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Through a Glass Darkly:  
Gothic Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

par

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures  
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Through a Glass Darkly?

et

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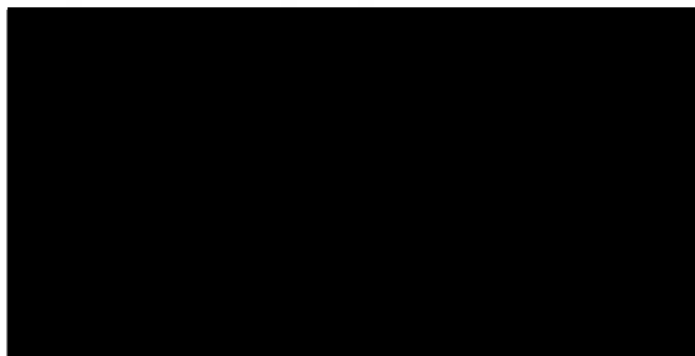
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## ABSTRACT

My thesis deals with gothic elements in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. Many critics have commented on Atwood's *Lady Oracle* as a satirical attack on the way that gothic romances perpetuate outdated stereotypes for women's identities. That Atwood herself has called *Lady Oracle* "anti-gothic" might suggest that she has no use for the gothic genre. However, in my thesis I prove that Atwood, in *Cat's Eye*, has found new uses for the gothic as a viable means of exploring women's contemporary concerns.

My thesis examines *Cat's Eye* in its use of two gothic figures, the vampire and the Double. It is my contention that Atwood uses these archetypal characters—their natures, and their traditional narratives in mythology and literature—as symbols or metaphors for existential grapplings, specifically those of contemporary women.

In Chapter One of my thesis I trace the vampire scenario in *Cat's Eye*—the way in which Atwood's young protagonist, Elaine, is symbolically transformed, through the persecution of her girlfriends, into a metaphorical vampire or lamia (a type of female vampire). I look at how Atwood draws upon various traditional works (some well-known, some not) to inform this symbolic transformation. I contend (along with critics such as James B. Twitchell) that even such traditional works as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel," while ostensibly describing supernatural beings, are essentially examinations of human relationships and therefore lend themselves well to Atwood's purpose in *Cat's Eye*. This purpose is to examine the way in which many women in western culture symbolically 'feed off' other women, and the results of this parasitical dynamic.

In Chapter Two of my thesis, I examine *Cat's Eye* as a Double story. First I briefly discuss different types of traditional Doubles in literature. Then I show how *Cat's Eye* takes its cue from both the tradition of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, where the Double story is basically a psychological ghost story, and from other gothic narratives such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which are predominantly psychological Double stories. I go on to show how Atwood, as well as portraying the usual scenario of a single Double as the protagonist, also presents different characters in *Cat's Eye* as secondary Doubles, putting it into the tradition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

My conclusion is that through her employment of the vampire trope, Margaret Atwood explores and explains women's interrelationships, which can involve a woman's initiation, transformation, and loss of self, but which can also lead to self-actualization. As well, I conclude that the various Doubles in *Cat's Eye* offer different possibilities for a woman's identity including, but not circumscribed by, the roles which society traditionally has seen as acceptable.

## RÉSUMÉ DE SYNTHÈSE

Ma thèse porte sur les éléments gothiques figurant dans le roman *Cat's Eye* de Margaret Atwood. De nombreux critiques ont vu dans *Lady Oracle*, du même auteur, une attaque satirique contre la manière dont les romans à l'eau de rose de style gothique perpétuent les stéréotypes désuets de l'identité féminine. Le fait que Margaret Atwood elle-même ait décrit *Lady Oracle* comme "anti-gothique" pourrait permettre de conclure qu'elle rejette totalement le genre gothique. Dans ma thèse, toutefois, je démontre que, dans *Cat's Eye*, Atwood a trouvé une nouvelle utilisation du genre et s'en sert comme moyen valable d'exploration des préoccupations des femmes contemporaines.

Ma thèse examine *Cat's Eye* sous l'angle de l'usage que fait Atwood de deux figures gothiques, le vampire et le double. Je prétends que l'auteur a recours à ces archétypes—leur nature et leur narration traditionnelle en mythologie et en littérature—comme symboles ou métaphores de luttes existentielles, plus précisément celles des femmes d'aujourd'hui.

Dans la première partie de ma thèse, je retrace le scénario du vampire dans *Cat's Eye*, en examinant comment la jeune protagoniste du roman, Elaine, persécutée par ses amies, subit une transformation symbolique en vampire métaphorique ou en lamie (sorte de vampire féminin). J'explique la manière dont Atwood s'inspire d'oeuvres traditionnelles (connues ou inconnues) pour réaliser cette mutation symbolique. Je prétends, à l'instar de certains critiques, dont James B. Twitchell, que même des oeuvres traditionnelles comme "Christabel," de Samuel Taylor Coleridge, qui semble à première vue dire des êtres surnaturels, sont essentiellement un examen de relations humaines et se prêtent par conséquent bien à l'usage qu'en fait Atwood dans *Cat's Eye*. Cet usage

consiste à examiner la manière dont les femmes, dans la culture occidentale, “se nourrissent” symboliquement d’autres femmes, et les conséquences de cette dynamique parasitaire.

Dans la deuxième partie de ma thèse, j’examine *Cat’s Eye* sous l’angle du double. Je commence par évoquer brièvement divers types traditionnels de double, pour ensuite démontrer comment *Cat’s Eye* s’inspire à la fois de la tradition de l’oeuvre de Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, dans laquelle l’histoire du double est essentiellement une histoire de fantôme psychologique, et d’autres narrations gothiques telles que *Jane Eyre*, de Charlotte Brontë, qui sont essentiellement des histoires de double psychologique. Je poursuis en démontrant comment Atwood, en plus de suivre le scénario habituel du protagoniste incarné par un seul double, présente également plusieurs personnages de *Cat’s Eye* comme doubles secondaires, plaçant ainsi son roman dans la tradition de l’oeuvre *The Picture of Dorian Gray* de Oscar Wilde.

Je conclus en démontrant que, par son usage du trope du vampire, Margaret Atwood explore et explique les interrelations entre femmes, lesquelles peuvent porter sur l’initiation de la femme, sur sa transformation et sur sa perte de soi, mais qui peuvent également mener à sa réalisation de soi. Je conclus également que les divers doubles figurant dans *Cat’s Eye* incarnent un éventail de possibilités ouvertes aux femmes et comrenant, sans toutefois s’y limiter, les rôles que la société a traditionnellement jugés acceptables.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*Cat's Eye* ..... *CE*  
"Spotty-Handed Villainesses" ..... *SHV*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In her review of *Cat's Eye*, Alice McDermott listed among Margaret Atwood's talents her ability to create "a sense of the ordinary transformed into nightmare" (12). Indeed, the unsettling juxtaposition of the mundane and the morbid is a trademark of the Atwood style. One has always a feeling, when reading Atwood, of unpleasant things lurking just beneath the placid surface of social reality, of worlds in which the familiar icons of order and civilization are highlighted to reveal the dark shadows behind them. For Atwood there is perhaps no other world so seemingly ordinary and yet so disturbingly nightmarish as the world of women, and in no other work of Atwood's to date is this world more realistically and imaginatively described than in *Cat's Eye*.

With *Cat's Eye* Atwood explores the theme of the pressure on women to conform to a predetermined ideal. This theme itself is a familiar one in both the history of feminist literature and Atwood's own works. However, the method which Atwood uses in *Cat's Eye* is a very different one from those which she has used in some of her earlier novels. Here, Atwood does not attribute this pressure on women to the civilizing forces of society (as in *Surfacing*), or to the brainwashing effects of socio-cultural constructs like the advertising industry (as in *The Edible Woman*) or the romance novel/domestic gothic (as in *Lady Oracle*). Nor does she, surprisingly for a late twentieth century woman writer, blame women who try to control and condition other women as agents of the patriarchy (as she does in *The Handmaid's Tale*). Instead, in *Cat's Eye* she points her accusing finger not at Society and the Patriarchy, but rather, at women themselves. Women, her novel suggests, can be their own worst enemies.

Specifically, Atwood uses the world of little girls, at least at the novel's center; even more specifically, she transforms the apparently ordinary into nightmare through the

use of gothic tropes. It is my contention that in *Cat's Eye* Atwood is not so much rendering the lives of little girls as gothic as finding and revealing to the reader what is gothic about the lives of little girls.

However, Atwood's use of the gothic is not an example of exaggeration, but of extended metaphor or analogy. This is not the pop-culture world of Ann Rice's actual vampires, but of the modern gothic as seen in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, where the gothic moves from the literal level to that of the psychological.

The gothic has always been essentially about human relationships, and even more essentially, about the relationship between the Self and the Other. Briefly speaking, *Cat's Eye* (while touching on elements of the ghost story, especially in its fascination with mirrors), mainly uses two powerful gothic tropes: that of the 'Dark Lady'—namely the female vampire—and the Double. While the central pattern of the protagonist's childhood experiences is analogous to the scenario of the female vampire or lamia and her victim, the larger picture focuses on the dynamics of Self-definition. The latter is more analogous to the scenario of Double stories, where the protagonist grapples with the various facets of the Self. If the vampire scenario is about human relationships, the story of the Double is introspective, an examination of the conflicted, fragmented Self and its struggle for integrity.

Of course, these are artificial delineations since, seen from this perspective, the vampire and the Double are both equally about existential concerns. However, Atwood herself constructs such a matrix in *Cat's Eye*. The vampire scenario structures the childhood flashbacks of the narrative, when Elaine, the protagonist is a little girl tormented by her friend Cordelia; meanwhile, a strong Double motif foregrounds Elaine's

adult life, where Cordelia has changed from a physical presence to an internalized one. As such, Cordelia haunts Elaine's psychological existence as a reminder of the part of her identity that she has lost or forgotten in order to protect her from memories of the pain of childhood.

The world of little girls may not seem important to many. One particular critic described *Cat's Eye* as a "jeux d'esprit" (a humorous trifle) precisely because Atwood chose little girls as her central subject matter (Ingersoll 235). Atwood, on her part, hotly refuted his reading as not taking women's concerns at all seriously. She then went on to address the larger question of the impetus behind *Cat's Eye*, especially in light of female readers' responses to this book:

Writers haven't dealt with girls age eight to twelve because this area of life was not regarded as serious "literary" material . . . . What *could* be of importance in what young girls do with and to one another? Well, lots, it seems . . . . Cordelia really got around, and she had a profound influence on how the little girls who got run over by her were able to respond to other women when they grew up . . . . Why hasn't anyone written about this? *Can* it be written about? Do I dare to write it? *Cat's Eye* was risky business, in a way—wouldn't I be trashed for writing about little *girls*, how trivial? Or wouldn't I be trashed for saying that they weren't all sugar and spice? (Ingersoll 236 )

Atwood's rhetorical questions are interesting ones. Since many women have indeed come up against and been "run over" by Cordelia-types as children, as Atwood's female reader response has proven, why is it that women writers have not given this

phase of women's lives the full attention it deserves? Is the literary blank which Atwood describes and addresses really a blank or is it, in fact, a blind spot, and a deliberate one at that?

According to Atwood, in her lecture "Spotty-Handed Villainesses," Victorians and certain feminists (especially in the 1970s) have worked hand in hand towards creating and promoting the image of women in literature who are good, or women who, if they are bad, are only bad because they have been corrupted by individual men or by the patriarchal order in general. Atwood lays particular blame on the Women's Movement for making the portrayal of evil women in literature "somehow unfeminist. . . . a somewhat closed-off road" (SHV 6-7). Once opened, Atwood argues, this road could lead in interesting directions for evil female characters. According to Atwood such evil literary women, traditionally viewed as aberrations who are "used as sticks to beat other women" in morality tales, offer other possibilities as well:

female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom—because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. (SHV 5)

But while Atwood acknowledges that the Women's Movement of the past 25 years has opened up such possibilities to a woman—in literature as in life—to rebel against patriarchal authority, "leaving her husband and even deserting her children," it

also has removed the taint of evilness from these actions, thus rendering the women who committed them, from a literary standpoint, more heroic but less interesting to readers. And, as Atwood explains, there are still other venues of female behavior which the Women's Movement cut off entirely:

[Was] it at all permissible, any more, to talk about women's will to power, because weren't women supposed by nature to be communal egalitarians? *Could one depict the scurvy behavior often practiced by women against one another, or by little girls against other little girls? . . . .* Or was a mere mention of such things tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy, namely the male power structure? . . . . Or, in another word—were men to get all the juicy parts? (SHV 5-6; my italics)

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood addresses and flouts the myth of female solidarity and mutual 'sweetness,' a myth of both feminist and patriarchal construction and perpetuation. But this is not what is most interesting about the work. Beyond the actual fact that Atwood has "dared" to deal with the subject of the "scurvy behavior. . .by little girls against other little girls," the manner in which she does this is unexpected, innovative, and highly effective.

Atwood had at her disposal several possibilities or precedents for a treatment of a young girl's tumultuous coming-of-age. Most obviously, she could have resorted to the traditional *Bildungsroman* narrative. Indeed, since her protagonist, Elaine, becomes an artist as an adult, a Joycian 'portrait of the artist as a young woman' approach would have been highly appropriate. In fact, *Cat's Eye* does approach this genre in some respects; in other respects, however, it goes beyond it, because of what Atwood has added to the mix:

a pungent, piquant twist of gothicism. Through her gothic 'take' on the girl's rite of passage scenario—or the way in which she uses the gothic to render this scenario at once a subtle and a richly textured pattern—Atwood appropriates, manipulates, and distorts the *Bildungsroman* to make it both a highly personal and a hugely universal, even archetypal story.

For negotiating a path through the largely unexplored regions of girls growing up, Atwood's implementation of the gothic as a vehicle may seem an odd approach. However, the gothic is a genre which, traditionally, is all about subverting the traditional, about reflecting the dark side of human nature, about exploring what we fear and desire, about the internal and external forces which control, create and destroy us, about the horror in the cellar and the terror in the attic, about the murky, turbulent currents which flow just beneath the placid, blue surface of social order. As such, Atwood's choice of the gothic as her mode of metaphoric expression and symbolic interpretation of the seemingly happy, innocent lives of little girls as they approach and then pass into womanhood is very appropriate indeed.

In this thesis, I intend to identify and closely analyse the gothic figures of the vampire and the Double as they are revealed intertextually by Atwood throughout *Cat's Eye*. I intend to examine how these archetypal characters, their natures, and their traditional narratives in mythology and literature work as symbols or metaphors for female growth and existential grapplings. Through her employment of these two gothic tropes Atwood explores and explains the often dangerous dynamics of woman's interrelationships, dynamics which cause a woman's transformation, initiation, loss of self and self-actualization. In this, and in spite of Ingersoll's claim that *Cat's Eye* is a



“humorous trifle,” I hope to show why the subject of girls growing up, for Atwood (and many women), is nothing to trifle with: it is a darkly, deadly serious matter.

**Chapter One:**  
**THE VAMPIRE**

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is not in any literal or obvious way a story about ghouls who suck the blood of the innocent living. However, vampirism, through many of its folkloric and literary guises, interpretations, and incarnations, is definitely present as one of several key gothic motifs or intertexts in the narrative, as one of the tropes through which the gothic 'Dark Lady'—in this case, the female vampire or lamia—is revealed and explained. Thus, although Cordelia is not actually a vampire or lamia, and Elaine is not overtly the victim of her bloodthirsty pursuits, certain aspects of Cordelia's appearance and behavior, and moreover, the relationship which Elaine enters into with this odd, enigmatic girl, partake of the vampire side of the gothic in a way that is at once traditional and innovative.

On the traditional side, the vampire 'scenario' plays itself out in *Cat's Eye* in a manner consistent with both the popular and the more obscure 18th and 19th century narratives about Dark Ladies—especially female vampires or the more snake-like lamias—complete with the mythic and folkloric superstitions and stipulations upon which they are based. However, Atwood innovatively cloaks this scenario in the modern raiments of metaphor and symbol. It is thus, through the metaphor and symbol of the vampire and the vampire-victim relationship, that Atwood traces the passage from girlhood to womanhood and, in so doing, explores the political, sociological, and psychological dynamics of women's relationships with other women. She reveals how such relationships can consist of a parasitical power-play between victim and victimizer based on and sustained by mutual need. As such, these relationships (which, ironically, are both energizing and enervating) therefore can be the means through which, Atwood suggests, the Self is tumultuously conceived.

Atwood's protagonist, Elaine, is not a conventional little girl, which perhaps helps the reader to share Elaine's entry into 'normal,' 'conventional' girlhood as a new experience and to examine, with Elaine, that type of world more objectively than would be the case for a protagonist who was born into it and took it for granted. Her grade school primer portrays the 1940's middle-class ideal as a world where families always live in homes with white picket fences, where fathers and sons are always dressed in suits and ties, and mothers and daughters in dresses. To Elaine, this stereotype is as foreign to her own family life as an African tribe in *National Geographic*.

Up until the age of eight, Elaine has no experience with other little girls or with the usual codes by which conventional society defines girls and women. Because her father is an entomologist her family moves continually and erratically, following bug infestations like primitive tribes followed game. They don't live in a house or even own one, but travel nomadically through the relative wilderness of northern Canada during World War II, from utility cabins to abandoned logging camps to motel rooms, to tents, to—occasionally—the cluttered attics of other families' rural homes, always only on the rough edges of the conventional world.

As for outward appearances, Elaine and her family are similarly far removed from the conventional ideal. Elaine has never seen her father in anything resembling a suit: his daily get-up consists of an old jacket, baggy pants, faded workshirts, and squashed felt fishing hat. Her mother dresses in pants and work shirts much the same as her father, since she prefers comfortable clothes to work and walk about the woods in rather than dresses and "doesn't give a hoot" about her appearance, so long as it is tidy (CE 46). Elaine herself is always outfitted in her brother Stephen's hand-me-downs, therefore

appearing more 'masculine' than the 'feminine' gender models set by North American society at the time. Although she helps her mother make preserves, Elaine also accompanies her father on bug expeditions. She also joins Stephen in playing war games with wooden swords and guns, looking under logs and rocks for interesting bugs, catching frogs and snakes, skipping stones on the river, and fishing with a makeshift rod. In short, she partakes in activities traditionally and stereotypically associated with the 'masculine,' the 'male,' as well as looking the part.

Most *Bildungsromans* of artistic protagonists portray these individuals as feeling alienated from (and even superior to), their families and/or the world at large. In contrast, amidst the prosaically masculine world of Elaine's family, Atwood reveals how Elaine secretly dreams of having girl friends such as those she has read about, and imagines what she would say to them if she ever encountered some and what they would do together (CE 29). While her older brother Stephen draws war scenes and weapons, Elaine draws little girls with ruffles, hair bows and patent leather shoes like the ones she has poured over in her primer. These pictures and her imagination are Elaine's only connection to her idea of conventional reality, and suggest a desire for conformity rather than any sense of individuation on her part. Sensing that she is not a 'normal' little girl, Elaine yearns to 'fit in,' to become somehow part of the more 'normal' society of little girls, with which she at this point has only the most distant and tenuous connection.

With the end of the war, Elaine and her family finally end their transient existence and settle in a house in the newly-constructed suburbs of Toronto. It is here that Elaine finally realizes her dream of having girlfriends. With her two new school friends, Grace and Carol, Elaine is introduced to the world for which she has been suitably prepared, or

“primed,” by her primer. Through Carol, she learns what “cold waves” and “twin sets” are (CE 54), that the living room is only used for company and is always off-limits to children, and that husbands and wives sleep in separate, identical beds—although, ironically, she learns that they are themselves in no way as ‘identical’ as she has thought during her earlier life. Through Grace, Elaine learns how to cut pictures of women, dresses, dish sets, sofas and ranges out of the Eaton’s catalogue and paste them into a scrapbook in a game of material accumulation (CE 56), and the importance of going to church every Sunday (CE 101-06).

Elaine learns these lessons with facility, and a certain sense of reassurance since, although hitherto foreign to her experience, they confirm and validate her prior impressions. Whereas Elaine had formerly led the life of a boy (or at least in accordance with that stereotype), she now makes the seemingly smooth and effortless transition to that of the contemporary, middle class life of a girl. For her, ‘being a girl’ seems, at first glance, much easier than ‘being a boy.’ As she sees it,

there’s a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be a part of without making any effort at all. I don’t have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well, make loud explosive noises, decode messages, die on cue. I don’t have to think about whether I’ve done these things well, as a boy. All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the *Eaton’s Catalogue* with embroidery scissors, and say I’ve done it badly. Partly this is a relief. (CE 57)

In short, it at first seems as if Atwood is saying that the interpersonal dynamic of females is a blissfully non-competitive one, rosy yet passive and vacuous, and certainly easier to conform to than the world of little boys. This is, indeed, the world of little girls that traditionally is seen by adults, who have romanticized the apparent innocent sweetness of it all. The truth, however, as Elaine and the reader soon discover, is quite different.

## ii

Enter Cordelia, the Dark Lady-as-child, and with her the first dark shadings of the vampire/lamia scenario, the end of Elaine's dreamily complacent notions of girlhood, and the beginning of her nightmarish transformation from girl into woman—a transformation which Atwood presents, at least initially, as one from victim to vampire.

Elaine's first encounter with Cordelia contains many of the elements which traditionally characterize a vampire or lamia's appearance before an unwitting protagonist-as-prey: the element of the uncanny in the midst of enchantment; a naturalistic setting (complete with Edenic allusion) along with an atmosphere or conveyed sense of the imminent corruption of innocence. Indeed, although the adult Elaine-as-narrator claims to have felt "empty of premonition" upon her first glimpse of Cordelia (*CE* 73), the backdrop against which the two girls meet has a strongly evocative sense of foreboding for any reader who has been alerted to the mythos of the vampire or lamia.

Elaine has just arrived with her family at their house after several months of summer vacation "up north." She is struck at once by a strong feeling that things are not

as they were when she left them, since her house “looks strange, different,” and the yard, formerly barren, has become overgrown with weeds (*CE* 73). Her friends, Grace and Carol, who have been waiting for her, have also changed:

Grace and Carol are standing . . . just where I left them. But they don't look the same. They don't look at all like the pictures of them I've carried around in my head for the past four months, shifting pictures in which only a few features stand out. For one thing they're bigger; and they have on different clothes. (*CE* 73)

In her appraisal of the hitherto familiar image of her home and friends, Elaine's sense of unfamiliarity is punctuated by the presence of an altogether new figure in the scene: Cordelia. Not only has Elaine never seen Cordelia before, but she has also never met a little girl who looks or behaves like Cordelia. As well, Elaine's encounter with Cordelia and the encounter itself are replete with a pervasive sense which is perhaps the very essence of a mortal's encounter with a vampire, or at least the essential quality of fear which the gothic, and the vampire as its stock character, evoke: the sense of the uncanny.

For example, not only does Elaine's house look unfamiliar to her, but it also seems to her somehow “enchanted.” This description, combined with the description of the “thistles and goldenrod” which “have grown up around” the house “like a thorny hedge” (*CE* 73), create a clear allusion to the fairytale of *Sleeping Beauty*, which is appropriate since Elaine, like the princess in the fairytale, will soon fall under an enchantment from which she will not easily break free. In this respect, Cordelia acts as the wicked fairy, and this identification very neatly puts her into the same class as the evil



ghouls and enchantresses of vampire lore, as vividly (and disturbingly) portrayed in “Lamia” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (who is literally described as “a fairy’s child” [Keats 4.14]), Johann Ludwig Tieck’s “Wake Not the Dead,” and elsewhere. These are creatures who, as we will see, capture their victims by putting them under their spell, and keep them in this enthralled—and often actually sleeping—state while they drain them of their power.

The natural setting in which Elaine’s introduction to Cordelia takes place is typically found in the female vampire scenario, especially—though by no means exclusively—in its lamia versions, because the female vampire or lamia is associated with nature on several levels. She is both a creature and a force of nature, wild and unyielding; she is also, ironically, nature’s aberration—something wholly unnatural. In Keat’s “Lamia,” the half-serpent, half-nymph emerges from her forest home to ensnare her intended prey on a deserted country road; the pale knight of Keat’s “La Belle Dame” meets his lamia in an apparently idyllic natural setting somewhere near a lake (1.3); in Coleridge’s “Christabel,” the lamia Gertrude appears to the female protagonist from behind a tree, almost as though she has sprung from its trunk (I. 35).

This latter example, with its combined elements of a tree and lamia who literally hisses, has obvious extra symbolic significance. Gertrude is likened to the biblical snake in the Garden of Eden coiled about the branches of the Tree of Knowledge; lingering in the shadow of a tree in the garden surrounding Christabel’s family castle, Gertrude deceives Christabel (I. 42), as the snake deceives Eve, into a ‘fallen’ state (which, in both cases, is never clearly or satisfactorily defined).

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood creates the same biblical allusion in her scene of vampire/lamian introduction, though with a different emphasis. When Elaine first sees Carol, Grace and new-comer Cordelia, they “are standing among the apple trees” in her front yard. It is mid-September, and the apples, left unharvested, are rotting:

The apple trees are covered with scabby apples, red ones and yellow ones; some of the apples have fallen off and are rotting on the ground. There's a sweet, cidery smell, and the buzz of drunken yellowjackets. The apples mush under my feet. (CE 74)

This description—beyond simply suggesting that Cordelia is a “bad apple”—clearly alludes to the biblical scene of the Fall. It also goes somewhat beyond the Fall (and further than “Christabel”) to evoke a state of post-Edenic decay, thereby suggesting that Elaine's fall from innocence, through her deception and disempowerment at the hands of Cordelia, is a foregone conclusion. The heady, cloying atmosphere of intoxication created by the fermenting apples is also indicative of corruption, its imminence, and even its nature: Elaine is figuratively intoxicated by Cordelia, lulled into a drunken kind of powerlessness which dulls her perception of reality and robs her of her self-assertion.

The pervasive and oppressive air of death in this scene is also significant. Through her intoxicated corruption by Cordelia, Elaine will symbolically die to be reborn into the role of a woman. In another sense which has already been suggested, Elaine's encounter with Cordelia symbolically marks the death of innocence and the first birth-pangs of knowledge of the true relationship between women, or one truer at least

than that which she has previously experienced. This is a progression which (not unlike that in the Eden narrative) is burdened with fear and reluctance.

Before Cordelia entered Elaine's life, it was Grace who basked in the glow of Elaine's admiration. In an earlier scene, in the springtime before Elaine goes on vacation, Grace sits with Carol and Elaine in that same grove of apple trees, "smiling primly, festooned with blossoms" (*CE* 65), the centre of attention. Not long after Elaine first meets Cordelia, Cordelia will usurp Grace's lofty position in Elaine's eyes. Where the prim and proper Grace offered Elaine the innocent, naive, easy life of little girls, a picture-perfect ideal like the one Elaine found in her primer, Cordelia offers, on outstretched palm, the power of knowledge of the real, true world of girls and women, a knowledge both terrifying and fascinating. Through her relationship with Cordelia, Elaine will almost literally fall from 'a state of Grace' into one as a persecuted, beleaguered outcast.

This passage from life to death to corrupted rebirth, moreover, clearly configures the transformation of the vampire's victim into a fellow member of the living dead. And yet, Atwood seems to imply that if Elaine had never encountered Cordelia (or someone like her), she would have been stuck forever in the dull, stereotypical world of 1950s women rather than emerging eventually, after a painful transition, as a true individual.

### iii

Just as the setting of Elaine's first encounter with Cordelia is rich with symbolic images which signal the unfolding vampire scenario, so Cordelia herself, her appearance

and her behavior, likewise suggest, albeit subtly, her symbolic alliance with the lamia/vampire. Cordelia is described as:

the tallest [of the four girls]. . .thin without being fragile: lanky, sinewy. She has dark-blond hair cut in a long pageboy, with bangs falling half into her greenish eyes. Her face is long, her mouth slightly lopsided; something about the top lip is a little skewed, as if it's been cut open and sewn up crooked. (*CE* 74)

Traditional literary descriptions of the female vampire or the lamia vary, but there is certainly no mistaking such a creature when she appears, especially once the reader has been told of her traditional characteristics. Cordelia's long face and long, sinewy—but elastically strong—physique, are the very familiar hallmarks of the female vampire, whose often serpentine features (combined in some instances with a tendency to hiss when provoked) are a reminder of her snakey, lamian identity or associations. For example, Brunhilda in Tieck's "Wake Not the Dead," in contrast to the nineteenth century's ideal of a full-bodied figure in women, has a "slender form" in keeping with her ability to change into a serpent (166); even the androgynous male vampire, Count Vardelek, in Stenbock's "A True Story of a Vampire" has "something serpentine" about his figure (qtd. in Frayling 58).

Cordelia's eye's, shaded and half-covered by her hair, suggest secrecy, a hidden, disguised identity, and also a provocative sexual knowingness. This same effect is seen, for instance, in an unnamed female vampire in Gogol's *Viy* (1835) whose long dark eyelashes fall "like arrows on the cheeks," thus enhancing the way in which she glows "with the warmth of secret desires" (qtd. in Frayling 48), and setting up a Cupid-like link.

The color of Cordelia's eyes is not *necessarily* a clue to her lamian nature since many lamias or vampires have deceptively innocent looking blue eyes or "dark and lustrous" eyes (like Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* in his work by the same name [32]), or else have eye colors which are too darkened with bloodlust to accurately describe. However, green eyes are a fairly familiar trademark of 'Dark' women in general, including witches and lamias. In fact, Cordelia's eyes are specifically "a muted sea-green" (CE 6-7), a shade which exactly matches the vampire Clarimonde's "sea-green eyes" in Gauthier's *La Morte Amoureuse* (qtd. in Frayling 48). This color is apt because lamias are often identified (as in the legend of Melisande) with water, in a mermaid-like way (Frayling 68).

But it is Cordelia's mouth with its oddly-shaped upper lip that is the most arresting of these familiar vampiric/lamian features. James B. Twitchell, in *The Living Dead*, notes how, according to folkloric superstition, a somehow raised, curled, or malformed lip was one of the marks looked for in identifying a vampire, apart from the giveaway blood-red shade of the mouth and the pointed incisors inside it (12). Ligeia's mouth, in Edgar Allan Poe's story of the same name, exhibits a "magnificent turn of the short upper lip" (qtd. in Twitchell 63). In Carolyn Lamb's *Glenarvon* (her revenge against former lover Byron which depicted him as a vampire), her vampire reveals his "haughtiness and bitter contempt" in "the proud curl of the upper lip" (qtd. in Frayling 8). Countess Sarah in Loring's *The Tomb of Sarah* has lips that look "like a hideous gash" across her face, a description which not only refers to their crimson appearance, but also suggests that they are misshapen (qtd. in Frayling 60). Cordelia's crooked mouth, like those of her literary counterparts, suggests lips which are often drawn back into a

contemptuous sneer, or a feral, bloodthirsty snarl, or (figuratively speaking) bare pointed teeth ready to sink themselves into living flesh.

Not only is Cordelia's appearance strange, but her manner also inspires in Elaine (as is usual with a lamia) feelings of the unfamiliar, the uncanny. Though she is visibly only a child, a little girl like Elaine and the others, there is something uncomfortably adult in the way Cordelia behaves: her behavior is in striking, disturbing contrast with her age. Cordelia's smile (which, Elaine notes, evens out her crooked mouth), is "a smile like a grown-up's." Cordelia further goes through the adult formality of extending her hand to Elaine with the accompanied adult introduction: " 'Hi, I'm Cordelia. And you must be...' " Elaine is too shocked by Cordelia's precocity to respond: "I stare at her. If she were an adult, I would take the hand, shake it, I would know what to say. But children do not shake hands like this" (*CE* 74).

Like Jonathan Harker before the three bloodthirsty temptresses in *Dracula*, or other victims of the lamia, Elaine is rendered motionless and speechless by Cordelia, disturbed by this strange girl with her adult ways. It is Grace who answers for Elaine, giving the expectant Cordelia her name; Elaine's identity is thus both symbolically removed from her by one girl and awarded to her by another, since in this single instance she is at once nominally identified to the reader for the first time, and yet is robbed of that identity in some way, as she begins her process of initiation to full female knowledge. Now at the start of her state of being disempowered, her identity lost to Cordelia, Elaine is easy prey. Changing her tone of voice from a superior adult one to an intimate, "confiding" one—as the lamia in John Keats' "La Belle Dame" uses her "language

strange” to beguile her victim (7. 27)—Cordelia moves in and (as Elaine describes it), “creates a circle of two, takes me in” (*CE* 75).

The fact that Cordelia manufactures, or “creates” a relationship, a union between herself and Elaine, signals its artifice. In gothic tradition (and with the occult in general), a circle drawn in chalk or blood on the ground (and combined with certain spoken or written incantations) can become a space of powerful protection from demons; Stoker pays tribute to this rite in *Dracula* when Doctor Van Helsing draws a magic circle around the thrice-bitten Mina Harker just in time to stave off her three Lamian pursuers (387). However, this described circle in the lamian context can also evoke the folkloric faerie ring into which the human may be welcomed, but enters at his own risk since it is a place of often inescapable enchantment.

The phrase “taken in” also has a number of important connotations in connection with this vampire/lamian theme. Most obviously, Cordelia has chosen, has singled out Elaine as the focus of her victimization/lamian ministrations; Elaine, for her part, is being ‘taken in,’ in the sense of being initiated into, a new, hitherto unknown existence, Cordelia’s world—symbolically, the world of the vampire. Idiomatically, Elaine is also being ‘taken in’ by Cordelia—misled, tricked, deceived—into believing that Cordelia’s interest in her is one based on liking, rather than hunger and need, that their relationship will be one of friend to friend, rather than of parasite and host.

Thus, Elaine is disturbed by Cordelia, and thus Cordelia, true to vampiric form, finds easy success in her enthrallment of Elaine. Notably absent from this first meeting, of course, are the combined feelings of repulsion and attraction—like Coleridge’s “desire with loathing strangely mix’d” in his poem “The Pains of Sleep” (ll. 23)—which are

characteristically experienced by the protagonist upon meeting, in contemplation of, or in physical contact with, the lamia or vampire (Twitchell 23). However, Cordelia does inspire these feelings later when she begins to instruct her friends in the world of women (CE 98)— a strange and even “horri-fying” world, yet a world the practices of which Elaine, like her literary counterpart Christabel, may come “to know and loathe” and “yet wish to do” (“The Pains of Sleep” line 48 ).

#### iv

When Elaine meets Cordelia, her earlier education about girls and women, begun by her primer and smoothly taken up by Carol and Grace, is suddenly disrupted, and her preconceived notions about little girls and women utterly disturbed. What she had initially believed to be an easy, undemanding identity she soon realizes to be impossibly mysterious, complex, confounding.

Just as the narrator becomes a ‘pupil’ of the lamia Morella in Poe’s story of the same name, introduced by her to “worlds unknown” (qtd. in Twitchell 62), so Elaine becomes Cordelia’s ‘pupil.’ Cordelia’s knowledge has been acquired by her careful surveillance of her two teenaged sisters and her female teachers, and is enhanced by an assumed air of worldly omniscience. Under this confident and condescending guidance, Elaine and her two friends are instructed in the various bizarre rites and secrets of the inner sanctum of women and their sexuality—from leg-waxing and foundation garments to menstruation, sexual intercourse, and procreation—which they discover are, unbelievably enough, their inescapable future inheritance. Elaine and other girls her age



receive and transmit this information at school, as Elaine describes it, with fascination and dread: “a long whisper runs among us, from child to child, gathering horror” (CE 98).

Thus Atwood shows us that Elaine has learned only a very superficial part of her present identity as a little girl from books and from Grace and Carol. It turns out that there is more to being a girl than wearing dresses, skipping rope, and playing with cut-out dolls. These are only the visible trappings of a culture of submission and subversion, of acceptance and exclusion. However, this submission apparently is not one to ‘the Patriarchy’. Atwood clearly shows that ‘women’s culture’ has within itself roles, hierarchies, and ‘pecking orders’ as real as any in the male world and, that while these hierarchies are not any more divorced from the opposite sex than men’s inter-relational hierarchies, neither are they the creations of the opposite sex, any more than men’s are. Or, to the extent that women’s role in the larger world that includes men has traditionally been that of subservience to men, this fact apparently does not determine women’s own inter-relational dynamics, which Atwood implies presumably would exist even if women were the dominant gender in our society.

Through Cordelia, Elaine becomes aware of the true nature of little girls beneath the ‘sugar and spice’ surface perceived by adults. It is a ‘little girl’ culture which defines itself not only by its obvious difference from that of boys, but as well by the subtle, perceived differences within its own ranks. As Elaine describes it, the groups of girls “whispering and whispering” in the school yard have something to do with “the separateness of boys,” but more to do with the mutual, cliquish exclusion of other girls., for “each cluster of girls excludes some other girls” (CE 107). What she doesn’t realize

yet is that this will be the pattern females must get used to for adulthood—a ‘sisterhood’ which has not quite the unbroken sense of solidarity that feminism has tended to idealize.

When Elaine herself suddenly becomes the object, not simply of this exclusion, but of the victimization and persecution it can entail, the next stage in the vampire scenario—when the lamia drains the victim’s vital fluid—is symbolically enacted in *Cat’s Eye* between Elaine and her tormentor (and initiator) Cordelia. At once we are faced with the familiar questions of specifics. What sort of ‘vital fluid’ is drained from the victim? By what means and in what manner? As we have already seen in the case of the lamia narratives, the answers to such queries are rarely easy or clear.

In “Christabel,” for instance, the reader is certain only that some sort of exchange—of energy, of lifesource—has taken place between Christabel and Geraldine in the course of their night together, or else we could not account for Geraldine’s apparent rejuvenation and Christabel’s obvious enervation the next morning. Similarly, in Keats’ “La Belle Dame,” the reader is also given only after-the-fact evidence that the enchanted/enthralled victims of the “wide-eyed lady”—including, it seems, the knight himself—have suffered a vital loss of life at her hands, since they are all “death-pale” (10. 38). Keat’s Lamia seems to do no real injury to Lycius other than deceive him; all that she drains from him is semen (hardly an unwanted or unpleasant experience) (II. 23), and he only dies when Apollonius forces her to reveal herself and disappear (II. 291-306)—even though her original prototype in *The Life of Apollonius* admits that she is a vampire who “was fattening up [her victim] Menippus with pleasure before devouring his body, for it was her habit to feed upon young and beautiful bodies because their blood is pure and strong” (qtd. in Twitchell 50).

In these and other works, the ambiguity surrounding what it is that is drained from the victim by the lamia and how it is drained is either intentional or is not the real issue, since the writers' emphasis in each case seems to be on the parasitical nature of the relationship itself, the exchange of energy between the lamia and her victim which causes the former to become stronger and the latter to weaken and completely die, or, in some cases, die to be reborn as a vampire and thus to continue the species. It is in this way, as we have already seen, that various writers have used the vampire scenario as an analogy, a metaphor for the fascinating, disturbing dynamics at play in human relationships—whether they be between male and female lovers, between mothers and daughters (as one interpretation of “Christabel” suggests [Twitchell 47]), or even between friends—which cause individuals to lose their strength, their identity, even their will to live to others, a loss which ultimately ends, as we see in *Cat's Eye*, in symbolic or actual death and/or transformation.

## v

Atwood, no less than other writers of the gothic genre, likes to have her way with the vampire myth, to use it for her own particular ends, to choose, reject, invert and subvert its many props and tropes. This having been acknowledged, I believe that, in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood not only attends to various aspects of the vampire myth as it is depicted by Bram Stoker in *Dracula*, but also structures Elaine's process of victimization (or initiation into a vampire-woman) into three discernible stages as Stoker does.

It was *Dracula* which, for the first time in literature, set out and encoded not only the spectre of the male vampire as he is envisaged in popular culture today, but the

tripartite stages by which he changes his victim into a fellow creature of the night. Before Stoker, the lore surrounding the vampire was largely undefined, a miscellany of regional stories and superstitions picked over and combined in different mixtures according to the whim of the particular tale-teller. There is certainly no known precedent before *Dracula* for his three part blood-sucking procedure as a condition for vampiric transformation; it is likely that Stoker invented these three stages in Mina Harker's alteration for the sake of heightened drama through prolonged climax, or simply for the sake of structural neatness.

Although writers since Stoker have exercised their artistic right to modify and embellish the vampiric plot, the basic elements of the story are universally recognized and accepted. Thus, a particular favorite among the various devices of the genre is the 'three-bites-and-you're-out' method of 'vamping,' perhaps popular as well because the number three has many powerful and magical associations in fairytales, folklore and of course Christianity.

Each of the stages in *Cat's Eye* is heralded by a symbolic death-rebirth experience—the equivalent of a vampire's bite which brings the prey closer to death or a life-in-death state—and these three stages culminate in Elaine's symbolic metamorphosis into a vampire.

As is suitable for a novel about death and rebirth, *Cat's Eye* is a novel replete with death imagery, much of which begins with the appearance of Cordelia. This appearance heralds the start of the symbolic death of Elaine's innocence, and gothically darkens the text and the evolving relationship between the two girls like a black filter over a film lens. It is therefore hardly surprising that Cordelia, apart from the other traits which

symbolically identify her as a vampire, is also preoccupied with thoughts of death, a rather morbid fascination (one might even say 'obsession') which she conveys, directly and indirectly, to Elaine and her friends.

She tells them, for instance, that the deadly nightshade berries which grow by the bridge over the ravine would be a good way to poison someone, and also that they are the food of the dead; she informs them that the stream which runs through the ravine carries the disembodied remains of dead people from the nearby cemetery, and that anyone who goes down there will be held prisoner by the dead for eternity (*CE* 79-80). In their play acting, she invariably insists on taking the role of a tragic heroine who kills herself for love; and (most telling of all), she digs a "large hole" in her backyard which she covers with boards with the explanation that she can use it as a "clubhouse," and which "she is very wrapped up in" (*CE* 110).

Apart from its psychological implications (of which Elaine is never made fully aware), Cordelia's morbid preoccupation with death, dying, and the dead is appropriate to her symbolic vampire identity. The hole which she digs for herself is one in which she spends a great deal of time, boarded up underground as in a burial plot, or coffin. As Elaine explains, "it's hard to get her to play anything else" (*CE* 111). As a coffin, the hole is particularly telling; it is a clear indication of her predilection for the dark, cold earth—a place of final burial for the dead and, as it is well known, a favorite and necessary recuperative region for the undead. It is also the site of the symbolic first stage (like the first bite) of Elaine's forced initiation into the realm of the dead, the beginning of her victimhood and transformation from a victim into a vampire.

The occasions of Halloween and then Remembrance Day—both associated with the dead—establish the atmosphere of death and foreboding for this first stage of initiation. On the pretense that it is a mock reenactment of the death and burial of Mary Queen of Scots, Elaine, dressed in black, is lowered into Cordelia's pit by the three girls, who board up, bury, and then abandon her (*CE* 112). Elaine's ritualized live burial is reminiscent of the folktales about mistaken live burials—understandingly horrifying experiences, for victims and witnesses alike, which may well have inspired or contributed to superstitions about vampires and their partially-metamorphosed victims, caught in a limbo state between life and death. The experience is certainly horrifying for Elaine, a trauma from which she never fully recovers. Symbolically, it also marks for Elaine a passage, from life to 'living death,' from an innocent little girl to a tainted vampire's quarry, from a state of relative security to one of total powerlessness. As the adult Elaine explains:

When I remember back to this time in the hole, I can't really remember what happened to me while I was in it. . . .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. (*CE* 112-13)

From this point onwards, during the period which Elaine describes as "the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me" (*CE* 20), her initial fear of death and the terror surrounding her live burial evoke a suicidal longing for death as an escape from the pain of the daily persecution and humiliation she suffers at the hands of Grace, Carol, and

their ringleader, Cordelia. Elaine is now, like Cordelia, preoccupied with death. She dreamily entertains thoughts of how she could achieve her own death—by ingesting the poisonous nightshade berries, for instance, or by getting herself caught in the clothes-wringer—and ascribes her knowledge of poisonous plants, not to Cordelia, but to a personal trait, “the sort of thing it’s my habit to know” (CE 114). When asked by her teacher to draw what she does after school, Elaine draws herself in bed and colors it in with a black crayon “until the picture is almost entirely black” (CE 174).

On the metaphoric level, the release Elaine wishes is the victim’s desire for release from the vampire’s power over her, which comes only from either the vampire’s or the victim’s death. For example, in *Dracula*, Mina Harker, already bitten, begs her friends to kill her before she becomes a vampire if they cannot kill Count Dracula first, since it is the only way she can avoid becoming like him—a fate that would mean she would be eternally damned; in the meantime, as though her victimization is her own fault, Mina suffers with the shame of being ‘tainted’ by the vampire, a taint which she visibly bears in the form of a red mark on her forehead, like an inversion of baptismal purification (Stoker 134).

Similarly, Elaine, after her first symbolic bite from Cordelia, feels not only a wish for death, but a seemingly unaccountable sense of shame in connection with (and long after) the episode and tries to purge herself of this shame through extreme piety. She begins to go to church regularly with Grace, fervently prays in the hopes of seeing a vision which will save her, and zealously memorizes psalms which she repeats over and over to herself as if attempting to expurgate her sin. She also uses self-mortification: she almost daily peels the skin off the soles of her feet until they bleed and then walks on

them (*CE* 120). This turning to religion is also similar to the resorting to crosses and holy water in *Dracula*, both by Mina, and by those attempting to save her from her vampire fate.

Apart from her preoccupation with death, and her desire for the release of death, Elaine, in her victimization by Cordelia and the other girls, also begins to manifest a number of the classic signs of having been under the power of, bitten and fed upon by a vampire. She is always “fearful,” “anxious,” “tremulous”; she grows pale, is often weak, and becomes recurrently ill with fever; she loses her appetite for food—it “tastes like nothing”—and throws up (*CE* 147).

In Coleridge’s poem, Christabel lies “Asleep, and dreaming fearfully” after having been enthralled by Geraldine (I. 292), and another character in the poem, “Bard Bracy,” dreams of a snake who throttles a dove (symbolic of Geraldine’s draining away the life-force of Christabel) (II. 549-50). Indeed, dreams play an important role in the gothic genre in general, including the vampire scenario. Thus in *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine is plagued by strange dreams and nightmares which, like the nightmares in “Christabel,” could be seen to symbolically describe her perilous situation and to anticipate, to foretell, her imminent transformation. In one, for example, she is standing on the footbridge over the ravine near her old Toronto house, which collapses under her feet, forcing her to cling to the railing, unable to get to the hill on the other side on which stands her mother and others; in another, the cherries she picks turn to nightshade berries, which are full of blood like the bodies of the blackflies (a more harmless form of vampire) which she has been vehemently squashing, and which burst when she touches them so that, as she says, “the blood runs down my hands” (*CE* 155).



In her enchanted state, Elaine is convinced that whatever Cordelia does to her—her constant criticism of everything Elaine does, her threats of punishment, her reproaches, her insults, her taunts—is done out of friendship and the desire to help and improve Elaine. Elaine’s trust in this, her “love” for Cordelia, cannot be shaken. Her *Cat’s Eye* marble, a symbolic talisman, gives her some comfort but, like garlic in the vampire tale, offers little in the way of real protection. Even Elaine’s mother—who in the role of an Apollonius or a Doctor Van Helsing, attempts to break Elaine out of her enchantment—is, as Elaine herself realizes, ineffectual against Cordelia’s power, mainly because, unlike Van Helsing, she is ignorant of what is really going on. As Elaine says of her mother: “Now I know what I’ve been suspecting: as far as this thing is concerned, she is powerless” (*CE* 168).

Elaine has been transfixed by Cordelia, inured to any other feelings but love for her, and the desperate desire to win her love and acceptance and to be like her. She would like to feel love for other people (her mother, for instance, or her new, popular teacher). “But I am too numb,” she explains, “too enthralled” (*CE* 166). It is as though Elaine can actually feel her metamorphosis into a vampire—her passage into the death-like state which precedes her rebirth into the living dead—upon her. As she says of her return from vacation to the city and to her powerless existence under Cordelia’s now “more relentless” persecution of her: “Already my body is stiffening, emptying itself of feeling.” As her dream of the collapsing bridge over the ravine and Cordelia’s renewed persecution tells her, “She’s backing me toward an edge, like the edge of a cliff; one step back, another step, and I’ll be over and falling” (*CE* 165).

Cordelia's victimization of Elaine has reached a feverish intensity at this point, and Elaine feels herself being forced ever closer to the void of death, and the terror of transformed identity.

## vi

Two events mark the next stage—the symbolic 'second bite'—in Elaine's progression towards her final alteration into a vampire: one, a bizarre, lamianesque encounter reminiscent of "Christabel"; the other, a trauma-induced collapse that, among other things, harks back to the romantic swoon of the vampire's recently drained female prey.

In a game of pretend, Carol pretends she is sick and Elaine, in the assigned role as nurse, is ordered by Cordelia to feel Carol's heart for a pulse. Unwilling to touch her but having no choice in the matter, Elaine puts her hand on Carol's exposed left breast (*CE* 177). The lamian significance of this odd scene is clear when examined in comparison with Coleridge's "Christabel." Christabel agrees to touch Geraldine's withered breast even though it is repugnant to her, and even though Geraldine tells her that

"In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,

Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel." (I. 267-68)

Clearly, this physical contact is necessary for both Christabel's transformation and Geraldine's rejuvenation, since the next morning Geraldine's breasts are full and "heaving" (II. 380).

The close affinities between this scene in "Christabel" and the one in *Cat's Eye* cannot be ignored. Like Christabel, Elaine feels revulsion in contemplation of touching

“that swollen, unnatural flesh” of Carol’s newly-grown breasts, and like Christabel she does it anyway, though it makes her feel ill. As she says, “Nausea grips me” (*CE* 177). Though there is no subsequent passage suggestive of rejuvenation, there is the symbolic suggestion of an “illness,” which Elaine’s physical contact will somehow treat. What some critics of “Christabel” have argued to be a scene of lesbian sexuality or at least of sexual awakening and indoctrination (Twitchell 45; 47), in *Cat’s Eye* becomes a scene, perhaps equally sexual, but with a different emphasis.

The sexuality treated in Atwood’s work is one of female sexual growth of which the swelling of breasts is often the first sign. When Christabel touches Geraldine’s breast the effect is clearly analeptic; however, when Elaine touches Carol’s adolescent breast the effect is not restorative but transformative, an act which may well empower Carol, but which, more significantly, triggers the further change in Elaine herself. The breast in this scene is thus used by Atwood to represent both the actual and symbolic locus of change, the change from girl to woman in puberty for which the vampire scenario of transformation—with its attached sense of powerlessness, fascination and disgust—is a disturbingly yet apt metaphor.

Apart from engaging a potent moment from the lamia narrative in her specific treatment of sexual “coming-of-age” for a female, Atwood also somewhat clarifies in this scene the rather troubling question of the symbolic identity of Carol and Grace. The illness is apparently Carol’s, and furthermore, this game is described by Elaine as a new, yet recurrent one: “Illness is now a game we play” (*CE* 177). Are we to believe that Carol—and possibly Grace, too—is now also metaphorically a vampire like Cordelia?

Were the two always so? Certainly their active participation in Elaine's victimization argues their unnatural kinship with Cordelia, though it is uncertain when it began.

Certainly Elaine is troubled by the sense that her three friends—and perhaps she herself— are no longer little girls engaged in “little girl activities,” that what they are doing and who (or what) they are is not as it outwardly seems, that (as she says) she and her friends only “look like girls playing” (*CE* 150). She is frustratedly aware that nobody outside this vicious circle is aware of her suffering at the hands of her supposed friends; what is for her a torturous ordeal looks to others—specifically adults—like a game. Standing outside Cordelia's bedroom waiting for her friends to decide what her punishment should be for yet another, unspecified misdemeanor, Elaine is asked by Cordelia's teenaged sisters what “little game” she and her friends are playing now (*CE* 124). Elaine knows that “Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized” (*CE* 125).

Elaine's own dis-ease regarding her friends aside, on a symbolic level there are strong suggestions that Grace and Carol are lamias like Cordelia. That they, along with Cordelia, possess the ability to appear to others as “little girls playing” when Elaine knows that they are not, is in itself a vampire trait: the power of deceit and disguise.

That Carol has begun to grow breasts, suggests (as has already been noted) a passage of one kind which may symbolically infer another; moreover, she now “pinches her lips and cheeks to make them red” and wears lipstick when she is at school, as though to signal her new identity as an alluring vamp (*CE* 176).

Grace, who before Cordelia enters on the scene is described in terms of unaffected purity and innocence, with Cordelia's influence is now watchful, sly, and “coy,” and has

even adopted such adult mannerisms as talking with Cordelia about Elaine in the third person “like one grown-up to another” (*CE* 130). Perhaps Grace has been initiated more easily than Elaine into womanhood because of her closeness already to the desired ‘norm.’ Certainly the ‘state of grace’ which Grace once seemed to represent is now a role she plays, not an innate nature for her.

Finally, the fact that there are three girls in league as Elaine’s persecutors is surely a tribute to Jonathan Harker’s three lamian sirens (Dracula’s cohorts) in Stoker’s work who later reappear before the entranced Mina, in the hours before she is supposed to become a vampire herself, in order to taunt and tempt her. Similar to Stoker’s ‘vamp vixens,’ the three girls in Atwood’s tale are always together; they are all cruel and manipulative (though Cordelia is their prime instigator); and they are all seemingly driven to torment Elaine, not for their entertainment, but out of some sort of need—a need which is easily understood if they are all symbolically recognized as vampires/lamias. Thus, Elaine’s feeling that Cordelia, Grace, and Carol are not at all as they seem to others, plus certain manifest traits of Grace and Carol themselves (including the ability to disguise their true identities), are Atwood’s clear allusion to the female vampire triptych in *Dracula*.

Along with what is a specifically lamian motif—and, even more specifically, a motif employed by Coleridge—Atwood also chronicles the second stage in Elaine’s transformation with a more recognizably vampiric occurrence: a fainting scene which recalls the enervated swoon of the victim after a vampire’s ‘kiss’ has been procured, and which represents a symbolic death with its loss of consciousness.

Elaine goes with her father and brother to a “Converstat,” a type of science exposition. There, in an airless room, surrounded by people, Elaine is pressed up against a special exhibit: an ostensibly dead turtle whose still beating heart has been wired for sound so that it can be heard over the loudspeakers. Hot, claustrophobic, revolted and disturbed, Elaine collapses (*CE* 182-83). Although neither Cordelia nor the other two girls are directly present and therefore directly responsible for Elaine’s swoon, the causal relationship remains symbolically intact. Elaine’s faint stems from a long period of mental and physical trauma caused by the relentless cruelties of her three friends. Though they are physically absent from this scene, their presence is continually felt by Elaine, since their power over her is psychologically inescapable. In essence, Elaine faints for the same reason that a vampire’s victim faints after having been bled: she feels weakened, both mentally and physically drained.

However, there are other aspects of this scene which ally it to the vampire scenario. Elaine, in her enslaved, stupefied, weakened state, clearly identifies with the pathetic turtle in the science display, who has literally lost control over its heart and its life just as Elaine symbolically has lost her own to Cordelia. Its description intones this powerless, tortured, near-death state:

The turtle’s bottom shell has a hole sawed into it. The turtle is on its back so you can see down into it, right to the heart, which is beating away slowly, glistening dark red down there in its cave, wincing like the end of a touched worm, lengthening again, wincing. It’s like a hand, clenching and unclenching . . . . Life is flowing from the turtle, I can hear it over the loudspeaker. Soon the turtle will be empty of life. (*CE* 182)

Both “alive” and “dead,” the turtle is also, like Elaine, being drained of life. Elaine’s self-identification with the prone, helpless turtle causes her to faint, an act which is common to the vampire scenario in literature. Practically speaking, the faint is the ultimate visible, physical proof of the vampire’s visitation and libation, and the victim’s powerlessness. To these practical elements is added the attraction that the faint can be portrayed in an expressly sensual, erotic light: the image of the female victim lying in an unconscious, drained, and half-dressed state, usually across a disheveled bed, has been by far the most popular in literature, drawings and paintings about the vampire myth after *Dracula*. Often the presence of the vampire, looming over the bed, and/or heading for the victim’s neck, was added to such depictions, no doubt to intensify their sexual titillation for the reader or viewer, since he is absent from this scene in Stoker’s book.

Mina Harker is twice discovered by her friends in an enervated swoon after *Dracula* has visited and fed upon her; the only sign that he was ever there is an open window and the bite marks on the woman’s neck. The third time she is visited by the ghoul, her friends come upon her being force-fed by him from an opened wound on his chest (Stoker 135).

The victim’s faint in the vampire story is, of course, the result of her tremendous loss of blood to the vampire’s greedy appetite; this passing out is thus, as a symptom of blood-loss, literally a near-death state. In *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine’s faint, like her live burial, describes a symbolic rather than an actual encounter with death:

There’s black around the edge of my eyes and it closes in. What I see is like the entrance to a tunnel rushing away from me; or I am rushing away from it, away from that spot of daylight. (CE 183)

Elaine soon becomes adept at a self-induced fainting as a way to achieve escape—the same nihilistic death drive, perhaps, which has dominated her thoughts during this period of enthrallment and victimization. Far from representing her self-control, this means of escape (which almost amounts to an out-of-body experience) testifies to Elaine’s supreme powerlessness: by fainting, Elaine is symbolically giving herself up to Cordelia’s greater power, giving in to a transformation which is inevitable. During her second faint, Elaine even receives a cut to her forehead, the blood from which temporarily appeases Cordelia: “Cordelia is subdued; blood is impressive” (*CE* 185).

When Elaine faints, she willingly succumbs—relinquishes both self-control and life—to the stronger force which drains and depletes her, and like Mina Harker, Elaine now bears the symbol of her tainted soul and her likewise rapidly transforming identity.

vii

The third and last stage of her initiation—the “third bite,” so to speak, that she receives—is configured by an actual, and not symbolic or ritualistic, near-death experience. Cordelia throws Elaine’s winter hat over the side of the footbridge and down into the stream that runs through the ravine and orders Elaine to retrieve it. Unable to refuse, Elaine forges through the waist-deep, icy water in the ravine, and nearly freezes to death on the embankment. Cordelia and the other girls have immediately abandoned her and gone home. Then a ‘vision’ of the Virgin Mary—a vision which will later be explain as heralding the ‘Double’ imagery in the novel—guides her back up to the bridge and to safety (*CE* 202-03).



This third symbolic death for Elaine—very nearly an actual death—is rife with death imagery and allusion. Elaine’s trip down to the ravine—already established as the locus of danger and death—is clearly symbolic of the mythic hero’s descent into the underworld. There, she encounters (or imagines she encounters) the “dead people” from the cemetery (about whom she has already been told by Cordelia), and imagines joining them:

The water of the creek is cold and peaceful, it comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. It’s water made from the dead people, dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it. If I don’t move soon I will be frozen in the creek. I will be a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them. . . .My head is filling with black sawdust; little specks of the darkness are getting in through my eyes. It’s as if the snowflakes are black, the way white is black on a negative. The snow has changed to tiny pellets, more like sleet. It makes a rustling noise coming down through the branches, like the shifting and whispering of people in a crowded room who know they must be quiet. It’s the dead people, coming up invisible out of the water, gathering around me. *Hush*, is what they say. (CE 201-02)

The attraction that death has for Elaine—since she identifies it as ‘clear’ and ‘peaceful’—is obvious, a release from her clouded and troubled living state.

## viii

Elaine does not join the dead, but returns, it seems, to the world of the living. Moreover, what was undeniably a traumatic experience for Elaine appears to have psychologically strengthened rather than weakened her: where she was once helpless and submissive before her friends, Elaine is now unmoved by and invulnerable to their taunts. It is as though the spell has been broken, the haze of enthrallment and delusion has lifted, and Elaine can see clearly for the first time:

There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. . . . I feel daring, light-headed. They are not my best friends or even my friends. Nothing binds me to them. I am free. (*CE* 207)

Of course, Elaine's sudden empowerment is easily explainable according to the vampire scenario. Elaine is free of Cordelia's spell not because she has triumphed over her but because she has joined her; she is now able to see her friends clearly for what they are because she herself has become like them—Elaine has symbolically died (has briefly joined and communed with the dead) and has been reborn as a member of the 'living dead': a vampire, a lamia.

The subtle parallels, the analogistic dialectic which Atwood has created between the vampire scenario of transformation and that of the girl-child's physical and psycho-social coming-of-age become increasingly transparent once Elaine's initiation, her transformation, is complete. Now in high school, Elaine is physically a woman: "I have grown," she says, "Specifically, I've grown breasts. I have periods now, like normal girls" (*CE* 244). Psychologically, Elaine has also changed; she describes herself as

having become “among the knowing,” as “silent and watchful” (*CE* 244). Moreover, as though in keeping with her new-found ‘normalcy’ Elaine has taken on the traits which Cordelia has long possessed, which she, in fact, imparted to Elaine through first-hand experience: she has become hard, calculating, cruel. As Elaine says of herself:

I have a mean mouth.

I have such a mean mouth that I have become known for it. I don’t use it unless provoked, but then I open my mean mouth and short, devastating comments come out of it. . . .

Girls at school learn to look out for my mean mouth and avoid it. I walk down the halls surrounded in an aura of potential danger, and am treated with caution, which suits me fine. Strangely enough, my mean behavior doesn’t result in fewer friends, but, on the surface, more. The girls are afraid of me but they know where it’s safest: beside me, half a step behind. (*CE* 252)

Elaine’s self-description is clearly significant in terms of her symbolic vampire nature: the phrase “mean mouth,” which is repeated several times by the narrator, is an apt and rather clever description of the vampire whose mouth is nothing if not ‘mean.’ Certainly, Elaine’s verbal attacks—her ‘pointed’ and ‘biting’ insults—can cause her own victims mental injury as the vampire’s sharp fangs inflict physical pain upon the same. Elaine is not the only girl to practice verbal cruelty; indeed, as she explains, mean insults are “standard repartee among girls” (*CE* 251). But Elaine is particularly adept at it (“I know where the weak spots are,” she says [*CE* 252]), far surpassing even Cordelia, her mentor. In the same way that she can easily, cold-bloodedly dissect an insect or rat or

frog in her science classes (*CE* 264), Elaine is good at putting other girls, her victims, in their place and cutting them down to size.

Elaine's cruelty is, in part, a protective maneuver, a way to hurt other girls before she is hurt by them (an ordeal she refuses to undergo again), or a way to deflect the hurt of being insulted by throwing back even more cutting remarks. At the same time, she derives a sort of gleeful pleasure from her well-aimed, often lewd affronts.: "I've come to enjoy the risk, the sensation of vertigo when I realize that I've shot right over the border of the socially acceptable" (*CE* 252). When she and Cordelia goad each other in a game of making fun of Grace Smeath, Elaine, rather than feeling guilt over this disloyalty to her once best friend (who is not even present to defend herself), relishes and revels in the sport:

This is for me a deeply satisfying game. I can't account for my own savagery; I don't question why I'm enjoying it so much, or why Cordelia is playing it, insists on playing it, . . . She looks at me sideways, as if estimating how far, how much further I'll go. (*CE* 247)

The vampire must consume blood in order to survive; it is evident, however, that blood does not have the effect simply of sustaining the vampire, but of actually reviving her, empowering her. This combined need and greed of the lamia or vampire is, perhaps, part of what is dreadful about it: it does not drain from its victim only what it needs to continue its existence, but in fact more often engages in a gluttonous frenzy of drinking, much like an alcoholic or other such addict. As Twitchell tells us, the Countess Elizabeth Bathory, upon whose ghoulish practices supposedly much of vampire legend is based, drank (and bathed in) the blood of virgins because of the invigorating effects which she

believed she drew from it, as well (no doubt) as the power which she felt in being able to sacrifice them for her personal benefit, not because it was the only thing that could keep her alive (*CE* 18).

The vampire lore that was partially inspired by the exploits of many such eccentrics has made the vampire's consumption of blood a necessity for the continuation of their species (both for its self-preservation and also for its procreation); but the sense of lust, insatiability and an empowerment which goes beyond mere vivification in the vampire's transfusions—usually described in overtly sexual terminology—is still palpable. And it is this sense (minus the sexual aspect) that Atwood suggests in Elaine when she engages in insulting and ridiculing other girls, the very same—and now shared—sense of “need” and also “greed” that she perceived in Cordelia, Carol and Grace (*CE* 208). In short, Elaine is driven to hurt other girls not simply because, for various reasons, she *needs* to, but because she *can*.

As a metaphor for women's behavior towards each other, vampirism disturbs the notion of women as passive, kind and giving, as united in a spirit of mutual support and love. Indeed, if there is any real bond between Elaine and her female peers, it has been formed through fear and submission. Woman culture, in *Cat's Eye*, is a war zone with words as weapons instead of fists; as Elaine specifies, “it's girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys” (*CE* 254). It is a totalitarian regime where women, far from being equal and communal, are either despotic leaders like Elaine and Cordelia who have won their position through sadistic cruelty; or sycophantic acolytes, ‘yes-women’ like Carol and Grace who take cover from insults “beside” them; or followers, “half a step behind” (*CE* 252), who meekly submit to them, women “swinging their hair, swaying

their hips as if they think they're seductive, talking too loudly and carelessly to one another . . . or else acting pastel, blank, daisy-fresh" (*CE* 255). One way or other, they are women for whom Elaine feels nothing but "amused disdain" or contempt (*CE* 252) .

Atwood's interpretation of women's parasitical victimization of each other in the metaphorical language of 'bite or be bitten' vampire politics, describes a world in which cruelty looks to outsiders like a game (in the same way a vampire's kiss can look like love); where names not only hurt but scar girls, taint and transform them like a vampire's transfusion, initiate them into 'mean-mouthed' women who, like vampires, inflict and feed off other women's emotional pain and suffering as their sole source of nourishment and pleasure.

## ix

In a scenario where victim can become victimizer, Atwood explores the possibilities of vampire relationships to their logical end: Elaine, once Cordelia's victim, turns her new power as a vampire herself against Cordelia. This seeming 'twist' on the traditional vampire narrative is not Atwood's own invention. While many of the most familiar vampire stories share a familiar climax of the execution of the vampire and the subsequent salvation of his victim(s), other works are more ambiguous about the vampire/victim relationship and how it grows and changes. Their authors, it appears, are far more interested in a scenario which explores the constructive and destructive qualities, the dynamics of the relationship itself, than simply in how it is destroyed.

As Twitchell explains, many writers have used vampirism as an analogy, a metaphor for human relationships and more specifically, relationships which are

sustained and propelled by a parasitical dependence which is not one-sided, but somehow reversible, oscillating (38; 62). Thus, although it is unfair to call Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and others of its ilk simply supernatural vampire stories (since there are many subversive elements at work there beyond supernatural ones), they tend to seem somewhat more superficial than other, more obscure works in which the line between vampire and victim comes blurred or erased, works which use vampirism as a springboard for a deep inquiry into the corrosive and creative aspects of relationships.

Although Atwood brings her own personal element to the tradition, it is in this latter vein of psychological investigation that she is working in *Cat's Eye*. In the tradition of Keats' "Lamia," Atwood moves beyond the Stoker scenario into one in which her conception of women's relationship with women can be more fully and realistically portrayed.

In "Lamia," what appears to be a fairly straightforward plot of deception, revelation and destruction, is complicated by the fact that Lamia is not the only vampire in the story. First Lycius, her deceived and used lover, uses her love for him against her; metaphorically, he himself has become a vampire through her ministrations, and now seeks to use her as she has used him:

Against his better self, he took delight

Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.

His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue

Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible

In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.

Fine was the mitigated fury, like  
 Apollo's present when in act to strike  
 The serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes, she  
 Was none. (II. 73-80)

Keats' message in this passage is clear: Lamia, though a serpentine creature, is imbued with the very human qualities of love, while Lycius, a human, is at once revealed as monstrously inhuman when, for his own empowerment, he feeds off Lamia's love. It is not Lycius, however, who kills Lamia, but his friend, the philosopher/priest Apollonius. Arriving uninvited to the wedding banquet, Apollonius recognizes Lamia for what she is and attempts to exorcise her. But the way he does it, interestingly enough, is not as a philosopher or a priest, or even human being, but as though Apollonius were a fellow vampire. Lamia grows pale at Apollonius' accusation as though she is being drained of blood (l. 273), and Lycius cries out to his guests:

“Corinthians! look upon that grey-beard wretch!  
 Mark now, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch  
 Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!  
 My sweet bride withers at their potency.” (II 286-90)

Lamia, literally and figuratively, has met her match in Apollonius, whose piercing eyes cause her to be metaphorically staked (Twitchell 53) as they “Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly /Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging” (l. 299-301), and she disappears. As Twitchell explains:

Each member of the threesome is described as vampiring at least one other. Lamia draws energy from Lycius, and he reciprocates by draining



her; Apollonius drains energy from Lamia, who in turn depletes the dependent Lycius. When one member is removed from this *menage a trois*, the energy flow ceases. (53)

Although this sort of part actual, part figurative parasitical “threesome” is of course not present in *Cat’s Eye*, the idea of mutual feeding, of energy exchange and role reversal, certainly is, in the relationship between the metaphorical vampire Cordelia and the victim, Elaine.

The scene of the first energy exchange from Cordelia to Elaine is also one of the most pivotal and, moreover, the most explicitly “vampiric” in the narrative. Elaine and Cordelia are exploring in the cemetery, the one near the ravine. What begins as a mean game of pretending that various people are dead—from Grace and her family to the founding family of Eaton’s—becomes serious as Elaine turns her cruelty onto Cordelia:

“Mrs. Eaton is really a vampire, you know,” I say slowly. “She comes out at night. She’s dressed in a long white gown. That door creaks open and she comes out.” . . .

I refuse to laugh. “No, seriously,” I say. “She does. I happen to know.”

Cordelia looks at me nervously. The snow is falling, it’s twilight, there’s nobody here but us. “Yeah?” she says, waiting for the joke.

“Yes,” I say. “We sometimes go together. Because I’m a vampire too.”

“You’re not,” says Cordelia. . . . She’s smiling uncertainly.

“How do you know?” I say. “How do you *know*?”

. . . it’s just the sun I have to avoid. On days like this it’s perfectly safe. I have a coffin full of earth where I sleep; it’s down in”—I search for a likely place—“the cellar.”

“You’re being silly,” Cordelia says.

. . . “Silly?” I say. I lower my voice. “I’m just telling you the truth. You’re my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I’m really dead. I’ve been dead for years. . . . But *you* don’t have to worry. I won’t suck any of you’re blood. You’re my friend.” (CE 249-50)

This ‘game’ soon ends, but the transfer of power was real. Cordelia tries to resume the safer game of making fun of Grace, but as Elaine explains, “I’m tired of this. I have a denser, more malevolent little triumph to finger: energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (CE 250).

Cordelia, who once wielded power and control over Elaine, has lost that control and now, it seems, that power as well; Elaine, through a power play of intimidation, has had the power conferred to her, and she is now the dominant one. In her weakened, drained state, Cordelia becomes easy target practice for Elaine and her “mean mouth” (CE 252). Elaine herself enjoys, but cannot comprehend her cruelty towards Cordelia:

I’m surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she’s so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her. . . . I wonder, for an instant, how I can be so mean to my best friend. For this is what she is. (249; 264)

The reader, however, can have little doubt of Elaine's motive though she has deliberately forgotten their impetus: she wants revenge on Cordelia, wants to persecute her as she was once persecuted, to feed off of and enervate her just as she was once drained and weakened. Elaine's verbal 'bites' have their perceptible effect on Cordelia. As Elaine notices, for instance when they are dissecting worms and frogs:

Cordelia is becoming mushier and mushier. . . she is becoming a drip. .  
 . She looks at me, pale, her eyes big. The frog smell is getting to her. I  
 do her frog for her. I'm good at this. (CE 265)

Metaphorically, Cordelia is a vampire who has lost her taste for blood, for cutting into people. She can barely hold her own against Elaine's verbal jabs:

Sometimes Cordelia can think of things to say back, but sometimes she  
 can't. She says, "That's cruel." Or she sticks her tongue in the side of her  
 mouth and changes the subject. (CE 253)

At the same time, she is being drained of energy by Elaine as though by giving her a transfusion—she is like an I.V. 'drip' slowly draining itself into Elaine's body.

But this familiar vampire/victim relationship becomes complicated when Elaine begins to slowly sever her relationship with Cordelia. Rather than being rejuvenated by this event, Cordelia, no longer Elaine's object of victimization, is only seen to further degenerate:

Cordelia is failing more and more tests. It doesn't seem to bother her, or  
 at any rate she doesn't want to talk about it. . . .She has trouble  
 concentrating on anything. Even when she's just talking, on the way  
 home, she changes the subject in the middle of a sentence so it's hard to

follow what she's saying. She's slipping up on the grooming, too. . . .  
 She's let her bleached strip grow out, so it's disconcertingly two-toned.  
 There are runs in her nylons, buttons popped off her blouses. Her lipstick  
 doesn't seem to fit her mouth. (*CE 273*)

Perhaps, being a vampire as well as a victim, Cordelia maintains some sort of minimal life support in the mere contact with Elaine, a contact which, once broken, causes her to weaken. This would seem to be the case, since the next time Elaine sees Cordelia, after a long period of separation, her condition seems to have worsened:

Cordelia is a wreck. Her hair is lusterless, the flesh of her face pasty.  
 She's gained a lot of weight, not solid-muscle weight, but limp weight,  
 bloated and watery. She's gone back to the too-vivid orange-red lipstick,  
 which turns her yellowish. (*CE 275*)

The repeated emphasis, in these two descriptions, on Cordelia's mouth is obviously significant: her poorly applied lipstick and, later, the uncomplimentary shade she has "gone back to" both suggest her weak, superficial attempt to recapture her old, powerful self, the mean mouth she once possessed. Cordelia's weight-gain is an ironic twist on the conventional image of the vampire, wasted away from lack of blood; rather than appearing to be starving, Cordelia is overweight. However, the weight that she has gained is unhealthy, specifically "limp," "bloated" and "watery"—as though it is somehow insubstantial or superficial. Unable to get what she really needs in the way of sustenance, Cordelia is gorging herself on food and alcohol as though in an unsuccessful attempt to compensate for what she is missing: Elaine, her energy, her life source. Her

motive for inviting Elaine over is clear, even to Elaine, who was expecting her call: “ ‘I’d like to see you,’ she says. . . . What I hear is not *like* but *need* ” (CE 274).

Cordelia needs Elaine to replenish her dwindling energy, but Elaine is unwilling to let herself become enmeshed in Cordelia’s dark web once again. When Cordelia tries to engage her in a dialogue about their past together, Elaine refuses to participate, as though even talking about their past relationship will trap her in it for a second time, as though Cordelia is uttering a spell of enchantment, of enthrallment, which Elaine recognizes and wards off with her reticence.

I don’t want her to remember any more. I want to protect myself from any further, darker memories of hers. . . . She’s balanced on the edge of an artificial hilarity that could topple over at any moment into its opposite, into tears and desperation. I don’t want to see her crumple up like that, because I have nothing to offer her in the way of solace.

I harden towards her. (CE 277)

Unlike Christabel, who willingly establishes the contact with Geraldine which will secure her own enthrallment, Elaine cannot allow herself to go that way again, even though she feels a sense of guilt for refusing Cordelia:

I know she has expected something from me. . . . I know I have failed to provide it. I am dismayed by myself, by my cruelty and indifference, my lack of kindness. But also I feel relief. (CE 278)

This odd ambiguity of emotions, like the contradictory “desire with loathing strangely mix’d,” is one of the strange and fascinating paradoxes of vampire literature, not to mention the gothic genre as a whole. But then, relationships between humans—be

they between lovers or friends—are themselves replete with such ambiguous and contradictory feelings, which accounts, at least in part, for the constructive or destructive ways in which relationships can be fueled and the dynamics of interdependence which can become unequal, unbalanced, unhealthy, parasitical—in other words, vampiric.

**Chapter Two:**

**THE DOUBLE**

In my introduction, I noted the primary distinction between the vampire and the Double: the former trope is about human relationships (of which those between women were my focus), while the latter is an inward-turning investigation of the conflicted psyche or Self. Although this distinction is a useful one it is not altogether exact. The vampire, after all, is only one type of Double, ostensibly one of its more archaic manifestations. As such, the vampire scenario partakes of that of the Double and therefore is as much an introverted exploration as an extroverted one; that the victim, and not the vampire, is always the protagonist in these stories (with modern works such as Ann Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* being a notable exception) is telling. After all, the vampire, as a Double, is in Freudian terms a projection of the protagonist's fragmented identity, the Id feeding off the Ego in a neurotic, death-drive impulse. For the purposes of my study I have chosen to treat the Double as a gothic archetype separate from the vampire. This is because a discussion of the Double allows for a foray into other hitherto unexamined aspects of relationships between women and of the gothic in *Cat's Eye*.

The widespread and diverse use of the Double in the history of gothic literature makes it difficult to categorize it satisfactorily by type or nature. However, a reading of some of the major works in this genre reveals two readily apparent, albeit rather superficial, categories of the Double in literature. There is the Double that is very obvious to both the protagonist and the reader, or what I will call the overt Double, and the less obvious or covert Double; these categories are often referred to by critics as the "manifest" and the "latent" Double respectively, drawing from the language of Freudian psychoanalysis (Guerard 4).



Unlike anything in *Cat's Eye*, the overt Double typically bears an exact resemblance to the protagonist, primarily in outward appearance but sometimes in action, mannerism and behavior as well. Such Doubles can be identical twins, or fraternal twins who are alike in every way save gender. Of the earliest type of Double, Shakespeare's comedies *Twelfth Night*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *A Comedy of Errors* are perhaps the most well known.

However, in most other, more modern Double stories in which the Double bears an exact or near-exact resemblance to the protagonist, the question of relatedness does not arise and indeed seems irrelevant to the narrative; the Double most often appears as out of thin air, both a supernatural force and a psychological projection. Fyodor Dostoevski's novel *The Double* and Poe's short story "William Wilson" are two examples of this type. In both works the Doubles not only look like the protagonists, but even call themselves by the same name, or almost (since in Dostoevski's work, the Double adds on "Jr." to his "Golyadkin").

Still other overt Doubles are less separate characters than they are symbolic representations. In Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Shadow," a man's shadow claims an independent identity from its owner and gains a life for itself as an affluent and influential businessman while the 'shadowless' protagonist sinks into poverty and obscurity. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde presents us with a situation where a man's portrait comes to bear all the physical disfigurements of age and reflects visibly the stains on his soul caused by his immoral life.

Still other overt Doubles might be called such even if they do not bear an exact resemblance to the protagonist, so long as their role is obvious to the protagonist. In Guy

de Maupassant's story "The Horla" (a play on the French phrase 'hors la' meaning 'out there'), the Double isn't even visible, but the narrator becomes increasingly certain of its presence until his neurotic conviction appears justified when he can no longer see his own reflection in a mirror—as though his Double "has absorbed" it (Guerard 8). One critic, Claire Rosenfield, even goes so far as to describe Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* as "exact Doubles differing in sex alone" for reason of their similar natures and because they choose as their mates two individuals (the brother and sister Edgar and Isabella Linton) who are their complementary opposites (315).

Just as overt Doubles are clearly—and usually immediately—identifiable, covert Doubles are characters who are not immediately obvious to the protagonist or the reader, but are revealed to them as such through indirect or subtle means. Such is the case with Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer". Here, the narrator slowly becomes aware that another sea-captain, Leggatt, is his Double, primarily because of his sense of their supposed physical similarity (which may only be on account of their similar dress) (145-47), and their similar speech patterns, but more covertly because of his personal feelings of being, as he puts it, a "stranger" to himself (138), and because of his attempt to make of Leggatt his ideal Self fully realized. The reader, in turn, is also alerted to the true identity of the mysterious visitor by Conrad through a number of narrative clues, including mirror references and imagery.

As we will see in *Cat's Eye*, the covert Double may be many things in regards to its nature, behavior or manner which may make it difficult to readily identify. This having been said, however, there seem to be certain things that this type of Double cannot be. The covert Double cannot be identical in appearance to the protagonist although, as

we see in Conrad, such may be the conviction of the protagonist. The covert Double cannot be merely a figment of the protagonist's imagination or otherwise any sort of obvious projection on the part of the protagonist like a hallucination, though the protagonist is likely to project onto the Double his own insecurities, delusions, desires; indeed, part of what makes this kind of Double 'covert' is the fact that it is a separate character in and of itself, often fully fleshed out by the author. It is only in the manner in which this character relates to the protagonist, the manner in which the protagonist reacts to this character, and the way in which their relationship creates conflict in the narrative and drives the plot forward that the character's role as Double is exposed. This does not mean that every antagonist in a work of fiction is necessarily a Double to the protagonist. Rather, the Double, as an alter-ego or other Self, although it can be a particular type of antagonist, is one for which the protagonist feels a very particular—and usually irrational—connection, a connection which he finds at once comforting and abhorrent. This is the sense of the *unheimlich* or uncanny which, as previously noted, is also present with the vampire.

Often, as in *Cat's Eye*, the protagonist feels connected to another character in some strange ways. For example, in "Bartleby the Scrivener" by Herman Melville, the unnamed narrator/protagonist, while finding his clerk Bartleby completely annoying, still feels a strong sense of responsibility for him, to the extent that he is reluctant to fire Bartleby in spite of the young man's total inactivity in his Manhattan office (as well as everywhere else). As a Double, Bartleby represents for the narrator an individual who, through free will, chooses to completely refuse to comply with the Protestant work ethic or any other aspect of social interaction or responsibility. In his avoidance of all societal

constructs, he is the antithesis of the narrator, who may however recognize in him some element of his own free will which has never been exercised in non-conformity.

In Saul Bellow's *The Victim*, the protagonist Asa Leventhal is similarly annoyed by his Double, Kirby Allbee, who aggressively demands the protagonist's responsibility for his loss of employment; despite Bellow's deliberate ambiguity over the question of Leventhal's actual culpability, the protagonist suffers from a guilty conscience which far outweighs his supposed 'crime' against Allbee, thus calling into question the identity of the 'victim' to which the title of the novel refers.

By far the strangest example of a covert Double is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where Jekyll's very existence is threatened by Hyde, the stronger of two identities sharing the same body. Stevenson's work is usually considered the quintessential Double story, perhaps because it is most closely allied to the gothic narrative of supernatural transformation, updated by the author from the Werewolf to the 'mad scientist' scenario. Ironically, though, this tale of a man who through "transcendental medicine" becomes his Id Self both behaviorally and physically, is unique among Double stories rather than exemplary.

Covert Doubles can also be ones who appear in a story in addition to the main Double. These secondary Doubles might be multiple Doubles in the sense that they represent other projected identities of the fragmented protagonist, perhaps weaker or more subverted than the main Double. Or, they can be Doubles of other characters in the narrative, thus creating a structural duplication or 'doubling' of the main narrative in a secondary narrative which restates and re-emphasizes the main theme. In *Dorian Gray*, both the painter Basil and the dilettante Lord Henry are Dorian's Doubles as well as each

other's Doubles. For Dorian, Basil and Lord Henry represent conflicting aspects of his own potential identity; to one another, they are complementary Doubles who vie for Dorian's soul in an attempt partly to relive their own youths and largely to claim Dorian as their own personal creation—an image of ideal Beauty for Basil and of guiltless, sensualistic hedonism for Lord Henry.

## ii

If the Double scenario involving male characters seems convoluted, it is nothing in comparison to that involving women. This is perhaps because women, in grappling with their own identities, must contend not only with those social constructs which each person must resolve with an inner—and one would argue truer—Self, but also with the narrower spectrum of possible roles that a male-dominated society has traditionally defined.

In fact, until this century many women writers may not even have recognized that they were creating Doubles in their novels. Emily Brontë may have known clearly that Cathy and Heathcliff are Doubles, since she has Cathy say “I am Heathcliff” and Heathcliff declare that he cannot live without his “soul,” Cathy; however, it is unlikely that Charlotte Brontë ever considered the possibility that Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad first wife, is Jane Eyre's Double, as many critics would maintain today (Twitchell 66-67). Ironically, nineteenth and twentieth century criticism (well into the mid 1950s, in fact) saw Bertha as *Rochester's* dark Id Double, the embodiment of his once wild self, now necessarily repressed and denied (Twitchell 67). How can one account for this misappropriation of Jane's Double on the part of early critics, and what implication, if

any, does this have for women's gothic stories dealing with the Double? Is this not a problem similar to the one faced by Atwood when *Cat's Eye* was misidentified as a "jeux d'esprit," a problem which she attributed to the fact that women's concerns, in literature as in life, were generally ignored, made light of, or subordinated to the concerns of men?

The answer may originate in the Victorian sense of the one-dimensional identity of women (hence the impossibility of their suffering from any internal conflict or fragmentation), combined with a willful inability to see women as having identities independent of those tied up in the domestic service of men. Women traditionally have been viewed in the Judaeo-Christian culture as either Eve/lamia-like temptresses who acted as the devil's gateway to lure men on to the path of evil (MacHaffie 37), or like Beatrice, the Dantean ideal woman, or like the Virgin Mary, the immaculate, nurturing, suffering mother. According to Barbara MacHaffie in *Her Story*, Victorians, in their nostalgic recreation of chivalry, were perhaps the first to see respectable, middle class women as "domestic angels" who served and nurtured men and who interceded to temper men's baser instincts with their own naturally elevated ones (95-97). "Fallen women" from both the middle and working class could be seen as Mary Magdalene figures to be pitied and rescued by respectable men and women (98). Therefore, it is more typical for Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* to pose two women as the virtuous woman and the fallen woman in the form of a morality tale than to treat them as complementary Doubles.

At the start of this century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," shows that her protagonist's relationship to the figure she imagines is behind the insidious wallpaper of her sick room was part of her psychosis, but did not seem to want to make her protagonist undergo a conscious recognition of the trapped figure she wishes

to rescue as her Double, a symbol of her own trapped situation. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was for years considered or classified as a ghost or horror story with no acknowledgment of its psychological subtext and social implications. The reason for this may lie in the narrative voice which is deliberately naïve and unaware and which may have been mistaken by critics for the author’s own voice—and, by extension, her own supposedly limited understanding. In contrast, in Henry James’ “The Turn of the Screw,” the frame story and narrative voice—and possibly the fact that a male is writing the story—have led to the possibility, almost from the beginning, of both a ghost story and a psychological story as its interpretation .

Margaret Atwood has said of ghost stories,

You can have the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one’s own self which has split off, and that for me is the most interesting kind and that is obviously the tradition I am working in.

(Gibson 12)

Before writing *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood used the genre of the ghost story in a psychological context in *Surfacing*. Although there is the possibility that her eccentric father is simply missing somewhere in the bush, *Surfacing* merges the protagonist’s nervous breakdown with her impression that her dead mother and father—and aborted child—seem to be haunting her on the remote Canadian island where her family used to live (Gibson 17). Similarly, in *Cat’s Eye*, the question of whether or not Cordelia is dead is constantly on Elaine’s mind when she returns to Toronto for her artistic retrospective. However, whether alive or dead, Cordelia definitely haunts Elaine as a disquieting psychological force.

Women traditionally have been seen as victims in gothic works (although usually victims of men). In the modern gothic, as we can see in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, the idea of a woman from the past, whether dead or alive, serving as a Double in victimizing another woman by disturbing her psychological state. Although both of these novels involve dead women, neither of them contains an actual ghost; however, in each work the protagonist feels persecuted by the dead woman, as if the dead woman were exercising her will over her from beyond the grave. Jackson takes this idea of persecution to the furthest extreme, where the protagonist, already emotionally unbalanced, slowly goes insane and ends up committing suicide. In *Rebecca*, the unnamed girl whom Maxim deWinter marries feels herself living in the shadow of his beautiful and accomplished first wife, and is nearly driven to suicide by Rebecca's jealously vindictive personal maid, Mrs. Danvers. Both of these works seem concerned with exploring not only the psychological aspect of the gothic/ghost story genre, but also the relationship of women with other women, since in both works there is a live, present woman who, as a kind of intermediary to the dead woman/Double (and a secondary Double) is actually the source of the persecution. There is no such intermediary figure in *Cat's Eye*, but Elaine's memory is enough of an intermediary, or bridge, between present and past to make such a figure unnecessary.

### iii

With *Cat's Eye*, Atwood integrates the ghost story with the Double story. As she used a lamian metaphor to explain the vampiric interplay between girls as a mode of initiation and transformation into womanhood, so she uses the gothic trope of the Double



as a vehicle for exploring how girls' mutual victimization symbolically causes a loss of Self and necessitates Self-retrieval and reclamation through the confrontation with the Other.

As with that of the lamia, Atwood does not propose or propel the Double theme through plot alone. Instead, through a gothicly labyrinthine trail of images and motifs, she takes the reader through a kind of Fun House where, at each twist and turn of the passage, an unexpected mirror may reflect either a distorted vision of one's self or a vision of someone else entirely. In fact, the mirror, as one of this work's central, unifying motifs, perfectly embodies the theme of the Double. Understanding the way in which Atwood's mirrors reflect, duplicate, distort, and disclose is essential to a further understanding of the way she portrays the dynamic of female relationships: the way women reflect and refract each other—often to destructive ends—in the female journey towards self-actualization.

Mirrors feature early on in *Cat's Eye* as props which Atwood uses to introduce, explore, and signal her theme of the Double. As the novel opens, Elaine, a middle-aged artist, describes her increasing inability to see her reflection in the mirror clearly because of her weakening vision: "Too close and I'm a blur, too far back and I can't see details. . . .so much depends on the light and the way you squint" (CE 5). This statement may be true of most middle-aged people; but it also clearly lends itself to a larger, more general context of meaning in terms of narrative reliability in the autobiographical approach which *Cat's Eye* and Elaine's narrative entails. Elaine, as the narrator of her own past history, will be undertaking a difficult and treacherous journey; there are obstacles

involved, since reconstructing the past, a personal history, presents the subject with almost unlimited possibilities for blurring and eliminating details (Grace 117).

The task becomes particularly problematic in Elaine's case, however, since she has blocked or suppressed many significant details and episodes of her early life when she was mercilessly persecuted by her three friends, particularly Cordelia. On a deeper level, Elaine's difficulty in seeing, due to her increasingly impaired vision, offers the first important clue to her real or psychological problem—a problem which the traumatic events of her childhood have helped to create.

As I have suggested in Chapter One, Elaine has been symbolically turned into a vampire in her childhood, as a rite of passage to womanhood. Because of the severity of this ritual (due both to Elaine's level of sensitivity and to Cordelia's choice of extreme methods for purposes of the ritual), Elaine has been left traumatized and scarred, though she hides it beneath a hard surface of acerbic wit and often cruel contempt for others—especially other women. Instead of being a 'normal' woman (which for Atwood seems to mean a vampiric woman, unthinkingly 'feeding' on other women as well as on men), she is, at the start of the book, in her middle age, a kind of vampire with an identity problem.

In one sense, Elaine is caught in the modern existential dilemma of the need to present to society an external image which conforms to its expectations, its norms and its conventions of appearance (not to mention of behavior). Elaine herself describes her morning ablutions before the mirror as "preparing my face," and one cannot help but think of T. S. Eliot's Prufrock 'preparing a face to meet the faces' of his society, with all the sense of falsity and disguise which the line conveys. (Eliot's poem also discredits the idea that creating a social facade is exclusively a female concern). Elaine's own 'face'

being as unacceptable as she feels it is, she believes that she must create another one which is acceptable, and in more than simply a cosmetic sense.

However, Elaine's problem is more particular. Her 'vision' is in a symbolic (as well as a literal) sense impaired. Her image of herself—her face reflected in the mirror—is indistinct not only because of failing eyesight, but because her self-image has been damaged, leaving her self (which her face symbolically represents), somehow incomplete. In becoming the kind of woman she has become through her experience with Cordelia (which has meant symbolically becoming a vampire), a part of herself has been misplaced, lost and buried. Being an artist, she needs (more than other less-introspective women) to identify, retrieve, resurrect this lost self and reassimilate it into herself to make her a complete, unified whole.

Elaine's traumatic childhood is bad enough (as we have already seen) to cause her to begin, at an early age, a protective internal division and separation of herself, initially by the means of self-induced fainting, whereby she can "step sideways outside her body" and stay outside, suspended and untouchable (*CE* 184). Eventually the pain of trauma leads Elaine ostensibly to reject and abandon her child-self in the past. This means, in practice, that she suppresses her past and the part of her that lives in it. Consequently, it remains, metaphorically buried but not quite dead, like the undead spirits which, as a child, she superstitiously believed floated from the cemetery through the cold, murky water in the ravine under the footbridge where she herself once almost died as the result of the cruel trick played on her by her heartless little friends (*CE* 200-02). The ravine is an apt metaphor for the unconscious—or subconscious—since it is deep, cold, mysterious, and unknown. Indeed, it is there, in the ravine, that Elaine still thinks of her

child Self as remaining, abandoned by her just as she was abandoned by her friends on that cold winter evening of her past.

The forcibly submerged child-Self of Elaine will not stay down beneath the surface, in the adult Elaine's suppressed memories of the past. The troubled relationship between Elaine and her Double, between the adult Elaine of the present and the child Elaine of the past, is often explored in her uneasy relationship with mirrors, both actual and imagined. Indeed, mirrors and things that reflect become the physical loci of her combined fascination with and fear of her past and her Double.

iv

In high school, having long since turned her back on her past, Elaine becomes intrigued and disturbed by a story in a horror comic book about twin sisters, one angelic and beautiful, the other evil and horribly disfigured by a burn covering half of her face. In this corny gothic tale, the evil twin is eventually killed off, only to reappear, cackling triumphantly, in the mirror whenever the good twin looks into it (*CE 225*). So unsettling is this story for the teenaged Elaine that she cannot have the magazine in her bedroom, and fears looking into mirrors:

I'm afraid I'll find out there's someone else trapped inside my body; I'll look into the bathroom mirror and see that face of another girl, someone who looks like me but has half of her face darkened, the skin burned away.  
(*CE 227*)

Soon after, a girl her age is found murdered in the ravine (*CE 266*), triggering a series of nightmares for Elaine involving being trapped under the ice-covered surface of

the ravine, or involving mirrors. In one dream Elaine, dressed in the clothes of the dead girl, stands in front of her bedroom mirror and senses that there is someone behind her, just out of the range of her vision:

There's someone standing behind me. If I move so that I can see into the mirror, I'll be able to look over my shoulder without turning around. I'll be able to see who it is. (*CE* 268)

Clearly, the 'someone' standing behind Elaine is her Double, her banished child-self, lost in her initiation into vampire-like womanhood. Less clearly, although Elaine's seeing who it is behind her requires no more than the normally simple action of altering her position so that she can look into the mirror over her shoulder, the way that Elaine describes this action makes it seem as though doing so is impossibly complicated and difficult. Obviously she does not want to confront her Double, fears the confrontation, and thus this simple action becomes extremely hard for her to perform. Similarly, that she is afraid and unwilling to examine her past (the only way she can confront her Double), is symbolically revealed in her difficulty in looking directly into a mirror or simply looking over her shoulder. The action of looking over the shoulder, looking behind oneself, symbolic of looking back at one's past, is a recurrent one in *Cat's Eye* and, as with the equally symbolic idea of poor vision, often involves mirrors in its difficult execution. As David Punter says:

ghost stories, surely, have always been vehicles for nostalgia, attempts to understand the past, and the glance over the shoulder is their central motif and embodiment. (425)

The middle-aged Elaine not only has trouble seeing her face in mirrors because of her poor eye-sight, but also describes her difficulty in seeing her back in the mirror, as when she's trying on clothes: "I crane my neck, trying to get a rear view" (CE 46).

But though seemingly fearful of, or at least uncomfortable around, mirrors, the younger Elaine is also strongly attracted to them. In art school she becomes fascinated with the effects of "glass and other light-reflecting surfaces" in the works she studies and in subjects for her own painterly attempts. She is particularly impressed with Van Eyck's 'The Arnolfini Marriage,' which features in the background a mirror in which is reflected not only the backs of the bridal couple portrayed, "but two other people who aren't in the main picture at all". These two figures in the mirror "are slightly askew, as if a different law of gravity, or a different arrangement of space, exists inside, locked in, sealed up in the glass as if in a paperweight," and the circular mirror itself appears to Elaine to be "like an eye, a single eye, that sees more than anyone else looking" (CE 347).

The significance of this painting, and especially of Elaine's fascinated description of the mirror and its reflections, cannot be overemphasized in terms of its contribution to the Double theme in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine's description of the mirror which seems to 'seal in' its reflections 'like a paperweight,' describes the way in which she herself has sealed away that part of herself, her other Self, inside her subconscious where it is trapped in limbo-like existence in her unconscious. That Elaine thinks of the mirror as an eye furthers the significance, uniting the motifs of her impaired vision (her bad eyes) and her difficulty (because of fear) in seeing or looking behind her. The 'eye' is a clever play-on-words for 'I' — in other words, the Ego, the Self. Elaine's essential identity is incomplete, since part of it has been suppressed.

It is here that the '*Cat's Eye*' of the title comes into play as the central symbol of Elaine's partial identity. The Cat's Eye itself is a marble Elaine keeps with her during her period of victimization in elementary school:

I keep the Cat's Eye in my pocket where I can hold onto it. It rests in my hand, valuable as a jewel, looking out through bone and cloth with its impartial gaze. With the help of its power I retreat back into my eyes. (*CE* 166)

The Cat's Eye marble acts as a talisman to protect her from harm; also, it symbolically contains the part of herself which needs to be protected, something hidden and thus preserved. By the time she is in high school and her childhood trauma is ostensibly behind her in the past, Elaine's Cat's Eye marble is put in a box in the cellar "where old things go that are not thrown out" (*CE* 217), and is forgotten, perhaps because Elaine believes she no longer needs it. In one sense she is right: the children who mistreated her have moved out of her life (or out of her line of vision). Moreover, she has symbolically internalized the marble: in a dream, she sees it pass through her, into her, making her impermeable with its ice-cold hardness. She has become, like the marble, "like something frozen in ice" (*CE* 151).

But in another sense, the Cat's Eye marble, because it represents and symbolically embodies her lost self (and because she thinks that, like the mirror in the Van Eyck painting, the marble has sealed the past and that self within its glass sphere like the blue swirl at its center), is integral to a whole, unified identity for Elaine. Without it, without her past, without her child-Elaine Double, Elaine is incomplete and continually

haunted by a pervasive sense that she has left something behind, a part of herself that she needs as much as it needs her. She expresses this feeling as she stands by the fateful ravine as a middle-aged adult, recalling the time when she was forced (and then left) down into the ravine. It is an “uneasy feeling, as if something’s buried down there, a nameless, crucial thing, or as if there’s someone still on the bridge, left by mistake” (*CE* 216).

The significance of the mirror in the Van Eyck painting and what it reflects is even greater than hitherto acknowledged by Elaine. The presence of two individuals in the mirror who are not the Adolfini couple of the portraiture, while underlining the sense of duality, is also a clue to this greater meaning. Elaine’s strange sense about the ravine helps solve the mystery: there *is* someone in the ravine, but also someone on the bridge. In Elaine’s near-death experience in the ravine, the person on the bridge was the instigator of Elaine’s persecution, the inflictor of her punishments and suffering: Elaine’s ‘best friend,’ Cordelia.

vi

Thus, in a sense Elaine has two Doubles, is haunted by two ghosts: her child-Self and Cordelia. The line between the two is often fascinatingly blurred, and often they overlap like the superimposed image of the photograph in Elaine’s old album (*CE* 58), and even blend into each other, share and exchange characteristics in Elaine’s unconscious in an ambiguous, complex dynamic which even she barely comprehends. As in the first chapter, Cordelia’s persecution of her during Elaine’s years at elementary school (aided by Elaine’s two other friends Carol and Grace) is subtle, relentless, and



disturbing for Elaine because it seems unwarranted, its reasons never justified. The nature of the torture has been the sort which little girls in particular inflict, verbal and psychological rather than physical, a kind of game whose rules are as arbitrary as the punishments for breaking them.

Elaine's identity has begun to break under the tremendous weight of Cordelia's increasingly merciless mental cruelty. Eventually (but not before Elaine's internal division has occurred), Elaine has turned away from Cordelia and the others, but she has never successfully extricated herself from Cordelia's tenacious grip, has never completely escaped Cordelia's range of power, which seems to span both time and space in its continued impact on her. Like the Cat's Eye marble, Cordelia (who has green eyes like a cat) has become a part of Elaine, like her child self who may be 'buried' in the unconscious but is not dead (*CE* 49). Cordelia thus complicates the mirror examples already mentioned (*CE* 14).

Moreover, Cordelia's sporadic re-entries into Elaine's life at various points after childhood make her like a ghost even though she is actually not dead. She is a constant reminder for Elaine that her past is not really behind her. Each time Cordelia makes a reappearance, the presence of mirrors or reflections—either actual or symbolic—is alluded to, informing the text and attending to the theme of the Double. For example, when Elaine is in high school, Cordelia calls and asks to see her. Cordelia has changed: no longer the slim, attractive and high-spirited individual she was in her youth, she is now overweight, pallid, and listless. A reversal seems to have occurred, since it is Elaine who now feels superior to and contemptuous towards Cordelia, and refuses by her reticence to

give Cordelia what she expects and needs, which seems to be “some connection to her old life, or to herself” (*CE* 278).

Elaine doesn't want to participate in Cordelia's needy nostalgia: “I don't want to remember any more. I want to protect myself” (*CE* 177). It is with this sense of relief that Elaine leaves Cordelia, but looking back at her house she sees Cordelia's “face again, a blurred reflection of a moon, behind the front window” (*CE* 278). Cordelia, whose name means (among other things) “Heart of the Moon” (*CE* 274), has perhaps become, like Elaine herself, ‘blurred’ in terms of her identity, has become a shadowy ‘reflection’ of her former self. Furthermore, this image evokes the way in which Cordelia and Elaine reflect or mirror each other so that when Elaine ‘looks back’ and sees Cordelia's blurry image in the window, she is also symbolically looking into a mirror and seeing her own reflection—that aspect of herself which she has turned her back on and rejected, which needs her and which she also needs (she does, after all, look back), though she doesn't yet realize it.

Later, when Elaine is in university, Cordelia again emerges out of the past and again seems to have undergone a transformation. Thin, striking and full of affected, pretentious attitudes, Cordelia has apparently “reinvented herself” (*CE* 319). This new incarnation however, is somehow false, a disguise like a mask or a costume in a play covering her true Self. (Cordelia is, in fact, part of a theatrical troupe at this time.) However, Elaine, who has never seen through Cordelia's disguises, feels once again inferior and ugly, “at a disadvantage” compared with this shiny, new Cordelia (*CE* 320). Cordelia puts on a pair of mirrored sunglasses and the effect, the essence of the Cordelia-Elaine dynamic and the power Cordelia wields over it, is complete. As Elaine

thinks: “There I am in her mirror eyes, in duplicate and monochrome, and a great deal smaller than life-size” (*CE* 322).

The image is almost self-explanatory: Elaine is in duplicate; Cordelia’s eyes as cat’s eyes, mirror eyes, reflect but also distort, diminish and, like a mirror but unlike glass, cannot be seen into. Like Elaine (who once looked through the eye of her marble), Cordelia also hides behind her eyes or in another way, hides her ‘ I ,’ her Self, behind a layer of glass to project a false, yet impermeable self. Elaine, not seeing Cordelia for who she is, who she is pretending to be, feels only insignificant in Cordelia’s eyes, diminished, ‘smaller,’ not simply because Cordelia makes her feel inferior but because Cordelia reminds her of her past and her ‘smaller’ child-Self. Like the mirror in the Italian painting Cordelia reflects, duplicates and contains Elaine’s old, other Self; like the Cat’s Eye marble, she offers Elaine a vision into her past—a vision which Elaine, by refusing again to play Cordelia’s game of ‘remember?’ is rejecting and denying: “I don’t want to remember. The past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across water. . .” (*CE* 322). Elaine has once before unwittingly and unwillingly caught a glimpse through Cordelia’s eyes of their shared history when Cordelia revealed her own troubles as a child—her own persecution by her father, her own troubles at school—of which Elaine was never really aware, or else chose not to see. As Cordelia said,

“When I was. . . little I guess I got into trouble a lot, with Daddy. When he would lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it. ‘Wipe that smirk off your face,’ he would say. . . .I hated the kids at Queen Mary’s. . . I didn’t really have any friends there, except you.”

Cordelia's face dissolves, re-forms: I can see her nine year old face taking shape beneath it. This happens in an eyeblink. 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. There is that glimpse, during which I can see. And then not. . . . I don't want to know. Whatever it is, it's nothing I need or want. I want to be here, in Tuesday, in May. . . .(CE 271-72)

Elaine's self-imposed inability to see, her refusal to enter into the past with Cordelia as her guide—a journey in which each could help the other fill in the empty spaces to create a complete, unified history—is of course a fear tactic, a defensive mechanism, the same one which drives her to avoid and lose touch with Cordelia, the same one which caused her to 'lose' her Cat's Eye marble.

But, of course, just as the Cat's Eye marble is not really lost, but only packed away in the cellar, so Cordelia, though physically absent, continues to exist for Elaine as a felt presence in her life, a ghost-like figure who haunts her by being "in every image Elaine has of herself, every self-doubt, every fear, in every wish to be loved" (McDermott 1).

## vii

*Cat's Eye*, like many of the more sophisticated modern Double stories, contains other characters who also figure as Doubles. Thus, while Cordelia might be called the primary Double in this work, Elaine's childhood friend Carol, her art school classmate, Susie, Mrs. Smeath (Grace's mother), and even the Virgin Mary can be seen as secondary

Doubles. They are nonetheless important in their function, among other things, as role models, each exemplifying a type of woman Elaine herself could become, or personae which she already contains within her fragmented identity and from which she feels she must ultimately choose as a dominant Self. As such, these women are objects of fascination, fear, contempt, and repulsion for Elaine.

As a child as yet uninitiated into the culture of women, Elaine finds in her very first girlfriend Carol the living incarnation of the little girl in crinolines and patent leather shoes whom Elaine has studied in her primer. Uncomplicated and weak in character, with a habit of crying when she doesn't get her way, Carol is her cold-waved, twin-set-wearing Mother in the making. She is also the child version of the "daisy fresh" woman of the fifties for whom an adult Elaine apparently feels such utter contempt. Nevertheless, it is Carol whom Elaine first tries to emulate, and the Carol-type of woman whom Elaine spends her life envying, even while loathing. It is through Carol that Elaine first recognizes how weakness can be used as a weapon against persecution, such as the persecution by Cordelia which Elaine herself cannot escape. As Elaine explains:

Carol cries too easily and noisily, she gets carried away with her own crying. She draws attention, she can't be depended on not to tell. There's a recklessness in her, she can only be pushed just so far, she has a weak sense of honor. (*CE* 128)

Carol's emotional weakness, like Mrs. Smeath's physical weakness (her heart), has its "uses" as Elaine can see (*CE* 60). Elaine is much stronger in character than Carol. She may play the stereotypical role of the passive victim to Cordelia's overbearing victimizer, but it is, perhaps, not in Elaine's nature to be a passive-aggressive person,

using her victimization to gain sympathy or to play the martyr. She does learn to faint on cue (evoking an image of the swooning heroine of the gothic), but this tactic buys her little sympathy from Cordelia and is done mostly for purposes of escape rather than control. Elaine will neither cry nor go running to adults for help like Carol, which demonstrates her inner strength. This strength is what Cordelia recognizes instantly in Elaine (though Elaine herself cannot do so), and which she tries to feed off and eventually break. Paradoxically, it is that very strength which brings about Elaine's psychological breakdown. Had she been weak in the way Carol is, she would never have been singled out by Cordelia as a challenging object for persecution.

As an art school student, and having chosen strength—her “mean mouth”—rather than weakness as her weapon of choice, Elaine again encounters a Carol-type in Susie, one of the students in her class. A product of the late fifties/early sixties, Susie has the ‘dumb blonde’ looks, mentality, and little-girl-lost frailty of Marilyn Monroe (*CE* 300). Elaine joins the other women in the class in making contemptuous fun of Susie, who is having an affair with their married professor. Elaine's feelings of superiority over Susie crumble, however, when she herself becomes involved with the professor, and trapped in a relationship in which her already fragile identity is absorbed and recreated.

When Susie appeals to Elaine for help, Elaine goes to her apartment to find that the girl has tried to abort an unwanted fetus (*CE* 340-41). There, Elaine regards the bloody scene before her with feelings of scorn and of abandonment (*CE* 340). In Susie, Elaine unconsciously recognizes both Cordelia and, by extension, her own doomed child-Self crying out from the depths of the ravine for help, for rescue. Susie's misery and helplessness recalls her own. Because, however, she cannot yet help her Self, because she

has deliberately forgotten and turned away from that Self, she must automatically resent and hate anything or anyone that reminds her of it. When the teenaged Cordelia begins to tell Elaine the truth about her own difficult childhood—her demanding, unsympathetic mother, her verbally abusive father—Elaine, as has already been noted, quickly shuts herself off from this revelation, which she reacts to as though it is a form of attack:

A wave of blood goes up to my head, my stomach shrinks together, as if something dangerous has just missed hitting me. It's as if I've been caught stealing or telling a lie; or as if I've heard other people talking about me, saying bad things about me, behind my back. There's the same flush of shame, of guilt and terror. . . (CE 272)

Elaine says in reference to Cordelia that “the more you know about someone, the more power they have over you” (CE 278). This is an odd statement, as the normally accepted truism states that knowledge is power. For Elaine, however, this kind of knowledge is terrifying and destructive.

### viii

In “Spotty-Handed Villainesses,” Margaret Atwood makes reference to the Virgin Mary, saying that just as certain mythological or fictional evil women have been “used as sticks to beat other women,” so too the Virgin, the Christian epitome of goodness, has been used as a tool for women’s conformity, and as a source of guilt for the average, sexually-active women who can only be a sinner compared to Mary’s supernatural chastity—“better than you’ll ever be,” as Atwood describes her (12).

In *Cat's Eye*, and for Elaine, the archetypal figure of the Virgin Mary offers the attractive yet perilous possibility for salvation and escape, for an alternate persona. During the time of her vicious persecution by Cordelia, Grace and Carol, Elaine experiments with Christianity. She does this partly in an effort to appease Grace Smeath, with whom she attends church; but increasingly, through fervent prayer and devotion, she does so out of a desperate need to escape her emotional suffering and absolve her guilt over an imagined imperfection. No longer willing to pray to God, who has not answered her prayers, and with whom she can not identify in any way, Elaine decides to pray to the Virgin even though her family has no apparent religious affiliation, and the Smeaths, being Protestants, look with contempt upon any practice which smacks of Catholicism. It is Catholicism—its idolatry, its superstitions, its martyrish, fanatical ablutions, and its privileging of the Virgin in a position which rivals Christ in popularity—which awards Elaine the emotional gratification and release she needs. Elaine tries to image the Virgin Mary as an aid to prayer:

I try to picture what she would look like, if I met her on the street for instance: would she be wearing clothes like my mother's, or that blue dress and crown. . . ? (CE 197)

When, in a near-death state in the icy ravine, Elaine is seemingly rescued by the Virgin, it is as though her prayers have been answered:

I hear someone talking to me. It's like a voice calling, only very soft, as if muffled. I'm not sure I've heard it at all. I open my eyes with an effort. The person who is 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 toward me as if walking, but there's nothing for her to walk on. . . . Now she's quite close. 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 her half-opened cloak there's a glimpse of red. It's her heart, I think. It must be her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like coal.

Then I can't see her any more. But 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.*

I don't hear the words out loud, but this is what she says. (CE 202-03)

The vision, whether supernatural, imagined, dreamed, or projected by Elaine's troubled inner psyche, offers her the absolution she has sought, the release from her enslaved suffering which she has required. Indeed, it is only after this near-death 'encounter' that Elaine finds herself suddenly gifted with the epiphanous realization that her enslavement by Cordelia and the other girls was always, in part, of her own creation and perpetuation; that her desire to be accepted and loved, even to the detriment of her self-assertion and self-esteem, as much as their need to be in control, made and reinforced the chains which bound her to her wardens.

The vision of the Virgin Mary which Elaine sees, with the exposed heart, corresponds to the picture on the Sunday school card which she has found on the ground just the day before, a version of the Virgin often called Our Lady of the Sorrows or Our Lady of Perpetual Help. However, there are some distinct differences with Elaine's

Virgin: she is dressed in black, and she has no crown (*CE* 204). Elaine describes her search as an adult in Catholic churches for a statue of the Virgin which matched her childhood vision. For a while the search seemed futile: “The statues were of no one I recognized. They were dolls dressed up, insipid in blue and white, pious and lifeless” (*CE* 211). Then, in a small church in Mexico, Elaine saw her vision:

I saw the Virgin Mary. . . .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. (*CE* 212)

As Elaine discovers, this is the “Virgin of Lost Things” (*CE* 212), which explains why Elaine relates to this statue. Having blocked out all conscious memory of her childhood, Elaine is unsure as yet what exactly it is she herself has lost. Nonetheless, she feels an immediate, overwhelming emotional response: when her husband finds her, she is lying on her back before the statue in an unwitting re-enactment of her position in the ravine when the vision of the Virgin appeared before her—a position unconsciously associated with feelings of helplessness, humiliation, death and escape.

As an artist, Elaine portrays other images of the Virgin. In one painting, the Virgin has the head of a lioness and is holding Christ, a lion cub, in her lap. For Elaine, this image of the Virgin seems “more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history.” Elaine’s Virgin Mary “is fierce, alert to danger, wild. She stares levelly out at the viewer with her yellow lion’s eyes. A gnawed bone lies at her feet” (*CE* 365). In another painting, the Virgin is imaged as the modern domestic goddess “wearing a winter coat over her blue robe, . . . a purse slung over her

shoulder. . . .carrying two brown paper bags of groceries” and looking exhausted (*CE* 365).

The significance behind these two different representations of the Virgin is clear. The Virgin as a wild, potentially dangerous animal is a powerful image of womanhood, one which, as the narrator explains, is a truer portrayal than the milk sop of patriarchal creation. But as, in part, a symbolic representation of the ‘new woman’ of the then-emerging Woman’s Movement, it is not necessarily a comfortable image for Elaine. A recent initiate into a woman’s encounter group, she on the one hand admires the rage of her fellow members, who blame their personal suffering and the problems of the world on men and who scorn women who are “nukes”: part of a nuclear family. As Elaine explains:

These meetings are supposed to make you feel more powerful, and in some ways they do. Rage can move mountains. In addition, they amaze me: it’s shocking, and exciting, to hear such things from the mouths of women. I begin to think that women I have thought were stupid, or wimps, may simply have been hiding things, as I was. (*CE* 365)

On the other hand, more than feeling empowered and relieved by these fierce and somewhat feral women who have the courage to say many of the things she has been thinking, Elaine feels uneasy, an outsider. She remains reticent in these meetings, fearful as she is of saying “the wrong thing” and feeling that she has not earned the right to speak because she has not “suffered enough.” Obviously there is more at work behind Elaine’s sense of exclusion and discomfort around these women than the fact that she is a married mother:

I feel as if I'm standing outside a closed door while decisions are being made, disapproving judgments are being pronounced, inside, about me.

At the same time I want to please. (CE 365)

Elaine herself cannot explain these feelings—"These meetings make me nervous, and I don't understand why"—but this is because she has suppressed their original source: her childhood persecution by Cordelia and the others, of which the image of judgments behind a closed door is reminiscently representative. Now, as then, Elaine experiences the same feelings of unworthiness in the eyes of her severe, vindictive peers, and also the same need to be accepted, to be liked, which she can only equate with silent, agonized prostration and suffering at the alter of those she has practically raised to the status of divinities—vestal virgins who are and will always be 'better than she'll ever be.'

The second portrait of the Virgin Mary presents an alternate perspective of womanhood. In an ironic play on the Victorian, patriarchal image of the 'domestic goddess,' the Virgin is weighed down with groceries which seem to be pulling her from her elevated, ethereal position, down to the ground and the tiring toil of earthly life for the woman as domestic drudge. (Elaine appropriately entitles the portrait *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*).

These two images of women which Elaine paints—wild woman and housewife—though certainly contrasting, are not necessarily diametrically opposed as identities. They are, to a certain extent, represented in Elaine herself at this point in her life, the forces and frustrations which are continually creating, destroying, and recreating her identity. She describes herself, for instance, in the tiring role as a wife and mother, cooking and cleaning for her family, laden down with groceries as she navigates her

daughter's stroller through the slushy streets (*CE* 359); she also speaks of her "ferocious love" for her child (*CE* 360), and her increasing hatred of her husband, whose unwillingness to let her have her own, separate life as an artist, and whose expectations of a servile, passive wife send her into violent, verbally savage rages (*CE* 366).

ix

Grace's mother, Mrs. Smeath, represents another image of womanhood. With her scourged, Spartan appearance and her long-suffering, holier-than-thou manner, Mrs. Smeath becomes, in Elaine's paintings of her, a decidedly earthly incarnation of the Virgin Mary. In Elaine's memories of the woman, Mrs. Smeath is always either peeling potatoes the raw color and texture of her complexion, in a house dress and bib apron which makes her seem shapeless and sexless (*CE* 61), or lying prone on the living room chesterfield so as to rest her apparently "bad heart" (*CE* 60). As earlier mentioned, even as a child, Elaine understood the attractions of such an ailment: "Bad hearts have their uses; even I can see that" (*CE* 60); whether real or imagined, it was an excuse for escape, from responsibility, from dull, domestic duty. In this way, Mrs. Smeath symbolically and ironically embodies the Virgin Mary in her two aspects: Our Lady of Perpetual Help and—with her visibly exposed heart, often portrayed on fire, or with swords in it—Our Lady of Sorrows.

However, the symbolic significance of Mrs. Smeath is even more complex. Though seemingly a pious woman, Mrs. Smeath possesses a streak of cruel, un-Christian savagery which Elaine experiences first-hand when she overhears the woman criticizing her to a friend as a badly-raised heathen who deserves the ill-treatment she received from

Grace and Carol and Cordelia. This savagery recalls Elaine's imaging of the Virgin as a lioness; but Elaine's later portraits of Mrs. Smeath suggest something more. In one work, Mrs. Smeath is naked except for her "one-breast bib apron," and is ascending into a Heaven filled with a doily moon and Christmas-sticker angels (*CE* 90); the humorous allusion to the ascension of the Virgin Mary is clear. In another portrait, however, the image of Mrs. Smeath and the Virgin are again symbolically allied, but far from humorously: Smeath is pictured with her "bad heart" exposed, "the heart of a dying turtle: reptilian, dark-red, diseased" (*CE* 372).

Clearly, Elaine cannot forgive or forget Mrs. Smeath's unfair discrimination of her as a child, an unwarranted, inexplicable vindictiveness which was perhaps even more damaging to Elaine than that of her peers because it came from the supposedly just and impartial world of adults. Elaine cannot shake off the sense that Mrs. Smeath knows "what is wrong" with her but "isn't telling" (*CE* 358), a feeling of which she is persistently reminded by the "smug and accusing" face of Mrs. Smeath who Elaine has resurrected in her portraits in an attempt either at cathartic exorcism or flagellatory masochism.

In still another work, Mrs. Smeath is shown, again partially naked, holding a skinless potato in one hand and a "sickle-moon paring knife" in the other (*CE* 242). This image, far from suggesting the Virgin, seems to revert to an older female archetype: the Earth Goddess, revered as a goddess of both life and of death, of the lunar cycle which perpetuates both realities, a female figure who is all-powerful, omnipotent.

## x

When Elaine returns to Toronto from Vancouver for her art retrospective, Cordelia's presence becomes all the more persistent, and even visible, as a projection of Elaine's unconscious. Afraid of seeing Cordelia again and yet obsessed with imagining what would happen if she did, Elaine is everywhere haunted by the thought of Cordelia's apparition. For Elaine, Cordelia is always just around the corner, a glimpse just out of the range of her vision, a face in the crowd. The drunken bag-lady with Cordelia's green eyes (*CE* 162); the hand with the green nail polish that reaches under the dressing room door trying to steal Elaine's wallet (*CE* 46-47); the East Indian beggar-woman who asks for money (*CE* 334); the green-eyed journalist who asks Elaine too many probing questions about her past and influences as a painter (*CE* 92-95); the young sales clerk who is rude to her (*CE* 119); the teenaged waitress who treats her with bored contempt (*CE* 123)—all are incarnations of Cordelia, like hauntings, according to Elaine's distorted vision and feverish paranoia.

Elaine feels relentlessly pursued and persecuted by Cordelia but, as in "William Wilson," *The Double*, and many other classic Double stories, Elaine is also in some odd way in pursuit of her persecutor, just as she is on a deeper level in pursuit of her child-self who was persecuted. This dynamic relationship between Elaine and her Double, in all of its complexities and ambiguities, is represented in Elaine's portrait of Cordelia which, according to Elaine, is "the only picture I ever did of Cordelia, Cordelia herself" (*CE* 243). In fact, all of Elaine's paintings are of Cordelia in the same way that they are all essentially self-portraits. Elaine describes it as follows:

Half a Face it's called: an odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall. . . is another face, covered with a white cloth. The effect is of a theatrical mask. Perhaps.

I had trouble with this picture. . . . I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers. . . . But the eyes sabotaged me. They aren't strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant. . . Cordelia is afraid of me in this picture. (CE 243)

The essential meaning of the portrait is clear to the reader, though not yet to Elaine: Cordelia is incomplete ("half a face") just as Elaine is; hence, the portrait is also of Elaine. The weak, fearful eyes that Elaine has trouble with are Cordelia's, 'masked' by obstinacy and cruelty, behind layers of superficial personalities, but also express Elaine's own insecurities. Elaine's realization of all this lies on an unconscious plain of comprehension from which her paintings, like her dreams, seem directly projected, and in which her anxieties and neuroses are explored and worked out.

In the traditional Double story, the protagonist's final confrontation with and destruction of his or her Double, while necessary for the re-integration of the divided selves, typically necessitates the destruction of both. As Punter explains, "In folklore, the *doppelganger* motif, in which one meets oneself coming back as one goes forward, signifies either death or the onset of prophetic powers" (143).

In *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood pays tribute to this classic confrontation, but complicates it with interesting ambiguities which seem to evade or circumscribe a conclusive resolution. Elaine's confrontation with Cordelia happens not as she expected (with Cordelia coming to her Toronto art retrospective), but in a symbolic manner. This



confrontation, if not completely conclusive, nonetheless helps her to arrive at a clearer understanding of her relationship with Cordelia, with her past, with her lost self. Earlier, Elaine finds her Cat's Eye marble when she and her mother are sorting through the box she long ago put in the cellar, and the symbolic retrieval of the marble, representative of her lost self, enables her to begin to regain a clear, unified vision of her once fragmented past: "I look into it [the marble] and see my life entire" (*CE* 420). Through this very Proustian experience, Elaine is at once able to recall all the disturbing memories of her childhood which she has suppressed until now.

Soon after rediscovering the marble, Elaine goes back to the bridge over the ravine, the locus of her original trauma. In a scene which significantly 'mirrors' Elaine's dream about the mirror and the 'someone' standing behind her, she symbolically confronts and seemingly makes peace with the 'ghost' of Cordelia as she never could in an actual meeting:

There's a sound: a shoe against loose rock. . . .I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me along the path, someone will be standing there. At first I think it will be myself, in my old jacket, my blue knitted hat. But then I see that it's Cordelia. She's standing halfway up the hill, gazing back over her shoulder. . . .the yellowish-brown hair with the bangs falling into the eyes, the eyes grey-green. . . .I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same

loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were.

I am the older one now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here any longer 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 down, 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. (CE 442-43)

Years ago, in the past, when Elaine was a child, she was abandoned down in the ravine by Cordelia to freeze to death; later, in high school and college, Cordelia's symbolic 'cries for help' were like the cries of a child still standing on the bridge over the ravine: the feelings of guilt and shame were *hers*; now, in the present, as an adult, Elaine will not abandon Cordelia but rather will rescue her, forgive her and, in doing so, put her to rest once and for all.

Elaine's symbolic 'dispersal' of Cordelia, as of a ghost, necessitates for her the final realization that her subconscious image of Cordelia, like her Self, has been trapped in the past; that the way home for Elaine, the way to reintegrate her past Self with her present Self, is through confronting, acknowledging, and metaphorically embracing, Cordelia.

I could give her [Cordelia] something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her.

We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key. (*CE* 434)

Just as seeing her past as a unified whole required finding the Cat's Eye marble, so Elaine has come to understand the true nature of her relationship with Cordelia, which is the relationship of two halves of a whole, of the past and the present, of the Self and the Other—as a relationship of reflections in a mirror.

## CONCLUSION

The broad spectrum of identities for women which Elaine has seen, experienced and represented in her paintings—the sanctimonious aesthete, the martyrish sufferer, the household helper, the sad savior, the ferocious animal, the clothonic creator and destroyer—are the identities for which women, like Elaine, may feel contempt, fascination, identification, or fear. Whatever she feels for them, they are identities or possibilities for female identity, which women must confront and with which they must in some way contend. Elaine's representation of these identities in the symbolic language of art, embodied in the familiar yet uncanny female figures of her childhood (Cordelia, the Virgin Mary, Mrs. Smeath) is, Atwood suggests, her way of exploring these alternate aspects of womanhood and, perhaps, of blazing the path of her own identity in and through them.

Atwood has long been interested in the issue of women's identity, of the forces, societal and otherwise, which shape and contort, which reflect and distort that identity. Through Atwood's works, the reader can trace a course of an increasingly sophisticated, independently-conceived and honest theory about woman's selfhood. In her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood decried the position of women in the sixties as prettily-packaged commodities to be 'consumed' by a voracious and brutish patriarchal society. In *Surfacing*, Atwood depicted a surreal dream of a woman's escape from all societal constraints as she shucks off first civilization and then the layers of her own 'civilized' identity, to embrace the wild woman that prowls within her. With *Lady Oracle*, Atwood identified, as one of the sources of woman's conflicted identity, the traumatic and formative interplay between little girls in what was primarily a satirical attack against the female stereotypes perpetuated by the gothic romance.

With *Cat's Eye*, we see the culmination of Atwood's literary 'research' in a work which follows a woman's quest for self-realization, complicated by the reality of a society whose codes for woman's identity are owned, taught, learned by means of pain and persecution. These are codes inscribed upon women not by a brutish patriarchy, but by women themselves. Here, Atwood recognizes the tropes of vampire and Double as a window through which the reality of woman's multi-faceted identity can be viewed, or else as a cat's eye marble, the very distortions of which force the viewer to look at women and their place and function in society in a new way.

In the end, what is Atwood suggesting, through Elaine's journey of Self-discovery and recovery, about women's relationship with women? She makes it clear that women can destroy other women, but Atwood seems to believe that this destruction can also be the means by which psychological growth can occur, a vital step in the project of women to recoup and reclaim their multifaceted identity and be empowered in the process. Women can break other women; women can be pushed off bridges by other women and shatter. But those women, like Elaine, who have the inner strength and the luck to survive the fall and the sensitivity and creativity to examine the fragments of their fragmented identities, and accept them—the good, the bad, and the damaged—are the women who survive and triumph. The dream image, at the climax of *Lady Oracle*, of the protagonist's confrontation with her different Selves at the centre of the labyrinth is taken up and followed through by Atwood in *Cat's Eye* as a reality of womanhood.

Herman Hesse, in *Steppenwolf*, uses the metaphor of the many-doored "Magic Theatre" to effectively convey a sense of the many identities contained in humans, and to reject the idea of a simple inner dichotomy of Social versus Anti-Social Self, in favor of a

selfhood rich in its many aspects—not simply the wild and the tame, but many others, all legitimate, all necessary to a complete and healthy being. Atwood, in *Cat's Eye*, through the metaphors of the vampire and the Double, makes the same claim for women. Women are not limited to a virgin /whore polarity any more than men are confined to the choice between the gentleman and the wolf; they are not either “wild” or “tame,” as Elaine at first believes (*CE* 139). Women, as Elaine slowly comes to learn, contain these aspects and others. This is better than rejecting the wild aspects because they can be irrational, fierce, destructive and frightening, or rejecting the tame aspects because they are too feminine, or domestic, or nurturing (and therefore weak).

As a troubled little girl, Elaine identifies herself with the Thanksgiving turkey, an embodiment of “lost flight” (*CE* 140). At the end of Atwood’s novel, Elaine is on a plane home to Vancouver—literally and figuratively in flight. However, rather than recognizing in this final scene the traditional gothic image of the heroine in helpless ‘flight’ from a place of danger and terror, Atwood seems to be asking her reader to see gothic flight as one not away from, but *to* something, a positive flight, an image of freedom, a full realization of the kind of liberation Elaine first felt when she turned her back on her cruel childhood friends—“like stepping off a bridge”; the freedom she found at last when she turned to face the imagined ghost of Cordelia on the bridge that has been the locus of her symbolic death and rebirth, and forgave her with the magical words “You can go home.”

In the psychologically potent language of the gothic, home, the house, is the metaphor for woman, the female protagonist herself. Thus, when Elaine gives Cordelia permission to ‘go home’ she is not simply enacting the gothic scene of the expiation and

dissipation of the ghost or demon; she is welcoming back a part of her Self into herself—  
a small, rejected little girl who has been left out in the cold.



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