elaine is not fully aware of Mrs Smeath's agenda; however, she becomes more and more aware throughout the text that Mrs Smeath may have ulterior motives: "[Mrs Smeath] is pleased with herself, for going out of her way, for displaying charity" (Atwood, 2009:146). Elaine tries very hard to fit into this environment; she notes that she has "memorized the names of all the books of the Bible, in order, and the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, and most of the Beatitudes" (146). Despite her efforts she is not able to find the solace she seeks in religion. Church and Sunday School soon become a place for Grace to watch and critique her every action, reporting Elaine's shortcomings to Cordelia, yet Elaine persists, hoping that her own efforts at piety will earn her some favour in the eyes of Mrs Smeath.

Elaine is shocked when one afternoon she comes upon Grace's mother and aunt discussing her, and she comes to understand that Mrs Smeath is aware of the abuse that she suffers at the hands of the other girls and has done nothing about it, rather she rationalises it as "God's punishment" (213), and suggests that "[i]t serves her right" (213). This realisation evokes an abject hatred in Elaine for the woman:

> I hate Mrs Smeath, because what I thought was a secret, something going on among girls, among children, is not one. It has been discussed before, and tolerated. Mrs Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right. (213)

Elaine is devastated by this knowledge, and Osborne (1994) emphasises the significance of her new understanding by noting that Elaine "realizes that despite her efforts to conform, they still view her as a heathen, and more importantly, that the adult society sanctions the abuse she receives from her peers for being different" (105). The knowledge that her treatment is condoned initiates two changes in Elaine: firstly, she develops a hatred for Mrs Smeath that manifests itself in much of her artwork later on in life, and secondly, she becomes fascinated by Catholicism. Her fascination with the denomination that is frowned upon by the Smeaths is a small comfort for Elaine, but more importantly an act of silent rebellion. Catholic symbolism also becomes another subject that recurs in her artwork, which is characterised by a preoccupation with the Virgin Mary.

Elaine's inability to properly bond with and form meaningful relationships with girls, favouring the more straightforward and bold nature of boys, places her in a unique position. Due to the fact that she does not adequately identify with girls she maintains a certain distance from the other female characters in the text. Elaine does not conform to the gender stereotypes imposed on the other female characters in the text, making it possible to analyse the way gender and femininity operate in the novel, keeping in mind Elaine's position in this culture but at the same time not compromising her 'outsider status'. It is clear that the society in this text is an exceedingly patriarchal one; it is only later on in the novel when Elaine is an adult that the first inklings of Women's Liberation and feminism begin to trickle in. There are two lenses through which to explore gender in this text: behaviour and bodies.

Some scholars, for example Carol Osborne (1994) and Bethan Jones (2008), suggest that, although Cordelia should still be held responsible for her abusive behaviour, she also is a victim of a somewhat abusive family structure. Cordelia has two older sisters, Perdita and Miranda, or Perdie and Mirrie as they are affectionately called. As both are high-achieving girls, Cordelia often falls short of the standard they have set and becomes the target of her father's disappointment (Jones, 2008:29). Although the novel never openly states that Cordelia is abused, it is suggested that she does not necessarily feel secure in her family unit. Osborne suggests that "[i]n tormenting Elaine, Cordelia is simply acting out the loneliness and rejection she feels within her own family, even echoing her parents' words in her reprimands of Elaine" (1994:102). The novel hints at Cordelia's own alienation in one of the significant instances of bullying in the text, which will be discussed in more detail shortly; this is when Carol, Grace and Cordelia bury Elaine alive in a hole Cordelia digs in her family's garden. When Elaine sees Cordelia as an adult Cordelia recalls the hole and claims that her intention was never to bury Elaine. The two of them discuss it:

> "What did you want it for?" I [Elaine] ask.
>
> [Cordelia:] "I wanted to put a chair in it and sit down there. By myself."
>
> I laugh. "What for?"
>
> "I don't know. I guess I wanted some place that was all mine, where nobody could bug me. When I was little, I used to sit on a chair in the front hall. I used to think that if I kept very still and out of the way and didn't say anything, I would be safe."
>
> "Safe from what?" I say.
>
> "Just safe," she says. "When I was really little, I guess I used to get into trouble a lot, with Daddy. When he would lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it." (Atwood, 2009:298-299)

Although Cordelia is being vague and flippant Elaine has some understanding of what she is referring to. She describes this brief moment of comprehension in the following way: "It's as if I've been standing outside in the dark and a shade has snapped up, over a lighted window, revealing the life that's been going on inside in all its clarity and detail" (299). Elaine also perceives the differences in Cordelia's household. She notices that when Cordelia's father is there the table is immaculately laid, everyone is

appropriately dressed and they all comport themselves with decorum, whereas when her father is not there things are much more casual and light-hearted.

Carol also hints at the power of her father in her home, noting that if she is naughty "her mother spanks her with a hairbrush or else a slipper [but when] she's really in for it she has to wait until her father comes home and whacks her with his belt, right on the bare bum" (56). Therefore, one could explain the way that the girls treat Elaine as that they have learned this behaviour from the male figure in their homes, or that their hostile behaviour towards Elaine is a kind of projection or transference of their own experiences and feelings. As such, Hite (1995) suggests that "Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category 'girl' and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their fathers" (137).

The body, and in particular the female body, is highlighted in the text. Young children are often curious about the body, its functions and the way that it changes as they reach maturity, but the way in which the female body comes under scrutiny in the text emphasises the patriarchal society in which the novel is set. Andreea Şerban (2009) points out that "[w]omen are always objects of sight, having their bodies standardised by the dominant male culture, whose ideal about femininity – white, big-busted, long-legged, sensuous and sexual – is embodied by the Barbie doll" (187). This is a notion that Atwood somewhat combats in the text by way of the frank, yet respectful, descriptions of women's bodies and their functions. These observations of the body, through the eyes of Elaine, are characterised by anxiety. This is evident in the discussion among the young girls. Cordelia tells Carol, Grace and Elaine about menstruation as she has learned from her older sisters: girls are under a 'curse' and "blood comes out between your legs" (Atwood, 2009:108). Although they do not fully understand the changes that occur, they live under the inevitability that they will also succumb to some kind of monstrous transformation:

> This frightens us. Whatever has happened to them, bulging them, softening them, causing them to walk rather than run, and if there's some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check – whatever it is, it may happen to us too. We look surreptitiously at the breasts of women on the street [….] We

examine our legs and underarms for sprouting hairs, our chests for swellings. But nothing is happening: so far we are safe. (108-109)

This anxiety is not limited to the female anatomy: they worry about the "carrots" men have between their legs, only "[t]hey aren't really carrots but something worse" (109). However, this concern with the male anatomy is combated by the idea that the male has some kind of control. For example, Elaine recalls the winter trips with her family when her brother practises writing his name, as well as the name of his girlfriend, in the snow with his urine. Despite the fact that Elaine cannot understand his motivation for doing this she is intrigued by his meticulousness and his ability to bend his bodily functions to his will. On a more subconscious level, Stephen's ability to write with his urine, essentially to write with his penis, represents a kind of male control of language that correlates with patriarchy and suggests a kind of phallogocentrism. Stephen's affinity for science also conforms to this notion. Potvin (2003) summarises this idea by suggesting that Elaine's brother "has power synonymous with both patriarchy and science or order, whereas women's lives are messy, filled with chaos and flux of bodily processes like abortion, weight gain, and all the other functions which the young girls in the novel are taught to control" (640). This unease associated with the body is not limited to childhood but persists through the novel, not only although the descriptions of Elaine's self-mutilation, which verge on body horror, but into adulthood in the graphic descriptions that Atwood provides. Therefore, it is clear that gender as well as other social issues such as racism, classism and religion work together to create a precarious environment which Elaine must navigate, and which is not only unsettling but complicates her quest journey as well.

Having contextualised the text and the society in which it is based, it is important to explore some of the key events in Elaine's life before beginning a discussion regarding narration, memory, motifs or art in the text. The first of these instances is one that was briefly mentioned previously when Elaine is 'buried alive' by her friends. This begins as a common game among the girls, as they dress up and play pretend; however, this instance is the first example of the sinister bullying that the girls begins to inflict upon Elaine. In this game she is "supposed to be Mary Queen of Scots, headless already" (Atwood, 2009:125), and so they lower her into the hole that Cordelia has dug in her garden to act as a kind of grave. The girls cover the hole with

boards and then with dirt, which Elaine does not object to, but hereafter she quickly realises that this is not the game she thought is was, perhaps not a game at all:

> Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror. (125)

The image of the hole and grave is a significant one, especially when associated with another memory from that time. Although she cannot place the exact origin of this memory or image, Elaine closely associates this incident with deadly nightshade: "a thicket of dark-green leaves with purple blossoms, dark purple, a sad rich colour, and clusters of red berries, translucent as water" (126). Both the grave and the nightshade indicate the initial instances of Elaine's loss of control which spirals on throughout her childhood into adulthood, when she must confront the memories to regain her selfhood. The grave is significant because it symbolises death, as is the nightshade which is toxic to humans. Just as death is the literal end of a life, so too this symbolic death that Elaine endures represents a break in her normal, healthy development. Additionally, she is unable to conjure any image of the hole, no identifying markers or visual cues to which she can attach meaning. She notes:

> I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it's only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power. (126)

Elaine's description of the grave as a "door" could suggest that it represents a threshold, a time where she has a sense of herself and her identity as opposed to when she is no longer able to view herself as a complete entity. This idea is emphasised by her description of the grave as a "marker": something that separates the two periods in her life very distinctly. This description illustrates very clearly the way in which Elaine 'loses' herself, an idea that is highlighted by that fact that the above quotation is followed by her admission that shortly after this she turned nine years old but has absolutely no memory of the event. In addition, references to the "black square" several other times during the course of the text indicate that she does not easily

overcome her stunted self-development, and that she spends much of her life without a fully developed 'self'.

Moreover, nightshade is not only toxic to humans but can also be a powerful hallucinogenic. Potvin (2003) suggests that as such nightshade can be seen as a metaphor in the text for Elaine's "zombiefication" (636). She notes that it serves to "induce a state of forgetfulness which makes her subservient to Cordelia" so that "[i]n effect, [Elaine] becomes a zombie, a slave to Cordelia, who is herself enslaved by patriarchal demands" (639). It is important to note that Elaine's behaviour is not as a result of exposure to nightshade, as this would have other physical effects, but rather that this is a powerful association that she forms which serves as an effective metaphor in the text. I would also suggest that given the hallucinogenic properties of nightshade the metaphor could be extended to include Elaine's dissociation from herself, and thus becomes a signifier for her catatonic-like existence.

The most severe treatment that Elaine receives at the hands of her friends is what has up to this point been described as her near-death experience, and can be considered the climactic event of the text. The four girls are on their way home after school and are playing in the snow; Cordelia is making snow angels. They realise that they are late getting home and hurry, and in her rush Cordelia tries to slide down an embankment; however, because it has only just begun to snow, "the snow is too soft, not icy enough [and she] falls down and rolls" (Atwood, 2009:220). The girls all find this amusing and laugh until they realise it was not intentional and begin to fear Cordelia's wrath. In an effort to spare themselves Carol and Grace hide their own amusement by pointing out that Elaine was laughing, and Cordelia 'punishes' her unacceptable behaviour by tossing Elaine's knitted hat over the bridge down into the ravine where the girls are forbidden to go. She follows this by insisting that only after Elaine goes to retrieve it will she be forgiven. Elaine seriously considers her options at this point and almost reaches the point of defying Cordelia: "It occurs to me that I may not [do as she says]. What will she do then? […] Maybe she's gone too far, hit, finally, some core of resistance in me" (221). Cordelia seems to be aware of Elaine's indecision and begins cajoling her. Elaine's resistance is counteracted by her fear of what Cordelia may do if she does defy her, or what it would be like to be completely shut out, and so she decides to retrieve her hat, under Cordelia's stipulation that she

must "count to a hundred […] [b]efore coming up" (222). Elaine is aware that Cordelia "sounds like someone giving instructions for a game" (222), but ventures down into the ravine and finds her hat atop the ice of the small creek that cuts the ravine. As she goes to pick up her hat she falls through the ice into the waist-deep water, instantly soaking her clothes and filling up her shoes with near freezing water, but when she looks up to the bridge for help "[n]obody is there. They must have walked, run away. That's why the counting to a hundred: so they could run away" (222). She manages to pull herself to the creek bank and collapses, nearly passing out from the shock to her body, and enters a kind of dream-like state.

She lies on her back on the ground looking up at the bridge, on the brink of hypothermia, when she has an epiphany:

> I can't see the face, there's just a shape. One of the yellowish-green lights is behind it, coming out in rays from around the head [….] The person who was standing on the bridge is moving through the railing, or melting into it. It's a woman, I can see the long skirt now, or is it a long cloak? She isn't falling, she's coming down towards me as if walking, but there's nothing left for her to walk on [….] I can see 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 the half-open cloak there is a glimpse of red [….] It must be her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal [….] I feel her around me, not like arms but like a small wind of warmer air. She's telling me something. *You can go home now*, she says. *It will be all right. Go home*. (224) [Author's italics]

Elaine manages to drag herself up to the street and begins stumbling home, meeting her harried mother, who has been searching for her, on the bridge. She only finds out many years later that Carol, Grace and Cordelia actually went to her mother and told her that Elaine had been kept at school so that her mother would not go looking for her. It is unclear whether the careless as well as sinister nature of their actions ever truly occurred to them. Nevertheless, this vision that Elaine experienced is very significant, as it incorporates particular noteworthy aspects of the text, is an experience that she recalls multiple times, and is the subject of one of her favourite works of art.

Before beginning an examination of the painting that correlates to this image there are a few other aspects that must be discussed. Firstly, Elaine understands this incident as

a visitation by the Madonna: "I know who it is I have seen. It's the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt" (225). It has already been mentioned that her cruel treatment at the hands of Mrs Smeath prompts Elaine to adopt Catholicism as an act of rebellion. She does this after she finds a Sunday School leaflet from Our Lady of Perpetual Help featuring the Virgin Mary. She understands the contempt that Mrs Smeath feels towards Catholics and decides to convert. She notes this decision: "I decide to do something dangerous, rebellious, perhaps even blasphemous. I can no longer pray to God so I will pray to the Virgin Mary instead" (217). Elaine kneels when she prays because "the Catholics are known for it" (217), and focuses on imagining Mary's attire, "that blue dress and crown" (217), and in so doing conforms to the ceremonial nature of the religion. Potvin (2003) points out that in this way "Atwood presents Catholicism as a voodooesque religion, exotic and ritualistic in a way that the predominant Protestantism of Ontario is not" (645). Yet it is important to note that this 'conversion' to Catholicism precedes her near-death experience. Her conversion is not out of gratitude for the Virgin's blessing, or a result of some kind of bargain. Rather it is more likely that her conversion, her simple small act of rebellion, inspired her epiphany which encourages her to extend her independence further and gives her the courage to stand up to and oppose Cordelia.

Much later in life Elaine finds greater significance in the Virgin Mary while visiting a church in a small village in Mexico with her second husband, Ben. She recounts this experience:

> Then I saw the Virgin Mary. I didn't know it was her at first, because she was dressed not in the usual blue or white and gold, but in black. She didn't have a crown. Her head was bowed, her face in shadow, her hands held out open at the sides. Around her feet were the stubs of candles, and all over her black dress were pinned what I though at first were stars, but which were instead little brass or tin arms, legs, hands, sheep, donkeys, chickens and hearts. I could see what these were for: she was a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost. She was the only one who had ever seemed at all real to me. (Atwood, 2009:234-235)

The connection that Elaine feels with this Virgin is based not only on the physical similarities to the Virgin that she sees in her hypothermic state, but also on the significance she ascribes to supplicants: here, the restorer of things lost. Although Elaine is deeply touched and spends an extended amount of time just sitting on the

floor looking at her, so much in fact that her husband comes to look for her, it is interesting to note that Elaine cannot call to mind anything that is lost, anything that she should ask the Virgin to return. She says: "I didn't [kneel or light a candle], because I didn't know what to pray for. What was lost, what I could pin on her dress" (235). There is a double meaning in this statement: on the one hand, she cannot think of any object that is lost, she does not truly comprehend that a part of her is missing, and she does not feel as if there is anything that the Virgin can restore to her. On the other hand, the suggestion is that there is something that is missing but it is not an object that she could simply pin on her dress. What she has lost, her sense of self, cannot be quantified, it is not a thing that is lost and easily returned. Thus, she is thrown into a quandary, as she is missing a significant part of herself but either has no cognizance that it is missing or is unable to comprehend how to begin to restore it.

Furthermore, as a child, during the time that she is trying to identify with the Virgin Mary she concentrates intensely on conjuring an image of her in her mind. She only receives a flash of illumination which she perceives as the heart: "bright red, rounded, with a dark light around it, a blackness like luminous velvet [….] It looks like my red plastic purse" (218). Elaine keeps her favourite marble in this red purse. She enjoys the game of marbles, despite the fact that it is played predominantly by boys (perhaps it is for this reason that she is drawn to it), and admires her brother's prowess. Her favourite marbles are the cat's eyes: "[they] really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They're the eyes of something that isn't known but exists anyway" (73). There is one marble in particular that she keeps aside, which she will not risk in games: the blue cat's eye. She feels as if the marble is imbued with some kind of power and she uses it as a kind of "talisman" (Şerban, 2009:191). Elaine remarks that Cordelia is not aware of the significance of the object:

> She doesn't know the power this cat's eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. (168)

Additionally, Elaine describes the marble, the cat's eye, as if it has its own ability for sight, its own independent, "impartial gaze" (184). The name of the marble is

significant as is the way that Elaine implies its ability to 'see'; Şerban (2009) notes that "it could therefore be considered an inner or third eye, which enables her to gain deeper insight, and at the same time, offers her protection" (190). The cat's eye can also correlate to Elaine's artistic eye and her ability to see beyond extraneous detail and understand an object, person, or situation in an artistic context (Şerban, 2009:192).

Both the Virgin Mary and the cat's eye marble figure strongly in her painting, "Unified Field Theory". This painting closely resembles Elaine's vision:

> Positioned above the top railing of the bridge, but so her feet are not quite touching it, is a woman dressed in black with a black hood or veil covering her hair. Here and there on the black of her dress or cloak there are pinpoints of light […] She is the Virgin of Lost Things. Between her hands at the level of her heart, she holds a glass object: an oversized cat's eye marble, with a blue centre. Underneath the bridge is the night sky as seen through a telescope [….] But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots [….] At the lower edge of the painting the darkness pales and merges to a lighter tone, the clear blue of water, because the creek flows there. (481-482)

The inclusion of the Virgin of Lost Things rather than the traditional Madonna figure speaks to the resonance that the symbol has with Elaine, and emphasises the fact that there is a 'lack' in Elaine's sense of self. The inclusion of the night sky as seen through a telescope and the stars remind the viewer of her brother Stephen, who is fascinated by stars and galaxies as a teenager and who later becomes a physicist. The stones, beetle and small roots represent the bottom of the ravine where she experiences her vision, but they also refer to her father's work as an entomologist, her own interest in the subject of biology and the happy memories she has travelling with her family as a small girl.

The oversized cat's eye marble is the centrepiece of the painting and is a symbol of resistance and empowerment in the text. Şerban (2009) also notes the significance of the blue colour of the marble as "blue is – besides spirituality – the colour of emotion, introversion and self-protection" (190). The cat's eye, although up until this point not able to complete the healing process, is a symbol of restoration and strength, and thus it is significant that it is reintroduced at the end of the text as Elaine fulfils her quest

and her fragmented sense of self is restored. Potvin (2003) also suggests that this painting has significant implications in terms of the larger gender concerns of the text:

> Atwood's strategy of employing the image of ultimate passive female carrying the ultimate object of empowerment (the cat's eye) in this text brings together the two notions of womanhood – one patriarchal, one feminist – and the Virgin of Lost Things represents that power Elaine has lost and now found. (646)

One of Elaine's other noteworthy paintings is one entitled "Cat's Eye", a "self-portrait, of sorts" (Atwood, 2009:480). This is a painting that not only succinctly represents Elaine's fractured sense of identity, but also highlights the indelible effect that her young friends have had on her life, especially Cordelia, and emphasises the complex motif of sight in the text. The painting consists of the top half of Elaine's face, "from the middle of the nose up" (480), and the top of her head in the foreground. She notes that she "put in the incipient wrinkle, the little chicken-feet at the corners of the lids. A few gray hairs. This is cheating, as in reality I pull them out" (480-481). The centre of the picture is occupied by a large ornate, convex mirror in which the viewer is able to see the back of Elaine's head, "but the hair is different, younger" (481). In the distant background of the painting, quite a lot smaller, are "three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed against a field of snow" (481).

The painting can be considered a self-portrait in two ways. Firstly, the most straightforward explanation is that this painting reflects the image of Elaine, as she appears in the present day. This idea is somewhat complicated by the fact that she has altered her exact appearance in the painting, portraying the grey hairs that are not visible in her hair because she plucks them out, and including wrinkles and chicken feet that are not fully developed yet. A realistic interpretation of this portrait could suggest that these subtle changes represent the idea that she has still not gained a fully realised and complete sense of herself; however, the *Künstlerroman* and the art that characterises the genre is rarely so straightforward. The way in which Elaine has rendered herself older and less conformist to patriarchal norms of beauty brings to mind the difference that she admires in her childhood role models, each of whom stood out against the norm. Moreover, this older rendering of herself could also

represent the desire for a wiser future-self free of the societal expectations that hinder the development of her identity. The second way in which this painting can be considered a self-portrait is that it represents, like many of Elaine's other works, an incident from her childhood that had a meaningful effect on her. The situation that is presented here is a few day after she nearly froze to death, and the other girls are harassing her because they each received some kind of punishment for their role in the event, although their parents do not know the full extent of their involvement. When Cordelia suggests she be punished for "telling on [them]" (228) she resists Cordelia and stands up for herself, inciting Cordelia's anger. In this moment Elaine experiences several revelations:

> I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed. But I turn and walk away from her. It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don't have to do what she says, and, worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. I can do what I like. (228)

As Cordelia and the other girls hurl commands and insults at her turned back she also realises, on a subconscious level, that this is behaviour that has been learned in their homes from their own somewhat abusive environments: "[i]t's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation of someone much older" (229). As she understands that this behaviour is a projection, she also realises that "[t]here was never anything about [her] that needed to be improved" (229). She realises that their critique and punishment of her 'unsatisfactory' behaviour is unfounded, and as they follow along behind her in a desperate attempt to regain their power she realises that their negative treatment of her is something they crave and need: "I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass" (229). This is important as it once again reminds the reader of the role of the cat's eye marble; it is as if she equates her resistance with the object. Moreover, the cat's eye marble is reflected in the painting, not only in the name but in the shape of the pier-glass, convex and clear, like the outer surface of the marble. However, it is important to note that although this incident signals Elaine's separation from Carol and Grace indefinitely, and Cordelia until high school (where the roles are reversed and it seems that Elaine has more power over Cordelia), her identity has still been damaged by their treatment of her, and as significant a moment as this may be it does not represent healing or restoration.

There are several motifs that emerge in the novel, two of which are manifested in the self-portrait. One of the central motifs in the text, and one which has been discussed at some length already, is the motif of sight and seeing. As previously mentioned the cat's eye marble is the most compelling indicator of this. Potvin notes that the cat's eye is associated with "metaphors of increased clarity and vision" (2003:638) in the novel, and in some ways the cat's eye acts as the "antidote" to the "blind submission" that the nightshade induces (640). Elaine's paintings are also closely associated with the motif of sight, and Hite (1995) notes that "[p]ainting has served for Elaine as a means of vision and revision" (147).

The correlative to sight, however, is blindness – a motif also evident in the text. The motif of blindness is manifested in the text through Elaine's own inability to perceive herself clearly. She either has no memories of certain events or is unable to situate herself in relation to them; she has no recognition of herself in her reflection and lacks a complete sense of herself as she enters adulthood. This is apparent in her relationships with both Jon and Josef, as Şerban (193) confirms when she notes that "men seem to fragment the protagonist's body" (193) in the novel. For example, Elaine notes the way that Josef rearranges her (Atwood, 2009:358), commenting on the way she should wear her hair or the kinds of clothes she should wear, and considering her as if she were a composition or painting rather than a real person. Jon on the other hand is referred to as "[offering] escape" (371). Yet he also does not value Elaine as an individual but considers her in relation to his very simplistic evaluation of women: "Jon doesn't think women are helpless flowers or shapes to be arranged as contemplated, as Josef does. He thinks they are smart or stupid. These are his categories" (373). This blindness to herself in the context of heterosexual relationships eventually results in a suicide attempt on Elaine's part, during her marriage to Jon and shortly after the birth of their daughter. Preceding this event she is consumed with feelings of nothingness: "I am inadequate and stupid, without worth. I might as well be dead" (438). The motif of blindness, although strongly linked to Elaine's image of herself and her identity, is also exposed in another series of her paintings, the Mrs Smeath series. Her representations of the woman are numerous and complex, imbued with aspects that Elaine associates with her: the rubber plant, white tissue paper, the bad heart, and religious symbols. Elaine is aware

of their significance to her: they are a "mockery" and a "desecration" (477), but she also comes to comprehend, during the exhibition, the event that marks the completion of her quest, that these paintings represent considerable malice. She recognises the point of view from which Mrs Smeath sees and identifies, and is able to empathise with parts of the situation in which Mrs Smeath found herself. As such, she realises that "I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (477).

Additionally, the idea of doubling and splitting is also a prominent motif in the novel. The idea of repetition and splitting is initially associated with the fracturing of Elaine's identity. This is a kind of defence mechanism that she uses to combat the abusive treatment she receives at the hands of her friends. This behaviour begins with Elaine retreating from herself, which she describes as her "body stiffening, emptying itself of feeling" (183), resulting in a kind of shell that she presents to Cordelia and the other girls, something capable of absorbing the brunt of their maltreatment and a separate, dark, unseen place in which her psyche 'hides'. This however, develops into "self-splitting" (Hite, 1995:143) by way of fainting. She first faints at a Conversat that she attends with her father; overwhelmed by the number of people and the heat of the room she passes out. This is an exercise that she becomes able to manipulate, and she is able to faint at will. She recounts this ability: "Now I can do it almost whenever I want to. I hold my breath and hear the rustling noise and see the blackness and then I slip sideways, out of my body, and I'm somewhere else" (Atwood, 2009:204-205). To begin with Elaine was able to 'observe' this experience: "I can see my own body lying on the ground, just lying there. I can see girls pointing and gathering" (204), but this is not always the case. Yet the notion that her body remains in one place while she occupies another after "[slipping] sideways" is congruent with the motif of doubling and splitting.

Elaine's artwork also conforms to the motif of doubling in the text, as each work of art is linked with some event or association from her life. Ellen McWilliams (2009) notes that the protagonist "reconstructs the traumas of her early life through her paintings" (117). As Elaine reviews each painting she, and by extension the reader, is transported back to that time and the events that inspired the art work. Nicola King (2000) sums up this idea by pointing out that "Elaine's paintings are visual

equivalents of the way in which we rework and represent elements of the past, and her reinterpretations acknowledge the complex processes of condensation, displacement and fantasy which produce what we call memory" (80). In addition, her artwork is also the medium for much of the doubling and repetition in the text, itself conjuring images of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Lost Things, the cat's eye marble, images of her self and her friends, Mrs Smeath and the nightshade.

Furthermore, these motifs are also central to the events that ultimately signal Elaine's healing, recovery and the completion of her quest. There are two main instances of repetition and doubling at the conclusion of the text that demonstrate restoration and the completion of Elaine's quest for selfhood. The first of these instances is one that has been suggested already, her retrospective exhibition at the gallery, for which she has especially returned to the city of Toronto. The paintings represent the duplicates or doubles of significant events from Elaine's past. She talks about the order in which Charna, the gallery curator and director, has arranged her paintings, and that "[c]hronology won out after all" (Atwood, 2009:476). Although the events of the novel are not arranged chronologically and jump between different episodes both past and present, emphasising the way that Elaine's identity is somewhat scattered, the correct chronological ordering of the artwork symbolises some kind of resolution of the fragmented nature of Elaine's past. This suggests that now that the 'puzzle pieces' have been properly arranged she can begin to move forward and stop fixating on the events of the past. Lorraine York (2006) explains Elaine's review of her artwork in this way: "as she walks through the rooms of the gallery, it's as if she is bringing life back to these paintings in the act of reviving their moments of creation and of their inspiration of her past" (36). This cathartic experience is also an exorcism of sorts: "I walk around the room surrounded by the time I've made […] I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have came out of me. I'm what's left over" (Atwood, 2009:482). The memories that the paintings represent have been excised: the paintings become complete artworks and Elaine is free of the entrapments of her past. Osborne contextualises this moment in the context of recollective art, using the work of Ikenna Dieke, who writes:

> Recollective art is a rhetorical strategy of relocating the lost self, of seeking
> and uncovering an inner tapestry of identity, not mere psychological identity,

but the exterior contexts – social, political, and personal – that make up the human self in all its complexity. (1994:101)

The second instance of the motif of repetition and doubling in *Cat's Eye* occurs the morning after the exhibition. Elaine wanders the streets of Toronto, as she has been doing since she arrived, revisiting places that hold significance for her, and she comes to the bridge where she almost died. She notices that the wooden bridge has been replaced by an established concrete one and that the ravine has been cleaned up: "this is no longer an unofficial garbage dump but a joggers' route" (Atwood, 2009:494). She recalls her experience with the Virgin Mary, and now understands that this was not a true visitation or revelation of the Madonna but instead the workings of her fading mind. Nevertheless, she recalls the comforting voice. Jolted out of her reverie by the shuffling of another passerby she looks up ahead of her and sees a vision of Cordelia: "[s]he's standing halfway up the hill, gazing back over her shoulder [….] I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant" (495). The feelings that she associated with Cordelia, inadequacy and shame, all rush back to her, but she "[recognises] that the fear, loneliness and pain she felt as a child were the emotions Cordelia experienced as well" (Osborne, 1994:109). She realises: "these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (Atwood, 2009:495). This cleansing moment culminates in Elaine's acceptance of her current situation and her releasing the past:

> I am the older one now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late. I reach out my arms to her, bend, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. The snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke. (495) [Author's italics]

The motif of repetition is evident in this incident. For example, the fact that Cordelia appears as a child, dressed in the clothes that she wore during that time, reminds Elaine of all the time she spent with Cordelia as a child. As this meeting also takes place under the bridge where Elaine was left for dead, the fact that this happens in the same place and now Elaine is concerned for Cordelia's well-being is also an example of repetition. The pose that Elaine assumes, with her hands held out, is reminiscent of Elaine's own vision of the Virgin, as is the assurance that she offers. The final sentence is also significant: Elaine's mention of snow in her eyes not only refers to

the present time but also to her own experience under the bridge, as she lay freezing on the creek bank, staring up at the sky unable to move, her eyes clouding with snow. The reference to her eyes clouding over during that childhood experience could suggest the permanent effect that that event had on the formation of her identity and that she has not been able to 'see clearly' since then. It is only after she has confronted Cordelia and excised her painful past that she is able to become whole. Osborne offers her own suggestions of the significance of Elaine's actions: "By reaching out to comfort the imaginary figure of Cordelia, Elaine shows that she has reached an acceptance, not only of her past and figures in it, but of herself" (1994:109).

The novel closes with Elaine's flight back to Vancouver. She watches two older women on the plane, joking and enjoying their trip and their time together, and as she does so she realises her own loss, not for the friend that Cordelia was (she was not a very good friend to her) but for the possibility of the future in their relationship, and in Elaine's subsequent relationships with women. She remarks that she does not miss "something that's gone, but something that will never happen" (Atwood, 2009:498). The final words of the novel are about the darkness of night: "Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars, which are not as eternal as we once thought [….] It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by" (498). The idea of fading to darkness is not only a fitting end for the closure of the text but offers some insight into the nature of memory and hints at Elaine's development as a result of the trajectory of the text. It is important to note that this is a clear sky, unobstructed by clouds, sleet or snow, and it is also very clearly a night sky, not the oppressive, consuming darkness of Elaine's isolation in the novel. Moreover, the reference to the age of the stars correlates to Elaine's own findings about memories: they are not eternal, but they morph, change, fade and lose their significance. Finally, the idea that there is only minimal light is also important. This is not complete darkness, it is not the complete absence of light, but it is not enough to see clearly by either. Equating this notion to Elaine's journey in the novel one can infer that although she has been able to shed some light on her life and throw off some of the oppressive darkness in which she felt frozen, her issues have not been completely illuminated. This ending still offers hope, however, in that it suggests the possibility of further healing, and although Elaine has been lost for so long, "she is healing her blindness. She has learned to see in the dark" (Wilson, 2006:184).

The idea of narrative structure in the study of this text as a *Bildungsroman* is very important as it disrupts the linear structure of the traditional male *Bildungsroman* in favour of a more circular and convoluted narrative. Additionally, one cannot conduct a discussion of the narrative structure of this text without considering the role of memory, as the two are inextricably linked in *Cat's Eye*. The role of memory has been dealt with in the text fairly extensively; however, there are several additional points that must be stated before continuing with a discussion of narrative structure and the *Bildungsroman*. The narrative consists of two parts, "which never quite meet" (King, 2000:63): one deals with her memories of her childhood, some traumatic and painful, others innocuous, while the other tells of her return to Toronto in the 'present day' for her art exhibition. One reason for the fractured state of her memory, as previously suggested, is that "extreme victimisation and the experience of powerlessness dislocate memory and the sense of self" (63). These are central concerns in the text and have already been dealt with; however, it is also important to consider King's astute observation regarding the recollection of these events:

> Although the visit to Toronto, when she revisits the sites of her childhood experience, provides the occasion for an *intensification* of memory, it is not the time or place when she first 'remembers'. This occurred some years earlier, with the finding of the cat's eye marble, although the *effect* is that she is remembering during her visit to Toronto. (67) [Author's italics]

Thus, it is important to note that Elaine's development in *Cat's Eye* is traced through the "collage of reconstructed memories" (McWilliams, 2009:116). The non-linear structure as a result of Elaine's recall of these memories is the basis of Carol Osborne's observations regarding narrative structure and its role in the disruption of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Osborne (1994) argues that in contrast to the straightforward linear structure that traces the development of the male protagonist, the narrative that Atwood provides is circular, alternating between past and present and fixated on a specific time period in Elaine's past. Furthermore, Osborne notes that the significance of the circular plot is that it highlights the way in which the female protagonist is not necessarily shaped by events in her development but rather "defines herself relationally, [reflecting] the differences in male and female identity formation" (96). She goes on to note:

> Unlike the male protagonists of bildungsromans who separate themselves
> from earlier experiences, Elaine finds her identity through consciously going
> back to and accepting her past and the people in it, and embracing herself as
> she was and is. In this way, Atwood privileges the relational needs of the
> female protagonist; although Elaine's childhood makes it difficult for her to
> form actual relationships with other women, her inner concerns reflect a desire
> for connection rather than separation from others. (97)

Osborne also points out other aspects that characterise Atwood's text as a female *Bildungsroman*. The significance of tracing Elaine's journey into adulthood is not only to illustrate the way in which her whole life has been marked by her treatment as a child, but also to illustrate the deviations from the traditional *Bildungsroman* structure. In adulthood Elaine finds herself with a secure job and 'hobby', as well as a husband and a daughter; on the surface she seems to be fairly well actualised, but we learn that her relationship with her husband is tense, the pressures of motherhood are overwhelming and she has little free time to devote to her artwork. She confronts Jon, saying: "I don't have time. I don't have time to think, I don't have time to paint, I barely have time to shit. I'm too busy paying the goddamn rent" (Atwood, 2009:437). It is necessary to note that even with all these areas of her life filled she is not satisfied:

> By making her protagonist middle-aged, secure professionally as a minor
> artist, and already a wife and mother, Atwood avoids the traditional pattern in
> which the point of maturation is marked by the heroine's marrying, giving
> birth, or finding a career [….] By making Elaine secure in job and family,
> Atwood shows that these aspects of a woman's life do not necessarily lead her
> to a better understanding of herself. (Osborne, 1994:97)

Atwood also incorporates aspects of the *Künstlerroman* into the novel. The fact that Elaine's development and her eventual healing are so closely linked to her artwork emphasises this point. Hite also notes the connection that the motif of seeing has with Atwood's extension of the *Künstlerroman* into her female *Bildungsroman* structure: "visual art is not only a convenient displacement of literary art in this novel. *Cat's Eye* is also about visibility: about who sees and is seen, about evading or controlling the gaze, about the seeing that is the precondition and product of art" (1995:136). These aspects provide convincing proof that Elaine's psychological negotiation of her identity, through time and memory, as well as the narrative structure and elements of

Elaine's adult life, exemplify Atwood's ability to explore and extend aspects of the traditional *Bildungsroman* to achieve a narrative that is more clearly a female *Bildungsroman*.

Elaine's narrative, although a *Bildungsroman*, shows evidence of quest motifs as well. For example, Elaine is required to make a physical journey away from her home that she considers to be her 'safe haven'. This is the most significant physical aspect of the quest, although the way in which Elaine wanders the streets of Toronto revisiting areas that have meaning to her also constitutes a physical aspect of a quest journey. However, Elaine's most intensive journey is through time, when she delves into her memories in order to excavate a complete sense of herself. This psychological journey is the most fraught with trials, as this exposition of Elaine's traumatic past is very painful. As a crucible of sorts, it allows her to order her memories and their significance and to come to terms with her past and herself. Moreover, her near-death experience, like the protagonist's drowning/baptism experience in Atwood's *Surfacing*, represents a kind of descent into the Underworld. She finds herself in the ravine under the bridge twice in the novel: during her own near-death experience and in the concluding episode of the novel during her encounter with the shade of Cordelia. In both instances she experiences a visitation of sorts and has a kind of epiphanic experience. Hereafter, she achieves some kind of healing, although in the latter case this is a more permanent state of restoration that the former is not. She concludes her journey by returning to her home, having received the elixir and preparing to live in the knowledge of her discoveries.

Therefore, in conclusion, it is evident that Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* presents a compelling narrative that traverses the boundaries of the traditional male-centred *Bildungsroman* and offers a female *Bildungsroman* as an alternative. Her treatment of the complex nature of memories and childhood traumas is an appropriate foundation on which to base a discussion of a psychological quest. The importance of art in the text as well as the fascinating motifs that she presents support the themes in the novel and enhance the discussion of the text as an example of a quest narrative and a female *Bildungsroman*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The focus of this dissertation has been to examine the way in which Margaret Atwood presents the *Bildungsroman*, and more specifically the female *Bildungsroman*, as well as specific quest motifs in a selection of her novels. This analysis has been conducted through the lens of gender and has therefore paid special attention to the construction of femininity, and in some cases masculinity as well. It has considered the journey of development as a whole, as well as considering the unique nature of the journey, that is to say whether it is physical, spiritual or psychological, in an effort to examine Atwood's use and manipulation of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. In each chapter, aspects which strongly influence the protagonist's *Bildung* and quest journey have also been examined. In this final chapter, I will briefly summarise the way in which each of the chosen texts fits into the larger project of this dissertation and will present my conclusions regarding Atwood's use of the *Bildungsroman* genre and quest motifs.

Bonnie Hoover Braendlin notes that

> The feminist bildungsroman delineates woman's self-development toward a viable present and future existence, free from predetermined, male-dominated societal roles, which in the past have yielded a fragmented rather than satisfactory integrated personality. (1979:18)

Each of the texts examined in this project represents a variation of this definition and so constitutes an important contribution to the genre of the female *Bildungsroman*. However, given the unique and varied nature of each novel it is important to consider the merit that the texts offer individually.

The Penelopiad, one of Atwood's most recent works, both highlights the importance of this project and provides an apt foundation on which to base it, as the main concern of the text is to give credence to a more feminist narrative, one that in actuality may contradict or negate the socially accepted and renowned male-dominated narrative. Atwood is careful not to completely dismiss Homer's famous work or to suggest that

the account that she provides is able to replace the *Odyssey*. She does this by portraying Penelope as a somewhat unreliable narrator and by instilling a level of scepticism in the reader throughout the text. Ultimately, Atwood's *Penelopiad* is a critical work that augments Homer's *Odyssey* with a much more dubious and speculative account. This work represents Atwood's manipulation of the *Bildungsroman* and quest motifs in several ways. Firstly, the novel is not strictly a *Bildungsroman*, as it does not trace Penelope's personal development throughout the novel but rather follows a different kind of journey, one in which she seeks to be recognised as a fully developed, smart and respectable woman who is not merely the brunt of a male joke. Yet this *Bildungsroman*-like narrative journey is complicated by the fact that Penelope is already dead and is in fact speaking from the Underworld in the novel, and is therefore not 'developing' at all. However, there are aspects of the texts that can be interpreted as qualities of the female *Bildungsroman* and are more true to the form. For example, the majority of the story takes place during Penelope's somewhat unsatisfactory marriage to Odysseus. She remains unfulfilled in the role of wife and mother, is separated from and in fact not close to her own family, and she is in the unfamiliar surroundings of her marital home in Ithaca. Furthermore, she experiences tension, rather than solidarity, with the other female figures such as her mother-in-law, Anticleia, Eurycleia and her cousin, Helen. As a result she experiences the kind of isolation and the struggle to find her own 'voice' that is typical of the female *Bildungsroman*.

The relationship of this text to the quest structure and its characteristic motifs is unique and complex. Campbell's (1956) mythic structure of separation, initiation and return is not particularly straightforward with regard to Penelope's journey. Her separation occurs when she leaves her home in Sparta for Ithaca, and encompasses all the time up until Odysseus is apparently lost at sea. Those ten years during which Penelope must head the household and cleverly evade the suitors constitutes her initiation. It is the return aspect of her journey which is complicated. Penelope's return is to a state of normalcy after her husband resumes his role. During this stage of a quest the protagonist enjoys the fruits of his or her labour and lives the remainder of their life peacefully. Although on the surface, and particularly in Homer's account, this is the case, Penelope's struggle for credit and recognition and her quandary over the death of her maids undermines this structure. This ambivalence and lack of

satisfactory resolution is not only characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* but to some extent of Atwood as well. Braendlin notes, with regard to the female *Bildungsroman* that:

> [Usually] with the bildungsroman, these development journeys follow the protagonists no further than their decisions to adapt to society or to retreat into exile; the newly reborn women cannot predict the consequences of their choices, and hence their attitudes combine anxiety and indecision with jubilation and determination. (1979:20)

Atwood uses this aspect of the feminist *Bildungsroman* not only in *The Penelopiad* but in her other novels as well, offering particularly unique endings. The ending of *The Penelopiad* possesses this ambivalence in that the reader is unsure of Penelope's reliability and is also aware that the uncertainty that she feels regarding the death of her maids colours the remainder of her life, so much so that even after her death she is compelled to offer some explanation for this.

Furthermore, Atwood's use of the Homeric myth in this novel illustrates a special relationship with the quest. The way in which she undermines the traditionally masculine tale through her female narrator calls into question the validity of the precedent. It opens up a space for the discussion of and a focus on a more female-centred narrative and an interrogation of the *Bildungsroman* and quest motifs therein.

Surfacing, one of Atwood's most famous works, is the closest in structure to the traditional quest narrative. Before commenting on the way in which the quest is represented in this novel, I will offer some observations on the use of the *Bildungsroman* format in *Surfacing*. The protagonist's background fits very neatly with the experiences of the protagonist in the female *Bildungsroman*. For example, the beginning of her journey takes place later in life, not in adolescence, and it also takes place after she has found the romantic experience unfulfilling. She also experiences a sense of isolation as she is completely estranged from her family and she has very few friends. However, most significantly, this novel constitutes a female *Bildungsroman* as the protagonist's journey is her search for a complete and fully realised identity, a quest for autonomy.

The quest structure is more prominent in this novel than that of the *Bildungsroman*. Charles Berryman notes that the "narrator of *Surfacing* is shown to re-enact a pattern from mythology – a ritual journey of descent and rebirth" (1987:51). The quest structure in the novel extends further than Campbell's broad separation, initiation, and return outline, and instances from the novel illustrate that the quest is far more deeply embedded in Atwood's work. Berryman notes that the "mythic pattern" that is present in the novel unfolds in "the descent into the underworld, a meeting with the shadow of death, a madness to become one with nature, and a return to the surface marked by a new control, power, and wholeness" (51). This pattern is repeated many times in classical quest mythology but predominantly with regard to a male hero. Berryman also notes that in classical quest mythology, the most notable female figure to experience this kind of journey is Persephone (51). Other elements of the quest narrative emerge through further study of this novel: the protagonist experiences hallucinations of her dead mother and father which not only constitute some kind of communication with the dead, which occurs in classical mythology, but also implies that these figures act as mentors in her quest journey. Furthermore, one of the most significant aspects of the quest is the restorative components that the grail brings. In this novel, there is no grail, no physical thing for which the protagonist searches; however, the fact that her experience of madness yields a more healthy and independent individual suggests that her identity, when fully realised and not dictated to the protagonist by the men in her life, constitutes the grail.

Atwood extends the genre of *Bildungsroman* in this novel by including significant spiritual aspects. The protagonist's guidance and communion with First Nation's religious symbols as well as how she experiences the natural world during this time is significant. Spirituality and nature both appear in *Bildungsroman* literature, yet the protagonist's complete integration with both during her transformative experience is noteworthy here. Furthermore, Atwood's use of a classical mythic pattern that so closely resembles Persephone's emphasises the prominence of the female protagonist.

Cat's Eye, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, constitutes a more subtle exploration of the *Bildungsroman* and the journey towards self-development. This novel is more like the traditional model of the *Bildungsroman* in that it traces the life of the protagonist from childhood through to adulthood; however, it is important to note that

this is done in the context of recollection. This novel is one in which "the self is created from recollection and reconstruction of memory – a remembrance of things past" (Braendlin, 1979:19). The narration by both the young Elaine from 'within' those memories and the present, middle-aged Elaine is significant. Braendlin notes that the "ironic juxtaposition of younger developing protagonist and older matured narrator results in a 'double vision' out of which a new person is born" (19). One of the most significant aspects of the novel is the vocation of the protagonist, Elaine Risley, who is a painter. The notion of a woman as a creator, who has the power to manipulate a medium for a specific message, is central to the idea of the female *Bildungsroman*: women in female *Bildungsromane* are often artists or authors. In emphasising Elaine as a painter and artist and incorporating art into so many aspects of Elaine's quest Atwood also makes use of the *Künstlerroman*, in conjunction with the female *Bildungsroman* and quest. Moreover, the context that Atwood provides is extensive; she shows the effect of family, friends, schooling, and religion on the development of the individual. It is as a result of these experiences that Elaine feels lost, without purpose and unfulfilled, which prompts her search for identity.

Of the three texts examined in this dissertation, *Cat's Eye* offers the most understated representation of the quest. The narrative, typical of the female *Bildungsroman*, is circular and convoluted rather than linear, narrated through the lens of Elaine's memory, and thus does not provide a straightforward representation of the quest. Yet Campbell's mythic structure is evident in the text: Elaine experiences separation when she leaves Vancouver and returns to Toronto for the exhibition of her artwork. The time when she is in Toronto and recalls her memories constitutes the initiation period and the road of trials through which she must navigate. Finally, her return comes when she journeys home to Vancouver, having made some peace with her past.

Having briefly revisited the three texts examined in this dissertation, it is evident that these texts are examples of female *Bildungsromane* and that there is evidence of quest motifs in each. However, it also becomes clear that although Atwood does use the *Bildungsroman* genre extensively and conforms to the literary standards consistent with it she also extends the genre. As with other specifically female *Bildungsromane* the age timeline is disrupted in each of the chosen texts. Atwood does not trace their journey from childhood onwards but rather begins later on in the protagonist's life,

choosing to incorporate specific instances from their childhoods that are relevant to the search for their identities. Another aspect of the female *Bildungsroman* that Atwood aligns with is the power of the woman as a creator, which is evident in each text: Penelope is a 'story-spinner', an early form of an author; the protagonist of *Surfacing* is an illustrator, and Elaine is a painter. Furthermore, each protagonist is unfulfilled in her romantic and family life and is disillusioned by the heteronormative model of romantic love and marriage. Penelope's ability is overlooked by her husband; the protagonist of *Surfacing* experiences a relationship with a married man who forces her to have an abortion and now struggles to relate to her current partner; and Elaine is unfulfilled as a mother and wife, having already experienced an affair with her teacher and an unsuccessful first marriage.

Thus, although each text exhibits aspects of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, there are other significant examples of how Atwood extends this structure. For example, a *Bildungsroman* with a female protagonist is generally considered to have a more circular rather than linear plot; Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (1983) and Rita Felski (1989) comment on the way that this narrative differs from the strictly linear structure of the male-centred *Bildungsroman*. Atwood's use of the narrative structure is noteworthy when considering her use of the female *Bildungsroman*. In each of the chosen texts that narrative structure is circular, revisiting moments from the protagonist's past, but it is also further complicated by other aspects. In *The Penelopiad*, the narrative is disrupted by the fact that Penelope narrates the story after her death and the fact that Atwood makes use of an already well-established account of the events that occurred. In *Surfacing* the narrative is augmented with the protagonist's memories, hallucinations and moments of madness, which contribute to the circular rather than linear structure. And finally, in *Cat's Eye* the inclusion of Elaine's memories to make up the majority of the text and the resulting dual narration complicates the narrative structure of the text. The precise control that Atwood exhibits over each narrative is an example of how she carefully makes use of and extends the traditional structure to represent a more female-focussed *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman* is a search for identity, and while the protagonist in each of the texts embarks on a journey to find her identity it is coupled with many other issues

which they must overcome in order to be successful. Atwood incorporates other aspects into each of the protagonist's journeys so as to diversify the genre. For example, in Penelope's journey her identity is closely linked to the specific events that occurred and the extent of her involvement therein. Thus, her journey is just as much a quest for truth, which the reader is ultimately denied, as it is for identity. In *Surfacing* the protagonist's search for identity and autonomy is connected to a spiritual quest which she must complete. Elaine's *Bildung* in *Cat's Eye* is affected by her psychological trauma and her memories. The expansion of each narrative makes each text much more than a simple *Bildungsroman* and contributes to the genre of the female *Bildungsroman*.

Finally, an essential aspect of Atwood's work within the genre is the way in which she handles the conclusion of her texts. Her texts are characterised by ambivalent endings. Although Atwood's protagonists are largely successful, it is clear that although their *Bildungs* or quests are complete, the 'struggle' is not necessarily over. There is a sense of hope and promise at the conclusion of the texts, but the crucible of the search for their autonomous identity is not something merely left behind. I would argue that the possibility is posited that they continue their struggle, only now, as a result of the *Bildung* and quest, they are better equipped to navigate the remainder of their journey. This is evident in the texts; for example, Penelope has provided an alternative to Odysseus's narrative; however, the reader is reluctant to accept it, and thus Penelope is not necessarily accorded the sense of vindication that she hopes for. In *Surfacing*, we are not told explicitly whether the protagonist will leave with Joe; however, we get the sense that her wilderness experience has offered her all that it can. Yet if she does return to the city with Joe, the obstacles in their relationship still need to be dealt with and they will need to manage the possibility of a pregnancy as well. The protagonist will also need to balance this new romantic experience with the trauma of her past. In *Cat's Eye*, at the conclusion of the text, Elaine seems to have a new sense of herself, a more complete self-image, but her life in Vancouver has not changed and she will need to integrate her new state of mind with her current life. It is also unclear whether or not she will be able to dispel the memories and trauma that have haunted her entire life. This is congruent with the final phase of Campbell's mythic structure, return. A large part of this phase of the quest is learning to balance one's quest experience, or *Bildung*, with one's ordinary life.

It is important to note that the ambivalence of these endings is not unsatisfactory, and in fact they form part of Atwood's unique use of the *Bildungsroman* structure. The deferral of a neatly packaged conclusion highlights Atwood's focus on endurance and an alternative to victimhood (McWilliams, 2009:151). Ellen McWilliams notes that this "relates powerfully to Atwood's interest in the Bildungsroman: her fiction serves to question, rather than to invest in, conventional models of growth and development" (151). She goes on to highlight the importance of Atwood's ambivalence and questioning mode in the development of a female *Bildungsroman* genre in her comment regarding Atwood's style:

> [I]t refuses to invest in misleading constructions of the personal odyssey in literature, where coming of age holds the promise of victory or triumph. Instead, it interrogates the promise of cohesive selfhood associated with the original Bildungsroman and suggests that this kind of questioning method is the more useful and creative position from which to consider ideas of human subjectivity and development. (151)

Therefore, it is evident that Atwood contributes significantly to the female *Bildungsroman* genre. She appropriates facets of the original structure, adapting them and making them her own, as well as providing alternatives and other aspects which extend the genre and contribute to its ongoing development.

McWilliams includes a postscript in her book, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*, in which she notes the impact of Atwood's work, particularly with regard to *the Bildungsroman*, on other Canadian female writers. She notes that "Atwood's engagement with coming-of-age narratives constitutes an especially powerful aspect of her work, one that carved out an imaginative space within which other women writers could work" (137). The navigation of selfhood and identity is a theme on which such writers are specifically focussed. McWilliams lists several works and authors that are influenced by Atwood's work; these include Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), Joan Barfoot's *Gaining Ground* (1978) and Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983). McWilliams notes that these works and others "appropriate [Atwood's] slant on the Canadian wilderness, in the way they develop or engage with typically Atwoodian preoccupations, and in how they represent the Canadian woman writer or artist" (2009:138).

This dissertation has explored three examples of female *Bildungsromane* and the quest in the oeuvre of Margaret Atwood. Through the lens of gender it has examined three very different journey narratives, noting the compliance with and deviation from the traditional *Bildungsroman* structure and the presence of quest motifs in the text. It has considered different contexts within the quest and has highlighted that Atwood's relationship with the female *Bildungsroman* is "playful, inconclusive, and ultimately highly subversive" (152). The theoretical material that has been used was carefully selected, and creates a particularly applicable framework around which to build this study and which emphasises the complex nature of the chosen texts. Additionally, reading from a South African background and frame of reference, rather than a Canadian one, allows for a much broader focus on identity construction in a range of scenarios rather than a particularly Canadian construction of identity. I have focussed on a more diverse construction of identity and the varying nature of the quest. Thus the study becomes relevant to wider audience and readership and its contribution to the study of the genre is not limited by a single aspect, nationality.

This dissertation provides only a sample from Margaret Atwood's extensive opus; however, the selected texts offer a comprehensive reading of the female *Bildungsroman* and the quest. The way in which Atwood makes use of the original structures but also extends them highlights the complexity and the fraught nature of the search for one's self or identity. She provides journey narratives that highlight the female perspective but which also incorporate other dimensions so as to provide a more nuanced journey experience. Margaret Atwood's work, and these novels in particular, not only make an important contribution to the genre of the female *Bildungsroman* but also inspire and encourage further development of the genre in contemporary women's fiction.

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