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Watching Women, Falling Women. Power and Dialogue in Three Novels by Margaret Atwood.

AN ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

which will, on the proper authority of the Chancellor’s Office of Umeå University for passing the doctoral examination, be publicly defended in Hörsal F, Humanisthuset on Saturday, 29 March, at 10.15.

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Abstract
This study examines the three novels Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood. It focuses on the female characters and their relationships to each other: Their friendships are formed in a patriarchally structured environment and are therefore arenas for defending and controlling the norms of such a structure. The women continually watch each other and themselves, and through the power exercise of watching, femininity is constructed. Atwood describes acts of dialogic storytelling as a means to find options to gendered behavior.

Key words: Atwood, cyborg, dialogics, dualism, falling, femininity, feminism, friendship, gender studies, literature analysis, mobility, place, power, storytelling, watching, water, women
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for my family and friends
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine and discuss the themes of the exercise of power and constructions of femininity in the three novels by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood: *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1992), and *Alias Grace* (1996). In my view, these novels clearly demonstrate Atwood's contribution to the contemporary feminist discussions of a gendered world. She furthermore explores potential alternatives to social monologue.

This dissertation deals primarily with the construction and reconstruction of the self-images and identities of the major female characters in the three works. I discuss constructions of identity from a feminist standpoint, and aspects of gender structures are accentuated. Since this work is limited to a discussion of the female characters, for reasons explained below, only constructions of femininity will be examined.¹

There will be an examination of the female characters’ relationships to each other. I aim to show how normative, patriarchal structures, in these novels, work as obstacles to relationships between women. Patriarchal structures and related value systems do not encourage friendships. On the contrary, I argue that Margaret Atwood shows that they rather actively work against them.

There is an emphasis on watching, which I regard as the major component in construing femininity. Watching equals a form of power exercise in these novels. The watcher has, in the novels, internalized a patriarchal value system. It is an intricate surveillance system, but with a simple result: the watcher constructs and the watched is constructed.

Furthermore, I will argue that what I call monologic storytelling is, in Atwood’s novels, highly important in the creation of femininity. I discuss femininity in Atwood as being a normative, traditional, and patriarchal story which is told and retold so often it become internalized and a given. In the novels, it is only possible to tell new, unconventional stories through dialogic interaction.

¹ Gender is, in short, socially, culturally and historically created as opposed to an essentialist belief that gender and sex are biologically created, and therefore inherent. For discussions, see, for example Sophia Boca and Rebecca Wright, *Introducing Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), and Roger N. Lancaster, Micaela di Leonardo, eds., *The Gender/Sexuality Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
There will be an examination of how, for whom, why, and where the gendered stories available for the female characters in *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace* are told. I will discuss the stories themselves and the consequences of seemingly telling them voluntarily. This act of storytelling has negative effects on female friendships. It is also possible to claim that the friendships — since they are formed in a patriarchal environment — have negative effects on the subjects. Furthermore, I will examine Atwood’s suggested strategies for achieving alternatives to the patterned behavior that comes with the assigned stories.

I also discuss the concepts of place and borders. The borders in Atwood’s texts, are symbolic borders of norms. These borders are imprisoning and limit the physical and psychological mobility for the female protagonists. Critic Sherill Grace observes that Margaret Atwood often places a focus in her writing on breaking “imprisoning circles;”² and I will hence explore exactly how this break and outbreak is performed in the narratives. The importance of dialogic storytelling will be stressed here. Finally, I will concentrate on a couple of important, recurring, images and discuss their relevance to the issue of femininity in the narratives. These are ‘falling’ and ‘water.’ In this introductory chapter I will briefly discuss the major concepts which run through this thesis: femininity, friendship, internalization, watching, power, storytelling, and place.

My focus on femininity and female characters is a conscious choice based on the fact that, in the Atwood world of fiction, patriarchal structures and values can be upheld independently of men. The normative scheme is internalized, mainly through the power exercise called ‘watching’ and is protected by, almost exclusively, women.

Generally speaking, the collective term “men” still often tends to represent the formation and basis of a patriarchally structured society. “Men” are often said to be the operators behind the grand machinery which organizes the way women and men are perceived, how women and men act, and even how they look. However, in two of the three novels, men have a marginal place in the narratives. They have physically little room. The female characters, on the other hand, are in focus. Even in a novel such as *Alias Grace* where the plot evolves around and within a dialogue between

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Grace Marks and her male doctor, the story has its natural focus on Grace: the woman is the subject of the story.

The friendships the women form are with other women, so it is a place seemingly devoid of men. Yet, with or without the presence of men, the structures which govern the female gender never seem to stop or slow down. Iris Marion Young notes that the “[p]atriarchal culture confines women […] to immanence. […] Whereas a man exists as a transcending subject who defines his own individual projects, patriarchal institutions require a woman to be the object for the gaze and touch of a subject […]”3 Whether men are absent or physically present, the “technologies of gender”4 as Teresa de Lauretis calls it, still make objects out of subjects. This assertion is what forms the basis of my examination, and the main reason for focusing on femininity. It is possible to claim that the objectification is impossible to escape because woman as a term and as a person is always a product of a patriarchal society. Is there something in the relationships between women that desires only victims and stereotypes? What is the impact that this patriarchal context has on these interactions? Stein writes that the issue of victimization is made complex in the writings of Atwood: “Her female protagonists experience a duality of power and victimhood, for they are all simultaneously both victims and at least potentially powerful. But social constraints deform their power, so it is often expressed in distortion or excess.”5 In my view, the issues of the complex power relations become especially clear in Cat’s Eye and The Robber Bride. Something encourages and strengthens the women’s interactions at the same time as it threatens their potential mutual and individual power. I will argue that while on the one hand a stereotypical role creates both safety and power, on the other hand the role is limited and linked to immobility, victimhood and objectification.

Objectification is a result of the exercise of power I refer to as watching. To watch is to construct and therefore objectify. The many theories surrounding the matter of watching, or “the gaze,” have been elaborated by, among others, Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, and John Berger. To have the power to watch means to have power over (a certain) behavior and appearance of the object in

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3 Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 75.
the watcher’s eye. In the eyes of a watcher, a subject becomes an object, and watching is, in this sense, similar to a subtle type of surveillance system.

Feminism and discussions of the gaze are much concerned with psychoanalysis using and re-using Freudian terms such as, of course, the gaze, as well as fetishism and the spectator. Gender politics is also closely linked to post-colonial studies. Looking is a political tool, and highly inscribed with power mechanisms, and also exists outside the psychoanalytical field. References to theorists concerned with power structures and power usage will be highlighted in this dissertation, such as Michel Foucault.

Michel Foucault sees the exercise of power in every layer of society. He emphasizes “that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist.” He continues, “Power exists only when put into action.” Foucault’s thesis is that relations of power are open-textured: they are exercised from innumerable points, not limited to one particular domain; they take a wide variety of forms and are only partially co-ordinated. Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain make clear that to Foucault, the problem of what power really is, is of secondary interest. More important, they claim, is the question of the manner in which power is exercised. Since power exists only when put into action and not as an entity on its own, the discourse of power cannot be analyzed on its own. It can only be looked at when actually practiced. In theory, power belongs to no one and to everyone. In those works by Atwood under discussion, power exercises are prevalent in the women’s friendships. My discussions will furthermore show that power is mainly exercised through active watching, which in extension leads to monologic storytelling. These two activities are closely related as

6 Laura Mulvey writes: “To summarize briefly: the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end. It does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory, which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack. […] Woman’s desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis […] Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signer for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which the man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.” Visual and Other Pleasures (London: MacMillan, 1989) 14.
8 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 786.
to what it in fact means to author someone else’s story. Watching is not only a matter of judging. It is, as Foucault says, a matter of surveillance and controlling, a shaping. From this point of view, storytelling is linked directly to the concept of watching. Or rather, it is a result of watching. The watcher has control, has power, and help control a monologically structured storytelling. Thus, watching is meant to control an unwanted behavior, and storytelling is meant to fixate a desired behavior. Both watching and monologic storytelling are means to objectify, determine, and finalize a subject.

Foucault writes: “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject:’ subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.” In an essay on feminism and Foucault’s thoughts on power, Amy Allen explores the concept, explaining that it is a term of ambiguity. To say that a person ‘has power’ can either mean that she has the capacity to do something, or that she has power over another individual. Moreover, even if we narrow down our definition of power merely to mean ‘power over another individual’, it is not clear that all relationships in which an individual has power over another are necessarily oppressive.

Hence, power can be a positive force, i.e. the ability to do something, and, on the other end of the scale, it can prove to be abusive: to control another person. Allen furthermore argues that women are not incapable of power exercise, but rather that their options are limited in a gendered society, as also will become clear in my analysis of Atwood’s novels. This study will concern itself with two types of power: the power exercised over another through watching, and the internalized power over oneself which can be termed self-watching.

As stated, in my reading of Atwood, there is an emphasis on the connection between power and watching. Not surprisingly, we find that both film and art discourses are (naturally) concerned with the issues of watching and being seen: ‘the

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10 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 420.
12 Allen 277.
gaze.’ Film theoretician Laura Mulvey sums up one of the recurring discussions: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”\textsuperscript{13} To simplify, it can be argued that the ability and power to watch render the watcher mobile while, on the other hand, the watched becomes immobile. Lisa Bloom quotes Mark Roskill’s \textit{What is Art History}: “A work of art is affected in the way in which it is seen [. . .] And if it is to give up its secrets, assuming it has some, it most often has to be worked at. Particularly if it is a great work of art, it does not spontaneously lay itself open to us.”\textsuperscript{14} It is fairly easy to see the argument’s relevance to the construction of femininity. Bloom appropriately says:

What is striking about this passage [from \textit{What is Art History}] is that both the duration of the look and the viewing process itself are construed as incontrovertibly masculinist, as evidenced by the way in which sexual difference is inscribed in the very language and formulation of the act of looking. Moreover, there is a disturbing voyeurism evoked in likening the work of art to a female body that will ultimately yield its secrets and “lay itself open.”\textsuperscript{15}

Roskill’s words signal a male watcher, a male pair of eyes. Hence, the power lies in the male’s hands (and eyes). However, the concept of watching is problematized further when the watcher is female. In Margaret Atwood’s narratives, the watcher is almost always a woman.

Art historian John Berger links together the concepts of gender construction, place, immobility and watching. Berger writes:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Mulvey 19.
\textsuperscript{15} Bloom 2.
This passage describes the woman as the watcher of herself, with a result of almost having a state which is similar to a split personality disorder. The woman is both the active watcher and the object of the gaze; she must be complacent with always being non-complacent. John Berger calls attention to two of the more prominent themes which can be detected in the Atwoodian literary societies. His thesis that “to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space” supports my repeated references to, and discussions of, ‘place’ in this dissertation. Berger thus stresses the fact that gender construction equals a limited or even arrested mobility. In the novels discussed in this dissertation, we find many references to confinement in most of the places the female characters occupy. Furthermore, Berger’s declaration that a woman “is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself” echoes the statement about watching Atwood makes in Murder in the Dark: “Watch yourself. That’s what’s mirrors are for, this story is a mirror story which rhymes with horror story, almost but not quite.” Berger expands on the question of watching and says that “[t]he surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” Margaret Atwood lets Roz in The Robber Bride almost quote Berger in the declaration: “You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur” (RB 392). The internalization of the patriarchal ‘voyeur’ in Atwood’s texts will be thoroughly expanded on in the second chapter.

In Cat’s Eye we find “The Watchbird,” which is the most observable representation of the woman who surveys another woman. The Watchbird takes its first shape in form of an advertisement in a woman’s magazine. The Watchbird is a symbol of a never-ending internalized surveillance system, which takes less obvious and visible forms in The Robber Bride and Alias Grace. I am in agreement with Molly Hite who claims that the Watchbird’s function is corrective at the same time as it guarantees the impossibility of correction, “the women are fighting a losing battle.”

17 “Place” in my reading of Atwood’s novels refer to actual physical places and also situational place. This will be discussed below.
18 Berger 47.
19 Hite, “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye”, Twentieth Century Literature (41:2, 1995): 142. Hite also writes about being watched in another novel by Atwood: Lady Oracle. Joan, the protagonist in the novel, comments: “I read two of the hymns, at random. One was about a joyous boat ride across a river to the Other Side, where loved ones were awaiting. The other was about the blessed spirits of those who’ve gone before, watching o’er us for our safety till we reach the other shore. This thought made me uncomfortable. Being told in Sunday school that God was watching you every minute of every hour had been enough, but now I had to think about all those other people I
They fight a losing battle because the Watchbird and the watched is the same person. Furthermore, they fight a losing battle due to the fact that femininity changes and rechanges through time and discourse: femininity is simultaneously a state and a process. Elaine in Cat’s Eye verbalizes this dilemma when she exclaims, “there will be no end to perfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your face or your stupid act, somebody frowning” (CE 148-149). The crux of the matter is that the “somebody” Elaine mentions is always present, because it has nested inside herself. The “voyeur” is internalized. Hite makes a connection between Atwood’s Watchbird and Michel Foucault’s writing concerning Jeremy Bentham’s prison scheme “Panopticon,” the critical analysis of a technique of surveillance of prisoners.20 The prison is constructed so that all prisoners are at all times visible, or rather, being visible is at all times possible. This is the simple reason why prisoners watch themselves: they believe they are being watched already. Foucault opens up the discourse of a prison to include any discourse. He states that this exercise of discipline cannot be identified with a particular institution because “it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise. Comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets: it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology.”21 We can, without doubt, regard the surveillance system as a corner stone in the construction of gender.

In her writing, Atwood shows that it is not only Grace Marks in Alias Grace who is a (surveyed) prisoner. The prisons may have different structures, but their function is similar. The issue of watching is connected to the issue of the subsequent discussion of “place” in my work. In the same manner as a place is safe and comfortable as long as you stay inside it, watching oneself to ensure that one acts and looks the way one is expected, has a sense of safety connected to it. Watching becomes

didn’t even know who were spying on me.” Hite says: “Here, as elsewhere, the view from Joan’s side inevitably amounts to a vision of being ‘spied on’. The side from which others watch and judge her is inevitably the side that puts her in the position of Other.” The Other Side of the Story (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 128.


double-edged: the act of being watched by others guarantees attention, and the act of watching by yourself renders a sense of active power.

Michel Foucault maintains that the great achievement of the Panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." The issue here is, thus, not actually being seen, but the conviction that one is being seen. As Foucault sums up: "Visibility is a trap." That the watcher is perceived as being invisible equals the understanding that the watcher is present everywhere. The presence of an actual watcher is not as important as the sense of the presence of a watcher. Again, the result is immobility. Foucault explains that the person who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Original pronouns)

Taking this into account, it becomes apparent that the women in the novels play a great part in their own imprisonment, their own subjugation. It is in this way that the patriarchal system, with a built-in panoptic schema, functions at its best. Therefore, the sense of a present watcher is more than just a sense; the watcher is very much present, because, as stated, he or she becomes internalized in the watched. The power to control and watch is fluid because, as Foucault emphasizes, anyone can work this apparatus of surveillance. Although Foucault is describing a plague-stricken town at the end of the 17th century, a place which is located far from the Atwoodian environments, it still has relevance to this discussion. Foucault writes: "It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place." Order is a key word throughout Foucault's discussions on surveillance. He describes a place that is itself sterile: stern walls, rigid boundaries circumscribe the place. Inside this place the individual is immobile. To me, this denotes that a place cannot have such rigid borders without the voluntary or involuntary cooperation of the subject. If the subject

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22 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.
moves outside his or her assigned, frozen role within the place, the boundaries may break. To continue this line of reasoning: to break the boundaries of a place does not necessarily imply an actual outbreak from the place, as in breaking out of a prison. On the contrary, disorder and transgressive behavior within the place is needed.

Foucault again invites other fields of theory and politics, and says that “[w]henever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used.”

The panoptic schema can, indeed, be used as a means to describe the major themes in Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace. The ‘multiplicity of individuals’ is, in the novels, a multitude of women and the ‘behavior’ imposed on them is based on femininity, that is, a feminine behavior. The surveillance technique which is the basis of the Panopticon — the Watchbird within the subject, to tie it to Atwood — is something that strongly influences characterization and themes in the novels. The internalization process starts at an early stage and affects the female characters as individuals and as a group. In Atwood’s texts, the construction of femininity is not possible, it seems, without internalization.

Due to the fact that I make a connection between femininity and ‘place,’ the issues of place and immobility will often be discussed throughout this dissertation. Sally Robinson’s claim that “if women are marginal to patriarchal culture, Woman is absolutely central” is essential in order to explain the link between femininity to place. The oppositional positions of marginality and centrality point to the fact that the organization and distribution of actual physical places are related to gender issues. In any place, any room, women are simultaneously marginalized and capitalized. Geography per se is an important field within feminist studies.

As any reader of contemporary cultural studies will recognize, the textual landscape (to invoke one of the terms in question) has long been crowded with references to borders, ground, terrains, margins, sites, zones, displacements, and placelessness, while critical activity is represented repeatedly through metaphors of mapping, traversing, locating, revisiting, and unpacking.
Obviously, places and mobility are loaded metaphors, but it must be emphasized that the term ‘place’ is not used in this study to enforce an essentialist side to feminism. As Catherine Nash explains, place can be connected to an “intuitive closeness to nature,” something which women traditionally have been said to have in contrast to men’s rationality. Even though, today, women move in other places than the sphere of the traditional, feminine home, it seems as if a place becomes marked with femininity upon entering it. There are many examples of gendered places in Atwood’s novels.

Generally speaking, “place” can include everything from a geographical, concrete place, to a more vague usage such “a place in one’s heart.” In this dissertation, “place” means both actual physical places as well as situational “places.” By situational places I mean, for example, (“the place of”) childhood. I argue it is possible to make that classification, due to the fact that what I basically look for in a place are borders. The question of borders is moreover the reason why I prefer the term place to space. In the novels, through the creation and recreation of femininity, borders of a place are produced. It is these issues of femininity that limit a place and furthermore make borders tangible. Because of the fact that one setting in the novels is a prison, it triggers a further use of the metaphor of prison for place. Sarah Sceats writes:

Extreme circumstances, in particular those involving severe restriction and incarceration, are manifestly of interest to Atwood, returning as she does to such situations in both The Handmaid’s Tale and Alias Grace — indeed, imprisonment may be taken as a metaphor for women’s condition […].

The borders of the place are rigid, and if the Watchbird stand guard as well, as in Cat’s Eye, the place becomes too small for a subject.

Susan Stanford Friedman claims that “[b]orders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrepresentation. They also invite transgression, reconciliation, and mixing.

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31 Gillian Rose writes “‘Places’ are not transparent like time-geographic ‘space,’ for example, but are laden with meanings, including the meaning attached to place by the geographer.” 43-43.
Borders protect, but they also confine.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, bell hooks uses the popular geographical terms “transgressing,” “boundaries,” “movement,” etc. hooks poignantly points out:

“To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement. Everyone I know talks about border crossing these days, as though it were a simple matter not to stay in one’s place, not to stand still. All this talk does nothing to change the reality that there are so many barriers blocking the paths that would lead us to any space of fulfillment that it is impossible to go forward if one lacks the will to transgress. And yet most of us seem to carry this will. It comes to us early in life, when we are really little beings and just learning a relationship to space. And we are taught over and over again that the only way to remain safe is to stay within fixed boundaries. Most often it is the boundary of family, community, nation.\textsuperscript{35} hooks claims that the boundaries are most often connected to ‘family, community, nation.’ In Atwood, the boundaries are, to a great extent, gendered. However, the protection and safety which hooks explains ‘we are taught’ to feel is the same. To remain within the ‘fixed boundaries’ of, for example one’s femininity in Atwood’s novels, guarantees safety.

Together with watching, internalization, and place, storytelling is another key-word in my dissertation. It can be argued that both femininity and masculinity arise from a master narrative — the master \textit{story} — of patriarchy. In Atwood’s novels, patriarchal structures and norms govern the stories of subjects.

Karen F. Stein discusses Atwood’s characters, and claims that most of the time the protagonists have the role of the “engaged witness, the reporter, the storyteller.” Stein continues to say that “telling her story is virtually a life-and-death matter […].\textsuperscript{36} Appropriately, when André Brink discusses the complexities of story, memory and construct, he takes \textit{Alias Grace} as an example:

At least three characteristics of story are relevant here, all of which have been demonstrated by Atwood’s handling of the Grace character (who herself is a mere ‘alias’): story as the outcome of a process of internalization and person-


\textsuperscript{36} Stein, 7.
Thus, Brink too, emphasizes internalization. André Brink points out that Grace is an 'alias,' as the title of the novel indicates. Grace’s position is vulnerable because she is, so to speak, stigmatized by the stories surrounding her and constructing her; she is a victim of preconceived opinions. Atwood precedes every chapter in the novel with either poetry from the Victorian period or with real references to books or newspapers. It is effective to frame fiction with other pieces of fiction or with “facts” from newspapers. The incorporation of other pieces of fiction and facts highlights the fictionality of fiction and the fictionality of what is regarded to be non-fiction. The “alias” in the title thus becomes obvious. Susanna Moodie, for example, writes: “My chief object [...] was to look at Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon her trial [...] (AG 3).” Grace has many names. She is, and has, an alias. Grace’s enclosed place renders her subject to judgments and preconceived notions of her crimes. She is the target of constant investigation, gossip and ill treatment. She is, one could say, a good story.

The protagonists in Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace are situated in various times, ages, classes, and places. In Alias Grace we find the most distant and unfamiliar place and time for a present-day reader. Margaret Atwood has stated in an interview, “we cannot help but be contemporary,” and concludes, “all fiction is about when it is written.” Even though Atwood chooses to write about Grace Marks, who lives in a nineteenth century environment, and about another woman, Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale, who lives in a future dystopian society, her texts are contemporarily situated; the issues she deals with are of immediate interest. For a reader, the different time period settings are perceived as being closely linked to her or his own time. The social constructs dealt with in these two texts are derived from, as well as reflect, the concerns of a present society. To exemplify: Alias Grace is classified as a historical novel because it is set in the past. Grace Marks did indeed exist once, and

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38 Susanna Moodie wrote Roughing It in the Bush in 1852, and it is an account of immigrant life in Canada. Atwood’s The Journals of Susanna Moodie is book of poems with Moodie as the fictional narrator.
she was convicted of a double homicide. Yet, the narrative focuses not so much on Grace Marks as a historical entity but rather — reasoning with current post-structural concerns — on Grace Marks as a story, a creation, and a construct. Or rather: stories, creations, constructs, because, in the novel, depending on who watches her, and listens to her, the interpretation, and consequent classification of her, changes.40 This is particularly striking, since more than anyone else in the Atwood gallery, Grace is confined to a socially prescribed — pre-existing — pattern. As a convict, she achieves certain characteristics from the public spectator. The fact that she is a woman who is a convict and murderer complicates the matter even more. Is she an innocent victim or a cruel murderer? What do the conventional stories say about her? Into which story does she fit?

Out of Margaret Atwood’s ten novels and countless other texts (poems, short stories, criticism, etc.), I have decided upon these specific texts since it is in these three novels that issues of patriarchy and misogyny are presented in the most complex manner. The complexity consists of the fact that patriarchal values are protected and upheld by almost only female characters.41 Considered together, Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace cover multiple aspects of female gender constructions; the ‘techno-

40 Margaret Atwood has also testified to her own (previous) view of Grace Marks, which was based on the writer Susannah Moodie’s (romantically influenced) account of Grace. For instance, see Laura Miller, “Blood and Laundry. An Interview with Margaret Atwood,” http://www.salonmagazine.com/jan97/interview 970120.html, David W. Brown, “Table Talk. An Interview with author Margaret Atwood,” Margaret Atwood, “Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For”. http://www.pneumatic.com/bookcellar/emailia/Tabletalk/atwood.html.
41 It could be argued that Atwood lays the ground for the three subsequent novels in The Handmaid’s Tale, the novel published before Cat’s Eye. The Handmaid’s Tale is the tale about a future, hyper-patriarchal society, Gilead, where women are used as breeders. The dystopian narrative emphasizes aspects of women watching women, femininity, storytelling, friendship and place. The novel discusses issues like “gender treachery” and the fact that friendships between women are considered “suspicous.” For example, Coral Ann Howells emphasizes aspects of story telling in The Handmaid’s Tale. She writes: “Offred asserts her right to tell her story. By doing so she reclaim her won private spaces of memory and desire and manages to rehabilitate the traditionally ‘feminine’ space assigned to women in Gilead,” and thus also emphasizes aspects of place. Margaret Atwood, London: Macmillan Press, 1996, 126. I believe that a similar friendship to the one between Grace and Mary Whitney in Alias Grace is found in The Handmaid’s Tale. Offred’s friend Moira is used as a tool for Offred to speak her mind. It is furthermore a violent narrative, where death is more common than birth. However, I believe that one major difference between The Handmaid’s Tale and the other three novels is the treatment of the issue of storytelling, and that is the major reason for not including The Handmaid’s Tale to any greater extent in this study. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that every word is intended for another but the words that Offred, the protagonist, leaves behind are interpreted monologically, by authoritative “experts.” Her life story thus comes to an end. That is one major difference between The Handmaid’s Tale
logies of gender.' This is because the narratives vary in their descriptions and discussions of time, place, age, and class. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the narratives depict relationships between women that at times can be provocative to the reader. There are many descriptions of women who hurt each other within the frame of a friendship. More often than not the hurtful actions form the foundation of the friendship in question.

The novels examined here will be discussed as being outspokenly feminist. Rita Felski's definition of "feminist literature" reads as "all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed."\(^4\) Hence it is a type of literature — where Cat's Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace are situated — that discusses patriarchal structures ('women's subordinate position') and questions of gender from a critical point of view.

The reader will find references to other works by Atwood for the simple reason that it would be unwise to be so rigid that I would circumscribe my own analysis, my own text. Thus, the objective here is not to claim that these three novels are completely unique and that nowhere else in Atwood's other pieces of writing can the themes I discuss be found. That would be a false statement. I find traces of my subjects of discussion in most of her writing. For this reason I have sometimes chosen epigraphs from some of her other texts to, in a way, frame Atwood with Atwood. Allusions to other texts occur within the body of my work as well.

Initially, my intention was to study the issue of "friendship/interaction between women." "Friendship" is a word that, to most, echoes harmony and mutual trust, whereas "interaction" is a more neutral term. Both friendship and interaction were and still are, to some extent, starting-points for my discussions of femininity, because the interactive relationships/friendships are all resolutely situated in a patriarchal context which more or less governs their structure and appearance. Karen F. Stein has noted: "Women's friendship is more prominent in [Cat's Eye, The Robber Bride and Alias Grace] than in previous novels."\(^4\) However, it appears that the more prominent the theme appears, the more prominent the provocation appears. As Barbara Hill Rigney

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and the three subsequent novels. And that is, in addition, the major argument for not calling the three novels dystopian.


\(^4\) Stein 86.
puts it: “Mostly men do terrible things to women in Atwood’s fictions, but increasingly and particularly in the most recent novels, women do them to each other.” The more important one woman is to another, the stronger the hurtful actions become.

Janet Todd’s *Women’s Friendship in Literature* discusses the friendship themes in canonized classics such as Jane Austen’s *Emma* and John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*. In the more recent book *In the Company of Women*, Karen Hollinger contemplates on contemporary stories about women and their relationships in film. Among other issues, she examines what she labels as “Anti-Female Friendship.” On the subject of that specific category of friendship, Hollinger explains that the women are mean to each other for various reasons but that “issues related to women’s social roles under patriarchy escape consideration.” The meanness of the female friends is not problematized, according to Hollinger. The various narratives seek simple explanations that only strengthen prejudicial opinions of women. In comparison to the “Anti-Female Friendship” Hollinger discusses, Atwood’s tales of friendships offer no simple explanations for “bad behavior.” The friendships are always contextualized and political. Atwood may use the myths surrounding, for instance the *femme fatale* of Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, but still avoids polarization between “good” and “bad,” as I will demonstrate.

In an article from 1986 — two years before *Cat’s Eye* was published — Margaret Atwood declares that “women’s friendships are now firmly on the literary map as valid and multidimensional novelistic material.” In the three texts I deal with this “multidimensionality” consists of Atwood’s refusal to simplify or idealize any female community: the idea of “best girl friends” is critically examined. In a speech from

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47 It should be noted that I do not argue that if women were to form friendships outside of patriarchal structures, their relationships would be freed from conflicts and power exercises.
48 Margaret Atwood, “That Certain Thing Called the Girlfriend.” *New York Times Book Review* 11 May, 1986, 39. Atwood chooses Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as a good example of a work of literature which deals with women’s friendship on several levels. The friendship between Sula and Nel is complex and difficult, loaded with feelings of hatred, love, jealousy, love and betrayal. Discussing the same novel, Katherine B. Payant claims that *Sula* is as much a story of about friendship as it is about the nature of evil, an idea “not often explored in the context of female behavior.” * Becoming and Bonding. Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993) 175.
1994, Atwood speculates on the fact that female characters in literature often are two-dimensional. Could it be that it is not politically correct to depict a woman behaving badly? Atwood believes that complicated — indeed, even morally and ethically questionable — aspects of women’s behavior are necessary in storytelling simply because they exist in life and thus should exist in fiction. She continues: “Women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn’t their many-dimensionality be given expression?” Consequently, the relationships between many of the characters are strained in Atwood’s fiction, and especially so in Cat’s Eye and The Robber Bride, and the stories they tell are multi-dimensional.

However, even though Margaret Atwood creates room for the “multi-dimensional” woman, naturally I do not argue that “bad” is simply synonymous with “multi-dimensional.” There is much more to her bad characters than simply evil behavior, and this will become especially clear in a discussion of the gendered structures of the “bad” characters’ assigned places and conventional stories. As I will show, the bad behavior and meanness of some characters in Atwood’s fiction can be read as Atwood’s comment on a society which is based on rigid ideas of how men and women should act.

By using the frame of a specific established genre in combination with feminist and postmodern issues like gender and identity construction, Atwood creates an alternative understanding of a specific genre, such as the thriller or the gothic novel. We can regard Atwood’s narrative structures as being, in themselves, political statements; the structure disturbs a monological view of the world. Her narratives are plural, nonlinear, and her regular use of irony makes them ambiguous. Her writing moves from one literary genre to another but a similarity of thematic elements can nevertheless be discerned. There is a link between her re/usage of genre writing and the

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50 Atwood, “Spotty-handed Villainesses.” Atwood has received some criticism for her portraits, something Jane. W. Brown has mentioned: “In attempting to create what is in effect a new genre, Atwood has endured a range of critical charges: her concerns are puerile, she has betrayed feminism, and the like.” “Constructing the Narrative of Women’s Friendship: Margaret Atwood’s Reflexive Fictions,” Literature, Interpretation, Theory, 6: 3-4 (1995) 198.
themes that are under the magnifying glass in this inquiry. For instance, it is possible to claim that, for example *The Robber Bride*, which, in Ann Heilman’s words “revises and satirises Greek myth, biblical legend, fairy tale, folklore and crime writing” uses canonical, patriarchal texts in order to transform them. In other words, Atwood employs a type of re-storytelling.

*The Robber Bride* might be regarded as a modernized, revised interpretation of the fairy-tale *The Robber-Bridegroom* by the Brothers Grimm; and *Alias Grace* is a historical novel, a fictionalized re-account of Grace Marks, a convicted murderess who lived in nineteenth century Canada. Atwood has been described as being part of a group of realist writers who, by employing postmodern techniques, subvert the norms of contemporary writing. When genres are distorted the frame of the story becomes distorted as well. Stein says that Atwood’s “texts resist closure, preferring ambiguity.” When rewriting/re-telling a genre such as the gothic in *The Robber Bride* or *Lady Oracle*, Atwood allows stagnant roles to be investigated, questioned and opened to change. From my perspective, that implies that her subject matter as well as her subjects become ambiguous.

Due to her texts’ quality of ambiguity, Atwood’s work invites many readings: feminist, post-colonial, and even nationalistic, to mention a few. Among many

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53 Furthermore, Howells points out, in Atwood’s *Interlunar* there is a poem called ‘The Robber Bridegroom,’ and it was considered by Atwood as a potential title for her novel *Bodily Harm*. It seems as if aspects of *The Robber Bride* have been in progress for some time. 65.
54 See, for example, Margaret Atwood, *In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction* (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1997).
56 Stein xii.
57 In relation to the novel *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood mentions what she calls “the perils of Gothic thinking.” She explains that when one has a certain scenario in mind which involves specific roles, and then goes “to real life, you tend to cast real people in these roles. (...) Then when you find out that the real people don’t fit these two-dimensional roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real person or discard the real person.” *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed., Earl G. Ingersoll (1990, London: Virago, 1992) 64. Coral Ann Howells’ *Margaret Atwood* discusses, among other things, the Gothic aspects of *Lady Oracle, Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. *Cat’s Eye* is, according to Howells, a gothic novel where “the protagonist is haunted by the past and by her doppelganger Cordelia.” 64.
58 On the subject of nationalism, Rosemary Sullivan’s writes in the “not-biography” of Margaret Atwood, *The Red Shoes*, that “Margaret Atwood began her career when Canadians were still in the deep-freeze of colonialism and only beginning to think of themselves as having a culture.” Rosemary Sulli-
books and articles of analysis and criticism on the works of Atwood, a few have directly inspired this dissertation. Sharon Rose Wilson’s book from 1993, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-tale Sexual Politics*, discusses Atwood’s recurrent play with and use of fairy tale motifs in her otherwise realistic narratives. My discussions of storytelling stem from Wilson’s assertion that Atwood’s revision of fairy tales is a manner of depicting characters that are locked into pre-existing patterns. In other words, the traditional fairy tales might be monological, but Atwood makes them dialogical. Wilson’s book is, in the author’s own words a serious attempt to “offer a new reading of the Atwood canon and a fresh appreciation of fairy tales.” She furthermore claims that fairy tales *per se* are the most important intertext in Atwood’s works. Wilson argues that Atwood’s “fabulist” qualities [which are to a larger extent visible in *Cat’s Eye* than in other texts], do not make her writing less political in any way, because “[a]ll products of culture are, of course, ideological.” Wilson labels Atwood a “feminist postcolonialist” or a “postcolonial feminist.” Wilson’s lengthy analysis include interpretations of Atwood’s visual art in addition to her literary works. On the subject of *Cat’s Eye*, Wilson also highlights the theme of vision/watching:

> Because Elaine is a visual artist, the development of her identity or ‘I’ is even more dependent upon the development of her vision, her ‘eye,’ than in Atwood’s earlier works. In *Cat’s Eye* the main fairy-tale intertexts, the Grimms’ ‘Rapunzel’ and Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen,’ illuminate the ‘eye-I’ imagery.

Wilson says that Elaine “goes ‘blind.’ She symbolically adopts an unseeing glass eye, [...] and adopts Snow Queen vision, thereby choosing to freeze.” The Snow Queen, for Wilson, is symbolic of narcissism and alienation “with images of mirrors, ice, and snow.”

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van, *The Red Shoes*. Margaret Atwood starting Out (Toronto: HarperFlamingoCanada, 1998) 9. Hilde Staels’ *Margaret Atwood’s Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse* begins with the claim that Atwood “is undoubtly Canada’s most successful poet, novelist, short-story teller and critic.” In her volume, Staels provides the reader with thorough analyses of Atwood’s novels, from *The Edible Woman* — which Staels calls a “prototext” — to *The Robber Bride*. Staels focuses on themes of women’s colonization as well as the nation’s.

60 Wilson 6.
62 Wilson 296.
63 Wilson 308-309.
64 Wilson 302.
However, it is Molly Hite’s articles on *Cat’s Eye* — “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*” and “An Eye for an I: The Disciplinary Society in *Cat’s Eye*” — which are most crucial for this study. Hite compares *Cat’s Eye* to *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

*The Handmaid’s Tale* was built on the observation that the implications of culturally constructed femininity, even femininity as constructed by a relatively liberal society, can be used in extremity to justify organizing women into slave casts based on various roles retroactively attributed to biology. *Cat’s Eye* shows the more subtle means by which the relatively liberal society both marginalizes middle-class girls as a group and individualizes each girl, making her responsible for her own marginalization.

Molly Hite opened up my eyes regarding the application of Foucault’s Panopticon to *Cat’s Eye*. In addition, I find her approach pertinent to the remaining novels in this study as well. The internalized surveillance system Hite sees in *Cat’s Eye*, I see in *The Robber Bride* and in *Alias Grace* as well, thus reflecting a strong ideological comment on Atwood’s part.

Chapter One introduces some of the major theories which frame my dissertation. Firstly, I will briefly discuss a few theoretical approaches to gender. For example, the issue of dualism and the theories of Donna Haraway will be highlighted here. Then I will explain my use of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories concerning the dialogic word.

Chapter Two discusses how femininity in Atwood’s novels is constructed and re-constructed through monologic storytelling and watching. Due to the factor of internalization, Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* is not the only prisoner in Atwood’s fiction. Even though *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace* are different narratives I discern a focus on, and a repetition of, thematic elements. I find that these themes become acutely emphasized when they exist in distinct narratives. The characters are subject to similar constraints in their experiences. They are labeled, and accordingly label themselves; “Girl” when they are children and “Woman” in their adult lives. They are all involved in the becoming of the female gender. This is the reason why I


have chosen to treat the novels in a parallel manner in this chapter. Instead, I make
thematic divisions into, for example, monologic storytelling, immobility and watch-
ing. I draw upon the theories of John Berger, Michel Foucault, and Linda McDowell,
among others.

In Chapter Three, as opposed to the second chapter, I examine each character’s
individual strategies to find mobility as subjects within their assigned and bordered
places. The importance of dialogic interaction will be stressed. The theme of story-
telling is expanded here. However, as the example of Grace shows, instead of being
defined by other’s stories they participate in the storytelling by sharing and exchang-
ing stories.

I will thus, broadly speaking, explore the manner in which they move from a
monological and stagnant subject position to a dialogic mobile self. Hence in this sec-
tion I will shift my ground to incorporate theorists who deal with aspects of inter-
action that seem valuable to my study: Mikhail Bakhtin and Donna Haraway, among
others.

Chapter Four discusses a couple of recurring images found in the three texts:
“falling” and “water.” This chapter is linked to both the second and the third chapter,
because “falling” and “water” are connected to both restrictions of femininity and to
liberating movements outside of femininity.
CHAPTER ONE: A THEORETICAL FRAME

My investigation of Atwood’s three novels is, throughout, encircled by certain helpful, theoretical voices. Postmodernist feminism rejects the idea of a master narrative, and it seems to me impossible to claim that any single narrative or theoretical voice can provide the various approaches I want to use. As indicated, several rather distinct approaches will be employed, when an altering perspective on the texts is necessary. My interpretation and development of theory thus involve dialogic shifts from one Atwoodian context to another, as clarification demands.

To distinguish the theories I am going to apply I have divided the chapter into three sections. In the two first parts I have gathered various theoretical voices under key word headings, “A Dualistic Base” and “Mobility,” which in turn both summarize and connect the theoretical approaches to the question of construing femininity. These two sections furthermore link back to, and expand, the discussions of watching and power from the introductory chapter. The last section — “Mikhail Bakhtin and Dialogics” — is an attempt to explain in what way I employ dialogics and a few other terms coined and developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in analyzing the Atwood’s texts.

A DUALISTIC BASE

Drawing on an essay by Virginia Woolf, Sally Robinson points out that “if women are marginal to patriarchal culture, Woman is absolutely central.”\(^1\) Robinson’s statement points to the paradoxical but indispensable foundation of a patriarchal system: women are simultaneously marginalized and capitalized. The term patriarchy, writes Linda McDowell, in the most basic sense “refers to the law of the father, the social control that men as fathers hold over their wives and daughters.” She continues: “In its more specific usage within feminist scholarship, patriarchy refers to the system in which men as a group are constructed as superior to women as a group and so assumed to

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have authority over them.”

The patriarchal system, its rules and regulations — unwritten or not — and its consequences are distinct themes in the novels by Margaret Atwood. In her novels we find portraits of women who are concurrently in the center of (a powerful and judgmental) attention and yet remain powerless in terms of arrested or limited mobility.

Whether or not the issue of mobility might be a question which unites one woman with another, due to aspects of ethnicity, class, and age, etc., discussions concerning whether one should and can use the collective and universal terms Woman and Women at all, are at the heart of feminist and gender studies. Judith Butler maintains that the subject of feminism, which is “the category of ‘women’ is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.”

Judith Grant further explains that:

[t]he category woman has become one of the most foundational if contentious ones in contemporary feminist theory. The category derives from an early feminist notion that women are oppressed not by virtue of their class and race, but simply by the fact of their womanhood. That is, women are oppressed as women. (Original emphasis)

Women’s oppression is therefore based on their female sex. It is undoubtedly a superficial motivation for any oppression, but as in the similar case of racism, sexism has a “simple” ground in a belief in a cursory dualistic value system which, however, is frequently contested by many. Despite the on-going challenge of the political system of duality, the world seems to be structured around it. As Teresa de Lauretis makes clear: “The historical fact of gender, the fact that it exists in social reality, that it has concrete existence in cultural forms and actual weight in social relations, makes gender a political issue that cannot be wished away […].” She continues, “we [cannot] deny that precisely such a process finally positions women and men in an antagonistic and asymmetrical position.”

It might seem contradictory to use a term like process to de-
scribe the creation of gender, when the result of this creation appears to be rigid and
locked positions, which being static, are far being akin to a ‘process.’ Rita Felski uses
the word “process” in connection to gender as well and explains the logic of that word
usage: “Gender is continually in process, an identity that is performed and actualized
over time within given social constraints.” If we compare Alias Grace, and the Victo-
rian ideal of femininity depicted there, with The Robber Bride’s descriptions of a
more contemporary femininity, we can observe those periods’ various traditional sto-
ries of femininity, their differences as well as their similarities. The process is cer-
tainly a process, which means that femininity is performed and re-performed, defined
and redefined, so the goal of the process is not mobility per se. On the contrary, it is
inflexible classification, invoking once again de Lauretis’s words ‘antagonistic and
asymmetrical position.’

Judith Grant lists some of the classical divisions of femininity and masculinity.

- Women are sexually attracted to men and vice versa. (It follows that sexual
practices connected to reproduction are considered the most ‘normal.’)
- Women are smaller than men.
- Women are more passive than men.
- Women are not as good at thinking abstractly as men.
- Women are more emotional than men.
- Women are nurturing, caring, generally most fit to parent.

Judging from this list, it is observable, as Grant also points out, that the genders are
perceived as being (only) two, with heterosexuality as the norm. Both the female and
male genders have different characteristics in different times and places, which is ob-
servable, for instance, in a comparison of The Robber Bride and Alias Grace. Con-
clusively — and which is obvious from a glance at the above list — it is justified to
claim that “the attributes of femininity are less highly valued than those of masculin-
ity.” In an effort to summarize it is possible to claim that the objective as well as the
foundation of the master narrative called patriarchy is that the categories of women

21.
7 Grant 164.
8 McDowell 11.
and men must be situated opposite each other on a sliding scale, where masculinity is deemed superior to femininity. This is perhaps basic knowledge, but still needs repeating, and is supported by, for example, historical and contemporary facts related to power structures and power distribution. Linda McDowell says: “In advanced industrial societies there are several ways in which [the] superiority and control [of a patriarchal system] is constructed and enforced: through the legal system for instance, in the tax and social security systems, as well as through everyday attitudes and behaviours.”

The border between femininity and masculinity is, in short, historically, socially and culturally construed. The genders are “the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations,’ in Foucault’s words, by the deployment of ‘a complex political technology.’” Echoing Felski and Grant, Linda McDowell explains that [t]he subject, it is argued, rather than being a fixed and stable entity which enters into social relations with its gender in place, is always fluid and provisional, in the process of becoming. Gender is constructed and maintained through discourse and everyday actions.

In conclusion, “process” is emphasized in contemporary discussions about gender construction. In Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace the femininity of the female characters is construed and maintained through various means. Atwood’s stories of femininity are descriptions of the seemingly contradictory fact that constructions of gender equal a process, and the process changes through time and discourse. Linda McDowell refers to the patriarchal discourse, which is in turn born out of, and finds support and substantiation in, a dualistic belief. As previously mentioned the binary components are compared and deemed oppositional and even antagonistic. Donna Haraway states that the belief and practice of dualism are used as power tools, to dominate all “whose task is to mirror the self,” and mentions “women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals.” She lists the major, most problematic dualisms as being, among others, self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civi-

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9 McDowell 13.
11 McDowell 22.
12 Haraway 177.
lized/primitive, reality/appearance, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, and God/man. Foucault also emphasizes the impact of dualism:

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.) (Original pronouns.)

Without the very tangible practice of dualism, surveillance is impossible. If the boundaries between subjects are blurred how can it be possible to tell who should be surveyed? In order to maintain the hierarchical system a decision must be made and the decision must be based on a simplified solution.

**MOBILITY**

Donna Haraway has developed her own field, which can be termed cyborg feminism. The cyborg approach is a response to the traditional master narratives such as capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, because it “has no origin story in the Western sense.” Her cyborg feminism can be utilized as an approach used to come to grips with the surveillance system, a politics of dualism, and the multiple limitations of a gendered society. Haraway employs the metaphor of a cyborg and sees it as a post-modern, feminist approach to the much-contested binary of “woman/man.” Haraway envisions a post-gender world where cyborgs take the place of categorized women and men. She continues to say that the cyborg is a “hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” The main cyborg characteristic is a resistance to being defined, and is therefore impossible to dominate. Haraway declares that “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream

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13 Haraway 177.
15 Haraway 150.
16 Haraway 149.
not of a common language, but a powerful infidel heteroglossia.”¹⁷ Even though it is possible to define what we mean by a binary system see, it is still, in Haraway’s choice of words, a ‘maze,’ suggesting that it is less easy to escape from. Cyborg feminists are involved in the struggle against “any more natural matrix of unity” and argue that “no construction is whole.”¹⁸ The cyborg is a provocative, postmodern mixture of fact and fantastic fiction, a transgressor of boundaries. Hence, one key word in Haraway’s philosophy is mobility. It should be stressed that mobility is not necessarily a literal mobility. Donna Haraway writes:

A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the impossibility of innocent ‘identity’ politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot ‘be’ either a cell or molecule — or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on, — if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. ‘Being’ is much more problematic and contingent.¹⁹

If the categorization of subjects is abandoned, then the usage of dualism will naturally die out. Or, if the usage of dualism is rejected, categorization is difficult. As Haraway states, ‘being’ is highly complex and therefore cannot and should not be pinned down, or explained in the use of one label/word or another. One way to abandon categorization/dualism is, Haraway proposes, to ‘retell’ the old myths, one of them being the myth of patriarchy. To retell the myths and stories means to subvert them, to go against the norm, “the code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.”²⁰ She explains:

The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myth of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse.²¹

Haraway calls the process of gender construction a type of colonization, where femininity and masculinity are the result of this political, rigid hierarchy.

¹⁷ Haraway 181.
¹⁸ Haraway 157.
¹⁹ Haraway 192.
²⁰ Haraway 176.
²¹ Haraway 175.
The character of Zenia is one of the most complex characterizations in the novels. She is, on the one hand, a dream woman, who comes across as being so feminine that she borders on parody. She originates in the patriarchal, conventional stories of Woman. However, her ability to move in and out of traditional stories of femininity and reconstruct them, can be interpreted through a cyborg reading. The story she tells the other women is always in the plural which makes her doublesided. Zenia’s roots in the myth about Woman, and the following transgression of the norms which transcends Woman, will be explained in the light of cyborg feminism. In the novels, Zenia represents subjectivity based on unfinalizability and endless mobility.

Rosi Braidotti employs the well-known image of a nomad in her view of contemporary subjectivity. Braidotti’s theories of nomadism emphasize the question of place and immobility/mobility. Braidotti furthermore stresses the fact that mobility need not be actual mobility, going from one geographical point to a new destination. A nomadic subject is a subject who moves, who is not locked in any one position or place. Braidotti writes that the nomad is her “own figuration of a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular.”

The issue of dualism is equally at the center of this discussion. Rosi Braidotti’s terminology is harsh as she explains that to be nomadic means to move “beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely monological mental habits of phallocentrism.” Earlier I stated, quoting Haraway, that a mobile positioning is a precondition for a new subjectivity. The major link between Haraway and Braidotti is that of mobility. Braidotti explains that in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari, nomadism dissolves a “notion of a center and consequently of originary sites or authentic identities of any kind.” Braidotti makes clear that the intellectual attitude to mobility supersedes actual moving:

[...] The nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. Not all

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23 Braidotti 2.
24 Braidotti connects Deleuze and Guattari with Donna Haraway. She writes: “The rhizome is a root that grows underground, sideways; Deleuze plays it against the linear roots of trees. By extension, it is ‘as if’ the rizomatic mode expressed a nonphallogocentric way of thinking: secret, lateral, spreading, as opposed to the visible, vertical ramifications of Western trees of knowledge. By extension, the rhizome stands for a nomadic political ontology that, not unlike Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg.’
25 Braidotti 5.
nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling.  

Again, it seems that to break out of the boundaries of a place is not as significant to the subversion of gender structures as a breach within the boundaries of a place. Using Zenia as an example of a border breaker, her breakage is a combination of mobility outside and inside the boundaries of a place. When her stories meet, and are combined with, the other women’s stories, their stories change from within their specific place/s.

The principal keyword, in both the creation and structure of femininity, and the abandonment of such dualistic structuring of human subjects is process. It may seem contradictory, but as Donna Haraway reminds us: “being is [...] problematic.” The process inherent in construing the genders is pre-determined. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous words are again highly poignant: “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” The process works only within the constrictive parameters of a politics of dualism. In this conception, women are always subjugated, and are unavoidably already inferior to men. The Victorian value system in Alias Grace guides another type of femininity than the twentieth century ideals of women in Cat’s Eye and The Robber Bride. But as I will point out, the processes are so very cognate that the three novels can be treated as one text.

The process discussed by Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti —the retelling of old myths and stories and the subversion of set conventions — emphasizes indecisiveness and ambiguity. The dualistic basis of the genders has been dismantled, crushed, and the result is a mobile subjectivity. It is a subjectivity which cannot be defined and fixated within a place, or within a story. In conclusion, I locate two types of (opposite) processes in Atwood’s texts. The first process is the creation of the genders, and the second one is connected to a re-watching of the place/s, and a re-telling of stories.

The mobile process is not a lonely project. It is certainly unwatched by Watchbirds. Instead, the monological storytelling of another subject is replaced by a co-authoring, or a co-watching, if you will. To me, Haraway’s dream of a “powerful infidel heteroglossia” does not infer a solitary being and isolated self-storytelling. The

26 Braidotti 5.
contrary is true, as heteroglossia as a term implies a mixture of languages, and therefore a multitude of voices takes part in the storytelling. The infidel component of it is the political aspect. It is both an acceptance of other voices as well as a rejection and reversion of "the original myths."

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND DIALOGICS

I employ Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic ideas continually in connection/dialogue with another approach, which, in turn, is mostly feminist in one way or another. However, since dialogics will appear throughout the text used both to describe the creation of femininity, and, above all, to describe attempts to reconstruct femininity, I have chosen to discuss Bakhtin’s ideas under a separate heading in this chapter.27

Indeed, the use of not one, but many, diverse theoretical approaches seems opposite to any discussion that is partially influenced by gender studies and postmodernism. On the subject of Bakhtin’s work, Carla Kaplan mentions that “[i]n literary and cultural studies, the model of cultural conversation that has proved most influential has clearly been that of Mikhail Bakhtin.”28 Bakhtin’s ideas of multiple voices have opened up ways to integrate various fields of studies simultaneously, as the same ideas imply that many approaches to one single field of study is possible, sand necessary.

In a way, it could be argued that Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of language can be seen to have been the beginning of these theories, one example being postmodernism. Bakhtin says, “However monological the utterance may be (for example, a scientific or philosophical treatise), however much it may concentrate on its own object, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic.”29 Any thought (utterance) Bakhtin claims, whether philosophical, artistic or scientific, is created in a process of both interaction and struggle with others’

27 Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories have been applied to Atwood’s writing in the past. For example, see Sue Vice, Introducing Bakhtin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997). Vice discusses Atwood’s early novel The Edible Woman as being polyphonic.
thoughts.\(^{30}\) This is also why it is fairly comfortable to combine other voices with Bakhtin’s own in a discussion of, for example, a literary piece of work. His theories were intended to provoke interpretations and answers.\(^{31}\) It is possible that he would have called this usage a living discourse and an on-going dialogue since his claim is that it is not possible to say the last word about anything.\(^{32}\)

My application of dialogics to a study of the novels by Margaret Atwood can be said to be a kind of translation (of translations) because it is a response to, and product of, his ideas. For example, a usage of Donna Haraway’s cyborg philosophy can expand dialogics and add the issue of gender to the dialogic concept. On the subject of translation, Caryl Emerson writes, “to translate [is] never to betray; on the contrary, translation, broadly conceived, [is] for [Bakhtin] the essence of all human communication. Crossing language boundaries [is] perhaps the most fundamental of human acts.”\(^{33}\) Translation, then, can be viewed as one form of dialogics.

One way of describing the much-used term “dialogic” is simply to explain it as being a linguistic dialogue. However, Sue Vice explains that dialogics refers mainly to ‘double-voicedness’ or ‘double-wordedness’ more than it refers to dialogue.\(^{34}\) It is difficult, and perhaps somewhat immaterial, to settle with one single definition of the term because Bakhtin himself used it in a wide variety of ways, from discussing novelistic language to defining language per se. In a novel, dialogics can be seen as a type of intertextuality, a mixture of languages (heteroglossia), where languages from a non-literary arena are brought into a literary context. The result is that words constantly change, provoke, and transform in an on-going dialogue, opening up new world views.

A dialogic act does not necessarily require an oral, or linguistic voice. For example, Bakhtin discusses the possibilities of dialogic relationships between different

\(^{30}\) Bakhtin, 1986. 92.

\(^{31}\) Editors Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson argue: “A number of recent thinkers have responded dialogically to him, either by extending his ideas into areas he did not consider, or by challenging the conclusions he draws from his own premises. By ‘extensions’ we do not mean mere ‘applications’; […]. Rather, each thinks with Bakhtin’s ideas, and sheds light on current problems. As Bakhtin observed, agreement, too, is a dialogic relation. And disagreement can be something other than an empty rejection.” Rethinking Bakhtin. Extensions and Challenges (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989) 4.

\(^{32}\) This is emphasized by David Lodge in After Bakhtin: Essay on Fiction and Criticism (London: Routledge, 1990) 94.

\(^{33}\) Caryl Emerson, “Editor’s Preface” in Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, ed. and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota, 1984) xxxi.

\(^{34}\) Vice 45.
art forms. Moreover, he stresses that dialogic relationships appear not only in what is said but also between what is merely assumed by addressee. In a closed dialogic situation, which translates into what I refer to as a monologic situation, the assumptions made by the addresser and/or addressee decide the outcome of the dialogue. In an open, ideal dialogic situation the outcome is open-ended, perhaps even never-ending. In the introduction, I discussed monologic storytelling, which, it could be argued, is an example of a monologic situation. The assumptions made by the addresser and/or addressee turn the other subject into an object, as exemplified by, for example, Dr. Jordan’s meetings with Grace Marks in Alias Grace.

What active dialogics demands is the participation of at least two consciousnesses, since an isolated “I” cannot develop a full picture of the self. However, a full picture does not signify a complete picture. Bakhtin describes how consciousnesses of other people cannot — should not — be analyzed or defined. He explains that on the contrary, one can only think about them and relate to them dialogically.

Bakhtin mentions what he calls “nonself-sufficiency:”

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a thou). (Original emphasis)

This quotation forms the basis of my discussions of the dialogic relationships detected in Atwood’s novels. I aim to show how isolation of the female subjects negatively affects them, and how dialogic intercourse with other subjects helps them see themselves from other perspectives than the one required. The characters make use of heteroglossia in every meaning of the word. Heteroglossia implies a confrontation and conflict between various discourses, various voices, various acts. Bakhtin says that an act need not be verbal; it is any act performed by an individual. In connection to the discussion of the performance of an act, Pam Morris explains that an act which is performed “constitutes an ‘answer’ to the world. An act is both a response to previous

35 Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 185.
37 Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 68.
38 Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 287.
acts, and an anticipation of future acts.”

Thus, an act is, as is a word, dialogical, and I will show these dialogic acts in, above all, different art forms that are explored and exercised in the novels.

Bakhtin sees isolation as a loss of the self. Yet, he does not argue for a subject’s complete consolidation with another voice. A distance is needed, or an “outsidedness,” as he calls it. Pam Morris explains that “[o]utsidedness is that quality which I as a ‘self’ bring to my perception of the ‘other,’ and which enables me to complete the other as an existence, by completing the other’s perception of his or her self.” This form of outsidedness must be contrasted with surveillance, watching, where one subject is truly “outside” another. The outsidedness Bakhtin argues for is not determined or shaped by a power relation. The outsidedness gives power to both participants, it does not diminish one of them into an object. They are, in a way, co-workers, or co-builders of their own and each other’s subjectivities.

Bakhtin insists that contrariety is crucial: “What would I gain were another to fuse with me? He would see and know what I already see and know, he would only repeat in himself the inescapable closed circle of my own life: let him rather remain outside me. (original pronouns)” I argue that ‘outside’ in this context can be translated into ‘beside,’ ‘moving toward’ or even ‘meeting.’ There lies an impossibility in the idea that subjects can develop and grow without a certain distance between the interlocutors. This reasoning can be summarized with the help of two words: co-existence and interaction. ‘Coexistence,’ then, implies that it is impossible to define and finalize another subject. An addressee is always on the same level — yet with an ‘outsidedness’ — as the addressee; in a dialogic meeting, the addressee uses an un-authoritative and nonmonologic voice. ‘Interaction’ means that a word is shared by the voices in the dialogue. Bakhtin argues that the

word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. [...] A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my ad-

40 In my later discussions in the following chapters, I will use the words “voice” and “word” when referring to a participation in a dialogic interchange. Instead of “consciousnesses” I will use “voices” and “words” even though I am not always referring to a spoken dialogue.
41 Morris 250.
dressee. A word is a territory shared by both addressee and addressee, by the speaker and his [sic] interlocutor. (Original emphases)\(^{33}\)

Bakhtin explains that a ‘word’ can be called an ‘utterance’. This is an often-used term and is one of the fundamental ingredients of the dialogic imagination. Bakhtin writes that “[e]very utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ [...] and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia [...]”\(^{44}\) It is thus opposing languages that meet and blend. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist define an utterance as being either spoken or written, and always expressed from a point of view.\(^{45}\)

That a subject cannot and should not be finalized can be said to be a response to a dualistic worldview; it implies mobility, a ‘non-finalizability.’ As stated, a mobile subjectivity is on the feminist agenda as well. Throughout this study, I present Bakhtin’s dialogics within a feminist context, because I see that there is a great potentiality for feminist voices in his dialogic imagination. The (dialogic) interaction with other subjects leads to mobility and a desire to be non-finalized. Dialogics is a recognition and appreciation of non-essentialism (and, postmodernism, if you will); human beings cannot be defined or finalized — as they are by essentialist discourses — because one word is not valued more highly than another word. This means that a constant exchange of words and ideas are floating to and fro between interlocutors and this floating mobility excludes monologism. Lynne Pearce argues that the answer to the question of why a writer who never discussed gender would appeal at all to feminist studies lies in the word dialogics itself. It has turned out as being crucial for feminists, regardless of the kind of debate they are involved in. It is a concept evocative of “the perpetual negotiations of sameness and difference.”\(^{46}\)

When discussing a feminist dialogics, Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry explain that the goal of feminism is not to bring into being a reversal of the patriarchal voice

but to create a feminist dialogics that recognizes power and discourse as indivisible, monologism as a model of ideological dominance, and narrative as inherently multivocal, as a form of cultural resistance that celebrates the dialogic


\(^{45}\) Clark and Holquist 10.

\(^{46}\) Pearce 100.
voice that speaks with many tongues, which incorporates multiple voices of the cultured web.\textsuperscript{47}

Monologism implies that words may indeed be heard, but that responses are not needed, or even wanted, because then the power relation is lost. Instead an emphasis should be placed on multivocality which then opens up the possibilities for a movement towards inclusion and acceptance: the opposite of a monologically structured society.\textsuperscript{48} As Patricia Yaeger suggests, “the ‘dialogic imagination’ describes some of the most radical — and necessary — moments within feminist thinking.”\textsuperscript{49} The radical and necessary moments consist in acknowledging the multivocality of women, realizing that differences in female communities do exist, and that differences are what make female communities progressive. A ‘single-voicedness’ in any context will always and only tell just one side of the story. One of the advantages of multivocality can be said to be an amount of uncertainty concerning the outcome of a dialogue.

However, dialogics in a feminist context is not achieved overnight and not without struggle. Clark and Holquist argue that to move from a monologic to a dialogic view of the world, and subsequent movement of its subjects, “is to make a move almost as great as that from a heliocentric to a Copernican world view.”\textsuperscript{50} The context/worldview is quite resolutely based on dualism, and dialogics cannot exist outside of the reigning political structures.

Therefore Bakhtin, as for instance Michel Foucault, has received criticism for not dealing with power relations caused by gender constructions. Dale Bauer suggests that Bakhtin has a romantic notion of a dialogic world and that he furthermore does not appreciate any power battles between voices. However, even though Bakhtin does not specifically mention ‘power’ or ‘battle,’ he repeatedly refers to ‘struggle’ and ‘difference.’ Both of these terms are expandable and applicable to the feminist and gender criticism that aspires to move away from monologic, authoritative discourse, patriarchal or otherwise. Lynne Pearce comments on these problems regarding struggle for authority and states that power is, indeed, significant when we talk about any kind of dialogue, and that we, as feminists, cannot forget that dialogues seldom take place

\textsuperscript{48} Bauer and McKinstry 4
\textsuperscript{49} Patricia Yaeger, “Afterword,” in Bauer and McKinstry 241.
between equal participants.\textsuperscript{51} This issue becomes extremely complicated in the novels by Margaret Atwood. Aside from the relationship between Grace and Dr. Jordan, most meetings are between women. In a situation where the Watchbird has been internalized, the gender(s) of the participants are of less importance. Uneven power relations still form most forms of interaction, due to the rigid constructions of femininity and masculinity, and thus rendering the interaction monologic. As Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow claim:

\begin{quote}
[...\:] Bakhtin is accessible and valuable to feminism not only in terms of his philosophy, which is specifically directed at celebrating, highlighting, bringing to the fore the vitalizing force of dialogism — that is, the incorporation and interweaving of various voices to create a sum far greater and more generative than the parts — but even in terms of his form.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

That all subjects — men, women, etc. — are treated as potential participants in a dialogic event, world, situation, approach or whatever we choose to call it can be seen in Bakhtin’s term ‘heteroglossia,’ discussed earlier. Bakhtin refers to heteroglossia time and again. It is in a heteroglossic world that utterances take place, and it is in a heteroglossic world that various discourses meet, which in turn means that voices from various points of view and strata come together dialogically. Denise Heikinen suggests that:

\begin{quote}
[...\:] though Bakhtin never specifically referred to a gendered world in his many descriptions of heteroglossia, he also seldom defined any word too definitely, preferring more general terms such as official, government, or religious language. He might have unconsciously avoided using a word such as feminism, believing that all ‘ism’ words indicated what Milan Kundera calls ‘totalitarian kitsch’, an ‘acceptance of a categorical agreement of being.’[...\:] For Bakhtin this results in a breakdown of dialogue, which by its interplay of words should encourage change, potential, flux, becoming, emerging — rather than stasis.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Thus, the dialogic moments lead subjects away from stasis and ‘totalitarian’ definitions. The dialogic moments encourage and provoke subjects, in struggle or under-

\textsuperscript{50} Clark and Holquist 244 - 245
\textsuperscript{51} Pearce 102.
\textsuperscript{53} Denise Heikinen, “Is Bakhtin a Feminist or Just Another Dead White Male? A Celebration of Possibilities in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman,*” in Hohne and Wussow 116.
standing, to constantly grow and change. It seems fair to say that the differences between people — the differences between addressee and addressee — are the prerequisite of a dialogic relation. Differences and anomalies must be recognized as well as encouraged. If we link this to cyborg feminism, the new stories which will be told if the old ones are re-told is a definite opening towards a dialogic worldview.

Bakhtin does not specifically mention male or female voices, but points toward ‘human culture:’

I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or in other semiotic materials).54

The recognition of the variety and necessity of a multitude of voices, together with various other ideas link Bakhtin to present day thinkers such as Donna Haraway, or anyone involved with post-colonial studies. For example, I mentioned earlier that Haraway argues for a new way of regarding subjects and subject positions. To move away from hierarchical values and worldviews we need to commit ourselves to “a mobile positioning.” To acknowledge the fact that one lives in a world of “other’s words” as Bakhtin says is to allow mobility for both addresser and addressee. As Bauer and Mckinstry maintain:

How do these ideas apply to feminist theory? One of the vital signs of feminism is its voracious desire to multiple practices and theories, to develop new ways of correcting and coping with female voicelessness. And yet, as with any political movement, there is a tendency — even within feminism — to normalize categories, routines, ideologies: to set some standard for politically correct thought and behavior. In the light of this conservative/conservationist tendency, I want to suggest that the ”dialogic imagination” describes some of the most radical — and necessary — moments within feminist thinking.55

Before ending the discussion on Bakhtin, and also this chapter, I must mention what he calls “speech genres.” He argues that we, as speakers, are always speaking in one speech genre or another. We are not always consciously aware of their existence, but nevertheless employ them. He states that:

54 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 114.
[t]he better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them (where this is possible and necessary), the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the un-repeatable situation of communication — in a word, the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan.⁵⁶

He contrasts the flexibility of speech genres with the situation when a person is imprisoned by a genre, when acting not as I myself, but as “an engineer,” “as a physicist,” and so forth.⁵⁷ I believe that speech genres can be seen, from a critical feminist perspective, as a boundary between ‘mobility’ and ‘femininity.’ In order for the theory of speech genres to help subjects in daily dialogic meetings, a voluntary ‘entrance’ is of significance. The intricate power exercises — such as watching — are ignored and the speech genre is then merely monological. Bakhtin’s statement that one can speak as a ‘an engineer’ etc., can in my opinion, be expanded to include speaking as ‘a woman.’ In connection to the label Woman, I find the discourse of speech genres to be a clear limitation to a mobile subjectivity. It is also obviously a comfortable role to take on, which adds to the difficulties of dismantling such genres. In Margaret Atwood’s novels we find a ‘woman artist,’ a ‘woman boss,’ as in the cases of Elaine in Cat’s Eye, or Roz in The Robber Bride. Grace Marks contemplates her own speech genre as a woman prisoner on several occasions during the sessions with Dr. Jordan. Holquist and Cark point out that Bakhtin strove for a dialogic “both/and” to replace the binary pair “either/or.”⁵⁸ Haraway’s claim that “being is much more problematic and contingent” suggests that the usage of speech genres is too restraining for anyone, and it thus becomes clear that gender construction (or, indeed, any other labeling) is the greatest obstruction to any dialogic encounter.

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The theoretical frame to the examination of Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace might be defined in a handful of keywords: dualism, watching, place, mobility,

⁵⁶ Bakhtin, Speech Genres 80.
⁵⁷ Bakhtin, Speech Genres 144.
and dialogics. Through the act of watching (self-watching and watching of others) a dualistically structured environment is simultaneously created and solidified, and therefore upheld. Atwood describes places which are guarded and therefore closed. Mobility — psychological and physical — is achieved by dialogic encounters which then lead to re-watching, and a re-telling of traditional stories.

58 Holquist and Clark 7.
CHAPTER TWO "THERE WILL BE NO END TO PERFECTION:"
CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMININITY

"...for it is the fate of a woman
Long to be patient and silent,
to wait like a ghost that is speechless,
Till some questioning voice dissolves the spell of silence.
Hence is the inner life of so many suffering women
Sunless and silent and deep, like subterranean rivers
Running through caverns of darkness..."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,
"The Courtship of Miles Standish," 1858,
quoted in Alias Grace.

"Sometimes you have to be a high-riding bitch to survive’, she said.
‘Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hold onto.'"

Stephen King, Dolores Claiborne.

These two epigraphs may seem contradictory; the silenced woman versus the raving bitch. However, they both highlight two aspects of Atwood’s accounts of the construction of femininity which I discuss in this chapter. They are, one can say, both results of the femininity process as they are depicted in the texts. The silenced woman is evidence of a structural monologism, where the woman is in a place where she has no authoritative voice. The high-riding bitch from Stephen King’s novel is a result of a place, which, due to its inherent mobile limitations, has molded the woman into someone who hurts other women. The bitch in this sense is a horrific and punishing Watchbird who is aggressively defending and imposing patriarchal norms.

The themes of being confined in a specific monologic place, being watched in that place, and being construed in that place are issues I find crucial in Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride and Alias Grace. These themes are intertwined and form the content of the novels, their characterization, and even their structure. Furthermore, these issues are all major ingredients in the cultural constructions of femininity. As stated, I employ the term place because a place has borders. In my analysis, the borders are normative.
It must be re-emphasized that, throughout the chapter, I will use the term place to signify, for example, childhood. Instead of calling childhood a period of time or perhaps a situation in life, the term place — with its borders — emphasizes a non-movable state of mind and body. It is a defined and stagnant state. The place is moreover a place where power is clearly exercised, and I will examine and show parallels between politics of gender construction and the exercise of power. The power consists primarily of a monologic gaze that never fails to watch, silence and judge the characters that belong to the female gender. The power structures are so rigid that any alternative eyes and/or voices fail to come to the surface. I will show that the power structures are so rigid because the monolithic gaze of patriarchy is internalized in the female characters. Because of the link I make to matters of gender, I often refer to these places as gendered places. Let us also remind ourselves of Foucault’s claim that power only exists when it is put into action. In her book *Discourse*, Sara Mills elucidates Foucault’s power arguments and maintains that any knowledge is the product of a power struggle between discourses. In order for one area of knowledge to be born, another area of knowledge has to be conquered. If the area of knowledge is internalized within oneself, the power struggle becomes more troublesome, something that we will see examples of in the analysis below.

In this chapter I will discuss the imprisoning structures of everyday life described in the novels. The chapter deals with the experiences in places such as childhood, girlhood, and adulthood. It deals with the workplace as well as the sphere of the family. It examines school and higher education. Therefore, the word place also signifies “real” places, concrete places with walls, roofs, etc. The chapter furthermore discusses relationships as places, whether amorous or not. Moreover, it briefly discusses body as place.

I will start with a discussion of the terms place and storytelling in connection to the construction of femininity. They are clear illustrations of power exercises. Secondly, in the lengthy analytical part of this chapter I will move on to a discussion of internalization in connection to friendship. Finally, I will discuss the goal and ultimately horrific result of the power exercises as well as places of power: the gendered construction of girl and woman.

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The structure of the chapter is designed as an attempt to separate themes, to emphasize various aspects at various points in the text. However, many of the most crucial parts interweave.

DEFINING ATWOOD'S GENDERED PLACES

Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* is aware of the many versions (of the story) of herself. She comments:

I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said, for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right in your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just the wooded doll. And that's what it was like at the trial, I was there in the box of the dock but I might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice did not get out. (AG 295)

The scene Atwood depicts is noteworthy from many perspectives. Here, Grace describes herself as being placed in a ‘box of the dock,’ and she claims she is ‘shut up inside that doll of [her]self.’ The ‘box of a dock’ is the place where the accused and/or questioned sits during a trial. It is a confined place designed with the aim of watching and judging the (questioned/accused) person in question. Grace identifies with a ‘wooded doll.’ The ‘doll of myself’ is symbolic of several situations involving Atwood's gallery of characters in *Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride,* and *Alias Grace.* Atwood’s dolls are most frequently a representation of a person of the female sex. The doll is designed for a double purpose: as an inscription of a preferred image of a woman, and as an imitation of a woman. Since the doll is often connected to femininity, the doll furthermore renders the ‘box of the dock,’ the very closed place, gendered. Furthermore, Grace Marks ties the trial to a fair, a show. These are places which are attended for the purpose of watching other people. The objects that are watched are there for one reason only: to please the eyes of the watcher/s.

Developing an aspect of the idea of place, Linda Alcoff conveniently advocates that a view of woman can be located from a positional point of view:
When the concept ‘woman’ is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position […] it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change.² (My emphasis)

Women who are positioned in a particular place where power and mobility are not available, or, in that particular position and place, at any rate difficult to attain, produce an image of a locked room or a prison. From another point of view, this is a description of a woman as merely an attribute to that particular place, as in a show or at a fair. In her book Gender, Identity & Place, Linda McDowell explains place as something that is “made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries.”³ To some extent, McDowell employs the term “gendered place.”⁴ This is a term I find convenient and use in a wider sense than she does in her book. In my treatment of it, I refer to any place which demands a particular gendered behavior or appearance from a subject, in order for her/him to maintain the boundaries of that place.

It appears as if most or every place in the novels is affected by gender. In Murder in the Dark, Margaret Atwood writes as follows on the subject:

He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged. He arranges to want her. This is the arrangement they have made. With strings attached, or ropes, stockings, leather straps. What else is arranged? Furniture, flowers. For contemplation and a graceful disposition of parts to compose a unified and aesthetic whole. […] It can never be known whether she likes it or not. By this time she doesn’t know herself. All you see is the skin, that smile of hers, flat but indelible, like a tattoo. Hard to tell, and she never will, she can’t. They don’t get into it unless they like it, he says. He has the last word. He has the word.⁵

This passage brings to the surface various acute effects of patriarchy. Initially, it is a description of a gendered construction (‘He wants her arranged…’). The man literally arranges the woman to satisfy his gaze and to make her fit the place where she is situ-

⁴ McDowell uses the term “gendered place” when discussing for example certain work places.
ated. The questions then, of whether a place forms the subject or if the subject give meaning to a place, and where the site of power is located, receive immediate answers. From one point of view, it can be argued that it must be in the subject, since the male subject generally speaking frequently brings power to the site where he is located for the moment. The female subject, on the other hand, is objectified. Also, places are constructed according to the claims of a patriarchal structure, so male power might be inherent in the actual place. Whichever answer one chooses, the outcome is the same; the division of power is highly unequal.⁶ Often, it seems as if the tiniest detail is supervised by rules of femininity and masculinity. Roz in The Robber Bride says:

...because a man driven by a woman might have felt diminished, she’d read the women’s magazine articles about all the ways you could unwittingly diminish a man, it was terrible how easily they shrunk, and though she usually liked to drive her own car herself she didn’t want to scare Mitch off. (RB 310)

Even a place as small as a car needs supervision.

Furthermore, the man from Murder in the Dark is the storyteller of the woman’s self, her place, and her body. The words “He has the word” suggest that he is the owner of the word and this is more than a monologic situation; it is actually a monologic place. In fact, it is the ideal place if the societal gendered constructions are to be upheld.

**MONOLOGIC STORYTELLING**

Critic Denise Riley wonders if she is “that name?” referring to the name of Woman. She proceeds to question whether someone can at all times be cognizant of what gender one belongs to, to “‘be a woman’ through and through, make a final home in that

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⁶ Frank Davey examines Atwood’s poetry and says that “[t]he camera, an overtly time-fixing instrument, is a frequent symbol in Atwood’s writing for the conversion of female space into male. The Atwood photographer is usually male, the person photographed female, so that both technology and spatial design remain ‘male’ by association and time and natural process ‘female.’” He quotes from the poem “Camera:” “You make me stop walking and compose me on the lawn[...].” Margaret Atwood: a Feminist Poetics (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984) 19.
classification without suffering claustrophobia?"7 Riley suggests here that this classification, perchance any classification, is too definitive for an individual. Her use of claustrophobia invokes, for me, the term I often come back to: place. A place with borders is too restrictive for an individual, and can cause a sense of claustrophobia.

Another destructive side effect to fitting into the shape of a woman, figuratively and literally8 speaking, must be that femininity can provoke a sense of having a split personality.9 The sense of a split personality disorder points to process aspects of the construction of femininity, because the limitation concerns many different, however restricted, places. They are distinctly defined by borders and by a set of attributes, which vary with each respective area. The areas concern all ages and all stages of life. It is made clear in Cat's Eye in particular that this construction starts early in life. As soon as the place is identified, the uniformity of the female gender is static within that particular place. When the place changes, the uniformity of Woman changes but then remains equally as stagnant within the borders of the new place. Therefore, to "be" a "Woman" does not only limit, or exclude altogether, possibilities of development as Riley supposes, but, in my view, the limitation is actually pluralistic.

Elaine, Grace, Tony, Roz and Charis all "belong" to the female gender,10 and therefore they have been — despite their different personalities — situated in places which are marginalized. This is something they have in common. When Tony in The Robber Bride meets the robber bride Zenia for the first time, she both summarizes and verbalizes the problem, as if the mere presence of Zenia enlightens her. "West has been discussing her with Zenia, the two of them, analyzing her behind her back, sticking adjectives onto her as if she's a child, as if she's anyone at all, as if she's a topic"(RB 127-128, my emphasis). Grace, in Alias Grace, articulates a similar problem when she explains that "murderess is a strong word to have attached to you" (AG 22). Furthermore, Dr. Jordan indulges in fantasies of Grace the murderess. "Murder-

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7 Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (London: Macmillan, 1988) 6.
8 The female body should be sexually attractive and therefore it might need re-shaping in forms of dieting and even surgery. Roz's view of her own body will be discussed as an example of this.
9 I here employ the medical terms claustrophobia and split personality in a symbolic sense, my intention is obviously not to make a medical diagnosis.
10 Judith Butler appropriately asks: "Is there 'a' gender which persons are said to have, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to be, as implied in the question 'What gender are you?'" Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, London: Routledge, 1990) 7. If one compares gender to a place, than perhaps "belong" is a fitting verb to attach to one's gender?
ess. He applies it to her throat like a brand” (AG 389). I suggest that Atwood’s choice of phrasing — ‘sticking adjectives onto her,’ ‘a topic’ from the first citation, and the verbs ‘apply,’ and ‘attach’ in the two latter — clearly indicates the author’s intention here. By using these specific words Atwood emphasizes the performativity and physicality of the act of naming and categorization. They show an actual construction of another subject. These three examples demonstrate with clarity how subjects are regarded and treated as topics and stories. Subjects can be molded into new or preferred shapes depending on who is telling their stories, and what adjectives they attach to them. The examples furthermore demonstrate how monologic this type of situation is.

There exist different roles and places and therefore also discourses for the characters in Atwood’s novels. There are readymade, predetermined costumes and attachable adjectives to dress up in, in every situation and place of life. Their femininity places them in one category; their race, profession, past, and physical appearance in others. They are placed and placed again by normative structures. Here, the allusions to books and stories in, for example, The Robber Bride and Alias Grace, are important to consider in a discussion of storytelling. It appears as if the places, and consequently the subjects, of the women are actually authored by a monologic voice. Dr. Jordan’s brutal opinion and final definition of Grace is that “[h]er story is over. The main story, that is; the thing that has defined her. How is she supposed to fill in the rest of the time” (AG 91)? Since the women themselves do not give the impression of being co-authors, the stories are very closed. Roz in The Robber Bride tries to summarize her life: “Smoking, eating, waiting, the story of my life” (RB 289). Merely by verbalizing this, Roz limits her own mobility and adds even more rigid borders to her place.

The power of storytelling lies, as shown in these examples above, in other’s hands. Grace Marks belongs to several places and thus several aspects of woman, depending on who at the time is authoring and constructing her. Dr. Jordan and other men see her as an extremely sexual person, and several women see her as being romantic with a somewhat tragic twist to her character. Grace comments: “Miss Lydia tells me I am a romantic figure […] But if I laughed out loud I might not be able to stop; and also it would spoil their romantic notion of me. Romantic people are not supposed to laugh, I know that much from looking at the pictures” (AG 25). Another illuminating example of this is when Grace, after having been pardoned from her
prison sentence, receives help with packing and other preparations from a woman, Janet. In the subsequent example it is obvious that Janet addresses Grace as a story:

When all was ready I thanked Janet with deep gratitude. [...] And then [Janet] began to cry, and when I asked her why she was doing that, she said it was because I was to have a happy ending, and it was just like a book; and I wondered what book she'd been reading. (AG 446).

Grace has not yet internalized this specific story, which is being chosen by a man who agrees to marry her. Marriage in this context—a Victorian society with Victorian standards—implies per se a happy ending to a previously tragic story.

A traditional, monological story with its obligatory, normative content can be compared to “the confessional.” Sara Mills discusses “the confessional,” an issue which Foucault deals with in his work Discipline and Punish. Mills says that the confessional is the area where power-subject relationships are perhaps the most obvious. She further argues for the usefulness of an analysis of this phenomenon within feminist theory: “This notion of confession has proved useful for feminist theorists who have analyzed conduct literature and women’s religious writing, and the relation between confessing and submitting to a relation of power.”¹¹ Mills claims that the situation of psychoanalytic therapy for Foucault would also serve as a confessional situation. A patient would, by confessing to mistakes, sins, regrets etc., contribute to placing herself or himself in a subjugated position.¹² In The Robber Bride we come across Roz in related circumstances when she discusses her life situation with her therapist. “[I]f Roz can figure out what story she’s in, then they will be able to spot the erroneous turns she took, they can retrace her steps, they can change the ending” (RB 383).

Judging from these examples, it seems, then, as if an understanding of the ‘story,’ an appreciation of the conditions that regulate the story, is mandatory if any sort of new representation, a self-representation, is to take place. It is possible, from one perspective to equate place with storytelling, or at least story. They are so closely linked in the femininity process it is hard to determine what comes first. The story becomes (the story of) Woman. When storytelling is monologic, as in the illuminating picture of Grace’s trial, the place becomes gendered and the subject becomes immobile. So where does it all start for the characters? How and when do their “stories” begin?

¹¹ Mills 81.
¹² Mills 81.
In all of the narratives, traces and clues in the women’s different pasts are described that answer, at least partially, the question of why they are in a place of powerlessness in the present. At one point, Tony thinks of an ancient war hero, trying to recreate a battle which he fought. History tells her he did lose the battle, i.e; he has already lost it. Tony observes: “She feels helpless. It’s too late. It was too late a thousand years ago” (RB 113). This can be seen as an actual parallel to her own place and situation; she — and the other protagonists — is born into a particular situation, a place and immediately given a name. I must mention the issue of names here in view of the fact that it is observable that many of the characters in the novels are concerned with their own names, and names of others. When questioning the meaning and impact of a name — and here I disregard the name “Woman” which Denise Riley discusses above — an attempt to question normative patterns is visible, or at least it is a realization of surrounding power structures. I argue that within the discourse of monologic storytelling, when this storytelling is used to construe femininity, naming has its place.

When Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye* decides to become an artist she soon learns there are categories and names of painters that the men have created, based on sex: painters and lady painters, or even girl painters. I place this on a level with what is termed pejorative naming. Trinh T. Minh-ha also discusses this issue. She claims that to label somebody a “lady painter” actually means a painter who is not as talented as a real painter (who is a man).13 An interesting aspect of this is that, as Minh-ha says, the label “male” does not even have to be mentioned/written/said. The gender-less “painter” can only mean a male painter. Elaine, both in high school, and later, when she is older and in art school, hears some of the pejorative attachable labels used for women. In high school, she hears “stunned broad, dog, bag and bitch [...] as well as worse words” (CE 254-55). In art school the students use names such as “cow” and “discards” (CE 298). What is highly interesting here is Elaine’s observation that the names are *seen* as much as they are heard. Elaine imagines “clouds of silent words” surrounding girls, “pointing at them, reducing them, cutting them down to size so they can be handled” (CE 255). Her observation implies that these words — names — become power inscribed as soon as they leave the mouth of the person who is making the judgement. It is thus an example of exercising power. Judith Butler proposes that
hate speech that is directed towards someone makes the target of this type of speech “suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where [they] are. Indeed, it may be what is unanticipated about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control.”¹⁴ I believe that while on the one hand, a loss of control (and also power) is obvious in, for example, Elaine’s case, on the other hand, the use of a pejorative term circumscribes a sense of place to a even greater degree. What Butler calls the ‘context,’ is highlighted in this way of naming. Naming undoubtedly comes across as a monologic use of words, and therefore it only strengthens the borders of a certain place. If ‘lady painter’ may not appear to be pejorative in the common sense of the word, it is still an exercise of power which limits another subject’s mobility. And, as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out: “Lady and whore are both bred to please.”¹⁵

Other aspects of naming are spoken of in Cat’s Eye. Elaine comments on marriage when she cannot find her old girlfriends in the telephone directory and reflects on how easy it is for women to disappear into another person’s name, possibly never to reappear again. “Women are hard to keep track of, most of them. They slip into other names and sink without a trace” (CE 243).¹⁶ Elaine’s friend Cordelia and her sisters are named after characters in plays by Shakespeare; dramatic names that have gained a certain contextual and cultural meaning. To Elaine, this is more than just an original way of naming:

Why did they name [Cordelia] that? Hang that weight around her neck. Heart of the moon, jewel of the sea, depending on which foreign language you’re using. The third sister, the only honest one. The stubborn one, the rejected one, the one who was not heard. If she’d been called Jane, would things have been different? (CE 281)

Reacting strongly to the name and subsequent (?) fate of Cordelia¹⁷ — being ‘the only honest one’ — makes Elaine give her own daughters the “good sensible names” (CE

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¹³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 27.
¹⁵ Minh-ha 97.
¹⁶ An extreme variant of this type of situation is spoken of in The Handmaid’s Tale. The women receive their masters’ names. For example, Ofglen, Ofwarren, etc. “I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn’t be easy to find her” (HT 295).
¹⁷ Earl G. Ingersoll suggests: “Most readers sense the irony in Atwood’s borrowing the name of one of Shakespeare’s innocent tragic heroines, but there are also implications of a transfer being transacted here. In the years following the Second World War, King Lear became one of our most attractive cul-
15) Sarah and Anne. Turning to *Alias Grace*, the mere title of the novel indicates that Grace is more than Grace and other than Grace. She comments on her name:

As for what I was named after, it might have been the hymn. My mother never said so, but there were many things she never said.

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind but now I see.
I hope I was named after it. I would like to be found. I would like to see. Or to be seen. (AG 379)

Like Cordelia, she has a name loaded with meaning. The discourse of naming in the novels, both calling someone a cow, and to actually give someone a name at birth, can be seen as part of the discourse of storytelling.

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**PLACES AND IMMOBILITY**

These illustrations of naming as storytelling limit the mobility of the subjects. In comparison to the other characters I discuss, Grace Marks is the most evident example of a person who has been stripped of mobility and power. She is a prisoner, sentenced for life. She comments: “At least in the Lunatic Asylum you could see out better. When you were not muffled up in a darkened room” (AG 238). Prison life is built around a set of constructional rules which control the prisoner’s behavior. However, Grace is allowed out of prison to work as a maid from time to time. One question is

18 Grace also comments on the ‘safe’ and positive side of being watched. She would like to be seen. This will be discussed further below.

19 Atwood has in *Alias Grace* quoted from the Kingston Penitentiary’s *Punishment Book* from 1843. Some of the offences and punishments are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>Punishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laughing and talking</td>
<td>6 lashes; cat-o’-nine-tails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking in wash-house</td>
<td>6 lashes; rawhide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening to knock convict’s brains out</td>
<td>24 lashes; cat-o’-nine-tails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to Keepers on matters not Related to their work</td>
<td>6 lashes; cat-o’-nine tails</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
why she is allowed this freedom. Is it out of pity? Or is it a decision based on a belief in her innocence? Grace explains that when working, she is just as supervised as in prison. It is a very exposed position. She is “one of the accomplishments. I come into the room and curtsy and move about, mouth straight, head bent, and I pick up the cups or set them down, depending; and they stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets” (AG 22). The words ‘stare without appearing to’ links the place to the panoptic scheme. Grace knows they are watching her, but she cannot know for certain. She is regarded as a project, as an “accomplishment” and she is at all times watched by others. She is as much on display as when she was on the trial/fair. She is there for the thrill of others, and also because they have demanded and expected it. This fact makes Grace Marks both an internal and external prisoner. She is a criminal who is imprisoned, and she has internalized the reigning norms of how to act as a woman and prisoner.

Furthermore, Grace’s limitations and subsequent immobility have always been apparent from a class and gender perspective. She grows up in a poor family in Ireland, she becomes an immigrant in Canada, she spends her life up until imprisonment working as a servant in several households, and when she is released from prison she accepts a proposal from a man who had earlier testified against her in court. Speaking of his proposal, she admits, “I made a show of hanging back, though the reality of it was that I did not have many other choices, and it would have been most ungrateful of me to have said no, as so much trouble had been taken” (AG 452). Her motion out into the “free” world — a place supposedly without borders — as a wife is, in this manner, shown to be only a motion into another equally closed place. In prison, the physically tangible walls that surround her make her a prisoner in the legal sense, but other walls make her a prisoner in the normative sense. This is exemplified, and rather ironically so, when she first receives the news of her pardon: “I could see that some tears were in order, and I shed several” (AG 442) and then, when she is actually released from prison, she still thinks:

That is it, I thought. I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued. And so I tried. It was very strange to realize that I would not be a celebrated murderess any more, but seen perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly, or at least for too long a time, and an object of pity rather than of horror and fear. It took me some days to get used to the idea; indeed I am not quite used to it yet. It calls for a
different arrangement of the face, but I suppose it will become easier in time.

(AG 443)

Grace addresses the fact that she has entered a new story and a new place, and despite the fact that she has not yet internalized it, ‘it will become easier in time.’ Her place has been changed from prison to the outside world. In this passage Grace articulates the demand made on her, which is the demand to act ‘right’ — as is expected — in any given situation. The picture we get of Grace is a picture of someone with these expectations, these norms, internalized, so that even ‘if it took [her] some days to get used to the idea,’ eventually she will act correctly in her new place.

The question of place and placement is highlighted in all three novels. What at first glance seems to be the opposite of Grace’s situation of being locked up in prison, is the narrative about Elaine’s childhood. It is initially described as partially nomadic; travels with her family over Canada provide her with a fragmented upbringing, seemingly devoid of normative structures. The geographical places are changed regularly, hence implying mobility.

As a child, Elaine of Cat’s Eye sees many places around the country, and compared to Toronto where her family eventually settles down, the places are places of nature and wilderness. However, as an adult, place has a different connotation. Elaine herself has become involved in the concept, and now sees there are links between place and her age. She states:

This is the middle of my life. I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over. I’m supposed to have accumulated things by now: possessions, responsibilities, achievements, experience and wisdom. I’m supposed to be a person of substance. (CE 13)

Here, the conception of age or period as place is demonstrated. The place presupposes certain acquirements, as Elaine mentions. But the place is a closed, immobile one and the acquirements are thus not optional. On the contrary, they are expected and obligatory. She is ‘supposed to be a person of substance.’ The adult Elaine does refer to herself as a nomad (CE 16), but also sadly claims ‘I am always lost’ (CE 14). This could tie back to Butler’s claim of a loss of control, a loss of place, as Elaine was an abused child who grew up feeling inadequate at all times. Elaine’s adult sense of be-
ing lost could also, however, point to her position as marginalized in a strictly structured and limited place.

Some of the protagonists’ places are more visibly constrained than others’ are. Grace is in a penitentiary; Charis lives isolated on an island; and, in order not to disturb her husband with her characteristically unwomanly interest, which is the history of war, Tony spends a lot of time underground, in a basement. Moreover, the child Cordelia spends time digging holes in her backyard, an act which is symbolically inscribed since it reflects many aspects of her life. When she is older and looks back on it, she admits that it might have been to create a place that was only hers, a place with no demands. However, when considering her position within her own family the hole becomes also a great metaphor for a very limited place where she is literally confined.

It is in Cat’s Eye that we find the place which is marked with gender more than any other described physical place in the three novels. It is the much talked about ravine, which is “forbidden and dangerous” (CE 200). When Elaine is forced by her friends to enter the ravine, she describes the path down as being not “a real path, it’s just a place worn by whoever goes up and down here: boys, men. Not girls” (CE 201). Unknown men lurk down there while waiting for innocent young girls. McDowell touches upon “natural places” when expanding on the subject of the binary constructs of women and men. She suggests that “[t]he binary division is also deeply implicated in the social production of space, in assumptions about the ‘natural’ and built environments and in the sets of regulations which influence who should be excluded.”

The ravine is a manifestation of this division. It is male territory, constituting a violent threat to anyone of the female gender who even considers going down there.

Living on an island and digging a hole for oneself in the ground are indeed to exist in limited places with clear borders. But what happens when your body becomes your place? Linda McDowell presents her view on the body by saying it is the immediate place, and she argues that we should see bodies as fluid and flexible. She goes on to argue that whereas “bodies are undoubtedly material, possessing a range of characteristics such as shape and size and inevitably taking up space, the ways in which bodies are presented to and seen by others vary according to the spaces and places in which they find themselves.” However, since femininity is connected to appearance and performance, the context and result is that the body is always seen

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20 McDowell 11.
and presented. Atwood capitalizes the female body to call attention to its marginality, when she ironically writes in *Good Bones*:

> The Female Body has many uses. It’s been used as a door-knocker, a bottle-opener, as a clock with a ticking belly, as something to hold up lampshades, as a nutcracker, just squeeze the brass legs together and out comes your nut. It bears torches, lifts victorious wreaths, grows copper wings and raises aloft a ring of neon stars; whole buildings rest on its marble heads. It sells cars, beer, shaving lotion, cigarettes, hard liquor; it sells diet plans and diamonds, and desire in tiny crystal bottles. Is this the face that launched a thousand products? You bet it is, but don’t get any funny big ideas, honey, that smile is a dime in a dozen.\(^2\)

The above section shows aspects of the idealized feminine and sexual body. The Body is voluptuous but slim, it is strong and simultaneously sexually submissive. Roz — and to a certain degree Charis — represent the body aspect in these three novels. In comparison with, and in contrast to, Elaine, Roz connects her place both with her gendered body and age. She cannot understand and see herself as anything but an unfeminine and thus unattractive body.\(^3\) She describes herself as being continually categorized and re-categorized:

> She was a big-boned girl, a raw-boned girl (her mother’s words), a girl with a backbone (her father’s), and a full, mature figure (the dress shops’). Dainty she would never be. Dear God, shrink my feet and I’ll do anything for you. A size 6 would be nice, and while you’re at it, make me a blonde. (RB 308-309. Original emphasis)

She can make jokes about it, or needs to make jokes about it, but her body somehow provokes in others an explanation of sorts, a translation — a labeling. Her “big slack raw embarrassing body” (RB 72) is her limitation. John Berger points out the simple equation: “Those who are not considered beautiful are not beautiful” (original emphasis).\(^4\) Roz’s age contributes to her limitation:

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21 McDowell 34.


23 It is noteworthy that critics have found recurring themes of food and eating in Atwood’s work, and that they are made very political. See for example, Emma Parker, “You Are What You Eat. The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41.3 (fall 1995), Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 94-124.

She must feel so archaic to [her daughters]. So obsolete, so foreign. She spent the first half of her life feeling less and less like an immigrant, and now she’s spending the second half feeling more and more like one. A refugee from the land of middle age, stranded in the country of the young. (RB 77)

Her age and aging body are an impediment when expressing her emotions, as well. She has trouble showing anger, because at her age, “rage for the sake of rage is becoming less and less worth it, because every time you grind your teeth a few of them could break off” (RB 104).

Charis in *The Robber Bride* represents another aspect of the female body. As a child, she experiences one of the most severe patriarchal power exercises: incestuous rape. She is sexually molested on multiple occasions, and in order to deal with the pain she escapes into an extra corporeal body: “He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like a dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air. There’s no pain at all” (RB 262). Like Roz, Charis is not comfortable with her body, but while the former desires an attractive body, Charis rejects the idea of body altogether. “Having a body is an inconvenience” (RB 200), she claims and dedicates her life to her mind and the spiritual world. She admits that the body is the home of the soul, but “[h]aving a body, being in a body, is like being roped to a sick cat” (RB 200). The difference between Roz and Charis is therefore that Roz is her body and Charis has her body. However, the strong similarity between the two bodies is that they are both perceived as, simultaneously as they are molded into, an obstacle to mobility. Both of these aspects are connected to the sexual body: the desire to be sexually attractive and seen (Roz), and the desire not to be sexually attractive and unseen (Charis).

The female body and the overall physical countenance of women are of significance. However, the judgmental attitude towards the body does not merely originate with women themselves. Dr. Jordan labels women attractive or unattractive throughout *Alias Grace*: “He regards her with disgust: a woman so porcine, and, in this weather, so distinctly sweaty, should not be permitted out in public. She’s a libel on the entire sex”(AG 323), and “[t]here must be a school for ugliness […] where such women are sent to be trained”(AG 188). Like Cordelia, he acts like a personified Watchbird. Not only because his task is to observe and listen to Grace in order to determine whether she was insane at the time of the murders or not, but because he
watches her with a preset opinion of her. Dr. Jordan is well aware of his powers, and
his thoughts on the subject of power border on the violent/pornographic. He thinks:

Thus he is one of the dark trio — the doctor, the judge, the executioner — and
shares with them the powers of life and death. To be rendered unconscious; to
lie unexposed, without shame, at the mercy of others; to be touched, incised,
plundered, remade — this is what they are thinking of when they look at him,
with their widening eyes and slightly parted lips. (AG 82)

Because she is attractive to him she becomes a damsel in distress, and he has been
chosen to rescue her. To rescue her from prison is one thing, but, in addition, he also
has to rescue her from what he sees as “her own construction,” since he detects in her
a threatening and alluring sexuality. The threat and allure are perceptible in this de-
scription of a dream he has:

[...] and then he understands that it isn’t cloth at all but hair, the long fragrant
hair of an unseen woman, which is twining around his neck. He struggles; he
is being closely embraced; he can scarcely breathe. The sensation is painful
and almost unbearably erotic, and he wakes with a jolt. (AG 195)

Dr. Jordan is especially interested in Grace’s accounts of mistreatment because they
make his own ego grow, and this is so because above all, as stated, he believes he res-
cues Grace. Another man, Jamie Walsh, who had previously testified against her in
court, also steps in to rescue her. Grace marries him after having been released. She
writes in a letter to Dr. Jordan that her husband “likes to picture the sufferings as
well. [...] Now that I come to think of it, you were as eager as Mr. Walsh is to hear
about my sufferings and my hardships in life” (AG 456-57). When there is a damsel
in distress, there must be a knight in shining armor, to use two old gender clichés. Or
is it the other way around?

When the body is considered to be a place more than just an appearance, At-
wood links the body, besides watching, to extreme immobility. Elaine’s fainting fits
resemble Charis’ body escapism. Elaine’s fits, too, are born out of trauma. She per-
ceives her situation as being under constant scrutiny and harassment and feels that she
is locked up in a place devoid of escape routes. “There’s a way out of places you want

25 Dr Jordan states, for example, in two different ways, his alleged rescue: “He’s got the hook in her
mouth, but can he pull her up?” and “[h]e means well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue,
surely he does” (AG 322). He also admits that he “wants her to be Anima. He wants her to be vindi-
cated” (AG 322).
to leave, but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of
time or into another time” (CE 183). There are ways to abandon the body, as the ex-
amples of Elaine and Charis demonstrate.

All the women in Atwood’s novels are again and again being finalized by the
monologic structure of a hegemonic society. When exemplified by, for example,
Grace, it is very possible to be finalized more than once — “there will be no end to
perfection” — despite the semantics of the actual word ‘finalized; When Grace
thinks, “I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued”
(AG 443), it is an illustration of what happens when the place has changed, from for
example, “prison” to “freedom.” The femininity must change to suit the new place.
Two examples of characters who make desperate attempts to escape the Watchbird
and immobile places are Charis who turns to sleepwalking, after having been raped
and finds herself without anyone to talk to about it and nowhere to go, and Elaine who
starts to faint. Grace touches on the same subject when saying, “[w]hen I was
younger I used to think that if I could hug myself tight enough I could make myself
smaller, because there was never enough room for me, at home or anywhere, but if I
was smaller then I would fit in” (AG 33).

Elaine’s escape into nothingness when she faints, and her words “[t]here’s a
way out of places you want to leave, but can’t” (CE 183), are words which emphasize
the locked positions of many of Atwood’s characters. Elaine’s thesis refers to her
brother Stephen’s ideas about time and time traveling.26 However, his apprehension is
a positive one: to transgress the dimensions of time and to exist in more than one
place at once is a way of maximizing experiences. Elaine does, in a way, transgress
these dimensions, but rather than seeking to explore new areas of experience and ex-
istence she strives to avoid time, place and life all together. To take up as little room
as possible.
THE WATCHBIRD: THE INTERNALIZED GUARD OF PATRIARCHY

To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange. To have them watching him all the time. To have them wondering, What’s he going to do next? To have them flinch when he moves, even if it’s a harmless enough move, to reach for an ashtray perhaps. To have them sizing him up. To have them thinking, he can’t do it, he won’t do, he’ll have to do, this last as if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there’s nothing else available. [...] It must be just fine. It must be hell. It must be very silent.

The above quotation, taken from the science fiction novel The Handmaid’s Tale, is all about watching, the major ingredient in construing both masculinity and femininity. The above passage, however, is interesting to examine because it, in a few sentences, encapsulates a number of necessary issues when one discusses watching. “To be a man” who is watched by women must be “entirely strange” writes Margaret Atwood. Strange means both something that makes you uncomfortable, as well as something uncommon. In Cat’s Eye, The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, as well as The Handmaid’s Tale, either it is a woman who watches another woman, or it is a man watching a woman. Lastly, the citation accentuates the fact that when one is constantly watched, one is no longer part of one’s own story telling: ‘It must be very silent.’

When Elaine’s family in Cat’s Eye has settled down in Toronto, after having spent years on the road, Elaine meets girls for the first time. It is now that the act of watching and being watched becomes an everyday fact. It is in the process of making friends, and above all keeping them, that the patriarchal structures and the gendered roles primarily become visible to Elaine. Furthermore, it is with these new girlfriends that Elaine realizes how her life might turn out. The structures of society are models for their games, their conversations, and when they meet the girlfriends’ families. Playing with them proves different from playing with her brother Stephen, and Elaine says: “Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I’m only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it” (CE 55). As Elaine’s words show, and as Judith Butler emphasizes, the (new) role is a simula-

26 "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once.” These sentences commence the novel Cat’s Eye, 3.
crum. The self-consciousness Elaine experiences demands hard but necessary work. This example is very similar to Grace Marks' previous, equally self-conscious words: "[To be rescued] calls for a different arrangement of the face, but I suppose it will become easier in time" (AG 443). As I will demonstrate, self-consciousness is perhaps the most crucial part of the machinery of gender construction. Butler's theories on performativity deal with the issue I believe that Elaine addresses here: gender is a performative and an imitating act. It is made abundantly clear in Cat's Eye that the process starts at a very young age, perhaps even suggesting that it is a phenomenon that happens at any (and every) age.

By choice, Elaine slips into the role of a girl-among-girls. The reason for choosing this is threefold. One, her longing for girlfriends, whom she has thus far only read about in children's books, is great. Two, she does as is expected of her, since the reward is acceptance, and she has not (yet) discovered any optional behavior. Three, the punishment for not behaving as expected is very harsh. The connection one can make here to Atwood's reference to the Kingston Penitentiary's *Punishment Book* in *Alias Grace* is not that far-fetched. If others do not punish Elaine by forcing her down into the ravine, she punishes herself by, for instance, tearing off the skin of her feet.

Again, it is in Toronto that the norms become visible, even in print, as Elaine's discovery of the sphere of girlfriends reveals. She now comprehends that she is being observed, watched. When browsing, and cutting out pictures from magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *The Ladies' Home Journal*, Elaine realizes, with amazement, that "there will be no end to perfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain on your face or stupid act, somebody frowning" (CE 148). This is similar to how Roz in *The Robber Bride* describes the Catholic Sisters' advice on love, that "the self should be scrubbed like a floor" (RB 301). Both comments suggest that the self needs disciplinary action because it is far from flawless. Yet, it seems as if the subject will always stay flawed.

In the magazines Elaine reads, the women in glossy photographs (who are all doing what women supposedly do best: knitting or gossiping) are being watched and

28 Butler asserts: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." 33.
judged by a big red and black bird, called the Watchbird. The slogan of the advertisements is “This is a Watchbird watching a Busybody. This is a Watchbird watching YOU” (CE 148). Molly Hite’s words need to be integrated here again: “The women are fighting a losing battle.”29 The function of the Watchbird is first and foremost corrective but simultaneously it guarantees the unfeasibility of ever being corrected. To reiterate Tony’s words: “It’s too late. It was too late a thousand years ago.” It is a built-in function of the Watchbird: it is an impossibility to be finished, it is impossible to ever become perfect. Because, even if the requirements are fulfilled on the surface, the definition of woman always changes. Molly Hite also discusses Cat’s Eye’s characters’ obsession with appearances, something which is part of the same argument: it is always possible, or perhaps even obligatory to improve your looks. Hite comments: “‘Look’ is always a pun, conveying at once the gaze that judges and the process of being gazed at and judged [...]” She continues to say that “to be the object of the look is to look like, the trope of simile instantly invoking stereotypes of women who have aged past the point of being rewarding to the acquisitive gaze.”30 A woman must look like a woman. Cordelia’s two older sisters, who are exemplary representations of girls who struggle hard with their appearance frequently use expressions such as “I look like Haggis McBaggis,” a phrase which also Cordelia and Elaine eventually will come to use. Elaine says of them:

They smile a little ominously, as if they know already what is in store for us. ‘Just wait and see,’ they say. This frightens us. Whatever has happened to them, bulging them, softening them, causing them to walk rather than run, as if there’s some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check — whatever it is, it may happen to us too. (CE 97)

There are hints of horror and violence here, even though this statement may seem innocent enough. It could be seen as a regular description of adolescence. However, when Atwood describes this process as involving leashes, the result is quite violent and forceful. Something vague “[holds] them in check,” thus limiting their mobility. The Watchbird is active here, it has started the division into active/male and passive/female as Laura Mulvey explains.31 Finally, this also relates back to the example

30 Hite 1995, 139.
of Roz’ unhappiness with her physical, bodily appearance. Those who are not considered beautiful are not beautiful, their names are Haggis McBaggis and they are in need of a new, attractive look.

Atwood’s Watchbird can straightforwardly be read as an image of a prison guard and the internalized gaze of patriarchy. The internalization is highly complex. In Elaine’s case, the downsides of this process are numerous: self-loathing, self-mutilation, and self-constraint to the point of self-negligence. On the other hand, the reward of the hard work is future acceptance in the circle of friends, and above all, a femininity which is considered “natural” and therefore unchallenged. However when the two contrary discourses of the process of femininity are mingled, even mixed up, the sense of having a split personality is determined. To be “continually accompanied by her own image of herself” makes Elaine an object as much in other’s eyes as in her own. In school, Cordelia holds up a mirror in front of Elaine and, as an accusation says: “Look at yourself! Just look” (CE 169)! The claustrophobic/schizophrenic side to this situation is that Elaine is caught in the mirror, she is caught in the watcher’s eye, and she is somehow, vaguely, disappointing. Most importantly, Elaine is the watcher of herself, thus disappointing to herself, more than to anybody else. Berger claims that the primary function of the mirror is to aid the woman in treating herself as an object of vision. In the mirror Elaine can accordingly see herself, but only as others see her. In this way the mirror mirrors more an idea/l of an image than a real one.

By letting John Berger’s words about the company of one’s own image work as a frame, it becomes apparent that the protagonists themselves are active participants in an exercise of power. The characters do have power but they can only use it to control their own behavior and appearance. The images of their own selves are always seen through their own and other’s eyes. “Visibility is a trap,” as Foucault asserts. Foucault emphasizes that the person “becomes the principle of [her] own

32 Berger 46.
33 Concerning the painting Vanity by Memling, Berger writes: “The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself, as, first and foremost, a sight.” 51.
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In the context of the Atwoodian environments, the claim Foucault makes about the fluidity of power is clear: the Watchbird is ignorant of, for example, age and sex. The Watchbird can take any shape, because it is omnipresent, or, in the words of Martin Jay, an “invisible omni- voyeur.” Furthermore, its power is most successfully upheld when the Watchbird has nested in a woman. To be a Watchbird oneself is the best or only way for the female characters to handle and accept the existence of a Watchbird.

Cordelia and Grace’s mother Mrs. Sneath in *Cat’s Eye*, who belong to two different generations, are the most striking examples of Watchbirds in the novels. Cordelia performing a Watchbird act torments Elaine with demands of improving herself, perfecting herself. Elaine explains:

I worry about what I’ve said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time. (CE 125)

Elaine worries about her talk and her walk, but on the other hand the worrying shows her need for belonging, collectivity and this explains the double-sidedness of the process of femininity, the act of watching. The coercion of the others, the surveillance performed on her, becomes subtle when her extreme self-consciousness is in focus. John Berger states that “[f]rom earliest childhood [a woman] has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually,” and Elaine and her girlfriends in the three novels best exemplify and demonstrate this strategy of upholding hegemonic and monologic values. Cordelia, and to a certain degree Grace and Carol as well, represent a painfully apparent internalization of a patriarchal and actually very violent view of femininity. In the words of Steven Ahern, Cordelia “functions as the ‘conscience’ of the patriarchal status quo.” Cordelia’s choice of words is clearly an echo of others’ words. Molly Hite suggests that Elaine becomes a surrogate victim of sorts. She is used and abused to channel Cordelia’s own suppression and suffering. Or, as Sarah

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35 Foucault 203.
36 Foucault 202.
38 Berger 46.
40 Hite 137.
Appleton Aguiar claims: "Cordelia’s crime against Elaine, therefore, is that she is willing to sacrifice her friend in order to save herself." The flaw in her argument, however, is that there is no evidence of the possible fact that Cordelia manages to save herself. On the contrary, Cordelia’s mental health deteriorates, as she grows older. Furthermore, the striking absence of Cordelia, and the fact that the middle-aged Elaine never meets her friend again in Toronto is ominous.

In a situation of being regularly watched and judged, Elaine must be acutely self-conscious. Sandra Bartky demonstrates how the panoptic schema affects women in general:

it is women who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies[...]. The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy.

Self-surveillance and self-consciousness are cornerstones which help construe and preserve the technologies of gender. The act of femininity construction cannot function without them. In Cat’s Eye, these two ingredients lead ultimately to self-contempt via constant self-examination.

The issue of self-examination leads the discussion back to “the confessional.” A confessional situation — place — is a place where power exercises are clear. An admittance to sin, guilt, or any kind of wrong-doing — ‘to spot the erroneous turns’ as Roz in The Robber Bride expresses it — makes the confession-teller powerless and the confession-listener gains power. In Alias Grace we find this type of power situation, and here the confessional is not even of the voluntary kind (if there is such a thing): Grace has no alternative but to meet with Dr. Jordan. The complexity of this type of arrangement is obviously multifold. As Grace states: “I would like to be found. I would like to see. Or to be seen” (AG 379). Having once stated that her “true voice” had not been heard at the trial (AG 295), the meetings with Dr. Jordan allows

Grace to be seen, regardless of the power structures the meetings are based on. Yet, and this is the downside, due to the power relation, Dr. Jordan is one who also has “the last word,” ergo; “he has the word, (my emphasis)” as Atwood expresses it in *Murder in the Dark*.

Furthermore, and as already mentioned, Roz in *The Robber Bride* discusses her life with her therapist, with the hope of “changing the ending.” Here, the problem is that for various reasons Roz chose to marry someone who ended up hurting her, and the responsibility for behaving badly and betraying her on a regular basis lies not with her husband, but with herself. It is moreover hinted that Roz’s life is treated as a story, and not as a life. If the therapist and Roz decide upon the genre of the story, a solution to, among other things, Roz’s marital problems, seems to be possible.43

However, it is neither Dr. Jordan nor Roz’s therapist who is the most active critics in these novels: it is the Watchbird in its many shapes. That the Watchbird is a stern judge is revealed, for example, in a scene that resembles a trial. Elaine's behavioral problems have made the self-proclaimed Watchbird gather the jury to agree upon a verdict:

I’m standing outside the closed door of Cordelia’s room. Cordelia, Grace, and Carol are inside. They’re having a meeting. The meeting is about me. I am just not measuring up, although they are giving me every chance. I will have to do better. But better at what? (CE 124)

The scene certainly resembles a trial, but as opposed to the trial scene in *Alias Grace*, the accused in *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine Risley, is a member of the jury herself. The Watchbirds within the girls and women guard not only the other women but also themselves. Hite’s earlier suggestion that “the women are fighting a losing battle” together with Tony’s “[i]t was too late a thousand years ago” illustrate the imprisonment of the characters. It is a “tyranny of the normal,” to borrow the phrase from Leslie A. Fiedler.44 The characters encourage constant construction and reconstruction (‘I will have to do better. But better at what?’) in others and themselves, as well as seeing fit to

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43 Verena Bühler Roth has coined *Cat’s Eye* a “confessional novel.” *Wilderness and the Natural Environment. Margaret Atwood’s Recycling of a Canadian Theme* (Tübingen, Basel: Francke Verlag, 1998) 103
punish the one who voluntarily or involuntarily breaks the norms. Elaine physically punishes herself, for example, by removing skin from her feet, thus making moving — mobility — a very painful procedure.

The fact that there is no end to the desire for perfection is highlighted in, for instance, Sunday school. Her friend, Watchbird Carol, watches and judges Elaine and then reports back to Cordelia. "'She didn't stand up straight in Sunday school yesterday.' Or: 'She was a goody-goody'" (CE 131). Elaine believes both of these judgements to be accurate, yet experiences great difficulty because the message is illogical: it is an arbitrary construct which cannot be fulfilled:

I make an effort to stand straighter, my body rigid with anxiety. And it's true I got ten out of ten again, and Grace only got nine. Is it wrong to be right? How right should I be, to be perfect? The next week I put five wrong answers, deliberately. 'She only got five out of ten on Bible,' Grace says on Monday. 'She's getting stupider,' Cordelia says. 'You aren't really that stupid. You'll have to try harder than that.' (CE 131)

Denise Riley's remark that claustrophobia is created if one has to be constantly aware of one's femininity is comparable to the feeling of being watched at all times.

Elaine overhears Mrs. Smeath discussing Elaine's problems with another woman. The judgement is that "it's all rote learning, it doesn't sink in. The minute your back is turned they'll go right back the way they were" (CE 192). Roz encounters the same attitude; one of the Sisters tells her: "you just never learn" (RB 329). Learning appears as a keyword, again placing emphasis on issues of repetition and performance. However, since it is 'a losing battle' to use Molly Hite's term again, how is it possible to ever please? The judgements of the watchers seem predetermined. It is always already decided that 'it doesn't sink in,' so the ruling is logical: guarding and watching must never come to a close.

Elaine describes her feeling of being watched as leading to something akin to paranoia. She starts to feel watched even by the stars in the sky (CE 106). Moreover, when she receives a doll for Christmas, Atwood again invokes the image of the feminine doll, as the trial scene with Grace Marks depicted. But more than that, Atwood

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45 Lyn Mikel Brown also mentions this in "The Dangers of Time Travel: Revisioning the Landscape of Girls' Relationships in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye" in Literature, Interpretation, Theory 6. 3/4 (1985).
reminds us of the fact that this is no less than a horror story: “[The doll] has the worrying power of effigies, a lifeless life that fills me with creeping horror. I put it back into its cardboard box and tuck the tissue paper around it, over the face. I say I’m doing this to keep it safe, but in fact I don’t want it watching me” (CE 136). She has realized that even a doll, a toy, is inscribed with the hegemonic gaze. In these three novels, the power structures of patriarchal society leave few things untouched.

Elaine decides to become an artist. In art-school she, at first, tries to blend in with the other girls. She wears the same clothes and talks about the same things they do, but admits: ‘I feel ill at ease with them, as if I am here under false pretenses’ (CE 294). When in art school, and out of Mrs. Sneath’s and Cordelia’s sight, Elaine starts dressing like the boys do, wearing black clothes, an effort to, it seems reasonable to conclude, escape her gender and the persecuting Watchbird. The (male) ‘painters’ comment on women, using pejorative terms such as cows, bags, and discards. Elaine says: ‘I don’t resent any of this. Instead I think I am privileged: I am an exception to some rule I haven’t even identified’ (CE 298). She makes rude remarks about the other female students, and when trying to draw a woman, she looks at the model, judges her naked body, and thinks: ‘She is not beautiful, and I am afraid of turning into that’ (CE 288). Here again, the obsession with appearance shines through. Her art teacher, with whom she later has a love affair, tells her she is an ‘unfinished woman’ (CE 291), but he promises that he will change that. This promise implies both that he will be meddling with her person and that he will try to control her artistic expressions.

As a fairly successful artist, the adult Elaine still experiences great insecurity and the presence of the Watchbird. She thinks: “Galleries are frightening places, places of evaluation, of judgment. I have to work up to them”(CE 20). A final remark sums up Elaine’s feeling about herself, her self-confidence: the result of the never-ending presence of the Watchbird. It is the adult Elaine on her way to the gallery, who says: “Today we hang. An unfortunate term” (CE 44). The gallery — a place ‘of judgment’ — invokes the sense of a death trap or a death sentence.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s “act of consummation” concerns the watching, the gaze.

The gaze of another is comparable to the word of another. A self is not complete/in

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46 This situation resembles a meeting in *The Robber Bride* between Tony and Zenia where Tony is grateful for being excluded from Zenia’s sarcasm. Tony says, “it was a great privilege to find yourself
progress without the other's responding and exchanging gaze/word, and the process starts when an answer/ an exchanging gaze is anticipated.\textsuperscript{47} Grace Marks's wishes to be seen are an example of this. But a gaze can be hegemonic, as a word can be monologic. A hegemonic gaze seeks to finalize another subject, and finalization means a state of non-development. It becomes a troublesome task to avoid a hegemonic gaze when the very same gaze is inside of you. As I have shown, all of the characters become Watchbirds themselves and they are often even harder judges of themselves than of the girls and women in their surroundings. Elaine has been taught that "[w]hatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me" (CE 358). In accordance with John Berger's thesis that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male,"\textsuperscript{48} Roz also realizes and verbalizes that she has her ruthless judge living inside her:

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole in your head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (RB 392)

By using the vocabulary 'up on a pedestal or down on your knees,' Roz juxtaposes the conflicting, yet similar, images of the Madonna and the Whore (terms which must be capitalized because they are canonized). And it seems as if even fantasies become limited in a political structure which is based on dual, opposing pairs. As Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests: constructs like these are both "bred to please."

Following the same line of reasoning, John Berger suggests that the ultimate watcher "is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him,"\textsuperscript{49} and in this passage Roz verbalizes this constant struggle. Apart from the recognition of the Watchbird inside herself, Roz's words 'up on a pedestal or down on your knees' is emblematic of the view that women are both central and mar-

\textsuperscript{47} See, for example, Pam Morris ed, \textit{The Bakhtin Reader. Selected Writing of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov} (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1994) 247.
\textsuperscript{48} Berger 47.
\textsuperscript{49} Berger 64.
original in a patriarchal context. They are either celebrated or exploited. Roz’s awareness of this situation does not eliminate her efforts to convince herself of the opposite: “Surely she isn’t still trying; surely she isn’t still in the man-pleasing business. She’s given that up. I do it for me, she tells Tony” (RB 73). As Sally Robinson states: “It is important to consider how Woman, or the feminine, is a masculine concept that has real effects on women’s self-representation.”

The most severe and violent effects in these novels vary from self-mutilation to suicide attempts.

SOCIETAL IMPACTS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY

“There is a social and political reason to who we are,” writes Leslie Cagan. This is true of the characters Atwood creates. It is clear, for example, that parental influence plays a large role in most of the characters’ stories. Zenia tells Tony that it is good to be an orphan, because then one can be whomever one wants. Her interpretation of the state of being an orphan suggests a freedom; that is, less authoritative influence. Even though Elaine, Grace, Tony, Charis, and Roz are, as adults, orphans, the characters were once born into familial situations and contexts that are firmly constructed. Therefore ties to their parents, and often especially their mothers, are depicted as being hard to untie.

In Cat’s Eye, the adult Elaine is interviewed in connection to the retrospective exhibition of her art. There is hostility in the air during the interview. Elaine feels threatened by every question, feeling as if they are asked just for the purpose of pinning her down, labeling her. Her creative work is concerned mainly with the 1940s, “[t]hat was when I grew up,” she says. “ ‘Oh right, [the interviewer] says. ‘You mean it was formative. Can you talk about the ways, how it reflects in your work’ ” (CE 93, original emphasis)? Formative is a keyword in any discussion of the characters’ lives and upbringing. Moreover, the word formative can be exchanged for nor-

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50 Robinson 14.
52 When discussing The Robber Bride, Hilde Staels claims that the protagonists “cannot escape the facts of life that tie them to ‘home’, to the family and society in which they grew up”, Margaret Atwood’s Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1995) 199. This is not the
The small details that form the everyday life of, for instance, Elaine, are in a wider perspective highly gendered and part of a larger picture. The picture is one depiction of a patriarchal society which is divided into either/or categories and dichotomies. The either/or categories make personal development very problematic, or very easy depending on how you look at it. The either/or categories are visible, for instance in the place of school:

If you go in the wrong door you get the strap, or so everyone says. I am very curious about the BOYS door. How is going in through a door different if you’re a boy? What’s in there that merits the strap, just for seeing it? [...] The boys don’t have a separate classroom, they’re in with us. They go in the BOYS door and end up the same place we do. (CE 49)

Elaine’s remark “until we moved to Toronto I was happy” (CE 22) should be interpreted as if it was not until the settling down in “Toronto, the Good, Toronto, the Blue” (CE 13) that the normative structures became clear (blue) and visible. Elaine is right about the fact that the boys and the girls end up in the same physical place, but officially added are suddenly the normative either/or categories, the gendered constructions. Or other constructions just for the sake of strengthening the authority already in motion. For instance, left-handed Tony in The Robber Bride is not allowed to use her left hand in school, simply because it is not the norm. “Nobody told her why. About the closest she’d come to an explanation was a speech of Anthea’s — of her mother’s — in which she’d said that the world was not constructed for the left-handed” (RB 138). This shows both the constructedness of a society, and also how one actually learns to fit in the structure.

Not only school takes part in producing the preferred Woman, as in the example about the different entrances for boys and girls. The authorities change when the areas change, and in turn alters the meaning of Woman (or here, Girl). As children, Roz and Elaine have similar feelings: because of their families they both feel like outsiders from the community, and the wish for acceptance is great. Elaine wants girl friends — she has read about their existence in a book, and Roz feels that “she was among them, but she wasn’t part of them. So she would push and shove, trying to case when discussing Zenia, as she can easily move from one story to a new one. She can use conventional stories to her advantage, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

break her way in" (RB 325). There is no place for exceptions to the norm, being an outsider means being even more powerless. Consequently, it is not a real choice to become Girl/Woman, and an emphasis should be placed on normative rather than formative.

The place of family, of home, is important. The difficulty for Elaine of finding a place which is not predestined and closed is partly due to the uncommunicative — and therefore unquestioning — streak that runs in the families. (Authoritative) silence leaves many questions unanswered, and frequently unasked. Elaine explains that “[t]here’s a great deal they don’t say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It’s filled with wordlessness” (CE 98). Tony in *The Robber Bride* likewise testifies to how silent her family were when she grew up, which led to a war marked with silence that ultimately resulted in her parents’ death.

There are traces of Tony’s parents’ life together if we examine Tony’s marriage more closely. She always feels that she must protect West, especially from women such as Zenia – who has the power to ruin him, like her mother ruined her father. However, simultaneously she protects him from Tony herself: she is reluctant to share her thoughts with him; “She doesn’t want West peering in at anything that might be going on in her brain” (RB 16). The aggression Tony witnessed as a child leads to visible destruction, and Tony thus suppresses her emotional capacity and turns to studies in military history. Intellectually she knows what anger and violence are, but emotionally she keeps the lid on. She admits that, “[s]he isn’t sure what it would be like, to be enraged. Possibly too dangerous. Or else a relief” (RB 152). Like Roz, she has severe problems showing anger.

That Tony’s mother chooses not to be a wife or a mother is a catastrophe for the ones left behind: to Tony herself, and the wreck of her father. Tony comprehends that “[d]ogs ran away, cats, horses. Mothers did not” (RB 153). Accordingly, to avoid harming West, who has “already been damaged enough” (RB 110), she never leaves him. She thinks of him as “perfidious” (RB 39), but nevertheless he is — probably in remembrance of her father — “frangible” (RB 11). His frangibility makes

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54 Elaine learns that “Married women don’t have jobs; we know this from our mothers. There’s something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women” (CE 80-81).
him a sort of victim of war. To fulfill her view of what he wants her to be, a large part of her intellectual and emotional capacity is tuned down.\

Elaine’s friends’ mothers are authoritative voices on their own, but step aside when the authoritative voices of the fathers enter and demand to be heard. Cordelia represents the prime example of a person whose only possibility to communicate is to imitate the adult voices in her home. As a young child, her tone and choice of words are so painfully adult that it can only suggest that her own voice is brutally silenced at home. For example, Cordelia tells her friends about the woman who used to clean her family’s house: “The woman before this one,’ Cordelia tells us, in a hushed scandalized voice, ‘was caught stealing potatoes.’ [...] ‘It was so embarrassing.’ She means for them, not for the woman. ‘Of course we had to let her go’ ”(CE 76). Both her ‘hushed scandalized voice’ and her use of the pronoun ‘we’ give evidence of an imitation of an adult, authoritative and patronizing voice. Furthermore, Mrs. Smeath’s daughter Grace reproduces most probably her mother’s voice and words. Elaine describes Grace as someone who never becomes angry, raises her voices or cries. She is merely “quietly reproachful, as if her headache is our fault” (CE 55). Sarah Appleton Aguiar suggests that “Grace, the silent leader, is the embodiment of patriarchal upbringing in both the familial sense and the religious sense, and she subscribes to the brutalization of her own sex, as does her mother, Mrs. Smeath.”

Placed at the dinner table with Cordelia’s family, the father is portrayed as being in charge as he watches and judges. Elaine’s realization that “there will be no end to perfection” comes to the surface again, and again. Cordelia symbolically shrinks before her father’s eyes. “She’s frightened of not pleasing him. And yet he is not pleased. Elaine has seen it many times, her dithering, fumble-footed efforts to appease him. But nothing she can do or even say will ever be enough, because she is somehow the wrong person”(CE 268). Cordelia is still severely marked by the gaze of the Watchbird — both performing as one and “being performed” by one when she and Elaine start high school. Elaine observes, acting as the Watchbird, Cordelia’s manners when she is around boys. “Her attempts at conversation with them is performance, an

55 Tony says: “She once remarked to him that she could understand those kings who used to have their enemies’ skulls made into wine cups. This was a mistake: West likes to think of her as kind and beneficent. And forgiving, of course” (RB 14).

56 This is also elaborated on by Susan Strehle in Fiction in the Quantum Universe (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 169. Strehle discusses both the silences of the mothers of Elaine’s three friends, their inactivity, conventionality and also their placement in a sphere of domestic objects.

57 Appleton Aguiar 109.
imitation. Her laugh, when she is with them, is refined and low, like a woman’s laugh on the radio, except when she forgets herself”(CE 262).

Cordelia’s family appear to be as the opposite of the young Elaine’s mobile home. The freedom to move around, places Elaine’s family in a border landscape between a norm regulated society and apparent absolute freedom of choice. Many critics have regarded this as an indication of a family that is free from norms.\(^5^8\) Still, the question has been raised: of what it is in Elaine’s childhood that later makes her so vulnerable that she accepts herself as a victim?\(^5^9\) I wish to argue that her family is not as free from normative behaviorism as it might appear at first glance. One critic has noticed that Elaine, to a great extent, avoids describing her family.\(^6^0\) Elaine does say that before she moved to Toronto she was happy. But her memories of the pre-Cordelia childhood are more or less filled with a sort of nothingness. The endless road trips are, despite the constant change of scenery, just trips, a movement from one point to another, and relevant, or not, the points are picked by her father. The nothingness I have found can be observed in the scene where she watches her parents through a window and reflects: “It’s disquieting to look at them, in through the window, and know that they don’t know I can see them. It’s as if I don’t exist; or as if they don’t” (CE 72-73). There is a lack of descriptions of intimate conversations with her family; the sense of nothingness also springs from this silence. There are no conflicts, no arguments, no sense of intimacy: her parents are situated on the periphery. Yet, the stereotyped gender roles are nevertheless discernible. Her father is the working man, concerned more with work than with anything else, and still has the power to rule the conversation at the dinner table; and her mother, who strongly dislikes doing house work, nevertheless does the house work. She is a present character who is still absent, on the sideline. When they live in Toronto she is described as being fond of skating, gardening and she “doesn’t give a hoot” when it comes to fashion. She is even more on the periphery than Elaine’s father, even when considering the fact that she spends her days in the home, and that he is mostly absent from it. When Elaine goes through her many crises with her girlfriends — to faint on a regular basis, to tear the skin off

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\(^6^0\) Brooks Bouson 163.
her feet, for instance — her mother is awkwardly absent from the story, even though she is the one who most often meets Elaine at the place of home. Additionally, it is evident that Carol’s mother Mrs. Smeath, knows about what takes place in the name of friendship, and in the place of friendship, and she actively encourages the girl’s system of behavior. It is, after all, a miniature construction of the adult world. The adult Elaine suspects that her mother must have comprehended, like Mrs. Smeath, that Elaine was suffering, but chose to not intervene.

It is assumed by her family, and accordingly by Elaine herself, that Elaine will follow in her father’s footsteps; she is supposed to become a biologist. It is Elaine’s brother Stephen who commences the narrative about her, rather than Elaine herself: “Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once” (CE 3). Apart from the fact that this citation serves as an indicator of the great influence and, in a way also, power her brother had over Elaine, it verbalizes a wish or need for transgression of a place and situation governed by something out of control. Carol Osborne writes that Stephen has the power to control the narrative when Stephen and Elaine play war and he writes his name in the snow with his pee while she stands idly by. The episode is symbolic of his inscribed authority. Elaine comments on her brother when she states that “[s]ometimes [he] decides that it is his duty to educate me” (CE 233).

61 The situation with new girlfriends can be compared to a previous one, the role as a younger sister. Playing with her brother Stephen, for example his games of war, it is evident that it means playing according to his rules and definitions. He is the general and Elaine is the infantry: “‘You’re dead’, he says. ‘No, I’m not.’ ‘Yes, you are. They got you. Lie down’ There is no arguing with him, since he can see the enemy and I can’t. I have to lie down on the swampy ground propped against a stump to avoid getting too wet, until it’s time for me to be alive again” (CE 26). Elaine also comments: “Once in a while we fight. I don’t win these fights: Stephen is bigger and more ruthless than I am, and I want to play with him more than he wants to play with me” (CE 26). Furthermore, Stephen scares her, which is a way of showing who is in control. Thus, one can say that it is Elaine’s father who decides where the family should stay and when it is time for them to leave, and it is her brother who decides when and what games they should play, he even decides whether she is ‘dead’ or ‘alive’. See Katarina Gregersdotter, “’There will be no end to Perfection’: Transgressing Boundaries in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye”, in Monica Loeb and Gerald Porter (eds.), Dangerous Crossing (Umeå University: Acta Universitatis Umeensis, 1999) 145-152.

62 It is not surprising that Elaine wants to be like her father and/or brother, because they are not surrounded by Watchbirds, and therefore have the power of mobility.

63 Carol Osborne suggests that Atwood is “playing with Freud’s association of penis and pen.” “Constructing the Self Through Memory: Cat’s Eye as a Novel of Female Development,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies, 14.3(spring 1994) 98. See also June Deery, Twentieth Century Literature, 43.4 (winter 1997). Deery writes: “’Atwoods (male) scientists go on trying to make their mark, like young Stephen pee the names of planets in the sand.’” 482.
Roz, Charis, and Tony in *The Robber Bride* are depicted as striving to control their marriages and relationships, to mold them into shapes that they see as being the opposite to their parents’ marriages. It is a complicated issue, for at the same time as they all come from broken and troubled home environments, they accentuate their mothers’ roles, instead of turning to new patterns and solutions. Naturally, the accentuation leads to similarly closed homes with no or little possibility for personal mobility and dialogue. Like her mother who spends her life waiting for her husband to return from the war, Roz spends her time waiting for her husband Mitch to return home from one of his multiple adulterous affairs. “Smoking, eating, waiting, the story of my life” (RB 289) thinks Roz. Eating, drinking, and smoking is what she does to “[fill] up her inner spaces. As best she can” (RB 91). Hence, she follows the advice that the Sisters gave her in Catholic School: her love should be “selfless.” Most importantly, however, this shows that Roz is immobile — waiting — with no one to interact with in her home.

Even though Roz is rich, her money does not provide her with a sense of security or freedom to move. Her money is partly family money, acquired illegally by her father during the war. This is one reason behind her low self-esteem, her body and failed marriage being others. She ironically ponders over the label “Most Influential” which she has received in the media. “But if that kind of recognition is the measure of power, then Mickey Mouse is a million times more powerful than she is, and Mickey Mouse doesn’t even exist” (RB 88). She has a brilliant business profile in Toronto, but she experiences limitations in her workplace, even though she is the boss. However, she is not only a boss. She is a female boss. With Bakhtin’s speech genres as a layer here, Roz exemplifies my argument that the speech genre is often gendered. Roz’s gender brings to the work place a whole set of attributes she must consider in her daily doings. She knows that “[w]omen don’t look at you and think Boss. They look at you and think Woman, as in *Just another one, like me, and where does she get off*” (RB 88, original emphasis)? Roz understands that the fact of her gender requires a certain kind of behavior, especially if you hire women: “you have to make them into

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64 Hilde Staels makes clear that Atwood’s characters often “rely on social and moral presuppositions of earlier generations against which they affirm themselves.” 216.

65 Noteworthy is that critics have found a recurring theme of food and eating in Atwood’s writing, and it is made political. See, for instance, Emma Parker, “You Are What You Eat. The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (fall 1995).
your girlfriends, into pals; you have to pretend you’re all equal which is hard when you’re twice their age” (RB 89).

PLACES OF BITCHES, VIOLENCE, AND WAR

“Why do I hate her so much” (CE 62), asks the adult Elaine when thinking back on Mrs. Smeath. That the stories of the gender construction of the characters in the three texts are more than simple descriptions and observations of places of childhood and adulthood are clear. Hatred is there. Bitches are everywhere: Mrs. Smeath, Cordelia, Grace, Carol, (the older) Elaine, and finally and most importantly, Zenia.

Generally speaking, a bitch is only a bitch in comparison to a woman who is not. That is, the not bitchy woman is gentle, and not selfish and aggressive. The fact that the bitch is always compared to ‘good’ compliant women is traditionally how the bitch is produced.

In Atwood’s novels, the bitch is, more than anything else, a woman who is aggressively imposing patriarchal norms on other women, and the bitches are not bitches unless they hurt other women. That Zenia hurts men in the novel can not be judged as being as destructive and “bitchy” as when she hurts Tony, Charis, or Roz. Secondly, being a bitch is also to have power; power that is limited, of course, because it is not the power to transgress femininity. After having scared Cordelia, Elaine ponders: “I have a denser, more malevolent little triumph to finger: energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (CE 250). In Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s The Bitch is Back, the author claims, in line with for example Molly Hite, that “[t]he ‘evil’ of each bitch becomes a surrogate evil; that is, the vengeance of the bitch is misdirected toward another woman instead of toward the repressive forces she initially intended to challenge.”66 This is apparent especially when we look at Cat’s Eye. As I have shown in the previous sections in this chapter, the women and girls, with perhaps Cordelia as the standard bearer, are molded into Watchbirds and bitches. Their behavior and their use of language are imitations and proof of a type of stability and upholding of patriarchal values. Appleton Aguiar continues:

66 Appleton Aguiar 99.
Unlike so many of the portrayals of the bitch in male-authored fiction, contemporary feminist renderings of the bitch suggest that she is not born a bitch, as was, for example, Steinbeck’s Cathy Trask or Turow’s Carolyn Polhemus; she is instead, created by specific circumstances and, more importantly, by herself. This character makes the choice, either consciously or subconsciously, to reject the traditional roles open to her and to possess power, a power that is always presupposed to have been usurped from the male sphere. And although in most cases she does not reject her femininity, she does reject the social limitations of femininity.\textsuperscript{67}

Here, Appleton Aguiar suggests that in feminist authored fiction the bitch is ‘created by specific circumstances and […] by her self.’ This is, so far, in line with, for example, Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath in \textit{Cat’s Eye}. That Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath would reject their traditional roles is, on the other hand, less true. Supported by Foucault’s and Berger’s theories, I claim that the two characters only act as is expected of them. Their cruelty never reaches beyond, nor affects, the ‘male sphere’ in any way. As “anyone can work this apparatus of surveillance,” anyone includes women, a fact that is stressed through the presence of the Watchbird. Elaine’s bitchiness is directed towards girls, as she was once the target of her girlfriends’ cruelty. “Girls at school learn to look out for my mean mouth and avoid it. I walk the halls surrounded by an aura of potential verbal danger, and am treated with caution, which suits me fine” (CE 251). Elaine takes the pejorative words, the hate speech, and uses them to exercise power.

Another type of bitch is the hyper-bitch Zenia, who is a multi-faceted figure. She is described at times as so feminine that she is almost in drag. A dream-woman, a caricature of a woman. Consider for a moment the headlines to a couple of reviews of \textit{The Robber Bride}. “Three Heroines and a Woman They Love to Hate”\textsuperscript{68} and “Every Wife’s Nightmare”\textsuperscript{69} signal conventional roles for women. Tony, Charis, and Roz are heroines, and Zenia is the dangerous femme fatale whom they love to hate. And at a first surface glance, Zenia fits the description Appleton Aguiar gives of the traditional bitch in male-authored fiction. She “is often an insatiably voracious figure. Devouring the souls of her victims, she seduces, betrays, murders, castrates, and mercilessly

\textsuperscript{67} Appleton Aguiar 98.
abuses those whose gentler and ‘finer’ natures allow her to trample them." She continues to explain that the bitch, in other works, has a double purpose; “both to comparatively highlight the virtuous woman’s goodness and to act as an insidious emissary of patriarchy; doing the dirtiest of ‘dirt work,’ she is a double agent in the gender battles.” I agree that the bitch Zenia has a double purpose, much like the talked about doll. But whereas the doll’s dual function is to describe and prescribe gendered behavior, Zenia has another function in the story. She is not there to highlight the other women’s good sides, she is there to emphasize the constructedness of femininity. Furthermore, Zenia’s bitchy stories create chaos in order and disrupt the structures. This argument will be developed further in the following chapter.

Atwood’s texts describe brutal and sometimes blood-dripping experiences and feelings. The sense of being defined and confined is often an image of a prison as I have tried to show. The critical observations of society are obvious: it can be a severely destructive place, and in extreme cases it can lead to death. That Elaine connects an exhibition of her art with an execution or the act of committing suicide is simply one example of many. Merely returning to Toronto as an adult brings violence into the present: “I’ve started to chew my fingers again. There’s blood, a taste I can remember” (CE 9). One of the more extraordinary deaths in Cat’s Eye becomes even more extraordinary in comparison with the fates of the other characters. Elaine’s brother Stephen dies at the hands of terrorists. Compared with a mentioned suicide, a possible suicide, and other less dramatic vanishing of women, the terrorist-caused death is, if the reader ignores the tragedy of it, very heroic. It would be heroic on its own, but in comparison, the death of Stephen is an appropriate way for a man to go. Whereas simply disappearing into a phone book, as Elaine mentioned, is never heroic. Death in Cat’s Eye, from this point of view, becomes gendered.

Violence has more or less a “natural” place in The Robber Bride due to the recurring theme of war. The protagonists grow up in wartime — both World War Two and the wars in their homes. Their marriages are also laden with war symbols. Witnessing the wounds of the victims incites protectiveness in all three characters, as adults, toward their respective boyfriends and husbands. Having failed to protect her family, i.e. Mitch, Roz attempts suicide. Mitch has previously drowned.

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70 Appleton Aguiar 34.
71 Appleton Aguiar 34.
War affects all the protagonists, leaving their families “dislocated,” the war “literally tore them apart.”\textsuperscript{72} Tony chooses to become a military historian. When she describes her childhood to Zenia, her choice of profession seems a natural consequence. Her parents have a disastrous marriage and Tony is used as an intermediary between the two combatants in a civil war: her mother and her father. Their arguments develop war fantasies and she describes her family as follows: “Her mother was a war bride, her father was a war husband, she herself was a war baby. She was an accident” (RB 158). In between the arguments there is silence. One plausible conclusion is that it is partly due to this that Tony becomes interested in war. The clues to who she is, lie buried under the arguments and silence. They are, in reality, buried under war itself. The war must be deconstructed, but it is a difficult job:

Tony sits on the floor, looking at her father and wondering about the war, which is such a mystery to her but which appears to have been decisive in her life. She would like to ask him about the battles, and if she can look at the gun; but she knows already that he will evade these questions, as if there’s some sore place on him that he must protect. A raw place. He will keep her from putting her hand on it. (RB 146)

The aggression and frustration that are the foundation of Tony’s parents’ marriage effectively silence the child Tony. She tiptoes in their presence, something she continues to do in her own marriage with West. “She didn’t want to disturb West by working in her office […] Her computer makes beeping sounds, and the light could wake him” (RB 110).

When Tony’s mother suddenly vanishes from the home never to return again, her departure and absence create an even greater chaos. Tony’s father takes to drinking and finally commits suicide.

Zenia, who has no parents, is compared to, among many other things, the female warrior Dame Giraud. She is also the one who is guilty of wounding West, Tony ironically thinks, “[h]earth and home are what [West] needs, not a feckless, mossless rover like Zenia, and Tony is such a busy little housewife — isn’t this cunning food” (RB 182)! Consequently, even though Tony is surrounded by war she adopts a woman’s typical position in battle: not in the line of fire as much as taking care of the wounded men, in this case her husband West. When discussing the Gulf war she ex-

\textsuperscript{72} Atwood speaks of this in an interview with Staels, “You Can’t Do Without Your Shadow,” 212.
plains: “And maybe women soldiers will get a crack at the front-line combat, strike a blow for feminism. Though I doubt it. They’ll probably just be doing bandages-as-usual” (RB 30). Once, Tony and West’s lovemaking is actually compared to Tony dragging West away from the battlefield and tending to his wounds (RB 179). Tony suppresses her wish for action, for, indeed, she has such a desire. As mentioned previously, it is Zenia’s story that hurts West, and Zenia can hardly be described as ‘doing bandages.’ Nevertheless she is complex. She is on the one hand so extremely feminine that she at times appears to be a (male and then also female) fantasy. On the other hand, her femininity is a construction, a performance and in combination with active aggression she destroys both the women and men she encounters, thus showing that Tony really desires to be an active, rather than a passive, agent. She desires to be an active part of events that will, in the end, effect her. Her interest in war is morbid to most people in her surroundings, even at the department where she works, where both the men and women think she ought to do something else. “She will be patted on the head, praised, fed a few élite dog biscuits, and dismissed, while the boys in the backroom get down to the real issue, which is which one of them will be the next society president” (RB 109). Her friends Roz and Charis think she is cold and calculating, but Charis sees her limitations, as a woman: “Maybe that’s who Tony was, in a previous life: Julius Caesar. Maybe Julius Caesar has been sent back in the body of a woman to punish him. A very short woman, so he can see what it’s like, to be powerless” (RB 66). Her husband West is shocked when she talks of violent details of ancient wars; therefore she chooses to act silently and adopts a protectiveness towards West that reduces her own ability to move and act. In contradiction, and at the same time, she realizes that it is all a construction: “She puts a lot of effort into keeping it together, her willed illusion of comfort and stability, the words flowing from left to right, the routines of love; but underneath is darkness” (RB 35).

Charis’s entire childhood is bloodstained. Her mother (who is a widow, her husband having died during the war) physically abuses Charis. Her mother is later hospitalized and lobotomized. After her mother’s death, and a short sojourn at her grandmother’s, she lives with her aunt and uncle where she is sexually abused by her uncle. The adult Charis lives isolated on an island with only the occasional visit from her daughter, and Tony and Roz. Strong emotions scare her, even stories of strong emotions scare her. This attitude stems from her many personal encounters with violence. When she was hit by her mother she
cried a lot...not just because it hurt but because she was supposed to show that she was sorry, although she was confused about why. Also, if she didn’t cry her mother would keep on hitting her until she did. You hard girl! But she had to stop at the right moment or her mother would hit her for crying. Stop that noise! (RB 235, original emphasis.)

This requires a great amount of self-control and also self-denial. It furthermore resembles Elaine’s observation that there is no end to perfection, because however you act it is wrong. There are clearly places where one must not go. Elaine’s emotions and reactions serve only to please — and obey — an authority. Her relationship to Billy follows this pattern;73 as West could, in the eyes of his wife Tony, be compared to a victim of war, so can Charis’ boyfriend Billy. He is an American deserter during the Vietnam War. She romanticizes the picture of him and his nation and he is in her words “a prisoner of war.” She cannot picture him being anything else than a victim — “He was so lost, so wounded, how could she refuse to offer him whatever comfort she had” (RB 214)? — and her role is to take care of him. Charis’ and Billy’s relationship gives the impression of being monological and is based on submission and pain on the part of Charis, as is shown in this example: “Sometimes he did things that hurt...but since she didn’t mention this, how was he supposed to know”(RB 208). Her previous childhood traumas have made her “soft,” so soft, in fact, that she loses her self in her own smoothness. “She was so soft there was no resistance. Hard things sank into her, they went right through her; and if she made a real effort, out the other side. Then she didn’t have to see them or hear them, or touch them even” (RB 41). When Billy eventually leaves her to go with Zenia, he leaves a trail of blood after him: he kills her chicken.

We often see Grace Marks through the eyes of her own private Watchbird and psychiatrist, Dr. Jordan. Atwood lets him reflect the Victorian view — and a quite perverted version of it — of women, where the categorizations are dramatic and romanticized. The place of Grace is a confessional place, and in Jeremy Tambling’s

73 Charis lived with another man before Billy. The relationship came to a brutal end and it confused her, because, “hadn’t she been affectionate enough, hadn’t she nodded her head when he talked, hadn’t she laid herself down compliance, whenever he wanted her to, hadn’t she washed the sheets afterwards, hadn’t she tended him? She was not an ungenerous person” (RB 209).
opinion, confession as a phenomenon often reflects subject matters concerned with sexuality. This is also exemplified in *Alias Grace*:

> Once you start feeling sorry for yourself they've got you where they want you. Then they send for the Chaplain. Oh come to my arms, poor wandering soul. [...] Describe how conscience tortures you day and night [...] Shed tears of remorse. Confess, confess. Let me forgive and pity. [...] And then what did he do? Oh shocking. And then what? The left hand or the right? How far up, exactly? Show me where. (AG 35)

This picture stresses the Madonna/Whore division, as well. However, it is suggested that Grace should simultaneously act as Madonna *and* Whore, combining sexual innocence with sexual experience.

Before moving on, the difference between, for example, Cordelia and Grace should be foregrounded here. Cordelia is active, or as active as the political gendered structures allow her to be, and her activities are limited to practices allowed within the patriarchal discourse. Grace, on the other hand is highly immobile, non-active, in her cell, and due to her status as a woman prisoner. Dr. Jordan simply applies behavior and appearance onto her, like a painter fills a canvas. Grace, as Dr. Jordan construes her, goes from lady to whore and back, and as repeated before, both these types exist to please others. Donna Haraway maintains that the myths of our Western patriarchal cultures work as colonizing tools, and, in her novels, Atwood exemplifies that the myths live on in our time. In sum, a woman is either a victim and then receives angelic traits, or the woman is an extremely eroticized being, and then compared to a prostitute. Atwood says herself: “It is very eroticized in the art of the period, in the painting, in the operas, in the poetry. It was really a very attractive thing to the male artist of the period, rescuing the crazy, fainting woman.” In this light, Dr. Jordan is an artist as much as he is a doctor. He is a Watchbird artist because he creates Grace every time he meets her, he had started to create her even before they conduct their first meeting. She is at one time called “a project” (AG 188), and on another occasion Grace herself describes Dr. Jordan as an artist of sorts: “While he writes, I feel as if he

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is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me — drawing on my skin” (AG 69).

She describes the feeling on the one hand as tickling, as she feels he is drawing with an “old-fashioned goose-pen,” but using the feather end. On the other hand, this feeling of being drawn creates a violent image “of being wide-eyed awake and watchful,” and “torn open” (AG 69).

Dr. Jordan frequently loses himself in fantasies of women. The fantasies are sexual, and almost always violent. There are many examples of this. He thinks of Grace: “Some days he would like to slap her. The temptation is almost overwhelming. But then she would have trapped him; then she would have a reason for resisting him. She would turn on him that gaze of a wounded doe which all women keep in store for such occasions” (AG 362). In this passage he reconstructs Grace’s place, he renders her the power of the gaze when in fact it is still his own. With his “knowledge” of her gaze, this suggests that either he has abused women before or at least read about this somewhere. He thinks of his landlady, Rachel, with whom he has a sexual liaison: “He would like to make an incision in her — just a small one — so he can taste her blood, which in the shadowy darkness of the bedroom seems like a normal wish to have” (AG 365-366).

Dr. Jordan in Alias Grace has what he believes to be access to the true story of Grace. She is a woman, however, and he can therefore conclude that “[her] will is of the female negative variety - she can deny and reject much more easily than she can affirm or accept” (AG 362). He detects a “cunning look in the corner of her eye,” yet she is “outwardly calm as a Madonna” (AG 362). Finally, Dr. Jordan reflects on the constructedness of the situation: “A prison does not only lock its inmates in, it keeps all others out. Her strongest prison is her own construction”(AG 362). Dr. Jordan is aware of her “own construction” yet is ignorant of the fact that he himself has a judgmental, predetermined view of her and the institutionalization of Grace — as in the example above — both indisputable part of the construction/s.

Atwood helps create a Victorian atmosphere when she prefaces the sections of the novel with quotations from Victorian authors. It is within the Victorian frame that Dr. Jordan’s predetermined opinions are born. One woman betrayed in love is accordingly described as a woman who “could be seen wandering in a distracted manner by the lakeshore in a black dress and cloak and a black veil blowing in the
wind, and some said she was intending to do her self in” (AG 427). When suggesting that “she was intending to do herself in” with the impersonal, neutral pronoun “some” it is all that is necessary to give authority to the suggestion. The suggestion thus becomes storytelling.

The on-living myths are present in Cat’s Eye as well. Elaine is playing with her friends Cordelia, Grace, and Carol:

‘Now kill yourself,’ says Cordelia.
‘Why?’ says Grace.
‘Because you’ve been deserted,’ says Cordelia. (CE 78)

Dr. Jordan’s view of women is influenced by the polarities Madonna/Whore and has its foundation in the myths of that particular period. Good Housekeeping did not exist at the time, but other ‘sources of information’ did. For example, one of the preceding quotations is taken from woman Watchbird Isabel Beeton’s Beeton’s Book of Household Management, 1859-61. She deals with hysterical women, and depicts the fits of hysteria as fits that most commonly take place in young, nervous and unmarried women (AG 137). The behavior of the distressed woman dressed in black, is explained in the light of this, she walks on the shore, acting as she is expected to. Furthermore, she lets herself be on display: everyone can watch her on the beach and thus with relief conclude that she is behaving properly. Maybe she deserves to die? Maybe, in Stephen King’s words: “you have to be a high-riding bitch to survive”?

The societal, heterosexual norms are concretized in the homes Atwood describes in her fiction. The families function best with clear roles for the women, and for the men. The dualistic system run through most layers of most places: schools, work places, marriages, families. The different doors at Elaine’s school perhaps best exemplify this system.

77 André Brink sees the quotations as a means to make the reader aware of an entrance into “a textualized and storified world” in Nuttel and Coetzee, 34.
78 Margaret Atwood claims that if one reads Beeton’s Book of Household Management, “you will hear that in the evenings ladies should be doing needlework while somebody else reads an instructive book out loud to them, explaining the difficult parts.” In “Margaret Atwood Speaks to the TCTE May Gathering – May 25/95.” http://www.web.net/owtoad/q.htm
Atwood at times emphasizes the enclosed nature of places by including places such as islands, basements, prisons, ravines, and even holes in the ground. Naturally, in a place such as a prison a certain behavior is demanded of the person in the place. However, basements can function in the same way as the dangerous ravine. Most—or all—places in the novels are gender marked.

In many ways story and place are connected in the texts. When a subject is objectified and thus deprived of power—even the power to speak—the difficulties of being oneself part of the construction and storytelling of one's own subjectivity and place are paramount. The place is always constructed by someone else and the story is told by someone else. “[T]here were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was the former and she the latter” (RB 312), and there are then, logically, story tellers and story tellees. Furthermore, on the subject of storytelling, when naming is a tool for power, and power exercised, it means to have the power to narrate someone else’s story, life and body. One name is Woman.

The Watchbird’s role is twofold. It regulates the behavior and appearance of girls and women in Atwood’s fiction. Concurrently, it makes perfection impossible. It is internalized, and therefore difficult to escape. As Elaine says:

> Cordelia seems to forget about improving anybody, and I think she may have given up on it. I’m expected to behave as if nothing has ever happened. But it’s hard for me to do this, because I feel I’m always being watched. At any time I may step over some line I don’t even know is there. (CE 129)

The gaze of the Watchbird has no beginning and no end. When someone appears to have stopped watching, someone else continues the gaze.

The self-surveillance and self-consciousness which are produced can lead to violence or images of violence. Atwood describes being watched at all times as an extreme situation. Suicide attempts, self-mutilations, and fantasies of hurting other people, render other people—other women—immobile. The presence of the bitch is also a result of a fundamental, patriarchal society which actively discourages friendships between women.

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79 This is an often-discussed concern in and about Atwood’s writing. See for example, Hilde Staehls, *Margaret Atwood’s Novels. A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1995).
CHAPTER THREE RE-WATCHING AND RE-TELLING SELF AND PLACE

When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it to yourself or to someone else.

Alias Grace

Perhaps I will tell you lies.

Grace Marks to Dr. Jordan, in Alias Grace

Through the interaction with others, it can be possible on a symbolic level for the protagonists in Margaret Atwood’s novels to visit the past. It is in fact crucial not to visit, but to re-watch their pasts, their personal histories and their stories, in order for them to try and claim place/s and voice/s of their own. A type of re-watching of the place is imperative.

Through the act of re-watching it becomes possible to build and achieve a new kind of power in the place where they are situated. Or rather, by re-watching, power is consequently produced in the place. By re-watching I refer to the act of critically observing the familiar and normative environment/place and the monological, traditional stories which are the basis of one’s own femininity.

By power I refer to a power of mobility and speaking without being watched and judged by the Watchbird, the foucauldian eye. This is when it becomes possible to say ‘Perhaps I will tell you lies,’ as Grace Marks tells Dr. Jordan. The power lies not in the word ‘lies’ but in ‘perhaps.’ It suggests an amount of uncertainty. It suggests freedom. It means that a new story is possible, and, as a consequence a new side to one’s self.
However, as I will demonstrate, a new story, and a new “sight” is not attainable without interacting with others. A new story is only possible if it is told to someone else. In the novels, re-watching is born out of a dialogic interaction between subjects. In the previous chapter I referred to the places of the women as either gendered places or prisons. Following a similar line of reasoning, Roberta Rubenstein calls Atwood’s characters escape artists, which suits the themes of this chapter. It both implies a type of (social) imprisonment and a necessity to tear (prison) walls down. At the beginning of Cat’s Eye, there is a significant scene where Elaine and Cordelia ride the bus. They play games, outstaring other passengers, and making fun of most of them. There are some people on the bus though, who win the girls’ positive attention; they are those who stand out. Elaine explains:

This is the kind we like best. They have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention, they don’t care what people think. They have escaped, though what it is they’ve escaped from isn’t clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose. (CE 5)

Even though the weird passengers may not have chosen their ‘verbal tics,’ Elaine here captures what it means to be unwatched by others. To be unwatched is at the heart of being mobile. Those unwatched do not have to care about what others think, they ‘have escaped’ and can therefore make choices that are against the normative stories that produce and re-produce subjects.

Such mobility can be likened to what Rosi Braidotti calls nomadic mobility. She says that “[n]ot all nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling.” For example, The Robber Bride’s Zenia is a manifestation of nomadic mobility. In particular, she subverts most conventions of femininity. Furthermore, Lucy Sargison challenges the old notion of a Utopia as the perfect state which in turn postulates that no changes are necessary, “[t]o perfect is to complete.” On the contrary, she explains that Perfect is

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Thus, a subject can move without actually moving, and stay in the same place and still be mobile. In order to avoid being locked into the power structures of a patriarchal society, it is the attitude to, and questioning of, power that has to be in motion.

In this chapter, I will first of all discuss Elaine in *Cat’s Eye* and show how she uses her artistic expressions as methods to communicate and reverse the gaze of patriarchy. It is appropriate to summarize Elaine’s art in three words: Cordelia, the Virgin Mary, and the cat’s eye. These motifs will be dealt with separately.

Next I will talk about *The Robber Bride*’s Zenia, first separately, and then together with Tony, Roz, and Charis. Each of these women use Zenia’s stories of femininity and stories of transgressions in order to re-watch themselves and their places. Her stories lead to their new stories.

Finally I will discuss Grace in *Alias Grace*, who, as Elaine, communicates through art. Furthermore, she has two friends who she can speak through and to. These contacts increase her mobility. Friendship, mobility, and interaction are key terms in each novel.

**HALF A FACE: ELAINE**

I call the section about Elaine Half a Face because Atwood gives a clear picture of a subject who is only half a subject without interactive participation. It is also an indication of Elaine’s situation as watcher and watchee.

Verena Bühler Roth argues that, contrary to the opinion of many critics, *Cat’s Eye* is not a “portrait of the woman artist” as much as it is a portrait of a “woman and a subject in relation to society.” I would like to expand her argument by saying that by expressing herself by painting, Elaine is transforming herself from an object to a subject. She is a subject in process. Time past and present are intertwined at the gallery Sub-versions when Elaine’s older eyes and voice are added to her younger artistic utterances. I regard her works of art as being utterances, in the same manner as Bakhtin calls novels utterances. Utterance, says Bakhtin, is something that belongs to oth-

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4 One of Elaine’s paintings is called Half a Face. It will be discussed below.
ers and not only the performer. Elaine's art can therefore be said to be one or many voices in a multifold dialogue. Firstly, the dialogic interaction takes place between, Elaine's younger and older self. Secondly, the motifs of her art, in particular Cordelia, are addressees. Thirdly, her art speaks to the people at the gallery who watch her paintings.

As Elaine's paintings are her utterances, they are there to give rise to questions and responses in herself as well as in her addressees. Bühler Roth proceeds to say, "When the I-narrator talks about her paintings, the focus is on their private iconography and thus the paintings reflect in a non-linguistic, symbolic way the complex experiences of Elaine." 6 J. Brooks Bouson rightly claims that there is a strong focus in Cat's Eye on the connection between Elaine's life and art. Her art "finds its source not only in loss and yearning but also in fear and anger," the novel "enacts what it depicts: the transformation of deep emotional trauma into a complex and coded work of art." 7 Yet, her artistic tendencies begin to take shape after her near-death experience, therefore her art has actually a connection to her (possible) death as well as her life. Furthermore, I maintain that it is not only a transformation of an emotional trauma but a product and dialogic response to such a trauma.

Every traumatic experience in Elaine's life is an end result of the existence of the Watchbird. As established, Elaine is surrounded by Watchbirds — the internalized eye of the power structures — in various shapes. A Watchbird has nested in her own mind — the only place a Watchbird nests — and as a result Elaine is the victim of a split identity. 8 She is concurrently a watcher and a watchee. This state of (oppositional) duality, of course, creates an extremely efficient system of upholding traditional behavior in society. It can be a difficult task to oppose or re-watch something that is so deeply rooted in oneself that it appears as something intrinsic, rather than something achieved, something gained.

Elaine re-watches her life in a chronological manner, as her art is also ordered chronologically at the gallery. Thus, the narrative of Cat's Eye is divided into two narrations and two voices. Yet it should be pointed out that it is the adult Elaine who

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6 Bühler Roth 103.
7 J. Brooks Bouson, Brutal Choreographies — Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) 160-161.
speaks the two voices, and therefore the childhood version results in a child’s experiences told from an adult’s point of view. One commentator stresses the point that the past is gone, and “[Elaine’s] paintings embody time past as she saw it then. They also change through time because they are regarded from different temporal viewpoints.”

The confirmation of, and confrontation with, her past combine different voices, leading to a dialogue with Elaine’s self, thus allowing the self to be in a state of flux. The adult, the child, the artist, the woman, the girl, the friend, the Watchbird, the bullied; all of these subject positions may seem to be labels as they define her. Still, in her art the labels/subject positions are allowed to blend with each other. They become negotiations, because they are regarded ‘from different temporal viewpoints.’ Most importantly, they are negotiations because they are, at the gallery, made accessible to others. Her paintings are co-watched. As Eleonora Rao states, Elaine’s memories are “no longer pure recollection, but [blend] with the present. The effect is one of simultaneous relevance: sequence is transposed into coexistence, that is into a series of present moments.”

However, the ‘coexistence’ spoken of is also a coexistence of all the new voices and eyes which are present at the gallery.

Elaine’s dialogue with herself, and with others, is by no means an easy one, Elaine is a complex subject to converse with. Her inauspicious attitude towards the art exhibition is a sign of discomfort with herself and with potential meetings with new Watchbirds. Lynne Pearce discusses dialogic obstacles in her reading of Wuthering Heights. In the novel, Pearce locates characters who consciously resist dialogue. They are prone to shouting and abuse, verbally and physically. Margaret Atwood’s Elaine Risley is also an example of someone who consciously resists dialogic encounters. This is a natural outcome of how she has been (mis)treated by previous interlocutors who were never interested in a dialogue, only in monologic storytelling and oppression. For example, Elaine assumes she meets a judgmental journalist. The following dialogue is a sign of her reluctance to enter into dialogue with other people and in particular people who have views on her art. She initially fails to see the dialogic opportunity that her art in fact provides:

9 For a discussion of this, see Chimny Banerjee’s “Atwood’s Time: Hiding Art in Cat’s Eye”, Modern Fiction Studies, 36.4 (winter 1990).
10 June Deery, “Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood’s Body of Knowledge.” Twentieth Century Literature 43.4 (winter 1997) 481.
12 Lynne Pearce, Reading Dialogics (New York: Routledge, 1994) 93.
‘Do men like your work?’ [the journalist] asks slyly. She’s been going through the back files, she’s seen some of those witch-and-succubus pieces.
‘Which men?’ I say. ‘Not everyone likes my work. It’s not because I’m a woman. If they don’t like a man’s work it’s not because he’s a man. They just don’t like it.’ I am on dubious ground, and this enrages me. My voice is calm; the coffee seethes within me.
She frowns, diddles with the tape-recorder. ‘Why do you paint all those women then?’
‘What should I paint, men?’ I say. [...] Everyone paints women. Is there something wrong with painting women?’
‘But not like that,’ she says.
‘Like what?’ I say. ‘Anyway, why should my women be the same as everyone else’s women?’ (CE 95)

Here, Elaine also articulates her attitude to the much-encountered controlling gaze that tries to fix identities of women. She objects to the norm of how women are usually portrayed (‘Everyone paints women’) and expresses her own effort to break the norm (‘why would my women be the same as everyone else’s women?’) Molly Hite maintains that the narrative mainly deals with visibility; with avoiding the gaze, or the ownership of the gaze. The gaze is the gaze of the Watchbird: and the gaze produces intricate power structures. Seeing, says Hite, is both the precondition and the eventual product of art: “So much depends on how you look at it.” Furthermore: so much depends on who looks at it; whose eyes and voice are added to it.

However, Elaine is a reluctant time traveler, to use Lyn Mikel Brown’s phrase. She seems not fully aware of her own dialogic attempts. Elaine can feel “[t]he smell of blood on the wall” (CE 90), which leads us momentarily back to the earlier discussion about survival in a violent place. When she enters the gallery, ‘the smell of blood on the wall’ becomes her description of her view of art in general, and of her own art in particular. Her reaction is symptomatic of a place and past where there exists much pain. The smell of blood represents the violent constructions in the past: Cordelia’s tortures, Elaine’s treatment of herself, her systematic skin peeling sessions, her suicide attempt as well as Cordelia’s. What is important to remember

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13 Diana Brydon comments on Elaine’s feminist art by saying that “she creates her own images of women in her paintings, which counter both classical, painterly systems of representation and the socially prescribed gender roles of her period.” “‘Empire Bloomers’: Cross-Dressing’s Double Cross” in Essays on Canadian Writing 54 (1994): 30.

14 Hite 137.

here is also her vision of herself/another with half the face burnt off. The ‘smell of blood’ also leads to the image of a violent imprisonment, where traces of the cruel treatment are left on the walls.

Emotional — and violent — imprisonment is the key to Elaine’s reluctance to participate in the retrospective exhibition in the first place. “[P]ost this, post that. Everything is post these days, as if we’re all just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own” (CE 90). Having been defined in her past she eludes additional labels, and she has strong feelings about the critique that her art receives. Her attitude toward critics, and especially the internalized Watchbirds she detects in female critics, is highly negative. Despite the fact that a retrospective means meeting with all types of Watchbirds, one commentator writes that Elaine wishes her paintings to be current, and this is the reason why she has such ambivalent feelings about the art exhibition.16 This is, in fact, a very Bakhtinian principle. Bakhtin writes, that that “which has meaning only as ‘earlier or ‘later’, which is sufficient only unto its own moment, which is valid only as past or as future, or as present in relation to past or future” is not essential. By painting, Elaine refuses to be categorized, frozen in time. Even though it can be argued that “Risley’s rebellion is public resistance to trends set both by the establishment and the “alternatives” including mainstream feminism,”17 it needs to be stressed, however, that there is nothing ambivalent in her art: her paintings are clear dialogic attempts and statements. Martha Sharpe likens Elaine to a “dissident woman artist.” A dissident is, then, someone who seeks to subvert oppressive and/or stagnant languages and laws in society.18 Sharpe writes that Elaine’s “combination of science with private symbolization” challenges language and linear time and crosses the narrow limitations regarding women’s communication.20 Thus, Elaine’s art is not ambivalent, but Elaine’s own emotions are: she risks

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18 Jill LeBihan, “The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye and Interlunar: Margaret Atwood’s Feminist (?) Futures (?)” in Howells and Hunter, 99.
19 Martha Sharpe, “Margaret Atwood and Julia Kristeva: Space-Time, the Dissident Woman Artist, and the pursuit of Female Solidarity in Cat’s Eye.” Essays on Canadian Writing 50 (fall 1993) 175. An important detail is that the gallery where Elaine’s art is shown is called Sub-Versions.
20 Sharpe 177. Donna Haraway writes, “Women know very well that knowledge from the natural sciences has been used in the interests of our domination and not our liberation. […] Moreover, general exclusion from science has only made our exploitation more acute. “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic: A Political Physiology of Dominance” in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvestment of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991) 8.
being watched again, and it is a dialogic obstacle she slowly overcomes. When the interviewer suggests that Elaine is a feminist painter, she resents the whole idea, simply because the word is a threat to her; it categorizes her, gives her a new role.

CORDELIA

Elaine’s very first — and very limited — encounter with some sort of artistic expression occurs together with her girlfriends Grace and Carol. Grace owns an Esther Williams coloring book that she, under rigid supervision, lets Elaine and Carol use. Elaine is told what colors to use and how important it is to keep within the lines. The Esther Williams coloring book encourages only traditional storytelling and watching of women. The woman must be produced and kept within the lines on the pages of the book. This type of exercise does not leave much to her imagination. It is used to create and recreate the expected image of a woman. When Cordelia has entered the stage, she becomes a feminist of sorts in these gatherings. She objects to the stereotyping of women by drawing mustaches on their faces in the magazines and (returns the) hairs under their arms. “The grotesqueries of the body were always of interest to her,” (CE 7) thinks the adult Elaine and reminisces how she and Cordelia used to make fun of Cordelia’s sisters and their many beauty products. The ‘grosserquies of the body’ turn out to be an observable motif in the adult Elaine’s art.

Several critics have emphasized the unorthodox sides of Cordelia, and claim that she triggered Elaine into the art world. Shannon Hengen suggests that “the wonderfully imaginative quality of Cordelia’s childhood plots [is] a quality that helps shape Elaine’s own imagination and contributes to Elaine’s decision to pursue a career as an artist rather than a biologist.”

Elaine and Cordelia admire those individuals “who don’t care what people think” (CE 5). Lyn Mikael Brown sees a brave girl in Cordelia, who invites Elaine “to know the unknowable, to speak the unspeakable.” Cordelia is a Watchbird produced in a patriarchal society, even though she tries her hardest to distort her role. Because of her imaginative power and wildness, Cordelia is attrac-

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22 Brown, 290. See also Carol Osborne’s “Constructing the Self Through Memory: Cat’s Eye as a Novel of Female Development.” FRONTIERS: a Journal of Women Studies 14.3 (spring 1994): 102.
tive, but since there is no real place for this power in the patriarchal structures she channels it into being a powerful Watchbird. She ends up using the power to oppress other girls and herself. Stephen, Elaine’s brother, also affirms the positive sides to Cordelia when he claims that she “has a tendency to exist” (CE 261). This comment has a multiple meaning. Stephen sees Cordelia as a vital force, someone who is hard to “tame.” Elaine confirms this on one occasion when she divides the people she knows into two categories, one being “wild” and the other being “tame,” and concludes that wild people are smarter. She sees Cordelia belonging to this category. Secondly, to have a tendency to exist refers back to Elaine’s words that ‘[n]othing goes away.’ This is proved by the fact that Cordelia, even though physically absent from a large part of the story, is nevertheless there, both in Elaine’s past and present life. When Cordelia and Elaine meet for the first time Elaine feels that Cordelia “creates a circle of two, takes [her] in” (CE 75). The circle, of course, is as comforting as it is imprisoning. Cordelia shows a side of being a girl that Elaine has not encountered in Grace and Carol:

‘There’s dog poop on your shoe’, Cordelia says.
I look down. ‘It’s only a rotten apple.’
‘It’s the same color though, isn’t it?’ Cordelia says. ‘Not the hard kind, the soft squooshky kind, like peanut butter.’ (CE 75)

Comments like this one, about unconventional and unfeminine topics such as squooshky dog poop appeal to Elaine, because they remind her of her games with her brother. When playing with Grace and Carol, she has to abandon the games of “making up revolting foods, such as toadburgers” (CE 53). Cordelia shows Elaine that there is an opportunity for girls to indulge in unorthodox games like that, too. She demonstrates that there exist possibilities for expanding the place of girlhood. On Cordelia’s good days, she embraces issues such as dog poop, but on other days she diminishes Elaine to such a degree that she prefers fainting to meeting her. It is, again, a question of Cordelia’s own survival. Both types of behavior are survival techniques.

The adult Elaine feels and sees an active Watchbird in most people, as much as she once felt its presence as a child and young woman. Above all she encounters it in the women she meets, which implies that the controlling norms are celebrated by those who the same norms are meant to affect. A good illustration of this is when
Elaine describes her feelings about feminist meetings she attends. She connects these women, too, with Watchbirds. The "trial scene" discussed in chapter two, is echoed here:

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. Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not. (CE 365)

'Sisterhood' is difficult for the simple reason that only sisters, never brothers, are Watchbirds. On another occasion Elaine ponders: "They want to improve me. At times I feel defiant: what right have they to tell me what to think? I am not Woman, and I'm damned if I'll be shoved into it. [...] Don't boss me around" (CE 401, original emphasis).

When Elaine returns to Toronto for the retrospective exhibition of her paintings, she re-encounters the women of her past, and in particular Cordelia. Throughout her visit in Toronto, "the archeological sites" — or rather sights — of her past, Elaine believes she sees Cordelia in the faces of other women, but Cordelia still remains absent. This non-presence is something that leads almost to an anticlimax for the narrator. Despite her apparent wish to meet Cordelia, Elaine is nevertheless ambivalent; she vacillates between wanting to meet her in person and indulging in fantasies of a Cordelia who is defeated. She imagines Cordelia in an iron lung or an oxygen tent (CE 7), which would give Elaine a natural upper hand in any confrontation. "She is fully conscious, but unable to move or speak. I come into the room, moving, speaking. Our eyes meet" (CE 8). This is a fantasy that in the context of Elaine’s suffering at the hands of Cordelia seems almost mild: she once almost killed Elaine. It is moreover a fantasy of a power of mobility and an available voice — 'I come into the room, moving, speaking.' Still, the imagined power is achieved at the expense of another's powerlessness and muteness — it is only one variation of the power exercises of the Watchbird — and therefore a fantasy of a silent and immobile Cordelia proves insufficient for Elaine during the retrospect of her life.

However, Cordelia is present in Elaine's art. Elaine's art is pictures of her past. Her stories and her memories are thoroughly vivid, primarily because they are con-
cretized, they are rendered essential through her art. Elaine exists simultaneously in the present and in the past throughout the narrative. The paintings which are now gathered in the same venue, the gallery named Sub-Versions, is a gathering of many of the crucial moments, people, and things in Elaine’s past. The exhibition serves as an apparatus to aid her in presently taking active part in the past, as I will demonstrate. Elaine herself acknowledges, “You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water […] Nothing goes away” (CE 3). If, then, ‘nothing goes away,’ it becomes crucial for Elaine to work with, and rework what there is. Or, in other words, watch and re-watch what there is.

Elaine says of Cordelia and their mutual past:

She will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her 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 twins in the old fables, each of whom has been given half a key. (CE 434)

This is an open invitation by Elaine directed towards Cordelia. Her pictures of Cordelia are ‘a reflection.’ They are aspects of Cordelia that will remain absent, unless they are seen. And Elaine is as much Cordelia’s ‘half a key,’ who help her to gain access to a look on her own self from the outside. Bakhtin’s insistence on the importance of affirming someone else’s “I” as another subject is here echoed in the adult Elaine. Cordelia is to a large extent not physically present in the narrative. This situation bears similarities to the story of Grace and Mary in Alias Grace, where Mary is present only in retrospect and in The Robber Bride, where Zenia is the semi-absent character. The adult Elaine’s attitude toward Cordelia is ambiguous, as she is as ambivalent towards the whole realm/place of girls and/or women. But Elaine acknowl-

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24 For further discussions of this, see also Sonia Gernes’ “Transcendent Women: Uses of the Mystical in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye and Marilyne Robinson’s Housekeeping,” R&L 23.3 (autumn 1991) 144, Sherrill Grace’s “Gender as Genre: Atwood’s Autobiographical ‘I’” in Colin Nicholson, ed., Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity (London: Macmillan Press, 1994) 189-203, and finally also Verena Bühler Roth’s Wilderness and the Natural Environment. Margaret Atwood’s Recycling of a Canadian Theme. An important aspect of time, as discussed in the second chapter, is Elaine’s efforts as a child to avoid time altogether.

25 Bakhtin speaks of this in many places, see for example The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. He writes: “The consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things — one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them; otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images” (original emphasis) 68.

26 Caryn James writes in her review of Cat’s Eye that one of the novel’s strengths is the emphasis placed on the ambiguity of friendship between girls. On the other hand, she feels that Cordelia’s
edges the fact she experiences a connection to Cordelia, as strong as if they were twins, and therefore opens up the possibility of a type of 'sisterhood' after all. Shannon Hengen points out the double-sidedness of Cordelia, and says that, in a similar way to Elaine’s mother, Cordelia represents a difference from the conventional or normal which is both attractive and frightening. Painful’ must be added to the list — at least in the case of Cordelia — because a departure from the conventional leads to threats or acts of reprisal, which both Elaine and Cordelia experience. In contradiction, I believe that at the same time both Elaine’s mother and Cordelia are conventional. Elaine’s mother is very much part of the traditional stories of marriage and motherhood. Cordelia’s attempts to break conventionality backfires most of the time, and her performance as a Watchbird over Elaine leads also to the construction of herself as Girl and Woman.

At one point, the adult Elaine looks at a painting she tried to make of a young Cordelia. The painting carries the name Half a face. Elaine confesses it is an awkward title,

because Cordelia’s entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall, like emblems in the Renaissance, or those heads of animals, moose or bear, you used to find in northern bars, is another face, covered with white cloth. The effect is of a theatrical mask. Perhaps. I had trouble with this picture. It was hard for me to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age. I wanted her about thirteen [...] But the eyes sabotaged me. They aren’t strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened. (CE 243)

The resemblance to a ‘theatrical mask’ can be seen as a reference to Cordelia’s interest in theater and her need to express herself, but more than anything, Half a face is an image of Cordelia’s double-sidedness and importance to Elaine. That ‘another face’ is visible in the picture in an indication of the probability that Elaine includes herself in the image of Cordelia. She initiates a dialogue with her, making the object of her art, as well as herself, a multi-dimensional subject. Even though they have not met for many years, Elaine cannot ‘fix Cordelia’ at a time and age, and it is symbolic of a bond between them that apparently cannot be untied. Their relation goes beyond any limits of time and age. Elaine is not capable of reproducing Cordelia’s eyes, which


27 Hengen 108.
she has felt were often watching and judging her, and this suggests that half the face — the pair of eyes — is Elaine’s. Or at least, they could be. Hilde Staels suggests that “Cordelia inhabits a repressed dimension of Elaine.” As a logical consequence, this statement then also suggests that Elaine inhabits a repressed dimension of Cordelia. Elaine confesses that she and Cordelia have switched places, but she does not know when. However, it is clear that Elaine’s recognition of Cordelia being part of her or vice versa is not self-evident, it is rather a growing recognition as she is revisioning the painting as being someone older. And the adult Elaine, complaining about Cordelia’s absence, feels that Elaine is “nine years old forever,” and will remain in that age unless she can meet Cordelia.

Elaine claims that “[t]here is no one I would ever tell this to, except Cordelia. But which Cordelia” (CE 6)? She also says: “If I were to meet Cordelia again, what would I tell her about myself?” and concludes, “The truth, or whatever would make me look good. Probably the latter. I still have that need” (CE 6). It is precisely due to this need to say only things that would make Elaine look good, that she is in need of a dialogue with Cordelia. It is not until now, back in Toronto, in her fifties, that she acknowledges this need. The two comments above show two sides of the same past. Elaine maintains there are two or more Cordelias, and then proceeds to admit that she herself often hides behind appearances in order to gain approval. This means that several Is are available, and also required. Is and Eyes.

The many images of half-seen faces appear early in her mind. There is a violent aspect added to the image. Teenager Elaine confesses: “I’m afraid I’ll find out there’s someone else trapped inside my body; I’ll look into the bathroom mirror and see the face of another girl, someone who looks like me but has half her face darkened, the skin burned away” (CE 227). Furthermore, Elaine can also reply to questions asked and unasked in her past, as well as ask new questions herself. As Susan Strehle points out, the self-image in Cat’s Eye is not presented conventionally: “sovereign, universal, self-present, unitary.” Elaine’s self-portrait “of sorts” (CE 430) is emblematic of her need to have a dialogue with her past. She describes it as follows:

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28 Hilde Staels, Margaret Atwood's Novels. A study of Narrative Discourse (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1995) 190.
My head is in the right foreground, though it’s shown only from the middle of the nose up just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outward, the forehead and the topping of hair. I’ve put in the incipient wrinkles, the little chicken feet at the corners of the lids. A few gray hairs. This is cheating, as in reality I pull them out. Behind my half-head, in the center of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier glass is hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame. In it, a section of the back of my head is visible; but the hair is different, younger. At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow. (CE 430)

In this painting, even though Elaine’s ‘head is in the right foreground,’ only half a face — her ‘half-head’ — is visible, which again emphasizes her need of another consciousness, another half of a face. Accordingly, her childhood friends are ‘at a distance’ but in the center of the painting. The half face is visible in Half a face, the painting of Cordelia, and Unified Field Theory, the painting of the Virgin Mary, as well.

THE VIRGIN MARY

The ravine, which was discussed in the previous chapter as being a highly gendered place, is also the place where Elaine’s life changes, since it nearly ends there. Left to die, Elaine sees the Virgin Mary, who tells her that it’s “alright” and that “she can go home” (CE 203). Elaine’s vision of the Virgin Mary is a passage in the novel that has been scrutinized by critics to the same extent as the significance of the cat’s eye. It has been argued that the Virgin Mary is the (only) constructive strong mother figure; a friend because Elaine lacks a real friend, the opposite of the God that Elaine has encountered through Mrs. Smeath, the opposite of Mrs. Smeath herself; an icon.

30 **Unified Field Theory** will be discussed below.
31 Molly Hite observes that the ravine incident takes place due to Cordelia’s effort to return the gaze. She has slipped in the snow and in order to end her friends’ staring at her, she throws down Elaine’s hat. 140.
32 Gernes 148. Elaine says: “I can no longer pray to God so I will pray to the Virgin Mary instead” (CE 196).
33 The image of the Virgin Mary has been contrasted to the image of Mrs. Smeath. The first being the Good mother and the latter being the Bad. Judith McCombs writes as follows: “In the text, Mary’s good red heart mirrors Mrs. Smeath’s bad red heart; Mary’s savior/godmother gift to Elaine is the ability to walk, with freezing feet, on snow, up the hill and, a few days later, the ability to walk away from
Following the text closely, the function of the image of the Virgin Mary shows, in my view, that she is an early but distinct example of the manner in which Elaine’s mind has started to operate. Elaine testifies to the ability of the cat’s eye to protect her. It has given her the power to “watch back:” to return the gaze of the Watchbirds. The Virgin Mary is created by Elaine herself. This is because, at this point in Elaine’s life, and in a gendered place such as the ravine, Elaine realizes that she lacks a place where she can have a voice. Elaine lacks words to express her feelings. She has no place of her own, and suddenly she is an involuntary trespasser; she finds herself in the ravine which is deadly for two reasons; she risks freezing to death and dying by the hands of the obscure men who are down “there” instantly transformed into down “here.” The immediate horror Elaine experiences sets off her imagination as a means to deal with her fear. Because, as critics have stressed, the concern of the novel is not a matter of well-being as much as it is matter of survival.\(^3\) J. Brooks Bouson writes

Despite the narrative’s depiction of the ravine incident as a near fatal accident, it also is a thinly veiled enactment both of the suicidal fantasies that long have plagued Elaine and of a fantasy of restitution, an attempt by the narrative to convert trauma into a magical — a purely fictional — rescue.\(^3\)

Despite the fact that the Virgin Mary is a ‘fictional’ rescue, she is produced by Elaine in response to a highly realistic and equally dangerous situation. The fantastic, imagi­native element that Elaine adds to the situation is her first work of art. It is moreover palpable that her art is communicative: she generates an interlocutor to help herself.

Previous to this experience she has only once — not counting the Esther Williams coloring book — expressed herself through art. In school she tries artistically to concretize her limited place, and consequent limited self. Elaine draws herself, as stated in chapter two, as hardly visible in her bed surrounded only by black color.


\(^3\) Gernes 148.

\(^3\) Molly Hite, “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye,” Twentieth Century Literature 41.2(1995): 136. The feeling of trying to survive does not leave Elaine just because she grows up. She attempts to kill herself at one point, and when she returns to Toronto she feels like she is slowly vanishing — also an echo of the drawing she made in school —: “I’m supposed to be a person of substance. But since coming back here I don’t feel weightier. I fell lighter, as if I’m shedding matter, losing molecules, calcium from my bones, cells from my blood; as if I’m shrinking, as if I’m filling with cold air, or gently falling snow” (CE 13). Note also Chinmoy Banerjee, “Atwood’s Time: Hiding Art in Cat’s Eye,” Modern Fiction Studies 36.4(winter 1990): 520.

\(^3\) Brooks Bouson 170.
However, after the vision of the Virgin Mary, she commences to expand her limited place. She walks in the opposite direction, away from her girl friends, with a previously never experienced realization of their mean words and behavior: “I can hear this for what it is. It’s an imitation, it’s acting. It’s an impersonation of someone, much older. It’s a game” (CE 207). The Virgin Mary becomes an interest to Elaine and the object of the adult Elaine’s art. One painting carries the title *Unified Field Theory*. It is larger than the other paintings and contains a bridge above the ravine, with a woman dressed in black floating above the railing:

Here and there on the black of her dress or cloak there are pinpoints of light. The sky behind her is the sky after sunset; at the top of it is the lower half of the moon. Her face is partly in shadow. She is the Virgin of Lost Things. Between her hands, at the level of her heart, she holds a glass object: an oversized cat’s eye marble, with a blue center. Underneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy: the universe, in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground. At the lower edge of the painting the darkness pales and merges to a lighter tone, the clear blue of water, because the creek flows there, underneath the earth, underneath the bridge, down from the cemetery. The land of the dead people. (CE 430-431)

This painting makes tangible the sense of security Elaine ascribes to the cat’s eye and the Virgin Mary. ‘The Virgin of Lost Things’ holds the cat’s eye next to her heart, and in this manner she approves and blesses a use of the eye. The thin line between life and death is expressed in the only half visible face of Mary, and in the fact that the Virgin Mary is described as someone who links the sky with the underground, the living and ‘the land of the dead people.’

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37 Sherill Grace discusses the relevance of the Virgin Mary: “The Virgin will surface again later, but she will never be explained as a cause or a link; she will never be invoked to provide a reason, a purpose or a meaning. Nothing in Elaine’s past leads into or explains her present and her future, because her past co-exists in her present. What the Virgin restores is a conscious awareness of what she already has or is, of what she has forgotten.” Nicholson 201.

38 Another painting by Elaine carries the title *Lost Things*. These are objects so associated to her childhood that they are painful: “Until now I’ve always painted things that were actually there, in front of me. Now I begin to paint things that aren’t there. I paint a silver toaster, the old kind, with knobs and doors[...] I paint a glass coffee percolator[...] I paint a wringer washing machine[...] I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories. [...]I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it’s not my own anxiety. The anxiety is on the things themselves” (CE 357).
THE CAT'S EYE
Coral Howells writes: “What is never explained in either the discursive or the figured narrative is Elaine’s moments of revelation: her childhood vision of the Virgin Mary or that moment when she looks through the cat’s eye marble.” As mentioned previously, there have been many explanations and interpretations of what a cat’s eye may symbolize. One critic claims that the cat’s eye functions as a means to create distance to reality, another envisions the marble taking the place of her heart, providing her with a heart of stone. The redundant interpretations emphasize the need to go back and examine the text. “The cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They’re the eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway; like the green eye of the radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet” (CE 67). In this manner Elaine speaks of her marble, her cat’s eye that she does not risk losing when playing with marbles at school. As repeatedly emphasized, much of the power lies in, and is produced in the eyes, the eyes of others, and one’s own. To have a new eye, a third eye so to speak, is a strategy to return the gaze. “Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see them moving like animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out” (CE 151). By returning the gaze, however invisibly to the others, she can also critically observe the roles people, and girls in particular, have to play. After a while the alien eye proves inadequate. However, it has given her a momentary exercise of power, and it serves as a collector of memories. When Elaine finds it many years later she can see back through time. Again, ‘nothing goes away.’ Molly Hite writes that in recovering the cat’s eye and the subsequent recovery of her memory, Elaine’s understanding of women from her past changes.

There are traces of her ability to return the gaze even before she takes up painting. She can use her cat’s eye gaze on Cordelia and see her friends from a new angle: “I can hear this for what it is. It’s an imitation, it’s acting. It’s an impersona-
tion, of someone much older” (CE 207). Hence, I interpret the use of the cat’s eye as the first step out of the role as a Girl. It is, in the initial stages, the opposite of the Watchbird gaze. Furthermore, it is something that hints towards Elaine’s future career as a painter. Elaine is aware of her own imprisonment — she can even see Cordelia’s — and the difficulty of breaking out of gendered places and behavior when many people around her stand guard at all times. Cordelia has been named “a self-appointed member of the gender police,” but when Elaine looks through the cat’s eye, the matrix around Cordelia that creates her, becomes substantiated for Elaine. Considering the painting *Half a face* again, the eyes of Cordelia reveal yet a new layer of meaning; they imply that Elaine acknowledges that her girlfriend is as much a victim as she is a participant in a structure that encourages women and girls to become Watchbirds. Cordelia’s eyes are even “frightened,” hinting again at the violence that lies embedded in the layers of such a society.

The look through the cat’s eye and the vision of the Virgin Mary strengthen Elaine — she can move away from the tormentors in her life — and in high school the now empowered Elaine’s movement towards art becomes even clearer. She has fully apprehended that power lies in the eye of the beholder. Confirming her subjectification, she gives herself that power by judging and harassing Cordelia, and by critically evaluating other people — contrary to her previous status as an object of others’ analysis. The cat’s eye becomes similar to the Watchbird’s eye. She discusses boys in this manner: “My love for them is visual” (CE 257). Hence, she does not pay much attention to their words, because in their silences she can create, and recreate their bodies. “I study their hands lifting the cigarettes in the darkness of the movie theaters, the slope of a shoulder, the angle of a hip” (CE 257). She enjoys the return of the gaze. So, for example, her painting *Life Drawing* contains a double meaning. It is a portrayal of two men, Josef and Jon, with both of whom Elaine has had romantic relationships. The painting is her view/gaze of them, and of their bodies in particular. So, in Elaine’s art, the gaze becomes a dialogic gaze. Here Atwood also comments on her early novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) with this power inversion:

Josef preserved in aspic and good enough to eat. He is on the left side of the picture, stark-naked but turned with a twist half away from the viewer, so what

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you get is the ass end, then the torso in profile. On the right side is Jon, in the same position. Their bodies are somewhat idealized: less hairy than they really were, the muscle groups in higher definition, the skin luminous. I thought about putting Jockey shorts on them, in deference to Toronto but decided against it. Both of them have wonderful buts. Each of them is painting a picture, each picture is on an easel. Josef’s is of a voluptuous but not overweight woman, sitting on a stool with a sheet draped between her legs, her breasts exposed; her face is Pre-Raphaelite, brooding, consciously mysterious. Jon’s painting is a series of intestinal swirls, in hot pink, raspberry ripple red and Burgundy Cherry purple. The model is seated on a chair between them, face front, bare feet flat on the floor. She’s clothed in a white bedsheets, wrapped around her below the breasts. Her head is a sphere of bluish glass.

The model wrapped in a bedsheets is half-naked, but her head, which is ‘bluish glass,’ suggests a cat’s eye instead of a head, which is an indication of Elaine returning the gaze. Having suffered severe objectification which nearly led to her death, Elaine does not view her new status as a subject as entirely unambiguous. She defines art as being “what you can get away with [...] a kind of stealing. A hijacking of the visual” (CE 241). On another occasion, however, she confesses that she “can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I’m what’s left over” (CE 431). I believe that her art is not so much a theft or ‘a hijacking of the visual’ as it is a negotiation with the visual, with seeing, and being seen. The reason for this is that the visual always includes an aspect of the artist herself. Hence, while Elaine obviously returns the gaze, when she paints the men naked, she is also allowing herself to be seen. Because her pieces of art are not mirror images, they are always interpretative and subjective experiences. Furthermore, she points out and responds to Josef’s view of women: Josef once calls Elaine “Pre-Raphaelite,” and he continuously tries to rearrange her to his liking during their relationship. Lastly, Elaine comments on one traditional art motif, when letting the watcher of her painting simultaneously watch Josef’s painting of the naked woman.

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46 In her article “You Can Mean More Than One—age, gender and Atwood’s addresses,” Barbara Comiskey writes about the power switch reflected in Life Drawing: “The ‘viewer’ is taken behind the male easel to a vantage point other than that which has dominated Western art history. The model Risley faces us. Positioning of the viewer, agency and control of the gaze, are of the female about the male. A paradox of such address is that there is of course no ‘spectating position’ in the text. The model’s head is itself a reflective surface. The paintings are not represented visually but verbally mediated. What the text is offering is a verbal description of how one kind of female spectating position might be achieved, and inviting its audience to take pleasure in the achievement.” Journal of Gender Studies, 6.2 (1997) 138.
As shown, for instance in the above example, art gives Elaine Risley power.\(^{47}\) It is a power to choose the object of her art, and power to interpret what she sees and experiences. The medium gives Elaine the ability to return the gaze of the Watchbird she grew up with, and still recognizes around her. Elaine explains, “whatever else women want to see, it’s not themselves; not in their worst light anyway” (CE 46). Hence, she paints them, forces them to see themselves, often in an exaggerated way. She is particularly harsh when it comes to depicting the infamous Mrs. Smeath, the most common object of her paintings. The ‘grotesqueries of the body’ are given form. There are many of her. Mrs. Smeath sitting, standing, lying down with her holy rubber plant, flying, with Mr. Smeath stuck to her back, being screwed like a beetle; Mrs. Smeath in dark-blue bloomerers […] Mrs. Smeath bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God. I put a lot of work into that imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear. (CE 426-427.)

Hite claims that Elaine has achieved a position “usually reserved for the dominant class of men in a patriarchal system: she can disengage seeing from being seen.”\(^{48}\) However, it is more complex than that. Elaine allows herself to be seen in this achieved place: but the difference now is that she is seen in a place of power and exchange, rather than in one of submission and silence. Even though Elaine once realizes that she and Cordelia have switched places, she cannot yet see the connection between herself and these images of women, she feels a distance to them that she has carried with her since childhood. In art school she has to choose between the company of men and women. And the company of men, which she chooses, requires a specific attitude towards women which Elaine adopts. In addition, Elaine seems also to be worried that she will find out that she herself is a component in the paintings, that they are not merely images and interpretations of others.

The return to Toronto and the retrospective of her art are dialogicsituations which Elaine finds herself acknowledging and responding to. As she exists simultaneously in the past and present, as a 50-year-old and a child and teenager, she allows

\(^{47}\) Molly Hite makes a comparison between Elaine’s artistic signature and the phallic inscription in pee her brother makes. 149.

\(^{48}\) Hite 140. Here Hite draws on Michel Foucault’s idea of the modern disciplinary society, the Panopticon.
herself a new view of the work. The adult Elaine regards the somewhat cruel paintings of Mrs. Smeath and focuses now on the eyes:

I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man: the eyes of a small town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was. (CE 427)

This painting bears a striking likeness to *Half a face*. Cordelia’s eyes gave her trouble, they did not come out as she expected them to. The vicious Mrs. Smeath’s eyes are not vicious anymore. Elaine now realizes what she did not seem to realize before, even when actually making the painting: the women she has encountered who are members of the gender police, who are Watchbirds etc., are themselves victims. There is more than one factor contributing to Elaine’s change of mind: the retrospective, and return to the city she has hated so long that she “hardly remember[s] feeling any other way about it” (CE 13). The novel contains interpretations of others regarding Elaine’s work of art, and such interpretations are often far from the intended meaning of the artist. However, as she herself starts to see new dimensions to her art, the critics’ voices suggest, according to Hite, “that the eye of another person can provide the crucial part of the artistic work that, like the alienated ‘part of herself’ which the other can ‘give back,’ is required for full compensation.” Hite takes the example of Jody, who is the organizer of a show where Elaine’s art is presented. Jody feels that Elaine treats the aging female body with compassion. This observation is indeed consonant with what I have just noted about Elaine’s dialogic reevaluation; her “subsequent recognition of Mrs. Smeath’s suffering and relative generosity is provoked by these same paintings, which she comes to regard as having aspects that she was not aware of having rendered.” The adult side of Elaine can also see that two or more sides of the story existed in herself even back then, only unrecognized: “I labored on it, with, I now see, considerable malice. But these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration. I put light into them too. […] I have said, *Look.* I have said, *I see*” (CE 426-427, original emphasis).

49 Hite 151.
The paintings reveal new aspects, which entails that there are likewise aspects to the artist she did not previously endorse. She is now able to both give voice to and see “the other side of the story,” to use Molly Hite’s term. Hite explains, “the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of ‘other sides,’ alternative versions that might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphases and values.”51 By saying “Look” and “I see” Elaine invites others to enter into a dialogue. The invitation, more than anything or anyone else, includes such complicated people as Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath. By opening up to this dialogic opportunity she can appreciate the intended interlocutors as multi-dimensional.52

On the opening day of the exhibition and in the midst of her paintings, and the consequential overview and review of past experiences, Elaine states that “[r]eally it's Cordelia I expect, Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her” (CE 433). This is an admission on the part of Elaine.53 Once upon a time when Elaine and Cordelia switched places, Elaine used her power to revenge herself. She treated Cordelia in the same tyrannical manner as she herself had been treated. When the middle-aged Elaine visits the scene that turned things around, it is with a new insight. Revenge is not on her mind, it is dialogue. Elaine acknowledges the fact that she needs Cordelia’s voice and also her eyes on her art/past. The plurality of consciousnesses, says Bakhtin, is the prerequisite of an event.54 The need of others is again and again in the forefront of Cat’s Eye. Furthermore, the event here is plural; Elaine’s art is, as I have discussed, not only ‘art’ but comments and queries made by a person in need of responses. The event is also the event of her childhood. She did not experience it alone, and she does not wish to re-experience it alone. Lyn Mikel Brown argues that

50 Hite 151.
52 Martha Sharpene notices that Elaine is provided with an acceptance and recognition of other women in spite of herself. 186.
53 Gayle Lawson Moody writes that, “As a connected knower, Elaine realizes that Cordelia’s fate could have been hers,” which is similar to her view of Mrs. Smeath as a displaced person. The Quest for Selfhood: Women in the novels of Margaret Atwood (Ann Arbor: U.M.I, 1995) 165. A ‘connected knower’ is a psychological term for achieving a ‘selfhood.’ It means that a person must be “able to reconcile received knowledge with her personal knowledge” and “relationships are experienced as a response to others in their terms,” 146-147.
54 “At their root lies the Russian word for ‘existence’ or ‘being’ (bytie), and -although the etymology here can be disputed - so-bytie can be read both in its ordinary meaning of ‘event,’ and in a more literal rendering as ‘co-existing, co-being. Shared existence or being with another.” Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 6.
the "real tragedy [...] is that Elaine and Cordelia will never really know each other, that they will feel so totally separate, unable to see the common threads that tie them." Brown continues: "Elaine and Cordelia's stories seem distinct and unrelated; their interdependence obscured because they are locked in battle against each other." 55 I believe, on the contrary, that Elaine's art demonstrates the fact that Elaine does see the 'common thread' between them. Paintings such as Half a Face show that their stories are far from distinct and unrelated. In her return to a place connected to a highly traumatic experience, it is suggested that Elaine performs some kind of exorcism. 56 Yet, above all she seems to have reached the recognition that "she and Cordelia had identities less distinct from each other than it seemed in childhood, that each had been fashioning the other in the image of a self she could not otherwise confront." 57 She has looked, and she has seen. Elaine has developed and turned away from keeping the pain within, to dealing with the pain in a medium that is available to others, and her art has worked with and reworked "what there is." By the ravine, Elaine says to the absent but present Cordelia, giving her the support she once received herself: "It's all right," "You can go home now" (CE 443). Elaine has the questions and answers she needs, and she has been active herself in asking the questions and collecting the answers.

INTRODUCING ZENIA

Roz in The Robber Bride has three children: one son and two twin daughters. The twins' attitude towards their surroundings and their mother appears at times to be laid-back, sometimes obnoxious, and occasionally even subversive. 58 They demand that their mother's friend Tony should revise a classic fairy tale by the brothers Grimm, The Robber Bridegroom, and exchange all the characters for female characters. They have women both marrying and killing each other in the story now renamed The Rob-

55 Lyn Mikel Brown 296.
56 Sherill Grace, "Theory & Practice," 137.
58 Jane W. Brown points out that Atwood oftentimes uses the mother-daughter motif, where the daughters' functions are to oppose and illuminate the protagonists' characters. "Constructing the Narrative of Women's Friendship: Margaret Atwood's Reflective Fiction," Literature, Interpretation, Theory 6.3/4(1995) 210.
ber Bride, consequently transforming women into active participants in all major actions and conflicts. They are both victims and victimizers — an echo of Cat’s Eye where Cordelia and Elaine are made to suffer, and make each other suffer, by their own hands. The twins’ remaking of the fairy tale is in a way a summary of the plot of The Robber Bride. As Lorrie Moore observes, the fairy tale theme can be seen as a remaking of traditional roles for women in general, and it can be argued that the novel itself elaborates this feminist field. However, if we use Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto as a filter, the twins are performing a cyborg feminist act. On the subject of cyborg writing, Haraway explains that one way of ending a dualistic worldview is by using stories, “retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualism of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture.” Her twin daughters, who Roz “has always been able to tell […] apart, or so she claims” (RB 76), are engaged in a constant re-watching of the structures of the world.

remembers one phase, when they where, what? Four, five, six, seven? It went on for a while. They’d decided that all the characters in every story had to be female. Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter Rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said ‘he,’ they would correct her: She! She! they would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female, too. Roz still doesn’t know why. When she asked them, the twins would give her looks of deep contempt. ‘Can’t you see?’ they would say. (RB 293, original emphasis)

The twins mirror each other, respond to each other and work together. Jane W. Brown suggests that the twins are an illustration of “Atwood’s radical process of transforming narrative to reflect women’s struggle for friendship in a society that devalues and blocks them.” They also emphasize the importance of watching (‘can’t you see?’).

On the subject of stories and social myths, Margaret Atwood says:

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61 Jane W. Brown 197.
62 As a parenthesis, Roz’s son Larry is connected to borders, but as someone outside them: “But Larry has an exiled look to him, the look of a lost traveller, as if he’s stuck in some no man’s land, between borders and without a passport. Trying to figure out the road signs. Waiting to do the right thing” (RB 83). He is also the only one who knows Zenia who is not harmed by her. He is also the reason why Roz, Charis, and Tony frequent The Toxiq.
Myths mean stories, and traditional myths mean traditional stories that have been repeated frequently. The term doesn’t pertain to Greek myths alone. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* are just as much myth or story as anything else. But some get repeated so often in the society that they become definitive, i.e. myths of that society. Certainly Biblical ones have been very important in our society.\(^{63}\)

Atwood thus claims that repetition creates norm. Is it possible to just turn things around, like the twins do, to make women active in non-traditional places with non-traditional behavior often enough to make it definitive? A new norm? Zenia represents this possibility in *The Robber Bride*. She turns stories inside and out, and she does it often: in meetings with Tony, and Charis, and Roz. And her actions — her repeated actions — definitely leave marks. She influences both the other women’s own actions and ways of looking at society.

Zenia — “the robber bride” — is what Tony envisions as a puzzle and a knot, which means that “if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone is involved” (RB 3). As she is this ‘knot’ it is impossible to exclude her from the sections dealing with the other protagonists. Lacking a last name, her first name hints she is part of the other characters.\(^{64}\) Furthermore, her name implies that she resists being locked into any one story. Tony in *The Robber Bride* thinks:

> Even the name Zenia may not exist, as Tony knows from looking. She’s attempted to trace its meaning — *Xenia*, a Russian word for hospitable, a Greek pertaining to the action of a foreign pollen upon a fruit; *Zeinada*, meaning daughter of Zeus, and the name of two early Christian martyrs; *Zillah*, Hebrew, a shadow; *Zenobia*, Emperor Aurelian; *Xeno*, Greek, a stranger, as in xenophobic; *Zenana*, Hindu, the women’s quarters or harem; *Zen*, a Japanese meditational religion; *Zendic*, an Eastern practitioner of heretical magic — this is the closest she has come. (RB 461, original emphasis)

As seen from the multiple meanings of Zenia’s name, her name resists monological story telling. Zenia would not be a character without the others telling stories about

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\(^{64}\) Mari Peepre pointed this out at a lecture at Umeå University, 1996. Zenia is created from the other women’s names: Roz, Karen (Charis), Antonia (Tony). To me, her use of only a first name is also a strong indication of independence. She can never, as Cat’s Eye’s Elaine says, disappear in the phone-book in case of a marriage. If this is the case, it can be seen as a comment on *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the female characters all receive the men’s names. For example, Offred: (property) Of Fred.
her. She exists in the narrative only in relation to another consciousness, another subject, which is similar to Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, who exists only when Elaine talks about her and remembers her. Zenia’s thoughts are never revealed; the reader has to depend solely on the other characters for descriptions of her. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that few things concerning Zenia happen in the present. In one way, the stories of Zenia happen/are retold for the second time, when the reader is informed of them through the thoughts and speech of the other women. All of these aspects of Zenia, her name, her various existences in the words and worlds of the other women, her lack of center — or achievement of center in others’ stories when discussed and thought about — and ability to transform, point toward a large amount of interdependence between the characters. Coral Ann Howells comments on this:

As each of the three tells her own life story, different overlapping frames of reference are set up through which Zenia’s character and significance are given meaning, though Zenia never exists independently of the stories of the other. It is through her relationships that Zenia’s identity is constructed, but it is also transformed as it is refigured through the perspectives of a military historian, a successful businesswoman and a New Age mystic.  

The fact that she is made visible — ‘constructed’ and ‘transformed’ — only through the eyes of another, is the reason why I have decided to deal with her only in connection with the other women: Tony, Roz and Charis.

To create an accurate description of Zenia is, as Tony says numerous times, very difficult. The first sentence of *The Robber Bride* reads “The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began” (RB 3). However, the story then begins with Zenia’s return from death at a restaurant called The Toxique, and one critic argues that this restaurant is comparable to the gallery Sub-Versions in *Cat’s Eye*. They are both places of discovery and places from where the various narratives take off.  

Besides serving as a place of discovery, the restaurant The Toxique, like the gallery in *Cat’s Eye*, works as a collector of memories. The aspects of violence connected in a previous discussion with the gallery are echoed here too. The Toxique. Toxic.

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66 Jane W. Brown, 203. Furthermore, Karen F. Stein points out that the name Toxique is an anagram for Quixote, the hero of a melodramatic quest.” *Margaret Atwood Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers 1999) 98.
Due to the many painful pasts of the protagonists their narratives are also reluctant, as Elaine’s is. The image of war is overwhelming in each person’s story. The Zenias come back to life so that, in historian Tony’s words, “history comes unravelled” (RB 3). The reader’s first encounter with this figure is in the present. However, since the witnesses to this resurrection are three different people we meet Zenia three times in this short passage and the result is unquestionably multi-dimensional, which, as I will show below, is also a sign of the interdependence and codependence of and between the characters.

The Zenias have different stories to tell each woman; she appears to have as many shapes as a chameleon, and her stories shift forms and succeed in shaping strong ties with the interlocutor. The Robber Bride is divided into three different voices, all so clear that they, according to Thomas, almost make up a novel on their own. The structure of the novel is an illustration of Tony’s claim that

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\text{history is a construct [...] Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definite moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at these events and we can say that after them things were never the same again. (RB 3)}
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The form of the novel can also be regarded as ritualistically symmetrical; a useful tool claims Thomas, for emphasizing how deeply rooted our patterns of behavior are. Zenia has her place in this symmetry, but the way she moves in the narrative(s), from death to life, from life to death, from one story to the next, creates chaos in the structured narrative, as well as in the fictional reality of the other women.

The way to approach Zenia is, then, to go via the others’ accounts of her. Zenia’s origin and stable self can never truly be pinned down, because she does not have one. She is someone who tells stories to others, and whose stories and actions become the others’ stories. Her stories are part of her personalities. Or, her stories have to be part of her personalities to make some sort of sense to the listener. Or, again: the others’ stories of her are used as explanatory information of her personalities and actions. And, most importantly, Zenia appears, and appears again — even “after death” — to the women, bringing forward their stories. Robert George states

68 Thomas 30.
that storytelling is always communicative and a social experience. Furthermore, Valerie Shepherd quotes Atwood’s “Let us now praise stupid women” in the short story collection *Good Bones* (1993) where a character exclaims “No stories! No stories! Imagine a world without stories!” Shepherd proceeds to say:

The speaker is rightly incredulous at the prospect, for story-telling appears to be an essential part of the human condition. It is not confined to the creation of literary narratives, but extends to our daily construction and conversational telling of personal stories.

Shepherd argues that people appear to tell stories as “a strategy to sustain life.” I have shown in the previous chapter that storytelling can indeed be uncommunicative. Storytelling as a tool for communication is dependent on context. Context is all. And if context is governed by patriarchal structures, the story becomes mythical and normative, and new stories cannot be born.

Seeing the effects of Zenia’s many stories, they, without exception, provoke responses and reactions in every person she encounters. She has a “malign quality,” and it is of an undying kind, it “merely re-assigns itself to another moment.” In other words it means that her ‘malign quality’ re-assigns itself to another person, another story. Zenia’s stories are both stories that provoke dialogues as much as stories which are provoking when part of a dialogue. Bakhtin suggests that one reason behind the mobility of words, a dialogue, is a degree of dissatisfaction with the responses. The dissatisfaction does not indicate a negative attitude towards the dialogue or dialogue participant; it is, on the contrary, a sign of a continued interest due to a fascination and curiosity to know more.

The use of Zenia’s stories, her use of “bad language,” and her acts of treason against the women are signs of non-traditional, unexpected, female behavior. Coral Ann Howells states that what Zenia represents is something that will always exceed

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71 Shepherd 355.
73 It is noticeable, however, that Zenia’s language transgresses what is deemed appropriate for women. She uses words like “fuck.” This becomes extra evident when set against Roz’ use of “bad language”. She sticks with the more childish version, for example: “Holy Moly” (RB 77).
the bounds of decorum. Lorrie Moore writes that she is “impossibly, fantastically bad. She is pure theater, pure plot. She is Richard III with breast implants. She is Iago in a miniskirt.” However theatrical she may appear there is obviously a need to label her. When Elaine at the end of the narrative can look at Cordelia with new eyes and see the reasons for her cruel behavior, Zenia’s motives are on the contrary blurred, if they exist at all. She does not spring from a visibly troubled background, she has no origin story. She uses victimhood in order to gain power, power she already possesses. What she ultimately represents is power to move across the borders of places for women. She adopts an authoritative voice, unlike Tony, Roz, and Charis. Zenia has power, due to her recklessness and evident lack of a conscience and is free to move from one conventional story to another.

The listener and participant of the moment need to reply in order to make some sense of her. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theories to a reading of the stories of Zenia, her provocations and undefinability are a foundation for an ideal dialogic relationship. Any subject who can be defined becomes a closed story, a monologically told story, and there can be no questions to ask, and nothing to add.

As said, Zenia’s complexity lies in the difficulty of defining her. The women who meet her try to label her, to pin her down, believing that comprehending her and responding to her will be easier then. She is compared to a vampire, to a *femme fatale*, a warrior, and a victim. She is a friend and she is an enemy. Most of these labels are mythological and therefore normative. Zenia can even conquer death, and in this manner contravenes the great theme of war. But, as Howells points out, Zenia “belongs to two different fictional discourses, that of realism and that of fantasy. She is a transgressive figure who exists both as a character in the realistic fiction and also as the projection of three women’s imaginations.” From this point of view, the character/phenomenon of Zenia resembles the elements of fantasy that are emphasized in *Cat’s Eye*. The Virgin Mary is a fantastic element with roots in a very real event.

Donna Haraway’s combination of the fantastic and reality is a feminist approach to the troublesome dual pair of “woman/man.” Haraway invites cyborgs to take the places of categorized people, thus un-gendering the genders. Most impor-

75 Moore 22.
77 Howells 81.
tantly, the cyborg “has no origin story in the Western sense.” The cyborg cannot be defined, and thus cannot be dominated. The cyborg is a transgressor of boundaries. And so is Zenia.

THE STORIES OF TONY, CHARIS, ROZ, AND ZENIA

Zenia’s stories are rebellious, because they always change. Zenia moves within the places that are typically assigned to women, and adopts myths available about women and uses them to her advantage in order to gain power. I do not argue that Zenia’s behavior towards the women who trust her is worth celebrating. It is what springs out of her rebellious stories and acts, the responses to her and her actions, that are praiseworthy. She must be responded to. Her behavior in these traditional places is non-traditional. She literally breaks in and enters the places. When she visits Tony at the university, she climbs in through Tony’s window of the dormitory, finding a way to visit her in a closed environment. She transgresses the codes of the university, the actual boundaries of the university as a place, and therefore notions of right and wrong. Coral Ann Howells rightly suggests that “Zenia is everything [the characters] want most and everything they fear, for she represents their unfulfilled desires just as she represents their repressed pain-filled childhood selves. She is the dark double of them all, having multiple identities but no fixed identity.” Why? Tony contemplates, when considering and finally agreeing to write Zenia’s paper for her: “But Zenia is doing Tony’s rebelliousness for her so it’s only fair that Tony should write Zenia’s term paper. Or that is the equation Tony makes, at some level below words” (RB 169). The fact Zenia acts out Tony’s dark ‘unfulfilled’ desires makes Tony noticeably hesitant but she still obliges.

When Tony sees the supposedly dead Zenia at The Toxique, the sight instantly provokes a response in Tony’s head where the images of war are paramount. She thinks “Forward! Charge! Fire” (RB 34, original emphasis)! The crux of the matter is that as a recorder and interpreter of only other people’s battles, Tony is waiting for someone else to tell her to ‘charge.’ In other words, she is awaiting the order. Antonia

78 Haraway 150.
79 Haraway 149.
80 Howells 81.
Freemont/Tony is — “despite her lace-edged collars” (RB 4) — so interested in war that she has made it her profession. As established in the previous chapter, her parents’ marriage has made her an involuntary expert on the subject. The death of her parents can be seen as a consequence of years of warfare, and Tony is the sole survivor who spends her life analyzing battles and the use of artillery.81 I regard Tony’s interest as an indication of her preoccupation with the past, of her being defined by her past. “The whole point of being a historian […] is that you can successfully avoid the present, most of the time” (RB 29). As in Cat’s Eye, the past is important, and it needs to be integrated and looked at in the present, and needs to be addressed from new points of view. Remember Elaine’s words: “I don’t want to be nine years old forever” (CE 422).

Zenia can enter the women’s lives rather easily. They all have different histories, different pasts, and accordingly Zenia is invited (and/or breaks in) for different reasons, into different places and different roles. Charis represents one place and role. Being a victim of sexual violence and other types of physical abuse, Charis represents the most traumatic childhood and upbringing in The Robber Bride. In her state of mind, however, she is also and simultaneously the one who most obviously welcomes Zenia into her life. Her attitude is generally welcoming because, void of cynicism, she feels that people “are all a part of everybody else […]. We are all a part of everything” (RB 56). At least on a psychological level, she is open to dialogic encounters, simply because ‘we are all a part of everybody else.’

Between the death and re-appearance of Zenia, Charis has someone in her life who slightly resembles Zenia: Shanita. Shanita “can be whatever she feels like, because who can tell” (RB 57)? Charis expresses a wish that “[i]n her next life she’s going to be a mixture, a blend, a vigorous hybrid, like Shanita. Then no one will have anything on her” (RB 58).

Charis is thus far not a blend, not a hybrid. One reason for this is the fact that she has successfully excluded Karen from her self, and therefore drawn a rigid line between past and present: “Finally she changed into Charis, and vanished, and re-

81 The discourse of war is a field and a place that, both practically and theoretically, is traditionally male oriented. “Male historians think she’s invading their territory, and should leave their spears, arrows, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes, and bombs alone. They think she should be writing social history, such as who ate what when, or Life in the Feudal Family. Female historians, of whom there are not many, think the same but for different reasons. They think she ought to study birth, not death, and certainly not battle plans” (RB 22). Even though her colleagues disapprove of her field of interest, Tony does not leave the bombs, swords, and guns alone.
appeared elsewhere, and she has been elsewhere ever since” (RB 41). Being ‘elsewhere’ limits the possibilities for re-watching, simply because ‘elsewhere’ is never “there” or “here.” She has, in other words, concluded her personal stories and nothing further can be said to expand and/or change them. Even though she is ‘elsewhere’ there are other borders around her which she tries to transgress: the borders between one life and another, the borders between death and life. Therefore seeing Zenia at the Toxique after having been presumed dead does not surprise Charis. “Not surprised, because people don’t die” (RB 48).

Zenia must have something she wants to say. Or no. Maybe it’s Charis who has something to say; maybe this is what’s holding Zenia to this earth. Because Zenia’s around, she’s around somewhere, Charis has known it ever since the funeral. [...] Zenia was loose in the air but tethered to the world of appearances, and it’s all the fault of Charis. It’s Charis who needs her to be here, it’s Charis who won’t cut her free. (RB 50)

Charis draws a line between dying, resurrection, and dialogic storytelling. She makes it clear that people ‘don’t die’ because there is a need for a dialogue. And when Zenia appears outside Charis’s door, “Charis [mutely] holds out her arms, and Zenia stumbles over the threshold and collapses into them” (RB 223). Charis is without words — mute — when she experiences Zenia, but she nevertheless recognizes their mutual need for a meeting.

It is, as noted, uncomplicated for Zenia to enter the life of Charis. She immediately acknowledges the Karen-side of her by calling her Karen. “Mirrors deflect” (RB 61), thinks Charis, and Zenia appears in Charis’s life as a type of mirror image of Karen.82 Zenia furthermore physically resembles Charis/Karen very much: “Zenia too has changed. In addition to being thin she’s ill, in addition to being ill she is cowed somehow, beaten, defeated” (RB 220). She is an image of Charis who, as described in the previous chapter, does not like to have a visible, fleshy body at all.

Roz, on the other hand, is defined by her past as much as by her role as a mother, and is constantly guilt ridden. Her money labels her “Rich Bitch” (RB 104), and her body gives her other labels, as explained previously. Her money with its dubious origin makes her a compulsive donator. She experiences constant guilt. “[Roz]

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82 Tony thinks when she sees Zenia returned from the dead, returned from the past, at The Toxique, “What is she doing here, on this side of the mirror”(RB 34)? Hilde Staels calls The Robber Bride, and I
still does Battered Women, she still does Rape Victims, she still does Homeless Moms. How much compassion is enough? She’s never known, and you have to draw the line somewhere, but she still does Abandoned Grannies” (RB 92). Roz’s role as, in her twin daughters’ words, the Big Mom is a role that she brings with her into her professional life and friendship with Tony and Charis. “Tony is so little, Charis is so thin, both are shaken. She feels as if she’s hugging the twins, one and then the other, on the morning of their first day at school” (RB 103). Here, Big Mom is manifested through references to her body — she has a big body and her friends have small bodies. Furthermore, Big Mom is manifested mainly through her will and need to take care of other people. Above all, she does not want to hurt anybody:

Dejection enters Roz, a familiar sense of failure. The one she’s failed most is [her son]. If she’d only been — what? — prettier, smarter, sexier even, better somehow; or else worse, more calculating, more unscrupulous, a guerilla fighter — Mitch might still be here. Roz wonders how long it will take her kids to forgive her, once they’ve figured out exactly how much they need to forgive her for. (RB 83)

Her wish to please everybody limits her mobility, and in a way blinds her to what is in front of her. Her motherhood role creates in turn roles for her children, for her friends, for her employees. “She extends her invisible wings, her warm feathery angel’s wings, her flutttery hen’s wings, undervalued and necessary, she enfolds them. Secure, is what she wants them to feel; and they do feel secure, she’s certain of it” (RB 303).

Roz has a troubled relationship with her past and in particular with her father. Her past has produced a feeling of perpetual guilt in her, and it has led to her life being “cut in two” (RB 332). When she is a child, Roz experiences that her father’s presence pushes her “off to the edge” (RB 332). The two sides of her past have her mother on the one side, and her father on the other.

There are many stories about Roz’s father. When Zenia walks over the threshold to Roz’s wealthy home she comes as someone who knew her father, and can therefore add new aspects to the old stories of him. “Roz’s father, the Great Unknown. Great to others, unknown to her” (RB 318), and Roz “welcomes the chance to think well of him” (RB 262). Furthermore, Zenia comes in the disguise of a successful woman who is not tormented by guilt. Both of these personas are needed in order for guess the robber bride, meaning Zenia, “the return of the repressed” (193). Zenia offers “a mirror im-
Roz to expand her places, transgress them psychologically. "[Zenia’s remark of the Third World] was a selfish, careless remark, a daring remark, a liberated remark — to hell with guilt" (RB 98)! Just the mere abstract idea of behaving egotistically creates a sensational feeling for Roz. She feels “an answering beat in herself. A sort of echo, an urge to go that fast, be that loose, that greedy, herself, too” (RB 98). The feeling is one of crossing boundaries: “It was like speeding in a convertible, tailgating, weaving in and out without signalling, stereo on full blast, and screw the neighbours” (RB 98). The feeling of experiencing freedom is also stressed here by the fact that Roz takes (back) the car that previously was gender marked and could be driven only by Mitch.

Zenia contributes to a re-telling of Roz’s life story. She appears as someone in a similar situation as Roz, as someone with a similar background. Roz appreciates that “Zenia is a mixture, like herself” (RB 360)! Zenia tells her story of Roz’s father, and by doing that lifts him up to a new level of understanding. Roz is permitted to see her father through someone else’s story and eyes, and remembers positive sides of him herself. He was a daredevil, a transgressor:

‘But your father, he never blinked. He could walk through a border like it wasn’t there,’ says Uncle Joe.
‘What’s a border?’ asks Roz.
‘A border is where it gets dangerous,’ says Uncle George. ‘It’s where you need a passport.’ (RB 331)

Roz’s father and Zenia are both transgressors of borders and boundaries. However, the fact that Roz has acknowledged that she and Zenia are similar, that they are both a ‘mixture’ is also a realization that Roz adds up to more than the many labels of Mother, Fat, Rich Bitch, and Woman Boss. She has more in common with the transgressors than she previously believed.

The issue of transgression, so prominent a theme in Margaret Atwood’s novels, leads the discussion to the notion of thresholds. The threshold is exemplified, for example, in the aforementioned depicted scene where Zenia visits Charis on the island. Bakhtin writes of Dostoevsky’s characters that they are on the “threshold.” It is on thresholds and “in doorways, entrance ways, on staircases, in corridors” where a
turning point takes place, a grand event that transforms the lives and selves of a specific character. In the example of Zenia, where ‘she stumbles over the threshold’ it might seem that it is Zenia who will transform, who is the transgressor. In one way this is true as she is, in the lives of Tony, Roz, and Charis, the original transgressor, but it is the (life)stories and selves of the others that change and develop. Therefore, it is a threshold situation. Atwood describes multiple threshold events in her novels, and in particular in The Robber Bride. Any parallel to a vampire needs a threshold, needs an entranceway. But the image of a threshold is furthermore, in my opinion, easy to place within any “border” discourse. A threshold is an obvious boundary between one place and another. To cross a threshold involves actual mobility, and this time the mobility is also physical.

In addition, in the case of Zenia, it means also a blurring of boundaries. While having sex with Billy, Charis “doesn’t think about being Karen, or Charis either. She thinks about being Zenia” (RB 267). When Charis is pregnant with her daughter her thoughts are mixed up: “She has always known who the father was, of course. There weren’t any other choices. But the mother? Was it herself and Karen, sharing their body? Or was it Zenia, too” (RB 266)? Here, Charis acknowledges the fact that she is in possession of an actual body, her being has grown fleshier. Furthermore, Charis confuses her grown up daughter with Zenia. This could be seen as being both transgression and blurring. Even before Zenia arrives at Charis’s door, before she stumbles across the threshold, Charis walks through the “beautiful” and “ominous” mist, making the latter feel as if she is “able to walk through a solid barrier” (RB 202, 205).

As in the case with Tony, Charis lacks interlocutors. Her relationship with Billy is non-communicative and sexually aggressive. Her isolation on the island is more than just a metaphor: she is ‘elsewhere.’ With Zenia in the house, Charis regains her voice, and also a sense of importance and friendship. “It creates a circle, a circle of language, with Zenia and Charis on the inside of it and Billy on the outside” (RB 50).
This description is very similar to the one of Roz and Zenia, and Elaine and Cordelia in *Cat’s Eye*. The friendships provides a new place for these protagonists, a ‘circle.’ The circles of friendship and language are the foundation of communication: “[Karen] drifts closer and closer, and her mouth opens. [She wants] to speak” (RB 231-232). Together with Zenia, a new story is told, a story which Charis finally wants to tell. Here, the two major requisites for a re-watching of a place are brought to the fore: moving and speaking:

Zenia sees Charis and motions to her, and Charis goes close and then closer, and she sees the two of them side by side in the mirror. Then Zenia’s edges dissolve like a watercolour in the rain and Charis merges into her. She slides her on like a glove, she slips into her like a flesh dress, she looks out through her eyes. What she sees is herself in the mirror, herself with power. (RB 398)

Mirrors deflect once more. If mirrors deflect, re-watching is possible. In the above example Charis is mobile, moving towards her almost-mirror image, watching herself from a new point of view, gaining power.

Studying, and working with, this particular genre of history where power and aggression must be a key word, does not entail that Tony makes use of any knowledge of, at least, aggression. Tiny Tony is more of a negotiator, a talent grown out of her childhood dealings with her parents. “She leaves a note on the secretary's desk: The toilet is Clogged. Thank You. [...] There is no need to be unpleasant. Nothing will come of this note, but she has done her duty” (RB 25).87 Her place in the house she shares with West is in the basement, in order not to disturb him with her wars. It is mentioned that Tony also “enjoys being awake when others are asleep. She enjoys occupying dark space” (RB 192). Occupying dark empty places is a method for Tony

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86 “[Cordelia] creates a circle of two, takes [Elaine] in” (CE 75). “But I didn’t think I could’ve told them the real story, what really happened to me. They wouldn’t have understood it.” [Zenia] gives Roz a long look, straight out of her deep indigo eyes, and Roz is touched. She, Roz — she alone — has been chosen, to understand. And she does, she does” (RB 364). “[Roz] doesn’t want to share Zenia’s dismaying life story with him. It’s a story told just to her, for her, for her ears alone, by one outsider to another. Only Roz can understand it. Not Mitch, because what would he know about being on the outside” (RB 366).

87 When Tony has told Zenia about her mother who ran away and never saw Tony again. Zenia asks: “‘Weren’t you furious?’ ‘No’, says Tony, ‘I don’t think so.’ She searches through herself, patting surfaces, testing pockets. She doesn’t discover any fury. ‘I would have been,’ says Zenia. ‘I would have been enraged.’ Tony isn’t sure what it would be like, to be enraged. Possibly too dangerous. Or else a relief. (RB 152) Zenia’s actions towards Tony, and in her immediate sphere, will finally lead to some sort of aggression, Tony even brings a pistol (a relic from World War Two, a Luger that her father killed himself with) when she goes to see Zenia at her hotel.
to avoid conflict. In the basement, Tony transfers, on a regular basis, objects that tradi-
tionally belong in a typically female sphere — the kitchen — to a homemade battle-
field. Her unconventional usage of women’s places and attributes is a way of re-
watching traditional norms and stories, much in the same way that Cat’s Eye’s Elaine
makes kitchen supplies into objects of her paintings in order to re-watch them:

For the armies and the populations, Tony doesn’t use pins or flags, not pri-
marily. Instead she uses kitchen spices, a different one for each tribe or ethnic
grouping: cloves for the Germanic tribes, red peppercorns for the Vikings,
green peppercorns for the Saracens, white ones for the Slavs. The Celts are cor-
iander seeds, the Anglo-Saxons are dill. (RB 111)

When Tony is in college, she explains that West is the only one she can talk to about
her interest in war, but then admits without irony: “She hadn’t done it yet, but she was
working up to it gradually. Such a thing might take years” (RB 121). Roz admits on
another occasion: “She didn’t tell Mitch [about her father], though. She never told
Mitch” (RB 349). Zenia’s allowed and welcomed presence in the women’s lives is
answered for partly by relationships such as Roz and Tony’s. It is made clear that
Tony lacks an interlocutor, even in her own home. Since she lacks one, she continues
to be defined by her past. Her story is not open to a re-telling. However, when origi-
nally meeting West’s then-girlfriend Zenia, she addresses her interest in war for the
first time to someone else. Her interest is “‘Raw,’ she says” (RB 129). She
realizes that she’s made a mistake, a slip of the tongue. […] ‘I mean war,’ she
says, pronouncing this time carefully. ‘That’s what I want to do with my life. I
want to study war.’ She shouldn’t have said it, she shouldn’t have told that
much about herself, she’s put it wrong. She’s been ridiculous. Zenia laughs,
but it isn’t a mocking laugh. It’s a laugh of delight. (RB 129)

Tony thinks that she somehow must have asked Zenia into her life and past

because people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never
enter and tangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them. There has to
be recognition, an offer of hospitality, a word of greeting. […] What was there
about her, and about Zenia, that made such a thing not only possible but nec-
essary? (RB 114. My emphasis.)
The image of Zenia as a vampire implies that Zenia cannot survive without the life (blood) of another. But since Tony shows ‘hospitality’ and invites her, and Zenia’s first response is positive — ‘a laugh of delight’ — it is made clear that, as Bakhtin maintains, even understanding is a dialogic phenomenon. Zenia appears to be understanding, encouraging, and above all interested in Tony’s raw war.

Tony’s marriage to West is tragically silent, partly because of their static notions of the other. Tony thinks that “she doesn’t want West peeping into anything that might be going on in her brain” (RB 16), simply because she believes he will not understand her. Tony thinks about her marriage with West and admits that the sense of stability and comfort is an illusion, “the words flowing from left to right, the routines of love; but underneath is darkness. Menace, chaos, cities aflame, towers crashing down, the anarchy of deep water” (RB 35). When Tony meets Zenia, she publicly exposes and confronts another side of herself, this is shown in her choice — slip of the tongue — of the word ‘raw’.

Tony describes her language as “another language, an archaic language, a language she knows well. She could speak it in her sleep, and sometimes does” (RB 19). Another language, yes, but not merely that. The language symbolizes Tony’s buried past, the language developed during her childhood years, and it is, like Elaine’s cat’s eye marble, an alternative way of viewing the world. “[Her language] isn’t evil, however. It’s dangerous only to her. It’s her seam, it’s where she’s sewn together, it’s where she could split apart. Nevertheless, she still indulges in it. A risky nostalgia.” (RB 19) It is a rebellious act, rebellion against normative behavior. When marking students’ papers, Tony’s way to “combat boredom” is by “occasionally read[ing] a few sentences out loud to herself, backwards” (RB 8). She reads:

Seigolohcet gnitepmoc fo eneics eht si raw of eneics eht. How true. She has said it herself, many times. Today she marks quickly, today she’s synchronized. Her left hand knows what her right hand is doing. Her two halves are superimposed: there’s only a light penumbra, a slight degree of slippage. (RB 8. Original emphasis)

Karen F. Stein writes: “The Robber Bride copyright is held by O. W. Toad. While Atwood often uses this anagram for her name, it is especially noteworthy here, for it signals the importance of wordplay in the novel.” Margaret Atwood Revisited (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999) 97.

Donna E. Smyth discusses alternative uses of language and quotes Margaret Avison, “abstract form and structure can liberate language, can spring it free. Margaret Avison calls this process ‘jail-break / And re-creation,’ ” “Dialogue: Self and Severed Head,” Barbara Godard ed., Gynocritics. Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women’s Writing (Toronto: ECW PRESS, 1985) 34.
It is a cyborg language, a violation of language seen as a whole, a system of definitions, and consequently a move towards a heteroglossic reality. Heteroglossia is to cross traditional language borders, “the most fundamental of human acts," whether it is the borders between official and unofficial languages, or the borders between the spoken word and the only anticipated word. Yet, similar again to the cat’s eye in Elaine’s pocket, her backward-language is used secretly. Zenia is someone, however, who appreciates the Ynot-side of Tony. Zenia laughs with ‘delight’ when Tony/Ynot makes her backward-language audible to others, and thus Zenia encourages a development of Tony’s story, a dialogic storytelling. The main subject of her story — war — is equally pleasing.

Rosi Braidotti connects the polyglot with the nomadic subject. She says that

a person who is in transit between the languages, neither here nor there, is capable of some healthy skepticism about steady identities and mother tongues. In this respect, the polyglot is a variation on the theme of critical nomadic consciousness; being in between languages constitutes a vantagepoint in deconstructing identity.\(^{91}\)

If one regards Zenia as (mainly) an addressee, and disregards all conflicts created by her presence, she could be seen as an ideal addressee. She appears, magically, when Tony needs her the most. The first meeting takes place at a party where Tony feels at a loss, surrounded by people who are all dressed in black. Zenia enters the scene all dressed in white, and by her mere appearance becomes someone Tony can relate to, someone who also stands out and is different. Tony ponders: “Which was the magic word, raw or war? Probably it was the two of them together; the doubleness. That would have had high appeal for Zenia” (RB 130). As Bakhtin asserts, “[t]wo thoughts are already two people, for there are no thoughts belonging to no one and every thought represents an entire person.”\(^{92}\) Tony’s language does not necessarily mean that she is two different people. Rather, it implies that she has important thoughts and sides of her personality that are kept from others, and therefore, as a consequence, kept also from herself. Tony claims that Zenia appreciates the doubleness of something, and does not realize that she appreciates the same type of doubleness: “No!

\(^{90}\) Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, xxxi.

\(^{91}\) Braidotti 12.
No!” Tony screams but hears her other voice screaming at the same time: “On! On” (RB 137)!

Even though Zenia physically disappears from Tony’s, Charis’, and Roz’ lives, the dialogue continues with her. She is allowed to enter, because she is the first one who listens to them, understands their stories (because she has always a similar story to tell them back), and, above all, opens up their stories for a re-telling.

As shown in the discussion of Cat’s Eye, Elaine’s main addressees are physically absent, but Elaine’s art is still a living discourse. And in The Robber Bride, whereas Zenia is absent, her function as an addressee is not: the characters’ words are nevertheless directed towards her. As Bakhtin puts it, “[t]he word is oriented toward an addressee, toward who that addressee might be […] There can be no such thing as an abstract addressee, […]” Therefore, Zenia’s absence does not equal her being abstract. Absence is presence because the storytelling she is part of is no longer monological. Furthermore, Bakhtin writes that the word wants to be heard, comprehended and responded to and in turn respond to the response. The word thus “enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end.” Tony’s words below can be seen in this dialogic context. She suggests a never-ending co-operation when it comes to mere understanding:

All history is written backwards, writes Tony, writing backwards. We choose a significant event and examine its causes and its consequences, but who decides whether the event is significant? We do, and we are here; and it and its participants are there. They are long gone; at the same time, they are in our hands. (RB 109)

Events and their participants are “here” even though they are events in the past tense. They have happened — ‘they are long gone’ — but still need to be worked with, because, ‘they are in our hands.’ I.e. the dialogue has no semantic end. The characters in The Robber Bride meet to tell their histories/stories about Zenia. Their mutual need of her brings her back from the dead. Their histories are histories of war, in a way, both when it comes to the actual wars such as The Second World War as well as in connection with the war against Zenia. But Zenia is not only a history of war; she can

92 Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 93.
be explained as a history of women as well. Hilde Staels claims that each character’s story about Zenia offers only a limited version of her, “she is female story material that needs to be expressed, i.e. shaped into history. History is a version of reality and so are the three stories about Zenia.”95 What is vital to remember is that the protagonists’ own histories are connected to hers — “The story of Roz and Zenia began…” (RB 269), “The history of Charis and Zenia began…” (RB 201). So when Charis makes the claim that all she “has on her side is a wish to be good, and goodness is an absence, it’s the absence of evil; whereas Zenia has the real story” (RB 428), she has not fully realized that Zenia’s story is not real without Charis’s participation in it. It is when the women realize their own parts of the history that they can fight back. Zenia is always retrospective, but they make her present, they turn her into a discourse that is alive, which is shared, and which is interpreted and finally responded to. It is, as in Cat’s Eye, a question of time travelling, and here, too, we find reluctant time travelers.

Tony, Roz, and Charis have traumatic childhood experiences (during the Second World War), and one way for them to deal with such experiences, is to change their names. Antonia turns into Tony who also occasionally turns into Ynot, Rosalind becomes Roz, and Karen is Charis. By choosing new names, they make a statement about their pasts, which are half erased just like their names. Their new names are markers of a future which will be different from the past. Simultaneously the name changes are in themselves escape routes which only lead into cul de sacs. Re-watching is not possible because they cannot look back. The name changers somehow stop with the name change itself, and it is not until they encounter cyborg Zenia that they travel back in time: “Zenia wages a war against the characters’ attempt at ‘normality’, against the illusion of a unified self, and she reminds them of their divided, multiple condition,”96 claims Staels.

Tony mentions that Zenia enjoys the doubleness of things. Zenia appreciates the doubleness of Tony, Charis, and Roz, and forces them to appreciate it too. Bakhtin asserts that Dostoevsky shows an “urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not in time, […] forcing a character to converse with his own double, with the devil, with

95 Staels 197.
his alter ego, with his own caricature. " Zenia is a manifestation of coexistence in this novel because she cannot exist outside the other women's stories. Secondly, she is a force which unites past and present stories. Zenia can perhaps be seen as simply a bitch, but more likely she works as the characters’ repressed double. Accordingly, Tony draws a parallel between her own (suppressed) left hand and Zenia. In the same manner as Zenia is ‘doing her rebelliousness for her;’ Tony’s left hand, linked to her other self Tnomerf Ynot, is “a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring” (RB 137). Instead of fully accepting those sides to her person, she, as a result, feels “approximate” (RB 37).

Zenia’s presence opens up dialogic encounters not previously possible. The name changes, from one point of view, also limit actual speech. For example, when Karen became Charis she effectively muted the Karen-part — “Karen has no speech, because Charis has taken all the words with her” (RB 263) — and, as a consequence, the doublesidedness of Charis/Karen is silenced, and only one story is possible to tell. Zenia is therefore important to Charis for more than one reason. Firstly, Zenia keeps calling her by the name Karen, which means that “Karen is coming back, Charis can’t keep her away any more. [...] She looks like Zenia” (RB 266). Secondly, Zenia is openly fragile and wounded as opposed to Charis who has rid herself from her wounds. The silenced Charis/Karen takes responsibility for Zenia in order to save her life. (“Mutely Charis holds out her arms, and Zenia stumbles over the threshold and collapses into them” (RB 223)). Both these reasons force Charis into a dialogue with Zenia and with Karen. “Charis doesn’t like to question — she doesn’t like to intrude on the selfhood of others — but Zenia is so drained of energy it’s unlikely she will say anything at all, otherwise” (RB 220). Charis says: “Zenia was sent into her life — was chosen by her — to teach her something” (RB 451).

One of the most important outcomes of having met Zenia, is a realization and admittance of a subject’s non-finalization. Tony says towards the end of the narrative: “What she is remembering is Zenia. She owes her this remembrance. She owes her an end” (RB 464). Then she acknowledges, in seeming contradiction: “Every ending is arbitrary, because the end is where you write The end. A period, a dot of punctuation,
a point of stasis” (RB 465. Original emphasis), and she continues “[t]he end of any history is a lie in which we all agree to conspire” (RB 465. Original emphasis).

Zenia’s ashes are spread in the water on Remembrance Day, and this fact is not only symbolic of a remembrance of Zenia, but of, as Tony claims: “all the wars” (RB 466). All the wars means all the different pasts. Which means that there is no real end to anything. All the buried sides of the women’s selves and their stories prove more dangerous to the characters than incorporating the past stories with the present. Through Zenia it becomes possible to bring out Karen, Ynot, and Rosalind and therefore add a new way of watching themselves and each other. Through Zenia, the construction of femininity becomes blatantly clear. The fact that she changes shape in every new place is a manifestation of the constructedness of people in general, and of women in particular. That she changes shapes is indeed provocative and political. She is movement personified. Most of all, she triggers the other women to move.

Karen F. Stein notes that on the surface, The Robber Bride is about “women battling about men,” and continues to say that it is more about “an evolving friendship between women who band together in the face of their mutual enemy, Zenia.” Here, I would like to add — and re-emphasize — that it is important to understand what Zenia represents. She is not merely a femme fatale. She is the ideal and perfect woman. She is the absolute and definite construct, but with a twist. As Roz says, she is a “monster. [...] I thought I could control her. Then she broke loose” (RB 95). The monster refers of course to Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, the most famous construction in the history of literature, which the doctor built with his own hands. The most famous construction in the history of literature. The fact that both Frankenstein’s monster and Zenia could not be controlled was not part of the original scheme. In Zenia’s case I refer to the master discourse of patriarchy. She, at first, appears as traditional, normative images of women types. She is the victim, and she is sexually attractive and beautiful.

However, her abilities to transgress borders concerning friendship, honesty, sexuality among other things, make her into someone who can construct herself whenever she wants to. It is as if she has sprung out of the pages of Roz’s daughters’ children’s books. Furthermore, the fact that she brings the other women closer to-

98 Stein 96. Jane W. Brown writes: “The relationships among the women are paramount. The metaphor of war, the story of the robber bride, and [...] the fragmented structure and many doubling devices, all
gether is not part of the master discourse either. Phylis Sternberg Perrakis makes the claim that “despite its apparent insidiousness, Zenia’s function is ultimately transformative, forcing the three protagonists out of submissive relationships and making possible new modes of self-other interaction.” Roz ponders over her feelings about Zenia and understands, “[o]ddly enough, it’s gratitude” (RB 467) that she feels.

Zenia can truly be read as a cyborg. She, too, is originally a conventional story, but she is a ‘retold’ story, with a function to challenge and displace the central myths about women.

The final threshold event comes in the last sentence of the novel. “Was she in any way like us? Thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her? Then she opens the door, and goes in to join the others” (RB 470). The fact that Tony ‘opens the door’ and ‘joins the others’ renders it of course a threshold event, but more than anything it means, because it is described in the last sentence, that it is not the end; it is not a cul de sac anymore.

**GRACE**

As Grace Marks’s confined place in *Alias Grace* is more apparent than the other women's confinements, her methods of re-watching and re-telling the story of herself as a woman in prison are, from one perspective, on a more subtle level compared to the characters in the other two novels. As established in the previous chapter she is a person who has been deprived of everything from her own clothes to her own words, and she says that “they seem to know my story better than I do myself” (AG 41). She cannot move around without restraint, she cannot say what she wishes, she has no optional addressees. When she is not allowed to/ordered to be a maid, her place is limited to a prison cell where she has only the occasional visitor, and, later, a regular visitor in Dr. Jordan.

Grace is aware of the fact that no one comes to visit her “unless they want something” (AG 38). There is a knock on her door and she thinks:

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contribute to the realization that the three friends reach at the end of the novel: although they hate Zenia, they also identify with her and have found their courage and their friendship through her. 200.
The knock again. As if I have a choice. I push my hair back under my cap, and get up off the straw mattress and smooth down my dress and apron, and then I move as far back into the corner of the room as I can, and then I say, quite firmly because it's as well to keep hold of your dignity if at all possible, Please come in. (AG 36)

She moves 'as far back into the corner' as possible, but that is all she can do, physically. Her position and place entail that she must be thankful for any visit as well — she must open the door — she is obligated to say 'please.' The act resembles Elaine's school painting of herself lying in bed, surrounded by black and with nowhere to go. Yet, when Elaine takes to fainting as a way out of confinement, Grace does not. There are examples of how she constructs her fantasies around ironic actions and strategies — a strategy which is, according to Donna Haraway, both political and rhetorical — since she is not free enough to always say what she desires:

My hair is coming out from under my cap. Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster. When they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my head and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one. I never do such things though. (AG 33)

There are also examples of how she openly uses irony as a practical strategy. Dr. Jordan has given her an apple. "I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits. Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead." (AG 42). I believe that these two instances of ironic situations can be traced back to the influence of two mobile persons in her life, Mary Whitney and Jeremiah the Peddler.


100 Haraway writes: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg." 149.

101 This passage is also commented upon by Margaret Rogerson, and she suggests that Grace might be flirting with the doctor. "Reading the Patchworks in Alias Grace," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 33.1 (1998): 18.
MARY WHITNEY AND JEREMIAH THE PEDDLER

Mobility is a key term in my discussions concerning roles for women and power structures in various contexts. The question of mobility is essential in any discussion of borders and restrictions. And the most crucial mobility is not situated, physical movement, the movement is situated in the mind. If we examine Mary Whitney from a class and gender perspective, she is someone who is like Grace, situated in an powerless place, but she expands her story and place through a mobility which lies on a different level than the physical one. Being a woman who is in prison for life, Grace’s place does not contain many advantages. But both her thoughts and comments show an extreme consciousness of the power structures surrounding her. Grace’s awareness has roots in the friendships with first of all, Mary Whitney, and secondly, Jeremiah the Peddler. Margaret Atwood depicts their friendships as dialogically expanding Grace’s limited place as a woman prisoner. Grace tells Dr. Jordan:

Mary Whitney was once a particular friend of mine. She was dead by that time, Sir, and I did not think she would mind it if I used her name. She sometimes lent me her clothing, too. I stop for a minute, thinking of the right way to explain it. She was always kind to me, I say; and without her, it would have been a different story entirely. (AG 102)

The story would be different, indeed. This endorsement should be compared to one similar recognition on Grace’s part. On the subject of a quilting pattern, Grace explains: “On my Tree of Paradise, I intend to put a border of snakes entwined; they will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others, as I will make the eyes very small, but they will be snakes to me; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing” (AG 459-60). Without snakes and without Mary the story would be different. Yet, to Grace, the snakes represent the structural society — they are the borders on the quilt — and Mary’s significance and contribution to the story is of a different kind. She is the means to cross those borders.

The narrative about Grace is filled with references to Mary Whitney. For example, Grace says: “I remembered Mary's advice” (AG 199), “[a]s Mary used to say...” (AG 199), “[w]hat Mary Whitney used to say was [...]” (AG 32), and “[...] which is the kind of thing Mary Whitney would have said, or so I told myself” (AG 264). The words ‘or so I told myself’ illustrate the fact that Grace uses Mary’s words even though she never spoke them. Grace makes use of Mary Whitney’s name when
she escapes after the murders, and she continues to use her name and words as a means to be truthful, rude and crude. For example, she says about the people they work for:

[T]hey were by their nature as useless as a prick on a priest – if you'll excuse me, Sir, but that's how she put it — and if they were to lose all their money [...] they would end up getting — I won't say the word — in the ear; and most of them did not know their own arse from a whole in the ground. And she said something else about the women, which was so coarse I will not repeat it, Sir, but it made us laugh very much. (AG 158)

What Mary actually did and did not say however is not made clear. Whether Mary ever existed is not proven, because similarly to the narratives about Cordelia and Zenia, the presence of Mary is tangible only in Grace’s stories about her. When Grace explains that the story would be different without Mary, she is trustworthy. Without the story about Mary, Grace is prohibited from speaking about women’s positions in a structurally organized society: “I should remember that we were not slaves, and being a servant was not a thing we were born to, nor should we be forced to continue at it forever…” (AG 157), and “[a]s I've said, Sir, Mary was an outspoken young woman, and did not mince words; and she had very democratic ideas, which it took me some getting used to” (AG 159). Unequal relations between men and women are brought to the surface through Mary: “[Mary] said that some called it Eve's curse but she thought that was stupid, and the real curse of Eve was having to put up with Adam, who as soon as there was any trouble, blamed it all on her” (AG 164). Grace can verbally express highly political opinions at the same time as she says she pronounces the fact that she is only quoting somebody else. Even Mary’s death provides aspects of a patriarchal society:

…it is my true belief that it was the doctor that killed her with his knife; him and the gentleman between them. For it is not always the one that strikes the blow that is the actual murderer; and Mary was done to death by that unknown gentleman, as surely as if he'd taken the knife and plunged it into her body himself. (AG 178)

Regarding the subject of class and gender, Susanne Becker argues that Mary Whitney’s offensive statements as well as “Grace’s own sharp observations […], reveal
[Atwood’s] recognitions of recurring abuse and sexual entanglements.” Compared to the times when she “repeats” her friend Mary’s words, ‘Grace’s own sharp observations’ are always politely expressed.

Jeremiah the Peddler proves to be another important aid in Grace’s re-watching and re-telling. He is a shape shifter, with little or no respect for the authorities. He is nomadic because he is “always on the move” (AG 266) and claims that “[l]aws are made to be broken [...] and these laws were not made by me or mine, but by the powers that be, and for their own profit” (AG 266). He takes on the shape of Dr. Jerome Dupont, and this disguise is a turning point for Grace as a legal prisoner. His presence as a fake authority authorizes yet another voice for Grace. Dupont “hypnotizes” her, and whether or not is it true hypnotism, Grace can appear as a new person. ‘I am not Grace’” (AG 401) she exclaims. She continues: ‘I am not lying!’ [...] ‘I am beyond lying! I no longer need to lie’” (AG 402)! This is perhaps the strongest indication of Grace being more than the Grace the public has constructed. This enrages, among others, Reverend Verringer who later cries out: “We cannot be mere patchworks! It’s a horrifying thought, and one that, if true, would make a mockery of all notions of moral responsibility, and indeed of morality itself, as we currently define it”(AG 406).

Atwood lets Verringer’s opinion represent the public’s opinion. If people are ‘patchworks’ it implies that the basis of the rigid, dualistically structured society may be disrupted. There is no basis for the belief in duality anymore. Thus, it is not a question of ‘morality itself’ but of power distribution. Through his new authoritative voice, Jeremiah the Peddler, creates a new dimension in a formerly closed place. The fact that Grace in this new place — a place situated in between fiction and reality — is perceived as a patchwork becomes her salvation. She is later released from prison.

Lying and lies are methods to gain power handed down to Grace from Mary and Jeremiah. Mary is physically not present in Grace’s story, but Grace can employ her voice whenever she has the opportunity and in this manner develop her personal storytelling. Jeremiah’s advice about breaking the law without being punished is another influence. The conversations between Dr. Jordan and Grace are filled with hints of uncertainties, lies, and, at best, half-trues.

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102 Susanne Becker, Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999) 272
I should not speak to him so freely, and decide I will not, if that is the tone he is going to take. (AG 161)

But I do not say any of this to Dr. Jordan. And so forth, I say firmly, because And so forth is all he is entitled to. Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him. (AG 216)

Instead I said that I had indeed had a dream. And what was it about, said he. [...] I told him I’d dreamt about flowers. [...] But I did not say that they were made of cloth, nor did I say when I had seen them last; nor did I say that they were not a dream. (AG 242)

But I don’t say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practiced. (AG 38)

This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story. (AG 6)

These diverse examples point to the fact that the power distribution has started to become more equal in the relationship between Grace and Dr. Jordan. Grace is here also described as a shape shifter, as Jeremiah the Peddler. She has ‘practiced’ a ‘stupid look,’ which she can use to her own advantage. The fact that she can take on a stupid look is also a comment on the performativity of subjects. Furthermore, Grace underscores the story-aspects of the talks with Dr. Jordan—‘that part of the story.’ This is a story, however, that cannot be told and re-told without the (unknowing) participation of Dr. Jordan, because of the fact that he is her only real addressee. The major importance of this story is that it is now a different story than the many stories told in the press, and in the courtroom. Furthermore, she has been able to tell it partly via Mary Whitney and Jeremiah the Peddler. As Grace puts it: “I try to think of what Mary Whitney would say, and sometimes I can say it” (AG 63, my emphasis). Leaving Dr. Jordan, and us, in suspense.

PATCHWORKS AND QUILTING

Alias Grace is divided into sections that each carry the name of a quilting pattern. As André Brink states, patchwork is the key image of the novel.103 The novel itself is structured as a work of quilting, a patchwork. The image is a metaphor: the novel it-

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self is structured as a patchwork. Margaret Rogerson claims: “The pattern blocks of the novel are not all donated by Grace: some of them have been provided by Simon Jordan, and each of the characters contributes in some way to the collection.” It is only one part of Alias Grace that is narrated in the third person and it occurs when the story reaches the telling of the murders. Rogerson claims that the words in this section were scripted by others, the lawyers, and newspapers. The alleged presence of (only) others’ voices in this chapter points to the fact that Grace has never truly been heard, not even when she was at the center of attention. Her position is comparable to Sally Robinson’s assertion that “if women are marginal to patriarchal culture, Woman is absolutely central.” It is important to keep Grace at the center and equally imperative that she be kept silent. The alleged partaking in a brutal crime is larger than life, so to speak. A destructive side of patchworks is the one created in an unequal power situation, and Grace is a prime example. The Governor’s wife keeps clippings in her scrapbook about crimes. In a way they make out a violent patchwork consisting of the media’s version of crime and criminals. Grace states:

So I have read what they put in about me. She showed the scrapbook to me herself, I suppose she wanted to see what I would do; but I’ve learnt to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl’s in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person, and would she wish me to remove the tea things now; but I’ve looked in there since, many times, when I’ve been in the parlour by myself. A lot of it is lies. (AG 26-27)

Here other lies are in focus, lies told by others about Grace. The lies have helped define her. I maintain that we can understand Grace as a human being who is, in a broad sense, an embodiment of stories that are told and listened to, and read. She is a patchwork of others’ stories about her.

Elaine Showalter celebrates quilting and patchworks, and pronounces them as strong metaphors for women’s writing, both thematically and structurally. She writes that quilting is symbolic “for a Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival.” In addition, she claims that it is “celebrated as essentially feminine art forms, modes of nurturance and thrift, and they constitute a women’s language

104 Rogerson 10.
105 Rogerson 14.
unintelligible to male audiences or readers." Showalter furthermore argues that "piecing is not a repetitious recycling of design elements, but a series of aesthetic decisions that involve the transformation of conventions." I claim that this last statement is true when considering Atwood’s use of quilting and patchworks in *Alias Grace*. From one perspective, all three novels are patchworks in, at least, form, and as I will demonstrate Grace is capable of using her patchworks to transform conventions. However, I believe that Atwood, in *Alias Grace*, takes the ‘essentially feminine art form’ in itself and transforms it. Quilting is to a high degree connected to a woman’s preoccupation and therefore also to a woman’s place. By adding the prison setting, and all the aspects of violence, a patchwork, which according to Showalter is typically feminine, becomes both forceful and a way to comment upon contemporary events and places. Atwood thus expands the limits of a woman’s traditional place. It is no longer a question of ‘nurturance.’

The clippings about Grace contain much violence as do, in a way, the actual ‘real’ patchworks Grace makes. Hilary Mantel writes about the names of the sections in *Alias Grace*:

> This would be a worn and dangerously coco device, if the names themselves were not so shudderingly evocative. There is peril here: Jagged Edge, Snake Fence. There is woman’s fallibility, woman’s fate: Broken Dishes, Secret Drawer, Rocky Road. There is destruction: Falling Timbers. And woman’s primal guilt: Pandora’s Box.

From one perspective, these names, for example, Broken Dishes and Snake Fence, are aspects of Grace’s history as a maid and later as a prisoner. But Pandora’s Box, or ‘woman’s primal guilt’ as Mantel calls it does not mean the same thing for Grace as it does to her contemporaries. I have demonstrated how Grace’s friend Mary Whitney gives voice to unfeminine and radical — in this context — ideas, and how Grace herself can use these opinions safely, simply because she is quoting somebody else. Grace says of Pandora:

> And I say, Yes, she was a Greek person from days of old, who looked into a box she had been told not to, and a lot of diseases came out, and wars, and other human ills; for I had learnt it a long time ago, at Mrs. Alderman Parkin-

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108 Showalter 150.
son's. Mary Whitney had a low opinion of the story, and said why did they leave such a box lying around, if they didn’t want it opened. (AG 146)

Grace has been a quilt maker since she was very young. It is an area of expertise she can use in her sessions with Dr. Jordan. Quilt making becomes a very concrete way for Grace to increase her power. Dr. Jordan asks what the pattern of a quilt created only for herself would look like:

I used to get [the quilt Tree of Paradise] out on the pretence of seeing if it needed mending, just to admire it, it was a lovely thing, made all of triangles, dark for the leaves and light for the apples, the work very fine, the stitches almost as small as I can do myself, only mine would make the border different. [...] [M]ine would be an intertwined border, one light colour, one dark, the vine border they call it, vines twisted together like the vines on the mirror in the parlour. It would be a great deal of work and would take a long time, but if it were mine and just for me to have, I would be willing to do it. But what I say to him is different. I say, I don’t know, Sir. Perhaps it would be a Job’s Tears, or a Tree of Paradise, or a Snake Fence; or else an Old Maid’s Puzzle, because I am an old maid, wouldn’t you say, Sir, and I have certainly been very puzzled. I say this last thing to be mischievous. (AG 98)

Grace knows the answer to the question, but she also knows what the answer to him would be. Dr. Jordan has no knowledge of the art of quilting, and Grace takes advantage of this situation. She can use her knowledge of quilting as a means to gain control of her meetings with Simon Jordan. It is also an unexpected power devise, because quilting is such a quiet and traditionally feminine work of art. As Margaret Rogerson argues, “quilting, as a form of female discourse, empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible. In particular, it enables her to withhold secrets from her male inquisitor…”10 She goes on to suggest that “[t]he vision of Grace stitching in the fading light is one of apparent tranquility, but it may represent what she wants her audience to see rather than a clear recollection of the scene.”11

Whether Grace’s quilting represents only an image of ‘tranquility’ and or actual compliance is not as relevant as the patterns of the quiltings she creates. Out of rigid patterned solutions to how a quilt should look — and therefore also how the

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10 Rogerson 6.
quilt should function — Grace re-creates new patterns, and new meanings. Grace appears as a mystery, an alias for somebody else, and her quilt patterns her language, her words. She describes a quilt called Attic Windows and that it has “a great many pieces” and one thing all quilts have in common is that the viewer can “see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light” (AG 162). This is a highly accurate description of the story of Grace herself, as it/she has been created by the media, hospitals, court, and also Dr. Jordan. Grace states that even the most superficial details about her are forged. She says they have said “that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall, and also not above average height” (AG 23). As Rogerson states: “Atwood uses patchwork as a medium through which we can read the central character, convicted murderess, expert quilter, Grace Marks, and, in addition, as a metaphor for the literary artefact itself.”

Moreover, Grace informs the doctor that she and Mary had first thought the name of the quilt was Attic Widows, and by doing so she subtly tells him not to be so quick in his judgement of her.

Quilting is Grace’s best opportunity to express herself. Having made quilts since the age of four, the meaning of the art and the possibilities that come with it are not something she realizes until she is sentenced to prison. She says: “But I did not have these fancies about the quilts until after I was already in prison. It is a place where you have a lot of time to think, and no one to tell your thoughts to; and so you tell them to yourself” (AG 161). Just as Elaine uses her art to speak to herself and others, Grace uses the art of quilting as an act of communication. Her situation is naturally more extreme than Elaine’s, with very few interlocutors, but that only strengthens the argument about Elaine’s solitude, her lack of dialogues with others. At the end of Alias Grace, Grace writes in a letter to Dr. Jordan about the first quilt she makes for herself only. “It is a Tree of Paradise; but I am changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas” (AG 459).

On my Tree of Paradise, I intend to put a border of snakes entwined; they will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others, as I will make the eyes very small, but they will be snakes to me; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing. […] But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney’s; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as

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112 Rogerson 5.
a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy’s that she had on the first day I was at Mr Kinnear’s, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away. I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (459-60, my emphasis)

Firstly, Grace points out that the patchwork is her own (‘On my Tree of Paradise’). She constructs it ‘to suit [her] own ideas.’ Secondly, she makes the quilt dialogic by including colors from people from her past. In the quilt she transforms them from past to present. The work is also symbolic of her taking an active part in the stories from her past. This too is similar to Elaine’s art which almost exclusively depicts people from her past, and includes them in a dialogue, and therefore transforms them into a living discourse, open to change. They now belong in the present tense, as well as the future. As Aritha Van Herk claims: “Quilting is an art that pulls together pieces of the past into a cover promising a warm future, and Atwood’s employment of the quilt of experience works as a visual and textual metaphor for Alias Grace.”

With both forms of art — painting and quilting — a great variety of interpretation, and thus expression, is allowed: Colors, objects, forms, blank spaces, personal memories, stories, and social commentaries. Through quilting, Grace can re-construct her own story. Her description of quilts on beds allows her to comment on the unjust death of Mary Whitney:

And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on top of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in the room. And then I have thought, it's for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir, and to you it may mean rest and comfort and a good night's sleep. But it isn't so for everyone; and there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women that I will not mention to you what it is; and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die. (AG 161)

The bed quilt is symbolic of the unequal sexual relationship between Mary Whitney and the ‘unknown gentleman,’ a relationship which killed her. Grace develops the

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story of Mary, and thus also her own, when she connects what ‘some call love’ to a place where people die.

Patchwork is a strong metaphor for Grace’s story, as has been stated. Dr. Jordan deludes himself when he thinks:

…for at least they are approaching together the centre of Grace’s narrative. They are nearing the blank mystery, the area of erasure; they are entering the forest of amnesia, where things have lost their names. In other words, they are retracing (day by day, hour by hour) the events that immediately preceded the murders. Anything she says now may be a clue; any gesture; any twitch. She knows; she knows. She may not know that she knows, but buried deep within her, the knowledge is there. (AG 291)

However, they are not converging in the center, because in their sessions together, Grace deliberately de-centers her story. There is thus no center. She gives him one piece here and one piece there, but the center remains a blur. She also admits (but not to Dr. Jordan) that she embroiders her story on a regular basis. “Because he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him […]” (AG 247). Furthermore she claims that some patches of her life history are simply not possible to remember: “I don’t recall the place very well, as I was a child when I left it; only in scraps, like a plate that’s been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in” (AG 103). ‘Empty spaces’ are a prerequisite in a move from a monological to a dialogical storytelling.

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The Watchbirds in Elaine’s past are the greatest reason for Elaine to become a visual artist. Her preoccupation with watching and being watched result in paintings which are attempts on her part to become more than half a face. It is at the gallery that Elaine’s pieces of art become dialogic utterances to their fullest. They are displayed for a public which is also a ground for re-watching the past. The art becomes timeless and multi-layered.
Despite her absence, Cordelia is Elaine’s main interlocutor. She is furthermore the major motif in Elaine’s art. The fact that Elaine paints many half faces points to the fact that another half of a face is needed for the act of re-watching.

In short, the production of the Virgin Mary is a result of a traumatic experience. The fact that the Virgin Mary approves of the use of the cat’s eye in turn gives Elaine the ability to watch back.

Through the cat’s eye the performativity of Elaine’s friends is seen for the first time. Elaine’s new eye is a power tool. It strengthens her own vision in a manner that enables her to adopt a new subject position. Her new position is shown in, most of all, her visual art. Via her paintings she can both say ‘Look’ as well as ‘I see.’

Zenia comes across as something out of a myth, a story, or a fairy tale. But, as Tony says, she is nevertheless a ‘puzzle’ and a ‘knot,’ which means she cannot be explained as easy as a story. She arises from the western myths of Woman, but her stories take as many turns as there are women in the novel. She is central in the crucial parts of story telling in which Tony, Roz, and Charis are engaged, and she is the prime instigator of the same stories. Her most important feature is the one of unfinalizability, which is the reason why I see her as a symbolic feminist cyborg. Zenia’s stories are what make the other women re-watch their places and through a re-telling of their previously locked pasts, new stories are dialogically told.

Grace’s limited place — a prison cell — is expanded, mentally, through her talks with Dr. Jordan. It is to him, and for herself, that she can use more than one voice. Mary Whitney and Jeremiah the Peddler are integrated in her words, and thus it becomes difficult to determine where one voice ends and another starts. New modes of expression are reachable. For the first time she becomes a participant in her own story telling.

Patchworks and quilting are used as metaphors for people in general in Alias Grace. Grace Marks is a result of many people’s stories. Her own stories, lies and quilts are used to expand her limited place and to re-watch herself and her situation. A quilt consists of many pieces, which shows the constructedness of subjects, as well as the imperative of many voices and eyes.
This fourth and final chapter refers back to the previous chapters with new aspects of discussions I have previously been engaged in.

This chapter will discuss two often-occurring images. They are falling and water. They contribute to the preceding discussions on themes of femininity construction I have found prevalent in my collection of Atwood’s fiction. These images occur in various degrees in all three novels and they are therefore worthy of a chapter of their own. Earlier discussions have been concerned with the many images of war, prison, and blood. Obviously, they are all connected to violence and I have examined them as being signs and the result of being construed into, in my examples, the female gender. What separates the concepts and metaphors in this chapter from the ones earlier debated is that these are less homogenous in their meanings. Depending on context and character, I have found them to signify one thing and later, in a different context for example, they can take on another meaning. They are nevertheless to a large extent linked to my critical discussion of femininity in the novels.

I will firstly concentrate on the concepts of falling and falling women. They occur mostly in *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. Secondly, I will explore the concept of water. Again: both falling and water are linked to the themes of female gender construction.
The matters of falling and water will be seen as symbols that widen the meaning of concepts and events. To do so, it is necessary to scrutinize the subtle, or obvious, conditions surrounding the specific concept or event, and the effects of it. This discussion is also concerned with the effects the events have on the characters’ view of themselves and their context, their place. As Lucy M. Freibert emphasizes in her reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “context is essentially political”¹ and she quotes Offred, the protagonist of the novel, who claims: ‘Context is all.’

There is an “Atwood vocabulary” written by Frank Davey concerning what he considers to be typically Atwoodian symbols and images which he has encountered in a number of texts (*Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* excluded). He offers interpretations of words like mirrors, refugees and tourists, metamorphosis, and underground/underwater.² Elements of Davey’s discussions concerning underground/underwater will be employed in this chapter.

**FALLING/FALLING WOMEN**

The most legendary and discussed “falling woman” in literature is almost certainly Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who falls down the rabbit hole and ends up in Wonderland.³ According to Roberta Rubenstein, references to Alice can be detected throughout Atwood’s fiction, and she mentions, for example, the 1979 novel *Life before Man*.⁴ Furthermore, Sharon Rose Wilson claims that *Alice in Wonderland* is found as an in-

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² Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talbombooks, 1984) 93-127. He furthermore examines Atwood’s poetry and claims that the concept of “male and female space” is prevalent. Atwood’s recurring symbolic use of mirrors is perhaps the most debated image in scholarly circles. See, for example, Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood’s Novels. A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1995). In many ways the mirror is relevant for the texts I discuss too, for example in connection to how Cordelia and Elaine reflect each other, and ultimately switch places, and the mirror, according to Tony in *The Robber Bride* is Zenia’s tool: “As with any magician, you saw what you yourself wanted to see. She did it with mirrors” (RB 461).


tertext in *The Edible Woman*. In these three novels Alice cannot be detected as an intertextual reference, but falling in its many forms and fashion is almost ubiquitous.

Nina Auerbach says of Alice that her “fall endows her with the power to smash and transcend all rooms she enters and all countries to which she travels.” In her reading of *Alice in Wonderland*, Auerbach regards the fall as both positive and negative: “Alice’s fall is both a punishment for her inveterate curiosity and an alliance with mysterious underground laws that empower her.” When we look closer at falling in my samples of Atwood’s fiction, we will ascertain that there are here, too, both positive and negative connotations of falling. Falling can mean a prescribed behavior. It can point to the fact that a certain place has become so reduced that falling out of it is the only possible movement. It can furthermore mean a loss of control and place, and it may symbolize a realization of both needing and having control. Finally it can connote a sense of transcendence. Falling, in Atwood’s texts, is both a real activity and, at times, symbolic of an emotion, a state, a place.

Even if Alice herself cannot be detected in *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace*, I maintain that various forms of falling are present to a high degree. In *Cat’s Eye* an entire section is entitled ‘Falling Women.’ It contains Elaine’s description of feminist meetings which she attends. Furthermore, to a large extent, the section deals with Elaine’s love for two men, Josef and Jon. She loves them both, she claims, and by doing so she can avoid having to “make up [her] mind about either of them” (CE 336). The issue of falling in love, with an emphasis on falling, is found also in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely” (HT 237). In the context of heterosexual relationships in the three novels, falling is recommended behavior; it is normative.

I will start by discussing the act of falling as prescribed behavior. This type of falling has very much to do with falling in love. To fall here is to establish a solid, as much as a required, identity. Falling as in falling in love must be regarded in a non-literal way. Atwood gives a picture of falling (in love) as being part of a political

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5 Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993) xvi. Worth mentioning is that Wilson sees the brother Grimm’s “The Robber Bridegroom” in both *The Edible Woman* and *Bodily Harm*.


7 Auerbach 152.
agenda in which the patriarchal discourse may gain strength, or at least maintain *status quo*. To fall in love entails romance, drama, and a desired loss of “control.”

Falling in love with men is something every protagonist, with the possible exception of Grace, does. Falling in love is never an uncomplicated form of falling in these narratives. There are necessary negotiations which the characters need to make in order to fit into the place of a heterosexual, patriarchal idea of a love relationship. The monological aspect and the division of place are two out of many requirements. There is a clear example of when falling in love leads to violence, and, in this case, actual death. Grace Mark’s friend Mary Whitney secretly becomes involved with the son of the household where she and Grace work. The relationship is bound to end unhappily since there is a major difference in status and class between Mary and her clandestine lover. She becomes pregnant by him, has an illegal abortion and dies, (but of course) never revealing his part in her fate. In the old-fashioned way of judging her condition and character, Mary is then a fallen woman. The fact that Mary can never disclose his identity is furthermore proof of monologism. The risk Mary Whitney takes by being with this man, by falling in love with him, makes her from one perspective fall out of her prescribed femininity, as a lower-class maid. It makes her transgress the boundaries of her place. However, this transgression does not render her powerful. On the contrary, she has only one place to fall into, and that is the place of less powerless than before. The fallen woman’s place.

The issue of being a “fallen woman” points the way towards a discussion of Elaine Risley’s painting *Falling Women* — which is, however, not described in the section of the novel with the same name. The painting can be seen and understood as Elaine’s comment on a romantic relationship. Elaine claims that many of her paintings used to begin in “her confusion about words” (CE 286), referring to the well-known epithet ‘fallen women.’ She describes the painting as follows:

*Falling Women* showed the women, three of them, falling as if by accident off a bridge, their skirts opened into bells by the wind, their hair streaming upward. Down they fell, onto the men who were lying there unseen, jagged and dark and without volition, far below. (CE 286)

8 “Fallen woman” is still — surprisingly enough? — such a widely accepted phrase that it is even today found in English and Swedish dictionaries, it is used to exemplify “fallen”. See for example *Collins Concise English Dictionary* (1982, Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992) and *Norstedts stora engelsksvenska ordbok* (1980, Norstedts Förlag, 1993).
Elaine explains that even though there are no men in the painting, they are the center of attention. They were “the kind who caused women to fall” (CE 286). Her choice of words, “as if by accident (my emphasis),” suggests that the falling is in fact not by accident, the three women had been made to fall “by the kind [of men] who cause women to fall.” Elaine makes the connection between fallen and falling:

That must be what was meant by fallen women. Fallen women were women who had fallen onto men and hurt themselves. There was some suggestion of downward motion, against one’s will and not with the will of someone else. Fallen women were not pulled-down women or pushed women, merely fallen. Of course there was Eve and the Fall; but there was nothing about falling in that story, which was only about eating, like most children’s stories. (CE 286)

The words ‘against one’s will and not with the will of someone else’ suggest a rigid structure. The discourse is depicted to be so dominant that it here appears as if active participants and upholders are uncalled for. A prescribed social behavior pattern, in itself, by its own force, encourages, and makes women fall. The same social behavior relies on men, however unwillingly and unknowing they might be, to form the foundation, the basis of that structure. The same structure makes men if not necessarily in charge of women but the foundation, the basis, of the structure. The men do not seem to become injured by having women fall on top of them. The previously discussed ravine is the best example of this structure. It is a strictly forbidden place for the child Elaine and her friends, a place for men only and where a girl was likely to end up molested or dead if she trespassed all the same. The supposedly dangerous men are absent, as in the painting, but are nonetheless in control of the place. The men are there, without having to be physically present, and they are personified dangers to girls and women even though they are not active in any way. Lastly, Elaine mentions the mythology created around the figure of Eve, the prototype of the fallen woman, even though, as Elaine claims, that ‘children’s story’ is more about ‘eating.’

Another illustration of falling as prescribed behavior can be taken from Alias Grace. As discussed in the second chapter, the Victorian, romantic notions of how a woman should react in any given situation imbue the narrative of Grace Marks. There are literary sources embedded in the narrative, as well as outside, as epigraphs, creating a Victorian frame for the story. In a discussion with Dr. Jordan, Reverend Verringer speaks of Susanna Moodie’s poem “The Maniac:”

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Her poem contains all the requirements — a cliff, a moon, a raging sea, a betrayed maiden chanting a wild melody and clad in unhealthily damp garments, with — as I recall — her streaming hair festooned with botanical specimens. I believe she ends by leaping off the cliff so thoughtfully provided for her. (AG 191)

In this passage the words ‘requirements’ and ‘provided for’ point in the direction of a culture that demands that a “fallen woman” (she is fallen, because as a betrayed ‘maiden’ she is unmarried, and here, also possibly insane) must become a falling woman. Both these examples — Elaine’s painting and Moody’s poem — also provide an aspect of a limited and gendered place. The cliffs and ravines — during the 19th century regarded as very romantic settings — with their threats of violence and death, are there to heighten the fact that the women have no place of their own and they thus end up falling. That falling seems to be a set behavior is stressed by the indication that the cliff is ‘thoughtfully provided for her.’ Falling is then a prescribed act, a punishment if you will, when someone behaves unconventionally. Falling is also a manifestation of placelessness. The woman in the depicted Moody poem was a ‘betrayed maiden’ and accordingly someone who has had a less successful romantic involvement with an unknown, not present, man.

Elaine in *Cat’s Eye* provides many descriptions of her love relationship with Jon. She once claims that the two of them can be compared to a car accident, and that they are both survivors of each other (CE 17). Elaine’s description of their relationship carries distinct relevance in a discussion of falling:

> With Jon it’s like falling downstairs. Up until now there have been preliminary stumblings, recoveries, a clutching for handholds. But now all balance is lost and we plunge down headlong, both of us, noisily and without grace, gathering momentum and abrasions as we go. I enter sleep angry and dread waking up, and when I do wake I lie beside the sleeping body of Jon, in our bed, listening to the rhythm of his breathing and resenting him for the oblivion he still controls. (CE 391)

Obviously, in the novel, this is first and foremost an ironic version of “falling in love.” Furthermore, this example illustrates the fact that it is not only women who fall, men can fall too. But the way Elaine and Jon fall is nevertheless different from each other. Falling in this example is violent, causing ‘noise’ as well as ‘abrasions.’ The ‘falling downstairs’ includes both parties, and seem to cause them both much pain. Both of them have lost their balance, but since Jon still controls ‘oblivion’ in comparison to
Elaine, the act of falling is emblematic of an unequal relationship. He has the power to control himself, as opposed to Elaine who has no such power. Jon’s alleged oblivion furthermore accentuates a sense of separation between them. If we see falling as a sign of not only a loss of place and control but also separation (Elaine and Jon fall simultaneously but not together), it is, in Bakhtinian terms, a loss of one’s self. Bakhtin writes that separation, dissociation and an enclosure within one’s self leads to the ultimate loss of that self. It seems as if, at least judging from this example, men and women fall in a different manner, even though they, on the surface, seems to be in the same place: the place of a relationship. From these examples of love-falling various conclusions can be drawn. A (heterosexual) love relationship, in Atwood’s novels, is a place where the man and the woman have different positions. When the relationship ends — sometimes also even during it — the woman becomes a falling woman. She has lost a prescribed place, and does not have a new one to land in. Atwood’s use of words like cliffs, ravines, and edges propose threats of violence; they are places you can easily fall from.

Falling is to a great extent connected to the issue of place as it has been discussed in chapter two. I have discussed gendered places such as the ravine in Cat’s Eye, or Tony’s work place in The Robber Bride, or the place of the family as it is perhaps most viciously described in Cat’s Eye. Grace’s prescribed place is a prison, but references to and/or the image of prison in all the places are clearly perceptible. Or rather: all places function practically as prisons, with limited means to permit movement. In this sense, falling can implicate a way out of a place, literally or figuratively. Lorraine M. York points out that a large number of the Atwoodian female characters live on the margins. She cites Atwood’s The Circle Game: “I move/And live on the edges/(what edges)/I live/On all the edges there are.” This poem points towards the subject of my discussion as well. The character lives on the edges and must therefore be careful of where she (or he) moves. Moreover, to move and live on edges emphasizes an environment with many borders.

Elaine mentions the edges when she thinks back at her relationship with Jon:

I was unfair to him, of course, but where would I have been without unfairness? In thrall, in harness. Young women need unfairness, it's one of their few defenses. They need the callousness, they need the ignorance. They walk in the dark, along the edges of high cliffs, humming to themselves, thinking themselves invulnerable. (CE 387)

Here, Atwood places Elaine's behavior — including the behavior of Cordelia et al — in the context of a patriarchal borderland. It is also a possible result of the limitations of a hegemonic society. Without the girls' own cruelty they would be falling. With cruelty girls can walk 'along the edges of high cliffs.' The cruelty they perform is a cruelty incidental to the Watchbird. The unconstructive side of this of course, is as seen: fainting, self-mutilation and suicide attempts. 'Ignorance' here is also a reference to Jon's oblivion. To be ignorant — to be cruel — is to have a type of power.

The episode of the suicide attempt bears a strong resemblance to the episode concerning the ravine. Why Elaine trespasses into the taboo filled place is because Cordelia has thrown Elaine's hat into the ravine and Elaine struggles to stay in control of the situation. She decides she would rather go down there, voluntarily so to speak, than have Cordelia push her: "I remember falling through the ice" (CE 206). The choice is not a real choice; it is only, maybe, the least hurtful act out of two: "Usually I'm afraid to go so near the edge of the bridge, but this time I'm not. I don't feel anything as positive as fear" (CE 200). She continues: "And if I refuse to go, what will Cordelia do next? She might get angry, she might never speak to me again. She might push me off the bridge" (CE 200). The ravine incident in her childhood relates to her state of mind before she tries to take her life as an adult: "It's the difference between jumping and being pushed" (CE 395). When she tries to take her life, Elaine claims she hears Cordelia's voice, and whether it is Cordelia's voice she hears, or her own, each situation is nevertheless an example of the presence and control of the Watchbird. The Watchbird has taken complete control over her, it speaks to her.

The Watchbird has much to do with the theme of falling. When Cordelia has failed to live up to the demands of the Watchbird, and as a result has been committed to a mental institution, Elaine chooses to ignore Cordelia's pleas for her friendship and support. The result of this is a dream of falling:

I dream of Cordelia falling, from a cliff or bridge, against a background of twilight, her arms outspread, her skirt open like a bell, making a snow angel in the empty air. She never hits or lands; she falls and falls, and I wake with my
heart pounding and gravity cut from under me, as in an elevator plummeting out of control. (CE 381)

The words ‘her skirt open like a bell’ draw attention to Elaine’s painting *Falling Women*, and indicate that Cordelia is one of the three depicted falling women. They too had skirts open like bells. Like Lewis Carrol’s Alice, she seems to be falling forever, which stresses a loss of place. There seems to be a major difference between falling and falling forever. When you fall it is not the fall that is depicted as injurious, it is rather the impact when hitting the ground (or the men on the ground). To be falling forever implies that a place — whether it is prescribed or not — cannot be attained. A new place cannot be reached. In the dream, the strong psychological connection between Cordelia and Elaine is also shown: Elaine dreams of Cordelia falling, but wakes up ‘with gravity cut’ from under her. The separation of Cordelia and Elaine has led to a mutual falling, as dangerous as an ‘elevator plummeting out of control.’ It is not long after this that Elaine attempts to take her own life.

When the situation becomes ultimately unbearable, Elaine slits her wrists:

“This is when I hear a voice, not inside my head at all but in the room, clearly: Do it. Come on. Do it. This voice doesn’t offer a choice: it has the force of an order. It’s the difference between jumping and being pushed” (CE 395). Here, the sense of possessing neither control nor power is at its peak. Elaine describes her suicide attempt as unavoidable (she does not ‘jump’ voluntarily), she is ordered to do so, just as she was ordered years ago to pretend to be dead while playing Mary Queen of Scots. Just as Mary Queen of Scots was decapitated, Elaine is here in a similar situation: the description is not of someone who hurts herself but, on the contrary, it gives the impression that she is hurt by someone else. The feeling intensifies the sense of a lack of control. In addition, the place Elaine is in, circumscribed by her femininity, has shrunk so much that she has nowhere else to go.

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11 This is an attitude that sticks with Elaine. She contemplates the occurrence of a possible plane crash and thinks: “I don’t like to check things. I like to jam it all under the airplane seat. At the back of my mind is the idea that if something goes wrong, up there in the air, I’ll be able to grab my bag out from under the seat and jump out the window, gracefully without leaving any of my possessions behind” (CE 44).

12 As we have seen, romantic relationships can be described as falling, where the act of falling is heavily connected to a loss of control, and in extreme cases, sometimes loss of life. However, there are other occasions where falling is described as likewise threatening. These are the circumstances especially in *Cat's Eye*. The adult Elaine lives in Vancouver, but thinks of her hometown in terms of “suicidal capital of the country”. She explains that “[y]ou keep going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off” (CE 44). Elaine’s sense of not being in control of her own place of home, and even direction is manifested here.
Some time before Elaine’s suicide attempt, she observes another young woman, Susie, who is also sexually involved with Josef. Susie becomes pregnant by him, and tries to end her life. Elaine is then reproachful in her attitude towards the woman, as she is of Cordelia:

I agree with [Josef] that she’s been stupid. At the same time I know that in her place I would have been just as stupid. I would have done what she has done, moment by moment, step by step. Like her I would not have known where to go. Everything that’s happened to her could well have happened to me. But there is a also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: *It serves her right.* (CE 34, original emphasis)

The suicide attempts — Cordelia attempts suicide as well — are an extreme and brutal extension of the strategy of fainting. Elaine’s explanation that ‘in her place’ she ‘would not have known where to go’ points towards a situation marked with hopelessness. She has been confined to a place with no visible exits. This is a situation of which Elaine has full knowledge. She has multiple fainting fits in her youth, and they are described as “a way out of places you want to leave, but can’t” (CE 183). Furthermore, Grace Marks faints on many occasions.13 I see fainting clearly as a type of falling. Fainting and falling to the ground is the middle road between life and death. It is a desperate sign of powerlessness and hopelessness when it appears as if nothing else can be done. It is simply a strategy to deal with the never-ending Watchbird supervision. There are many examples of falling in connection to powerlessness and hopelessness in Atwood’s writing. As said, there are literal examples of fainting, and there are figurative examples such as feelings of powerlessness, below exemplified in the words of Grace Marks. Grace compares the task of trying to fit in the role of a woman and a convict to a situation where falling (and dying?) is a threat. There is a clear link between a moral fall and a physical one:

If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go; but it’s not easy being quiet and good, it’s like hanging on the edge of a bridge, when you’ve already fallen over; you don’t seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength. (AG 5).

13 “...waking up with Mary in the bed right beside me, and touching her, and finding she would not speak to me, and the horror and distress I would feel; and at that moment I fell to the ground in a dead faint” (AG 179).
Every day is spent trying to please her superiors, and, as she says, it is taking all her strength. But there is, again, no end to perfection. The panoptic Watchbird is reflected here, too; she must be constantly aware of her own behavior and appearance, simply because she is continually being watched. Grace Marks is a falling woman from many perspectives. She has certainly, in the eyes of society, become at least a fallen woman, because of her bloody (and sexual) past.

In *The Robber Bride* women are also falling. The new age follower Charis pictures herself falling through space when she experiences that she has lost control over herself, her body, and place. The context here is that she has just learned that Zenia is not dead as they all thought. Or she is alive again:

> Shaken and feeling sick, Charis closes her eyes, struggling to regain her body. My body, mine, she repeats. I am a good person, I exist. In the moonlit night of her head she can see an image: a tall structure, a building, something toppling from it, falling through the air, turning over and over. Coming apart. (RB 67)

The tall building represents the structures according to which Charis lives. The structure is however not as safe as it is desired to be, when a single person (Zenia) can break it. Charis identifies with someone falling from this tall structure and while falling she is also falling into smaller pieces, disintegrating, thus losing complete control. Furthermore, this is a sign of her memories of the repeated molestation she was subjected to during her childhood. The first time she is raped by her uncle, she “splits in two” (RB 262) because she is dehumanized and fundamentally devoid of power, thus coming apart.¹⁴

The Zenia who makes Charis fall is an exceedingly complex Zenia. She is depicted as being a threat in herself. She exists, trespasses, transgresses and is on the whole a menace to a well-structured society. Tony describes a meeting with her as follows: “Tony stands up. Her legs are wobbling as if she’s just been pulled back from a crumbling cliff-edge. How nearly she was taken in again!” (RB 413) In the context of Zenia’s many personalities and behavior, and the fact that she is always seen in contrast and comparison to someone else, in this example Tony, falling seems almost alluring. There is a thrill in the danger, however dangerous it might be.

¹⁴ I cannot help but to think of the famous lines by Yeats: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.” These lines are also quoted by Roz’s assistant Boyce (RB 91).
There are some positive sides to the act of falling, or the sense of falling. It may in some instances symbolize a feeling, or acknowledgement of one’s own physical and structural power. When Elaine is rescued from the ravine by her vision of the Virgin Mary she ascribes to Mary the power not to remain and possibly die in the ravine. The Virgin Mary ignores the choice between being pushed or jumping; falling voluntarily: “The person who was standing on the bridge is moving through the railing, or melting into it. [...] She isn’t falling, she’s coming down toward me as if walking, but there’s nothing for her to walk on” (CE 202-203). Elaine chooses to provide the vision with the strength she herself lacks. She can even be sure of the fact that the Virgin Mary says: “You can go home now” (CE 203, original emphasis). After the appearance of the Virgin Mary, Elaine walks away from her friends. She made the Virgin Mary not fall but to “com[e] towards [her] as if walking” (CE 202). And accordingly, Elaine does not fall when she meets Cordelia. She is frightened “[b]ut I turn and walk away from her. It’s like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does” (CE 207).

Charis in The Robber Bride, on the other hand, gives herself power in a vision: she “has a clear picture of herself pushing Zenia off a cliff, or other high object” (RB 70). In this sense, albeit in her head, she turns around the threat that Zenia manifests. The pushing of another person becomes a substitute as well as a symptom of the aggression and potential power Charis has long suppressed. The difference between falling or causing someone else to fall is clearly power related, since it means to be an active agent instead of a passive one. This point makes the distinction between attempted suicide and fainting important, because in such cases it is the internalized Watchbird who is in control. Even though both falling and fainting are motions, are acts, the result is finally and only a motionless state of being:

Own the emotion, she tells herself, because although it’s a thoroughly unworthy one it must be acknowledged fully before being discarded. She concentrates on the image, bringing it closer; she feels the wind against her face, senses the height, hears the release of her arm muscles inside her body. Listens for the scream. But Zenia makes no sound. She merely falls, her hair streaming behind her like a dark comet. (RB 70)

In this example, Charis’s emotions show more than a need for action. They are, in themselves, actions. She “owns her emotions,” “brings” the image closer, and she can feel her body muscles move.
Zenia, the omnipresent character, has been discussed as transgressing the borders of the female gender, and, maybe above all, as the representation of many silenced women. She is a threat to the order of things because she is very much aware of how the social structures operate, and she forcefully crosses the lines of decorum. When she enters the women’s various lives it is always in the persona resembling or representing themselves. She is a person who, in contrast to Charis, feels it is “thoroughly unworthy” to make someone fall, and easily moves from falling to causing to fall, pushing. Zenia as a falling woman is exemplified here in the words of Roz: “How badly Roz has misjudged Zenia! [...] She’s a waif, a homeless wandering waif; she’s faltering by the wayside, she’s falling” (RB 365). Zenia appears as someone victimized, as somebody or something has caused her to fall. It is in Roz’s hands to see to it that she stops falling. Roz feels she can save Zenia, because she herself cannot fall in that image: “Roz opens her heart, and spreads her wings, her cardboard angel’s wings, her invisible dove’s wings, her warm sheltering wings, and takes her in” (RB 365). That Zenia falls gives Roz the power to rescue her.

When Zenia dies (for the second time) she dies from falling. Charis sees the event in a vision — “I saw her falling: she was falling, into water. I saw it! She’s dead!” (RB 444) — but not as an actual witness; hence creating yet again ambiguity surrounding her death. “She didn’t only see Zenia falling, a dark shape turning over and over, the hair spreading like feathers, the rainbow of her life twisting up out of her like grey gauze, Zenia shrinking to blackout. She also saw someone pushing her. Someone pushed Zenia, over the edge” (RB 445). She continues: “Although she couldn’t see it clearly, she thinks she knows who that person was. It was Karen, who was left behind somehow; who had stayed in Zenia’s room; who had waited until Zenia had opened the door onto the balcony and then came up behind her and showed her off” (RB 445). Charis thus implicates herself in Zenia’s fall. The longtime suppressed Karen — whom Zenia was the only one to acknowledge — who disappeared at the time of the first rape, takes imaginative control of Zenia’s fall. In comparison to Roz, then — who stops Zenia from falling — Charis causes Zenia to fall. Both examples are power related.

Nonetheless, Charis sees that this Zenia’s act of falling will generate a positive outcome, a new beginning so to speak:
She can see Zenia clearly, Zenia lying in the fountain, with her cloudy hair floating. As she watches, time reverses itself and life flows back into Zenia, and she lifts out of the water and flies backwards like a huge bird, up onto the orange balcony. But Charis can’t hold her there, and she falls again; falls down, turning slowly, into her own future. Her future as a dead person, as a person not yet born. (RB 451)

Charis’ view of Zenia’s fall is an acknowledgement of Zenia’s ability to transcend boundaries. From this aspect, Zenia resembles Alice falling down to Wonderland. She has the power to “smash and transcend all rooms she enters and all countries to which she travels.” She has indeed smashed and transcended everything throughout *The Robber Bride*, and it seems she continues to do so after her fall from the balcony. Accordingly, Zenia’s death does not equal death but life, because Charis finds strength in herself to recreate the fall, and accordingly herself. Ambiguous, indeed, but what also matters is that Zenia not only falls but that she ends up in water. Twice.

**WATER**

Water, in its many forms, is a common literary trope. It can take on several meanings. The sea, for example, can symbolize the unknown, birth, and death. In Atwood’s novels, like falling, water is linked to power, and also to danger, re/birth and death. Many deaths occur in water, falling into water if you will. But water is also a metaphoric place of movement after death. Water serves as a place of remembrance. This means, in other words, an acknowledgment of someone’s importance to another. Furthermore, in the context of female gender construction water is, and most poignantly so in the case of Grace and Zenia, a strong metaphor for objection to finalization and permanence.

The first sentence of *The Robber Bride* has a reference to water: “The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead” (RB 4). In this passage, Lake Ontario signifies a place of burial and the place where Zenia is reborn.

Throughout *The Robber Bride*, Zenia is often one way or another connected to water (here, Lake Ontario). It is also in this novel that water plays a most significant

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role throughout the whole narrative. We even read about every time (or so it seems) that the characters drink a glass of water. The novel starts with the breeze over Lake Ontario, and it ends when Tony, Roz, and Charis throw Zenia’s ashes into the same waters, and later Tony has a drink of water. Water plays a significant role in especially *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*.

Frank Davey’s “An Atwood Vocabulary” in *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* does not deal with *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, or *Alias Grace* since it was published in 1984. He nevertheless discusses what he terms “Underground, Underwater” in many of Margaret Atwood’s other writings. Davey says of underwater: “Going underwater in Atwood’s writing usually means entering an instructive, ominous, and potentially transforming experience [...]”  

The issue of transformation is part of my discussions of water as well. However, the meaning of water is as multifold, I claim, as the meaning of falling. It appears in dreams and in as trivial an act as drinking some water (RB 43, 110, 191, 464). As with falling, water is linked to death, life, power, and lack of power. The question of power is emphasized in *The Robber Bride*. Linda Hutcheon claims that power, and the lack of power, is what the novel focuses on. “[T]he power of men over women and women over men; the power wielded by parents, by adults over children; the power of the rich over the less so, of the knowing over the naïve, of the liars over the truth-tellers.”  

Water — and falling — are often made to symbolize many aspects of power relations.

The most basic power situation connected to water is when prisoner Grace complains of not having any water to drink: “But yesterday’s water is all gone and I’m very thirsty, I am dying of thirst, my mouth tastes bruised, my tongue is swelling. That’s what happens to castaways, I’ve read about them in legal trials, lost at sea and drinking each other’s blood.” Having water means having a means to survive. Also, Grace seems to imply that a lack of water might also lead to, not so much dying of thirst, but taking someone else’s life.

16 Davey 111.

17 Linda Hutcheon, “Universal Soldiers”, *The Nation* Dec 13 (1993): 734. She continues the list: “But without trivializing this theme, Atwood also makes us think about the more subtle tyrannies of the beautiful over the plain, of the young over the aging, of the slim over the heavy and of the tall over the short.”

18 As a relevant parenthesis it should be pointed out that Grace is the one character in the novels who undertakes the longest journey over the ocean, going from Ireland to Canada. Her mother dies on the ship and is buried at sea. “And then with the icebergs floating around us and the fog rolling in, my mother was tipped into the sea” (AG 121).
The presence of Zenia’s stories in *The Robber Bride* calls attention to the fact that water is linked to power and death. All through the novel Zenia is connected to water. However, in one respect, Zenia is more than connected to water, she rather appears to *be* water. The fact that she comes with the mist — a form of water — supports this idea. However, the difference between water and mist, is that water is perceived as clear, possible to see through, while mist is unclear. Zenia is a shape-shifter; she has a new story to tell each woman. Mist is a form of water that obscures her shapes, and by choosing mist as an entrance way it can provide her with constantly new shapes. Zenia cannot be molded into one shape, however hard the protagonists try; mist serves as a symbol of this.

Zenia and Grace Marks resemble each other in many ways. In the different contexts where they operate they are thus hard to pin down, and to a large extent they are the results of (gender) story telling and (gender) myth making. But the final outcome is that they melt away like mist.

The untouchability and vagueness of the women are power tools. This is shown in one of Dr. Jordan’s many dreams. He dreams that he is powerless, surrounded by females who have power. He dreams he is in a corridor and a door is opened. “Inside it is the sea (AG 139).” He finds himself caressed by women. “It’s the maids; only they can swim. But now they are swimming away from him, abandoning him. He calls out to them, *Help me*, but they are gone” (AG 139, original emphasis). The dream functions as a description of Dr. Jordan’s attitude towards women in general: women are highly sexual and exceedingly dangerous. Their power is described as being a threat to his life: he cannot swim. The dream is furthermore a metaphorical account of how Dr. Jordan regards his sessions with Grace. She is tempting, but she is in addition too vague and problematical to pin down. She does not supply him with the answers he expects and needs in order to conclude his monological storytelling of her. The swimming maids abandon Dr. Jordan, and Grace does not help him either. In another dream he sees Grace: “Now Grace is coming towards him across a wide lawn in sunshine, all in white, carrying an armful of red flowers: they are so clear he can see the dewdrops on them. Her hair is loose, her feet bare; she’s smiling. Then he sees that what she walks on is not grass but water; and as he reaches to embrace her, she
melts away like mist” (AG 413). Like misty Zenia, Grace cannot be easily categorized.

In the same manner as Roz, Tony, and Charis try to fix Zenia, Dr. Jordan repeatedly tries to fix Grace into his idea of her. The fact that he connects her with water is, however, an indication of his ultimate defeat in this project. If Grace is water she is fluid, which means she cannot be finalized the way he pleases. Her reputation has fixed her, her status as a prisoner has fixed her, and her gender has constructed her. But when she finally is allowed to participate in a dialogue, even with a person with power over her, she finds methods to unfix herself.

Grace cannot of course physically move around freely as Zenia can. Zenia often comes with the mist (or when there is mist). For example, it is stated: “The day begins as mist” (RB 201), and “The mist is less threatening when you’re actually in it. It gives Charis the illusion of being able to walk through a solid barrier.” And in accordance to Davey’s description of underwater as being ‘ominous’, Atwood writes: “The mist is beautiful, true, it’s like solid light, but it’s also ominous: when there’s mist you can’t see what’s coming” (RB 205). Atwood flirts openly with the thriller or gothic genre here. The mist gives Zenia an air of mystery and an element of surprise, since, as Charis says, “you can’t see what’s coming” (RB 205). Furthermore, Zenia is linked to Lake Ontario. Regarding the issue of water, Mari Peepre states that “[t]he narrative is framed by powerful images of Lake Ontario as a metaphor for death and, especially, of life and reincarnation.” However, Zenia is also connected to Styx, and the Rubicon, the river Julius Caesar once crossed and thus started a civil war.

War is also linked to the subject of water. The central characters are all influenced by wars, and especially by the Second World War. The wars are extended...
though to the protagonists' immediate families, and they are all fighting a civil war in this sense.

When Zenia appears after having been supposedly dead, Tony's thoughts run in the direction of not merely war, but also water. In her mind, water is closely related to war. They are not separate entities. Tony faces the fact that she lives in a construction, a "willed illusion of comfort and stability" and that what she refuses to acknowledge is "[m]enace, chaos, cities aflame, towers crashing down, the anarchy of deep water" (RB 35). Atwood's use of the metaphor of water, which is expressed here, seems to be the opposite of how, for example, Elaine Showalter regards it. Showalter describes water and drowning as strictly feminine. "As the female body is prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid, so in drowning the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element." Atwood expands this particular feminine discourse of water in all three novels. It is made clear that water can mean power, death, and change.

It is not so much death that Zenia represents, or "blood, milk [and] tears" but, as Tony states above, anarchy. When Tony and Zenia meet for the first time, the feeling Tony experiences is sensational. It is a feeling of "having lost her footing, of being swept out into a strong current" (RB 130). When they have later established a friendship, Tony's impression is still linked to water:

This friendship with Zenia has been very sudden. She feels as if she's being dragged along on a rope, behind a speeding motorboat, with the waves sloshing over her and her ears full of applause. [...] She's out of control; at the same time, she's unusually alert [...] These are perilous waters. But why? They are only talking. (RB 134)

Water is strongly attached to the question of mobility. Water cannot be controlled. On the contrary it is water that takes control in this situation. So, in the context of traditional femininity, and Showalter's claim, water is, on the contrary quite explicitly unfeminine. Tony who even controls war by staging battles in her basement is, for the first time, open to another human being about her past experiences and her childhood, something that is made possible in these 'perilous waters.'

Zenia does not only produce sensational, transformational feelings and actions. Being a true transformer and anarchist, she follows no normative or moral guidelines.

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The result is both actual drowning — Roz’s husband Mitch takes his life after having been dumped by Zenia: “Where Mitch is, is in Lake Ontario” (RB 384) — and the threat of drowning. The threat of drowning is a symbol for power lost or power never had. The fact that Mitch drowns shows that water is not a gendered place, nor is drowning a gendered behavior, a feminine way of dying. It is relevant that Zenia is the unofficial reason for his death. Mitch is “a control freak” (RB 439), but trying to control Zenia — water — proves too great a task however. Furthermore, the drowning of Mitch is similar to the dream Dr. Jordan has. Simon Jordan dreams that he is drowning because he has less power than is needed to control the situation.

Water in relation to Zenia takes many forms and meanings. Water in relation to Tony, Roz, and Charis does not take on a similar transformative meaning until near the end of the novel. My main explanation for this is that in comparison to the three friends, Zenia is fluid and moving. She is likened to strong currents, or as Roz ironically puts it: as impossible to locate as the Holy Grail, constantly on the move with a pirate flag (RB 380). Roz, Charis, and Tony on the other hand have, since the personal wars during their childhood, closed off all entrances to the past, and therefore, in a manner of speaking, drowned (or buried) important parts of themselves.

If we first consider Tony, we can see this exemplified in a recurring dream. This takes place after West has left Tony for Zenia. She has the sense “that this dream has been waiting for her for a long time, waiting for her to enter it, re-enter it; or that it has been waiting to re-enter her” (RB 188).

The dream is underwater. In her waking life, she is no swimmer; she has never liked immersing herself, getting cold and wet. The most she’ll trust herself to is a bathtub, and on the whole she prefers showers. But in the dream she swims effortlessly, in water as green as leaves, with sunlight filtering down through it, dappling the sand. No bubbles come out of her mouth; she is not conscious of breathing. [...] Someone walking away from her. She swims faster but it’s no use, she’s held in place, an aquarium goldfish bumping its nose against glass. Reverof, she hears. The backwards dream language. She opens her mouth to call, but there is no air to call with and water rushes in. She wakes up gasping and choking, her throat constricted, her face streaming with tears. (RB 188-189, original emphasis)

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24 When Tony and West sleep together for the first time it is clearly described as a watery event. It is “like falling into a river, because West is what other people call him, a long drink of water, and Tony is so thirsty, she’s parched, she’s been wandering in the desert all of these years, and now somebody truly needs her for something, and in the end she discovers what she’s always wanted to know: she is bigger inside than out” (RB 179).
Firstly, Tony declares that the dream ‘re-enters’ her, meaning that this has been a part of her past. Secondly, the fact that she dreams in her backwards language is realted to herself as much as it is a metaphor for having lost West to Zenia. Tony feels she is ‘held in place’ and likens herself to a ‘goldfish bumping its nose against glass.’ This is an acknowledgment of the fact that she needs to include her past into her present, or she will never be able to move forward. She must increase her personal place. It was during her parents’ civil war that Tony developed Ynot and the backwards language,

Charis lives on an island, and is therefore naturally surrounded by water. The crux of the matter is that the water around her is the home of her other self: Karen. Just like Tony, she has drowned her past. “Still inside her head, she walked to the shore of Lake Ontario and sank the leather bag into the water. That was the end of Karen, Karen was gone. But the lake was inside Charis really, so that’s where Karen was too. Down deep” (RB 265). Charis symbolically buries Karen in water, but she has not counted on Zenia’s appearance out of water.

When Zenia comes through the mist and knocks on Charis’s door, claiming she is dying from cancer, Karen is acknowledged for the first time since her disappearance in Lake Ontario. On many occasions Zenia calls her by the name of Karen, even though Charis protests. Charis has a vision:

Someone is coming towards her across the lake, her bare feet touching the tops of the waves, her nightgown tattered by the years of weathering, her colourless hair floating. [...] It’s Karen, it’s banished Karen. She has travelled a long distance. Now she’s coming nearer, with that cowed, powerless face Charis used to see in the mirror looming up to her own face, blown towards this house where she has been islanded, thinking herself safe; demanding to enter her, to rejoin her, to share in her body once again. Charis is not Karen. She has not been Karen for a long time, and she never wants to be Karen again. She pushes away with all her strength, pushes down towards the water, but this time Karen will not go under. She drifts closer and closer, and her mouth opens. She wants to speak. (RB 231-32)

Through almost brutal force and recklessness, Zenia brings forward the molested and silenced child called Karen. Due to her dialogic part of the story telling of Charis, Zenia has of course foreseen/forced the homecoming of Karen. When Zenia reads Charis’s cards she says: “There’s water involved; a crossing of the water” (RB 270).

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25 It deserves to be mentioned that Tony’s mother used to call her child “Guppy”. (RB 141)
The examples of Tony and Charis indicate that what Zenia brings with her when she comes with the mist, through water, over water, are the parts of themselves they have repressed for a long period of time, in fact since childhood. Zenia more than just comes though. She comes again. As Tony said about her dream, it had been waiting to re-enter her. It is Charis who realizes this first.

When Zenia appears for the second time after her mock funeral, Charis sees her as yet again coming from water. “Zenia has made it back across, back across the river; she’s here now, in a fresh body, and she’s taken a chunk of Charis’s own body, and sucked it into herself” (RB 68). This vampyristic or cannibalistic description of Zenia shows again with what brutality and force Zenia can appear and reappear. But there is another side to this image and it is that Zenia is part of Charis, or Charis is part of Zenia, something Charis herself testifies to (RB 56). The fact that they are all a part of each other gives water a dialogic aspect. Water, like words, is shared.

Even though also Roz and Zenia are parts of each other, Roz differs from Charis and Tony in one respect. As Hilde Staels states, it is Roz who has the hardest time recognizing Zenia, and even at the end, when the three protagonists throw Zenia’s ashes in the lake, Roz gains only “superficial insight” compared to Charis. Roz’s imaginative waters are not filled with strong currents: “I’ll relax you, says Charis, though Roz, you have to help out. Don’t fight it! Go with it. Lie back. Float. Picture yourself in a warm ocean. But every time Roz tries this, there are sharks” (RB 106). However, at the end of the novel, Roz concedes that “oddly enough” she feels “gratitude” towards Zenia (RB 467). Thus, however reluctantly, Roz, too, realizes Zenia’s positive powers.

Water, for some of the characters, is also the imaginative place where they can exercise power over another human being. When still in Ireland, Grace Marks admits to having fantasies about drowning her younger siblings. “I will confess to having a wicked thought, when I had the young ones all lined up on the dock, with their little bare legs dangling down. I thought, I might just push one or two of them over, and then there would not be so many to feed, nor so many clothes to wash” (AG 108).

Water offers an easy way out of a place restricted by poverty. Furthermore, Grace says to Dr. Jordan that when she was angry with Nancy, the woman who is later bru-

26 Charis is likened by Tony, to “prehensile tentacles of sea anemones” (RB 119).
27 Remember that Charis compared her own daughter with Zenia, and “[t]he worst thing was that she hadn’t really been that surprised” (RB 47).
tally murdered: “I thought about throwing the scrubbing brush at her, and the bucket too [...] I pictured her standing there, with the hair streaming down over her face, like someone drowned” (AG 275-76). Grace’s two wishes to drown another human being stem from, in the first example, a wish to be in control of her own life, and in the second a wish for revenge in a situation where another person has a higher social rank and abuses that fact. It is not mere coincidence that it is death by water, drowning, which is described to have such power. Water can here be said to be a border. The surface border of water is a border of decorum; what is considered “right” and “wrong.”

On the subject of death and killing, Dr. Jordan’s frequent fantasy about dissecting and killing women has been discussed. When he has become sexually involved with his landlady and she wants to accompany him back to the United States, death can be the solution, and again there is water involved. “But here’s the part she has surely failed to imagine: once they’re in the States, she’ll be incognito. She’ll be without a name. She’ll be an unknown woman, of the kind often found floating in the canals or other bodies of water: Unknown Woman Found Floating in Canal” (AG 410, original emphasis). His wish to kill is based on his fear of being in someone else’s (a woman’s) control.

The final section in The Robber Bride, entitled “Outcome” is where Roz, Charis, and Tony throw Zenia’s ashes into Lake Ontario. They take her from the framed water of the pool and release her in non-framed water, and thereby acknowledging her transformative powers. Hilde Staels points out the many signs and metaphors in The Robber Bride that indicate that Zenia is a symbol of life force. She lists the phoenix image, but also the many references to life in water. She is said to have eyes like a fish, a mermaid, and she has fish gills.29

Water can be both life and death. Grace Marks travels over water from Ireland to Canada together with her family. Her feelings about the voyage are ones of fear, and again there is the threat of falling: “...but my heart sank within me because I had never been on a ship, not even the small fishing boats in our harbour, and I knew we were to sail across the ocean, out of sight of land, and if we were to be in a shipwreck or fall overboard, not one of us could swim” (AG 112). Her mother falls severely ill

28 Staels 204.
29 Staels 204. Remember also that Charis is likened to “prehensile tentacles of sea anemones” (RB 119), and that Tony’s mother used to call her child “Guppy” (RB 141).
on the ship and dies. Her dead body is thrown into the sea. Since water in this context is linked to Grace’s inability to swim and therefore the threat of drowning is acute, her mother’s burial in the sea is a manifestation of that threat, even though she has already died. It is very obvious in an example like this one that context matters, as later, when Grace is in prison, water does not symbolize the threat of dying at all, but freedom. “I like this song, as it makes me think of rocks, and water, and the seashore, which are outside; and thinking of a thing is next best to being there” (AG 196).

Mitch, and Tony’s mother Anthea, drowns. Charis metaphorically drowns Karen, and Zenia both falls and drowns. Anthea, Zenia, and Grace’s mother are buried in water. To Elaine in Cat’s Eye, who at the time of the ravine accident has not started painting and faints when she does not know how to act and where to go, water is only one thing: yet another extension of fainting. “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 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” (CE 201). Death in water is here a solution to the daily terror she endures.

Margaret Atwood says of The Robber Bride that “everything comes in and out of Lake Ontario.” Zenia comes from water and her ashes end in water. The scene where Tony, Roz, and Charis bury her in Lake Ontario is highly significant because it is then that the significance of Zenia becomes realized. Earlier in the narrative Charis thinks: “Maybe you don’t enter the light through a tunnel, she thinks. Maybe it’s a boat, as the ancients said it was. You pay the fare, you cross, you drink of the River of Forgetfulness. Then you are reborn” (RB 53). It is described how each of the characters has entered into the river of forgetfulness, but that it has been unsatisfactory. Their repressed pasts have refused to drown, and Zenia brings them back. The painful rememberance turns out to be necessary, because, as Elaine was made to realize, a dialogue with their history is needed in the present tense in order to reconstruct themselves. Therefore they bury Zenia in water, in November — “Month of the dead, Month of returning” (RB 465) — on Remembrance Day. “Remembrance Day is only

30 We also read about an anonymous woman in Alias Grace who has met her death in water: “This young lady was shortly afterwards drowned in the Lake when her ship went down in a gale, and nothing was ever found but her box with her initials done in silver nails; it was still locked, so although damp, nothing spilt out, and Miss Lydia was given a scarf out of it as a keepsake” (AG 25).

31 Staels 208.
fitting, thinks Tony. She wants to do Zenia justice; but she is remembering more than Zenia. She’s remembering the war, and those killed by it, at one time or later; [...] She’s remembering all the wars” (RB 466). Charis thinks that “[t]he dead return in other forms. Because we will them to” (RB 468).

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Falling in these Atwood novels means many things. The negative sides of this phenomenon are multifold. For example, falling is a result of social demands, and partly connected to the Watchbird, as in the example of Grace Marks. Furthermore, the question of falling in love is critically analyzed both by Elaine’s painting “Falling Women,” and the examples of Elaine’s relationship to Jon, and Mary Whitney’s relationship. Inequality in the relationships is described as prescribed. This is shown by the fact that the women have to give up power, and perhaps fall, whereas the men do not. Falling is threatening as in the examples of death by falling. Falling is also a way to emphasize a structured environment. Borders, cliffs and ravines suggest that falling out of/off/in these places is dangerous. Watch yourself and where you are going!

Falling in connection to Zenia, and as a consequence to Tony, Roz and Charis, is positive. Firstly, men fall in love with her, and not the other way around. And some die, or at least become wounded. Tony, Roz, and Charis experience power when Zenia falls, or when thinking about her falling. Falling is also symbolic of a positive loss of control, aggression and physical power. Finally, it is a place for feeling and expressing compassion.

I argue that water and falling can be connected on many levels. In one sense, water and falling are part of a similar dynamic. Elaine in Cat’s Eye makes the connection between water and past and memory. She says “[y]ou don’t look back through time but down through it, like water [...] Nothing goes away” (CE 3). It is precisely this all of the protagonists of The Robber Bride experience. They have buried histories in water, and when Zenia the border crosser comes with the mist, their pasts rise to the surface.

In this manner, water is a symbol of a border. However, there are many such borders. Water is, as said, the border between past and present. It is also, and perhaps
most importantly, a border that, due to its fluidity, implies that transgression is possible. I have stated that water is movement, and movement is a prerequisite for transgression. It is most apparent in the examples of Zenia, who is constantly obscured by mist, and Grace who in her vagueness threatens Dr. Jordan. These qualities of water are in themselves threats to governing, patriarchal structures. Both water and falling are then linked to power issues because they both imply movement. Above all, falling and water expand a bordered place.

Lastly, both water and falling are linked to life as well as death, and fantasies of causing death. In some instances even, water is the place where someone falls.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Margaret Atwood’s many-dimensional stories with their multi-dimensional voices generate various responses. This is one of them.

To watch oneself, I have argued, is directly linked to the creation of femininity in the novels by Atwood. I have examined how the female characters continuously watch themselves and women. I have used The Watchbird, which is introduced in *Cat’s Eye*, as a symbol for the process of internalization in all three novels. The Watchbird is transformed from a bird in a magazine advertisement to an internalized prison guard that watches, judges, and always condemns. I have moreover demonstrated the Watchbird’s double nature. It is simultaneously regulatory and condemning. It corrects behavior and appearance endlessly because these areas can never be truly corrected. Because, as Atwood repeatedly demonstrates in her texts: ‘there is no end to perfection.’ The Watchbird is connected to Michel Foucault’s writings about the Panoptic prison scheme, which in turn enhances the sense of imprisonment. I have argued that Atwood shows that self-consciousness is the ultimate mannerism in a woman. I have furthermore discussed the fact that the act of watching and consequential self-consciousness start, as in the example of Elaine, during the years of childhood. In these three novels, the watcher is almost always female, and the object of the gaze if also female. But the gaze itself is male. As stated in *The Robber Bride*: ‘You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.’ Being a Watchbird means being female, cruel and judgmental. It means being a bitch. The bitch is, of course, only a label, as any other label. The bitch (as are the other labels), in these novels, is born in, and a result of, a patriarchally structured environment. A bitch exercises power, but the power is very limited because it does not transgress or transform femininity in any way. Rather, the bitch, in especially *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, is only one side to femininity and is produced to uphold femininity. Bitchiness can also, for instance in the case of how it is manifested in Cordelia, be a sign of frustration. Evil is ‘misdirected’ towards another woman instead of towards whoever or whatever that has mistreated ‘the bitch.’ The bitch’s intentions become understandable in the context Atwood supplies us with. The presence of the bitch is in Atwood’s novels, always a result of a fundamental, patriarchal society which actively discourages friendships between women. Nonetheless, I have also em-
phasized the fact that the watcher’s gaze is always male. In conclusion, the gaze of the Watchbird has no beginning and no end. Atwood describes a gaze which moves from one subject to another, not nesting anywhere in particular, but everywhere, in all places, at once.

Throughout this study I have referred to the concept of ‘place’ in order to emphasize the many normative borders which surround and limit the female subjects in the novels. I have argued that Atwood describes these places as gendered, which means that a certain behavior and a certain appearance are expected from the subject. Speech can also be affected, in the way that a certain place, for example, a place of occupation, a certain speech genre must be adopted. The places themselves are thus monologically designed. They resemble a prison, much like the one Grace Marks is in, in *Alias Grace*. To have a clear, distinct role in a certain place creates a sense of safety. As bell hooks states: ‘[W]e are taught over and over again that the only way to remain safe is to stay within fixed boundaries.’ Atwood lets Offred of *The Handmaid’s Tale* express the same opinion when she says: “My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I’ve crossed no boundaries, I’ve given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It’s the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation.”¹ Many of these places, and especially so the place of family, are defined by war and violence. It may seem a contradiction in terms, to feel safe in a place often characterized by war or other threats of violence, but it is not the case in the Atwood texts. As Offred suggests, crossing the boundaries of a place is more terrifying than staying within them. I have also given examples that reveal that even self-mutilation and suicide attempts can be preferred to transgression of a place. Most — or all — places in the novels are gender marked.

Furthermore, I have placed emphasis on the subject of story and storytelling which I find prevalent in the novels. “[T]here were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was the former and she the latter” (RB 312), and then there are, logically, storytellers and storytellees. I have linked watching with storytelling. Femininity is construed through watching and monologic storytelling. The female characters’ lives, feelings, and experiences are treated as stories, which they have no part in telling themselves. Grace Marks is a good example of a story told by others. ‘Her story is over’ thinks one of her storytellers, Dr. Jordan. She is, however, many stories.

They have been told by the court, her employers, the prison guards, the newspapers, etc. The stories that the women are, or become, are part of what Donna Haraway calls ‘central myths of Western culture.’ This is also made particularly clear in the case of Grace Marks. She is construed through eyes influenced by a Victorian worldview, with its exceedingly romanticized notions of women (and men). Nevertheless, I have argued that the myths of such a society are detectable in the more contemporary societies depicted in *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. A woman who has been betrayed by a man in a love relationship, for example, is encouraged to kill herself, as is shown in little girls’ games in *Cat’s Eye*.

I have argued that storytelling as it is described above, can be transformed into a kind of mutual storytelling, where participation, and interaction with, others are a precondition. I have asserted that through such storytelling, a re-watching of both self and place is possible. Re-watching implies, in these texts, a power of mobility. Mobility does not necessarily signify actual mobility, to physically transgress borders of a place. It denotes a mobility of the mind, a mobility of thought and speech. I have exemplified this type of dialogical storytelling with discussions of, among other things, Elaine’s visual art, Grace’s quilting, and Zenia’s transformations. Both these types of expression are born out of silence. They are *answers* to silence, and therefore also instigators of dialogic events.

I have furthermore said that through dialogic storytelling, a revision of myths such as that of femininity is achievable. This revision is what Donna Haraway might call Cyborg feminism. Haraway’s deconstruction of the myth of Woman is a cyborg: half human, and half machine. I have argued that we can read Zenia as a cyborg. She is a myth which is told and re-told over and over again. Initially, in each first meeting with the other protagonists she comes across as a mythical figure, whether it is as a victim or a femme fatale. What makes her subversive is the ability she possesses to shift shapes. What makes her even more subversive is the ultimate result of her stories, which is a result contrary to reigning norms. Her appearance, often likened to a threshold event, activates new stories in those individuals she encounters, and they, in turn, becomes active participants in their own storytelling.

I have in addition described another option to monologism. It is possible to use and reuse other people’s voices and words in order to gain power. For instance, Grace refers to Mary Whitney so that she herself can express controversial opinions. In this way, loopholes in rigid structures/places are produced. Most importantly, the story
which seems to have already been told and is therefore definite, can change into new
directions.

I have argued that the theme of falling is highlighted in these three novels. An in-
credible amount of women are said to be falling. I have included dreams and fantasies
about falling, pushing, hanging on edges in the discourse of falling. I have tried to
discuss what falling mean in the narratives, and have discovered that there are many
types of falling, depending on context. Nevertheless I see falling as linked to the con-
struction of femininity. I have firstly discussed falling in connection to (heterosexual)
love relationships, i.e. falling in love. There are instances in the novels when the sense
of falling is accentuated in a relationship. There is naturally also the connection to
fallen women in this discussion. A fallen woman does not exist on her own, she is
fallen because of a man. Atwood writes in *Cat’s Eye*: ‘That must be what was meant
by fallen women. Fallen women were women who had fallen onto men and hurt
themselves.’ She continues: ‘There was some suggestion of downward motion,
against one’s will and not with the will of someone else.’ Here, it is stated that both
fallen and falling women are a part of the heterosexual, patriarchal matrix.

I have in addition mentioned the many instances and contexts where falling,
and making someone else fall, is power related, and is therefore connected to move-
ment and transgression. In other contexts, falling is yet another threat of violence,
maybe even dying. Falling can thus be punishment for behaving unconventionally.

Sometimes people fall in water. Water is another issue that I have found to be
of great importance in Atwood’s novels. Water, as falling, also means different things
in different contexts. I have given examples of when water is connected to life, death,
and life after death, and finally power.

The power issue is most evident in the cases of Zenia and Grace. They are, on
multiple occasions connected to water and mist. The constant movement and force of
water are stressed, as are the vague, obscuring qualities of mist.

There are many examples of water as threatening because many people die in
(because of) water. There is nonetheless also evidence of the fact that water is a sym-
bol for life, and life after death. For example, Zenia’s ashes are thrown in Lake On-
tario. There are, in addition, examples of when water is used as a burial ground for
past life in *The Robber Bride*. Via Zenia, however, the past can rise to the surface.
Charis’s description of this reads as follows: ‘Someone is coming towards her across the lake, her bare feet touching the tops of waves, […] It’s Karen, it’s banished Karen. She has travelled a long distance.’

I have stated that water and falling are, to a certain extent, related to each other. Water and falling can both be seen as movement, and therefore important aspects in the discussion of gaining power in a structural, patriarchal, environment.

Due to similarities of thematic elements, Margaret Atwood’s novels *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace* can be regarded as a trilogy. They highlight aspects of the power exercise I refer to as watching. The women characters are often in places of friendship, protectors of the patriarchal system, and thus mainly guard and watch themselves and each other. Atwood’s novels are furthermore engaged in, what is termed in this study, monologic and dialogic storytelling. Through these two types of storytelling Atwood demonstrates firstly, the technologies behind the constructions of femininity and secondly, options to patriarchal conventionality and stereotyping.
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